

University of Cape Town



CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

**VOTER INFORMATION,
GOVERNMENT EVALUATIONS
AND PARTY IMAGES, 1994-2004**

Robert Mattes

CSSR Working Paper No. 89

Published by the Centre for Social Science Research
University of Cape Town
2004

Copies of this publication may be obtained from:

The Administrative Officer
Centre for Social Science Research
University of Cape Town
Private Bag
Rondebosch, 7701
Tel: (021) 650 4656
Fax: (021) 650 4657
Email: kforbes@cssr.uct.ac.za

Price in Southern Africa (incl. VAT and postage): R 15.00

or it can be downloaded from our website
<http://www.cssr.uct.ac.za/>

ISBN 1-77011-012-7

© Centre for Social Science Research, UCT, 2004

CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE
RESEARCH

Democracy in Africa Research Unit

**VOTER INFORMATION,
GOVERNMENT EVALUATIONS
AND PARTY IMAGES, 1994-2004**

Robert Mattes

CSSR Working Paper No. 89

December 2004

Robert Mattes is Associate Professor of Political Studies and Director of the Democracy in Africa Research Unit in the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR) at the University of Cape Town.

Voter Information, Government Evaluations and Party Images, 1994-2004¹

Abstract

Citizens vote for the political party they think is best able to govern in their interests. But how do South African voters arrive at these conclusions? And what type of information do they use? This paper reviews available survey data from the past decade about South Africans' levels of political information, evaluations of government performance, and partisan attitudes. It argues that while voters have been generally satisfied with the performance of the ANC government, there has been a sufficiently large minority of dissatisfied voters to have accounted for more electoral fluidity than we have thus far seen. It ends by providing evidence that shows that while these voters may be dissatisfied with the ANC, they have little information about alternative opposition parties, and what they do know is very negative. Thus, dissatisfied voters must either vote for the ANC as the lesser evil, or simply stay at home.

This paper proceeds from the assumption that citizens vote for the political party they think is best fit to govern in their interests. As political scientist V.O. Key (1967: 1) succinctly put it: "Voters are not fools". Or, in Christopher Achen's formulation, voters are "neither geniuses nor saints." "Voters do not ignore information they have, do not fabricate information they do not have, and do not choose what they do not want. [...] They are required only to do the best with the information they have" (1992: 198).

But how do voters judge which party is best fit to govern? And on what kind of information or experience do they base these judgments? An idealised, but unrealistic version of democratic elections presumes that voters gather

¹ I thank Cherrel Africa, Jeremy Seekings and other participants in the Centre for Social Science Research Elections 2004 Seminar Series for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also thank Anneke Greyling and Michael Gordon of Markinor for providing additional data for this paper.

information about policy positions contained in party manifestos or articulated in election campaigns, compare them with their own preferences, and then vote for the party that comes closest to their own beliefs. But obviously, few voters are ever aware of what is contained in party platforms. Parties may feature just a few issues in their campaigns. Parties may have an incentive to blur the distinctions between themselves and others, or simply not to talk about policy issues at all, concentrating on other matters such as performance or projecting attributes such as compassion, strength or competence.²

More importantly, policy positions are basically no more than promises about what a party would do if it were in office, and as such, are not a very reliable source of information. A more reliable indication of what parties might do in future is simply what they have done in the past, either in or out of government.

But if voters make decisions on the basis of past performance, “how could the ANC have done so well in the 1999 elections, and again in 2004?”, one might ask. “Hasn’t this government presided over a massive increase in the number of HIV infections? Isn’t South Africa supplanting Uganda and Botswana as the world’s epicenter of the pandemic? Hasn’t this government fiddled with a Presidential AIDS Commission stuffed with dissident scientists, dragging its feet needlessly in providing drugs to extend lives or prevent mother to child transmissions, in the face of a massive reduction in adult life expectancy? Hasn’t this government presided over a substantial rise in most categories of crime, especially violent crime since 1994 (Bruce 2001: 9; Dynes 2001: 4; Pedrag 2000), while its ability to prosecute and convict has declined?” (*The Economist* 2001).

“Hasn’t this government mismanaged a sluggish economy that has shed 500,000 formal jobs, driving unemployment, broadly defined, to almost 40% and depriving hundreds of thousands of households of the income needed to make ends meet, while it refuses to implement a modest basic income grant? Hasn’t the income of the bottom two-fifths of all households actually decreased since 1994, increasing inequality (Whiteford and Van Seventer 1999: 11–19; Budlender 2000)? Hasn’t this government failed to build the business confidence necessary for both domestic and foreign investment, thereby limiting growth to around 3%, while it regards a growth rate of 6 to 7% as a prerequisite to cutting unemployment and reducing inequality?”

² For a discussion of various types of campaign issues, see Dalton (1996: 96-219).

One would expect such an “objective” social situation to create the grounds for a massive political realignment, rather than two landslide re-election victories. However, over the very same period, this government has facilitated the construction of 1.6 million low-cost houses and built 56,000 new classrooms. Massive infrastructure projects have given 9 million people access to clean water and provided sanitation to 6.4 million and electricity to 2 million. This government now provides various forms of social grants to 7.4 million people. The poor now have access to free medicine and more than 700 new clinics. Over 5 million needy children get a fifth to a quarter of their daily nutritional needs through school feeding programmes (Rumney 2001: 15; Barrell 2000: 87; *RDP Monitor* 7, 2001: 2; *RDP Monitor* 6, 2000: 2; Ballenger 1998: 1; February 2004: 7). Relatively low inflation means that working South Africans are able to keep up with the cost of living. The national budget deficit has shrunk from 8% to around 2% of Gross Domestic Product. Public and private affirmative action initiatives in education, business ownership and hiring have created a sizeable black middle class that is now surpassing its white counterpart in absolute size (Whiteford and van Seventer 1999).

The point is that an “objective” analysis of developments on the ground does not necessarily tell us whether voters perceive government as serving their interests. Existing voter loyalties, or what political scientists call “partisan identification,” do not change easily. Thus, the intense loyalties forged by apartheid and the struggle against it may withstand short term disappointment. However, voters do learn, and they do not ignore what they learn. Loyalties might shift due to what voters learn about political parties and government, not the objective socio-economic circumstances.

Cognitive Awareness of Politics

How do voters learn? What kind of information forms the basis of their evaluations? To what extent have the developmental changes described above increased voter access to and use of political information?

Ronald Inglehart and Russell Dalton have provided strong evidence that the post World War II exponential growth in access to formal education and electronic news media in Western Europe and the United States - what they call “cognitive mobilization” - has steadily reduced the effect of structural factors like class or religion on the vote. Instead, a more sophisticated generation of voters who are less likely to rely on party labels and more likely to gather information about government performance and alternative party positions has emerged (Dalton 1996: 215). In South Africa, one would expect that the government’s intensified

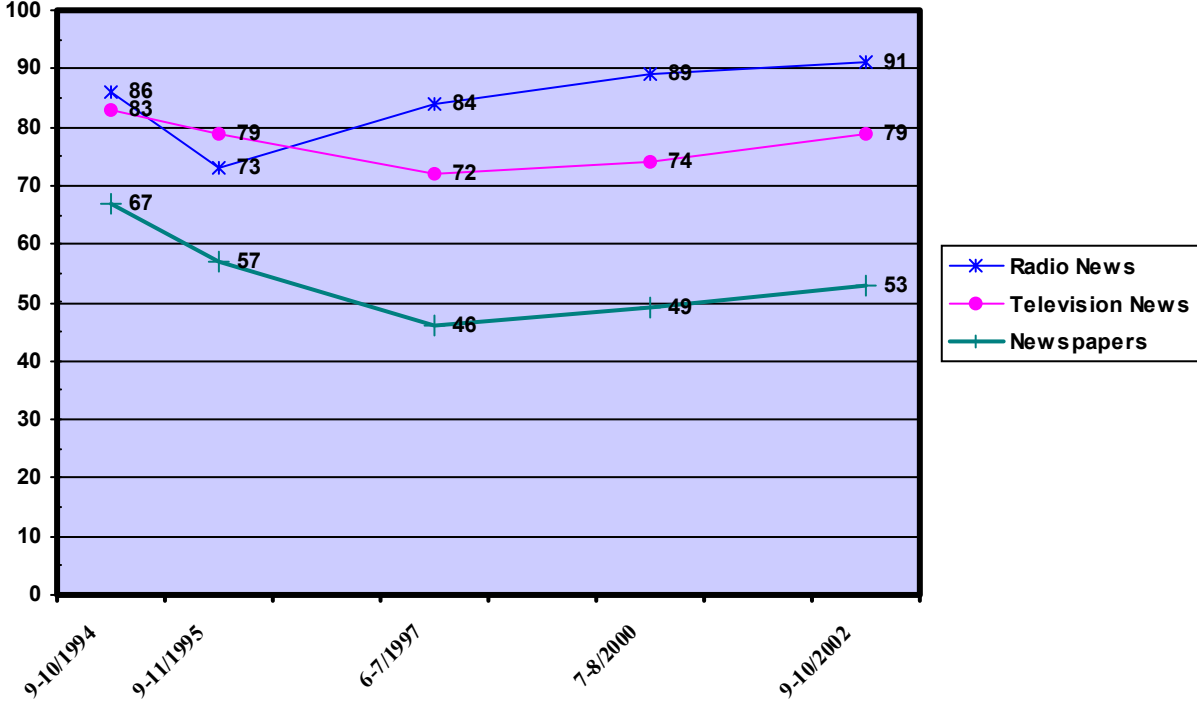
efforts to improve access to formal schooling and matriculation rates would gradually increase the number of citizens with the requisite cognitive skills to deal with complex political information. But at this point in time, a review of demographic data from surveys conducted by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), Afrobarometer and the *Washington Post*/Kaiser Family Foundation between 1994 and 2003 reveals no clear evidence of any trends amongst the adult population, either in terms of a reduction of the number of people without formal education or an increase in the number of people who have finished high school or have some university education.

One would also expect that the government's massive electrification projects would enable more people to watch television news; or that the partial deregulation of South Africa's airwaves would diversify the types of political information to which voters are exposed. Both developments would be expected to bring down the costs of obtaining political information. However, the Idasa and Afrobarometer surveys show that radio, which provides comparatively less news than TV or print media, remains the most pervasive source of news. As of 2002, nine in ten survey respondents said they received news from the radio (91 %), while eight in ten (79 %) said they got it from television "every day" or "a few times a week." Just one half of all voters (53 %) read newspapers with the same frequency.

There is no evidence that access to news has significantly increased over the past decade. In fact, the frequency with which people get news from the radio has only now attained and slightly passed the levels measured immediately after the 1994 election; the use of television news has almost caught up, but newspaper readership still lags significantly behind where it was in 1994 (see figure 1).

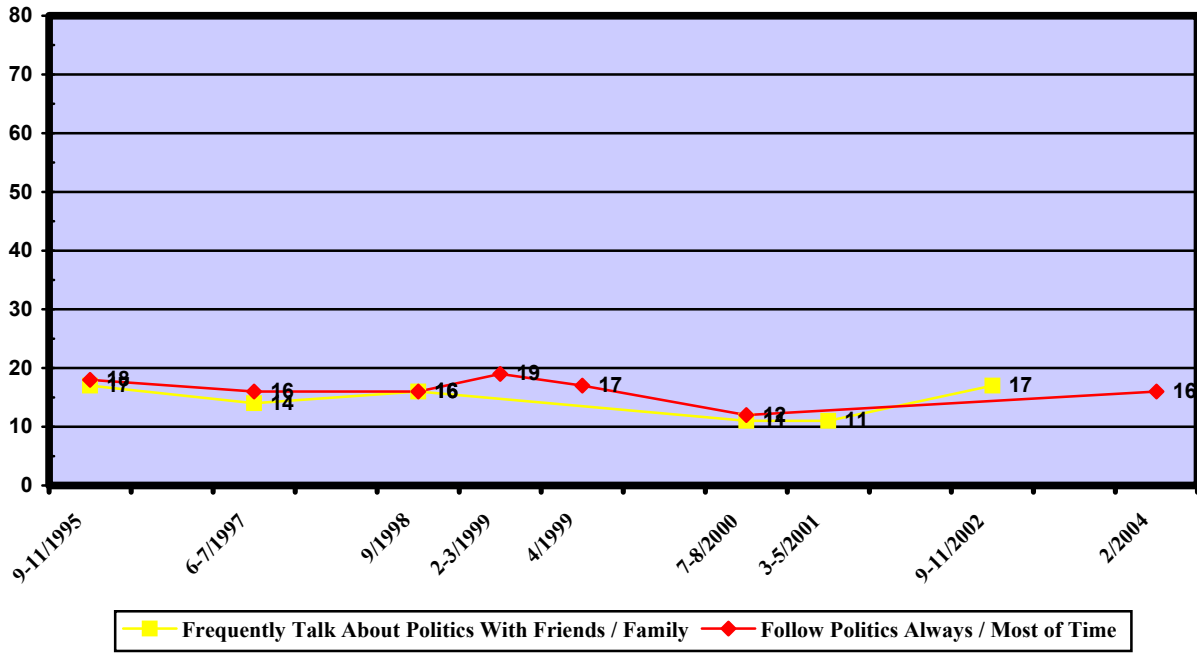
The use of news media and the level of formal education are indications of the amount of political information to which voters are exposed and the cognitive skills they have to make use of that information. But they do not tell us whether citizens are more or less politically aware or cognitively engaged in the political process. The Idasa and Afrobarometer surveys also asked people about their interest in politics and the frequency with which they engage in political discussion. The answers demonstrate that, since 1994, just one-twentieth to one-tenth of the electorate "frequently" speak about politics with their family or friends; more than one-third consistently say they "never" do this. Similarly, we find that only one-tenth to one-fifth frequently "follow what's going on in government and public affairs" (see figure 2).

Figure 1: Use of News Media (% Every Day/A few Days A Week)



Source: Idasa, Afrobarometer

Figure 2: Political Discussion and Political Interest



Source: Idasa, Opinion '99, Afrobarometer, Markinor

Political discussion and interest form a composite construct known as “cognitive engagement” which motivates voters to gather information from available sources (Bratton 2004). The level of engagement amongst the South African public is relatively low. In fact, the size of South Africa’s “attentive” public is the smallest in Southern Africa (see tables 1 and 2). Such low levels of engagement lead us to expect that South Africans are relatively ill-informed, even though they have the highest levels of formal education and media use in Africa.

Table 1: Political Discussion, Southern Africa (%) (1999-2000)

	Zimbabwe	Namibia	Malawi	Botswana	Zambia	Lesotho	South Africa
Frequently	25	20	19	14	14	13	11
Occasionally	38	41	45	38	40	27	52
Never	34	37	36	46	44	59	37

Question: When you get together with your friends, would you say you discuss political matters...?
Source: Afrobarometer.

Table 2: Political Interest, Southern Africa (%) (1999-2000)

	Lesotho	Zambia	Zimbabwe	Namibia	Malawi	Botswana	South Africa
Always, most of the time	31	22	21	18	17	15	12
Some of the time	17	32	27	49	32	23	37
Only now and then	20	17	17	14	30	21	28
Hardly at all	29	26	30	12	20	38	22

Question: Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs?
Source: Afrobarometer.

Measuring the amount of information that voters possess is notoriously difficult, raising questions about which information is most important, and whether respondents should be able to recall a correct answer, or merely recognise it when presented to them. But however one looks at it, evidence abounds that large proportions of the South African electorate remain in the dark about many of the important policy issues of the day.

For example, a 1995 Idasa survey tapping public opinion on the debate about the

final constitution found that one quarter of all voters (28%) were unable to offer any thoughts as to what rights should be included in the Constitution. Almost one half (48%) mentioned one right, but were unable to offer a second, and three fifths (61%) were unable to offer a third (Mattes *et al.* 1996). After years of debate between the government and labour unions about the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme, the 2000 Afrobarometer found that just 12% of South Africans said they had ever heard of GEAR. The 2003 *Washington Post* survey found that despite the major controversies raging in the media about South Africa's stance on land seizures and human rights in Zimbabwe and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, one fifth of voters (19%) did not know who Robert Mugabe was. One third (32%) volunteered to interviewers that they did not know who George W. Bush was.

Beside these anecdotal questions, the 2000 Afrobarometer offered a more systematic attempt to find out what information voters have across Africa. In each country, respondents were asked to name their Vice President, Minister of Finance, Member of Parliament for their constituency, and Local Councilor (see table 3). Almost six in ten (57%) South Africans could correctly give the name of Deputy President Jacob Zuma. This was substantially lower than the proportions of Botswana (84%), Malawians (79%), Zimbabweans (73%) and Namibians (71%) who could name their Vice President. A far lower proportion (38%) of South Africans could supply the name of Minister of Finance Trevor Manuel, though this trend was also observed elsewhere. Reflecting the obstacles created by the country's electoral system of Proportional Representation with party lists, just one percent of South Africans could even hazard a guess as to who their Member of Parliament or Local Councilor was supposed to be, by far the lowest in the region. While one might argue that the cross-national comparison is irrelevant because of different electoral systems, I contend that the absence of identifiable MPs or local councilors in South Africa means South African voters lack the "cognitive hook" around which voters in other countries focus their attention and follow the political process.

Thus, even while South Africans have relatively high levels of media use and formal education (at least compared to Africa), they remain relatively unengaged and uninformed about politics. Whether and how this limited amount of cognitive awareness shapes voter evaluations depends on whether voters are looking at opposition parties or the government.

Voters with little formal education or access to news media can still acquire information about government performance from conversations with friends and colleagues who pay more attention to politics than they do. They can also use what Samuel Popkin calls "low information reasoning" and look to their own direct or indirect experiences to evaluate government performance (Popkin

1994). Do they see more or less jobless people on the streets? Are their salaries keeping pace with the cost of living? Are their monthly bond or hire purchase payments increasing or decreasing? Do they see houses being built, water pipes being dug, and electricity lines being strung? Are more friends and family dying from AIDS related illnesses?

Table 3: Political Knowledge, Southern Africa (%) (1999-2000)

	<i>Malawi</i>	<i>Zimbabwe</i>	<i>Botswana</i>	<i>Zambia</i>	<i>Namibia</i>	<i>South Africa</i>	<i>Lesotho</i>
Vice President / Prime Minister	79	73	84	58	71	57	41
The Minister of Finance	26	42	14	26	37	38	6
Member of parliament for this constituency	85	55	73	46	24*	<1	1
Your local councilor	NA	59	55	31	6**	1	10

Question: Can you tell me who presently holds the following offices?

Notes: The table provides percentages giving the correct answer, but excludes all cases where it was not possible to determine whether the answer was right or wrong.

* Regional Councilor

** Excludes those who don't live in area with local government

Source: Afrobarometer.

In contrast to the high visibility of government performance, opposition parties tend not to have widely known track records, unless they have recently been in government. Voters cannot look to their everyday experience to infer how an opposition party has been doing. They must be able to either remember salient actions the party has taken in the past (while in opposition or as a governing party either at national or sub-national levels), or they must obtain information on what the party says it would do if elected. Obtaining this information requires a strong interest in politics which encourages the mental storage of such details, or avid media use. Even then, information is difficult to obtain because the actions or promises of opposition parties usually receive far less attention and are therefore less visible than government actions.

Government Evaluations

Voters are likely to pay the greatest amount of attention to government performance on the issues that matter most to them (Dalton 1996: 15-39). To determine what the salient issues have been, we turn to a question asked by

Idasa, Afrobarometer and the *Washington Post* since 1994: “What are the most important problems facing this country that the government ought to address?” The question was “open-ended” and allowed respondents to give up to three answers in their own words. Consistent with an unemployment rate moving toward 40% and a sharp increase in violent crime, jobs and crime have consistently topped the public agenda, mentioned since 1997 by three-fifths to three-quarters of respondents. Reflecting the massive inequalities in access to basic services bequeathed by apartheid, housing, education and health have also consistently received a significant amount of emphasis from the public, usually from between one quarter to one third of respondents.

Since 2000, growing numbers of voters have also listed poverty, AIDS, and to a lesser extent corruption as important problems. In contrast, issues of violence and discrimination, which were major public preoccupations in 1994 and 1995, quickly fell to the wayside in ensuing years. It is also interesting to note the many issues that typically pre-occupy a large amount of elite attention which are consistently *not* mentioned by ordinary citizens: inequality, wages, incomes and salaries, land, environment, affirmative action, death penalty, or anything remotely related to foreign policy such as immigration, Zimbabwe, military readiness, or war and peace.

Voter Evaluations of Specific Government Performance

For voter perceptions of how the government has performed on these and other issues, we turn to a set of questions from Markinor, Opinion '99 and Afrobarometer surveys. Over the past decade, these surveys asked people to rate how well they think government is handling a range of policy areas. Perhaps the clearest conclusion that emerges from these data is the extent to which South Africans are ready and able to discriminate across policy areas, criticising government in some areas and praising it in others. They are clearly *not* so constrained by pre-existing political loyalties as to offer uniform, rose-coloured assessments of government performance.

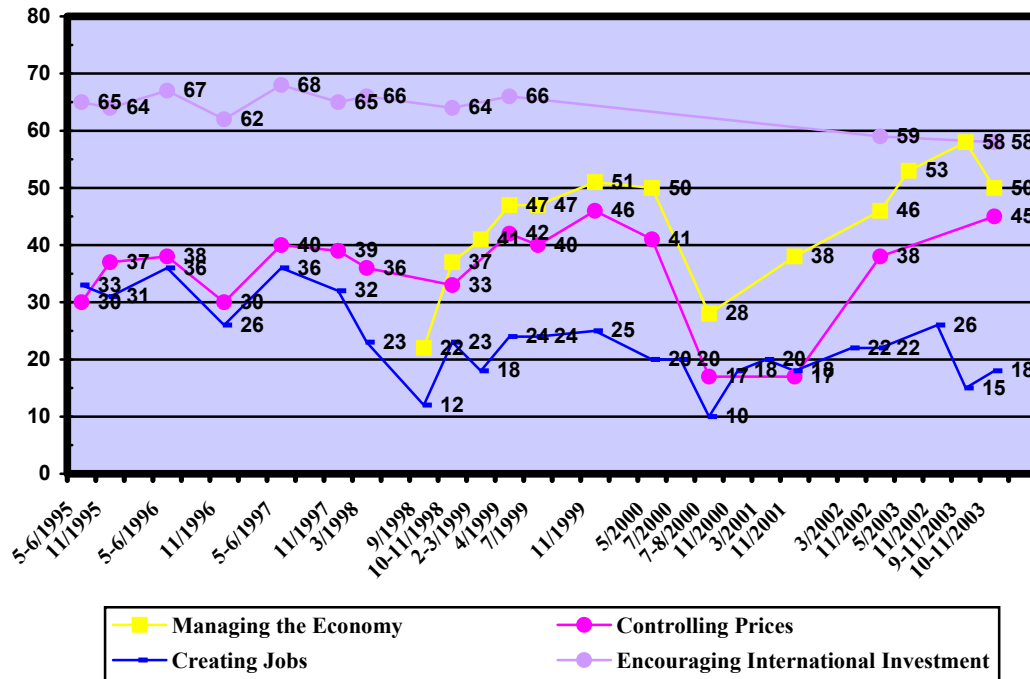
South Africans have experienced increasing crime and joblessness and have expressed serious criticisms of government performance in the two areas they consistently cited as the country’s most pressing problems. But people have also experienced, either personally or in their immediate surroundings, profound social change with the construction of houses, sanitation, electricity, water and health clinics and the availability of medicine - issues prioritised by a large proportion of voters - and have rewarded government with far higher levels of

approval in these areas.

We can divide the survey questions into four main policy areas: (1) macro-economic management; (2) equality, redistribution and nation-building; (3) welfare and development; and (4) political governance. In the area of macro-economics (see figure 3), public evaluations of the government's "handling of the economy" have fluctuated widely, rising above 50% during periods of economic expansion, but also plummeting below 30% during periods of high interest rates and inflation. And while inflation has been one of the success stories of the government's economic plan, voters have been far less impressed with the government's ability to control prices. The trends follow those of overall economic performance, but are generally at least 10 to 20 percentage points lower suggesting that voters are not so much concerned with the actual *rate* of inflation as the fact that prices are out of their reach. As mentioned above, voters are extremely critical of government attempts to "fight unemployment by creating jobs." Voter evaluations on this issue have taken a long downward path over the past decade. The only issue in the area of macro-economics where the government receives positive reviews is "attracting foreign investment," where two thirds to three fifths consistently approve of government performance. However, in this case, one struggles to ascertain what experiences are the basis for these evaluations.

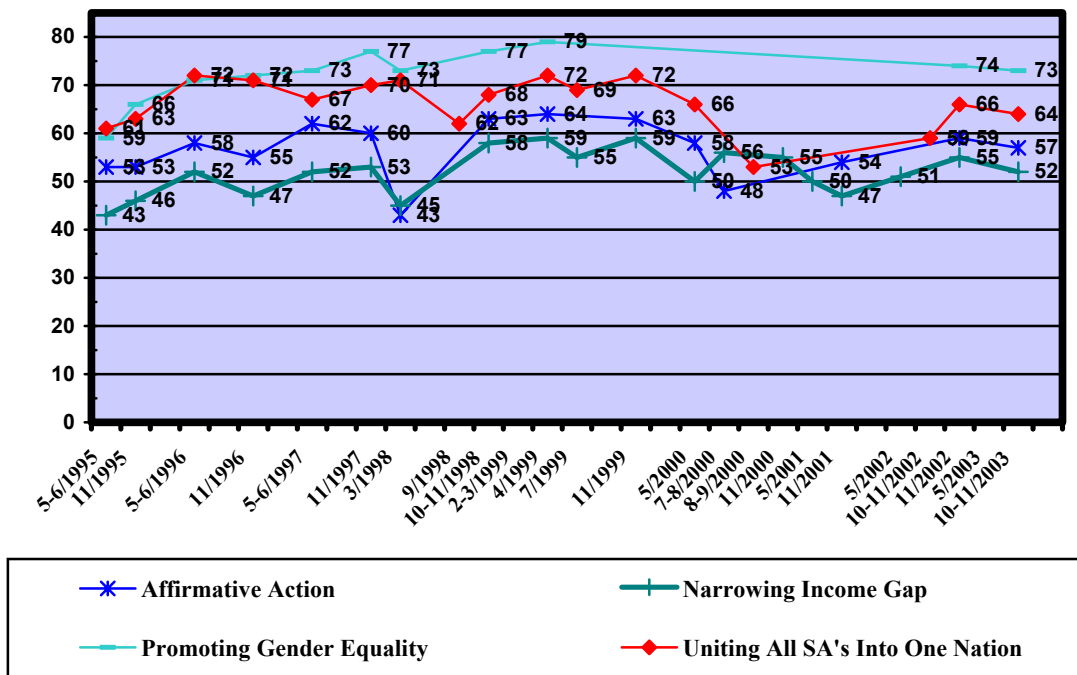
On average, South Africans are far more positive about government efforts to promote equality, redistribution and national unity (see figure 4). Almost three quarters say government has promoted gender equality well or very well. Solid majorities have also approved of its handling of affirmative action in the civil service, and majorities have generally seen government attempts to narrow the income gap in a positive light. Markinor has also recently begun asking people about government policy in ensuring "access to land," and between 60 to 66% have given positive marks in 2002 and 2003. Finally, while it took a noticeable dive after Thabo Mbeki assumed power, the public has been positively impressed with government attempts to "unite all South Africans into one nation."

Figure 3: Evaluations of Government Performance - Macro-Economic Management (% Well/ Very Well)



Source: Opinion'99, Markinor, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation, Afrobarometer

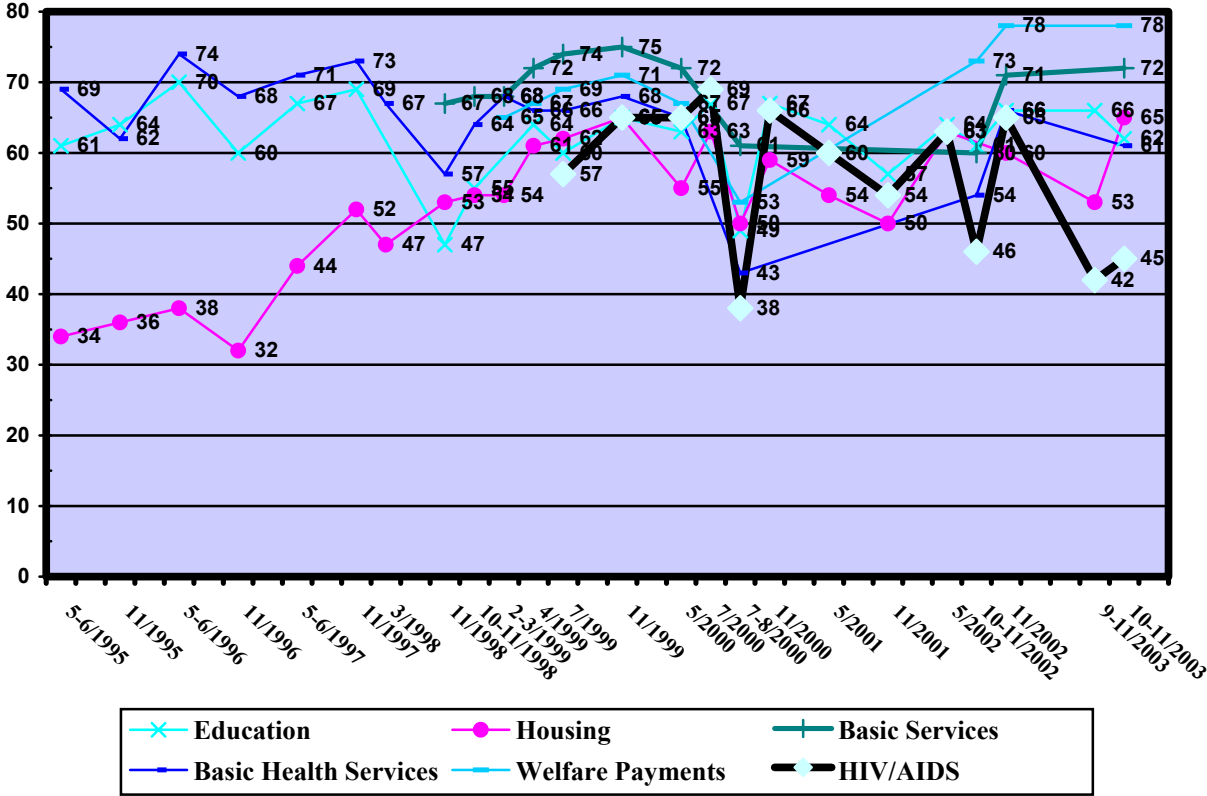
Figure 4: Evaluations of Government Performance - Equality, Redistribution and Nation Building (% Well/ Very Well)



Source: Opinion'99, Markinor, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation, Afrobarometer

Government also tends to receive fairly positive marks in the broad area of welfare and development (see figure 5). Government distribution of welfare payments has steadily increased in popularity and is now one of its most well received areas of performance. South Africans have also positively evaluated the provision of health services as well as basic services like water and electricity over the past decade. While citizens were highly critical of government housing policies from 1995 to 1997, since 1998 majorities have consistently approved of the government's provision of housing. Public opinion towards the government's AIDS policy has varied widely since the question was first asked in 1999, but has been on a clear downward trend in 2002 and 2003.

Figure 5: Evaluations of Government Performance - Welfare and Development (% Well/ Very Well)

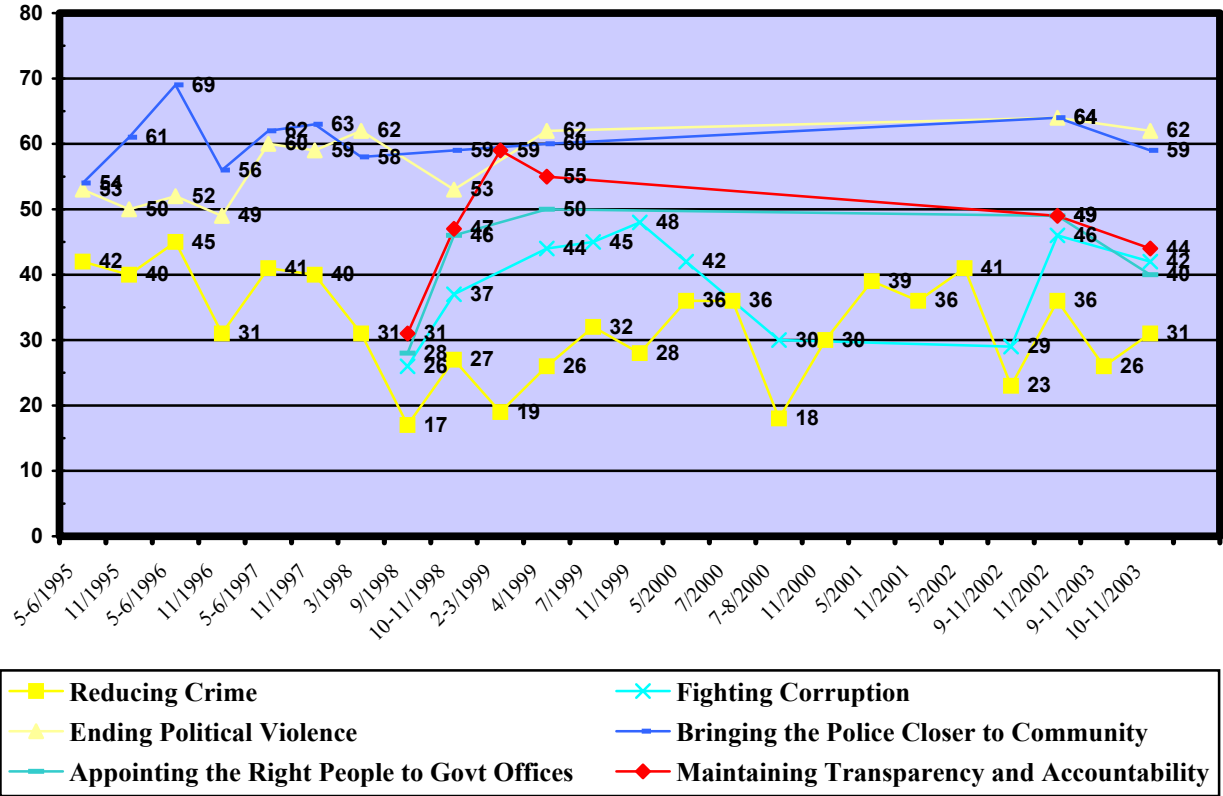


Source: Opinion'99, Markinor, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation, Afrobarometer

Finally, in the broad area of political governance, citizens have been extremely critical of government efforts to control crime, even as they have been generally positive about the government's ability to end political violence and its attempts to bring the police close to the community. Government efforts in fighting corruption have received more favorable reviews in 2002 and 2003 after two

years of quite critical assessments. This trend has been matched by improving evaluations of government appointments to high office, and government efforts to promote transparency and accountability.

Figure 6: Evaluations of Government Performance - Political Governance (% Well/ Very Well)



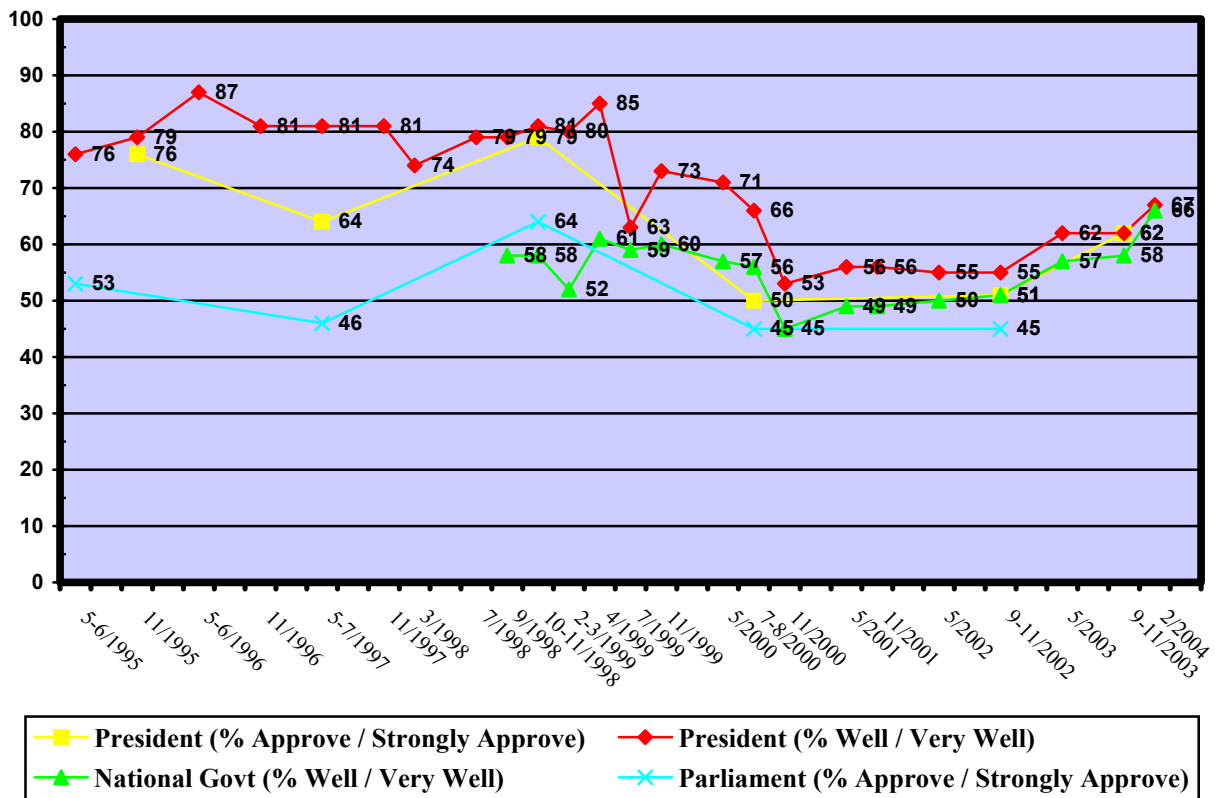
Source: Opinion'99, Markinor, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation, Afrobarometer

Voter Evaluations of Overall Government Performance

South African voters *do not* turn a blind eye to the massive problems of joblessness or criminal violence. They in some way *balance* these assessments against government performance across the spectrum. When asked to offer an overall judgment, voters have given broadly positive marks. Public approval of government performance has been relatively positive over the past decade, though there has been a sharp difference in degree between the widespread popular acclaim for the job done by Nelson Mandela (averaging in the 70 to 80% range, depending on question wording) and the mere majority approval of

Thabo Mbeki. Fluctuations in job approval of the national government as a whole have closely followed trends in approval for the President, though are generally five to ten percentage points lower.

Figure 7: Evaluations of Overall Government Performance



Source: Markinor, Idasa, Opinion'99, Afrobarometer, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation

Such high approval ratings clearly do not show the type of massive dissatisfaction that one might expect in a society with 40% unemployment and declining life expectancy. But as we have seen, this is not because South Africans fail to realise how bad things are, or that, playing Pollyanna, they simply turn a blind eye to these problems. Rather, they balance significant disappointments in certain areas against a range of impressive achievements in others. This suggests that South Africans were broadly satisfied with the performance of the ANC government over the first ten years of democratic rule.

Partisan Identification and Voting Intentions

How have these evolving performance evaluations translated into partisan attitudes and election results? To answer this, we turn to survey questions that have measured the concept of *partisan identification* since 1994. Partisan identification taps the extent to which voters “identify with” or “feel close to” political parties much in the same way as they identify with social groupings.

While this “identification” is analytically separate from the actual vote, it underlies the voting choice of most voters (Campbell *et al.* 1960).

Party identification is first learned through socialisation from one’s family and social milieu at a young age, largely because young adults have little other information about politics. However, we now know that party identification is constantly updated by a voter’s evolving evaluations of political parties, their leadership and their performance (Key 1979; Achen 1992). As voters accumulate experience and information about parties their identification may change. If a chosen party, whether in government or opposition, performs well, voters may stay loyal to that party. However, if the party does not perform well or a better alternative is presented, loyalties may weaken and party identification may change accordingly. We have firm evidence that the party identifications of South Africans, especially whether or not they feel close to the governing party, are strongly influenced by performance evaluations (Mattes *et al.* 1999; Mattes and Piombo 2001).

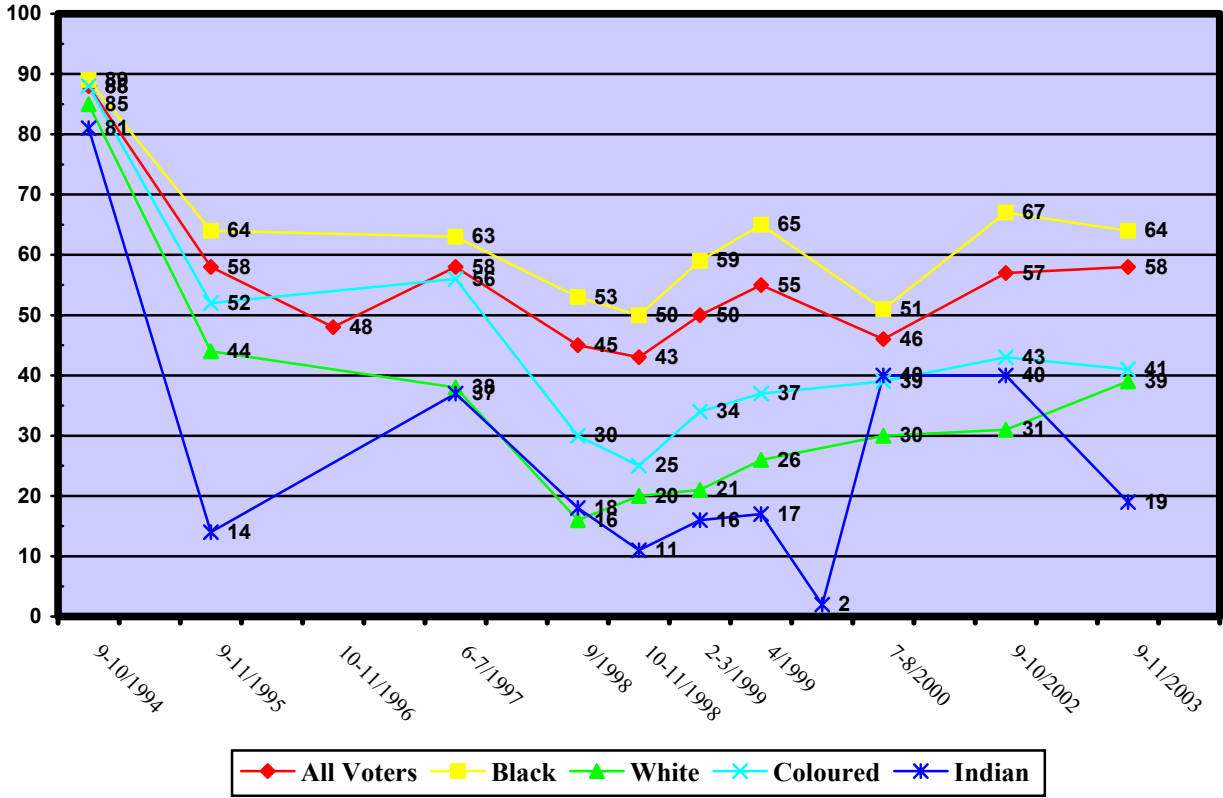
The changing ratio of people who identify with a party versus those who are non-partisan or “independent” indicates the maximum number of potential “floating voters” whose party support is in doubt at the start of a given election campaign. In the first South African National Post-Election Survey conducted by Idasa in 1994, an astounding 88% said that there had been “one particular party” which they “felt especially close to” when asked to reflect back on the historic inaugural election. This extremely high degree of partisan identification may be accounted for in part by the politically charged, euphoric period of late 1994, and partly by a unique question wording, but we have never again registered such a high degree of partisanship.³

Since we have moved to the use of the internationally accepted indicator, the proportion of partisan identifiers in the electorate has fluctuated in a fairly wide

³ In 1994, the question read: “Regardless of how you actually voted on Election Day (in April) was there one particular political party which you felt especially close to?” Thereafter, the question has read: “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party/ies?” The latter question follows the international standard.

band between 58 and 43% (see figure 8). Black (African) voters have consistently been much more likely to identify with a party than minority (white, coloured or Indian) voters. Yet beside the stratospheric 89% recorded after the 1994 election, no more than 65% of the black electorate have told survey researchers that they felt close to a party. This is the first indication that we are not dealing with the highly enthusiastic and loyal black electorate often depicted in popular discourse. In fact, these data yield the perhaps surprising finding that the average proportion of “non-partisan” South African voters is higher than in France and the United States (approximately 40%), Germany (approximately 30%) and the United Kingdom (around 10%) (Dalton 1996: 209).

Figure 8: Partisan Identification (% Identifying With Any Party)



Source: Idasa, Opinion'99, Afrobarometer, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation

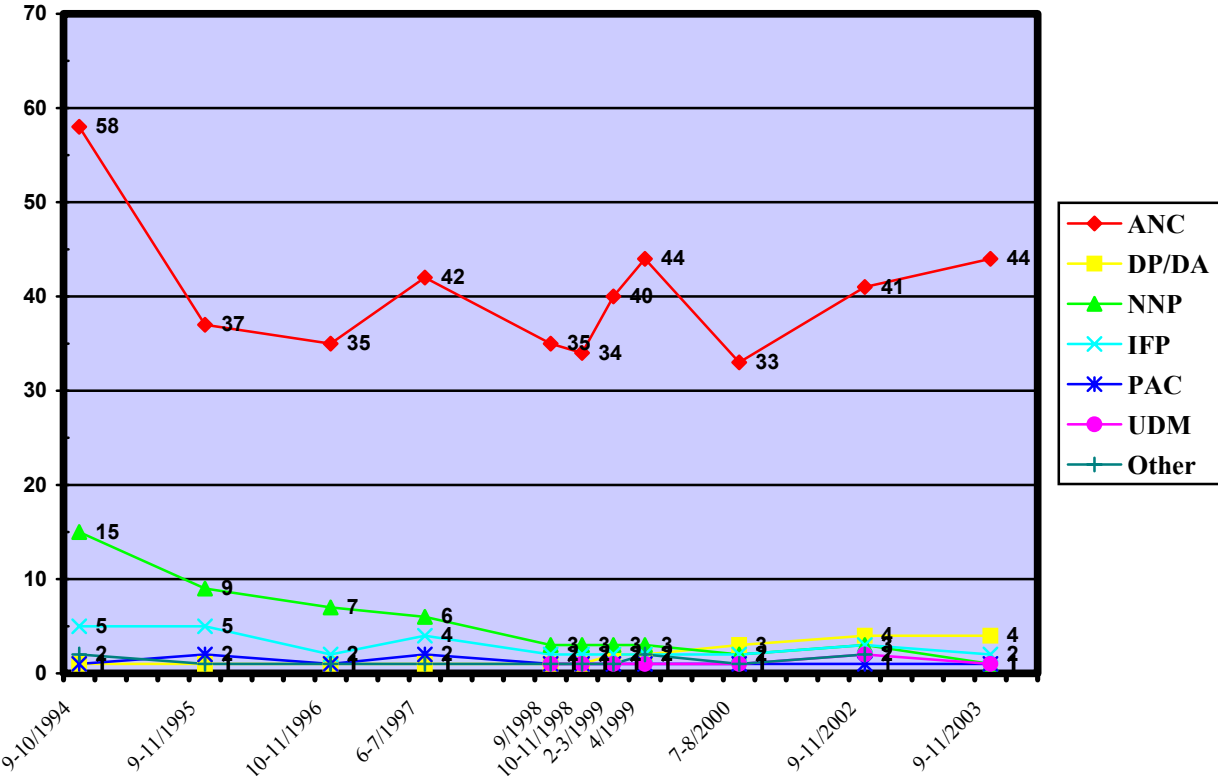
While relative stability in partisanship has been the dominant theme amongst black voters, trends amongst minority voters can best be described as de-alignment. More than 80% of white, coloured and Indian voters said they had “felt especially close to a party” prior to the 1994 election. Yet just one fifth of white, one quarter of coloured and one tenth of Indian voters identified with any party by late 1998, though there has been some movement back toward

partisanship since then.

Once we divide the electorate into partisans and non-partisans, we ask those voters who identify with a party, “which party?” In the 1994 Post-Election Survey, the ANC held a three to one advantage over its closest competitor (the National Party). That ratio grew even larger by 1998, mostly as a result of the collapse of the NP and the inability of other parties to pick up those voter sympathies.

More fluctuation can be observed in the partisan sympathies of minority voters. The demise of the National Party was nothing short of spectacular. NP partisanship plummeted from about half of the minority voters in 1994 to one in ten coloured voters and just 3% of white and Indian voters in 2003. While the insurgent Democratic Alliance failed to establish a meaningful support base amongst coloured and Indian voters, it did manage to garner the sympathies of one quarter of white voters by 2003 (up from just 3% in 1995).

Figure 9: Partisan Identification (% identifying with a specific Party)

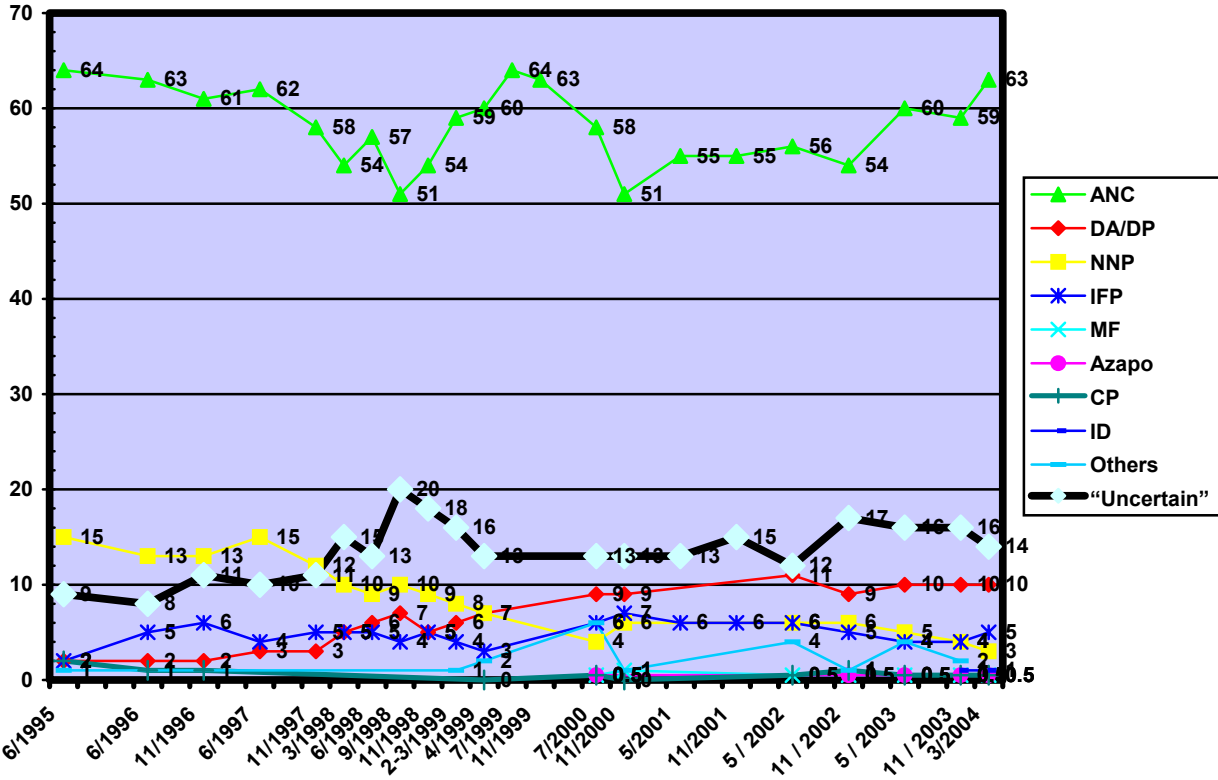


Source: Idasa, Opinion'99, Afrobarometer, Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation

Yet perhaps the most important point to be drawn from these data concerns the nature of the ANC's support base. The ANC won 63% and 68% of the popular vote in 1994 and 1999, and earned the partisanship of 60% of the total electorate in 1994. Since then, partisanship for the ANC has never registered more than 45% of the populace, and never more than 60% of black voters. Since 1995, the pro-ANC predispositions embodied by party identification have fluctuated between 33 and 44% of the total electorate and between 41 and 55% of black voters.

Since 1995, Markinor opinion polls have asked people how they would vote "if an election were held tomorrow" (and offered them a secret ballot). The data reveal that the ANC's professed voting support dipped from 65% in June 1995 to 51% in September 1998, returning again to over 60% in mid 1999, declining again between elections, and rising back to near 60% in February 2004.

Figure 10: Voting Intentions (% Party Vote If Elections Were Held Tomorrow)



Source: Markinor, Idasa, Opinion'99, Afrobarometer

Thus, voting support for the ANC tends to be significantly larger than its

partisan base. This is especially visible within the black electorate: while the ANC has been able to garner between eight and nine out of every ten black votes at election time, between three and four of every ten black South Africans have been dissatisfied with the President's performance, and around one third or more have said they felt close to no political party. This suggests that many non-partisans vote for the ANC because they see it as a better option than any other party. It also suggests that many non-partisans, even those who are dissatisfied with the government, do not see any feasible alternative to the ANC.

Party Images as a Source of Voter Information

Dissatisfaction alone will not lead a person to vote against the ruling party, especially if that person has previously been an ANC supporter. In order for dissatisfaction with the ANC to translate into votes for other parties, people need to consider those parties worthy of their votes. In turn, people must possess enough information about other parties to form such opinions in the first place. Yet, as argued earlier in this paper, it is likely that voters possess far less information about opposition parties than about the governing party. This makes the primary task of the opposition, convincing voters that they are worthy alternatives to the ruling party, all the more difficult.

The information gap is confirmed by answers to an Opinion '99 question that asked respondents how well each party had performed a range of party activities, such as rallies, report backs, or parliamentary questioning. While most people had an opinion - and an overwhelmingly positive one - about the ANC, pluralities or majorities were unable to offer an opinion about the Democratic Party, Pan African Congress, Freedom Front and the then newly formed United Democratic Movement. Only the New National Party and the Inkatha Freedom Party, two parties with significant track records from the apartheid era as well as in provincial governments since 1994, had lower levels of "don't know," but they also had very high levels of disapproval (see table 4).

With little direct experience and track record to go on, voters may have to rely on party or candidate *traits and attributes* to provide clues as to how an opposition party would actually perform in government. These clues could include some basic facts about the personal history of a party or leader (whether they supported, collaborated with, or opposed apartheid, for example), or whether they project an image of competence or compassion, or even more basic factors such as the party leader's skin colour, language, accent and dress. Clues such as these provide informational shortcuts as to how inclusive a party is likely to be in its policies and orientations. In a society like South Africa, an

image of inclusiveness would seem like a prerequisite to any political party hoping to build a multi-ethnic or multi-racial coalition. It is also likely to shape how voters evaluate a particular party.

Table 4: Evaluations of Party Performance

	<i>September 1998</i>			<i>April 1999</i>		
	Fairly Well / Very well	Not Very Well / Not at all well	Do not know enough about them	Fairly Well / Very well	Not very well / Not at all well	Do not know enough about them
ANC	69	26	5	72	21	7
NNP	22	58	20	21	55	37
IFP	16	55	29	16	56	24
DP	19	33	48	22	37	40
PAC	16	40	44	16	46	37
UDM	11	27	62	15	36	49
FF	7	39	54	7	45	49

Question: The survey asked: “Political parties could be involved in a wide range of activities such as developing policies, raising issues and debating in parliament and the media, holding public meetings and rallies, report backs to constituencies, etc. Think about each of the political parties and please tell me whether you thought they performed _____. If I come to a party you haven’t heard of or you feel you do not know enough about, just say so. How would you say ____ has performed these activities?”

Source: Opinion '99.

We can gauge perceptions of inclusivity by examining responses to a question asked in the 1994 Idasa Post-Election Survey as well as in two separate Opinion '99 surveys. Respondents were asked whether they felt a party “represents the interests of all in South Africa or looks after the interests of one group only?” Significantly, large proportions of voters were not able to offer this most basic assessment, even in the 1999 survey conducted *at the end* of the election campaign. In all cases, the number of “don’t knows” are far higher for opposition parties than for the governing ANC (see table 5).

Moreover, the data in table 5 also illustrate that opposition parties have a difficult time in obtaining a positive image amongst those who know something about them. While approximately three quarters of those who could offer an opinion of the ANC saw the party as inclusive, majorities of those who knew something about the Inkatha Freedom Party or the Freedom Front had a negative image, seeing these parties as exclusive. Significant pluralities of those who could offer an opinion of the Democratic Party/Democratic Alliance and Pan African Congress saw them as exclusive .

Opinion '99 also asked the same type of questions about each party with respect to its perceived ability to run the government if elected, whether the party was

believable, and whether it could be trusted. Each obtained the same general patterns of responses. Described in the language of a campaign spin doctor this means that the ANC enjoyed high levels of “positives,” while all opposition parties (whether historically white or historically black) had both high levels of “unknowns” and high levels of “negatives.” A focus on the views of non-partisan black voters (which amounted to 35% of all black voters at the time) shows that they had similar, if not more negative images of the opposition.

Table 5: Who Do Parties Represent?

	<i>September – October 1994</i>			<i>September 1998</i>			<i>April 1999</i>		
	All	Only One Group	Don't know	All	Only One Group	Don't know	All	Only One Group	Don't know
ANC	77	17	6	71	25	4	75	21	4
UDM	N/A	N/A	N/A	22	5	74	33	5	62
NNP	39	38	24	32	44	24	29	22	49
DP	39	14	47	24	20	56	28	22	49
PAC	24	36	40	26	23	51	28	25	47
IFP	16	54	30	20	46	34	27	41	32
FF	8	49	43	6	36	57	8	36	55

Source: Idasa, Opinion '99.

Further analyses of these data show conclusively that images of inclusiveness shape other party images like credibility or trustworthiness. And inclusiveness appears to be a necessary, though certainly insufficient condition for voters to support a party (Ferree 2004 forthcoming). Thus, black voters who are dissatisfied with the government see very little alternative because they have thoroughly negative images of virtually all other parties. This gives them the options of either voting for the ANC as the least bad alternative, or simply not voting.

Floating Voters?

While we have already detailed the existence of large numbers of non-partisan, potentially “floating voters,” we need to look more closely to determine just how likely they are to shift their vote. Being a floating voter implies, first, being aware of alternative parties, and second, knowing something about them and about why they might offer a better option. This would require some awareness of what a party would do differently to the present government if it were elected. I have already argued and presented evidence that this is extremely difficult for

many voters in South Africa.

Yet, difficult is not the same as impossible. Some citizens do possess information and, hence, can form educated opinions about various parties. In order to identify non-partisan voters who might have access to such information, Dalton has developed a framework that categorises voters by whether they are partisan or non-partisan on the one hand, and whether they are “cognitively mobilised” or not on the other. Cognitive mobilisation refers to whether a respondent *either* has at least some university education and, or is “very interested” in the election campaign, factors that should aid voters to gather information and form opinions about the various parties more easily. The two dimensions in the framework yield the following four categories.

- ***Apoliticals*** are not attached to any party and thus ideally open to persuasion, but they are harder to reach because they are less educated and uninterested in the political process.
- ***Ritual Partisans*** are mobilised into politics on the basis of their strong partisan attachments, rather than information and psychological engagement.
- ***Cognitive Partisans*** identify with a party but are intellectually engaged and support parties based on the information at hand.
- ***Apartisans*** are independent of parties, but unlike the apoliticals, engaged and informed. It is amongst these voters that the greatest volatility and unpredictability in voting occurs (Dalton 1996: 213-216).

For purposes of comparison, I have replicated this analysis for South Africa using Opinion '99 data. It reveals that four-fifths of the apparently “floating” non-partisan voters fall into the “apolitical” category and only one-fifth qualify as “apartisan,” or those more likely to act as rational floating voters. It is also instructive to note that the proportion of “apartisan” voters in South Africa in 1999 was twice as small as that measured in the United States nearly fifty years earlier (see table 6).

I have also constructed a longer time series within South Africa to test for any growth in the proportions of “cognitive partisans” or “apartisans”.⁴ It shows that the proportion of “apartisans” has remained at ten percent or less over the past decade, and the proportion of “cognitive partisans” has remained at roughly 15% or less. Thus, only about one quarter of the electorate meets Dalton’s definition of a cognitively mobilised voter. What this means is that even though South

⁴ Because the political interest item was not asked in a consistent fashion over this time period, I have used those people who either “frequently” engage in political discussion and / or have at least some university education.

Africa has a relatively large proportion of non-partisan voters, the vast majority of these voters probably do not have the information or cognitive skills that would enable them to shift their partisan allegiances on the basis of ongoing party performance or party policy positions (see table 7).

Table 6: Cognitive Skills and Partisanship, United States and South Africa Compared

	<i>1952 United States</i>	<i>1980 United States</i>	<i>1992 United States</i>	<i>1998 South Africa</i>	<i>1999 South Africa</i>
Apoliticals	16	19	16	47	37
Ritual Partisans	42	28	20	34	40
Cognitive Partisans	32	35	41	10	15
Apartisans	16	18	24	9	8
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Dalton, 1996: fn. 9, p. 219; Opinion '99.

Table 7: Cognitive Skills and Partisanship Over Time

	<i>1994*</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1996</i>	<i>1997</i>	<i>1998</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2002</i>
Apoliticals	11	35	44	36	46	45	34
Ritual Partisans	69	47	33	46	33	36	44
Cognitive Partisans	19	11	14	12	11	10	13
Apartisans	1	7	8	6	10	10	9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100.0

Note: *1994 data uses those who “urged someone to vote in a specific way” as the cognitive indicator because there was no item on either political interest or political discussion.

Source: Idasa, World Value Survey, Opinion '99, Afrobarometer.

Conclusion

The partisan alignment that emerged from South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 was largely the result of three main developments. First, the ANC had been, by far, the principal force in the successful struggle against apartheid, thus securing the deep gratitude of a large number of voters. Second, the National Party had been the progenitor and defender of the apartheid regime which caused the misery of millions of black South Africans. Moreover, widespread perceptions that it was either impotent to stem political violence in the early 1990s or was actively fomenting it, robbed the NP of any chance to capitalise on the initial goodwill earned by FW de Klerk among the black electorate (Mattes and Gouws 1998). And finally, the NP and De Klerk managed to engage the ANC in negotiations that resulted in a settlement seen to safeguard the interests of minority voters (Mattes 1995).

The public opinion data reviewed in this paper yield four main conclusions about partisan politics *since* 1994. First, even while the South African government has made major efforts to expand access to formal education, there is no evidence that the South African electorate is any more educated than it was a decade ago. Even though there has been a massive expansion of the number of people with access to electricity, voters are no more likely to get news from television (or newspapers) than they did ten years ago. If anything, voters appear to have become less interested in or engaged with politics over the past decade.

Second, with some important exceptions, voters have been generally satisfied with the performance of the ANC government. When voters have been asked to reach an overall assessment, their "averaged" opinion has been a generally, though not overwhelmingly positive view of the performance of the government and the President. Thus, the overall balance of pros and cons has not been so negatively tipped against the government as to alter the initial balance of partisan alignments formed in the 1994 election.

Third, public satisfaction with government performance and expressed voting intentions as revealed to survey researchers have typically not equaled the type of voting support that the ANC has received on election day. In other words, the "electoral dominance" registered by the ANC in South Africa's first three national elections has not been matched by a form of "preference" dominance in which South African voters are overwhelmingly satisfied with government performance. But the data reveal that the ANC has been able, through both an effective election campaign as well as the lack of an effective opposition, to stimulate sharp increases in support in the run-up to elections.

Finally, South African voters generally have very negative images of opposition

parties, and many have no opinions of them at all. When voters dissatisfied with government performance look for alternatives, they are faced with a range of opposition parties about which they have only minimal information. Party images, often based on no more than a few facts about a party's history and other basic attributes such as race, accent, and dress of a party leader, tell them for whom to vote, or more probably, for whom not to vote. Thus, dissatisfied voters must either swallow hard and vote for the ANC as the least bad alternative or simply not vote at all. Given the sharp decline in voter turnout displayed in the 2004 election, the evidence suggests that this latter option looks increasingly attractive to South African voters.

Reference

- Achen, C. 'Social Psychology, Demographic Variables and the Linear Regression: Breaking the Iron Triangle In Voter Research,' *Political Behavior* 14, no. 3, 1992, 195-211.
- Ballenger, J. "Troubled School Feeding Plan Is Still Essential," *Reconstruct* 11 (October 1998).
- Barrell, H. "Back to the Future: Renaissance and South African Domestic Policy," *African Security Review* 9, no.1 (2000).
- Bratton, M. Mattes, R. & E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy and Market Reform in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Bruce, D. "Suspect Crime Statistics Cannot Obscure Grim Truth," *Sunday Independent*, 10 June 2001.
- Budlender, D. "Earnings Inequality In South Africa, 1995-1998," in *Measuring Poverty In South Africa* (Pretoria: Statistics South Africa, 2000).
- Campbell, A. Converse, P. Stokes D. and Miller, W. *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960).
- Dalton, R. *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1996), 96-219.
- Dynes, M. "South Africa's Huge Steps On Long Walk to Prosperity," *Sunday Independent* 26 August 2001.
- February, J. "Political Debates Lack Substance," *Business Day*, 5 April 2004.
- Ferree, K. *The Microfoundations of Ethnic Voting: Evidence From South Africa* Afrobarometer Working Paper Series (East Lansing / Accra / Cape Town: Afrobarometer, 2004 forthcoming).
- Fiorina, M. *Retrospective Voting In American Presidential Elections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).
- Key, V.O. *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality In Presidential Voting, 1936-1960* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

- Mattes, R. *The Election Book: Judgment and Choice in South Africa's 1994 Election* (Cape Town: Idasa, 1995).
- Mattes, R. Christie J. Africa, C. "Public Opinion and the New Constitution." Institute for Democracy in South Africa, Public Opinion Service Reports #4 (Cape Town: Idasa, 1996).
- Mattes, R. Gouws, A., "Race, Ethnicity and Voting Behavior." In *Elections and Conflict Resolution In Africa*, pp. 119-142. Edited by Timothy Sisk & Andrew Reynolds. Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1998.
- Mattes, R. Piombo, J., "Opposition Parties and the Voters In South Africa's 1999 Election," *Democratization* 8, no. 13 (Autumn 2001): 101-128.
- Mattes, R. Taylor, H. Africa, C. 'Judgement and Choice in the 1999 South African Election,' *Politikon*, 26, no. 2 (1999): 235-247.
- Pedrag, S. "Crime Out of Control In South Africa," *MSNBC News*, 29 May 2000 (www.msnbc.com/news).
- Popkin, S. *The Reasoning Voter: Communications and Persuasion In Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- RDP Monitor* 6, "Electricity: Seeing Clearly Now" no. 7 (July 2000).
- RDP Monitor* 7, "Housing: A Good News Story," no. 5 (May 2001).
- Rumney, R. "A Question of Perceptions," *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 3-9 August 2001
- The Economist*, 24 February 2001
- Whiteford, A. and Van Seventer, D. *Winners and Losers: South Africa's Changing Income Distribution* (Johannesburg: WEFA 1999), 11-19.

The Centre for Social Science Research

Working Paper Series

RECENT TITLES

Seekings, J. 2004. *Social and Economic Change since 1994: The Electoral Implications*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 83.

Leibbrandt, M. Poswell, L. Naidoo, P. Welch, M. Woolard. I. 2004. *Measuring recent changes in South African inequality and poverty using 1996 and 2001 census data*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 84.

Nijzink, L. and Piombo, J. 2004. *The Institutions of Representative Democracy*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 85.

Piombo, J. 2004. *The Results of Election '04: Looking Back, Stepping Forward*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 86.

Visser, M. Booysen, F. 2004. *Determinants of the Choice of Health Care Facility utilised by Individuals in HIV/AIDS-affected Households in the Free State Province of South Africa*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 87.

Medupe, F. Collins, K. 2004. *Treatment for HIV/AIDS in the workplace: A Case Study of a Mine in Botswana*. Cape Town. CSSR Working Paper No. 88.

The Centre for Social Science Research

The CSSR is an umbrella organisation comprising five units:

The Aids and Society Research Unit (ASRU) supports quantitative and qualitative research into the social and economic impact of the HIV pandemic in Southern Africa. Focus areas include: the economics of reducing mother to child transmission of HIV, the impact of HIV on firms and households; and psychological aspects of HIV infection and prevention. ASRU operates an outreach programme in Khayelitsha (the Memory Box Project) which provides training and counselling for HIV positive people

The Data First Resource Unit ('Data First') provides training and resources for research. Its main functions are: 1) to provide access to digital data resources and specialised published material; 2) to facilitate the collection, exchange and use of data sets on a collaborative basis; 3) to provide basic and advanced training in data analysis; 4) the ongoing development of a web site to disseminate data and research output.

The Democracy in Africa Research Unit (DARU) supports students and scholars who conduct systematic research in the following three areas: 1) public opinion and political culture in Africa and its role in democratisation and consolidation; 2) elections and voting in Africa; and 3) the impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on democratisation in Southern Africa. DARU has developed close working relationships with projects such as the Afrobarometer (a cross national survey of public opinion in fifteen African countries), the Comparative National Elections Project, and the Health Economics and AIDS Research Unit at the University of Natal.

The Social Surveys Unit (SSU) promotes critical analysis of the methodology, ethics and results of South African social science research. One core activity is the Cape Area Panel Study of young adults in Cape Town. This study follows 4800 young people as they move from school into the labour market and adulthood. The SSU is also planning a survey for 2004 on aspects of social capital, crime, and attitudes toward inequality.

The Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU) was established in 1975 as part of the School of Economics and joined the CSSR in 2002. SALDRU conducted the first national household survey in 1993 (the Project for Statistics on Living Standards and Development). More recently, SALDRU ran the Langeberg Integrated Family survey (1999) and the Khayelitsha/Mitchell's Plain Survey (2000). Current projects include research on public works programmes, poverty and inequality.
