

Title: The Big Communicators: Political Interest and Political Information in South Africa

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1. Introduction

Political interest is the extent to which the citizens of a country engage and participate in political activity at the various levels of governance. This level of engagement from the civil society is crucial in the carrying out of democracy. Responsiveness of elected leaders to the demands of the people fortifies or degrades the institution of democracy and affects the level of engagement within the polity. The view of those in power by the powerless influences the nature of interaction between the two groups. While political information is about the facts communicated, it also acts as a conduit for correspondences between the leaders and the people. Through these channels, people are communicated to about political processes, the use of public funds and relations between the government and opposition. South Africa is a nation that has long since experienced a high level of political interest from its people, in traditional territories, as a colonial state and as a democratic nation. This essay evaluates how political interest has manifested in South Africa since 1994 and the reasons behind this, as well as the forces that command media attention and how the people receive information about political matters.

2. Participation

a. Voting: Turnout vs Outcome

Participation through voting is a good indicator of political engagement as the opinions and desires of a large percentage of the citizenry can be taken into account in the selection of leaders. Voting embodies the voice of the people and is considered to be the “...prime indicator of democratic participation” (Parry & Moyser, 1994:48). Consequently, voter turnout is heavily relied on to gauge political interest. While voting gives perspective into general consensus, it “conveys little information...as to policy preferences” (Parry & Moyser, 1994:50) which leaves the bulk of decision making to the elected representatives. The reliability of mass participation as an indicator of political interest is hampered by factors like voting fraud, influence on choice by wealth disparities, culture and education levels, accessibility of polling stations among others. Voting also seems to relegate the individual to a base political actor whose primary role is to enable representation, the more practical and cost-effective mode of participation. The importance of voting outcome as opposed to voter turnout is also evident by the majority opinion carrying the vote after an election regardless of how many people cast the ballot. Exclusion based on the majority vote is mitigated by a proportional representation system which keeps the leaders accountable to as many voices of the people as possible. This

is done by mandating that the seats in the legislature mirror the number of votes gained in national and provincial elections (Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), 2023).

Province	National election year																	
	1994			1999			2004			2009			2014			2019		
	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party	Votes (millions)	Votes %	Winning Party
Eastern Cape	2.41	84.4	ANC	1.62	73.9	ANC	1.81	79.3	ANC	1.61	69.7	ANC	1.59	70.8	ANC	1.40	69.3	ANC
Free State	1.06	77.4	ANC	0.88	81.0	ANC	0.84	82.1	ANC	0.76	71.9	ANC	0.72	69.7	ANC	0.57	62.9	ANC
Gauteng	2.49	59.1	ANC	2.52	68.1	ANC	2.41	68.7	ANC	2.81	64.7	ANC	2.52	54.9	ANC	2.41	53.2	ANC
KwaZulu-Natal	1.82	48.6	IFP	1.20	40.5	IFP	1.31	47.5	ANC	2.26	63.8	ANC	2.53	65.3	ANC	2.03	55.5	ANC
Limpopo	1.78	92.7	ANC	1.48	89.3	ANC	1.49	89.7	ANC	1.32	85.3	ANC	1.20	79.0	ANC	1.16	77.0	ANC
Mpumalanga	1.07	81.9	ANC	0.97	85.3	ANC	0.98	86.3	ANC	1.15	85.1	ANC	1.09	78.8	ANC	0.92	72.2	ANC
North West	1.33	83.5	ANC	1.05	80.5	ANC	1.08	81.8	ANC	0.82	73.8	ANC	0.76	67.8	ANC	0.63	63.7	ANC
Northern Cape	0.20	49.8	ANC	0.21	64.4	ANC	0.22	68.8	ANC	0.25	61.1	ANC	0.28	63.9	ANC	0.24	58.2	ANC
Western Cape	1.20	56.2	NP	0.68	42.6	ANC	0.74	46.3	ANC	0.99	48.8	DA	1.24	57.3	DA	1.12	52.4	DA

Table 1- The relationship between voter turnout and voting outcome shown through the statistics of the winning parties across provinces in South Africa between the 1994 and 2019 national elections. The data was collected from the (IEC, 2013; 2014; 2019) for the national elections in 2004, 2009, 1999, 2014 and 2019. The 1994 national elections were run by a temporary electoral commission (South Africa, 1994). For tabulation purposes, the votes (millions) were rounded off to the second decimal.

ANC- African National Congress, NP- National Party, IFP- Inkatha Freedom Party, DA- Democratic Alliance

The general trend following South Africa's transition to democracy has been consistent victories for the African National Congress (ANC) in all provinces with the exception of KwaZulu-Natal in 1994 and 1996 as well as the Western Cape in 1994 and since 2009. While a regular turnout shows high levels of political interest, it does not reveal intention behind the vote, nor does it explain the slow decline in ANC support after 2004. It is likely that the high voter turnout from 1994-2004 correlated with increased expectations for change among the people especially the majority black population after the fall of apartheid. The gradual decline from 2004-2019 can be explained by disillusionment in what was expected and what could be achieved by the new government. Despite a declining support base the ANC has continued to win elections, necessitating further study into voting patterns and more specifically, why people vote the way they do.

b. Protest

Protest is an expression of concern for issues about injustice in civil society in which a disruption of daily activity attempts to draw attention to the cause being advocated for. It is carried out through marches, rallies, riots, petitions and other forms of demonstration. According to Section 17 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) (hereafter the Constitution) everyone has the right, peacefully and unarmed, to assemble, to demonstrate, to picket and to present petitions. The codified support is conditional on a protest being peaceful, which is considered democratic and protected by the Constitution unlike violent demonstrations which are not. Violence is denoted by physical injury or destruction to property. The distinction between ‘violent’ and ‘unrest’ is an important one to make as both the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Incident Registration Information System (IRIS) record data using the term ‘unrest,’ as well as SAPS making a distinction between ‘protests’ and ‘incidents.’ The IRIS distinguishes a peaceful crowd from an unrestful crowd with the need for police intervention. The evidence for unrest is “based on what the police do...rather than what the protesters do” and the police are also not required to provide evidence of prior violence involving bodily harm or property damage Alexander, *et al.* (2015:13-19). With assessments of what constitutes a threat remaining subjective, the ambiguity created leaves interpretation of encounters between police and protesters up to speculation, something often done in the media Alexander, *et al.* (2015:19).

Protest as a form of interest is not inherently political, with many causes stemming from socio-economic reasons rather than governance. Communities go to great lengths to voice their concerns before resorting to protest however growing manipulation of the Regulation of Gatherings Act by municipalities has made lawful protest difficult (Duncan, 2014). Jane Duncan asserts that “many protests remain unreported” until they turn violent including cases of police instigating violence. She points out that the focused negative press on protests justifies “more resources and greater repression” (Duncan, 2014) which may place South African lives at greater risk. According to Alexander, *et al.*, the most frequent motive for incidents from 1997-2013 was ‘demand wage increases’ which showed that these protests were rooted in economic hardship Alexander, *et al.* (2015:36); (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997:131-145). The second most frequent motive between 2009-2013, ‘dissatisfied with service delivery’ is also relevant as it has been credited for many of the unrestful incidents that have occurred in South Africa. ‘Service delivery’ refers to local government, electricity, housing, water and sanitation, among others with incidents in this category happening most commonly in population dense

areas with rampant poverty. This motive option was officially introduced in 2008 which explains its prevalence in incident descriptions thereafter Alexander, *et al.* (2015:37-38). The question whether greater protest translates to greater political interest requires further analysis, but it can be understood as a type of engagement with leaders often taken by people that have exhausted other forms of recourse.

3. Representation

a. Political Parties

South Africa became a multi-party democracy in 1994 with the inaugurating national elections allowing 19 parties to vie for presidency (South Africa, 1994). Larry Diamond states "...in a modern society, democracy cannot function without political parties" (Diamond, 2016:394), as these are the channels through which people communicate their needs to the leaders. By 2019, the number of political parties had grown to 48. However, the strength of a multiparty system can also be its biggest drawback. Out of the 48, only 14 parties gained seats in the National Assembly with the ANC gaining 230 out of 400 seats (South Africa, 2019). As most of the political parties gained no seat, the efficacy of the multiparty system gets called into question. The failings of an overextended multiparty system are revealed, whereby numbers alone constrain or debilitate robust competition between political parties. According to Section 53(1)(c) of the Constitution (1996) all questions before the Assembly are decided by a majority of the votes cast. With more than half of the seats, the ANC can easily outvote all other parties in the National Assembly. Paired with the fact that the ANC has won all national elections since 1994, South Africa has in effect become a one-party dominant state.

The dominance of a single party for several years affects the level of political interest in ways that are difficult to predict. It is likely that both the political society and civil society become adversely affected by this monopoly. Activities within the political society begin to centre around maintaining or destabilizing power, all of which benefit political elites at the expense of alienating the civil society. Corruption can rapidly increase in a system where power has been concentrated in the hands of few for prolonged periods of time. This was the case when Thuli Madonsela, a lawyer and Public Protector in South Africa from 2009-2016 wrote a 444-page report exposing former President, Jacob Zuma for misappropriating 246 million rand of taxpayers' money for home renovations which included "...a swimming pool, amphitheatre, visitor centre, cattle enclosure and chicken coop..." (Smith, 2014). The building of Zuma's opulent homestead in KwaZulu-Natal, one of South Africa's poorest provinces and the

unauthorized displacement of his neighbours exponentially increased costs at the public's expense (Smith, 2014). The likelihood that Zuma's affiliation with the ANC allowed his actions to go unaccounted for is high, as his misappropriation was reported by an independent institution, not the government. The effect of one-party dominance on the level of political interest in civil society has most notably shown itself to be electoral disengagement. Table 1 shows the gradual decline of ANC support from 1994-2019 in all provinces except KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape. Western Cape became a major support base for the Democratic Alliance (DA) from the 2009 national elections following Zuma's rise to presidency in 2007. There was also increase in unrestful incidents between 2009-2013 under the motive 'dissatisfied with service delivery' Alexander, *et al.* (2015:38), which coincided with Zuma's terms in office. These events could be a result of poor leadership rather than fatigue with the ANC however they should all be taken into account in analysing South Africans' political interest.

b. Competition

The presence of multiple political parties is a great incentive for competition. The needs of ordinary people are necessarily prioritized in an attempt to secure their vote. It is the ability to compete that balances power between the winning party and opposition parties in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures. The main opposition to ANC has been the DA since its formation in 2000. The success of the DA highlights what could become a growing trend in South African politics: coalitions. The merger between the Democratic Party (DP), the New National Party (NNP) and the Federal Alliance (FA) solidified the DA as a serious competitor and viable alternative to ANC, winning 12.3% of the vote after its first run in the 2004 national election. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) have also proved to be highly competitive after gaining 10.8% of the vote in the 2019 general election, just 6 years after being founded (Democratic Alliance, 2019; South Africa, 2014). There has been a resurgence in populist politics with the rise of EFF which has given it a competitive advantage over older and more established political parties. The EFF focuses on economic emancipation and found support among "young adults, the poor, and the unemployed" (Mckenna, 2019). This party seemingly filled a gap, responding to the immediate need of South Africans for employment and the protests for wage increases. The EFF has shown that populism can evoke a greater voter turnout in 6 years than liberalism could do in 20 for most political parties. However, the coherence and practicality of the EFF's ideology is yet to be seen. Capitalizing on strong political feeling

might work in the short term but the ability to produce realistic results can only be discovered with time.

Fairness is crucial in electoral competitiveness. This is guaranteed institutionally by “an independent and authoritative electoral commission” that can honour and uplift the voice of the people in their choice of representation (Pastor, 1999). The Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), established by the Constitution plays this role and continues to uphold the integrity of elections. Among its obligations is managing elections of legislative bodies at national, provincial and municipal levels and ensuring that these elections are free and fair (National Government of South Africa, 2023). Robust competitiveness relies not only on fairness at the polling station, but also equitable access to funding for parties and campaigns. Diamond argues “newer parties and candidates cannot seriously compete without some fair minimum in this regard” (Diamond, 2016:37). Section 236 of the Constitution (1996) ensures this fair minimum by stipulating that to enhance multi-party democracy, national legislation must provide for the funding of political parties participating in national and provincial legislatures on an equitable and proportional basis. The Represented Political Parties Fund (RPPF) and the Multiparty Democracy Fund (MPDF) are obtained from the National Revenue Fund and donors respectively, then disbursed by the IEC in support of represented parties (IEC, 2023). These measures ensure that political competition remains vital, in turn safeguarding the interests of the civil society.

4. Political Information

a. Gatherings and Forums

Political information are facts about political matters; governance, use of public funds, elections however as the focus is often placed on the mode of delivery, it manifests more like a conduit than the information itself in both political and civil society. This delivery belies the nature and level of importance of the message being communicated. The magnitude of delivery, that is, how widespread, formal, unrestful or violent informs an observer of the message’s urgency. The size and demographic of the gatherings also give insight into the nature of the cause being discussed. However, it should be noted that size is not necessarily an indicator of importance. While these factors cannot always be taken at face value, they are a good indicator of the issue at hand and its effect on the general public. Political information is conveyed through a diverse makeup of gatherings and forums. These include rallies, campaigns, protests or political parties, independent organizations and national conferences. At the core lies

political parties which dominate the dissemination of political information. The parties represent pressing issues of their supporters, and are trusted to make these known in the upper echelons of political society with the influence bestowed upon them. The availability of funding and greater access to the media will mean that some political parties are more exposed to the public than others, thus can organize big campaigns and command attention more easily. As it is only the parties represented in the National Assembly and Provincial legislatures that receive government funding on an equitable and proportional basis, the lack of resources will relegate most of the 48 parties to the periphery of political activity.

Ideology is a key part of gaining attention from voters, in particular the ability to yield a radical stance which can play into populist ideals and attract more supporters. This is the case with the EFF whose focus on South Africa's high unemployment rate together with its support for expropriation of land and the "nationalization of mines, banks and other strategic sectors of the economy" without compensation resonated with a young demographic Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (2019:9). This created a rapid gain in the vote for EFF between the 2014 and 2019 national elections from 6.35% to 10.8%. A revealing comparison can be made to the DA which also focuses on the issue of unemployment however the numbers from 2014-2019 show a fall in the percentage vote from 22.23% to 20.77% (South Africa 2014; 2019). This difference in statistics could be explained by a number of reasons, but it is likely that the radical stance taken by the EFF gave it a significant advantage in garnering support from the people. Forums like political parties allow likeminded people to come together and discuss issues that are relevant to them, and also allow them to contest the ideas of other parties that seek legislative power. Thus, the level of competition for voters' attention sky rockets. In this environment the likelihood of misinformation, vilification of opponents and biased portrayal of events in the press also increases which can lead to polarized views amongst the most competitive political parties and their supporters leaving little room for nuance.

b. Technology, State-owned and Private media sectors

The role of technology in the spread of political information is unparalleled. Devices like radios, mobile phones and television have allowed facts about a given situation to be reported in real time, giving ordinary people the opportunity to draw their own conclusions before the input of institutions like the government or political parties. The advent of the internet has further empowered the spread of information, to an extent that one would struggle to find a political party or government without a website or some form of social media presence in modern society. With 34.5 million internet users, representing 57% of the population (Internet

World Stats, 2021) there is a ready access to everyday people in South Africa whose views are influenced by what they see online. The ease of access to information also increases the likelihood of misinformation that can skew the public's view of political affairs. Given these resources, access to alternative sources of political information has created a competitive media space. Both private and state-owned media outlets report on events in the public's interest but their perspectives are likely to differ with the State seeking to preserve its image as a democratic institution and the private sector exposing why this is not always the case.

State-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) dominates the media in both radio and television which has broadened its reach across the nation (BBC, 2022). SABC "operates three national TV networks, two pay-tv channels" and also owns the radio stations SAfm, 5fm, Radio Sonder Grense, Ukhozi FM, Lesedi FM and Channel Africa which function across languages like English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Sesotho (BBC, 2022). In a country with 11 official languages, multilingualism serves to include as much of the population as possible which bolsters the supporter and financial base of SABC. The breadth of this enterprise gives the ruling ANC immeasurable power in controlling the way stories are reported in the media. The media giant has dealt with accusations of political censorship which called into question its reliability as a political source (BBC, 2022) however this has not destabilized its base as SABC still firmly holds the public media sector in its grasp. Independent newspapers like Mail & Guardian, Sunday Times and City press challenge SABC's hegemony and indicate "no reluctance to exercise the freedom to speak out strongly and critically" in spite of harassment in form of investigations, impromptu arrests, bugged telephones and threats to withdraw government advertising (Harber, 2014:209). Harber discusses the role of the media in exposing corruption and lavish spending of government officials, notably commissioner of police Jackie Selebi who was "sentenced in 2010 to 15 years for his corrupt relationship with major criminal figures" and cabinet minister, Dina Pule who was dismissed for questionable spending (Harber, 2014:209). These news reports were made by the Mail & Guardian and Sunday Times. The private media market is dominated by Media 24, "the local arm of...global conglomerate, Naspers" which has a collective audience of 25 million people in South Africa (Harber, 2014:210). The only areas in which it is not prevalent are those "it is excluded from by regulation: free-to-air radio and television broadcasting," notably where the SABC is most influential. The monopoly of both the private and public media sectors by few organizations has potential for resounding positive and negative effect. It can either enhance the quality of journalism due to cohesive and focused views on ways forward or homogenise and create a

polarity in news reports. Receiving an accurate view of the political landscape would require being open to news from various sources.

5. Conclusion

Political interest has shown itself most visibly through voting and in form of both peaceful, unrestful and violent protests. The voter turnout for ANC has declined since 1994 to an all-time low of 57.5% (IEC, 2019) and although ANC still holds the majority vote, it can be expected following past trends that the percentage share will continue to fall. The high unemployment rate and dissatisfaction with the government's services are the current problems facing South Africa's people, leaving nostalgia of the liberation days to resonate less with younger demographics in the coming years. Protest remains a frequent form of political engagement and calls attention to why the people lack confidence in institutional solutions, or in the case of violent protest, democratic ones. The contradiction of one-party domination in a multi-party democracy reveals a loophole in the political process, and will likely have a heightened effect on future politics, namely the increase of coalitions or populist ideology like in the cases of the DA and EFF. Gatherings and forums continue to inform the people of political events, most notably political parties that represent their supporters' interests. The public and private media sector being dominated by SABC and Media 24, as well as few other media groups has potential to improve investigative journalism due to resource availability however the likelihood of polarization in the media is also high, requiring the average citizen to receive information cautiously to avoid bias.

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