



Briefing Paper 476

April 2019

THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION

1. Introduction¹

This year's National and Provincial Elections – to use the official name – are being touted as the most crucial yet in our 25 years of democracy. We have a tendency towards hyperbole and exaggeration when it comes to elections. In 1999 and 2004 there was much anticipation (and angst) about the prospect of the ANC winning more than two-thirds of the vote, giving it the power to change the Constitution. In 2009 there was serious concern about the kind of government that would emerge from the 'anyone but Thabo' coalition of forces that lined up behind Jacob Zuma and propelled him into the presidency.

Very little happened after 1999 and 2004 to justify the hype; even with a two-thirds majority the ANC made no significant constitutional changes. 2009 was different: even the direst forecasts at that time failed to predict just how deeply the Zuma government would harm the country. As the various commissions of enquiry now under way are confirming, the meretricious and kleptocratic state built by Mr Zuma – and his many allies both inside and outside of government – took South African to the brink of national failure. Even now, the country is not entirely safe: an Eskom default on its massive debt payments; a collapse of the power grid; a downgrade by the only credit ratings agency that still has us above 'junk' status; a strong resurgence by the state capture faction within the ANC – any of these things could send us over the edge.

And this is why the pre-election excitement this time around is justified. There is a clear sense that the ANC is not yet firmly under the control of the 'good guys'; that the renewal begun by Cyril Ramaphosa and his team could easily be derailed;

and that it may well be the result of this election that decides the matter.

2. Registration and Turnout

Before looking at the situations of the various parties and how they are likely to fare, it is necessary to give some attention to the underlying question of how many people will actually vote.

In 1994, an estimated 86% of eligible voters (also known as Voting Age Population, VAP) cast a ballot. This figure has declined ever since, apart from a slight rise in 2009, to the point where only 57% of the VAP voted in 2014.² There is a large gap between the number of eligible voters and the number of registered voters: there are 26.74 million registered voters, but the IEC estimates that as many as 9.8 eligible voters have not registered.³ In other words, almost 27% of people entitled by age and citizenship to vote next month will not be able to do so.

Very few experts predict a percentage poll (the proportion of registered voters who actually vote) of more than 70%. This would result in an effective poll of 51% (70% of the 73% of eligible voters who have registered). Even if this is not particularly low by international standards, it is certainly not good for our democracy. There are various reasons why people do not register: they may lack ID papers; they may find it difficult to reach registration offices, especially in rural districts; they may simply not think it important or worthwhile to do so; or, they may have made a conscious decision to turn their backs on electoral

politics. Each of these reasons is cause for concern.

A low turnout is widely believed to disadvantage the ANC, and to favour those opposition parties whose base is largely urban and wealthier. The DA, for example, is well-known for getting its supporters to the polls which, in the cities and the more densely populated provinces like Gauteng and the Western Cape, is much easier to do than in the far-flung districts of Limpopo and the Eastern Cape.

A low turnout of young voters would be especially problematic for the EFF, and for any other parties which draw much of their support from the under-30 age group. A total of 5.65 million people aged from 18 to 29 have registered, out of approximately 12 million citizens of that age group. In January, the IEC announced that only 16% of 18-19 year olds had registered;⁴ even allowing for a fairly successful registration weekend in February, this figure is unlikely to have approached 50% by the time the registration period closed.

There is clearly a great deal of work to be done to convince potential voters to become actual voters. Government and civil society both have a role to play here, but it is the political parties that should be asking themselves why such a large percentage of voters appear to find their offerings uninspiring and not worth voting for.

3. The ANC

Since Cyril Ramaphosa took over as President we have had clear indications of his reformist agenda, but we have also seen just how deeply entrenched his enemies are. Thoughtful, responsible voters – as opposed to those who merely tick the same box every five years out of habit or loyalty – face a difficult task: if they wish to strengthen Mr Ramaphosa's position, thus enabling him to continue clearing out the mediocre and the crooked members of his party, they have to vote for the ANC; but, by virtue of the party list system, such a vote will simply return many of the most undesirable ones to Parliament, and possibly to the Cabinet.

Voters also have to deal with the related argument that says that a poor result for the ANC – less than 60% – will threaten Mr Ramaphosa's position within the party, and strengthen the hands of

those who want him out. A strong showing by the ANC, on the other hand, will supposedly be seen as an endorsement of Mr Ramaphosa, and will undermine his enemies, putting us on the path to a potential ten years of benign and beneficent rule. It seems that quite a number of traditional opposition supporters are impressed by this argument.

This is an example of the 'Ramaphosa effect' – his ability to attract support at a rate far higher than that of his party. The ANC's own research earlier this year put the gap at 13 percentage points – 73% national support for Mr Ramaphosa against 60% for his party.⁵ The party's election team will be hoping that this effect shows itself at the polls, but there are at least three factors that are pulling in the other direction, and which threaten to keep the ANC's support below 60%.

The long years of corruption and scandal under Jacob Zuma have taken their toll on the ANC's reputation and have seriously devalued its brand as the 'party of liberation'. Its fall to below 54% of the vote in the 2016 municipal elections reflected both a stay-away from the polls by traditional ANC voters and, probably to a lesser extent, a switch to some of the opposition parties. Either way, it signalled dissatisfaction with the direction the party was taking. Three years later, and with Mr Zuma gone, we may expect a rebound. However, voters will also be taking note of the seemingly endless litany of greed, dishonesty, and hypocrisy that is emerging from the commissions of enquiry. Some of those who deserted the ANC in the Zuma years may return, but others may conclude that the rot goes further than just the former President and his immediate circle.

Secondly, there is a distinct lack of unity and policy coherence at the top levels of the ANC. To mention two examples,

- Finance Minister Tito Mboweni floated the idea of partial privatisation of state-owned enterprises during his budget speech, only for Deputy-President David Mabuza to say that he "doesn't take Tito seriously" in the matter.⁶
- Mr Ramaphosa, in a clear attempt to put some distance between himself and Mr Zuma, has frequently spoken of "nine wasted years" in reference to his predecessor's term of office; only for Gwede Mantashe, the ANC Chairperson, to

effectively rebuke him by claiming that “only the last four years were wasted”.⁷

The point is not who may be right or wrong in these debates, but simply that a party which, on the eve of an election in which it hopes to rebuild its majority, sends out contradictory messages and gives the impression of discord at the highest levels, is risking serious self-harm.

Thirdly, South Africa’s increasing urbanisation and the growth in the black middle-class make the ANC, arguably, a victim of its own socio-economic success. Certainly, poverty and inequality are stubbornly serious problems, along with huge unemployment, but it cannot be gainsaid that the government’s work in housing provision, mass electrification, social security, primary health-care and the use of the state as a source of employment, has economically and socially empowered millions of citizens who might otherwise have languished.⁸ It is precisely this empowerment, ironically, that opens these citizens to the ‘opportunity gospel’ preached by the DA and similar parties. Again, this is not about right and wrong, but merely a natural development which can be seen in many newly-democratic countries, but spurred on in our case by the ANC’s own, relatively successful, policies.

The ANC is increasingly becoming a party of rural over-30s, with its greatest strength in the former ‘homeland’ territories. Even though it will win the 2019 election fairly comfortably, its long-term prospects are far more questionable.

4. The Main Opposition Parties

It has become customary to refer to the DA and the EFF as the ‘main’ or ‘biggest’ opposition parties, and even to group them with the ANC as the ‘three major’ parties. This belies their actual size. In 2014 the ANC won nearly three times the vote of the DA, which in turn won three-and-a-half times the vote of the EFF. Two years later, the ANC still took double the DA’s votes, while the DA in turn maintained its three-to-one advantage over the EFF.

The last three or four years were a gift to the DA. The ANC was consumed by internal divisions and factionalism; the state-capture project was becoming public knowledge; Jacob Zuma’s reckless misgovernance was clear for all to see; the government even contrived to bring one of the

jewels in its crown, the social grants system, to the brink of collapse. At the same time, the DA’s effective victories in Johannesburg and Tshwane in the 2016 municipal elections meant that it controlled the country’s three most important cities. And in 2015 it installed a young, charismatic son of Soweto as its national leader. But somehow, the DA has failed to take advantage of this almost perfectly favourable combination of factors. It has also suffered from internal tensions and factionalism, though not to the same degree as the ANC. Some of its leading members, including its former leader, Helen Zille, have been caught up in Twitter controversies, and accused of perpetuating colonial and/or racial stereotypes. And the party’s highly-regarded head of policy resigned in January, shortly before the launch of its manifesto.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the drawn-out saga of the dismissal (or resignation, depending on whom one believes) of Patricia de Lille, one of the DA’s most high-profile politicians, who alleged racist treatment at the hands of some senior white members. Ms de Lille’s presence in the DA was touted as proof that the party had shed its white, liberal image and begun to attract people from more left-leaning, working-class, black backgrounds. Her departure undermines that claim.

All of this has detracted from the DA’s superior record in governance, at provincial level in the Western Cape, and in the three metropolitan municipalities mentioned above. It should have been looking at turning its transformed leadership profile and its good track record into a 30%-plus share of the vote (from 22.2% in 2014 and 26.9% in 2016). Instead, most opinion polls suggest that it will slip back towards 20% or even less.

Based on previous election polls that have underestimated the DA’s eventual performance, these polls might well be wrong, but it does seem that the official opposition may have stalled in its growth. Whether, or how much, this is due to its internal problems is difficult to say. Some argue that the party has simply reached its ceiling, and that it cannot make a decisive breakthrough into the black vote. But if this were so, there would be no reason to expect a lower vote than it achieved in 2016.

The EFF, through a combination of militant rhetoric, a penchant for sound-bites, and a media

that is generally more interested in sensation than substance when it comes to political matters, has secured major party status for itself. These elections are the big test for it – if it fails to make a showing significantly above the 10% level its future will be in doubt. It has also been affected by internal wranglings and at least one high-profile resignation. And there are serious allegations of financial impropriety related to the VBS Bank scandal.

If this election had been held two years ago, the EFF would probably have been confident of 15% or more. It masterfully exploited Jacob Zuma's inept presidency in general, and the Nkandla issue in particular (the chants of 'pay back the money' effectively made Parliament a no-go area for Mr Zuma for some time). But after a while the EFF's recipe of simply shouting louder than everyone else, and provoking over-reaction from the parliamentary authorities, seemed to wear thin. Not all voters base their decisions on rhetoric and personalities. Some, at least, look for substance and for deliverable promises; and they recognise when they are being offered a beguiling fantasy – such as the doubling of social grants and the handing over of half of SA's land to women and youth.⁹ Voters also have memories, and they recall some of EFF leader Julius Malema's flip-flops: he was once 'prepared to die for Zuma', only to become the latter's nemesis. Now, he shows signs of vacillating again, by offering support to one of Mr Zuma's key state-capture appointees, Tom Moyane, former SARS head. Mr Malema has also upset many with his perceived anti-Indian comments, and by his clear animus against the likes of Pravin Gordhan and Ismail Momoniat, people of great integrity who stood firm through the worst of the Zuma years.

The EFF also stands to be worst affected by the low rate of voter registration among youth. As Dr Jakkie Cilliers has remarked, the EFF may be able to fill stadiums with young supporters, but many of them are not registered to vote. For this and the other reasons mentioned, it seems unlikely that the EFF will emerge from these elections with its position significantly enhanced.

The viability of a multi-party system depends to a large extent on the possibility of power changing hands; for that to happen, there must be at least one opposition party, or a potentially strong coalition of parties, that poses a threat to the incumbent party. It seems we are not yet at that point in South Africa.

5. Smaller Parties

The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the United Democratic Movement (UDM), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), the Congress of the People (COPE), and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) have established themselves as persistent, if small, presences in successive Parliaments. (The National Freedom Party (NFP) could be added to this list, but for the fact that it failed to participate in the 2016 municipal elections due to financial and leadership issues.) The African Independent Congress (AIC), Agang SA, the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and the African People's Convention (APC) round out the list of parties that had at least one seat in Parliament after the 2014 election.

Two questions arise: How will these parties perform this time around? And, do they matter? (Related to the second question is another – is a vote for one of these parties a wasted vote?) There is very little data on which to base predictions for these parties. It is interesting that the IFP almost doubled its share from 2.4% in 2014 to 4.7% in 2016, but this probably just reflects the NFP's absence from the polls in 2016; it is an IFP offshoot and the two parties share a rural KwaZulu-Natal stronghold. None of the other small parties managed more than 1% in 2014, with the APC squeezing in in last (seat-winning) place with 0.17%.¹⁰ Most of them declined a little in the 2016 municipal elections. There is nothing to suggest that any of them will suddenly buck the trend and take 4% or 5% of the vote.¹¹ Neither is there much to suggest that all these parties will disappear from Parliament, though one or two might.

But this does not mean that all votes for these parties are wasted. Some of them occupy distinct niches which allow them to raise issues of great importance for small sections of the population. The FF+ is one such – some Afrikaans-speakers will feel that it at least gives them and their cultural concerns a voice at the centre of affairs. The ACDP is another – it articulates a solid, evangelical Christian viewpoint on social, economic and political issues. The PAC and the APC keep the voice of Africanism from fading out entirely.

More than this, these parties contain some of the most impressive, experienced, and capable MPs in the National Assembly. Whatever one's party preferences may be, it cannot be denied that

between them, COPE's Mosiuoa Lekota and Deirdre Carter, the UDM's Bantu Holomisa and Nqabayomzi Kwankwa, the ACDP's Steve Swart and Cheryllyn Dudley, the APC's Themba Godi, the FF+'s Corné Mulder, and the IFP's Mkhuleko Hlengwa and Liezl van der Merwe contribute more energy, hard work, and – of vital importance – cross-party compromise and consensus-building, than virtually any other ten MPs. A vote that returns MPs of this calibre to Parliament is not a wasted one.

6. New Parties

Apart from the 13 parties already mentioned, there are a further 35 registered to take part in the national ballot. (Provinces have varying numbers of contesting parties.) Some of the 35 have stood in previous elections, and have won a seat or two: the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) and the United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP), for example. However, there is no particular reason to think that any of these parties will reverse their fortunes this year.

Some of the newly registered parties may have better luck, especially those which are led by nationally recognisable figures, such as Good (Patricia de Lille); Black First Land First (Andile Mngxitama); the African Content Movement (Hlaudi Motsoeneng); and the African Transformation Movement (Mzwanele 'Jimmy' Manyi who, though not the leader, is widely known from his stints as government spokesperson.)

It will probably take between 35 000 and 40 000 votes for a party to secure a seat in the National Assembly. On name recognition alone, these four parties should reach that kind of total; Ms de Lille, especially, may take two or three times that number of votes.

In the 2014 election the previously unknown African Independent Congress (AIC) surprised everyone by winning almost 100 000 votes and three seats. Many observers put this down to the fact that it appeared on the ballot paper immediately above the ANC, with a logo in the same three colours, and thereby picked up a number of x's that were meant to go to the ANC. This time around, voters will find the Economic Emancipation Forum (EEF) occupying the spot immediately above the EFF – it will be interesting to see if the newcomer's clever choice of name pays off for it.

7. Likely Outcome

It seems clear that the Ramaphosa effect will lift the ANC above its low point of 54% in the 2016 municipal elections, but it will not be enough to allow the party to match its 2014 result of 62%.

Conversely, the DA will probably slip back from its highpoint in the 2016 elections (26.9%) but there is no reason to think that it will fall much below its 2014 mark (22.2%).

The EFF is likely to improve slightly, but the problem of low rates of youth registration and turnout will limit its growth to 10% or less.

Of the remaining parties the IFP will fare best, based on its continued strength in rural KwaZulu-Natal and the ANC's factionalism in the same region. The ACDP, FF+, UDM, and COPE will return to Parliament, but possibly with reduced numbers. The PAC and the APC may not make it. The same may apply to Agang SA and the NFP. The AIC may continue to benefit from its proximity to the ANC on the ballot paper. Three or four of the new parties are likely to pick up a seat or two.

ANC:	58%
DA:	22.5%
EFF:	9.5%
IFP:	2.5%
The rest:	7.5%

8. Conclusion

This will be our sixth general election since 1994, to go with five municipal elections. The professional approach of the Independent Electoral Commission has accustomed us to the idea of well-organised, smoothly-run elections that deliver reliable results. There have been no serious objections to the overall outcomes of our polls, despite the occasional slip-up at individual voting stations. The pure proportional representation system that we follow, for all its disadvantages, allows for very simple counting and auditing procedures. Most importantly, political parties make sure that their agents are present at the voting stations, observing all stages of the process.

All of this amounts to a significant achievement – relatively few countries anywhere in the world run such credible elections. Regardless of how anyone feels about the eventual outcome, the process is worth celebrating.

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¹ Parts of this paper are informed by the inputs and discussion at a Roundtable Discussion hosted by the CPLO and the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Cape Town on 12th April. The speakers were Dr Shingai Mutizwa-Mangiza (University of the Western Cape) and Dr Jakkie Cilliers (Institute of Security Studies), who spoke on the trends and prospects of the various parties; and Mr Andries Nel, Deputy Minister of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs, who spoke on the role of government in providing logistical and operational support to the IEC in the conduct of the elections.

² https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/PolBrief61_Aug14.pdf

³ <https://africacheck.org/fbcheck/yes-more-than-9-million-eligible-voters-arent-registered-for-south-africas-2019-elections/>

⁴ <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/only-16-of-18-and-19-year-olds-registered-to-vote-iec-20190110>

⁵ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2019-02-24-voters-like-cyril-ramaphosa-more-than-they-like-the-anc-survey/>

⁶ <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2019-03-13-watch--the-moment-mabuza-said-he-doesnt-take-mbowenis-tweets-seriously/>

⁷ <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/only-four-of-the-zuma-years-were-a-problem-gwede-mantashe-20190328>

⁸ It may appear absurd to credit the governing party with such achievements at a time when we are experiencing load shedding, and only a year and a half after a combination of corruption and incompetence almost destroyed the social security system on which much of the population depends. The use of the state as mass employer is also highly problematic – it has contributed significantly to the massive, and growing, debt to GDP ratio, and to the state’s huge interest bill. But a longer term view reveals that, despite the obvious failures, socio-economic policies since 1994 have helped the country to avoid the much-feared spectres of mass social unrest and political fragmentation, which usually lead to repression and instability. These policies have also lifted millions of people out of dire poverty; without them, we would be in a much worse situation than we are presently.

⁹ <https://www.sowetanlive.co.za/news/south-africa/2019-02-02-eff-promises-free-education-higher-social-grants-and-50-of-land-owned-by-women-and-youth/>

¹⁰ In a 400 seat chamber, 0.25% of the national vote ensures one seat. Rounding down of the totals of some of the bigger parties made it possible for most of the small parties to gain more seats than this ratio would indicate: the ACDP’s 0.57% won it three seats, for example, while Agang SA’s 0.28% got it two seats.

¹¹ There are murmurs of a revolt against the ANC in northern KZN as a result of how some rural Zulu-speakers view the party’s treatment of Mr Zuma, who remains popular locally. If true, the outcome will most likely be a stay-away from the polls, but it could conceivably translate into more votes for the IFP or the NFP, or both.



This paper was made possible by funding from the Hanns Seidel Foundation.

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