



# ‘None of the Above:’

## The 2019 South African National Elections

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By Steven Friedman

In India and a few other countries, ballot papers include a line that reads ‘None of the Above’; voters who reject all the candidates can say so directly rather than relying on an ambiguous spoiled ballot that could, after all, be seen as simply a sign of incompetence (Merelli, 2019). If this option had been available to South Africans on May 8, ‘None of the Above’ may have won a working majority.

Media, commentators and many politicians tend to approach elections through the lens of a civics textbook. What is happening, we are asked to believe, is an intense battle for public support between rival parties earnestly trying to convince

voters that their policies are best. Voters decide upon which offering they prefer and cast their votes accordingly. Yet, just about none of this was true of this election and the reasons for this say a great deal about the state of politics here.

There was no great battle between parties: which party would win was never in doubt. The parties made no serious attempt to debate policies and half the eligible voters cast no vote at all. It is also reasonable to assume that more than a few of those who did vote chose not what they would prefer but what they thought was least likely to do damage. The message sent here was clear,

although ignored by most of the commentary: there is a huge hole in the middle of South African party politics that needs to be filled if elections are to do what civics textbooks say they do.

### The Phoney War

The election was the most competitive national ballot in the country's democratic history. However, it was essentially a battle between two factions within the governing party rather than between it and the opposition.

The governing African National Congress's share of the vote peaked in 2004 when it won almost 70% in the national ballot. Since then it has been declining at each election (IEC, 2019). Initially, it suffered a slow leak rather than a sudden puncture – its vote declined slowly and steadily until 2016 when, in local elections, it dropped to 54%. This result was widely interpreted, with justification, as a sign that it could drop below 50% this year: while the earlier setbacks were limited and were the result of splits that siphoned off ANC votes to new opposition parties established by former governing party politicians, between 2014 and 2016, it lost 8% despite the fact that there was no split (IEC, 2019). This decline explains why this was the first election since 1994 in which the result seemed to be in doubt, a perception that prompted far more debate among citizens of the likely result than in any previous poll. But such debate missed an obvious reality. Even where the ANC vote edged towards or fell under 50% it was, both nationally and in every province besides the Western Cape, so far ahead of its rivals that there was no prospect at all of another party winning anything close to a majority.

The ANC vote this year was 57,5%, which is the first time in a national ballot it had sunk to below 60%. In Gauteng, where it had lost control of two metropolitan governments in 2016 and held onto a third by a coat of varnish, it scraped 50,2%. But even in these straitened circumstances, it was 37% ahead of its closest national rival and 22% ahead in Gauteng – a margin that would be regarded as a super-landslide in most democracies (IEC, 2019).

Given this reality, the ANC can, under present circumstances, lose control of national government or in eight provinces only through an alliance between the second- and third-largest parties, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the

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Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). While this is precisely what happened in a few cases at the local level, it is far less plausible in national or even provincial government, where their positions on issues such as land expropriation are diametrically opposed (ANA Reporter, 2018). Given this reality, even an unexpectedly sharp drop in the ANC vote would not have removed it from government but would have prompted it to form coalitions with small parties.

### The Battle Within

Yet while the election was never likely to threaten the ANC's hold on government, it was still vital to its future and that of the country because it had a direct bearing on a crucial conflict within the governing party. The decline in the ANC's electoral fortunes was a direct consequence of the presidency of Jacob Zuma, which triggered two splits in the governing party. Shortly after Zuma began his second term as ANC president, in 2013, differences within the ANC began to crystallise into a factional battle. This divide is reflected in the country's economic path since 1994.








The constitutional settlement of 1994 was not accompanied by a similar negotiation on the economy. In consequence, the structure of the economy remained intact and a tacit consensus between the new political elite and the old economic equivalent assumed that the country's goal was to incorporate black South Africans into the pre-1994 economy. The inevitable result of trying to open what had been designed for some to everyone was that it incorporated only some black people and continued to exclude many others (Lipton, 2016).

This reality was reflected in the internal ANC divisions. The faction that opposed Zuma spoke for those black people who had been incorporated into the formal economy – essentially, anyone who

earned a wage, salary or dividends. Zuma and his faction proposed no alternative to economic exclusion, but they did see it as an opportunity. One option open to some people who were excluded from the formal economy's benefits was to attach themselves to political parties and politicians in the hope of gaining access to resources. Politicians who used their position to get hold of resources, either from the public coffers or from businesses seeking political influence, could not only have enriched themselves but also bought political support by dispensing patronage. It was this brand of patronage politics that united the Zuma faction.

But the strategy suffered from a fatal flaw: there was not enough patronage to reach more than a handful of supporters. The patronage strategy was, therefore, very good at winning ANC elections but poor at winning votes. Patronage politics first alienated black middle-class voters and then began driving away working people and voters living in poverty.

2019 NATIONAL ELECTION RESULTS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

PARTY	VALID VOTES	%VOTE
 ANC	10 026 475	57.50%
 DA	3 621 188	20.77%
 EFF	1 881 521	10.79%
 IFP	588 839	3.38%
 VF PLUS	414 864	2.38%
 ACDP	146 262	0.84%
 UDM	78 030	0.45%

VOTER STATS: SOUTH AFRICA

Registered Voters	26 779 025
Total Voter Turnout	65.99%
Total Valid Votes	17 436 144
Total Votes Cast	17 671 616
Voting Districts Reporting	22 925/22 925

Courtesy of <https://www.news24.com/elections/results/npe#election=national&year=2019&map=previous>

By 2016 it was becoming clear that, for the first time since 1994, what happened inside the ANC could decide whether it won more than 50% of the vote. In 2017, when the ANC met for its first conference, at least one of its power brokers, then Mpumalanga premier David Mabuza, had decided – accurately, according to polls (Business Tech, 2017) – that, if the ANC fought this year's election with a leader drawn from the Zuma faction, it would lose its majority. And so, he allowed some Mpumalanga delegates to vote for the faction's opponent, Cyril Ramaphosa, which delivered him a narrow win (Hunter, 2017).

Ramaphosa inherited a deeply divided ANC whose leadership was evenly split between supporters of the two factions (van Zyl, 2017). This limited his and his faction's options, forcing them to accept cabinet members they would rather reject and to pursue policy priorities they did not share.

The election offered a chance to change this – if Ramaphosa could show that Mabuza was right and that he could at least improve on the ANC's 2016 result, making him the first ANC president in fifteen years to lead it into an election in which it fared better than the previous. Although national elections should, strictly, be compared to other national elections – the ANC tends to do worse in local than in national ballots – during Zuma's tenure, the distinction evaporated since the ANC did worse at every election, national or local, than it had at the previous election. In the perceptions of ANC politicians, then, an improvement on 2016 would be enough to show that this bleed could be halted.

The outcome could have shaped ANC politics for a decade or more. If Ramaphosa's faction was able to increase the ANC vote, it could not only keep the ANC in government, but also show that it could expand the number of ANC seats in local councils and legislatures. Doing so would be crucial: one consequence of economic exclusion is that, for many in the ANC and other parties, winning a seat is the difference between becoming middle-class or remaining poor. If Ramaphosa and his allies could show that they could expand entry tickets to the middle-class, which Zuma's reign had reduced, their chances of retaining control of the ANC would be greatly improved.

### Voters Reject the Zuma Faction

The outcome was, of course, a victory for Ramaphosa's faction because the ANC did improve on its 2016 result by 3%.

Equally important, voters signalled a clear rejection of the Zuma faction. This was the third election in a row that was fought after a battle within the ANC had produced a win for one of the factions. In each case, supporters of the losing faction formed political parties, which contested the election – in 2009 the Congress of the People received over 8% of the vote and in 2014 the EFF received over 6%. This time, three parties – the African Transformation Movement, the African Content Movement and Black First, Land First – were vehicles for disaffected Zuma supporters: they won under 0,6% between them (IEC, 2019).

In North West Province, the ANC dropped sharply in 2016 and continued to fall in by-elections for the next two years. These results suggested that, if the pattern continued, it would fall below 50% in this election (Stone and Khumalo, 2018). But after a Zuma ally Supra Mahumapelo was replaced as provincial premier by Job Mokgoro, who was chosen by Ramaphosa's group, the ANC vote began to rise again and in the May election it reached 62% (IEC, 2019). The message to the ANC was clear: it could do better at the polls only if it distanced itself from the Zuma faction.

The advantage this gave Ramaphosa's group was soon confirmed when the post-election cabinet was announced: only four of 28 ministers and 12 of 34 deputy ministers are Zuma faction members, so the Ramaphosa group is currently fully in charge of government (Friedman, 2019).

This, not the shifts between the ANC and opposition votes, was the significant outcome of the election.

### What Battle, What Ideas?

If ever a country seemed ripe for an election in which parties engaged in a contest of ideas, it was South Africa in 2019. But no contest emerged.

The election was fought against a backdrop of an under-performing economy and high levels of poverty and inequality caused by the economic exclusion mentioned earlier. Racial divisions remain palpable – they express themselves directly in demands for, or opposition to, racial redress and indirectly in demands for radical policy

changes such as free higher education and land expropriation without compensation (Friedman, 2018). The social fissures created by years of legalised racial domination have also produced high levels of violence.

Given this state of the country, we would expect the opposition to offer a diagnosis of these ills and an alternative way of addressing them. We would expect the governing party to respond with its own analysis of causes and its own set of promised remedies.

In theory, the electorate did get some of this. Party manifestos, particularly those of the three largest parties, the ANC, DA and EFF, were lengthy and detailed. None of them might have withstood much public debate because their diagnoses were often shallow and their remedies vague or impossible (the EFF substantially led the field on impossibility, promising an orthodontist in every school: there are some 30 000 schools and about only 6 000 dentists in South Africa) (Davis, 2019). But we will never know because the debate did not happen.

One reason is that voters do not read manifestoes. In the main, political commentators do not either. This does not indicate a lack of political enthusiasm – on the contrary, it is a rational response. Even if parties are serious about implementing the content of their manifesto (and obviously only the one or two who govern nationally or in provinces can be), they are never implemented as promised because they must be negotiated with interest groups. This is true of every election in every democracy. But manifestoes may still indirectly dominate the campaign because parties may rely on the ideas they propose in their campaigning. They may turn them into slogans and speeches and advertisements.

In this election, however, the slogans and the

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speeches and the advertisements were not about the ideas. The opposition insisted, rather, that the ANC was incompetent and corrupt and that they were not. The ANC, guided by polls indicating that Ramaphosa was more popular than it (Mvumvu, 2019), stressed the difference between him and Zuma: a recurring theme, emphasised by Ramaphosa himself, was that the ANC was sorry for the breach of trust during the Zuma era and promised to do better now (Feketha, 2019).

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The problems that parties failed to address still face the country – the campaign confirmed that, if it is to debate how to address them, political party contest is unlikely to be the arena in which the debate happens.

### None of the Above

One of the key stories of this election was voter turn-out – or, more accurately, its relative absence. Since 1994, South Africa's turnout has been consistently high by international standards. As

recently as 2016, 58% of voters turned out to vote in local elections, which is high: in the United States, the figure is around 20% (Maciag, 2014). But this may no longer be the case – in this election, the turnout was around 66%, which is average. But the actual level of participation in elections is much lower than this figure suggests. According to the Independent Electoral Commission, some 9,2 million eligible voters are not registered (Dhlamini, 2019). This means that only around 50% of eligible voters went to the polls, thus around 28% of people eligible to vote voted for the ANC, 10% for the DA and 5% for the EFF.

These numbers do not make the government illegitimate – democratic governments represent citizens who vote, not those who choose to stay at home. But it does raise important questions about the health of party politics. The standard explanation of low turnout is apathy but in this country the argument lacks evidence: why would voters who have been going to the polls in their numbers as recently as three years ago suddenly decide that they have better things to do? Interest in politics throughout the society is high (Naki, 2019). A more plausible explanation, therefore, is that many voters do not feel that there is a party on the ballot for which they want to vote.

The middle-class black voters who rejected the ANC during the Zuma period have not returned. While some have moved to the EFF, many more are uncomfortable with this option. Few have moved to the DA, which many still see as the party of suburban white people. But these voters are not alone. Black voters who are not middle-class face the same problem – they may have moved away from the ANC, but they see no attractive alternative. Many voters spent the weeks before the election agonising over who to support, not because they felt that they are spoiled for choice, but because none of the available options were attractive.

As long as this issue persists, governing parties, national and provincial, are likely to be far less effective than they might hope unless they recognise that their mandate to govern is even more qualified than it usually is. In any democracy, parties that win a majority – even on a high turn-out – soon discover that they cannot do what they promised to do unless they are willing to negotiate their plans with citizens. Voting for

a party signals a preference that it should govern and only that: the voter who endorses every policy of the party they select is rare. In reality, just about everyone chooses the party closest to them, even if they reject some of its policies. As such, voting for a party does not necessarily signal support for any particular policy that it wishes to implement (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968) and governments need to negotiate with all affected interests if they want to avoid tacit or overt resistance.

But a governing party that enjoys a mandate of only 28% of eligible adults cannot assume that a majority of citizens wants it to govern, let alone that they are willing to endorse what it does in government when its actions affect their interests. South Africa's major parties will always need to enhance their understanding of, and their willingness to, listen to the citizenry. But they need to devote particular attention to this when high rates of non-participation leave them with, at best, a tenuous mandate from citizens.

### Prospects for Change

What, if anything, might reverse decreasing voter turnout, where election results reflect the voice of a diminishing minority?

South African electoral politics is firmly shaped by identity. Voters do not select a party as a shopper might select a product, i.e. by comparing what is on offer and deciding on the offering that most meets their needs. As in many parts of the world, including the older democracies which may consider themselves immune to this, voters choose the party that, they feel, speaks for people like them. A racial affinity may be important, but voters here and elsewhere are influenced by many other identities, including language, religion or region. Clearly, the South African party spectrum, which is a product of the society's identity divisions, is no longer speaking for many of the people whose identity it once expressed.

But this does not mean that identity no longer matters to voters. Evidence that it does is provided by the 2016 local government elections, in which unusually high numbers of suburban voters turned out to vote against the ANC, while many people in townships and shack settlements stayed away. The fact that traditional ANC voters did not support another party shows that their identity still draws them to the ANC.

Given this, it seems unlikely that participation in elections will be revived even if new parties emerge that break with the identities that have governed voting up to now. It is far more likely to be a product of change which persuades voters that their identity is once again expressed by one of the parties.

One possibility is a rejuvenated ANC able to win back those who have moved away from it. Another is a new split in the governing party – and perhaps in the bigger opposition parties too – which may produce a politics again in tune with the identities of most voters.

Until then, winning elections will, at best, be a mandate not to impose plans on society but to connect with, and to begin hearing, citizens, including that half of the citizenry that prefers 'None of the Above' to either the governing party or its opponents. ■

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