



**ISS Public Briefing
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**South African Voter Trends & Election Campaigns: 1994-2006
19 March 2009**

Presenters:

- **Collette Schulz-Herzenberg** is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Security Studies Corruption and Governance Programme. She has recently completed her PhD in Political Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT), specialising in South African voter behaviour.
- **Cherrel Africa** is a lecturer in the Political Studies Department at UCT and a Project Manager at the Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR). She was recently awarded her PhD in Political Studies at UCT, specialising in party campaigning.

Discussant:

- **Kwandi Kondlo**, Executive Director, Democracy & Governance Programme, HSRC .

Background:

South African voters go to the polls in their fourth national and provincial elections on 22 April 2009. While elections are regular, free and fair we too seldom take stock of the quality of South Africa's democracy.

The increasing electoral dominance of the ANC governing party and the fragmentation of the opposition has generated consensus among analysts that electoral politics is predictable. Race has been cited as a major driver of voter behaviour. As a result, government's performance, even when poor, is seen as largely irrelevant to the outcome.

This has raised serious concerns about the possibility of genuine multi-party competition and the extent to which elections act as a mechanism to hold government to account.

Yet electoral politics may not be as predictable as is often thought. Recent findings suggest that the 2009 Elections offer real scope for the emergence of new electoral trends in South Africa.

Discussion focused on the following key questions:

- *Do South African voters still identify with political parties?*
- *Does race influence voter choice?*
- *Will voters punish poor government performance?*
- *Are elections an effective mechanism for government accountability?*
- *Do party campaigns offer voters real choices?*
- *Is there partisan bias in media coverage?*

Summary of the Seminar:

Hennie van Vuuren opened the seminar and introduced the speakers and discussant.

Collette Schulz Herzenberg presented her study focusing on voter activity in terms of registration and turnout among the eligible voting age population in South Africa between 1994 and 2008. She pointed to overall trends in voter activity which show that, despite the appearance of electoral stability, when we consider voter registration, voter turnout and levels of party identification several changes have occurred, especially in terms of an active ANC electorate. She also discussed the factors that influence or drive voters in South Africa. Findings show that while multiple factors drive partisanship, sociological factors and party images dominate voter choice. Yet, subtle but potentially profound shifts in the motivations of voters appear to be gaining ground. Performance evaluations play an increasingly more important role over time. Cognitive awareness indirectly affects voter choice by emphasizing different types of information, but still plays a minimal role in voter behaviour.

Cherrel Africa discussed the relationship between party campaigns and the quality of democracy in South Africa. In particular, she highlighted how public campaigning in South Africa adds to public cynicism and distrust for political processes, like voting. She argues that recent campaigns are characterized by widespread verbal assaults in which political parties lambaste each other, and as the election date draws closer the attacks become more scathing, the messages more negative and derogatory and the exchanges more aggressive. The continuous mud-slinging and harsh tone has the effect of drowning out the content of the messages.

Concluding Remarks:

As the elections draw closer, political analysts will be watching to see how the large pool of uncertain 'floating' voters respond to the various party choices. In addition, turnout will be a critical factor in deciding how well parties do in highly contested areas. Finally, the role of the media and journalists is key to ensuring voters have ample policy based information to process in order to make informed decisions about which party to support.