

Whatever happened to the opposition?

Strategically-timed delivery boost
helps explain the ANC triumph

By Lawrence Schlemmer

The African National Congress's (ANC) near 70 per cent majority in the 14 April general election led to a spate of questioning of the competence of some or all opposition parties in the media. This was despite the fact that the Democratic Alliance (DA) increased the size of its vote very significantly under very difficult circumstances, as I will point out. In a prominent article in the *Sunday Times* (25 April 2004), the controversial acting head of the university of Natal, Dr Malegapuru Makgoba, made the more than somewhat exaggerated claim that "South Africa has no opposition party worthy of the title". Editorials were either condescending or sarcastic about the performance of the collective opposition. The *Mail and Guardian* headlined the performance of the opposition as "Small change for opposition" and that of the smaller parties as: "And these little piggies had none."

The outcome was indeed a setback for those who judge a democracy by the viability of choice, checks and balances. Ruling party ideologists and intellectuals who are steeped in "liber-

ation" sentiment tend to challenge the need for strong parliamentary opposition and party-political competition. It is quite fashionable to claim that South Africa's statutory watchdog institutions — the Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Commission, the Auditor General — render an effective opposition redundant. This is nonsense.

Many of the watchdog institutions are staffed by appointees who make no secret of the fact that they favour the key tenets of the ANC policy of transformation. In any event, from the Constitutional Court itself downwards, they have specific and delineated mandates and cannot perform the more continuous and pervasive overview functions of a parliamentary opposition. Hence the ongoing function of holding the administration and ruling party to account becomes weakened in proportion to the numerical dominance of the ruling party.

Therefore, the outcome of the recent election, no matter to what extent it was deserved by the ANC — and the ANC certainly managed its victory strategy superbly — reflects a measure of pathology in our politics. It

might even come to pass, as I have experienced it in the People's Republic of China, that ANC ministers themselves will find themselves in the embarrassing situation of having to reassure anxious foreign observers that size does not matter and that the very modest opposition somehow remains a vital democratic institution.

Factors in the opposition slump

Why have we reached this pass? What happened to the opposition in the election?

The following assessment is helped by a pre-election poll that The Helen Suzman Foundation commissioned through MarkData, based on face-to-face interviews among a nationwide stratified probability sample of 2300 adult South Africans in February-March 2004. (The Helen Suzman Foundation will publish the full results of the pre-election survey in due course).

1. A skewed pattern of voter registration and election turnout

One does not know exactly what proportion of South Africa's eligible adults actually voted because the

first basis of any calculations, the census and projections of its counts, has been qualified by the government's own Statistics Council. The population at April 2004 was at least 47,3 million but probably significantly more. Taking the 47,3 million as a basis, it would mean that there are just over 26 million adults of 18 years or older who are able to register as voters, even allowing for foreigners. With 15,6 million people having voted, it means that 76,7 per cent of registered voters cast their ballots but slightly less than 60 per cent of the whole eligible population voted. This means in effect that the ANC "crushing" majority represents just over 40 per cent of all possible voters.

Low registrations and turnouts in democracies are not unusual and it does not discredit the outcome. But it shows among other things that neither the opposition parties nor the ANC achieved anywhere near their full theoretical potential.

We do not know exactly which categories of people did not participate. However, in the pre-election poll results the proportions of South Africans in the major population groups who indicated that were either not registered or would probably or definitely not vote are shown in table one.

These estimates cannot be precise, but they reflect a lower than average likelihood of voting among the kinds

of voters most likely to support opposition parties.

This conclusion is reinforced by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) figures for the turnouts by province given in table two.

From these results it is obvious that the provinces that were expected to yield the largest numbers of opposition votes tend to be those with the lowest turnouts — Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and Gauteng in particular.

Hence the first reason for the low opposition vote was most probably the high rate of abstentions of one kind or another in opposition constituencies. This tendency was of course strengthened by what only a churlish cynic would see as a planned coincidence of an official voting holiday and the tempting opportunity for middle class voters to extend their Easter holidays.

Given the population weight of the three provinces in which the opposition-supporting populations are relatively high, the differences in levels of voter turnout alone could have accounted for most of the ANC's increased share of the vote. Could the opposition parties not have done more to alert this substantial apathetic fringe that they were about to be responsible for a two-thirds majority for the ANC?

Certainly opposition parties could have done more. Although appeals to would-be supporters to vote were made, these appeals were generally overshadowed by rather bullish predictions by most opposition parties of how well they would do, and how they were bound to drive the ANC down to below anything near a two-thirds majority. Sometimes voters believe what politicians predict, and to the extent that they did so this time, opposition voters may have been lulled into complacency.

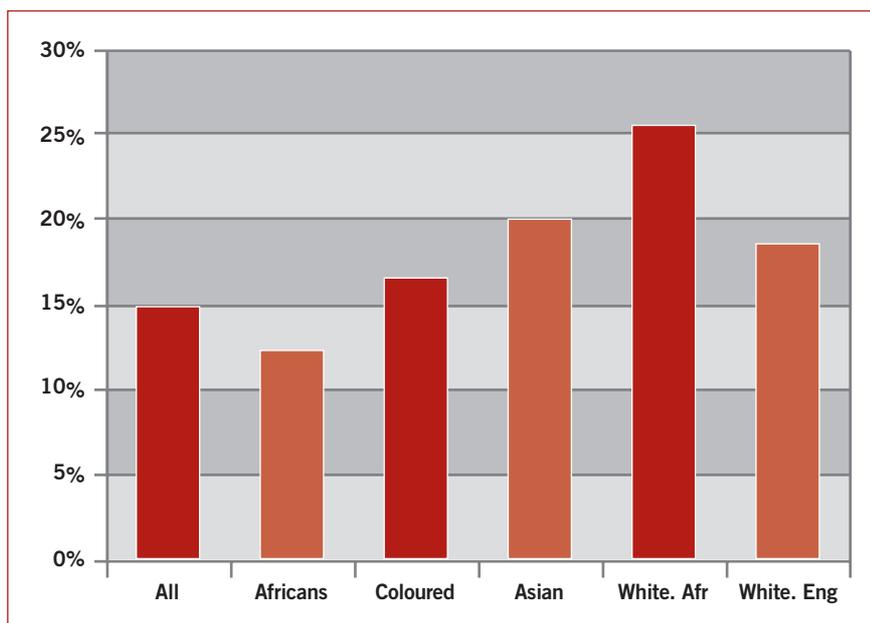
2. Misreading the mood of the majority

The DA's most prominent election pitch was that the country "deserved

Self-acknowledged non-voters (Table One)

	Per cent
All adults	15
Africans	13
Coloured	17
Asian	20
White Afrikaans	26
White English/ other	19

Proportions of non-voters (Graph One)



better” than the ANC was giving it. While the DA’s argument was the most effective, other opposition parties also played on government failures in job creation, service delivery and administration. This would have been a winning strategy in 2002, but it has been far less effective among African voters in 2004. The opposition parties underestimated the extent to which the ANC had recognised the problem and had done something about it.

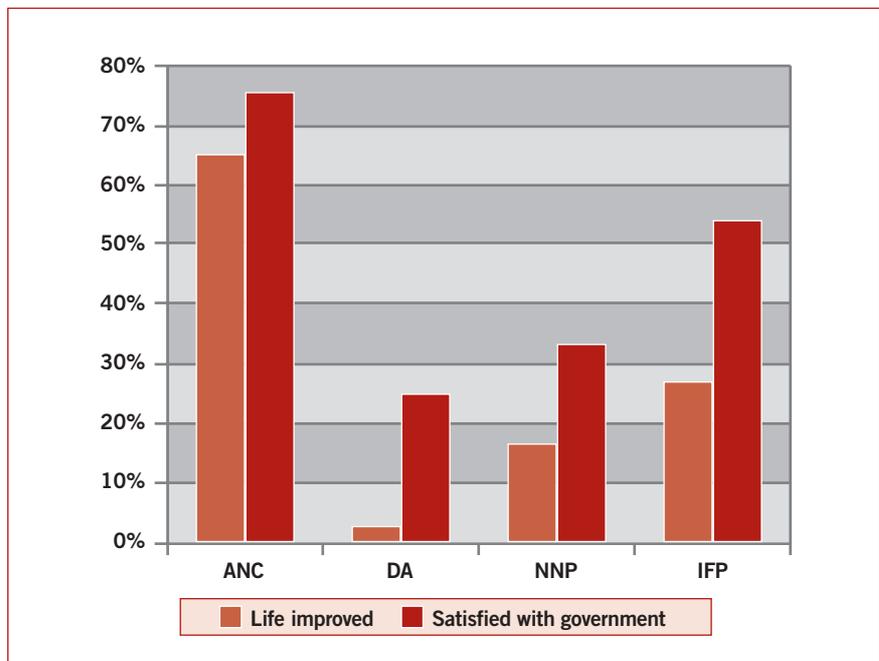
The old National Party was a past master at orchestrating election strategies and government back up to ensure resounding victories, as all incumbent parties try to do, but the ANC lifted the game even higher. It mobilised its membership and councillors to canvass in communities, the president tramped the length and breadth of the country, as did the deputy president, whose visits to IFP hostels ensured headline-getting controversy, it flooded the media with megaphone-sized adverts and as for delivery, it promised, promised and promised again, this time committing itself to a “people’s contract” to serve the masses.

With even greater effect, in the words of Rapule Tabane and others in the *Mail and Guardian* (8-15 April 2004), “The party... pumped up delivery over the past 18 months, getting its councillors into their constituencies to deal with pressing problems”. Applications, if not allocations, for child grants, disability grants and pensions soared. Assurances of job opportunities through labour intensive public works programmes peppered party speeches, as did less-convincing references to an impending “roll-out” of HIV/Aids treatment. Comparative research by Research Surveys, Markinor and MarkData showed that levels of satisfaction with government performance improved by around 50 per cent from their low points in 2002. One example of this from The Helen Suzman

Percentages of registered voters who cast ballots (Table Two)

	Per cent
NATIONAL	76,7
Eastern Cape	79,3
Mpumalanga	78,3
Free State	77,8
North West	75,6
Limpopo	74,8
Gauteng	74,2
Northern Cape	74,7
KwaZulu-Natal	72,8
Western Cape	71,3

Positive reactions to the past five years (Graph Two)



Foundation’s own poll is given in table three.

This reflects a quite massive recovery in the favourable response by ANC supporters to the government and illustrates the dramatic effect of the strategic shift by the ANC as the election drew near. In fact the mood among the majority of the population was buoyant, in sharp contrast to the feelings among minorities: table four.

The contrasts in mood between supporters of different political par-

ties are as sharp as those between races reflected in the table above. In table five the levels of favourable reactions to “life in general” and to government performance are presented according to the political parties the voters intended supporting.

Other results in the same pre-election survey showed that majorities of African voters were concerned about high and rising unemployment, increasing inequality, deepening poverty and a range of other problems. Nevertheless, the government

Levels of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with ANC/ government achievements (Table Three)

Levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with ANC/ government achievements among ANC supporters: February 2004 compared with an identical survey in February 2002. Sample 2300 nationwide, fieldwork by MarkData

Reaction to ANC government achievements	ANC supporters 2002 %	ANC supporters 2004 %
Satisfied	50	77
Don't know	1	1
Dissatisfied	49	22

has been successful in stimulating a feel-good effect among the population and a general impression that service delivery has improved or will improve shortly. In other words the expansion of state grants (as many as 56 per cent of households in the lowest living standard category are recipients of grants and pensions), some improved local service delivery and the government's sustained promotion of its performance and good intentions, seem to have created a bubble of contentment mixed with

alliance with the ANC. Previous surveys have shown that South African voters in general like the idea of co-operation between political parties. Nevertheless, when we asked NNP voters what they thought of the NNP's alliance with the ANC, only 48 per cent approved. Some 65 per cent of ANC supporters, on the other hand, liked the alliance. This may help to explain why the NNP lost so much support in the elections. Many of the people that approved of the alliance used it as a bridge, as it

vote because its main slogan: "South Africa deserves better" struck a chord among whites and many Indians and coloured people. The extent to which the DA articulated minority fears and minority voters' needs for effective "voice" were appealing enough to draw many potential supporters away from the Independent Democrats whose leader, Patricia de Lille, emerged as the most popular opposition politician in both the MarkData survey and in the last Markinor survey that appeared just before the election.

"South Africa deserves better" did not work as a slogan among the African majority. It might have worked two to three years ago but it could not be effective when such large majorities of African voters have such faith in the ANC, all their specific discontents notwithstanding.

Both the UDM and the IFP lost votes to the ANC, simply because the ANC, particularly since 2000 to 2002, has built a more powerful image than they have as a party that at least tries to improve life for the masses. Many of the voters who have in the past supported the IFP, the UDM and also parties like the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the Azanian Peoples' Organisation (Azapo) but who swung to the ANC in the recent elections, are also people who are impressed by the status and style of the ANC and by its "liberation" symbolism.

The disaster that befell the NNP shows that members of minorities that are not attracted to the ANC want "voice" — they want to support a party that expresses their fears and frustrations, cogently and as forthrightly as possible. There does not appear to be a space in South African politics for a "co-operative" relationship between any opposition party and the ANC. Those voters who feel sympathetic enough to the ANC to support co-operation eventually feel that they might as well vote for the

The ANC mobilised its membership to canvass, the president and deputy president tramped the length and breadth of the country, and it flooded the media with megaphone-sized adverts

anticipation of satisfaction to come. Clearly the majority also trusts the government's communication.

This positive mood extends to United Democratic Movement (UDM) supporters and to some extent to Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters as well. The good news effect is greatest among African voters and weakest among Indians and whites, and this reinforces the correlation between race and party support patterns.

3. Reactions to "alliance" politics

The NNP was the only party that deviated from the pattern of criticising government, because it felt that it had something else to sell, namely a chance to participate in majority-based decision-making through its

were, to shift their support to the ANC while those that didn't like it shifted away to the DA or the Independent Democrats (ID).

The DA-IFP alliance fared somewhat better, at least for the DA. Some 72 per cent of DA supporters approved of the association while 60 per cent of IFP supporters felt positive about it. Other results from the survey do not suggest that the IFP lost any votes because of the arrangement with the DA.

Did the opposition fail?

The DA did not exactly fail the test of these elections. It increased the size of its vote despite the fact that the enthusiasm for politics among population minorities has sagged since 1999. It succeeded in increasing its

ANC. The others want unambiguous opposition. The fate of the NNP is the danger that will face the IFP in a KwaZulu-Natal coalition with the ANC. As junior partner in that coalition, the IFP will not have the status and strength of image to retain the loyalty of many of its voters and the new coalition could also be the bridge that IFP voters will cross to support the ANC.

The future

Given the ANC’s demonstration of its ability to turn the tide of mass opinion in its favour, can any opposition party hope to make any gains in a future election? The municipal elections next year will be the first new test.

The DA and opposition in general can usefully strengthen their position if they can turn the tide of apathy and abstention among minorities. This, however, will mean that they have to devote much of their energy and resources to canvassing in and communicating to middle class constituencies. These categories of voters were rather neglected in the run-up to the April elections as the DA struggled manfully to extract votes from the townships.

But the spurt of support that the apathetic fringe could yield will not solve the basic problem of a weakening opposition. The real challenge

remains to attract more African voters. These elections have demonstrated again just how difficult, if not impossible, a challenge that will be. Parties like the DA and the ID will find greater affinity of values and style with the members of the emerging African middle class. But, here as

alternative policies could yield and how an effective opposition party can create pressure for the acceptance of such alternative approaches. This kind of tailored electioneering strategy is not suitable for mass rallies or “whistle stop” bus excursions. It is a strategy that requires a more sus-

The challenge for the opposition is to attract African voters. But the ANC has them captive because its empowerment policies make it unthinkable for middle class Africans to defect

well, the ANC has these voters captive simply by virtue of the fact that the ANC’s employment equity and empowerment policies make it almost unthinkable for middle class Africans to defect to any opposition party.

The future challenges for opposition parties are grim indeed. The only real hope for opposition lies in the fact that the current mood of satisfaction with government performance and optimistic anticipation of the outcome of ANC promises are a “bubble” that can be deflated, although not easily burst. This will require a very carefully crafted communication strategy.

Instead of assuming that there is pervasive discontent among African voters, a strategy will have to try to convey the additional benefits that

tained engagement with interest groups among the African middle class, allowing genuine debate and a demonstration of what a stronger constructive opposition can offer.

This or some other way of arousing the interest among the emerging middle class would also not be incompatible with rekindling enthusiasm among apathetic minority voters. The goal of reconciling minority and majority interests in building a dynamic economy — a win-win approach to policy — could have appeal among middle classes across the spectrum of race. Progress might well be very slow, but the ultimate contribution to a more dynamic and successful economy will be enormous. It may also save our democracy from degrading into single-party hegemony. □

Assessment of life in general over the last five years (Table Four)

Assessment of life in general over the past five years according to population groups. Sample 2300, MarkData

Life in general has:	African %	Coloured %	Indian %	White Afrikaans %	White English %	All Adults %
Improved	59	39	33	17	20	51
Become worse	14	26	38	59	35	20

Positive responses according to major political parties supported (Table Five)

Positive responses to life in general and to government performances over the past five years, according to major political parties supported. Sample 2300, nationwide, MarkData

Levels of positive response	ANC %	NNP %	DA %	IFP %	ACDP %	UDM %	ID %	Uncertain %	Will not vote %
Life has improved	66	17	2	28	8	64	25	30	42
Satisfaction with govt performance	77	34	26	56	21	57	24	40	41