

## **The Last Word Political posters: communicators or decorations?**

Political posters are often described as the decorations of elections. However, on how effective or successful political posters really are in harvesting votes, the last word has not been spoken. Although no party has probably ever won or lost an election because of its posters, the power of posters should not be underestimated. Posters are generally more effective in raising awareness than actually persuading voters to vote for a specific party. Political posters contribute mainly to image building, the reinforcement of party support, and the visibility of the party, which could ultimately lead to a bandwagon effect (Trent & Friedenber, 1995:269-271; Maarek, 1995:105).

Judging by the effort that parties put into their poster campaigns, they certainly seem to regard them as more than mere decorative statements. The countless reports of vandalism of posters by the different parties (see Van Staaden, 2006; Van Wyk, 2006; Louw, 2006:9; Smith, 2006; De Beer, 2006:9) are testament to how important parties perceive posters. The Democratic Alliance (DA) felt so strongly about their posters that they (as they did in 2004) installed electronic sensors in certain areas on their posters to alert them of vandalism (Anon, 2006). Surely parties would not be lodging complaints and quarrelling over posters if they were not seen as vital to the electioneering process. Parties thus spend a large portion of their budgets on posters. They estimate the cost of a poster at about R10,00 per poster, excluding the logistical costs of putting posters up and taking them down.

It is against this background that I will comment on the poster campaigns of the major political parties. My comments are mainly limited to posters that were available in Potchefstroom and the surrounding areas, as these are the posters that I personally observed. Still, reference will be made to some of the political hotspots, for example Cape Town, where the political campaigns enjoyed a high media profile. The comments will be directed at the themes addressed on the posters, the role of the party leaders on the posters, and the general appearance of these posters.

***POLITICAL POSTERS: AN IMPORTANT PART OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTION CAMPAIGN***

In the USA and certain western European countries, the so-called spot advertisements and electoral debates on television are vehicles of political edutainment. Although television spots and debates have come under much criticism for their focus on the image and emotional messages rather than political issues, at the very least these media succeeded in attracting the voters' attention.

In South Africa, posters have to play this attention-drawing role. In view of the low voter turnout, it could be assumed that South African voters are not particularly interested in politics. Political issues should thus be presented in a more digestible format. The mere nature of a political poster makes it an ideal medium to attract the uninterested voter's attention. Posters are very much seen as the "medium of the masses", as they can also reach disadvantaged and rural communities not served by other media. This is strengthened by the long tradition of posters in South African struggle politics (see also Du Preez, 1988:2.1; De Wet, 1995:109).

After more than ten years of democracy in South Africa, the novelty of elections has started to wear off. This is reflected in the relatively low voter turnout of 48,40% nationally and 45,63% in the North-West Province. Although the South African democracy is maturing and the election campaigns are starting to show signs of an American campaign style, there are still factors indicating that South African has very much a developing democracy. The ruling African National Congress (ANC) is the dominant party with 66,4% of the vote nationally and 76,6% of the vote in the North-West Province. Arguably, the ANC could probably have won the election without putting up one poster. Furthermore, when reading the different parties' manifestos, there is very little difference in what the parties are offering (promising) the electorate. From an electioneering point of view, it is thus very difficult to come up with unique posters distinguishing your party from the opposition parties.

In previous elections, it was mostly been the ANC against the rest of the parties, but it is becoming an increasing reality that opposition parties are competing against each other for the opposition vote.

***THEMES DURING THE 2006 LOCAL ELECTIONS***

When analyzing the political issues or themes on the posters, it should be kept in mind that posters reflect the highlights of a party's campaign, but should be interpreted within the broader context of the party's campaign.

### **African National Congress (ANC)**

The ANC, as the dominant ruling party, has the luxury of not needing to “attack” any other parties. On the other hand, it is in the unfortunate position of being attacked by virtually all the other parties and thus has to fend for itself, in spite of the overwhelming majority support. Although there were defensive messages in previous ANC election advertising campaigns, there was a stronger emphasis on the defensive messages on the posters in the 2006 local elections. The posters containing *Building better communities*, *Make local government work better* implied that the ANC was aware of “problems” in the communities and local government, and that improvement was necessary. They thus anticipated being “attacked” on these issues.

It is however noteworthy that the “fight theme” representing the language of the struggle disappeared from the posters in the 2006 local election campaign, although it prevailed in the manifesto. In the 1999 election campaign, the overall theme was *A better life for all*, and the slogan on the poster was *Together **fighting** for change*. This was followed by *Together speeding up change and **fight** poverty* in the 2000 local government elections, and ***Fight** poverty vote ANC* in 2004.

### **Democratic Alliance (DA)**

The overall theme of the DA in the 2006 local government elections was the *DA delivers*. The specific issues addressed on the posters in the run-up to the local elections of 2006 in the Potchefstroom area included themes such as corruption (*Stop Korrupsie, lewer dienste*), the improvement of service delivery, fair taxes (*The DA delivers, Fair Rates*), and crime (*Beveg misdaad, Zero tolerance for criminals*).

The DA’s posters have probably been the most controversial of all the parties starting with the Fight Back campaign in 1999 when they were still the DP. This campaign was seen in many circles as fight back against blacks; the ANC even had a poster implying that the DP’s poster meant fighting blacks. This was followed up with a softer and more inclusive approach in the local government elections of 2000, namely: *For all the people*. In the 2004 general elections, the DA’s theme, *South Africa deserves better*, was once again interpreted as better than the ANC. In both the 1999 and 2004 campaigns, the DP and then the DA used comparative or attack messages on their posters.

Once again, in 2006 the DA’s posters, especially those in the hotly contested Cape Town, made the headlines. The controversial posters had the slogan *Vat jou stad terug and Bly getrou*. The posters were interpreted as implying that whites should take their city back from blacks and that whites should stay loyal and thus stand together against blacks (Jordaan, 2006; De Lange, 2006:4).

Although the ethics of the DA’s posters might be questioned, one thing is for sure: their posters did attract the voters’ attention and could have had a mobilizing effect.

### **Freedom Front Plus (FF+)**

The FF+ had the caption of *More than just opposition* on their posters in the 2006 local elections. This implied that the FF+ has now started to compete with other opposition parties, in particular the DA. This slogan could have been used to distinguish them from the DA, especially in view of the DA's appeal to unite the opposition.

No specific political issues, national or local, were raised on the FF+ posters. This was also the case in the 2004 general elections when their posters had the wording: *Sê nee vir die ANC en Daar is weer hoop*. This is in contrast with the 1999 and 2000 elections where specific issues were raised, for example, in 1999 self-determination (*Selfseggenkap is die antwoord*) and the death penalty (*Yes for the death penalty*) were on the poster agenda. In the 2000 local government elections, the death penalty was still an issue.

### **PARTY LEADERS**

In most poster campaigns, the leader of the political party played an important role and was featured prominently. This is understandable in view of the functions and characteristics of political posters. Posters are suited to carry image-related messages and help to raise awareness among the voters. Coupled with the fact that photographs of party leaders are printed on the ballot paper, it makes sense to exploit images of party leaders in the hope that voters would recognize and associate with them. What is questionable however is when the leader becomes the party message. In the last instance, the leader is not only used to attract the voters' attention, but also becomes the whole message. When this happens, political issues are not raised and public debate is not stimulated.

Both Thabo Mbeki and Tony Leon were prominently featured in the poster campaigns of the ANC and DA respectively; regardless of whether other important political issues were raised. The party leader could thus be associated with a certain policy.

The ANC had the advantage that its leader is the president and therefore well known. It is interesting to note, on face value so to speak, that the image presented of Mbeki did not change since 1999. It is almost as if the same picture was used: a smiling Mbeki wearing a suit. Jordaan (2006:13) reports on posters on which Mbeki was dressed informal by wearing a cap, thus illustrating that he is one of the masses. However, these posters were not available in Potchefstroom available. However, what has changed is the focus of the Mbeki posters. In 1999, the ANC was still trying to establish Mbeki as Mandela's successor and the posters read *Mbeki for President*. From 2000 onwards, the posters only featured Mandela with the words *Vote ANC*.

In contrast, Leon's image has notably changed from 1999 to 2006. In 1999, Leon was portrayed as the "tough guy" ready for action against the ANC. Sporting a tie, he had a virtually expressionless face with arms folded; the caption of the poster read *The guts to fight back*. In the 2000 local government elections, Leon's hands were in an open position indicating readiness to listen. He also wore an open neck shirt. In 2004 and 2006, a smiling Leon in an open neck shirt is featured.

As was the case with the political issues raised by the DA, the posters featuring Tony Leon also made the headlines. In 2000 there was speculation about the dark complexion of Leon on the posters (see Fourie & Froneman, 2001). In 2004 the caption on the poster: *SA deserves better* inadvertently led to opposition parties remarking that the DA had themselves said it.

In 2006 the caption of *DA delivers* led to a prank call from Darren Simpson, DJ at 94.7 Highveld. The DA showed they had some sense of humour by delivering a four seasons pizza (Nel, 2006:3). Indicating the "power" that posters could have, this led to a complaint with ICASA by a member of the public, because the DA had received free coverage on 94.7 Highveld (see Pretorius, 2006:2).

It is especially the smaller parties that use their leaders as their party message. This is probably due to budget limitations or that the leader is one of the party's best assets. The latter is probably true of the FF+, United Democratic Movement (UDM) and Independent Democrats (ID), where the party leader has personal support.

Since Dr Pieter Mulder became the leader of the FF+, he has featured very prominently in their election campaign, probably due to Mulder's personal popularity and an effort to move away from the extreme conservative image the party had under the leadership of Constand Viljoen.

In the case of the ID, Patricia de Lille is the best known and most marketable asset of the party, thus also the DA's reference to a one-woman party in their 2004 election campaign. Similarly, Bantu Holomisa of the UDM has a personal following.

### **VISUAL ELEMENTS OF THE POSTERS**

In some cases, it is just as difficult to distinguish between the colours of the different parties and their various policies. The first that comes to mind is the UDM and ANC that both have the same yellow and green colours. Although the posters of the ANC, DA and FF+ were generally distinct from each other, when it came to their candidate posters, they all had the same yellow background.

In fact, in Potchefstroom a candidate poster of the FF+ hung beneath a general poster of the ANC, and the impression was created that the candidate was an ANC candidate.

On the positive side, the DA's blue and yellow posters were easy identifiable and easy to read. The same applies to the red and blue of the ACDP, except that their posters were not always easy to read. The characteristic orange of the ID was also unique.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Posters are definitely more than mere election decorations. They serve an important function, especially in a democracy such as the South African one that is still maturing. Whether they are used to their full potential in the South African democracy is another question.

A few points of criticism come to mind:

- Local government issues are not reflected on posters. With the exception of the ANC's posters, the other parties' posters could just as well have been used in a national election. The concept that local government is the vehicle for service delivery is thus not emphasized. If the DA's posters were interpreted within the broader context of their campaign, it would have been understood that they delivered services and not pizzas. However, these services were not further defined or explained.
- Probably due to budget constraints, there were few posters promoting ward candidates or even the executive mayoral candidates. Although this is understandable it does raise a question of whether the local in local elections is not being neglected. If a voter has a familiar face to vote for (and knows the candidate's policy perspective), he might be more motivated to vote.
- Very little was done with the posters to mobilize the electorate. The DA's Unite the opposition was at least an attempt to motivate voters to vote. The controversy raised by some of the DA's posters might also inadvertently have mobilized voters.
- Although it is understandable, it is unfortunate that the smaller parties only featured their leaders and did not raise more political issues.

To my mind, political posters could and should be used more as political agenda setters during election campaigns, as they have the potential for more than merely beautifying elections.

## REFERENCES

- ANON. 2006. ANC, DA poster removed. News24.com, 2006-01-22. [Web:] [www.news24.com/News24/SouthAfrica/Politics/0,6119,2-7-12\\_1867246,00htm](http://www.news24.com/News24/SouthAfrica/Politics/0,6119,2-7-12_1867246,00htm). [Date of access: 9 March 2006].
- DE BEER, L. 2006. DA, ANC in mekaar se hare oor plakkate. *Beeld*, 2006-02-07:9.
- DE LANGE, L. 2006. Mbeki het vrae oor DA se kiesplakkaat. *Beeld*, 2006-01-01:4.
- DE WET, J. 1995. Poster themes in Bloemfontein during the 1994 general election campaign. *Journal for contemporary history*, 29(9):107-116.
- DU PREEZ, J.M. 1988. 'n Kommunikatiewe ontleding van temas in Suid-Afrikaanse politieke plakkate. Pretoria: UNISA. (Proefskrif).
- FOURIE, L.M. & FRONEMAN, J.D. 2001. Political posters on the road to democracy: a case study of two election campaigns in the North West Province. *Ecquid Novi*, 22(2):177-195.
- JORDAAN, W. 2006. Lees tussen die pale: Politieke partye verraai baie oor hulself met hul plakkate. *Beeld*, 2006-02-21:13.
- LOUW, M. 2006. DA oor plakkate: genoeg is genoeg. *Beeld*, 2006-02-23:9.
- MAAREK, P.J. 1995. Political marketing and communication. London: John Libby.
- NEL, C. 2006. DA "deliver" besluit heel jaar lank . . . pizzas. *Beeld*, 2006-02-28:3.
- PRETORUIS, L. 2006. Omroeper se fop-oproep lei tot uitsaaiklag. *Beeld*, 2006-02-25:2.
- SMITH, A. 2006. VF+, IVP ontstoke na plakkate waai. *Die Burger*, 2006-02-16:16.
- TRENT, J.S. & FRIEDENBERG, R.V. 1995. Political campaign communication: principles and practices. Westport: Praeger.
- VAN STAADEN, H. 2006. Geen beperkings op vrolike verkiesingsplakkate, sê munisipaliteit. *Die Burger*, 2006-02-04:16
- VAN WYK, S. 2006. DA-lid los klag oor afdruk van plakkate. *Volksblad*, 2006-03-28:12