



# Voters' attitudes towards political parties' communication: the case of Diepsloot voters in Gauteng, South Africa

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## Abstract

This article investigates how South African political parties' communication strategies influence voters' decision-making. The study sought to understand the effects and influences of political communication approaches on voters' decision-making processes. The election periods used for the analysis are the 1999 to 2019 general elections. The focus area of the study was Diepsloot, a densely populated township in the north of Johannesburg in Gauteng, South Africa. Furthermore, the researchers also assessed whether Diepsloot residents understood political communication, especially during an election period. The research focused on the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). These parties were the top three when it came to electoral support in South Africa when this study was carried out. Data were gathered using open-ended telephonic interviews with voters in Diepsloot. While the study found that political communication affected a voter's choice, it also revealed that a voter's attitude towards these political communication interventions was one of caution. The article concludes that political communication is one of many discernible variables influencing voters when voting for a political party.

## Keywords

ANC, DA, Diepsloot, EFF, Gauteng, political communication, political parties

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## INTRODUCTION

"Political communication" is a broad term that encompasses news about political issues, institutions and politicians (Van Aelst et al., 2017). Kaushal (2018) places the spread of information and messages and how that influences politics, the media, policymakers and citizens in the definition of the term. These messages are produced by politicians, political parties and the media (McNair, 2017). Generally, this form of strategic political communication is meant to organise purposeful management of information and communication to reach the political objectives and to get the electorates to consider them on the ballot (Strömbäck and Kioussis, 2014). Makananise (2023:53) also points out that "communication strategies to attract potential voters could include posters that may be distributed during canvassing, displayed on street poles, or posted and accessed on social media accounts." Although these are not the only forms of political communication, they form part of the broader political ecosystem, which is found in most political environments and which provide widely available political information. Political communication research remains a source of much inquiry among political and communication scientists (Glenn and Mattes, 2011; Pfetsch and Esser, 2012; Van Aelst et al., 2017). From a democratic perspective, some of those studies were interested in understanding how the shift in political communication and information impacts the

character and quality of democracies (Van Aelst et al., 2017). From a communication perspective, the subject addresses how communication systems enable and empower the general citizenry towards their political behaviour (Barbara and Esser, 2014). On the former, Pfetsch (2009:344) adds that "democratic systems of government depend on political action and political decisions being publicly communicated and legitimated". For that reason, the researcher adds that structures of political communication are an essential variable in laying out the public representation of political objects.

According to Pfetsch (2009), much of the scholarly debate and development in political communication in recent democracies is focused on Americanisation and globalisation. However, Norris (2020) has found that even newer democracies worldwide have seen growth in political communications. In South Africa, research around political communication has received accelerated attention in the last few years. Researchers continue to grapple with how political communication finds expression in the country's public sphere and the dynamics surrounding this (Karam and Mutsvairo, 2021; Tyali and Mukhudwana, 2020). According to Kaushal (2018), political communication plays out through mass media and the general interpersonal relationship or communication between political leaders and their supporters. It further looks at the dissemination of such information and its effects on the audience. Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) state that political leaders often are interested in talking only about issues that matter to them and the general politics of what sets them apart from their political foes while forgetting the need to engage their supporters. Van Aelst et al. (2017) further suggest that for democracy to thrive, the general citizenry needs to be furnished with political information to make informed political choices. Some of those decisions concern whether to vote or not and who to vote for during elections. The term that encompasses this is called voting behaviour and is concerned with "the ways in which people tend to vote in public elections and the reasons they vote as they do" (Kaushal, 2018:08). While research on political communication continues to receive attention among scholars in a global context, there has not been much work done from a South African context focusing on its effects on voting behaviour.

Against this background, this article outlines the outcomes of a study by Hlungwani in 2021 that investigated the effects of political communication on voters' decision-making processes. The study also analysed voters' attitudes towards political parties' communication messages. To delimit the scope of this probe, the researchers focused on Diepsloot, a densely populated township in the north of Johannesburg, South Africa.

The focus was the top three political parties in South Africa, namely the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Focusing on the question "How do political parties' pre-election communication strategies influence a Diepsloot voter voting decision?", the study was interested in understanding whether Diepsloot voters vote for a party based on its communication strategies and messaging and what kind of communication strategies the parties (ANC, DA and EFF) used in the past (1999<sup>1</sup> - 2019) national and provincial elections in South Africa. The communication strategies encompass the construction and dissemination of political messages, the methods used to disseminate such messages, be it posters, the use of party websites, the use of paid mainstream media content, and the face-to-face method, also known as door-to-door campaigning.

The findings of this study are not meant to be conclusive or provide general evidence on the effects and influences of political communication approaches on voters' decision-making processes in South Africa. However, the findings do provide an overview of what goes into the minds of some voters when deciding which political party they vote for. This paper is organised as follows: first, the South African political landscape is presented in the context of electoral developments, background information on Diepsloot, which is the area of this study, and the political formations involved in political communication. This is followed by a summary of voting behaviour theories. The methodology critical to this study is

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1 In the context of the EFF, the focus was from 2013 as the political party was only formed that year.

then presented, followed by the findings on the effects of political communication on voters' decision-making processes. The findings discuss emerging themes to unravel voters' attitudes towards political parties' communication messages. In the concluding remarks, we argue that there is a need to explore other elements of political communication, such as satire, to establish whether it has an impact on voter attitudes and behaviour.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### South Africa political landscape

An analytical discourse on South Africa's political landscape shows a shift in governance systems amid changes in global political models. For instance, the era of dominant party hegemony seems to be approaching its last days, with political formations finding mechanisms to form collaborative models in the three spheres of government (Makole et al., 2022). It was after the 2016 local government elections, when the ANC lost control of metros such as Tshwane, Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Bay, that many saw a clear illustration that dominant party politics bearing a clear majority in political councils would soon be a thing of the past. As South Africans head to the 2024 general elections, concerns partly necessitated by the ANC's decline in electoral support had been raised about the possibility of a coalition in the national government. In the 2019 elections, the ANC came out victorious with an all-time low percentage of 57%, the first time it had achieved less than 60% since it came into power in 1994. Alence and Pitcher (2019) argue that the party's performance in those elections signalled that rebuilding public trust in government takes more than electioneering slogans but actions. The main opposition, the DA, achieved 21% of the votes in 2019, with the EFF walking away with 11% of the votes.

By the ANC's standards, the results of the 2019 elections were not impressive, as the party has always shown its electoral dominance since the first democratic elections in South Africa. Cyril Ramaphosa's promise of a "new dawn" has faced many challenges. Observers have argued that his main challenge was to collapse the networks of corruption and dissent without exposing himself as a typical politician who was out to purge figures believed to be aligned to his predecessor, Jacob Zuma, some of whom are members of the party's national executive committee (Harvey, 2023). Maseremule and Ndletyana (2016) posit that the ANC appears only to be a ruling power in the sense of political numbers and lacks political hegemony, since its support in the urban areas is declining while it retains control in rural areas. The results of the 2021 local government elections are testament to that. Amid all of this, researchers have found that the current model of coalition arrangements needs to find policy and regulatory expression to avoid policy confusion in government and the collapse of coalitions (Bradshaw & Breakfast, 2019). A solution, according to Makole et al. (2022), is putting in place coalition rules for all partners in coalition arrangements. In many areas across the country, violent protests continue to erupt in response to residents' unhappiness over the pace and quality of basic service provisions. According to Alence and Pitcher (2019), this cements the concerns that South Africa is measured as one of the most unequal nations in the world, with a steady increase in unemployment figures and income inequalities.

Ahead of the 2019 national elections, a central focus of this study, Ramaphosa campaigned on the promise of bringing what his team termed a "new dawn" that would ensure that the ANC reclaimed the glory and values of past leaders such as Nelson Mandela (Alence & Pitcher, 2019). The coining of the term "new dawn" was not just Ramaphosa's promise of efficient governance but was also an acknowledgement of what many social commentators have termed "the nine wasted years" during which former President Jacob Zuma led the country into what some regarded as a dark period in the country's history (Langa & Shai, 2020). During this period, state-owned enterprises were also in a dire crisis, with the country's power utility Eskom failing to end the energy crisis amid widespread rolling blackouts, an issue many have touted as a threat to economic growth and foreign direct investments (Desai, 2018).

Going into the 2024 general elections, which we argue presents a pivotal point in the country's history of electoral democracy since it has been 30 years since the first democratic elections, one of the concerns raised by politicians revolves around voter apathy, particularly the low participation of young people in

the country's electoral and democratic processes (Enaifoghe & Dlamini, 2021). Even with concerns raised, some see youth voter apathy as an indication of a broad political problem or a national crisis. It has been categorised as a suggestion that young people have lost an appetite for democratic processes such as elections (Chauke, 2020). In the 2021 local government elections, of the almost 1.8 million young people between the ages of 18 and 19 who were eligible to vote, about 90% of them did not register, while in the 20–24 age group, less than 20% of them registered to vote (IEC, 2021). Oyedemi and Mahlatji (2016) have found that factors varying from unemployment to the realities of poverty and generally being demoralised are some of the reasons young people do not vote. Young people's participation is considered an essential aspect of the country's political future.

### **Diepsloot**

The study underpinning this article was conducted in the informal settlement of Diepsloot. The township is a densely populated settlement in the north of Johannesburg. It features government-subsidised housing, shacks and personally financed and built brick houses (Madienyane, 2013). The area was developed in 1995 after some residents of a temporary camp were relocated from an unregulated dwelling on a private farm called Zevenfontein (Carruthers, 2008). Mangava (2018) states that the area consists of Diepsloot West Extensions 1–13. Like many informal settlements across the country, Diepsloot often battles service delivery protests, which many (Siphumeze, 2015) say results from the area's growing population. According to Bénit-Gbaffou (2005), locals of the area battle to find employment opportunities in various industries. This means that they cannot participate in the country's economic system. The area's rate of violence and service delivery protests that residents continue to experience are some of the issues that worry them.

Furthermore, Bénit-Gbaffou (2002) argues that such violence results from a lack of government intervention in the community regarding service delivery. High unemployment and many other issues make the area a fertile ground for social and political research. Broadly, political leadership is seen as a significant role in ensuring that service delivery, such as electricity, sewer systems, housing, sanitation and water, is possible in communities (Siphumeze, 2014). Generally, South African voters have tended to choose political leaders they believe will meet their expectations (Naidu et al., 2006). In cases where voted leaders fail to deliver on the electoral promises, the residents become angry and disappointed. Such disappointments breed a lack of trust and, in some cases, residents engage in protests (sometimes violent protests) to register their dissatisfaction with service delivery programmes (Siphumeze, 2014). Some researchers have found that violent unrest could signal a form of communicating frustrations to a government that understands only violence (Hough, 2008). The study underpinning this article was interested in understanding the attitudes of Diepsloot voters towards political parties' communication messages. The researchers only looked at the top three political organisations: ANC, DA and EFF. The ANC is the national governing political party, while the DA is the main opposition. The EFF is a splinter party formed and led by former ANC members (Julius Malema and Floyd Shivambu). In the following section, the discussion centres on political communication and agenda setting.

### **Political communication: The media setting the election agenda**

The effects of the media on voting behaviour and preferences have always dominated research on political communication and agenda (McLeod, et al. 2009). While voting behaviour theories can better explain the voting exercise and what voters consider when voting, the mass media, with its role in informing citizens and setting the agenda, can be regarded as one factor influencing voting behaviour (Tyali, 2017). In general, political communication involves the interactive processes of political information and how the information is shared. It works differently in varying political setups and affects mass political behaviour and how political systems function (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012). However, in most political systems, political communication research is interested in the public political communication environments in which politicians use mass media to communicate their messages (Habermas, 2006; McNair, 2017). According to Hopmann et al. (2012:175), "the basic idea of agenda-setting studies is that the salience of issues on the media agenda influences the salience of issues on the public agenda, that is, in the minds of voters." When

it comes to voters' perspectives, their exposure to political messages is important in helping to inform their political roles and impacts their capacity to make informed voting decisions. One of these is voting for their preferred political parties or candidates.

Many researchers who marry communication and political sciences research seek to establish the extent to which communication-related variables, such as news coverage about politicians and their political utterances, affect political outcomes such as voting behaviour and voters' attitudes towards the candidates (Cantarella et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2011). These studies reveal that political communication directly impacts voters and their attitudes, but that effect is mediated (Enli & Skobergo, 2012; Habermas, 2006). One of the mediating factors in this study is agenda setting. Regarding the effectiveness of political communications and campaigning to win voters, Herrnson and Campbell (2010) states that issues such as the political agenda in which the elections are held, the mood of voters and the efforts of those standing for elections impact the outcome. The same can arguably be said about the 2019 general elections in South Africa, where President Cyril Ramaphosa's ANC won with a marginal 57%, a drop from the 62.5% that the party had achieved in 2014. This occurred despite his campaign message being regarded as one of the most influential since the dawn of democracy (Mehale, 2022).

Some social scientists say this can signal that it takes more than election slogans to garner electoral support and rebuild public trust (Alence & Pitcher, 2019). Political parties and their leaders might not have the same influence or capacity in their messaging to set the media agenda but, by reading through and listening to their campaign messages, it is possible to find elements of agenda-setting. Hopmann et al. (2012:174) posit that "it is important for both the political scientist and the political parties to understand better the factors that condition the ability of parties to put their preferred issues on the media agenda". Agenda-setting should be seen as a filter that mass media plays in cases where they select and portray issues (Yang et al., 2016). Such action could lead the audience to believe that the widely covered issues are more prominent and important than the others because the mass media is a channel through which some of these messages are communicated. It can influence the salience of these messages (Scheufele, 2000).

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

### **Voting behaviour theories**

The focus on voting behaviour theories is expanded in the sections below with a broader look at the theories that help explain electoral voting behaviour. To get a clear theoretical background of voting behaviour, the researchers used voting behaviour theories, such as Rational Choice Theory (Downs 1957), the Psychosocial Theory of Voting Behaviour (Campbell & Kahn, 1952), the Sociological Theory of Voting Behaviour (Berelson et al., 1954) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 2011), as a yardstick to understand what voters consider when voting for a political party. In their nature, elections play a very important role in deepening democracy because they allow those governed to choose who they want to have govern them (Albert, 2007). That, in essence, is part of participatory democracy and forms an integral part of a fully functional democracy (Albert, 2007). Elections allow citizens to choose the candidates they deem fit to run the affairs of their countries. Kakuba (2011) sees this as one of the critical roles of citizens in democratic setups and political environments: to be given the privilege to make decisions about political issues.

Studies on political and voting behaviour are multifaceted and show that different factors influence voting for a political party or a candidate (Hindess, 1984). There are, however, many factors that influence voting behaviour. Therefore, the theoretical framework underpinning this analysis uses a combination of four theories to contextualise and explain voters' attitudes towards political parties' communication messages. The theories, as also noted above, are the Rational Choice Theory, the Sociological Theory of Voting Behaviour, the Psychological Theory of Voting Behaviour and the Theory of Planned Behaviour. In his initial conceptualisation of the Rational Choice Theory in his seminal work titled *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Downs (1957) projected that human beings are ordinarily rational in their choices as a

means to reaching their preferred or desired ends. The theory assumes that voting behaviour is a result of what people expect to receive from their actions. Following Downs's work, a great deal of scholarship was done to understand what drives voting behaviour (Hindess, 1984). Broadly, issue-based voting and policy design consideration underpin the Rational Choice Theory. In its analogy, the theory likens the relationship between politicians and voters to that of two parties in which each of them wants to benefit in a relationship. The theory sees voters as rational beings who base their decision to vote on their assessment of what is important and not important to them. While it is possible to see elements of the models in voters, it can also happen that more than one of them could be seen in voters at the same time, though it may vary in showing.

In the context of the research study underpinning this article, we argue that the Rational Choice Theory allows researchers to grapple with political communication and how voters make sense of that. As Hindess (1984:256) points out, "Political behaviour may sometimes depart from the canons of strict rationality, but such departures are not thought to pose a serious problem for the rational choice approach". Some theorists posit that people vote for a political party that promises some materialistic benefit to them (García-Rivero, 2006; Koter, 2013;). However, other studies have reached a different conclusion and found that some voters decide because they identify with a certain political party over others (Berelson et al. 1954). The psychological theory posits that motivational factors lead a voter to vote. According to Ahmad, Bhatti, Yousaf (2020, 09) "the voters feel motivated to solve the issues of the community, locality, or country".

The Psychological Model Theory of voting behaviour, with its focus on partisanship, postulates that voters express their preferences to show their loyalty to the political parties of their choice. This theory explains that partisanship plays a critical role with voters who are somehow attached to a certain party due to their partisan position on that party (Mahsud & Amin, 2020). In the context of a country like South Africa, where some citizens have expressed unhappiness with the performance of the governing ANC (Dubbeld, 2017), the above could be one of the reasons the party is holding onto power, despite its perceived bad performance in government. According to Mayer and Perrinea (1992), the model details that party identification is an essential determinant of voting, and that partisanship plays a central role in maintaining lasting political relationships between the voter and the party they identify with, irrespective of whether that party delivers on its promises (Antunes, 2010).

Because one or two theories might not be enough to explain voting behaviour in a society that is made up of different people with varying viewpoints on political issues, it is wise that researchers employ other theories. The Sociological Theory places individual voters within their social structure as a determinant for their voting behaviour (Mahsud & Amin, 2020). The theory finds that voters' decisions result from their social background, religion, family traditions, ethnicity, personality and attitude towards certain issues (Berelson et al., 1954). According to Mahsud & Amin (2020), while there are beliefs that voters decide based on political communication and sometimes the personality of the candidates, the social groups of which voters are a part play a role in their decision-making process.

The Theory of Planned Behaviour was also employed in the study to understand voter behaviour. Early studies on what constitutes voting behaviour revealed that many voters were not adequately informed about politics and were ignorant of the policy positions of the political parties they supported (Hindess, 1984). Mahsud and Amin (2020) admit that voting behaviour is a complex phenomenon whose determinants are difficult to explain in absolute terms. The empirical validity of the theoretical approaches above has always been the subject of research undertakings and political discussions (Feddersen, 2004). That, however, does not mean that the models of voting behaviour, whether used alone or jointly, cannot create a framework to understand voter behaviour. It is important to note that history and context can provide researchers with the lens through which they can understand voter behaviour. In the context of this study, the theory's application was based on its applicability to making sense of what motivates voters to vote for a political party: political communication or their intention.



## METHODOLOGY

To make sense of the research data, the study followed a qualitative research methodology through interviews to gather data about voters' attitudes. The study underpinning this paper employed the qualitative method, which, according to Brynard and Hanekom (2006), produces descriptive data mostly collected through in-depth interviews, case studies, participant observation and questionnaires. One of the aims of the study was to investigate the effect of political communication strategies on voting behaviour (Hlungwani, 2021). The qualitative paradigm with its focus on how people think, behave and deduct meaning from issues assisted the researchers to probe the attitude of Diepsloot residents to political communication and their voting preferences (Bellamy, 2011). Because it is almost impossible to study an entire population using in-depth interviews with respondents, a purposive sampling technique was used to sample 35 research participants, 30 of whom had voted before.

The selection criteria for the research participants from the residents were that the respondents had to be residents of the area, of an appropriate age (18 years) to vote and be able to provide their own consent without an adult's supervision. The race of the respondents, as was the case of many residents in Diepsloot, was Black. Mangava (2018) posits that such is the result of the apartheid spatial planning that passed laws that forced Black people to settle in the outskirts of cities, a setup still prevalent to date. It would have been very challenging for the researchers to interview all the residents of the area under probe. Ahead of the 2019 national and provincial elections, South Africa had over 100 active political parties registered with the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). According to the commission, the elections had 48 political parties standing for election, an increase of 39.6 % from the 2014 elections (Madinga et al., 2020). That makes it impossible to study all the political parties. For that reason, only the ANC, DA, and EFF, which were the top three political parties when this study was carried out, were studied. This decision was taken by looking at their electoral support and their vibrant political cultures, as they dominated the political sphere in South Africa at the time. This exercise required the researchers to plant themselves in the area's political sphere to understand the neighbourhood as a complex political community.

To ensure that the exercise achieved the study's aims, a social analysis of the area was done. The context of this is important because it exposed the political and socially diverse nature of the area and its surroundings. For instance, the community of Dainfern, which overlooks Diepsloot, is a very affluent suburb that exposes the extreme opposites in various communities across the country. The COVID-19 pandemic almost disrupted data collection with its regulations around movements but, fortunately, the researchers visited the area while selecting the case study. Even before that, the researchers were familiar with the place and its socio-economic challenges. Data in the study underpinning this article were collected through telephonic interviews and recorded with a voice recorder app embedded on the phone. This was followed by transcription for analysis purposes. Individual interviews were about two hours long. The benefit of conducting the interviews using an audio recorder was that the interviewer could focus on the asking of questions and not worry about transcribing because the content would then be retrieved after the field day (Kvale, 1999). The raw data were then analysed using thematic analysis, with the researchers reading the transcripts to make sense of the data and establishing units of significance that could represent the subjective experiences of the respondents.

During the analysis process, the researcher identified and discussed the major themes that emerged during the interviews with the selected respondents. The section below details the findings of the study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section details some suggestions found during the interviews with residents of the area. In South Africa, the election season is rich with political activities, such as campaigning, and voters choose their preferred political parties based on several things. From the findings of the study underpinning this article, there are varying viewpoints on what constitutes political communication and how politicians should use communication during elections. This makes it difficult for one to gauge what constitutes effective political communication. In the case of the national and provincial elections of 2019, political campaigns

comprised very different messaging, most of which went against one another. The ANC promised renewal and rooting out corruption, the EFF stuck to its land expropriation without compensation message of “our land and jobs now,” and the DA highlighted the ANC as a corrupt party and then evoked the “One South Africa for all” in its campaign posters – an issue widely seen as an attempt to create one united South Africa (Mpofu, Matsilele, & Nyawasha 2021).

The ANC also accepted its shortcomings by campaigning around what it termed its renewal strategy due to the myriad of issues that affected its image. The biggest drawcard was newly elected party president Cyril Ramaphosa with the message “New Dawn”, which some saw as the party admitting its shortcomings during Jacob Zuma’s tenure (Hlungwani, 2021). The sub-sections below offer a more detailed discussion and analysis of these approaches by political parties.

### **Political rhetoric**

Due to declining voter turnout, politicians devise ways to revitalise political participation by strengthening their political engagements (Calhoun, 2013). This is also done to mobilise electoral support. Respondents in this study felt the communication from politicians was full of rhetoric to garner electoral support. Participant #1 pointed out that the political communication employed by politicians was manipulative and used rhetoric to steer their minds towards supporting them:

The election season gives politicians an opportunity to make promises just to get votes. I think voters should take all campaign messages with a pinch of salt and analyse them against what the party has done thus far. The ANC is the biggest culprit in this. One measure is the party’s ability to provide service delivery and its willingness to be held accountable by citizens and own up to its shortcomings.

The reference “pinch of salt” could mean voters understand that political parties use rhetoric to win electoral support. The ANC used its “a better life for all” rhetoric in its campaign messages and posters. The rhetoric echoes its 1994 election campaign where the party won the elections with a majority of 62%. According to Mehale (2022), the “a better life for all” message evoked a sense of fighting for equality among South Africans. “Such a message was crucial because South Africans, particularly black people for the past years, did not manage to get equal opportunities as did the white minority” (Mehale, 2022:94). For some political scientists, low electoral support could signal loss of trust in political leaders from the voters (Mattes et al., 1999; Ryabchuk, 2016). However, this study argues that such a conceptual distinction could be flawed because, despite almost three decades of majority governance, the ANC still received the biggest margin of electoral support from voters, an issue political scientists say is caused by a lack of better alternative (Mattes et al., 1999; Ryabchuk, 2016). Participant #2 in this study noted the following:

Many political parties lie their way into our hearts as voters, and we unfortunately fall for their rhetoric because many of us are desperate for service delivery where we live. The issue of unemployment and poverty also play a part in the whole exercise of politicians lying to us.

The response from Participant #2 above highlights the fundamental part of the relationship between politicians and voters that ought to be founded upon trust. However, much as there is a need to establish trust between the two parties, Albert (2007) explains that the role of rhetoric is to evoke strong emotions and give the candidates an advantage in bridging the gap between the real and the imaginary world, which they want voters to envisage. This messaging appeals to some voters, such as that noted by Participant #3:

The EFF’s rhetoric is a big factor in making them popular, and I think most have realised this and are tapping into it to appeal to the needs/wants of the masses. Rhetoric is a



powerful tool that has the ability to increase visibility and create awareness on a particular subject. I feel that it can be used as a contributing factor in popularising political parties and their campaigns among voters.

Detailing the reasons they vote, Participant #4 below explains that messages from political parties are full of negative campaigning towards other parties that are also contesting elections. In recent times, unconventional campaigning, such as the DA's burning of the country's flag ahead of the 2024 national and provincial elections done through paid media advertisements on television, radio and newspapers. Political parties produce content that seeks to tarnish the name of their opponents by highlighting their failures.

The DA will tell you why not to vote for the ANC, the EFF will harp on about WMC and race, the ANC will attempt to highlight its success as the governing party. Generally, The EFF's racist rhetoric certainly impacted my decision not to vote for them in the previous elections. Their anti-Indian messaging felt exclusionary.

These are some of the attitudes voters had on the campaign messages delivered by political party leaders. With its promise of a clean government, the DA hammered on the credibility challenge the ANC faced under its former leader, Jacob Zuma (Africa, 2015). A study by Davis (2001) revealed that political parties that invoke an exclusive "us and them" rhetoric in their election campaigns do better than those that attempt to provide a wider umbrella of a "catch-all" approach. Such a finding is an important variable in a party with a divided racial past. Davis (2004) states that political parties must have realised that one of the most efficient ways to mobilise electoral support is through the play on voters' fears and aspirations associated with their race. Africa (2015) says that in democratic South Africa, the demographic traits of the electorate are normally blended into the curation of electoral strategy to form stereotypes and prejudice. While that is attractive to certain citizens, Participant #5 viewed it as a sensitive issue:

Certain rhetoric can be attributed and even expected of a particular political party. While it may make them popular amongst supporters, it can also desensitise non-supporters.

Observing many ANC leaders while addressing voters, they always invoked a fear of regressing into the apartheid system if they did not vote for the organisation. While that can aid political parties in garnering support, the dangers of such utterances are that they can fuel racial or ethnic tensions in a country such as South Africa, with a history of racial divides. Africa (2015) found that in its political campaigning and messaging, the ANC in the 2019 general elections spoke widely about its contribution to overcoming the apartheid government but still acknowledged the challenges it was experiencing in providing basic services for South Africans. This study found that all the sampled political parties relied on conventional face-to-face and door-to-door campaigning methods, where political leaders engaged their constituency and promised service delivery. It is the nature of these campaigns that senior political leaders would hand out t-shirts produced by their parties, with the face of the head of the candidate standing for election on the t-shirts. Participant #6 had the following to say about the campaign messages used by political parties:

These people sell us dreams during their campaigns. When I vote, I do so based on my assessment of the parties standing for elections. I would rather choose a better devil than vote for a party based on their electoral promises because I know they are lying to us. The EFF, for instance, has promised to raise the monthly social grant, with the ANC promising to scrap the very same e-tolls system that they have put to function, and the DA's promise to get rid of corruption is some of the messages that convinced me to vote.

As the Psychological Model Theory of voting behaviour with its focus on partisanship states, some voters support the parties as a showing of their loyalty to the political parties of their choice (Antunes, 2010). One can observe that while some of these electoral promises can be delivered, politicians exaggerate what they can do. This observation came from Participant #7, who also acknowledged that credibility is an essential aspect of communication, particularly political campaigning, even though this type of communication tends to be marred by rhetoric and false dreams. With the passage of time, voters seem to understand the nature of these messages and their purpose.

Politicians don't realise that party politics won't put food on our tables, that we have no interest in all that, but we want to know what a party is prepared to do for us when the promises are too good to be true, we easily see that. We are not interested in party politics. Sloganeering and political mudslinging do not.

In line with the Rational Choice Theory, which proposes issue-based voting and policy design consideration when voting, the participant above demonstrated that one goes to the voting booth with an expectation that whoever they vote for will implement policies that will change their lives for the better. Broadly, the rational choice model sees voters as rational beings who base their decision to vote on their assessment of what is important and not important to them.

Ahead of the 2019 national and provincial elections, the country faced the highest unemployment rate at 29.3%, with the youth (25-35 years) mainly affected by the issue at 35.6%, more than double that of the 45-54 year age group at 17.5% (StatsSA, 2020). Since political campaign messages are often cognisant of prevailing economic situations, creating employment then becomes integral to most political parties' communication strategies. While most of the presidential campaigning took place in urban settings and state capitals, other campaigns were held at the local government level, where most voters are found but still live in desperate and dire situations of poverty, unemployment and lack of service delivery. Because political parties would tailor make campaign messages based on the challenges prevailing at any given election period, the messages of those campaigning on the ground will reflect what the leaders at a national or presidential level will be delivering. For this reason, as Madinga et al. (2020) explain, the campaigning system in South Africa is still a political-party-oriented exercise, where political parties rely heavily on their ground forces and, in some cases, the employing of political advertisements and well-known public figures, mostly referred to as celebrities, to popularise their campaign messages.

### **False dreams**

In any country, electoral participation is influenced by political grievances such as lack of service delivery and unattainable promises. Going into the 2019 elections, the ANC's campaign message was woven around fighting corruption within the party's ranks and in government. The state capture commission exposed a lot of rot in the party's ranks, how some party leaders had used their political power to form alliances with the Gupta family and how such an alliance had created a litany of irregularities in state-owned enterprises. A key theme that emerged from one of the front-runners' campaigns, Ramaphosa, was the renewal of the ANC. However, as revealed by Participant #8 during the data-gathering process, some of these promises are false dreams:

They need to keep to their 'promises'. Some parties tend to change their tone once they see the 'numbers', some issues of crime, drug abuse and poverty. There has been no change since 1994. Instead, more young people are being sucked into the trap.

The issue of unemployment remains a challenge for many youths, as outlined by the respondent above. The participant's response above confirms the assumptions of the Rational Choice Theory that voting behaviour is a result of what people expect to receive from their actions (Downs, 1957). The theory assumes that in deciding who to vote for, voters consider what will be their material benefit from their

action (Downs, 1957). Since the youth is the majority in South Africa and has the potential to constitute the biggest voting block during elections, issues of youth employment always form part of campaign messaging. However, as Participant #9 contests below, campaign messages have no truth but are just words to win electoral support:

Their words are not backed up by actions that are meaningless, but words do need to be said to keep political parties accountable. Political parties will sell what is popular, especially to the younger generation. The marginalised are always targeted, so telling them what they want to hear has always been part of political campaigns.

One common element that can be found in campaign messages of liberation movements is the statement that they have saved their constituency from the shambles of previous oppressive governments. According to Participant #7, such an argument, or talking, is slowly losing relevance among voters as they call for more service delivery than the typical "we saved you message".

Parties must stop relying on past successes and understand that we live in a time that presents new challenges, some old. However, parties need to understand that we live in a digital age. Information is readily available, and young people no longer rely on party manifestos to help them decide which party to vote for, but their track record of service delivery and job creation.

While liberation movements often evoke partisanship, an element of the Psychological Model of Voting Behaviour (Mahsud & Amin, 2020) in reminding voters that they freed them from the shackles of colonialism and apartheid in the case of South Africa, Participant #7 above details that gloating about past success is not enough – political parties need to demonstrate how they will ensure service and provision of job opportunities. Although such developmental plans must be communicated, Participant #4 explained that political parties must be honest about their timelines instead of making promises they cannot fulfil:

Parties should communicate their plans with action/implementation plans with clear and realistic timelines. They should also communicate what they have done in the past, account for where they failed to achieve their targets and outline how they plan on changing the narrative.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite its findings, this study has its limitations. Although it is a burgeoning scholarship conducted to test the impact of political communication on voting behaviour, there is a need to look at that from many political organisations because this study only sampled the top three at the time: the ANC, the DA and the EFF. The study can be significantly strengthened by increasing the sample size and including participants in other geographical areas because the current one only focuses on Diepsloot. Secondly, the current study was limited to only three past elections. To compare results, subsequent studies could consider replicating this study in other African countries where political communication and its effects on voting behaviour remain of interest to scholars. The present study did not examine political communication, political affiliation and voting behaviour to understand whether the former influenced or changed the voting behaviour or preferences of those with political affiliation. Overall, this as a recommended possible focal point of future studies could enormously contribute to the existing scholarship on political communication and voting behaviour in Africa and globally. In an environment that is moving towards the digital era, future studies could explore other elements of political communication, such as satire and whether it impacts voter attitudes and behaviour. The study also recommends that political communication from the side of politicians should be a constant exercise and not a method employed before the elections to woo electoral support.

## CONCLUSION

This article sought to give an account of a research study conducted to investigate South African political parties' communication strategies and how these influenced voters' decision-making processes. The study found that credibility is an important characteristic that political parties should possess, giving them the upper hand in electoral support. On what wins the favour of voters during elections, the study demonstrated that there are various reasons voters choose Party A over Party B. Some of those could be long-lasting relationships the voters have with the party or the expectations that such political formations could bring change to the lives of the voters. However, that might not be the only explanation because voters could be influenced by a historical culture of voting. For instance, many argue that the ANC still has electoral dominance in South Africa despite its failure to transform the lives of most South Africans in terms of jobs, service delivery, the provision of housing and adequate healthcare. This is insufficient to back that argument because the party's electoral support is declining, which could signal impatience among voters. Such an argument has elements of the Rational Choice Theory, which emphasises that voters' choice of candidates in an election is based on issues and policy design of the political parties. This means that benefits directly influence individual choices; the greater the benefits, the greater the likelihood of a decision or choices being taken. This explanation seems only to reflect to a small extent in South Africa, where many people on the ground have become tired of electoral promises and are in dire need of service delivery. Conversely, the Sociological Model underscores voting behaviour as an expression of the social structure, suggesting that social group membership influences voting behaviour.

The findings of this study show that, in South Africa, this is still happening because those in the broader membership of the ANC as a liberation movement still vote for it despite its apparent failure to transform the country. In the visible South African context, where the majority are Black people, the tenants of the Sociological Model that ethnic and geographical belongings are determinants of voting behaviour could explain why the ANC still enjoys wide electoral support from many Black settlements, the majority of whom continues to bear the brunt of the party's apparent failure to provide services. Broadly, the findings also demonstrate that there is little appreciation of participation in election processes among South Africans, the implications of which are dire for democracy.

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