

Chapter 1

Introduction: Evaluating Democracy and the 1999 Election in South Africa

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Since South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 the country witnessed a large-scale transformation from a racially exclusive apartheid regime to a democratic system premised on constitutionalism, the rule of law, the protection of individual and civil liberties, institutions of accountability, and the construction of a new state with both a transformation and developmental agenda. These gains can only be sustained and enhanced if elections are held regularly, in a free and fair manner, and within a legitimate electoral and political system. South Africa embarked on the road of sustaining and enhancing its democracy by holding its first follow-up election in 1999. The election also created the opportunity to measure the extent of democratic consolidation to date by gauging public perceptions of and citizen participation in democratic institutions.

Election studies generally elicit a variety of debates on public participation, political socialisation, shifting patterns of political support and the socioeconomic underpinnings of voting behaviour and party performance.¹ These debates produce varying foci on electoral politics, ranging from sociological insights into the nature of party systems, to the socio-psychological explanations of attachment to political parties and the forging of political identities, to economic analyses of democratic stability and economic discontent.

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has since 1994 conducted a series of longitudinal surveys on a bi-annual basis to test shifting patterns of support and perceptions of social issues and democracy. These surveys are conducted on a randomly stratified national representative sample of 2 200 adults. The surveys test public perceptions of national priority issues, government performance, economic policy, service delivery, the state of democratisation, as well as party-political support.

In addition to the longitudinal surveys the HSRC also conducts election studies. The 1999 election presented the HSRC with a number of opportunities; first, to assist the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) to ascertain the number of potential voters in possession of a bar-coded identity document for the purposes of election planning (see Chapter 3); second, to measure the shift in public perceptions and support in the run-up to the election; and third, to conduct the first ever exit poll, evaluating the freeness and fairness of the election as well as the efficiency of the electoral machinery (see Chapters 4-7).

This volume draws together the results of all this work. Chapter 2 examines the extent of democratic consolidation on the eve of the election, through the prism of public perceptions. The chapter examines a number of key indicators of democratic consolidation including public support for democracy, public optimism about the future, deracialisation, gender equality and the strength of civil society.

Chapter 3 outlines the research conducted on the electoral machinery. It examines the extent to which the IEC was able to establish itself as a credible institution and the availability of green bar-coded identity documents a year before the 1999 election as well as on the eve of the election. The chapter further explores whether the requirement that each voter should be in possession of a green bar-coded identity document in order to vote would inhibit voter participation in the election.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the first ever exit poll to be conducted in South Africa, as well as critically examining the methodology and constraints of such polls. Exit polls were prohibited during the 1994 election. The HSRC exit poll was conducted at 214 voting stations, distributed across all provinces, stratified by metropolitan, urban and rural location, and yielded 11 140 respondents. The age, gender, race and educational distribution of the sample produced interesting results.

In Chapter 5 the author presents fieldworkers' observations on election day. A total of 211 fieldworkers completed a questionnaire on their impressions which complemented the perspectives

of the voters, because the fieldworkers were stationed at the voting stations for the duration of the day.

Chapter 6 discusses the views of political parties towards various key policy and electoral machinery issues, including voter registration, voter education and state funding for political parties for election campaigning. Senior figures in each political party were interviewed after the election to elicit their views on these issues. A key component of the interviews was their perceptions of and comments on the IEC's role in guiding the country towards election day on 2 June 1999. Besides political parties, IEC personnel at national, provincial and local levels were also interviewed.

In Chapter 7 the author presents the findings of an HSRC election study based on workshops and focus group discussions held throughout South Africa during July 1999. The aim was to assess the voting public's perception of the efficiency of the electoral process, voter education, voter registration as well as voting and vote counting.

In Chapter 8 the author examines the outcome of the election, compares the levels of voter participation in the 1994 and the 1999 elections and discusses the support for each political party. The chapter also explores electoral geography and issue opinion, as well as the party supporter profiles of the 1999 election.

Chapter 9 attempts to outline some strengths and weaknesses of the 1999 election as well as their potential policy implications. It reflects on the processes of voter education, registration, staffing, voting and electoral funding, and proposes nine policy guidelines emanating from the HSRC team study.

In producing this volume the HSRC has attempted to contribute to the literature on elections research in South Africa. We hope that the volume will be useful as it captures a historical moment in South Africa's path to democracy.

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Note

- ¹ Crewe, I. 1994; "Voters, Parties and Leaders Thirty Years on: Western Electoral Studies and the New Democracies of Eastern Europe". In: Budge, I. & McKay, D. *Developing Democracy*. London: Sage.