4 ■ *Identity and voting trends in South Africa*

Maano Ramutsindela

Over the last decade, questions of national identity have gained prominence among researchers, especially because of the resurgence of nationalist movements. The point here is not that questions of identities are a recent development – identity constructs have always existed in different forms. Needless to say, in the modern state, nationalist sentiments are related to the nation-state as a form of political organisation. That relationship reflects a political principle that seeks congruence between the political and the national unit. Gellner (1983) has noted that because there was no congruence between cultural and political units in European agrarian society, the transition to industrialisation became a period of turbulent readjustment of political and cultural boundaries to satisfy the new nationalist imperative. Thus, identities can be mobilised for political action. A gamut of literature shows how nationalist movements mobilised identities for purposes of self-determination, as seen in the examples of ethnic revivalist movements in and around the former Soviet Union. Political changes there provided a platform on which politicians, who stayed at the helm for decades, exploited existing socio-political conditions to advance local self-expression and self-determination (Smith, 1990). Of course, as Gachechiladze (1997) reminds us, regional ethnic partocracies were shaped in the long years of Breshnev's 'zastoi' (stagnation). What is relevant to the discussion in this chapter is the mobilisation of identities for political action.

In the HSRC's national survey of public opinion in 1999, respondents were asked specifically how they identify themselves. Almost two-thirds (61%) said that they saw themselves as 'South Africans', a label that appeared to be especially popular amongst Indian, white and the coloured respondents (see Table 4.1). A further 15% indicated that their primary identity was in terms of their language group (such as isiZulu, Afrikaans, Sepedi, etc.) and one in ten saw their racial category as the most prominent (especially in the case of coloured respondents).

One in eight of the African population saw themselves firstly as 'Africans'. The only other major source of identity was in terms of religious categorisations. Almost one in ten Indian South Africans identified themselves in terms of their religious affiliation (Hindu, Muslim or Christian). For the purposes of this chapter the November 1999 data is disaggregated in terms of the racial categories black, white, coloured and Indian.

Table 4.1 Self-identification of respondents by race, November 1999 survey (%)

	Black	White	Coloured	Indian	Total
South African	55	81	68	82	61
African	13	2	5	2	10
Black, White, Coloured, Indian	11	2	18	7	11
Member of language group	19	7	3	0	15
Member of religious group	2	5	6	9	3
Other	0	3	0	0	1
Total	100	100	100	100	101

It would not be stretching the point to suggest that other forms of political action underscored by questions of identity have not been subject to the same rigorous analysis as that of the link between identity and state formation. In other words, the question of how identities influence other forms of actions has not been fully answered. This chapter goes some way in attempting to answer that question by linking identity and voting behaviour in South Africa. The choice of South Africa as a case in point has its obvious logic: the history of the politics of the country is, to a large extent, that of nationalisms (Marks & Trapido, 1987; Beinart, 1994). In turn, those nationalisms diffused into voting behaviour. In apartheid South Africa, voting behaviour was 'a measure of the whites' reaction to the social, economic and political circumstances in which they [found] themselves' (Lemon, 1987:82). More crucially, the political support and decline of the ruling National Party partly reflected schisms over the question of national identity and the future of the state, a point that will become clear below.

The historical linkages between identity and party support pose salient questions about voting patterns in post-apartheid South Africa, particularly because the black majority had not previously been considered in the analysis of election

results. A fuller analysis of the voting behaviour of black people became possible in the first non-racial democratic election of 1994. The general interpretations of that election assert the pre-eminence of race and ethnicity as a determinant of voting behaviour (Eldridge & Seeking, 1996). However, such interpretations are likely to be hollow if attention is not given to the differences between the labels given to voters and voters' identity of themselves. These differences are important 'because if we claim that group-related factors like race or ethnicity, influence voting decisions directly, the first necessary condition is that voters must consciously think of themselves in racial or ethnic terms' (Mattes, 1995:36).

The chapter is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I sketch voting behaviour in South Africa from a historical perspective. The second part focuses on the 'racial census' approach to the analysis of election results. In the third part, I analyse findings of the 1999 survey data.

Identity, instrumentality and voting in 'white' South Africa

An analysis of the history of voting in South Africa necessarily excludes the non-white majority that was effectively disenfranchised until the last decade of the twentieth century, notwithstanding the limited granting of the franchise to non-white voters in the Cape and Natal from 1910–36.[1] On the whole, it is useful to understand the voting patterns of the white electorate since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The Union was formed as a political compromise from Afrikaans- and English-speaking whites. At that time, English speakers still maintained strong links with the British Empire. As Dubow (1996) has shown, the British colonial subjects were faced with the choice of whether they were British or South Africans, while Afrikaners resisted incorporation into a British identity. In this context, the cleavage between the two main white communities was an expression of a fractured identity of the white nation. Unsurprisingly, 'South Africa first' became an election slogan for Hertzog's nationalists in 1915 and 1920 (Davenport, 1991). Implicit in the slogan was the call for a South Africa independent of Britain, the result being the mobilisation of Afrikaner nationalism. That mobilisation was rooted in the resentment over unequal

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[1] February (1991) has dismissed the idea that coloureds had the freedom to vote in the Cape by showing that the qualifications enabling coloureds and Africans to vote were meant to disenfranchise the target group.

distribution of status, wealth and political control, and the fear of cultural absorption into an English identity (Bloomberg, 1990). The British factor became important, however, in the general election of 1943. It fuelled the continued opposition of the nationalists to South Africa's participation in the war against Germany and heightened the demand for the National Party's (NP) transformation of South Africa into an authoritarian republic outside the British Commonwealth (Stultz, 1974). All in all, the mobilisation of Afrikaner identity culminated in the consolidation of Afrikaner power in 1948 and the elimination of the imperial factor with South Africa's conversion into a Republic in 1961. Some have argued that the 1948 election was a 'realigning election' because of the partisan alignment it showed. Stultz (1974:69) described this realigning as follows: 'Compared with their showing against the coalition government of Smuts at the previous general election of 1943, the NP and the Afrikaner Party in alliance sharply increased their support in winning in 1948.' Unsurprisingly, 'from 1948 until the early 1980s the NP's source of political support had primarily been the Afrikaans-speaking white voter' (Rule, 1989:94).

Hertzog not only sought to mobilise Afrikaners for political purposes, but also sought coloured support through a United Afrikaner League, the aim being to build cultural links between coloureds and Afrikaners, while at the same time weakening the links between coloureds and Africans (Davenport, 1991). In part, this strategy helped to carry the Hertzog-Creswell Pact to power in the 1924 general election. The use of the coloured vote and the search for the purity of an Afrikaner identity by Afrikaner nationalists shows the manipulation of identity for political support. Subsequently, however, Afrikaner nationalists excluded the coloureds from Afrikaner identity mainly because the coloureds were considered a 'mixed race', or as Marks and Trapido (1987:29) put it, they were seen as 'the illegitimate progeny of European civilisation and non-European savagery'. Despite these stereotypes, the Afrikaner nationalists in 1924 employed the language and 'European blood' of the coloureds in mobilising the electorate.

While Afrikaner identity might have helped carry the NP to power in 1948, differences over strategies to preserve the same identity in a multi-cultural society served later to split the Afrikaner electorate. In the 1960s, one camp sought to protect Afrikaner identity in isolation while the other sought to relax the exclusive perimeters of such identity. The suggestion here is not that divisions among Afrikaners became an issue in the 1960s; deep divisions among Afrikaners can be traced back to the final stages of the Anglo-Boer war (Van

Rooyen, 1994). Rather, our interest is how that division is reflected in national elections. In the 1970 election, the conservative Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) secured only 3,59% of the votes against the NP's 54,86% (February 1991). That division widened in the 1980s for reasons that were very much related to the protection of Afrikanerdom.

During this period, the protection of Afrikaner identity became a contentious issue because of the intensive local and international campaigns against the apartheid state, and because of heated debates over alternative pathways for a future South Africa. Giliomee (1992:342) observed that 'the division of the 1980s between Afrikaners in the NP and the Conservative Party turned on the question [of] how explicitly state power could be used to protect Afrikaner identity'. The ruling NP sought to protect white interests by extending its support base. It aimed to extend the political representation and participation to coloureds and Indians by giving these groups separate parliamentary chambers alongside the white parliament. This was clear in Prime Minister's P.W. Botha's speech in the opening of parliament on 23 January 1981:

> The period of renewal and progress, which the country has entered, continues. In the year ahead this process will receive added impetus from the deliberations on, and the creation of, constitutional structures which can accommodate, in an orderly fashion, political aspirations of various peoples and population groups and their right to self determination (*Hansard*, 91, cols 6–15.)

More broadly, it sought to create a multi-racial alliance of forces wedded to the values of private enterprise, the intention being to wean Africans, coloureds and Indians away from Marxist doctrines by giving them a stake in the system worth defending (Cameron, 1995). Against this background, the campaigns for the 1981 general election centred on strategies to protect white interests in an environment perceived to be hostile to the white nation. For instance, the NP campaigned under the banner of the 'total onslaught', with the aim of uniting white South Africans against the supposed Marxist threat (Lemon, 1987). For their part, conservative Afrikaners and the right wing wanted to protect their group identity in isolation. They criticised the ruling NP for wanting to broaden state nationalism. As the leader of the CP, Andries Treurnicht, put it:

> There are certain people [NP] who only want to talk in terms of state nationalism in South Africa and who want to ignore all ethnic

consciousness and the nationalisms of various peoples. According to that view, whites, coloureds and Indians are one nation in South Africa. (*Hansard*, 105, col 1253.)

If the 1981 general election was an indication of the strengths of these voices, the NP's idea of broadening the political support base to protect white interests gained the upper hand. It enjoyed majority support (53,3%) against the HNP (13,1%) and the CP (1,3%). However, the break away of 18 MPs from the NP to the CP in 1982 strengthened the conservative voice. As Munro (1995:13) has observed, 'the CP both fostered and drew upon a popular sense that the nationalist regime had betrayed the Afrikaner volk culturally, politically and materially.' No wonder that the CP became the official opposition party after the 1987 general election with 26,6% of the votes against 52,3 % for the NP.

Having lost considerable support from the conservatives and right wing, the NP had to rely on the English-speaking component of the white population. This became clear in the 1989 general election. Rule (1989) has described the 1989 election as a realignment of the South African white electorate. A realignment election 'occurs within a psychological context of intense public feeling, usually associated with some widely perceived, great national crisis; it results in sharp realignment of a previously established voting pattern' (Key cited by Stultz, 1974:67). In the 1989 election, the traditional linguistic differential of Afrikaans speakers voting for the NP and English speakers for the political left-of-centre could no longer be taken for granted. 'A large proportion of the Afrikaans-speaking electorate in particular [switched] allegiance from the NP to the reactionary right wing CP, at the same time that many English-speaking voters [aligned] themselves with the NP' (Rule, 1989:100).

That realignment was, in part, ascribed to the NP's move from a hegemonic Afrikaner state model to a market-oriented ideology (Greenburg, 1987). Lemon (1990) noted that in the 1989 election, economic concerns among the white electorate rose to such prominence that they seriously challenged issues of race and security. Understandably, the late 1980s were dominated by considerable disinvestment. For instance, by April 1988, one-fifth of the British firms had pulled out of South Africa and 184 American companies had left (Davenport, 1991).

All in all, race policies had been central to elections in apartheid South Africa. Furthermore, it would seem the scrapping of racial policies in the post-apartheid

era did not divert interpretations of election results from racial terms. Most interpretations of the first non-racial election of 1994 placed emphasis on the race card. A closer inspection of these interpretations will shed light on this.

The racial census approach

The historic 1994 elections were not only significant in terms of launching democracy in post-apartheid South Africa, but they also had profound effects on the conceptualisation of voter behaviour and the reconstitution of the state. Such conceptualisations included that the 1994 elections were 'the liberation census' (Southall, 1994; Lodge, 1995) or an'ethnic/racial census' (Guelke, 1996; Johnson, 1996). The idea of a 'liberation election' in 1994 suggests a polarity in the voting, 'reflecting an historically determined division of the electorate into camps of colonisers and the colonised, represented primarily by the National Party (NP) and the African National Congress (ANC) respectively' (Southall, 1994:86). Southall (1994:91) went on to say that 'the newly enfranchised African majority very evidently conceived the election as the culmination of decades of the struggle against apartheid, and as an inauguration of a new era of majority rule.'

In this context, retrospective evaluations of the liberation struggle dominated other factors that influenced voters' choices. The hegemony of the racial factor is clear in the view that the 1994 election reflected the link between the voters' choice and their race or ethnicity – a 'racial census'. Friedman and Stack (1994:327) have argued that 'voters largely voted in blocks rather than as individuals: a tiny minority of whites voted for the ANC, an equally tiny minority of blacks for the NP.' Lodge (1995) invoked the regional results of 1994 to make the generalisations that the vast majority of Africans supported the ANC or Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), implying that the election was a 'racial census'. In the same vein, Johnson (1996) maintained that the ANC's enormous victory was founded less on the non-racialism that it preached than on the reverse.

The assumption that race formed the basis of voters' choices thus raises serious theoretical and empirical questions, the fundamental being why post-1990 elections in South Africa have been analysed as 'ascriptive voting', despite mounting evidence of the complexity of voting behaviour? What is so important about the relationship between race and voting in South Africa? To this end, Mattes (1995:3) argues that, if it is true that South African elections are a 'racial census', the establishment of democracy becomes a matter of concern because

'comparative research shows us that establishing stable, comparative multi-party democracy in societies which are deeply divided by race, language, religion or tribe is a very difficult undertaking'. Read from this angle, the racial census approach thus appears to be informed by concerns over the establishment of a viable democracy. The logic here is that if South Africans are still locked into different racial/ethnic compartments, attempts to establish a non-racial order are most likely to fail. Thus, racial census elections reflect the persistence of strong racial cleavages and present difficulties for the development of a properly competitive multiparty system (Johnson, 1996). Furthermore, such elections tend to heighten political conflict because 'when political parties fail to span the politically important divisions in society, [but] instead reflect those divisions, they lose the ability to reduce political conflict or negotiate group compromise' (Mattes, 1995:8).

Yet South Africa is not only divided in terms of race; there are other equally important dividing factors such as religion and language, to name a few. The question is why are these other divisions not given serious consideration if indeed democracy could be under threat in such societies? Of course South Africa is not alone in Africa as a highly stratified society. As a group, African states form an 'extreme set of cases as measured by the sheer number of variety of ethnic, language, religious and sub-national political divisions into which they are fragmented' (Crook, 1997:216). If we assume that voters only register their racial or ethnic identities, the question of how those identities were registered in Africa's single party states also becomes interesting. Crook (1997) maintains that Cote d'Ivoire's approximately 60 ethnic groups were successfully co-opted and balanced during that country's single-party phase (1960–90) as a result of the astute political strategies of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, who linked local elites to a powerful state from the spoils of a booming export economy.

Practically, the racial census approach neither provides insights into questions of voting behaviour in a new political environment, nor illuminates continuities and changes in the choices by members of a particular group. What is assumed is a 'crude view of voters who mechanically record their race on the ballot papers rather than exercise any discretion' (Eldridge & Seeking, 1996:518). Furthermore, the approach often threatens the influence of race in isolation. Notions of race in South Africa have always been linked to, or bolstered by, a variety of mechanisms and conditions. It is likely that issues and interests run parallel to factors such as ethnicity or race (Mattes, 1995), as evidenced by past and present policy

preferences and levels of development. These need to be considered in detail in order to understand voters' choices. Using the same logic, the impact of institutional structures, parties' election strategies and campaigns on the elections cannot be underestimated (Johnston & Pattie, 1999). Eldridge and Seeking (1996:520) are of the opinion that 'any correlation between race and voting is due to a third factor – attitudes on key issues – rather than to a causal relationship.'

The idea here is not to discount the race factor entirely; it is rather to question the assumptions that underscore its use as a determining factor. Indeed, as we shall see below, the racial census approach does not tell us how people see themselves.

Self-identity and voting preferences

As I have intimated above, the racial census approach over-emphasises voting patterns of different race groups. The classification of the South African population into these groups was given political meaning by the Population Registration Act and was reinforced by legislation such as the Group Areas Act. The November 1999 survey interrogated the ways by which people identify themselves, to determine whether these were at variance with the way they were perceived.

As indicated in Table 4.1, the majority of respondents (61%) saw themselves as 'South Africans', with the identification as members of particular language/ethnic groups being the second most important label. Despite the different meanings that could be attached to the concept of a 'South African', such a concept most probably represents a broader identification with the country. Guelke (1996) has described this as a widespread identification with South Africa as a territory and as a reflection of the presence of some society-wide loyalties. The survey showed that more than half of the respondents of all four racial categories said that they identified themselves as South Africans. This identity was also clearly visible among people of all age groups, as is evident in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Self-identity as South Africans among age groups

	18–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55+	Total
'South African'	60	64	59	64	57	61

An additional dimension worth investigating is the way in which individuals at different socio-economic levels perceive themselves. This assists in an understanding of the impact of material conditions on identity making. Generally, analysts view poverty as a fertile ground upon which identities can easily be mobilised for certain goals. To this end, Agnew and Corbridge (1995) have ascribed the persistence of local and ethnic loyalties in Africa to the failure of most states to create wealth. In the same vein, there are views that the failure of the new government of South Africa to meet basic needs could provide conditions for sustaining ethnic identities.

The majority of people from different income groups also saw themselves as South Africans, though this percentage was lower for those in the lowest income brackets. People in the highest income groups did not see themselves as 'Africans', implying that the main beneficiaries of the South African economy are those who see themselves in terms other than 'African'. Evidently, the failure of the economy to grow sufficiently to meet the needs of the poor (i.e. blacks) could contribute to maintaining cleavages in society, the more so because a significant proportion (27%) of people with the lowest income (let alone the unemployed) see themselves in ethnic terms.

The idea of being 'South African' resonates with the political imperative to move away from the apartheid-era identity constructs. However, that broad identification does not provide sufficient background to understanding how people identify with political parties, since the majority of parties were established to represent explicitly partisan interests. Insights into this can be gained by looking at the relationships between people's self-identity and their association with political parties. To this end, respondents in the survey were asked to indicate how close or distant they felt towards the political parties active at the time.

The largest proportions of respondents who indicated that they felt 'very close' to any of the political parties said that they identify with the label 'South African'. This finding corroborates with another survey question, which asked why respondents who had voted had opted for particular parties (Rule, 2000). Most responses (34%) were related to issues of an improved lifestyle in the country or to a specific policy (e.g. jobs, housing) of the party concerned (35%). Fewer (22%) appeared to identify with the party for less tangible reasons (e.g. trust or belief in the party, like for the party, preference for a good opposition). Only 4%

gave reasons that suggested overt racial identity as their voting motivation. Those calling themselves 'South African' was highest amongst those who felt very close to the AEB (80%), FA (80%), DP (76%), ACDP (74%), SACP (70%) and UCDP (70%) (see Table 4.3). Conversely, it was least dominant amongst those who felt very close to the PAC (43%), with more than one-third (34%) preferring to be identified as 'African'. Similarly, amongst those 'very close' to the MF and IFP, only 44% in each case preferred the label 'South African', while approximately one-quarter preferred a language or ethnic label (most probably Indian and Zulu, respectively).

The proportions preferring the 'African' label were also relatively high amongst those who felt very close to Azapo (39%), SACP (17%), IFP (14%) and the ANC (13%). Preference for a racial label (black, white, coloured or Indian) was highest amongst those who indicated a feeling of closeness to the IFP (16%), ACDP (16%), UDM (15%) and the ANC (10%). A language or ethnic label was the preference of more than one-fifth of those who felt close to the white-Afrikaans-speaking dominated CP (46%), FF (30%) and AEB (20%), as well as the Indian-dominated MF (27%), Zulu-dominated IFP (26%) and Tswana-dominated UCDP (23%). Finally, a religious label was the preference of 23% of those feeling very close to the MF (see Table 4.3).

Historically, Afrikaner nationalists in particular employed Calvinism in the construction of Afrikaner identity (Moodie, 1975; Adam & Giliomee, 1979; Du Toit, 1983; Maré, 1993) and mobilised that identity for political support. Similarly, the Africanist legacy was evident amongst strong identifiers with the black-dominated political parties.

To understand the actual voting behaviour of people who preferred the different identity labels, the survey also included the following question: 'For which party did you vote in the 2nd of June 1999 elections?' As Table 4.4 demonstrates, all the major parties in parliament (ANC, DP, IFP, NNP and UDM) drew the majority of their votes from people who saw themselves as South Africans.

Of course, these political parties presented themselves as representing the interests of all South Africans in the 1999 election campaigns, because few parties would have liked to been seen as partisan. So, there was some congruence between the political ideals cherished by the major political parties and the self-identity of the voters.

Table 4.3 Preferred labels of people feeling 'very close' to each political party

Political party	Identity labels					
	South African	African	Black, White, Coloured, Indian	Language group	Religious group	Other
ACDP	74	6	16	4	0	0
ANC	58	13	10	17	2	0
AEB	80	0	0	20	0	0
AZAPO	51	39	3	7	0	0
CP	30	10	0	46	0	14
DP	76	4	4	11	4	1
FA	80	0	6	14	0	0
FF	58	0	8	30	0	6
IFP	44	14	16	26	0	0
MF	44	0	6	27	23	0
NNP	69	5	9	11	5	1
PAC	43	34	5	18	0	0
SACP	70	17	6	5	2	0
UCDP	70	0	4	23	3	0
UDM	59	10	15	8	8	0

Table 4.4 Self-identity and voters' choices in the June 1999 election

	Party voted for				
	ANC	DP	IFP	NNP	UDM
South African	58	79	40	73	64
African	13	1	10	2	3
Black, White, Coloured, Indian	11	3	11	12	1
Language group	16	7	39	7	13
Religious group	2	8	0	5	19
Other	0	2	0	1	0
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Conclusion

> We want to de-racialise our country, so that people can start to think of
> themselves as South Africans holding diverse views, and not as members
> of this or that racial, ethnic or linguistic group locked into corres-
> ponding and definite political compartments. (ANC, 1992:3.)

The purpose of this chapter has been to understand how voters identify themselves and to relate issues of identity to voting patterns. In a hitherto deeply divided society such as South Africa, questions of identity remain crucial, not least because of the political vision of building a sustainable non-racial and democratic order. This calls for understanding identity constructs in historical and contemporary perspectives.

As I have shown above, the history of South Africa consists of sustained contestations over national identity and the mobilisation of identities towards political goals. It must be pointed out that South Africa is not an exception. Recent ethnic wars in Eastern Europe and the Baltics amply demonstrate the construction and reconstruction of identities for socio-political purposes, and also reveal how identities can be instruments of disorder and instability. That is, identities can be factored into political thinking and action. While these arguments have enjoyed considerably academic consideration over the years, scant attention has been paid to the connection between identity and other forms of political action, such as voting. In the aforementioned cases, attention is usually given to environments of overt conflict, such as that between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland (Hadden, Irwin & Boal, 1996; Rossiter, Johnston & Pattie, 1998) and the Quebec separatist movement in Canada (Gidengil *et al.*, 1997).

It follows that deeply divided societies provide the context in which more fully to understand identity constructs and voting patterns. The challenge of this chapter, though, has been to employ given identity labels in the analysis of the 1994 election results in South Africa. As shown above, most analysts have adopted a 'racial census approach', seeking to see how political parties received support from particular race groups. Race was considered a determinant without questioning whether the electorate consciously identified with race categories. Even if they might have done so in the past, the reasons for continuing to do so under very different political circumstances cannot simply be assumed. We need to know how and why voters identify themselves, which is a concern that has been central to this chapter.

In sum, the findings outlined here are that the majority of people see themselves as 'South African', despite people's different racial groups. Of added significance is the dominance of a South African identity among people who voted for all of the major political parties. However, identity constructs that have been established and nurtured over the years are still present. The future of South Africa will likely hinge on how effectively a common 'South Africanism' is built and sustained in the presence of other identity formations.

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