

Reflections on Election 2009

Now that the dust has settled around the election and Jacob Zuma is safely in the presidency, “payback time” is the theme coming from the ANC Youth League and COSATU. These claims appear to be based on the widely accepted conventional wisdom that these two organisations “delivered” the ANC’s “landslide” victory in 2009.

Yet there is little hard evidence in the election data to support the idea of the election being delivered by the youth or union members – and the data furthermore fails to support the widely accepted notion of an unusually large victory.

In fact the explicit support received by the ANC at the polls nationally is that of a minority of the eligible voting population – albeit a larger minority than that supporting the DA in the Western Cape.

In the Western Cape the DA got slightly more than one million votes. Opposition parties in that province (including the ANC) received 0.96 million votes. Based on an estimated adult population of 3.1 million, this indicates that an estimated 1.1 million adults did not vote. Thus the DA had the explicit support of 33% of the eligible population, 36% did not vote and a further 31% voted for opposition parties. As much as 67% of the eligible voters did not vote for the DA.

While the ANC has used this to question the legitimacy of the DA government, it is not that much different from the national situation, where – using the same arithmetic – 60% of the eligible population did not vote for the ANC (21% voted for the opposition while 39% did not vote). The ANC’s explicit electoral support of around 40% is thus somewhat better than the DA’s 33% in the Western Cape.

Of course “not voting” can mean a number of things. Many assume it means an acceptance (and approval) of a perceived inevitable result (a non-vote that is pro-ANC). However it could also mean a helpless (disapproval) of a perceived inevitable result (a non-vote that is anti-ANC). Or it can suggest an outright disillusionment with any of the available electoral choices, or even a rejection of the electoral system itself.

Whatever the reasons for not voting, the ANC’s popularity among those who did vote is obvious and their ability to get 11.7 million people to go and vote for them is a clear reflection of their ability to mobilise and motivate. As much as parties capitalise on passions and partisanship, translating these factors into votes requires organisation and management.

At the very least those who can present voters to the polling station are owed a debt of gratitude by the victors, and it is in this vein that the ANC Youth League and COSATU have claimed that it is time for Zuma to pay them back.

But among the registered voting population the youth, ANCYL’s main constituency, is under-represented. IEC statistics show that the registration rate of eligible adults aged 18 to 29 was only 57%.

While higher registration rates in older age groups are implausibly high due to those who have died or emigrated remaining on the voters' roll – the data indicates 96% of adults older than 40 were registered – we can still, taking into account the likely numbers of deaths, safely assume a registration rate in excess of 57% for older people.

The registration numbers for the youth are probably accurate and imply that even in the fantastical situation where every single registered young person voted, they would have contributed only 6.2 million votes (34%) to the turnout of 17.9 million. Yet the 18 to 29 age-group comprises 39% of the eligible population. Even this best-case scenario suggests therefore an under-contribution of the youth to this election.

International experience suggests that voting rates among the registered youth would most probably be lower than that for older people. If we instead assume that the average turnout rate of around 77% applied also to the youth, this would imply a contribution of around 4.8 million votes (27%) to the total votes cast – an under-contribution of 31%.

Further, it is by no means clear that those among the younger age groups who did vote voted for the ANC in any greater proportions than older age groups. For example COPE's appeal was thought to be particularly strong among black youth. Even in the fantastical situation that every one of the likely 4.8 million voting youth voted ANC, this would only bring their voting contribution to the ANC vote roughly in proportion to their share of the eligible population.

As quite clearly not every young person voted ANC, and youth chose not to vote in greater proportions than other age groups, the youth can by no means be said to have "delivered" the election for the ANC – in fact the evidence is that the youth under-contributed.

While some would argue that the ANCYL constituency is broader than the "youth" alone and that their contribution lay also in organisation and mobilisation, it seems clear at the very least that the youth component was under-represented among voters.

COSATU's claim that it too is owed a special place is also not without question. Union registration for the country at a whole is at around 3.4 million. Again, if every registered union member had voted ANC this would have contributed only 19% to the total votes cast. Even if every union voted ANC, this would have made up less than 30% of the votes received by the ANC.

Again, some would argue that union influence is far broader than that indicated by union registration. While that may be true, it is at least to be expected that relative provincial registration strength is a rough indicator of union strength – and also mobilisation and organisation. Thus if the claim is that union strength influenced voting turnout for the ANC, provinces with greater union registration and thus union strength should have greater ANC voting strength.

Provinces which contributed more than the national average to the ANC's proportion of votes were Gauteng and Mpumalanga (3% more than the ANC's national share), while the proportion of votes cast in favour of the ANC in the Eastern Cape, Northern

Cape and Limpopo were very close to the national average, indicating that these five provinces did “better than average” in delivering the ANC its victory.

Yet of these provinces, only Gauteng boasts a relatively high proportion of union membership. Again this suggests that the overall driving force behind the ANC victory was not the labour movement. In fact when examining the provincial vote shares it seems that the most reliable indicator of a big ANC vote was a large rural population. This suggests that ANC “owes” the older and rural population more than it “owes” the youth or the unions for its victory.

Mandela, whose ANC was elected in the days before voter registration was required, was probably the last – and only – President of South Africa to enjoy the explicit support of the majority of the adult population. Mandela’s ANC garnered 12.2 million votes – half a million more than the ANC managed some 15 years later – out of an estimated eligible population of only 23.2 million. Mandela thus gained the explicit electoral support of 53% of South African eligible voters.

In 1999, in the first election requiring voter registration, Mbeki’s ANC got 10.6 million votes out of an estimated adult population of 25.3 million (42%), while in 2004 the party got 10.9 million out of an estimated adult population of 26.8 million (41%). In 2009 the established trend of another one percent drop in ANC share of votes from the eligible population was continued.

These drops may be dismissed on the basis that a non-vote most likely equates to tacit support of an inevitable ANC win – and thus a drop in electoral support expressed as a proportion of eligible voters is consequently no indication of a true drop in support. This view sees voters as a representative sub-sample of the total electorate – in other words the proportion of non-voters who nevertheless support the ANC is the same as the proportion of voters who support the ANC.

But the analysis above shows that at the very least the age composition of non-voters is different from that of voters – non-voters lie predominantly among newer voters who cannot be assumed to have a deep tradition of ANC support. In future elections a political party able to mobilise current young non-voters has the potential to increase its support by around 5 million votes. An organisation which helps a political party do that will truly have something to crow about.

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