

Insiders and Outsiders in South Africa



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The more South African politics changes, the more it seems to stay the same. To political commentators across the country, the 2014 election promised a revolution. After twenty years of uninterrupted African National Congress (ANC) rule, economic stagnation, a lack of jobs and opportunities, and poor service delivery were supposed to shock the South African electorate into action. The ANC's vote share would surely fall below 60% for the first time, the Democratic Alliance (DA) would finally triumph in Gauteng, Agang would prove an attractive alternative to the ANC's black core of voters, and Julius Malema's ironically named Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) would shine in poor communities.

Yet once the electoral dust settled, the 2014 results looked eerily familiar. The ANC lost 15 seats in parliament (the same number it had lost in 2009, hardly a sea change), but held on to roughly the same proportion of votes that it had first captured in 1994. The DA expanded its vote share in impressive fashion, but by less than was hoped by many commentators; it also fell far short of the numbers needed to claim Gauteng.

On the surface, then, South African electoral politics looks very stable. If anything, there is perhaps evidence of a gradual convergence on two main parties (the ANC and the DA). The Western Cape appears to have settled as an established DA stronghold, and not as a result of racial migration. Black and Coloured voters in the Cape have shifted en masse away from the ANC, selecting the DA as their party of choice. KwaZulu-Natal, urban centres aside, is now almost entirely the ANC's playground. Changes in other provinces are small and few credible inferences can be drawn from shifts in their voting behaviour.

In this essay, I propose one shift that is emerging in the South African electorate – the shift in ANC support away from urban areas and in to rural areas. While the ANC is still capable of winning over 60% of the electorate, the types of people who constitute that 60% have changed over time. In recent years, I argue, the ANC has come to rely more drastically on rural voters than ever before. I posit that this shift is not epiphenomenal, and will be sustained through the present political cycle. The shifting nature of the electorate will play a significant role in shaping the behaviour of political elites in the next few electoral cycles.

I further argue that this shift is particularly significant in that, until now, rural and peri-urban black South Africans have been treated as outsiders by the ANC government. In contrast to urban populations (both white and black), who are political insiders, rural black South Africans have been systematically denied redress, much needed local political reform, socio-economic advancement, and access to public services. Rural black South Africans have been marooned outside

the ANC for twenty years, while urban blacks and whites have been protected, and indeed have had their positions advanced. To ensure its political dominance, the ANC now needs to bring those outsiders in, realigning itself with a new political base.

Insiders and Outsiders

One of the determining features of inclusion and exclusion in politics is the creation of “insiders” and “outsiders”. Insiders are those whose interests are protected by the arrangement of political interests in the status quo. This tends to bring with it, not only the protection of material interests, but the ability to defend those interests through relevant machinery. Outsiders, conversely, are excluded – their interests are not protected, and they are invariably excluded from the levers of power. Insider-outsider dynamics thus tend to be very stable: the insider has no incentive to change their strategy, and the outsider has no power to force them to change it. The result is, generally, persistence in the protection of the insiders and the exclusion of the outsiders.

The creation of systematic insiders and outsiders can result from a number of sources. It can be the accidental result of public policy (as in the case of welfare insiders and outsiders), or the very particular result of deliberate strategic choices (elites choosing a particular group and advocating for their interest). A typical example of an insider-outsider dynamic is union membership. Members of the union are insiders – their interests are protected and they have some power over the union’s future behaviour. Labourers not protected by the union are outsiders, and can be forced to accept the negative externalities associated with union activities (for instance, lower wages).

In contemporary South Africa there are clear insiders and outsiders, both economically and politically. Some of these have been structured by the negotiated transition of the early 1990s; notably, whites have found themselves in a strong “insider” position. So too have black elites, and, to some degree, upwardly mobile urban blacks.

Key in determining insider-outsider status is differential access to power structures. In the case of unions this occurs through membership, but it can occur through simple electoral numbers. In the case of Social Security in the United States, for instance, the insiders (retired Americans who receive Social Security disbursements) act as a veto voting bloc for any attempted reform of the system. No politician will ever suggest Social Security reform because he or she will be summarily punished by the older voting bloc.

This also suggests that insiders and outsiders can potentially swap places; if outsiders are able to gain some sort of political power, they may be able to align the state’s interests with their own. This may, in turn, result in some of the original insiders ending up as outsiders. In contemporary South Africa there are clear insiders and outsiders, both economically and politically. Some of these have been structured by the negotiated transition of the early 1990s; notably, whites have found themselves in a strong “insider” position. So too have black elites, and, to some degree, upwardly mobile urban blacks.

The dual protection of white capital (evinced by the slow pace of reform on JSE boards) and advocacy for a black middle and upper class (affirmative action, black economic empowerment), has created a politically tapped-in urban economic class.

Origins of a shift

Despite their status as outsiders, rural black voters have, for the most part, supported the ANC in every election since 1994. With the exception of rural KwaZulu-Natal (where the ANC performed very poorly before 2007), most rural voters, if they decide to vote, choose the ANC. These voters have supported the ANC for a mix of reasons – partly because they are the most well-known, most reputable party in the country, partly because the ANC has a legitimately strong track record, and partly because they are told, or induced, to choose the ANC. Yet turnout rates are not always high, and there are always a few more votes to squeeze out of any given electorate, should one try.

In sum, the ANC has begun to realign itself as a party with a large rural base, to which it needs to pay attention if it is to maintain the levels of parliamentary authority it has enjoyed for 20 years.

And that is precisely what has seemingly occurred in recent years. The ANC has moved toward rural voters – in particular Zulu voters in KwaZulu-Natal – to offset losses in urban areas. As much can be seen from the 2014 election results. The Western Cape, driven mostly by Cape Town, moved 10 percentage points toward the DA. Gauteng shifted similarly in favour of the DA and EFF. It is no coincidence that the provinces with large changes are also provinces with major urban centres.

Three intertwined forces have driven this shift in the ANC's support base. First, as outlined above, there is a shift in urban centres away from the ANC and toward alternative parties, notably the DA and the EFF. While the direct causes of this shift are hard to ascertain, there are a number of possibilities. Growing economic and job stagnation, the proliferation of education to a broader base, or simply the proof of concept afforded DA rule that the Western Cape offers. Whatever the particular forces at play, urban centres are slowly deserting the ANC for opposition parties.

The second major force has been an ANC strategic shift, away from a narrow urban focus – in which issues like land reform were only ever given lip service – into a much broader developmental focus. This is evident in the renewed focus on land reform, agricultural reform, and the role of traditional leaders.

The third force has been the gradual opening of KwaZulu-Natal's rural areas to the ANC's influence, partly due to the demise of Buthelezi's Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and, partly, the ANC's appointment of Jacob Zuma (an ethnic Zulu). This has meant that a large voting population, largely untapped by the ANC prior to 2007, has become available.

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Rational voters?

But if the ANC's attempts to recalibrate itself as a party of the rural poor are to really shift rural voters from outsiders to insiders, open questions remain. One such question is whether rural voters are likely to respond to the ANC's renewed focus at all, and whether urban voters might retaliate by drifting further away. While some critics believe that voters in South Africa are hyper rational and

respond to policies accordingly, many others believe that voters simply “follow their leaders”, irrespective of the policy path being taken.

The truth of the matter, of course, lies somewhere in between these two extremes. For instance, much academic scholarship suggests that voters in the United States and the United Kingdom are largely uninformed. They know little to nothing about politics or policy, and simply vote ad infinitum for the same party, usually the one they inherited from their parents. Rather than having strong policy preferences, they simply follow the policy positions of their preferred candidates. Rather than considering policy alternatives and thinking through choices, they use short-cuts and heuristics to cast their vote.

The same is probably true of South African voters – from the poorest areas of the rural Eastern Cape to the wealthiest parts of Cape Town. Voting can be a difficult and costly task. Establishing one’s own preferences, working out the policy positions of parties, and then determining how well those policies map to your interests is challenging and time consuming. So voters, world-wide and irrespective of income and education, tend to adopt shortcuts. Those shortcuts rely on, among other things, instantaneous assessments of the economy and subconscious associations attached to the parties or candidates. Voters everywhere are predisposed to not make carefully thought through decisions, and instead rely on simplifying shortcuts. Of course, if their shortcuts work, they may still make good decisions.

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In the South African case, as in many other developing democracies world-wide, the ability of voters to make “thought-out choices”, or to successfully rely on shortcuts to make good choices, is constrained by the socio-economic and socio-political environment. The ANC remains a powerful organization with a deep and well-resourced network. It is perhaps the most powerful single organization in the country, its institutional strength buttressed by its command of government. Build in its various agents – various arms of state, the ANCYL, COSATU, the SACP, the amakhosi – and the social reach of the ANC is unrivalled.

This has two consequences for South African voters. First, it has the effect of constraining and shaping the kinds of information to which they have access. Given the low levels of newspaper and television penetration in most parts of the country, the ANC is powerful enough to control the kinds of information voters encounter during elections. They are also able to mould the narratives that describe this information – reinforcing, for instance, the narrative of ongoing revolution and liberation.

The ANC can focus voters’ attentions on its successes, can make causal claims about its role in those successes, and demonize opposition parties as agents of white power or as ill-disciplined defectors. (The same is perhaps roughly true of the Democratic Alliance and white voters in wealthy areas). These effects are particularly acute in racially and economically homogeneous areas where information flows are already limited and the ANC has strong penetration. Given that we know voters take shortcuts, relying on pre-processed information and subconscious associations, it is easy to see the influence the ANC may wield over a large section of the population.

But that influence is not just limited to the control of information, narratives, and associations. Like many large parties in developing democracies, the ANC uses machine politics to improve its electoral performance. Luthuli House employs a large network of cadres, councillors, youth members, and grassroots members to ensure that voters turnout and vote for the right party. In a rural town, surrounded by ANC supporters and embedded with ANC agents, it can be very hard to even entertain the idea of voting for an opposition party.

Not only is it a difficult psychological and cognitive task, it may be a socially and economically dangerous choice. Consistent with this is the observation that many areas in South Africa exhibit high levels of bloc voting – a very high number percentage of members of the community vote for one party. Indeed, there are still many areas of this country that opposition parties consider “no go” areas, where only the ANC’s voice may be heard.

This suggests, then, that the ANC may well succeed in awakening rural voters as a powerful electoral bloc in forthcoming elections. They may do so through both the revitalization of rural-focused policies, and, more worryingly, through increased entrenchment of their political machinery in rural areas.

Long term effects

The picture painted in this essay is one of an increasing reliance in the ANC on rural voters, and perhaps in particular ethnic Zulus. Rather than attempt to win back urban voters who are slowly drifting from the core, the ANC has seemingly redoubled its efforts to maximize votes from rural areas. What do these changes mean for politics, more broadly, as we move forward? First and foremost, they imply that the ANC may become more and more reliant on rural voters over time. This itself may have many consequences, some of them potentially dangerous, both to the country at large and rural voters themselves.

First, it may signal the beginning of attempts by the ANC to entrench their political machine even deeper in rural areas. That may mean, unfortunately, that rural development itself is actually stalled, so as to sustain the particular power structures on which the machine hinges.

Relatedly, the ANC has already begun its latest attempt to expand the powers of chiefs. As dependence on rural voters becomes stronger, chiefs will potentially grow in importance in the ANC electoral framework.

Third, the ANC is making moves to radically reform land reform legislation, and farm ownership legislation. While such legislation is necessary, the potential for populist reforms is worrying, both constitutionally and economically.

Finally, in a more long term sense, there is the risk that the ANC will surrender a number of cities, but retain its parliamentary majority by dint of rural votes. If this happens, the country faces an interesting policy prognosis – how will a rural-based ANC govern a country in which the cities have turned away from them?