Racial Politics and Campaign Strategy in South Africa’s 2009 Election

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ABSTRACT South Africa’s 2009 election featured competition between the ruling African National Congress (ANC), the steadily improving Democratic Alliance (DA), and the newly formed ANC splinter party, the Congress of the People (COPE). In 2009, national-level parties faced the same strategic imperative as in previous elections: to gain support among the Black majority. But the emergence of COPE had potentially important implications for election strategy. Competition was no longer only between the liberation party (the ANC) and the successor of an apartheid-era party (the DA). COPE had its own set of liberation-linked leaders that presented a new challenge to both the ANC and the DA. This paper examines the main parties’ use of candidate lists, voter outreach, and campaign rhetoric to target the Black majority in 2009. It updates and expands previous studies of racial politics in South Africa, providing novel empirical data on the campaign tactics of the ANC, DA, and COPE.

Introduction

South Africa’s 2009 General Elections pitted the ruling African National Congress (ANC) against its traditional post-apartheid rival, the Democratic Alliance (DA), and political newcomers, the Congress of the People (COPE). This election showcased two potential challenges to the ANC’s continued political dominance: first, the historically White party (the DA) continued to reframe itself as multiracial in nature in order to win over Black voters. Second, as a party with strong ties to the anti-apartheid struggle, COPE attempted to outflank the ANC for Black voters.

The ANC’s electoral success is closely linked to its strong hold on the Black majority. With approximately 79% of the total population and majorities in almost all provinces, Black voters are key to election success for any political party in South Africa. The ANC’s leadership in the anti-apartheid movement has earned its large and persistent support among Black voters. However, the party’s sputtering anti-poverty programs and record of corruption have slowly increased its political vulnerability across elections. The DA, often constructed as a white party, has recast itself as multiracial political party. It had increased...
its vote share from approximately 1.7% in 1994 to 12.3% in 2004. Adding to the ANC’s challenge in 2009 was the creation of COPE; a breakaway party of former ANC officials. Unlike the DA, COPE’s leaders had liberation credentials that could potentially have neutralised the ANC’s traditional advantage among Black voters. The 2009 General Elections had presented a possible turning point in South Africa’s post-apartheid political dynamic: could the ANC’s hold on Black voters—and with them its hold on power—be broken?

The answer was ultimately no. The ANC achieved an easy victory with over 65% of the vote. The DA and COPE won 16.6% and 7.4%, respectively. This paper assesses the 2009 campaign strategies of the three main electoral competitors: the ANC, DA, and COPE. It focuses on each party’s tactical agenda with respect to winning strategically essential Black voters: How did the DA and COPE try to win over Black voters? How did the ANC fight off the DA and COPE to retain Black voters? By looking at candidate lists, voter contacts, and campaign rhetoric, this paper presents three novel empirical findings regarding the 2009 election. Firstly, the ANC continued its increasingly exclusive outreach to Black voters. Secondly, COPE attempted to mimic the ANC’s strategy, appealing almost exclusively to Black voters. Lastly, the DA continued its racially inclusive strategy, which further consolidated support among White, Indian, and Coloured voters in 2009, but failed to garner significant gains in Black support. The strategy used by the ANC, DA, and COPE can be called tactical racialism: the strategic use of racial appeals to maintain or build Black support.

This paper offers a multidimensional empirical analysis of racial politics during South Africa’s 2009 General Election campaign. It updates and expands previous studies, providing new data on the ANC, DA, and the newly formed COPE, which changed the strategic dynamic, though not the outcome of the election. This paper first analyses the racial character each party’s candidate lists, voter outreach, and campaign rhetoric, using cross-election comparative data when available. It concludes with a brief discussion of the drivers and implications of tactical racialism during South Africa’s election campaigns.

Assessing the 2009 election: ANC, DA, and COPE

To assess the racial character of the 2009 campaign of the ANC, DA, and COPE, this section examines the candidate lists, voter outreach, and campaign rhetoric of these political parties. Candidate lists were collected, coded by race, and compared to South Africa’s demographics. Voter contacts were assessed using a survey question that asked South Africans which parties contacted them during the election. Finally, campaign statements were collected and coded, using a detailed rubric to determine racial targeting. This three-part analytical framework found strong tactical racialism in the campaigning strategies of the ANC, DA, and COPE, where all three parties disproportionately targeted Black voters.
Candidate lists

Candidate lists provide a party the opportunity to define its public image. South Africa’s parties can choose to fill and structure their lists as they chose, which presents a strategic opportunity to target specific racial groups by stacking lists with a racially skewed set of candidates. Building on the work of Ferree (2010), who created a database of racially coded candidate lists for the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections, this section examines the national, regional, and provincial candidate lists for the ANC, DA, and COPE in 2009 across elections.¹

COPE’s 2009 General Election candidate lists closely mirrored South African society. On its national list, COPE’s candidates were 71% Black, 14.5% White, 8.5% Coloured, and 2.5% Indian. Its regional and provincial lists had similar totals. All three lists closely matched South Africa’s demographics, in fact slightly under-representing Blacks and over-representing Whites, as seen in Figure 1.

The DA has made significant advancement in placing more Black candidates on its lists since 1994 (Ferree 2010). Yet, in 2009, the DA’s party lists were the most misrepresentative of South African society of the three main parties. At the national level, the DA’s candidates were 26% Black, 63% White, 5% Coloured, and 6% Indian. This under-represented Blacks by 52 percentage points and over-represented Whites by 52 percentage points, as demonstrated with Figure 2.

Additionally, Figure 3 demonstrates that the DA’s lists showed an increase in the percentage of White and Coloured candidates and a decrease in Black candidates between 2004 and 2009 (Figure 3).² In 2009, the DA had 7.5% fewer Blacks and 7% more Whites/Coloureds on its lists. However, the DA greatly expanded its lists between the two elections. The DA had 83 additional Black candidates in 2009, which still equalled a drop in the overall percentage. This evidence fits Ferree’s analysis of DA candidate lists, which shows that the DA has had difficulty in recruiting well-known Black candidates even though it wants to diversify its image. In short, the DA’s growing popularity required it to expand its party list

![Figure 1. Racial Composition of COPE’s Candidate Lists for the 2009 General Elections](image-url)
membership in 2009, but in so doing, the party struggled to fill these new slots with Black candidates.

In 2009, the ANC’s national, regional, and provincial candidates reflected South African society as seen in Figure 4. The overall composition of all candidates selected to represent the ANC was 84% Black, 7% White, 5.3% Coloured, and 3% Indian. As shown in Figure 4, the national list, regional lists, and combined provincial lists minimally over-represent Blacks and Indians, while minimally under-representing Whites and Coloureds.

Parties can stack lists in particular ways to advantage certain candidates over others. Given the ANC’s consistent level of support across elections, it can predict with high accuracy its percentage of the vote at the national and the provincial level. Therefore, the party knows in advance which list placements are safe, competitive, or certain losers. The ANC could then conceivably position its minority candidates at the bottom of the lists, ensuring both the image of inclusion and the governing reality of mostly Black parliamentary members.
However, an additional analysis shows that the racial composition of the ANC’s winners and losers also mirrors South Africa’s demographics, showing that the ANC’s 2009 lists were substantively representative.

Although the ANC’s 2009 lists were broadly representative of South African society, the party’s candidates are in fact becoming increasingly less diverse. Figure 5 demonstrates that between 1994 and 2009, the ANC’s percentage of Black candidates increased from 70% to 84.5%. Its percentage of White/Coloured candidates decreased from 21% to 12.5%, and Indian candidates have decreased from 9% to 2.5%.

While the composition of the ANC’s party lists does not signify the full abandonment of racial inclusion, there is a clear homogenising of its candidates over time. Though the lists remain broadly representative allowing the ANC to legitimately claim inclusivity, its progressively diminishing percentage of non-Black candidates will inevitably lead to less diversity in Parliament.

Figure 4. The Racial Composition of ANC Candidate Lists for the 2009 General Elections

Figure 5. Racial Composition of ANC Candidate Lists: 1994–2009 General Elections
candidates suggests that the ANC no longer feels the need to reach out to non-Black voters by over-selecting their candidates. The ANC’s logic is likely influenced by the opposition parties’ strategic use of their candidate lists. Despite clear difficulty in acquiring Black candidates, the DA has greatly enhanced the racial diversity of its party lists. The drop in the DA’s percentage of Black candidates in 2009 obscures its recruitment of more Black candidates than in any previous election. Similarly, COPE’s lists featured a racially reflective candidate selection. In sum, the party lists in 2009 indicated an attempt by all three parties to gain support among Black voters through their candidate selection.

**Voter outreach**

A party’s candidate list is not the only dimension of its voter mobilisation effort. Parties appeal to voters through direct contacts with electronic, telephonic, and in-person messages. This section evaluates each party’s voter outreach effort using post-election survey data that asked South Africans which parties contacted them. The survey results do not show disproportionate racial targeting beyond what one would expect given South Africa’s demographics. However, it corresponds to parties’ candidate selection from 2009, which shows the ANC and COPE contacting overwhelming Black voters and the DA contacting a racially diverse set of voters.

The 2009 Comparative National Elections Project (CNEP) survey asked South Africans whether a political party or candidate contacted them and, if so, by what means: in person, SMS, telephone, mail, or email. By combining these five means of contact into a ‘contacted’ category broken down by race, we can see the frequency each political party contacted specific racial groups.

The ANC had the most skewed direct-targeting campaign during the election. Figure 6 demonstrates that of those directly contacted by the ANC, 83.1% were Black, 15.6% were Coloured, and less than 1% were Indian or White. COPE’s direct contacts were minimally more diverse. Of those directly contacted by COPE, 77% were Black, 18.4% were Coloured, 1.1% were Indian, and 3.4% were White. The DA had by far the most racially diverse contact campaign. Of those contacted by the DA, 39.5% were Black, 35.5% were Coloured, 1.3% were Indian, and 23.7% were White.3

The data on voter outreach correspond to the results of the party list analysis of the 2009 campaign. During the election, the ANC overwhelmingly contacted Black voters. Only 16.9% of its direct voter contacts were non-Black, and of this, less than 1% were Indian and White. COPE’s voter contacts were 24.6% non-Black. Although this was 7.7 percentage points higher than the ANC’s, it still was strikingly less than its Black outreach. The DA’s direct voter contacts were 76.3% non-White, with Coloureds comprising only 4 percentage points less than Blacks. While the DA’s voter contacts disproportionately targeted Whites and Coloureds, this political party spent three quarters of outreach campaign targeting non-White voters.
The 2009 general election campaign rhetoric: bridging, bonding, and neutral

In addition to candidate lists and voter outreach, a party’s campaign rhetoric is an important element of its mobilisation strategy. Following Davis (2004), I use the analytical framework of bridging, bonding, and neutral to investigate the racial content of each party’s campaign rhetoric. This method first defines the traditional racial constituency of each party and then determines whether the party’s campaign statements target that constituency (bonding rhetoric), bridge racial constituencies (bridging rhetoric), or is policy based (neutral rhetoric). I assume that firstly, the ANC’s traditional constituency is Black because of its role in the anti-apartheid movement. Secondly, the DA’s is perceived as a political party that caters for white interests. Lastly, COPE’s logical constituency is Black because it is a splinter party of the ANC. Therefore, ANC or COPE rhetoric that targeted White, Indian, or Coloured voters or DA rhetoric that appealed to Black, Indian, or Coloured voters was coded as bridging.

Neutral statements, that is, those that did not clearly target a racial constituency, presented a unique coding challenge in South Africa. Some policy issues disproportionately impact one racial group and are therefore not truly neutral. For example, HIV/AIDS primarily afflicts the Black community. However, whether issues of education or crime are also racialised is more difficult to determine. Survey data were used to solve this problem. In 2009, South Africans were asked about the most important issues facing the country (Comparative National Elections Project 2009). The answers were cross-tabulated with race and categorised as Black or non-Black (White, Indian, or Coloured). Issues that had a spread of greater than 20 percentage points between Black and non-Black...
respondents were considered racial issues and, as such, party references to those issues were considered either bonding or bridging instead of neutral.

For example, of those who cited unemployment as the most important issue facing South Africa, 83% were Black and 17% non-Black, a spread of 66 points. Therefore, unemployment was considered a ‘Black’ issue and any DA references to that issue were considered bridging. Conversely, of those who cited ‘crime and security’ as the most important issue, 31.7% were Black and 68.3% non-Black, a spread of 36.6 points. Therefore, crime and security was considered a ‘non-Black’ issue, and any DA references to that issue were considered bonding. Issues that concerned all South Africans, such as corruption, were coded as neutral for all parties.

However, policy-bonding statements required a coding assessment that accounted for the party’s position in the political system. Statements made by a ruling party are different from those made by opposition parties. The ANC, as the ruling party, is compelled to discuss issues of unemployment because it impacts the majority of South Africans. COPE and the DA, as opposition parties, are trying to build and expand their constituencies and therefore choose rhetoric strategically. Following this logic, a party-and-issue-specific addendum was used in conjunction with the rubric below (Table 1):

(1) DA references to addressing or improving unemployment, healthcare, poverty, HIV/AIDS, electricity, water, infrastructure, and housing were coded as bridging because the Black to non-Black spread was greater than 20 points on each issue.

Table 1. Coding Rubric: Bridging, Bonding, and Neutral

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bridging</th>
<th>Bonding</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference to racial</td>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>Division/separation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>groups</td>
<td>Unity between races</td>
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<td></td>
<td>We are multiracial/they are not multiracial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for non-racial cooperation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to party or</td>
<td>Positive reference to a policy issue that is</td>
<td>Positive reference to a policy that is</td>
<td>Reference to policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>other parties</td>
<td>uniquely important to another party’s racial base</td>
<td>uniquely important to your traditional racial base/only benefits your racial base</td>
<td>that is relevant across racial groups</td>
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Note: Adapted from Davis 2004.
ANC references to the same issues were coded as neutral (instead of bonding). The ruling party must address issues of poverty, healthcare, and HIV/AIDS as problems of state service delivery—regardless of the racial implications—while the DA and COPE are making a strategic choice to address these issues. It would be inaccurate to regard the ANC’s anti-poverty and pro-healthcare proposals as racially targeted, even though Black citizens stand to gain the most from these reforms.  

For the content analysis, about 400 campaign statements from the ANC, COPE, and the DA were drawn from 17 English-language daily and weekly newspapers. Because some newspapers cater to White or Black audiences, it was important to include newspapers from across the country to minimise the effect of biased coverage. The exclusion of Zulu or Afrikaans press could have conceivably skewed the sample of collected statements. However, the multitude of English-language publications and reporters increases the likelihood that statements made in a local language will be translated and reported on in the English-language press. By excluding non-English media sources, the coding process likely missed some unique campaign statements, but there is no reason to believe that this dramatically altered the final analysis. 

The electronic database SA Media was used, which has clipped and coded articles from 150 South African newspapers since 1978. The examination collected statements from only the ANC, COPE, and the DA, and included statements made in all nine provinces. The statements were made during the 53-day period prior to the election: 1 March 2009 to 22 April 2009 (election day).

**Previous studies of the 1994, 1999, and 2004 election campaigns in South Africa**

This paper’s coding of the 2009 campaign’s rhetoric builds upon the work of Davis (2004) and Ferree (2010). Davis analysed rhetoric from the 1994 and 1999 campaigns from the ANC, the DP (now DA), Inkatha Freedom Party, National Party/New National Party, and the Freedom Front. Between 1994 and 1999, Davis found that both the DA and the ANC used increasingly racialised rhetoric. His analysis shows that the ANC’s bridging rhetoric decreased by 10% from 1994 to 1999 (from 20% to 10%), while its bonding rhetoric increased from 42% to 47%, and neutral rhetoric increased from 38% to 41%. For the DP, he found that its bridging rhetoric decreased 9.5% (from 16% to 6.5%), its bonding rhetoric increased from 30% to 40%, and its neutral rhetoric stayed virtually the same.

Ferree’s analysis of the 2004 General Elections campaign is harder to compare systematically to Davis’s analysis of 1994 and 1999 General Election campaigns and this paper’s analysis of the 2009 General Election campaign. Her multifaceted coding effort looked at campaign audiences as well as campaign rhetoric and used more categories than merely bridging, bonding, and neutral. Nevertheless, Ferree’s
account provides a clear picture of racial framing during the 2004 General Elections, which can be usefully compared with other elections. Ferree (2010) finds that the DA sought out more ‘bridging’ or ‘partially bridging’ campaign audiences (non-White voters) than the ANC. In all, 61% of DA campaign events were before mixed audiences, while 9% were before White audiences. Conversely, 36% of ANC campaign stops were before ‘bridging’ or ‘partially bridging’ audiences (non-Black) and 54% were before Black crowds.

Ferree (2010) also coded the ways parties talked about themselves and each other. She finds that both the ANC and the DA presented themselves in 2004 as multiracial parties and reached out to opposing parties’ traditional bases while attacking each other as racially exclusive. Yet the ANC was guiltier of racial rhetoric than the DA. Ferree (2010) concludes that the ANC mentioned race more times than its competitors, while the DA emphasised policy, issues, and performance over race. Additionally, the DA was also less likely to originate racial rhetoric, while more likely to be the target of it.

The work of Davis (2004) and Ferree (2010) shows the trend-lines of (racial) bonding, (multiracial) bridging, and (multiracial) neutral rhetoric during South Africa’s first three democratic elections. Overall, these studies demonstrate that in the General Elections of 1994, 1999, and 2004 the ANC had increasingly deployed bonding rhetoric targeting its traditional Black constituency, often attacking the DA as a racist party. Alternatively, the DP/DA, after consolidating its White base through a more racialised 1999 election campaign, became significantly more multiracial in 2004.

**Election rhetoric: the 2009 campaign**

A content analysis of the 2009 election campaign shows new trends in South African politics. The emergence of COPE as a legitimate Black opposition party fundamentally changed the dynamics of the campaign, at least in the early phases. COPE utilised a significant amount of bonding (21.5%) and neutral (72%) rhetoric in an effort to win Black voters, but comparatively less rhetoric targeting non-Black voters (6% bridging). Unlike in previous elections in which the primary opposition was the DA, the ANC struggled to attack COPE as a racist, apartheid-linked party. Consequently, the ANC’s 2009 campaign rhetoric featured more neutral issues (67%) than in past elections in an effort to combat COPE’s constant attacks on its governance record. But the ANC still used the most bonding rhetoric (26.5%) of any party. The DA used the most bridging rhetoric of any party (34%).

Overall, the DA accounted for 62.5% of the bridging statements and 2.5% of the bonding statements made during the 2009 election campaign. The ANC accounted for 60% of the bonding statements, 21.5% of the bridging statements, and 42.5% of the neutral statements. COPE’s rhetoric included 15.5% of the campaign’s bridging statements and 37.5% of the bonding statements. (Table 2)

**Figure 7** demonstrates that the ANC’s bridging rhetoric continued its downward trend since 1994 (down 14 points to 6%). However, its neutral rhetoric increased 25
points between 1999 and 2009 and its bonding rhetoric decreased 15.5%. The DA continued its movement away from its racialised 1999 ‘Fight Back’ campaign. Its increase in bridging rhetoric (up 27.5 points to 34%) and decrease in bonding rhetoric (down 38 points to 2%) between 1999 and 2009 were equally dramatic. The party’s neutral and policy-based rhetoric also increased 10.5 points in 2009 to 64%.

**ANC campaign rhetoric**

The ANC’s bridging, bonding, and neutral rhetoric was shaped by the two-front campaign that formed its strategy for the 2009 General Elections. The ANC simultaneously sought to promote its achievements while acknowledging areas for improvement. The party’s five ‘priority areas’ outlined in its manifesto, such as work and sustainable livelihoods, education, health, rural development, and crime and corruption, featured prominently at rallies, during interviews, and in party statements. The ANC, Zuma argued while campaigning, has helped the
vulnerable, orphans, the elderly, and those with HIV/AIDS (Saturday Star, March 7, 2009). Yet much of the neutral campaign rhetoric focused on addressing the major critiques of ANC leadership over the previous 15 years. South African (custodian) President Kgalema Motlanthe argued that the ANC was working to root out corruption, improve education and health systems, and fight crime (Motlanthe Campaigns in KZN 2009). Zuma often emphasised the ANC’s ‘vision’ for the future, which included ‘no longer tolerating incompetence and laziness in government employees’ (Kids Hurt at Zuma 2009). SACP leader Blade Nzimande argued before a rally that the working class should vote ANC to enhance decent work opportunities, ensure free and quality education, create healthcare for all, expand food production and food security, defeat crime, and deepen democracy (Nzimande Pays NC 2009). On the economy, Zuma argued that BEE and affirmative action had ‘contributed to the growth of the Black middle class’ (ANC Wants ‘Strong State’ 2009).

The ANC also sought to maintain its inclusive image with some bridging rhetoric. A video message shown to a crowd of ANC supporters featured Nelson Mandela saying the ANC will ‘help build a united, non-racial society’ (Parties Lock Horns 2009). At a church in Gauteng, Zuma declared, ‘unity and reconciliation will continue to be the cornerstone of the new administration after elections’ (ANC President Addresses 30,000 2009). Zuma and other ANC officials also controversially reached out to Afrikaners, calling them the only true White South Africans and imploring them not to leave the country, which the DA claimed was an attempt to divide the White vote (ANC President Catches 2009). At the final election rally, Zuma proclaimed, ‘join us in building a nation that is a beacon of tolerance, equality, non-racialism, and unity in diversity’ (Election Show of Force 2009).

For the first time, the ANC faced an opposition party that could seriously challenge it for Black voters by co-opting its use of liberation imagery. COPE’s choice of Bishop Mvume Dandala as its presidential candidate also indicated its intention to critique the ANC on moral grounds. The ANC’s response was to emphasise its role in ending apartheid, its own religiosity, and COPE’s dysfunctional and ‘treacherous’ leadership. The ANC’s rhetoric toward COPE was split between neutral claims and bonding statements directly targeting the Black vote.

COPE’s invocation of Mandela on the campaign trail riled ANC officials. The ANC’s swift response with bonding rhetoric signified the potential potency of COPE’s tactic. ‘I heard a voice sounding like a bishop this morning’, Zuma told a crowd in reference to Dandala, ‘saying that Madiba is for all of us. When I heard that, I wanted...to warn them that if they do not have anything to say, they must not claim Madiba’ (Hands off Madiba 2009). Before a different audience, Zuma claimed, ‘Nelson Mandela belongs to the ANC, he was shaped by the ANC and he also shaped the ANC’ (ANC Urges Supporters 2009). The ANC’s claim to Mandela was not restricted to rallies. An ANC television advertisement, described by the Mail & Guardian, featured an elderly man discussing his crushed dreams during apartheid and how his life was renewed by Mandela’s release from prison (Mail and Guardian 5 March 2009). The ANC’s election
message was bluntly summarised by ANC chaplain-general Vukile Mehana, who implored an audience of churchgoers to ‘remember who liberated them’ when they went to the polls (O Come All Ye Faithful 2009).

In order to counter the influence of COPE’s Bishop Dandala, ANC leaders made numerous church visits as well as claims of divine support for re-election. In the North West province, Zuma announced that the ANC is a ‘child of the church’ and that the church’s support of the ANC was an ‘unequivocal biblical declaration that if God is for us who can be against us’ (ANC is a Child 2009). At a rally in Mpumalanga, Zuma said, ‘When priests pray for poverty to end and for development, then it means God agrees with the ANC because the ANC stands for those things’ (God is on Our Side 2009). He added, ‘We in the ANC know God’. ANC leader Mathews Phosa compared ANC voters to Jesus’ disciples and claimed, ‘As we emerge from Easter, we are sprinkling the blood of Jesus Christ into the body and soul of the ANC….Now He is with the ANC’ (Be Like Jesus’ 2009). Both Zuma and other ANC officials said that the ANC would rule until Jesus returned (Be Like Jesus’ 2009). The ANC’s use of religion indicated the party’s concern with Dandala’s criticism of its corruption. Dandala’s high moral standing, along with Bishop Desmond Tutu’s renunciation of the ANC (I Won’t 2009), enhanced the potential effectiveness of these attacks. To dispel COPE’s claims, the ANC used neutral rhetoric to emphasise the party’s piety.

The defensive measures outlined earlier, emphasising liberation politics and the ANC’s close relationship with the church and God were coupled with intense bonding attacks on the character, intentions, and organisation of COPE and its leaders. The ANC also cast COPE members as corrupt (COPE-ANC Battle 2009), disgruntled (ANC Urges Supporters 2009), and tied to disposed former ANC leader Thabo Mbeki, who never formally endorsed COPE (They are Fighting 2009). At a press briefing, an ANC spokesman accused COPE of trying to ‘devour’ the ruling party and betraying the legacy of Mandela (ANC thanks COPE 2009). Another ANC official claimed that Dandala had no integrity and was insulting the movement by urging voters to go against the ANC (COPE Comes Tutu Over 2009). A COSATU official called COPE the ‘Black DA’ (Cosatu Slams Tutu Over 2009). Former ANC Youth league head Fikile Mbalula claimed COPE was full of people who sought ‘to destroy the ANC’ (Malema Can Learn 2009) calling them ‘witches’ (Motlanthe Urges Voters 2009) who would be defeated like past ANC challengers such as the United Democratic Movement. (Mbalulua Rallies 2009).

Former ANC Youth League leader Julius Malema emphasised COPE’s disloyalty, comparing them to the ‘same people who killed [anti-apartheid activist] Chris Hani’ (Stylish ‘Dimwit’ 2009). The ANC also tried to portray COPE as ethnically exclusive. Mlungisi Hlongwane, a returned COPE defector, claimed, ‘A select group of Xhosa-speaking leaders [in COPE] have embarked on a secret strategy to place only Xhosa-speaking leaders at strategic political centres’ (COPE Election Manager Rejoins 2009). Days before the election, Malema summarised the ANC’s view of COPE with his characteristic flamboyance: ‘We can’t wait for
them to get their ugly faces out of our TVs after [election day]’ (Youth Leader Takes 2009).

Initially, the ANC’s primary focus during the election was COPE, which was challenging the ANC for national power. However, as the campaign progressed, it became clear that COPE was significantly weaker than anticipated. The DA slowly re-emerged as the strongest opposition party, particularly in the Western Cape, where it posed a serious challenge to ANC control. The ANC, as it had in previous election campaigns, framed the DA with bonding statements that portrayed the party as racist and linked with apartheid. In a letter to the Cape Argus newspaper, a South African voter summarised a common view of the DA: ‘To us, the National Party (NP) and all the parties in the apartheid parliament, including the PFP (later to become the DP and later to unite with the NP to become the DA), were part of the apartheid system’ (Why I Will 2009). The DA wanted to shed this historical baggage while the ANC sought to emphasise it.

Julius Malema was the ANC’s main combatant with the DA. At an election rally, Malema said, ‘[DA leader] Helen Zille is racist and fake, even her face is not original. Her real face is ugly, that is why she had plastic surgery. DA’s polices are just as fake as her’ (Youth Leader Takes 2009). In a township, Malema claimed that the DA was closing off water from ‘our people’, who are ‘tired of racially based governance’ and want ‘the people’s organisation to lead’ (Malema Says Good 2009). At a youth rally in Galeshewe, Malema called Zille an ‘apartheid agent’ who ‘dances like a Chihuahua’ (Malema Spews Fire 2009). At the same rally, he claimed that Joe Seremane, a Black former anti-apartheid political prisoner and now DA official, was Helen Zille’s token Black supporter who says ‘yes, madam... with a smile’ but has no real power in the party (Malema Spews Fire 2009). At another rally, Malema referred to the DA’s Black youth league leader, Khume Ramulifho, as Zille’s ‘... garden boy’ (Boesak Has Run Out 2009).

Though Malema’s statements received high-profile headlines, they were not the only racially charged attacks on the DA. The ANC head of elections Fikile Mbalula said in a party statement that the ANC would defeat the DA’s fascist, racist, ‘... swart gevaar ...’ tactics (We Will Defeat Racist 2009). In a Coloured township, ANC politician Chris Nissen warned of the ramifications of DA rule in Coloured areas:

If they [the DA] ever come to power in the Western Cape, they won’t take care of you. The DA-led city only takes care of selective communities ... They have an administration and a mayor that does not care about you. Look at how the townships look. We challenge them to say why (they) are selective in service delivery to the poor’ (Nissen 2009).

Furthermore, a fake DA pamphlet calling for White unity was distributed anonymously to voters in Mpumalanga early in the campaign. It read: ‘It’s a call to every White South African and abroad, if you have a club or society, church or a community organisation, bring them along, we have funds available so that we together can make it happen’ (DA Doubts the Sincerity 2009). Although the
ANC denied culpability for the pamphlet, the DA claimed it was produced by the ANC to scare Black voters (DA Doubts the Sincerity 2009).

COPE campaign rhetoric

COPE’s rhetoric against the ANC was a mix of neutral and bonding, focusing on poor service delivery, criticism of campaign tactics, and disgracing the legacy of Mandela and the liberation movement. In an editorial, COPE’s head of communications accused Zuma and his supporters of ‘utilising every aspect of South African culture, history and politics to achieve their personal objectives; whether it is to stay out of jail, get elected or re-elected into office and, not least of all, keep taking the money’. He argued that there are ‘criminal elements in the liberation movement’ that only pursue ‘the accumulation of wealth’. If Zuma won election, Dexter concluded, a new ‘…populist-authoritarian regime’ would be imposed on South Africa (Mail and Guardian, April 9, 2014). Presidential candidate Bishop Dandala routinely invoked poor service delivery, patronage, unemployment, and state corruption on the campaign trail (Teachers Hit Campaign 2009).

COPE often mixed accusations of corruption with liberation imagery in order to target Black voters. At a campaign rally, COPE President Mosiuoa ‘Terror’ Lekota said corruption, cronyism, and nepotism dominated the ANC, which was a ‘betrayal of everything that the generation of Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela stood for’ (Lekota Blasts ANC 2009). He added at a different rally in Gugeletu, ‘We promise that we will redeem the promises made by Nelson Mandela and point out deviations of the leading party’ (Vote with Caution 2009). Documented intimidation of COPE supporters by ANC followers drew comparisons with the apartheid regime. In a newspaper editorial, a COPE official wrote, ‘how [the ANC], which has such a proud history so quickly degenerated into the enemy that it defeated just a decade and a half ago is not only unfathomable it also hurts deeply’ (Restore Dignity 2009). He continued:

We call on South Africans to reclaim their dignity and hope. The Liberation struggle was primarily about the restoration of the dignity of our people. Never again should we allow any political party to take away the one thing that sustained many of us during the dark days of Apartheid.

Dandala argued that COPE would restore honour and value back to South Africa while improving service delivery, but he and the party struggled to differentiate COPE’s polices from those of the ANC. At one rally, Dandala acknowledged that COPE and ANC policies ‘are the same… But the difference is that [the ANC] have had those policies for the past 10 to 15 years. Their people in government did not implement those polices’ (Mail and Guardian, April 16, 2009). COPE candidates warned that ANC corruption and intimidation were turning South Africa into Zimbabwe (There’s No Place for Intimidation 2009). COPE also tried to challenge the Tripartite Alliance. Former COSATU president and
COPE member Wille Madisha argued that ANC-aligned COSATU and SACP worked against the interests of workers and that unions should be politically independent (Cosatu are Sellouts 2009).

COPE spent comparatively little time attacking the DA, though its bonding rhetoric toward the historically White party mimicked the ANC’s tone. COPE’s candidate in the Western Cape, Alan Boesak, asked, ‘What do (the DA) think of our people? In Delft, they fan racism and divide people. We’ve struggled together. We died together and we do not want to be racially divided any more’ (Last-ditch 2009). At one campaign event, a COPE supporter said the DA was ‘…full of apartheid…’ (We’ve Poached Hundreds 2009). Simultaneously, the party was split on its position toward affirmative action, a contentious issue for Whites and Blacks. Even though COPE’s manifesto proclaimed support for affirmative action, Dandala argued on the campaign trail that the program was marginalising Whites (COPE to Do Well 2009). Claims regarding affirmative action constituted a large portion of COPE’s minimal bridging rhetoric.

**DA campaign rhetoric**

The DA’s campaign focused on policy critiques of the ANC and its own vision for improving South Africa. Of its campaign statements, 64% were considered neutral. The DA juxtaposed the ANC’s alleged corruption and cronyism with what it claimed were successes of its own governance in local areas: better service delivery, more transparency, and less crime. The DA’s ‘Stop Zuma’ slogan played on fears of expanded corruption under Zuma. If Zuma was elected with a two-thirds majority, Zille argued, ‘the powerful will have free rein to engage in power abuse and corruption’ (ANC ‘Will Get More Corrupt’ 2009). The DA also criticised the ANC’s commitment to the poor: ‘Corrupt leaders make the poor people poorer’, Zille proclaimed often while campaigning (Zille and Boesak 2009).

Zille mocked Black Economic Empowerment programs as ‘…Black Elite Enrichment…’ (Zille Slams 2009) and called Malema and other Youth League officials ‘…Gucci revolutionaries…’ who do not care about empowering the youth (Change Course 2009). She reserved even harsher terms for Malema, whom she also called an ‘…inkewnke…’—Xhosa for an uncircumcised boy—(Snappy New Zille 2009) as well as a fascist and imbecile (High Turnout Vital 2009). Rather than address COPE head on, the DA’s rhetoric often elided COPE with the ANC. COPE, the DA highlighted, ‘lacks an alternative policy platform’ and had ‘…run out of ideas’ (Boesak Has Run Out 2009). The DA’s bonding rhetoric, which constituted 2% of their campaign rhetoric, focussed on issues of crime and security, which is particularly important to non-Black voters.

The DA went to great lengths to emphasise its racially inclusive identity with bridging rhetoric. The ANC’s efforts to cast the DA as a racist and White-only party were met head on by Zille, who was forced to declare at one event, ‘We will never bring back apartheid. Never, never, never’ (Zille Keeps 2009). Adding in a newspaper profile, ‘people who say that we are a White party are
being ignorant . . . it’s not about colour anymore, it’s about going to bed hungry’ (On Campaign 2009). Zille spoke at campaign events in Xhosa, which she had spent years learning, and encouraged other DA officials and supporters to learn other languages (Translation Nation 2009).

Zille argued that the ANC uses the ‘ . . . lure of history . . . ’ (DA’s Zille Spells 2009) to win and was trying to ‘ . . . define people according to race and ethnicity . . . ’ which suited the ANC ‘ . . . because if it can divide South Africa into separate boxes of race and ethnicity [it] will rule forever’ (ANC President Catches Flak 2009). Other DA officials also said directly to voters that the DA is ‘ . . . not a White party’ (Malema Can Learn 2009; Root Out Corruption 2009). In a Daily Dispatch editorial, DA politician Bobby Stevenson outlined the party’s inclusive vision ‘to bring back the ideal of a rainbow nation, where all South Africans, regardless of political connections, race or culture, know they have a bright future and their dreams for a better tomorrow will be realised’ (Vote to Bring Back the Ideal 2009).

**Tactical racialism in campaign rhetoric**

The campaign statements of the three major parties showcase their respective electoral strategies. The DA made by far the most bridging statements and the least bonding statements on the campaign trail. While its progress among Black voters has been slow, the DA is trying to build a long-term multiracial constituency. COPE, which believed that it could challenge the ANC on national terms, emphasised service delivery, focusing in particular on issues important to Black voters, as well as attempted to claim the legacy of Mandela and the liberation movement. In response, the ANC’s campaign strategy was bifurcated. It had to respond to COPE’s challenges on service delivery and the DA’s newly constructed multiracial image. To do so, it emphasised neutral policy statements as well as attacked the DA as racist while highlighting its own role in the liberation movement.

This content analysis provides an in-depth look into each party’s rhetorical strategy in 2009. The presence of COPE diminished the ANC’s reliance on bonding statements, but the combined rhetoric in the campaign demonstrates the dwindling multiracialism of South African elections. Only 13% of the campaign rhetoric bridged between racial groups, and the traditionally White opposition party was responsible for 62.5% of that rhetoric. The ANC could not attack the Black leadership of COPE as racist, so it was forced to emphasise neutral issues. Interestingly, both the ANC and the COPE were quick to attack the DA as racist even while challenging each other on mostly policy grounds.

**Understanding tactical racialism**

The empirical data gathered through this examination of candidate lists, voter contacts, and campaign rhetoric indicate the presence and growth of tactical racialism aimed at the Black majority during South African elections. The DA has attempted to move beyond its historically White voter base. In 2009, its party lists included
its highest ever number of Black candidates, its voter contacts skewed heavily toward non-White voters, and its campaign rhetoric was strongly inclusive. The newly formed COPE similarly targeted Black voters using voter mobilisation tactics that mimicked the ruling party from which it broke away. The incumbent ANC, facing two parties that were aggressively targeting Black voters in 2009, needed to consolidate its hold on its traditional constituency. The comparative data presented here demonstrate the persistence of racial politics in South Africa across elections. There are two incentives, one institutional and one social that explain tactical racialism.

Institutional incentives for tactical racialism

South Africa’s electoral system exacerbates the political utility of racial division. South Africa adopted a simple electoral system after apartheid’s end. National and provincial elections use list proportional representation with half of the 400 members of parliament chosen from nine regional lists and the other half chosen from a single national list. Each party produces closed candidate lists, from which members of parliament are drawn in rank-order based on the percentage of the vote the party receives. Candidates are taken from national lists based on their party’s national-level support, whereas regional lists are drawn from based on the party’s provincial support. National vote totals therefore disproportionately affect the distribution of parliamentary seats. Reynolds (2005, 62) argues that despite the presence of regional lists, South Africa effectively uses ‘one nationwide constituency (with 400 members) for the conversion of votes into seats’.

Constitutional scholar Arend Lijphart praised this electoral system design as ‘clearly a consociational democracy’ that was as ‘close to the optimal power-sharing system that could have been devised’ (Lijphart 1995, 222). However, these election rules interact with deeply reified racial categories to create a strong incentive for identity politics. As Posner (2004, 538) notes, it is logical for a party ‘to emphasise the cleavage that defines the most usefully sized coaltional building blocks and to ignore those that define groups that are too small to be politically viable’. Under proportional representation, South Africa’s large Black majority represents a winning electoral coalition by itself: whichever party wins the majority of Black voters, wins the election.

Social incentives for tactical racialism

The legacy of apartheid’s racial divisions weighs heavily on South African society. South African sociologist Deborah Posel (2001, 88) argues that systematised racism has made South Africa ‘one of the most thoroughly racialised social orders in the world’. Apartheid’s racial constructs were powerfully rooted in the materiality of everyday life. The ubiquity of the state’s racial designations, and the extent to which they meshed with lived hierarchies of class and status,
meant that apartheid’s racial grid was strongly imprinted in the subjective experience of race (2001, 109).

Posel concludes that it is unsurprising then that even after the end of apartheid these racial categories are still writ large in the everyday life of the citizens of the ‘new’ South Africa. New debates and contestations on the subject of race have begun to proliferate. But it remains the norm for articles and letters in the press, reports on radio and television, and other modes of conversation and commentary to identify social actors in racialised terms, attesting to the lingering salience of these racial constructions within social consciousness. There is little reason to suppose that they will atrophy spontaneously (2001, 109).

Indeed, in-depth focus group data indicate the profound social importance of race in South Africa. An edition of the South African journal Politikon was dedicated to an analysis of a series of focus group sessions on race relations in South Africa in 2011. Discussing the results specifically and racial identity more broadly, the volume’s contributors all acknowledged the obvious predominance of racial identity. Everatt (2012, 20) wrote, ‘South Africans ... see race first’. Bass et al. (2012, 34) concluded, ‘the core classification ... in South African society in general ... is that of race’. Taylor (2012, 42) argued that it is an ‘incontrovertible truth that South Africa remains a highly racialised society’. Nyar (2012, 105) found that within a focus group discussion, ‘... respondents appear to show no shame or reticence in using blatantly racist language ... It is clear that race functions explicitly as a fundamental cognitive category in personal relationships in South Africa’.

Various scholars have argued that racial categories remain relevant for both historical and contemporary reasons. Apartheid’s divide-and-rule policies fostered and rewarded racial competition in society and politics, creating lasting and deep-seated animosity. Moreover, the South African government’s continued use of race categories on official forms and for affirmative action policies perpetuates divisive racial identities. Regardless of the exact origin of racial salience in South Africa, Everatt (2012, 11) argues that the ‘denial of race as anything beyond a social construct’ in South Africa is ‘deeply naïve’.

Conclusion

The combination of functionally single-district proportional representation and highly polarised racial identities creates an incentive for racial politics in South Africa. Despite the rhetoric of ‘new’ South Africa’s ‘rainbow nation’, many authors have noted the connection between race and voting behaviour (Giliomee 1995; Mattes 1995; Welsh 1995; Ferree 2006). Future elections will likely continue this trend. All parties that seek to control the parliament must target Black voters. The ANC, COPE, and other parties with liberation credentials seek to maintain racial polarisation, which benefits them during elections. The DA and other parties that lack ties to the anti-apartheid movement strive to breakdown South Africa’s racial polarisation in order to win a majority.

South Africa, however, remains a remarkable success story. Non-racial institutions and democratic elections replaced over eight decades of race-based
social, economic, and political structures. Overtly racial political parties have struggled in South Africa, while the main parties are outwardly inclusive of all races. Yet political parties must respond to an institutional and social setting that is conducive to identity politics. Racial appeals are rational in a country that is 79% Black and in which a party needs 51% of the vote to win. The 2009 General Elections campaign embodied tactical racialism that was designed to target the country’s Black majority. The consequences of this strategy were mixed. It is certainly positive that the historically White DA is pursuing Black voters. However, as the ruling ANC becomes increasingly reliant on Black voters, its racial politicking potentially imperils the fragile multiracial consensus that underpins South Africa’s democratic strength and stability.

Notes

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1. The three parties’ lists totaled over 2000 names. In order to conduct the racial coding, each name was evaluated as Black, Indian, White, or Coloured. Racially distinctive names in South Africa make this method highly accurate. However, since White and Coloured names are often difficult to distinguish, additional internet and facebook searches were conducted to confirm the person’s race. A native South African and political science graduate student was employed as a research assistant for this task, which follows the method used by Ferree.

2. Ferree’s racial coding of lists combined Whites and Coloureds, while this project separated the two. For comparative convenience, Coloureds and Whites are combined for 2009.

3. An additional note of caution is necessary for interpreting these data. The vast majority of voting-age South Africans reported no direct contact with any campaign, with 92%, 90.9%, and 80.1% of those surveyed reported no direct contact from the DA, COPE, or the ANC, respectively. Table 2 indicates the percentages of those who were contacted by a political party or candidate, not of the whole voting-age population.

4. COPE did not have a ‘traditional’ constituency because 2009 was its first election.

5. Some additional clarifications are necessary. COPE’s invocations of the aforementioned service delivery issues were coded as bonding. COPE needed to poach traditional ANC voters in order to gain power and, therefore, its use of ‘Black’ issues was considered strategic. Crime and security is a non-Black issue, but different coding logics were used for each party. DA references to the issue were considering bonding and COPE references were considered bridging, given their respective traditional constituencies. ANC references to crime and security were considered neutral. Even though this is a non-Black issue according to surveys, the ruling ANC is compelled to address all issues of service delivery. Even so, its references to crime and security were minimal and changing the coding to bridging would have had little effect. References to service delivery were large, education, economic management, and corruption, regardless of which party said it, were coded as neutral. Blacks and non-Blacks were equally concerned about these issues.


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