

## OPINION

# More than a two-horse race

South African voters are more complicated than pundits and politicians anticipated, says Ralph Mathekga



**WINNERS AND WINNERS:** ANC members celebrating their Nelson Mandela Bay Metro victory while the DA's Patricia de Lille celebrated in Cape Town.

Pictures: Gallo Images

**S**OUTH Africa's third local government elections are over. By midday yesterday more than 99 percent of the votes had been counted and just over 95 percent of the voting districts declared and tallied at the Independent Electoral Commission's election centre in Pretoria where I was based from the time the elections started.

At the time of writing the ANC had won an average of 61 percent of votes, the DA just over 24 percent and the IFP were at 3.59 percent. I do not expect much change.

The synopsis? Having launched one of the most aggressive campaigns ever mounted against the ANC, the DA appears to have obliterated the smaller parties leaving us with a two-horse narrative.

This sets up the following scenario for the next elections: voters will express themselves in a yes-no fashion. In other words, they will vote against the ANC because the party has problems when it comes to service delivery in the municipalities it controls. This means a yes vote for the DA because it offers a viable alternative to the ANC. Or, they will vote against the DA because the party is simply not the ANC.

However, this fairly simple conclusion was not quite the impression that gained currency as vote counting was being completed. In fact, what emerged was a picture of South African voters being a little more sophisticated than anticipated.

In fact, what the 2011 local government elections indicated was that voters do not assess political parties on the basis of a single issue, for example service delivery.

And this is not necessarily a bad thing. Assessing political parties on the basis of a single issue can pose a serious threat to national stability. This is because a shift by a political party, or a perceived shift, on an issue voters consider the single decisive determinant on how they vote, could bring about sudden and radical shift in government.

Radical shifts are not always good for stability. If we observe patterns of political change in what we consider to be mature democracies, the differences between competing candidates or political parties are relatively minor, notwithstanding the usually high levels rhetoric on what the differences are.

This means that voting for an alternative party does not always mean bringing the house down.

Now in South Africa in the period that preceded the 2011 local government elections it became clear that South Africans were angry and dissatisfied with the ANC, but it is now evident that they demonstrated these feelings through a medium other than the polls. Rather they expressed themselves through protests and pickets against party representatives located at local government level.

This method of gaining attention from those who control the municipalities was not an indication of how citizens would cast their ballots.

Rather, there appear to be a combination of issues that influence voter decisions. What is apparent is that voters are capable of care-

fully separating the issues that upset them from the ones upon which they base their political support. Evidently they do not assess parties on the basis of what many analysts and commentators, and perhaps the parties themselves, expect.

As a result the status quo remained in terms of the ANC retaining the larger share of its votes and the DA continuing its consolidation of votes in areas that it already held.

Significantly the ANC losing a slight share of its margin (about three percent) and the DA increasing its margin (by about eight percent) hardly changes the political equation.

Does this imply that South Africans did not vote in a sensible way, given tensions that persisted before elections?

My sense is that voters have proved to be more complicated than we are willing to acknowledge.

Going into the 2011 local government elections, the ANC offered the idea of "better communities". The party advocated a holistic approach to what it means to live in a community. Obviously, behind this is an attempt by the ANC to reinvigorate its role as a grassroots organiser and motivator.

By tapping into these values, the ANC steered voters towards looking beyond a narrow approach to service delivery.

Rather than providing specifics, the party sought to promote the view that service delivery is only one of the essential elements of a community. If you build a community, then service delivery will follow.

While this is true, it still lacks the practical element when it comes to addressing the real infrastructure deadlock at local government level. But voters seemingly bought into the idea of a holistic community and did not make service delivery a voting imperative.

On the other hand the DA focused its campaign on service delivery and worked hard to ensure voters made their decisions on this issue.

DA leader Helen Zille had openly stated that the party did not want to run a race campaign and the DA stayed away from political rhetoric.

The question is, what would have happened had the DA attempted to broaden its campaign message beyond service delivery. Would the party have made inroads into the ANC's electoral base had it attempted to deliver a more emotional message in its campaign, instead of limiting itself to being a technically competent party.

This brings me to another difficult question about these elections: how clearly do the numbers reflect political support?

The DA has gained well in terms of numbers – an increase of eight percent of the votes compared to the 2006 local government elections. The ANC lost in terms of numbers – by a drop of three percent of votes.

Of course these numbers demonstrate a level of support. However, the gains and losses that have been seen in the elections may not translate directly into a broadening or a shrinking of the support-bases of either party.

The DA strengthened its hold on Midvaal and also the City of Cape Town. But increasing the margins in areas that the party already holds does not necessarily mean a widening of support. It may indicate dormant supporters who supported the party all along but did not previously bother to vote.

It may not even have been the DA's doing that voters in DA controlled areas came out to vote for the DA this time, rather they may have been propelled by anger at the ANC's failings.

Further, the dip of three percent may not translate into voter alienation from the ANC. Those voters may well have stayed within the ANC fold, but did not vote for their party this time around due to their dissatisfaction.

Amidst all of this there is also the matter of the smaller parties such as Congress of the People and Freedom Front, for example.

What impact would these parties have on the ANC and DA support-bases?

Smaller political parties stand a good chance to pick up what I call "voters in transit". This category of voters are mostly located somewhere between the DA and the ANC and could drift to these parties.

The challenge for the smaller parties is to survive when there remains such a huge divide between the ANC and the DA.

The Congress of the People could still however, play a key role in future considering they have performed relatively well for a party that has had such intense internal conflicts.

Unlike a soccer match that is decided by clear goals, elections are not really all about the final numbers.

The DA has merely been shown a carrot – now it will have to go back to the drawing board if it wants to make inroads into new areas.

As for the ANC, while their supporters have maintained their attachment to the party, the diminished mandate is a message to get to work – with less pompousness and a greater connection to the people.

**Ralph Mathekga** is a political analyst and the director of ClearContent Research ([clearcontent.co.za](http://clearcontent.co.za))

**.... what would have happened had the DA attempted to broaden its campaign message beyond service delivery. Would the party have made inroads into the ANC's electoral base?**