

Executive summary of the DDP political forum on party support and voting patterns in post-apartheid South Africa

Thursday, 26 February 2009, 18h00 – 20h00, Elangeni Hotel

Presenter: Professor Robert Mattes, Professor of Political Studies, University of Cape Town

The purpose of the discussion was to make critical sense of post-apartheid trends of party support and voting behaviour. The forum was attended by representatives of political society and civil society.

Professor Mattes' analysis dealt with four aspects: partisan identification, political and economic performance, perceptions about political images and voter turn outs. He indicated that party identification has dropped off since 1994, and has fallen very low by 2000. The figures suggest a growing pool of non-identifying voters, especially since 1999. Both the ANC and opposition parties have leaked partisan supporters to the independent category with opposition parties being the biggest losers. What it shows is that voters are less enthusiastic about political parties, especially those from minority groups. And that a much higher vote for the ANC does not equate to higher party support.

Professor Mattes indicated that the data shows a strong correlation between presidential performance and party support. As perceptions about the performance of the President spiral downwards, party support shrinks and vice versa. It thus suggests that performance does matter.

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction with the ANC does not necessarily mean voting for the opposition. He mentioned that Africans have exceptionally low trust in opposition parties. In South Africa, there is a 43 % difference between trust in the governing party and opposition parties. Voters look at the attributes of opposition parties: who they represent and whether they are inclusive. Non-partisans are more likely to vote for the ruling party than for opposition parties. According to Mattes, this is not only because they disagree with their policies, black independents also don't think that opposition parties are inclusive. Opposition parties thus have to work harder to build their public profile.

Regarding voter turn outs, he indicated that more people stayed at home in 1999 and 2004. The ANC lost more than a quarter of its electoral base and opposition parties more than half by 2004.

Furthermore, he mentioned that survey data reflects a large percentage of voter pessimism fuelled by harsh social conditions. It begs the question whether the ANC would be able to convince voters that conditions will improve, or whether opposition parties would be able to convince voters that they would be able to run the country better.

In summary, the analysis of Professor Mattes illuminated three salient trends:

- all political parties have lost identifiers,
- the pool of independents have increased, and
- voter turn outs have declined.

In response, most participants felt that political parties matter and that voting is important. However, many expressed unhappiness with the way in which the ANC has been delivering services. But, it is not clear whether they'll vote for opposition parties.

A follow up discussion is being organised to provide a platform for civil society to engage political parties on their vision / strategies to protect existing jobs, to create more jobs and to extend protection to those outside the formal labour market.
