

Inaction as Action:
South Africa's Political Culture of Protest and the Declining Voter
Turnout

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Introduction

Since her first free and fair election in 1994, South Africa has been experiencing an exponential decline in voter turnout. For scholars, including Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, this transitional election, which saw eighty six percent of the electorate turning out to vote (Reynolds, 1994: 187), exemplified “citizens’ appreciation of the core institutions of a democratic political society”—one of the conditions for democratic consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 1997: 17). However, since the 1994 transitional election, this appreciation of a democratic political society has not been sustained by South Africans. In 2004, 77% of registered voters turned out to vote, in comparison to 89% in 1999. As a percentage of the voting age population, 56% turned out to vote in 2004 compared to 64% in 1999 and 86% in 1994, (Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa). In a 1999 survey by the Joan Shorenstein Center on Press Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, only 45% of South African interviewees strongly agreed that voting was not a waste of time (Morin, 1999: 40). This finding contradicts the high regard that the populace had for participation in the immediate post-apartheid government (Reynolds, 1994: xiii).¹ What motivates an electorate that had for long awaited enfranchisement to refrain from voting?

During my fieldwork research in South Africa in the summer of 2005, I found two major reasons for the decline in voter turnout.² First, people did not vote because of government failure to deliver services, including the provision of jobs and the reduction of crime. The second reason is linked to the dominance of the African National Congress in government. Here, some people mention their lack of success in having their party of their choice, rather than the African National Congress (ANC), win elections.³ Throughout my research, no single finding was dominant within any specific race or

class. Asians/ Indians, Blacks, Coloreds, and Whites of different economic status were concerned about their loss of instrumentality in influencing political outcomes, and about the ANC dominated government's inefficiency in responding to their concerns.⁴ What I found were sources of contentious politics. Moreover, Tom Lodge, a prominent scholar on South Africa, also views the decline in South Africa's voting behavior as "silent dissent from the voting public" (Prudhomme, 2004: 65). Is South Africa's non-voting a form of contentious action?

Contentious politics as defined by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly is "collective political struggle" (Tarrow et. al., 2001: 5).⁵ This form of politics occurs "when ordinary people join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and opponents" to claim and influence political outcomes (Tarrow, 1998:2). Protest is one mechanism for expressing this contention, and South Africans have historically expressed their contention in the same manner.⁶ During apartheid, when over two thirds of the populace was disenfranchised, South Africans expressed their opinions and demanded specific political outcomes through boycotts.⁷ Although the institution of apartheid was obliterated a decade ago and South Africans now operate under the framework of a liberal democracy,⁸ could a political culture of protest still exist to influence political games in South Africa?

My study seeks to ascertain the extent to which declining turnout is motivated by a political culture of protest in South Africa.⁹ I have chosen to study declining voter turnout in South Africa, a new democracy in order to understand the influence of pre-transition political culture and attitudes on the consolidation of democracy.¹⁰ With its prolonged history of political segregation across racial lines, we would expect enthusiasm

for political participation, but as we have seen, the contrary is true.¹¹ Studying South Africa will also contribute to the literature on voter turnout in Africa—a region that has been marginally studied. A single case-study approach also provides for richer and more detailed understanding of the phenomenon of voter turnout, taking into consideration the historical and institutional context (Norris, 1999: 15).

Henceforth, this paper is divided into five sections. Following the introduction is a review of the literature on voter turnout with respect to South Africa. Thereafter is an examination of South Africa’s political culture of boycotts. The third section is the basis for my argument and an operationalization of “a political culture of protest.” The fourth section is an empirical analysis of my hypothesis and whether it applies at the provincial level. The fifth section states the conclusion and its implications.

Why People Don’t Vote: Sources of Contentious Politics in South Africa

A plethora of literature has been published to explain voter turnout, but none can individually account for the decline in voter turnout.¹² The rational choice model initiated by Anthony Downs (1957) and also built upon by numerous scholars including Riker and Ordeshook (1968) and Aldrich (1993) suggests that people’s decisions to vote are influenced by their view of returns from voting. There are costs and benefits to voting (Niemi et al, 1984: 23). According to Blais, “[the voter] decides to vote if in her view, the benefits of voting are greater than the costs; if, on the contrary, the costs are greater than the benefits, she decides not to vote” (Blais, 2000:1). The decision to vote depends on the probability that the rational individual’s vote will determine whether her candidate wins or loses the election (Blais, 2000:2, Leighley, 1995: 192).¹³ Here, the costs include

gathering information on the candidates and having to make a decision (Aldrich, 1993: 261-264). Moreover, political institutions, including electoral laws and voting procedures, and personal resources such as education, shape the costs and benefits of voting (Norris, 2004: 151).

Norris's view is electoral laws and systems determine who votes. Proportion Representation systems such as South Africa generate average turnouts of 65 percent (Norris, 2004: 162). Yet still, there is a decline in South Africa's voter turnout. Competition within parties, which reduces the probability of ascertaining the winner, boosts turnout. On the other hand, one-party dominant systems, such as South Africa's, that inform people of a definite winner and therefore decrease the cost of gathering information or of deciding on a candidate, depress turnout (Norris, 2004: 153). Since the election of 1994, the ruling party, the ANC, has won the majority of the votes in national and provincial elections (see Table 5). In 1994, the ANC won 62.7 percent of the votes to the national assembly. The party won 66.4 percent and 69.7 percent of the votes in 1999 and 2004 respectively (Piombo, 2004). According to this institutional school of thought, the continued concentration of power in the ANC party has created an increasingly apathetic electorate.

From my primary research, I find a link between the increasing dominance of the ANC and the decline in voter turnout. As Claude Kabemba, the Director of Research at the Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA) at the time of my interview, and now Chief Research Manager in the Society, Culture and Identity Research Programme in South Africa, states:

Politics in South Africa has become very predictable: This predictability forces people not to turn out because they know what the outcome will be. The

dominance of the ANC in the system does not give enthusiasm to people to go vote because it is an obvious situation. Where we have seen people coming out to vote in masses it is where there has been serious political competition to access power. Across South Africa the first elections were very appealing to the people because they wanted to ensure that the dictators were ousted. Where we have seen people coming out in great numbers has been in situations where there is an emergence of two strong parties (Kabemba, author interview, 2005).

Currently, opposition against the ANC is weak and fragmented and there are no signs of an alternative manifesto that could appeal to a plurality of the electorate (Piombo and Nijzink, 2005: 276-279 and Prudhomme, 2004: 40-53).

Personal resources such as education and income derived from individuals' social economic status (SES) also affect incentives to vote (Norris, 2004: 154-157). Along with Leighley's argument, high socioeconomic status places individuals in a social context where participation opportunities are abundant (Leighley, 1995: 191). Because of their status, people in this category have the opportunity--through formal institutional mobilization such as campaign groups, or through informal social mobilization, for example, political discussions--to engage in political behavior (Leighley, 1995: 189). South Africa ranks second to Brazil as the country with the most unequal income distributions in the world.¹⁴ Furthermore, 14 percent of South Africa's population is illiterate and 40 percent live below the poverty line. The ANC government has successfully improved people's standards of living by allowing access to services such as electricity and clean water.¹⁵ However, employment opportunities, which determine people's financial independence, have dwindled over time.¹⁶ With the low probability of challenging the ANC's dominance, discontent over the government's slow distribution of tangible economic benefits may be expressed through non-voting.

The socioeconomic and institutional models illustrate characteristics of individuals and institutions in which they are likely to vote. However, they do not point to what actually motivates people to abstain from elections. Considering South Africa's political culture of boycotts, I propose a model that incorporates the country's political culture of boycotts into the wider study on what motivates the decline voter turnout. Almond and Verba would argue that because boycotts such as those that existed during apartheid form a pattern of "orientation toward political objects" in South Africa, the electorate has a high propensity to employ them when sources of contention remain pervasive (Almond and Verba, 1963: 12-31).

South Africa's Political Culture of Boycotts

The use of boycotts to express contention is closely linked to the internal character of South Africa during the apartheid era. Here, South Africa's political culture was characterized by parochialism in which the ruling White population that consisted of a mere sixteen percent of the population monopolized the sociopolitical and economic sphere (Gutierrez, 1981: 12). In this racially discriminatory society, the majority Black, who comprised over three quarters of the population, could not vote and could not be represented in parliament. Political power was concentrated in the hands of the White-Afrikaner population and elections were contested only within the White population (Smith, 1990: 32-34). On the economic front, Blacks could not own land, were not allowed accessibility to jobs, and were denied freedom of movement (Smith, 1990: 39-54). In light of the inherent concentration of power and apparent social inequality characterized by the apartheid system, political contention was ubiquitous. Boycotts and

demonstrations such as those that culminated into massacres in Sharpeville (1960), Soweto (1976), and Port Elizabeth (1985) were an expression of contention by a highly dissatisfied populace.

Boycotts, as one of the non-violent means of attracting the attention of the authorities, were prevalent in various regions and sectors of South African society.¹⁷ Boycotting in South Africa can be traced from as far back as 1918 to the 1980s, when negotiations that later led to the end of apartheid were instituted (Zunes, 1999: 155). In 1918, mineworkers linked to the Transvaal Native Congress boycotted concessionary trading stores (Gurney, 2000: 124). In 1954, products by the United Tobacco Company were boycotted in Durban after the company had dismissed striking workers (Gurney, 2000: 124). Between 1955 and 1957, residents of Evaton and Alexandra in Johannesburg also boycotted public transportation in opposition to an increase in fares (Lodge, 1983:153-187, Gurney, 2000: 125). The 1980s are also known for frequent boycotts including the one against National Co-operative Dairies in protest of the dismissal of Black workers (Zunes, 1999: 154). Students of the Cape Peninsula also boycotted Colored Education in 1980 (Molteno, 1987). Boycotts were a very common form of contentious action in South Africa and they usually spread throughout other parts of the country (Lodge, 1983:156). For example, the bus-boycotts in Evaton and Alexandra spread to other parts of the country, including Pretoria, Port Elizabeth and East London, creating a “domino-effect” to instigate change (Lodge, 1983:166).

Participants in the boycotts were usually successful at reaching their goals. The Bus Boycott of 1940 in Alexandra forced the bus companies to reduce the fare (Lodge, 1983:157). The two day nation-wide boycott of 1984, which included workers and

students “terrified government, and many observers see it...as the starting point of the final wave of unrest which brought the [apartheid] regime to the negotiation table” (Gurney, 2000: 155). The collective nature of boycotts guaranteed an ardent following of participants who aimed at expressing their contention. Given the history of boycotts, South Africans may be expressing contention by not turning out to vote, an act with implications similar to boycotting.

Declining Voter Turnout and the Political Culture of Protest: Operationalizing the “Boycott-Logic” Model

As seen from the conventional literature on voter turnout presented above, the political culture of protest is not accounted for in determining declining turnout. In fact, the same literature does not provide a mechanism for measuring protest-voting. Power and Roberts (1995) in their study of Brazil, find a significant correlation between protest and abstention from elections. They use three sets of models that encompass a variety of variables: Socioeconomic status variables (literacy rates, percentage of population living in urban areas, percentage of females in the paid labor force) and institutional variables (number of parties in the National Congress, enfranchisement) are initially analyzed together to determine abstention. These two sets of variables retain insignificance when tested for abstention. However, the addition of protest variables (levels of authoritarian manipulation, inflation rates) corresponds with increased abstention rates (Power et. al., 1995: 815). In the case of South Africa, how do we measure protest?

Studies have found spoiled ballots (see Table 4 in the Appendix) to indicate protest. Spoiled ballots are a combination of blank and invalid ballots that do not

contribute to any candidate's total number of votes during elections (Reynolds, 1999: 253). In the study on Brazil, Power et. al., find a strong correlation between spoiled ballots and protest. The socioeconomic status variables and the institutional variables are initially analyzed together to determine their explanatory power on spoiled ballots. With the addition of protest variables the "full model" explaining factors that contribute to spoiled ballots becomes nuanced (Power et. al., 1995: 812). When voting for the Chamber of Deputies (Brazil's lower house), "high levels of authoritarian political manipulation were tied to a 9 percent jump in blank and null ballots [spoiled ballots]" (Power et. al., 1995: 812). At the Senate level (Brazil's upper house), all the protest variables turned out to be the strongest predictors of blank and null balloting (Power et. al., 1995: 814).

While studying the difficulty of voting systems in Southern African democracies, Reynolds also argues that spoiled ballots "are better indicators of protest" (Reynolds, 1999: 40). His rationale is that "ballots are spoiled deliberately by voters unhappy with a particular party or candidate or alienated from the political system in general" (Reynolds, 1999: 253). The 2004 annual report by the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa shows that the number of spoiled ballots has been increasing in the country's elections. In 1994, the total number of spoiled ballots was 0.98 percent. In 1999, the numbers were at 1.50 percent and in 2004, 1.58 percent of the total votes cast were spoiled (IEC, 2004: 38). Do these numbers imply a resurgence of protest in South Africa?

Despite the difference in voting systems between South Africa and Brazil, I will use spoiled ballots as a proxy for protest (boycott) in South Africa.¹⁸ Similar to boycotting, spoiling a ballot is a peaceful means of coercing government to become

aware of issues that concern the governed, and that have probably been ignored over time. My main assumption is that the voters who spoil their ballots in protest represent a proportion of the views of the people who stay at home. Unlike voters who stay at home, those who turn up to vote spoil their ballots with the expectation of arousing attention to their concerns. Hence, I will use the evidence of protest inherent in spoiled ballots to account for protest as a motivation for non-voting in South Africa.

I create a “Boycott-Logic” model that applies Power et. al.’s tripartite group of variables (protest, socioeconomic, and institutional), to argue that the boycott political culture of South Africa is a strong predictor in the country’s declining voter turnout. People abstain from elections not because they are indifferent or apathetic, but because there is a message that they are trying to send to the authorities; not turning out to vote is a political act.

Due to the lack of studies and data on voter turnout in South Africa and in Africa in general, I compiled data for my analysis from various sources. My unit of analysis is “provincial-election year.” I use provinces because not only will they allow me to have more cases than at the national level, but they will also enable me to acknowledge the phenomenon of non-voting within provincial outliers, while accounting for a national political culture of protest. South Africa has had three free and fair national elections (1994, 1999, and 2004) and there are nine provinces in total, which leaves me with a sample of 27 cases. This small number of cases also requires that I use few independent variables in order to allow for variance; I use four. My dependent variable is the difference between the number of registered voters and the actual number of votes cast (turnout deficit) during each particular election.¹⁹ Data for my dependent variable was

collected online from the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA) and the Election Resources Database (ERD). The independent variables include spoiled ballots, provincial GDP per capita, adult literacy rates, and the total percentage of votes won by the ANC during the past election in each province. The data for spoiled ballots and percentage of ANC votes were collected from EISA and ERD. The remaining data are from StatsOnline, the government of South Africa's statistics database.

i) Rationale for Variables

Turnout deficit: This variable measures voter turnout. High values indicate lower voter turnout. The desired dependent variable is the number of voters divided by the voting age population (rather than the number of registered voters), but due to the inaccessibility of provincial level voting age population data, turnout deficit will be used.

Spoiled ballots: This variable is used as a proxy for protest. High values signify high levels of protest. Although the number of spoiled ballots decreased in the 2004 election (see Table 4), the fact that average values exceed 1 percent of the total votes cast is sufficient cause for analysis. Spoiled ballots should be positively correlated with turnout deficit.

Provincial GDP per capita: This is a measure of provincial GDP measured in South African Rands (currency) divided by the total population of the particular province. It is a measure of government performance and socioeconomic status. Higher GDP per capita rates should be inversely related to turnout deficit (Norris, 1998).

Adult literacy rates: This is the number of persons 15 years and older, who can read, write and speak their home language. A socioeconomic status variable, it should be

inversely correlated with turnout deficit. Findings by Power et. al. (1995) and Norris (1998, 2004) amongst other scholars have shown that highly educated people have more access to information on politics and therefore tend to turnout more in elections.

Total Percentage of ANC votes during the past election: This institutional variable measures party competitiveness. Because the ANC had not competed during previous elections, all the provinces have a value of zero for the 1994 election. I use the total percentage of votes won by the ANC in 1994 for 1999 values and 1999 values for 2004. I hypothesize that dominance of the ANC in the previous election influences voters' view of their efficacy in the current election period. Increasing values of this variable point to decreasing party competitiveness, as the ANC's dominant position rises. I expect the total percentage of ANC votes during the past election to be positively correlated with turnout deficit.

The Provincial GDP per capita variable is in logarithmic form to enhance the normal distribution of values by eliminating possible outliers. After eliminating 2 cases (Gauteng Province, 1994 and 1999 elections), which had negative values for turnout deficit--votes cast exceeding number of registered voters-- the final analysis contains 25 cases.²⁰ Data was analyzed using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Regressions.

ii) Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Spoiled ballots	4663.00	52769.00	25007.1200	12812.52289
Ln (Provincial GDP per capita)	2.79	3.97	3.5255	.29154
Adult literacy rates	69.50	99.00	83.0968	8.28323
Percentage of ANC votes in past election	.00	92.73	46.7084	36.89740

Table 2: OLS Regression of Turnout Deficit

Variable	Excluding Protest Variable	“Boycott-Logic” Model
Spoiled ballots	-	17.039* (3.110)
Ln (Provincial GDP per Capita)	-98975.701 (249428.34)	190157.13 (170017.42)
Adult literacy Rates	16220.799 (8072.485)	6641.582 (5515.131)
Percentage of ANC Votes in Past Election	-238.642 (1746.739)	-433.033 (1132.374)
Constant	-621727.0 (797064.06)	-1262082 (529526.14)
R ²	0.184	0.674
Adjusted R ²	0.067	0.608

Note: N=25

Results are unstandardized coefficients. Values in parentheses are standard errors.

Significance levels: * p < 0.001

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the independent variables. Column 2 in Table 2, which presents regression results of the dependent and independent variables--excluding the boycott independent variable--shows that none of the variables significantly at predict turnout deficit. Additionally, all the independent variables, excluding the boycott-variable, account for only 18.4 percent of the variation in turnout deficit. Only by adding the boycott-variable in my “Boycott-Logic” model do we obtain a stronger model that predicts the decline in turnout. The “Boycott-Logic” model generates an R-square value that implies that 67.4 percent of the variation in turnout deficit can be explained by this particular combination of independent variables.

ii) Analysis

The results of the OLS regression show a positive, significant correlation between spoiled ballots-- a measure of protest--and turnout deficit, which measures voter turnout or the “Boycott-Logic.” Without assuming causality, increasing values of spoiled ballots are associated with high levels of turnout deficit. More specifically, every additional spoiled ballot leads to an increase in turnout deficit by 17 votes (difference between registered voters and votes cast). The chance that an increase in spoiled ballots has an effect on voter turnout also occurs at a 0.001 significance level, meaning that we can reject the null hypothesis. In this “Boycott-Logic” model, the variable “spoiled ballots” has the strongest explanatory power for declining voter turnout. There is reason to believe, therefore, that a large portion of abstention from elections is motivated by a political culture of protest.

I found in my primary research that one major cause of this protest is the government’s inadequate delivery of promised services. Kabemba’s (2005) view is:

South Africa still remains what President Mbeki calls a country of “two-worlds”; one which is poor and the other rich. The poverty level and unemployment are critical issues in this country. The country has been doing well economically. The current growth of 3 percent has not been experienced by this country in the last 25 years. But in terms of this economy to create jobs, which will then give the majority a better life, things are struggling (Kabemba, author interview, 2005).

Mxolisi Sibanyoni, the Outreach Coordinate for the Afrobarometer,²¹ corroborates this argument by claiming:

There are a number of reasons that contribute to declining voter turnout. In South Africa especially; the large factor is an economic one. People tend to see democracy as having access to economic goods. Given the history of poverty and discrimination in South Africa, people come with different expectations when they vote. They believe that once their party is chosen, their economic condition will also improve. Over ten years of democracy people tend to look back and ask,

‘has my situation changed?’ Have their basic needs and services such as electricity and water being met? People equate these economic freedoms with social freedom. There is a growing sense of disillusion with a slow pace of improvement when it comes to economic improvement in the country. People’s reaction to that is to develop attitudes that maybe this democracy is not working for us (Sibanyoni, author interview, 2005).

However, as my regression results indicate, and as another researcher’s (Jenkins, author interview, 2005) point of view will show, government’s ability to deliver services is not a significant predictor of people’s motivations to abstain from elections. Research in the western world has associated high income levels with increasing voter turnout (Leighley, 1995: 183). Especially in the case of the United States, increased income levels play a role similar to that of education; they reduce the opportunity cost of voting by providing easy access to information on the elections and by enhancing civic skills (Leighley, 1995: 183). For South Africa, there is a negative correlation between GDP per capita and turnout. Each one percent increase in provincial GDP per capita leads to an increase in turnout deficit by 190157 votes (difference between registered voters and votes cast). Unsurprisingly, my interview with Ivor Jenkins, Manager of the Kutlwanong Democracy Centre at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa supports this finding. He asserts that there is a dichotomy between politics and economics in South Africa. The extremely wealthy regard politics as secondary to business and therefore leaving it to the poor, who seek to benefit from it (Jenkins, author interview, 2005). Kabemba elaborates on this dichotomy, stating:

There is this competing interest around elections, which affects the turnout. When we speak about poverty and the lack of service delivery on a particular level, we can also speak about the increasing appearance in the South Africa society of a middle class. This middle class is somehow “having it” and elections are not necessarily important. They [middle class] can do without it because they already

have access. They do not feel too much under pressure to go and vote. It might seem very contradictory to say that on the one side there are those who do not vote because they feel that government has not done much for them. There are those who have benefited who do not come out (Kabemba, author interview, 2005).

The insignificance of the GDP per capita variable can be attributed to the fact that both poorer and wealthier South Africans are disposed to abstain from elections. GDP per capita, alone, is therefore an insufficient explanatory variable for abstention from elections.

Moreover, the other SES variable, adult literacy rates, also insignificantly influences voter's decision to abstain. In my "Boycott-Logic" model, adult literacy rates are positively correlated with turnout deficit; each percentage increase in adult literacy rates leads to an increase in turnout deficit by 6642 votes (difference between registered voters and votes cast). These results are anomalous to findings by Verba (1967), Leighley (1995), and Lipset (1993), who suggest an inverse correlation between adult literacy rates and voter turnout. Here, the reasoning is that "education affects the intervening role of political attitudes by boosting political interest, information, and efficacy" (Norris, 2002: 37). However, as Norris finds and as my results show, high literacy rates alone do not necessarily increase voter turnout (Norris, 2002: 57). Other factors, including people's attitudes and electoral institutions, have to be taken into consideration. These results also raise reservations to a supposition by Jenkins that education is essential to enhancing voter turnout in South Africa. He states:

The trend [in voter turnout] is downwards because proper civic education is lacking. New democracies have so much to deal with and forget about civic education. There needs to be quick response in the school system to educate about the values of democracy. Educate both adults and children. (Jenkins, author interview, 2005)

Considering the fact that the 1994 election attracted 86 percent of the electorate and that literacy rates have been rising in South Africa, the decline in turnout cannot be explained by a lack of education on the values of electoral democracy in South Africa.

While adult literacy rates are insignificant in predicting declining voter turnout, their positive correlation with the dependent variable deserves inquiry. Because of their high propensity to analyze political phenomena, highly literate people have two options during times of contention; they can either influence the system by staying in it or they can exit it (Kang, 2004). In a system where exiting the system (abstention) has been used as a political tool, it is highly likely that the literate, who are aware of their pivotal role in their representatives' reelection, will use abstention to express contention. With this logic, there is a high likelihood that the literate use their understanding of politics together with their political culture of "inaction as a political act" to demand desired political outcomes.

Furthermore, my findings demonstrate that the dominance of the ANC, as an institution that influences political outcomes, is an insignificant predictor of declining voter turnout in South Africa. The percentage of ANC votes in past elections is negatively correlated with turnout deficit: as the percentage of ANC votes in past election increases, voter turnout increases. This finding explicates the high level of ANC support evident in the percentage of votes that the party receives (see Table 5). The finding also disputes the assertion that people abstain from elections because of ANC dominance. In fact, only Kwazulu Natal and the Western Cape provinces, which have the lowest percentages of the ANC votes (see Table 5), represent regions where the dominance of the ANC probably discourages people from voting. The ANC still has a following that is

motivated to vote; however, the insignificance of the coefficient contradicts the conclusions in Norris's cross-national study on voter turnout that political institutions are the strongest predictors for voter turnout in national elections (Norris, 2002: 217).

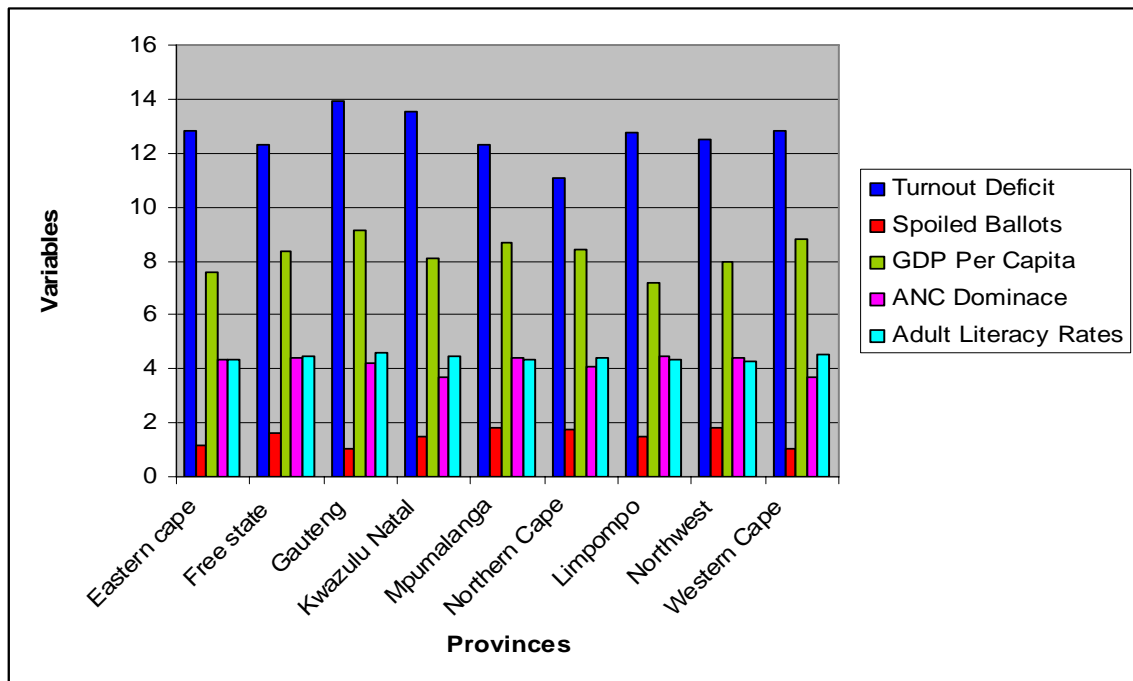
As a party whose electoral base lies predominantly in the Black community, the insignificance of the ANC dominance in motivating declining turnout comes as no surprise. In 1994, Blacks comprised 73 percent of the electorate; the ANC won 94 percent of their votes (Reynolds, 1994: 190). In 1999 and 2004, the ANC won 90 percent of the Black vote (Reynolds, 1999: 181 and Prudhomme, 2004: 56). A majority of my interviewees, who complained about ANC dominance, were non-Blacks.²² Provincial data also shows that provinces with low values of ANC dominance also have the lowest percentages of the Black population that makes up the ANC's electoral base. In the Western Cape, where Blacks make up only 26.7 percent of the population, the ANC is second to the most popular party, the National Party. The other province with low ANC dominance is Kwazulu Natal. Here, although 85.3 percent of the total population is Black, the Zulu ethnic group, which comprises 81 percent of the total Black population, votes for the Inkatha Freedom Party. With Blacks, who comprise majority of the ANC's electoral base, still making up approximately 75 percent of the total electoral base, the impact of ANC dominance when aggregated across provinces seems to have no significant impact on depressing voter turnout.

Other than the protest variable that is significantly correlated with declining voter turnout, all the other variables show insignificant correlations. A closer look at disaggregated provincial data may further reveal the connection between protest and voting behavior.

Similar Levels of Protest? Disaggregating Provincial Data

My initial hypothesis was that a large proportion of the decline in turnout is motivated by protest. When analyzing my aggregated independent variables at the provincial level using OLS, this hypothesis turns out to be accurate. Nonetheless, an examination of all the variables for each province generates remarkable findings as can be seen in Graph 1 and Table 7.

Graph 1: A Comparison of Variables across Provinces



Provinces with the highest turnout deficit (Gauteng, Kwazulu Natal and the Western Cape) also possess the highest values for their socioeconomic status variables. These three provinces support my findings at the aggregate level that socioeconomic status variables insignificantly influence declining turnout; high proportions of turnout deficit are not necessarily influenced by low literacy and GDP per capita rates. Gauteng, Kwazulu Natal and the Western Cape also have the lowest values of spoiled ballots and

ANC dominance. Arguably, because these three provinces have the highest GDP per capita and literacy rates, with no ANC dominance, they then have low levels of contention and therefore low levels of protest as indicated by low values of spoiled ballots. Mpumalanga, the province with the highest value of spoiled ballots, shows one of the lowest levels of turnout deficit. This finding means that although there are those who boycott elections, voter turnout continues to increase. When looking at individual provinces, there are no conclusive relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variable; protest-voting is significant only when provincial data is aggregated. Province-specific research has to be undertaken in order to interrogate the influence of province-specific characteristics on the decline in voter turnout.

Ultimately, socioeconomic characteristics or resources of individuals and the institutions in which they operate are not enough to explain declining voter turnout. Also, macro-level analysis alone is not sufficient to determine the strength of the factors that motivate people to abstain from voting in elections. These factors change over time and their impact varies between individuals. Their ability to sustain their influence in motivating people to vote is highly unlikely. Political culture (rather than merely cultural modernization attitudes discussed by Norris (2002)), which is created over a long period of time, and can be strongly preserved nationally, has more explanatory power on people's motivations to vote, when the characteristics of institutions and individual status in society change.²³

Conclusion and Implications

Two conclusions emanate from my study: First, declining turnout in South Africa can be explained by a political culture of protest, after controlling for institutional and

socioeconomic status variables. Second, this protest is significant at the national level, after provincial data has been aggregated. As voter turnout exponentially declines, sources of contention, which existed during apartheid when political participation was a luxury for only the White minority population, remain rampant. From my primary research, the sources of contention are the ANC's dominance of power and poor government performance in providing economic benefits to the majority of the population. South Africans are motivated to abstain from elections not because of their socioeconomic status or because of the institutional setup, but rather because of their political culture of protest. The socioeconomic status and institutional variables are merely sources of contention and non-voting is a method of expressing this contention; a form of contentious action.

Nonetheless, this study is not devoid of weakness. A major one is its utilization of few aggregate (provincial level) cases to account for individual behavior. In the case of South Africa, a qualitative analysis of provinces with the lowest levels of voter turnout and high levels of spoiled ballots should substantiate this qualitative study. Performing statistically representative exit-polls is one qualitative option (Power et. al., 1995:820). Because political culture has been studied as a national phenomenon (Almond and Verba, 1963), my study also uses aggregated provincial data to account for protest-voting as a national phenomenon. However, in order to avoid ecological inference problems, interviewing a representative sample of South Africans who abstained from elections will serve to deepen our understanding of individual's motivations of abstaining from elections. The possible limit of sample error in my analysis can also be diminished by

using more cases, and hence enabling the use of more independent variables to probe the explanatory power of protest on voter turnout.

Because no such study has been performed on any African country as of yet, these findings contribute to the wider debate on the impact of pre-transition political culture on democratic consolidation. Even more so, this study calls for an expansion of the research on voter turnout in new democracies in order to divert academic emphasis on older democracies. Conventional cultural modernization, institutional and socioeconomic status models also need to be supplemented with political culture variables, which tend to stay constant over time. Moreover, a comparative and comprehensive study of protest-voting in states that have historically closed off certain groups of people from the political scene should generate hypothesis on their consolidation potential.

There is a general tendency to assume high voter turnout levels in new democracies (Norris, 2002 and International IDEA). But in such volatile polities, any sign of a democratic deficit has an impact on ultimate consolidation. Bratton and van de Walle, prominent scholars on Africa, applaud the twenty nine out of a total of forty seven African countries that held “founding” elections between the period of 1990 and 1994 (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997: 7). Are elections alone enough to consolidate democracy? Declining voter turnout calls political legitimacy into question, and suggests a lack of representation of certain groups within a polity (Franklin, 2004: 1-2). Political participation, which also encompasses voter turnout, is undoubtedly one measure of a democracy’s stronghold; ascertaining the sources of its decline is therefore in the best interest of actors that seek to achieve political gains within the framework of legitimate institutions.

¹ In the National Party dominated government of the apartheid regime, all racial groups except the white population, were disenfranchised. Candidate choices for the White electorate were limited to White-dominated parties.

² This fieldwork was funded by two fellowships from Carleton College. While in South Africa, I interviewed a random sample of eligible voters in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, Kwazulu Natal and the Western Cape provinces during a period of three weeks. Most of my subjects--a total of over forty subjects-- were found at their places of work, their homes, at leisure or on the streets. I tallied responses that seemed to recur by noting them down. I also interviewed researchers at think tanks, including the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, and at the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa in order to aggregate my survey findings. These interviews were recorded on a tape recorder. Find my interview questions in the Appendix.

³ The African National Congress (ANC), originally known as the South African Native National Congress (name change occurred in 1923) was founded in 1912 to defend the rights of the Black majority population. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/about/umzabalazo.html>

⁴ Instrumental voting as presented by Fiorina occurs when someone's vote will have an impact on the results of the elections. An example of such voting occurs when one's vote will help push a preferred candidate over the top (Fiorina, 1976: 393).

⁵ For an extensive discussion on contentious politics, see Tarrow et. al. (1994, 1998 and 2001).

⁶ Other mechanisms of expressing contention include "occupations, marches, industrial sabotage, petitions, strikes, demonstrations" (Tarrow et. al, 1998: 91-105).

⁷ The film, "A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict" portrays the characteristics of boycotts in South Africa during apartheid. More information on these boycotts can also be found at <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/>

Other violent means including minor terrorist acts were used to express contention (Smith, 1990: 76). I will use "boycotts" and "protest" interchangeably throughout this paper when referring to South Africa's political culture.

⁸ A liberal democracy as defined by Larry Diamond encompasses various components, including, the institution of free and fair elections, the presence of elected and accountable leaders, autonomy of key institutions including the government and judiciary, cultural autonomy of minorities, independence of the media, equality before the law, equality before the law, protection of individual liberties, the rule of law and freedom of association (Diamond, 1999: 11-12).

⁹ I use Almond and Verba's definition of political culture: it is "political orientations—attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system" (Almond and Verba, 1963: 13). Diamond also defines political culture as "people's predominant beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, sentiments, and evaluations about the political system of their country and the role of the self in that system" (Diamond, 1999: 163). These orientations to action, "not themselves political determine the environment in which political processes and action operate" (Gutierrez, 1981: 2).

¹⁰ Even with only a decade since transition, my study of electoral behavior in South Africa is justified. Using socialization theory, Franklin states that three elections are enough to determine people's electoral behavior; "turnout changes only gradually because most people have adopted a 'standing decision' to vote or not to vote, based on their early experiences of elections in their country" (Franklin, 2004: 22-23). South Africa has had three national government elections, three provincial government elections and two local government elections.

¹¹ Norris (2002) extensively discusses other means of political participation besides voting. However, free and fair elections are the only determinants of government composition as legitimately decided upon by the electorate.

¹² In fact, most of the studies on voter turnout have been concentrated in the western world (Ellis, 2004: 1).

¹³ On the contrary, the rational Blais argues that the rational choice model does not account for situations where people vote, despite the low probability of their vote being decisive (Blais, 2000: 2). Other factors including psychic gratifications and sense of duty influence people's decisions to vote (Blais, 2000: 3-11).

¹⁴ Approximately 40 percent of South Africans live in poverty. The value of South Africa's Gini coefficient is 0.6. The Gini coefficient measures the distribution of a country's national income. The Gini coefficient varies between 0 and 1. The closer to 1, the more unequal a society and the closer to 0, the more equal a society.

[http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=42356&SelectRegion=Southern_Africa&SelectCountry=SO
UTH_AFRICA](http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=42356&SelectRegion=Southern_Africa&SelectCountry=SO
UTH_AFRICA)

¹⁵ Between “eighty to ninety five percent of South Africans have access to electricity. Eighty percent have access to clean water” (Kabemba, 2004).

¹⁶ Up until 2005 when the unemployment rate was 26.5 percent, South Africa’s unemployment levels had been on the rise since 1994. In 1995, the unemployment rate was 29.4 percent, in 1999 the rate was 36.2 percent and in 2003 the unemployment rate rose to 42.7 percent.

<http://www.statssa.gov.za/keyindicators/lfs.asp>

¹⁷ Some of these boycotts were instigated by the ANC under its Economic Boycott Committee, however, a number of them were community initiated (Lodge, 1983:166).

¹⁸ Brazil uses a compulsory voting system while South Africa’s is voluntary. Compulsory voting systems require that every eligible voter turns out to vote. This system is used in Australia, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands among other countries.

¹⁹ The standard way of measuring this turnout deficit is the quotient of the number of voters and the voting age population (VAP). Piombo and Nijzink (2005: 255) provide this data; future studies should consider using it to test the explanatory power of protest-voting in South Africa.

²⁰ I find no information on why the two cases have negative values. My first assumption is that the data was collected or recorded wrongly. Also, more people turned out to vote than were actually registered.

²¹ The Afrobarometer “is an independent, nonpartisan research project that measures the social, political and economic atmosphere in Africa.” <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>

²² One of my interviewees, a Black woman in Soweto mentioned that she disliked ANC dominance because the party had killed her husband, who had been a supporter of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP).

²³ The possibility of there being autocorrelation between the independent variables is nullified by the values of the tolerance statistic shown in table 5 of the Appendix. The tolerance statistic measures multicollinearity (how much the independent variables are linearly related to one another). Independent variables should not be correlated. Therefore, tolerance values above 0.1 are ideal. The tolerance statistics of the independent variables, as shown in table 3, are well above the minimum. This means that the likelihood of using any independent variable as the dependent variable is very low. A look at Table 6 also shows that when using spoiled ballots as the dependent variable, only 16 percent of the variance is explained by the independent variables.

²⁵ A liberal democracy is as defined by Larry Diamond encompasses various components including the institution of free and fair elections, the presence of elected and accountable leaders, autonomy of key institutions including the government and judiciary, cultural autonomy of minorities, independence of the media, equality before the law, protection of individual liberties, the rule of law and freedom of association (Diamond, 1999: 11-12).

Appendix

Table 3: Percentage of Spoiled Ballots during National Elections

	1994	1999	2004	Average
Eastern cape	.61	1.54	1.42	1.19
Free state	1.07	1.84	1.93	1.61
Gauteng	0.7	1.08	1.37	1.05
Kwazulu Natal	1.22	1.75	1.52	1.50
Mpumalanga	1.25	2.14	2.06	1.82
Northern Cape	1.14	2.16	1.97	1.78
Limpompo	.93	1.82	1.73	1.49
Northwest	1.23	1.97	2.23	1.81
Western Cape	1.20	.88	1.04	1.04

Sources: ERD and EISA

Table 4: Percentage Votes Won by the ANC in Each Province

	1994	1999	2004	Average
Eastern cape	84.39	73.91	79.31	79.20
Free state	77.42	81.03	82.05	80.17
Gauteng	59.10	68.16	68.74	65.30
Kwazulu Natal	31.61	39.77	47.47	39.61
Mpumalanga	81.87	85.26	86.34	84.49
Northern Cape	49.81	64.40	68.75	60.99
Limpompo	92.7	89.30	81.83	87.94
Northwest	83.46	80.53	82.23	82.07
Western Cape	33.60	42.62	46.11	40.78

Sources: ERD and EISA

Table 5: Collinearity Statistics

Independent Variables	Tolerance
Spoiled ballots	0.839
Ln (Provincial GDP per capita)	0.543
Adult literacy rates	0.639
Percentage of ANC votes in past election	0.771

Table 6: Correlation Statistics of Other Independent Variables with Spoiled Ballots

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	Significance
	B	Standard Error		
Constant	37582.836	36239.981		0.312
Ln (Provincial GDP per Capita)	-16969.378	11340.717	-0.386	0.149
Adult literacy Rates	562.210	367.030	0.363	0.141
Percentage of ANC Votes in Past Election	11.409	79.419	0.033	0.887
R ² = 0.161 Adjusted R ² = 0.041				

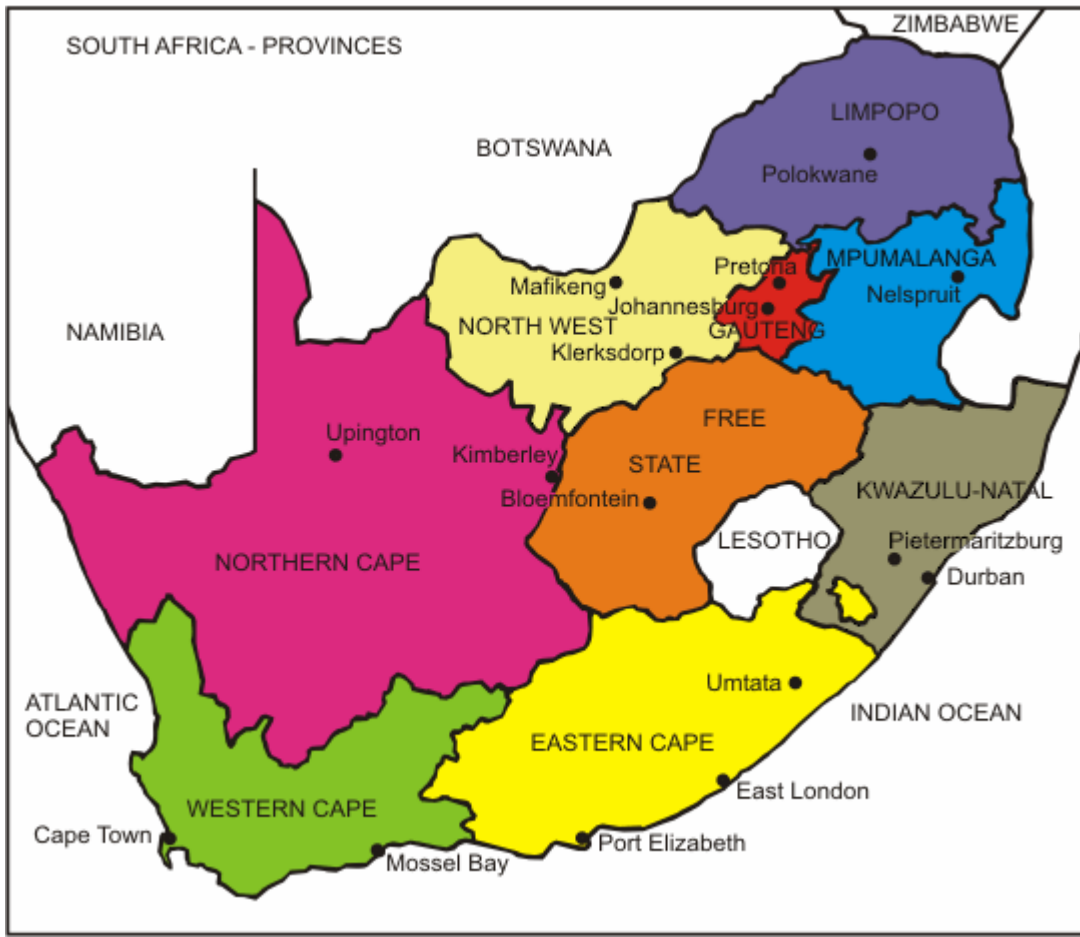
Note: N = 25

Table 7: Average Provincial Values for All the Variables

	Turnout Deficit	Spoiled Ballots	GDP Per Capita	ANC Dominance	Adult Literacy Rates
Eastern cape	12.9	1.19	7.6	4.4	4.3
Free state	12.3	1.61	8.4	4.4	4.5
Gauteng	13.9	1.05	9.1	4.2	4.6
Kwazulu Natal	13.6	1.5	8.1	3.7	4.5
Mpumalanga	12.3	1.82	8.7	4.4	4.4
Northern Cape	11.1	1.78	8.5	4.1	4.4
Limpopo	12.8	1.49	7.2	4.5	4.4
Northwest	12.5	1.81	7.9	4.4	4.3
Western Cape	12.8	1.04	8.8	3.7	4.6

All variables, except “spoiled ballots” are in log form.

Provincial Map of South Africa



Source: <http://www.anc.org.za/images/maps/samap.gif>

Fieldwork Research Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Race:

Did you vote in the 1994 elections?

Why / why not?

Did you vote in the 1999 elections?

Why/ why not?

Did you vote in the 2004 elections?

Why /why not?

Do you have any comments on South Africa's elections?

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DATASET

Provincial-Election Year	Turnout Deficit	Spoiled Ballots	Ln(GDP Per Capita)	Percentage of ANC Votes in Past Election	Adult Literacy Rates
Eastern cape 1994	301828.0	17432.00	3.46	.00	72.30
Eastern cape 1999	266359.0	34210.00	3.06	84.39	76.47
Eastern cape 2004	572095.0	32835.00	3.30	73.91	78.00
Free state 1994	253582.0	14748.00	3.71	.00	84.40
Free state 1999	130954.0	20550.00	3.52	81.87	88.77
Free state 2004	299151.0	20076.00	3.63	81.03	90.52
Gauteng 2004	1146231.0	48735.00	3.96	68.16	99.00
Kwazulu Natal 1994	788078.0	46407.00	3.66	.00	84.30
Kwazulu Natal 1999	485015.0	52769.00	3.26	31.61	89.17
Kwazulu Natal 2004	1054661.0	42682.00	3.50	39.77	90.00
Mpumalanga 1994	226168.0	16614.00	3.79	.00	75.50
Mpumalanga 1999	149135.0	24712.00	3.45	81.87	79.42
Mpumalanga 2004	308380.0	23871.00	3.95	85.26	80.46
Northern Cape 1994	29907.00	4663.00	3.81	.00	79.80
Northern Cape 1999	49223.00	7227.00	3.45	49.81	83.79
Northern Cape 2004	110390.0	6506.00	3.67	64.40	86.70
Limpopo 1994	349351.0	17964.00	3.31	.00	73.60
Limpopo 1999	186917.0	30760.00	2.79	92.73	77.70
Limpopo 2004	530316.0	29161.00	3.12	89.30	80.00
Northwest 1994	155368.0	19822.00	3.55	.00	69.50
Northwest 1999	220140.0	26326.00	3.34	83.46	73.16
Northwest 2004	425768.0	30202.00	3.46	80.53	77.50
Western Cape 1994	254076.0	25830.00	3.97	.00	94.60
Western Cape 1999	262097.0	14257.00	3.59	33.60	95.76
Western Cape 2004	597814.0	16819.00	3.82	42.62	97.00

SOURCES:

Turnout Deficit: — Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA), and the Election Resources Database (ERD).

Spoiled Ballots: — EISA, ERD.

Ln(GDP Per Capita) :— StatsOnline.

Percentage of ANC Votes in Past Election: — EISA, ERD.

Adult Literacy Rates: — StatsOnline.