



Trends in Political Party Support in South Africa

How has the standing of South Africa's political parties changed, especially in response to recent turmoil within regional party systems?

A recent Afrobarometer survey conducted from September-October 2002 offers some insights. This survey reveals that despite the continued dominance of the African National Congress (ANC), support for *all* parties in South Africa has declined since 2000 in terms of respondents' expressions of their voting intentions.

Continued One-Party Dominance

Since the inception of its new democracy, South Africa has had one large governing party – the ANC – with several moderate to small minority parties arrayed in opposition. In and of itself, this poses no danger to democracy. After all, established democracies such as the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and India have all endured extended periods of one-party dominance in executive and/or legislative elections in the last half century. However, in all these instances, parties such as the Democrats, the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, or the Indian National Congress faced at least some degree of uncertainty over future elections results, and won re-election by skilfully anticipating and responding to public opinion.

One-party dominance becomes problematic, however, when a governing party sees less and less need to respond to public opinion because it is assured of re-election. This is why an institutionalised, effective opposition is widely seen as essential to a healthy democracy. Without the possibility of defeating the government, dissatisfied voters may come to focus their discontent not on the party in power, but on the democratic regime in general. Serious opposition parties also help ensure healthy political debate and competition over ideas and policies. Further, they have electoral incentives to use their position and access to information and resources to empower groups who concentrate on highlighting abuses of power and corruption. Thus, the opposition parties play an important role as watchdogs, and in so doing, serve the public interest.

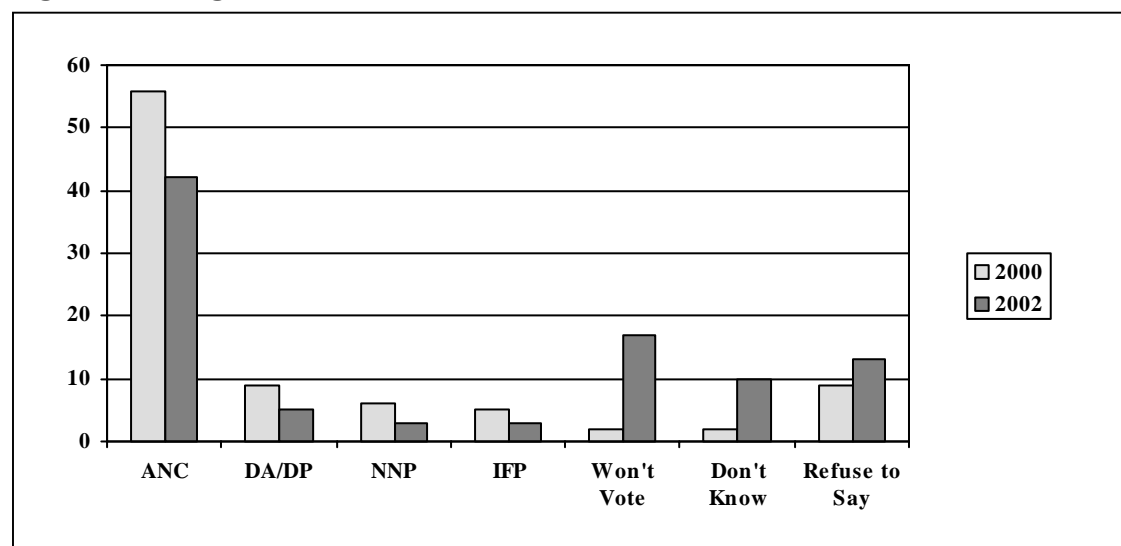
Declining National Trends In Party Support

We asked respondents what party they would vote for “if there were elections for national government tomorrow.” The ANC remains a clearly dominant party: 42 percent express an intention to vote for it in our hypothetical election. This puts it far ahead of the Democratic Alliance/Democratic Party (DA/DP) (5 percent), the (re-established) New National Party (NNP) (3 percent), and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) (3 percent).

While this represents a significant decline in the ANC's dominance since 2000, when 56 percent said they would choose the party, the ANC faces even less in the way of serious opposition than it did at that point (see Figure 1). Now that the NNP has broken away from the DA/DP, there is no significant electoral challenger to the ANC, as combined support for these parties has dropped by half, from 15 percent in 2000 to just 8 percent now. IFP support has similarly declined from 5 to 3 percent. Meanwhile, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), United Democratic Movement (UDM), Freedom Front (FF) and African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) each attract just 1 percent of respondents' imagined votes, also reflecting declines since 2000 (when they garnered 3, 2, 2 and 2 percent, respectively). Other minority parties each garner less than one percent of the vote in our hypothetical election.

The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 15 African countries. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For more information, including reports with complete findings, see:

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Figure 1: Voting Intentions for National Government (All Potential Voters)

However, while the ANC has lost support particularly among those voters who do not identify with any political party, it has simultaneously consolidated its core base of support. Nationally, 41 percent of respondents say they “feel close” to the ANC, an increase from 33 percent in 2000. While the size of the ANC’s support base does not, in and of itself, easily allow it to maintain electoral dominance, it benefits handsomely from the fact that no other single political party has secured these deeper commitments from even as much as 5 percent of the electorate. The DA enjoys the loyalties of only 4 percent of the electorate, and the NNP 3 percent.

Since 1995, potential voting support for South Africa’s political parties has typically been comprised both of voters who feel close to each party, plus a portion of less committed, independent voters who see a given party as better than the alternatives. But the voting base of each party has now been reduced to only its loyal supporters – those who say they feel close to a party are virtually the only ones who say they will vote for it.

Rising Trends in Uncommitted Voters

Perhaps the most dramatic development revealed by these results is the sharp increase in the proportions who say they “would not vote” if an election were held tomorrow, as well as the proportions who refuse to reveal a preference or say they do not know how they will vote. In 2000, a mere 2 percent said they would not vote, another 2 percent said they did not know who they would vote for, and 9 percent refused to answer this question. In 2002, the proportions have risen to a more worrisome 17 percent who would not vote, as well as 10 percent who are undecided (a five-fold increase), and 13 percent who are unwilling to state a preference. In total, fully 40 percent do not express any voting intention in 2002, compared to just 13 percent in 2000.

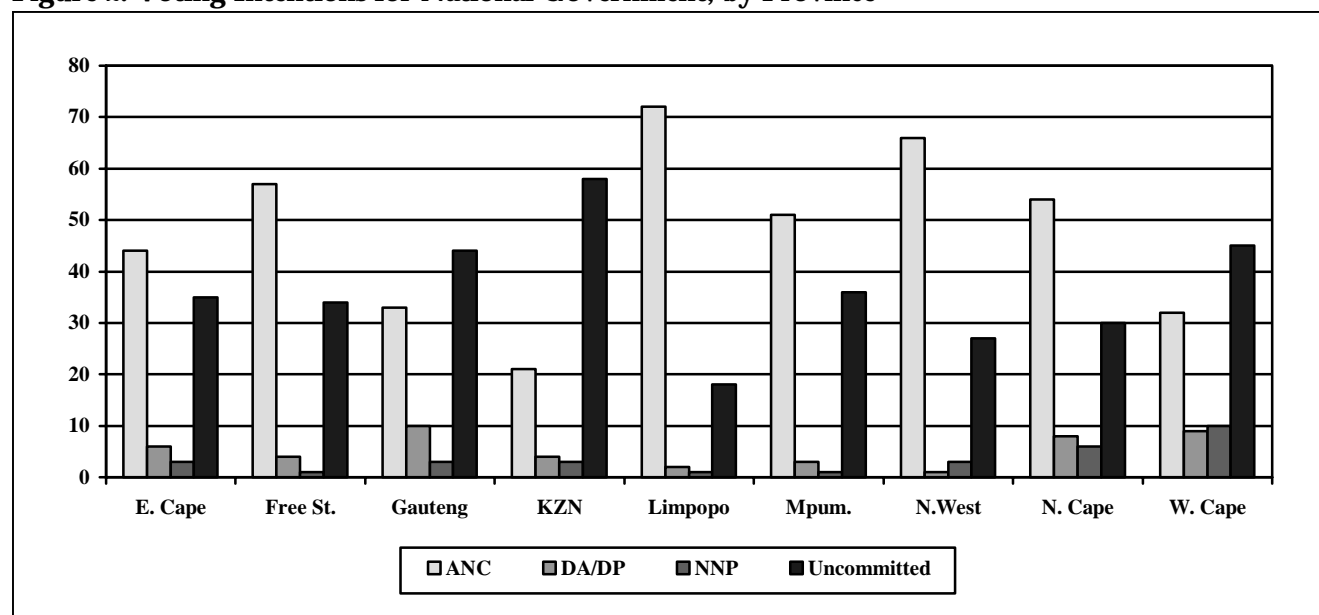
These differences may arise in part from both the timing of the survey with respect to the electoral cycle, and changes in the methodology for asking this question. In the past, Idasa has used a “secret ballot” in posing this question, but in 2002 it was posed as a direct, open-ended question. But even the “secret ballot” method has at times obtained relatively high levels of “will not vote” responses (e.g., 10 percent in a 1998 survey). So the sharp increase in total uncommitted responses in 2002 must also reflect important changes in the way voters view political parties. While many people may simply be uncomfortable publicly revealing what they consider to be a private choice, this trend should also call our attention to the fact that eight years into South Africa’s new democracy, significant numbers of people feel that they cannot publicly declare their partisan preference.

The marked increase in uncommitted responses also raises the spectre of sharply reduced voter turnout in the 2004 election. Voter turnout has already dropped from between 86 and 92 percent of all eligible voters in 1994 to 68 percent in 1999. In 2000, turnout in local government elections stood at 48 percent of registered voters and 37 percent of all eligible voters. On the one hand, reduced voter turnout may reflect a “normalisation” of democratic electoral politics. On the other hand, it may indicate that the South African electorate is becoming more apathetic, and that dissatisfied voters see no legitimate alternative to which they can turn. A scenario where the governing party wins increasingly large shares of the vote from ever smaller turnouts (and thus comes to depend on smaller proportions of the electorate for its support) is a worrying one.

Provincial Trends

The ANC now leads in voting intention in all nine provinces, the first time in any Idasa or Markinor survey since 1994 that this has occurred. Majorities declared their intentions to vote for the ANC in five provinces: Limpopo, Northwest, Free State, Northern Cape, and Mpumalanga (see Figure 2). In Eastern Cape, possibly in reaction to ongoing controversies that have dogged the provincial ANC, support for the ANC has dipped to 44 percent, though the ANC remains the dominant party in this province. ANC support is lowest in the three provinces that have had the most competitive party systems since 1994: Gauteng (33 percent), Western Cape (32 percent) and KwaZulu-Natal (21 percent), but it still enjoys plurality support in all three. The UDM received substantial support only in Eastern Cape (7 percent), while the IFP’s only strong showing is in KwaZulu-Natal (10 percent). But it should be noted that opinion surveys have consistently overestimated ANC support and underestimated IFP support in that province since at least 1993.

Figure 2: Voting Intentions for National Government, by Province



At the same time, the total numbers of unwilling and uncommitted voters are extremely high throughout all provinces. It probably is no coincidence that at least two of these provinces (Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal) have just witnessed turmoil and public mud-slinging over the split in the DA and subsequent floor crossing (whereby elected office holders were allowed to defect to other parties without losing their seats or positions). Other survey data demonstrate that voters in the Western Cape give local and provincial government the worst performance ratings in the country.

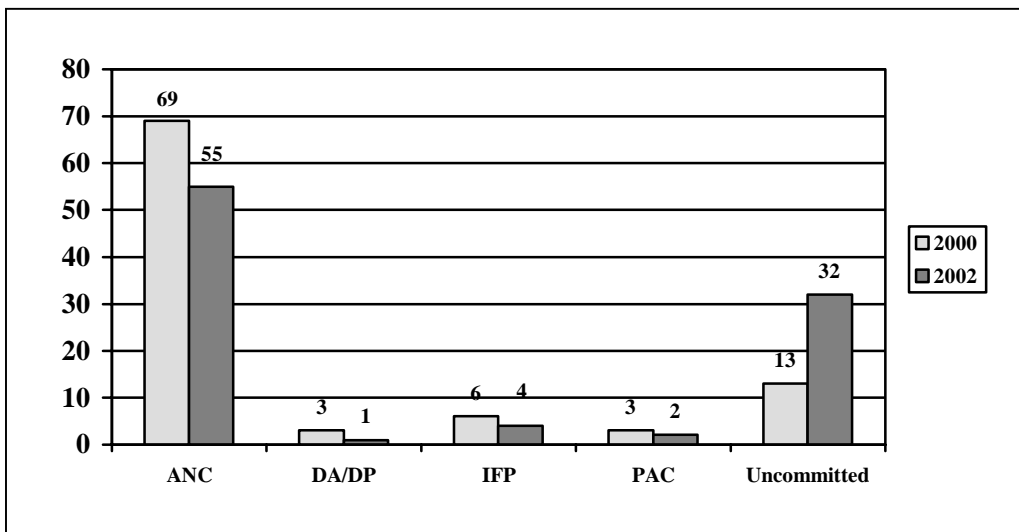
This scepticism may be related to a significant realignment in opposition politics since 2000. The NNP withdrawal from the DA and decision to cooperate with the ANC shifted the balance of political power in the Western Cape, leading to a reshuffling among key party and provincial leadership posts, followed by a scandal over NNP funding.

In October 2002, South Africa witnessed a movement of local councillors across party lines during a period of floor crossing specifically legislated by the ANC in order to enable it to form a governing coalition with the NNP in Cape Town and several other municipalities. The ANC/NNP coalition benefited heavily from the defections, taking control of Cape Town and several municipalities around the country. Prior to the floor crossing laws, the Democratic Alliance controlled the Cape Town Municipality with 107 out of 200 councillors. Former members of the NNP, who became councillors for the DA when the DP and the NNP merged, held 70 of the DA's council seats. During the floor-crossing window, at least 27 of those councillors left the DA for the NNP, allowing a new ANC/NNP coalition to take control of the Cape Town Municipality municipal government. These political actions and controversies may account for the increasing disillusionment of the electorate, especially among voters in the Western Cape.

Voting Intention by Race

While 55 percent of black voters support the ANC, this is a sharp drop from the 69 percent measured in 2000. However, this has not been accompanied by increased intention to vote for any other party; rather the proportions that “don't know,” “would not vote” or “refused to answer” have all increased.

Figure 3: Voting Intention Over Time, Black Voters



White voters have reacted to recent partisan developments by moving away from the DA/DP, the NNP and the IFP in droves. While the NNP has recovered some white supporters (6 percent) this is less than half of what it was at the time of the formation of the DA in late 2000. Nearly two out of three whites (64 percent) are now unable or unwilling to say who will win their vote – or simply unwilling to vote at all.

The ANC retains its position as the single most popular party among coloured voters, but even so, its support has fallen by half since the 2000 survey. While the NNP has recovered some support (11 percent), it is less than half of what it was in 2000. Notably, only the DA has maintained its support among coloured voters. Following the trend among white and black voters, the proportion of uncommitted voters has increase to include one-third of all coloured respondents.

For the first time, the ANC is also the leading party amongst Indian voters (18 percent). Similar to its position elsewhere, while the NNP has recovered some supporters, it has less than half the total it had just prior to its entrance into the DA. While DA/DP support had been increasing since 1994, it dropped by over half between 2000 and 2002. Over half (54 percent) of Indians voters will not commit their vote to any party. Nearly one in three (30 percent) now say they will not vote, compared to none who said this in 2000!

Figure 4: Voting Intention Over Time, White Voters

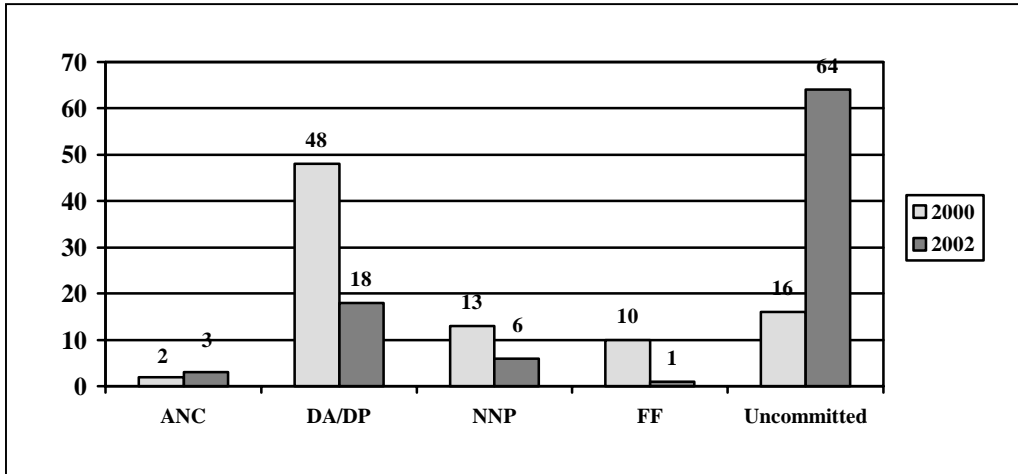


Figure 5: Voting Intention Over Time, Coloured Voters

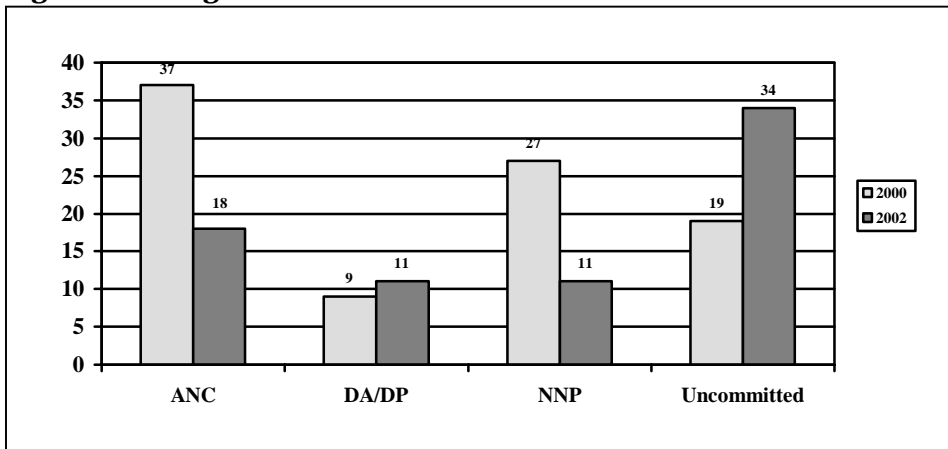
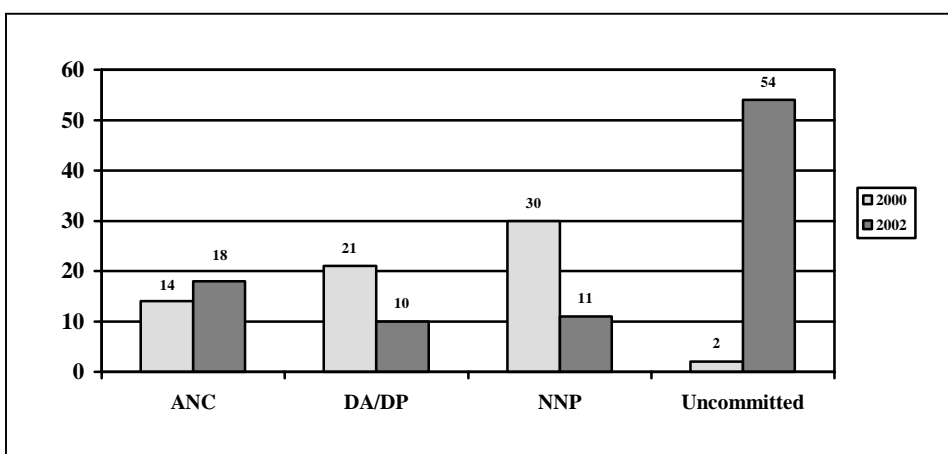


Figure 6: Voting Intention Over Time, Indian Voters



For more information contact Tanya Shanker (021-467 5600 tanya@idasact.org.za).
For comment, contact Bob Mattes (083 2340333 / bob@idasact.org.za), Collette Herzenberg (083 564 9567 / collette@idasact.org.za) or Paul Graham, Executive Director of Idasa (082 571 3887).