

Election results

8 August 2016

The poll percentage in this election was remarkably similar to that of the previous local government elections in 2011 (57.72% against 57.64%); but as is now well known, the voters delivered a very different result.

The ANC suffered serious losses with their share of the vote declining from 63% to 54%. In a longer view it is even worse: the party used to comfortably obtain 65% and more in elections, now it got 54%. If this trend continues it could get less than 50% in three years' time at the 2019 elections. Some spin doctors desperately tried to say all is fine, but the thinking leaders were more humble in their public reactions. In a telling move the party's victory celebration at Luthuli House was cancelled.

The DA continued its steady progress with an increase from 24% in 2011 to 27% of the vote now. In a longer view the party has grown from a low point of 16% in 2006 to its current 27%. Even if every single White voter in SA voted for the DA, which by no means happened, the party would still have garnered two Black votes for each White vote. What turned the "steady progress" into "dramatic progress" is that the DA wrestled control of two metros from the ANC (Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane) and put control of two more into play (Johannesburg & Ekurhuleni). The party also strengthened its grip in the Western Cape, getting more than 66% of the votes in Cape Town. Helen Zille's strategies, for which she was criticised, of first focusing on local and provincial government; and later to step aside for Mmusi Maimane, have certainly been vindicated. As for Maimane, he has established himself.

The EFF put in a credible performance by increasing their support from 6.35% in the 2014 general election to 8.24%. This translates into 731 local government seats which they previously did not have – meaning they will now have 731 paid officials who earn a (taxpayer funded) salary and can spend their working day building the party's base. It also means there are 731 public representatives who are unlikely to give up their status and disappear back into the ANC. This genie is not going back into the bottle.

Coalition politics

27 councils, including some metros, are "hung" i.e. no party has 50% of the council seats. Coalitions will have to be formed.

Councils have 14 days from the date of the official announcements of results (which was Saturday 6 August) to constitute themselves and elect a speaker and other executives. There is an intense period of deal-making ahead. Do not exclude any permutations or combinations.

The two issues to watch for are if the EFF will go into coalitions and with whom; and to what extent "grand" coalitions of the ANC and DA could be established. The DA's election progress could be cut short if it is "frozen" out of the Johannesburg and Tshwane councils through an ANC/EFF coalition. The EFF, on the other hand, will have a hard time to justify to its voters why it is keeping the ANC in power after it ran so hard against it.

More to come?

The potential importance of coalition politics is clear if one looks at the margin of victory in those metros where the ANC retained unfettered control: Mangaung (Bloemfontein); Buffalo City (East London), and eThekweni (Durban).

Another 9% swing away from the ANC, as happened in this election, will deliver all of them – except Buffalo City – into the hands of a coalition. A 10% swing will deliver Buffalo City too. In 2006 Buffalo City voted

81.5% ANC – this election 59%. Over ten years it is a 22.5% swing away from the ANC.

Two elections ago in 2006 the ANC had unfettered control of 7 of the country's 8 metros – now that is down to three and all of them with smaller margins. If this trend continues all metros in the country would end up under coalition control in five years' time.

The headlines actually hide what happened in Gauteng. The province comprises 9 councils: 3 metros and 6 municipalities. In five of those, including all three metros, the ANC's share of the vote dropped below 50%.

The ANC has their work cut out for them to turn this around; and the opposition parties have an opportunity to progress further.

Some perspective

It is important to retain some perspective.

The ANC still got two votes for every one the DA got – 8.1 million against 4 million; and it got 6.6 votes for every one the EFF got. It will control 161 local councils, as against the DA's 19, the IFP's 7 and the EFF's nil. (Final coalition arrangements will of course change these numbers somewhat.)

The EFF has done well, but it is worth remembering that for every one vote the EFF got, the DA got 3.3 and the ANC 6.6. It is a long way to go just to replace the DA as official opposition; not even to mention the ANC.

Risk

Much as we now rejoice in coalitions, they are not easy to run and could result in instability. The experience of the Oudtshoorn municipality, where the national and provincial government eventually had to intervene and establish an administration, is a telling example. (This time Oudtshoorn chose decisively for one party – the DA got 55% of the vote – so stability should return to the town.)

Instability has of course also occurred in one-party dominant councils as a result of poor management and maladministration; several such councils were placed under administration too. Hopefully the increased political competition we are seeing will take care of these.

More than the numbers

We can get so hung up on the numbers that we lose sight of some very important process issues.

Contrary to fears and the usual gnashing of teeth the elections went off peacefully and calm; no intimidation and violence on voting day. No mean achievement and better than the most optimistic commentators expected. What violence there was, was before election day and mainly intra-party, telling us more about party processes than national election processes.

Before the final official results were announced the ANC already conceded that they lost Nelson Mandela Bay. That is huge progress from previous elections when incumbents in Bitou (Plettenberg Bay) and Oudtshoorn clinged to their jobs long after it was clear they have lost.

The racist appeals Mr Zuma tried for support with comments about the DA being a White party clearly did not help the ANC. The country is moving on.

So What?

- Slowly but very surely what De Tocqueville called “the habits of the heart” – the rules of behaviour in politics – are being moulded. In this election those habits were strengthened considerably.
- This political stability ticks one more item on the ratings agencies’ checklist on a downgrade.
- In a longer view the swing away from the ANC is very clear and unambiguous – even in the metros where they retained unfettered control. It will be a challenge for the ANC to stem the tide.
- A competitive multi-party democracy is taking hold. Competition will become more intense, but at the same time also more the norm.