

POSTER THEMES IN BLOEMFONTEIN DURING THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

This article essentially focuses on the political poster as a medium for political communication and as a propaganda medium during an election campaign. An introductory discussion is followed by an analysis of the thematic content of party political posters which appeared in the city of Bloemfontein during the period 9 February 2004 to 14 April 2004 - the official campaign period for South Africa's third democratic general election. The analysis focuses particularly on the posters constructed by the four parties which gained seats in the Free State Legislature, namely the African National Congress (ANC with 25 seats), the Democratic Alliance (DA with 3 seats), the Freedom Front Plus (FF+ with 1 seat) and the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP with 1 seat). A total of thirteen parties contested the Free State Provincial election. The poster themes of two parties, the New National Party (NNP) and National Action (NA), which were exceptionally visible in the poster war in Bloemfontein during the election campaign and which gained no representation in the Free State Legislature, are included in the discussion. The interpretation of poster messages is linked to the specific context in which they appeared. Meanings can only be ascribed within a given context or, in this case, socio-political and economic circumstance.

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INTRODUCTION: THE SETTING

South Africa's third democratic general election took place on 14 April 2004 after a campaign that started officially on 9 February 2004. While 21 political parties contested the election at national level, 13 took part in the Free State provincial election. The 2004 election also celebrated 10 years of democracy in South Africa.

The following political parties contested the Free State provincial election (listed here as they appeared on the ballot paper):

- United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP);
- United Democratic Movement (UDM);
- Freedom Front Plus (FF Plus);
- African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP);
- African National Congress (ANC);
- Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO);
- Democratic Alliance (DA);
- Dikwankwetla Party of South Africa (DPSA);
- Independent Democrats (ID);
- Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP);
- National Action (NA);
- New National Party (NNP); and
- Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC).

The ANC won the Free State provincial election with more than 81% of the vote, followed by the DA with more than 8%; the FF+ with more than 2% and the ACDP with more than a percentage. Virtually 79% of voters who were registered cast their votes which amounted to approximately 1 million (cf. *Sunday Times* 18 April 2004 p.4).

The other parties did very poorly, especially the NNP (the once-mighty National Party was actually formed in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, in 1914) which could only muster an eight place after being the second largest party in the Free State after the 1994 elections (cf. *Sunday Times* *ibid.*). Newcomers on the Free State ballot, the ID and NA, also did not feature at all. In fact, the only parties which gained seats in the Free State legislature were the ANC with 25, the DA with three, and the FF+ and the ACDP with one seat each. Interestingly enough, the DA (then the Democratic Party – DP) and the ACDP won no seats in the 1994 (Free State) Provincial election; while the NNP with four seats in 1994 has no representation in the Free State legislature now.

This article essentially aims to report on an investigation into themes appearing on political posters in Bloemfontein during the 2004 general election campaign in order to show what kind of appeals were made to the voting public. Before turning to the findings and conclusion of the study, a discussion of the political poster as a medium for political communication, the research problem with its delimitations, as well as the methodology and categories of analysis used in the investigation would seem apposite.

A summary of poster themes propagated by the ANC, DA, FF+, ACDP as well as by the NNP and NA are also provided.

THE POLITICAL POSTER AS MEDIUM FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

According to the *South African Manual For Outdoor Advertising Control* (SAMOAC) posters for parliamentary or municipal election campaigns are classified as Class 2 (d)(iii) signs – along with pavement posters and notices (SAMOAC 1998: 91). This means that political posters are regarded as temporary signs attached to electrical light standards within the urban road reserve to advertise political events.

The number of posters for election campaigns are limited to a maximum of three posters per post or standard. Posters must be fixed by means of a suitable cord – no metal clamps or wire shall be used - at least 2 metres below any light fixture. There are no limitations with regard to the colour and texture of posters, but they may not exceed 0,55 square metres in size. A final technical remark about political posters is that “no poster relating to a parliamentary or municipal election or referendum shall be displayed for longer than the period extending from the beginning of the date of proclamation in the Government Gazette of an upcoming referendum or election to the end of the fourteenth day after the date of such election or referendum” (SAMOAC *ibid.*).

Political posters as a form of political advertising (cf. McNair 2003: 95ff.) have a long history – also in South Africa (cf. Du Preez 1988). For our purposes a political poster may be conceptualised as a political announcement printed on paper that consists of slogans, illustrations, symbols, colour, typefaces, layout and graphic design, and which is usually attached to a pole so that the general public, especially the voters, can see and read it. Election posters are the most common form of political posters and a most important form of political communication during an election campaign, especially if given a working definition of political communication as the transmission and interpretation of verbal and nonverbal messages that have been shaped, or have consequences, for the functioning of a political system. Political posters are intentionally produced and address issues that impact or may impact on the functioning of a political system.

A political poster is one of the so-called “below-the-line-media” – in other words, a medium that does not account for precisely how many people have read or used it. While many political posters are once-only publications, the gist of the message may be used many times. Political posters usually contain a single and dramatic or dynamic message with the aim of informing and, more often than not, persuading voters.

The advantage of posters are that they are relatively inexpensive, especially when considering that colour can be used at low cost. A colour, durable, maisonite poster in A1 format cost no more than R15.00 a poster (labour included) during the 2004 election campaign. Also posters can be widely distributed – even to remote areas – and their messages are less fleeting than radio or television. Another advantage is that the commuting public can see posters repetitively to and from work, which helps to

inculcate messages in the minds of recipients – especially when “high attention” messages (those conveyed in bright colours such as yellow or placed with human faces or the human body) are involved. The disadvantages of, or dilemma with, posters are that messages must be short and have “sound-bite” (for maximum impact) and it should be creative (to avoid melodrama or being judged boring).

Political posters are part of the rite of elections. Through the verbal and non-verbal messages on a political poster, meaning is conveyed to influence the functioning of a political system. Most often messages are linked to particular themes embedded in slogans with the intention of telling voters what to think about and hopefully how to act (vote).

The language of political persuasion is bent on guiding recipients’ attitudes and/or behaviour. Political language is not to be conceived as something which conveys meaning by itself. Its meanings are always a function of the context from which it emanates on issues, of the needs and interests of the audiences involved and of their modes of perception (Edelman 1985: 130).

Edelman (1985: 172) suggests that mass publics respond to conspicuous political symbols that make up the drama of the state. If political acts such as poster designing are to promote social adjustment, they have to be dramatic in outline and often rather empty of realistic detail, thus symbolic. The essence of the work of Edelman (1985) lies in the assumption that the political order is maintained through a system of manipulation of symbols. This manipulation – also on political posters – can of course be regarded as an effort to persuade.

Every poster used during the 2004 general election campaign, then, could be regarded as an attempt to persuade voters to support a particular party and/or to change or sustain their attitudes about a particular party/issue and/or to give them something to think about. This would have applied especially to undecided voters.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND DELIMITATIONS

The aim of this study was to analyse slogan themes on political posters displayed in public in Bloemfontein during the 2004 general election campaign in Bloemfontein.

The focus is on posters of political parties that eventually won seats in the Free State Legislature, namely the ANC, DA, FF+ and ACDP, in order to determine what kind of slogan themes as propagated on their posters may have influenced voter support in their favour.

The poster themes of two parties, the NNP and NA, which were exceptionally visible in the poster war in Bloemfontein during the election campaign will also be discussed to show which kind of slogan themes seemed to have very little effect on Bloemfontein voters.

METHODOLOGY

The political posters appearing on lamp posts (and at voting stations) in Bloemfontein were photographed and the slogan themes thereof analysed qualitatively by means of different categories of analysis – see section below.

The time period at stake during which posters were photographed was 9 February 2004 to 14 April 2004 – the official length of the general election campaign.

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

The following eight categories of analysis often relate to slogan themes that are depicted on political posters in election campaigns (Du Preez 1988) and were consequently used in this study – also see Finn, Weich and Rensburg (1983) in this regard:

Personification

With personification the leader of a specific political party is glorified as the person with the power and the abilities to fulfil the party's promises and voters' expectations. A photograph of the party leader is almost always a form of personification.

Time

With the time theme, the treatment of the past, the present and the future is emphasised. A comparison of the different parties' treatment of this theme can reveal attitudes towards change.

Basic needs

Basic needs such as the need for water, food, shelter and the like are people's most powerful needs. The bread-and-butter issues in an election campaign relate to such basic needs.

Security needs

Security needs imply that people want to feel safe. With the security theme the words "sure", "trust", "protect", "peace", "stability" and "freedom" feature prominently. Security needs also imply the need for a home, a job and an income.

Power

Power and the abuse of power is an important theme as political power is wielded to obtain political objectives. The power theme links closely with that of ideology.

Ideology

Ideology includes the form of government favoured by the political party. Democracy as ideology (secular belief) and as a form of government has become a catch-word, a slogan in itself, in the modern world. Federalism, socialism, communism and other isms also fall in this category.

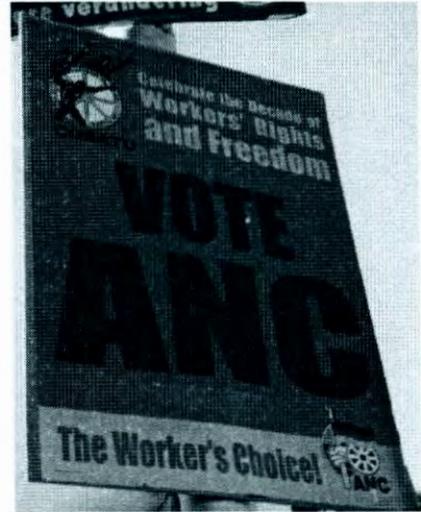
The voting process

The implications and practicalities of the voting process often feature prominently in an election campaign.

Policies

This category relates to policies with regard to basic/security needs (noted in separate categories above) but also includes economic policies, housing policies, employment policies and education policies.

SUMMARY OF POSTER THEMES



On its election posters the ANC again propagated its old and well-known slogan: “A better life for all” (coupled with “vote ANC”). It has become a standard slogan since 1994. One poster had a smiling President Mbeki presiding over the slogan, whereas another poster simply implored voters to vote ANC on 14 April. It is quite clear that unemployment and poverty were targeted by the ANC as major election themes in Bloemfontein and that workers’ rights and freedom would supposedly be protected by the ANC in its alliance with Cosatu. The slogans “A people’s contract to create jobs and fight poverty (vote ANC)”; “Create jobs, vote ANC”; and “Celebrate the decade of workers’ rights and freedom: Vote ANC, the worker’s choice” highlighted these issues.



The DA's poster themes focused mainly on creating jobs and decreasing crime above its standard 2004 slogan: "Because South Africa deserves better" (than the ANC has offered thus far). Voters were urged by Tony Leon to vote DA for real change. Within this framework the propaganda messages emphasised, were "1 Million real jobs" (by 2009); "150 000 (more) police members" (by 2007); and "Imprisonment for corrupt politicians". One poster focused on the idea that if you voted DA, you would be voting to unite the opposition in South Africa – thereby implying that the DA could provide South Africa with an alternative government.



The FF+ used only two slogans with Dr Pieter Mulder's photograph very prominent on the posters. The one slogan urged voters to say "No to the ANC" and on election morning it cunningly had a sticker entitled "Thank you" on this very poster to suggest that many voters were indeed saying "No to the ANC" and were voting FF+! Mulder (2004:18) said this slogan essentially suggested that voters should reject the ANC for doing very little about the crime and murder rate and about widespread government

corruption in the nation. The other slogan read “There is hope again” which, according to Mulder (2004 *ibid.*), is the result of greater unity and cooperation among Afrikaans speaking voters and the different political parties in the country. He said there was hope again even if the voting public said no to the ANC (and voted FF+ of course!).



The *ACDP* used four slogans on their posters in Bloemfontein. The party’s emphasis on family values was reflected in the slogan “Putting family first” (Vote *ACDP*). “Place South Africa in safe hands” was indicative of the *ACDP*’s strong stance against crime. Christian values are part and parcel of the *ACDP*’s manifesto and the slogan “Put your cross next to The Cross” (Vote *ACDP*) encapsulated its overriding Christian theme during the campaign. For the *ACDP*, South Africa can only develop and prosper through the application of Christian principles and values. As the slogan “Real hope for the nation” (Vote *ACDP*) suggests, the *ACDP* can bring Christians together and (in the words of Minnie 2004: 7) can defeat the ANC, thus reversing the secular humanism which predominates in the South African Constitution. A poster merely depicting a smiling *ACDP* Leader Kenneth Meshoe (with Vote *ACDP*) also featured prominently. Two parties that were very visible in the poster war during the election campaign in Bloemfontein and which gained no representation in the Free State Legislature thereafter were the *NNP* and *NA*.

The *NNP*’s slogans read: “Let us be your voice”; “You deserve a fair deal”; “It’s your land also”; and “*NNP* -your key to government”. The *NNP*’s poster strategy in Bloemfontein appeared to focus on its close relation with the party in power (*ANC*) and that non-*ANC* supporters should vote *NNP* to secure a voice in government. Its slogans

certainly did not attack or confront the ANC at all: In fact, the slogans were quite vague and rather philosophical.

The NA's poster messages were very busy and focused on the (new) party leadership with a photograph of a smiling Cassie Aucamp and Danie Schutte proclaiming to stand together and that "Your future is here"; that voters should "Ride the new wave" of the NA; and that "Affirmative action must go – no 2nd class citizens – merit in, quotas out". The slogan "Catch them and hang them – for a safe South Africa" also featured prominently. A very odd and inappropriate poster with the slogan "Pretoria stays Pretoria" with the Union Building in the background and the sub-title "We are here to stay" also appeared on Bloemfontein streets.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

It is important to note from the outset that the interpretation of poster messages is linked to the specific context in which they appeared. Meanings can only be ascribed within a given context or socio-political and economic circumstance. The South Africa of April 2004 was firmly in the ANC's control. There was no talk in the media or elsewhere about a new government after the election. The predominant issues confronting the nation were unemployment, poverty, crime, HIV/AIDS, general health care, affirmative action and government corruption (cf. Duvenage 2004).

Within the framework of the categories of analysis, the ANC used personification (by way of President Mbeki's photograph); time (with its standard slogan: "A better life for all") and the promise to provide basic needs (through the fight against poverty) on its posters. Security needs were addressed in its slogans "A people's contract to create jobs and fight poverty" and "Create jobs, vote ANC". Power (of the ANC) was related to workers' power, to the ANC's alliance with Cosatu. There is virtually always ideology involved in political messages. Arguably a democratic-socialist ideology was propagated in the slogan "Celebrate the decade of workers' rights and freedom: Vote ANC, the worker's choice". The voting process was referred to only in the sense that on one of the ANC posters, voters were urged to vote ANC on 14 April. With regard to the policies category, the ANC emphasised that it had "a people's contract to create jobs and fight poverty". The reference to the fact that the "people" or majority in South Africa were actively involved in the fight against poverty and unemployment, and hence that the ANC had to be supported, is a classic propaganda technique – the so-called "plain folks" technique - see Lee and Lee (1972: 22ff.).

The DA also used personification through the photograph of Tony Leon; and time in its promises to provide "1 million real jobs" (by 2009) and "150 000 (more) police members" (by 2007) if it came to power after the election. Its major focus in Bloemfontein was on the security needs of voters by emphasizing the need for a job and many more police members to fight crime, "because South Africa deserves better". The power of a united opposition featured on one of the DA's election posters. "Imprisonment for corrupt politicians" alluded to the DA's intention to fight crime wherever it occurs; while voting DA "for real change" was a broad appeal and falls within the policies category of analysis.

The *FF+* also used personification extensively. In fact Dr Pieter Mulder's photograph almost dominated the posters of the *FF+*. Its slogan "No to the ANC" was an all-encompassing attack on all ANC policies and suggested that *FF+* power and ideology should be revealed and manifested at the ballot box – and was indeed "revealed" with the "Thank you" sticker on this poster on election day. Time and ideology featured in its slogan "There is hope again" (if one voted *FF+*) – "again" brings in the time factor whereas ideology was brought into play in the sense that more likeminded Afrikaans speaking conservative voters were supposedly uniting and cooperating.

Personification was used by the *ACDP* with a prominent photograph of Kenneth Meshoe urging Christians to vote *ACDP*. Security needs were emphasized in the slogan "Place South Africa in safe hands" and "Putting family first". Power and ideology were implicit in the slogan "Put your cross next to the Cross". According to the *ACDP*, the power of the Lord should predominate in the land and secular humanism should be reversed in favour of Christianity. "Real hope for the nation" focused on the suggestion that the time was ripe for a change and that there was real hope if Christians stood together and voted *ACDP* in the election.

As was the case with most of the other parties, the *NNP* used personification with Marthinus van Schalkwyk's photograph prominent on posters. Power featured in the *NNP* slogans, especially "NNP – your key to government". As mentioned earlier in the summary of poster themes, the *NNP*'s slogans were very vague and philosophical and made no attempt to address other specific socio-political and economic issues.

The *NA* was personified on posters with a smiling Cassie Aucamp and Danie Schutte urging voters that their future (time) was with this newly-formed party. Security needs also came into play with the slogans "Catch them and hang them – for a safe South Africa" and (for especially White Afrikaans males) "Affirmative action must go – no 2nd class citizens – merit in, quotas out". These slogans specifically attacked ANC policies on the death penalty and employment opportunities for Whites.

In reflecting on party-political slogan themes on posters in Bloemfontein during the 2004 general election campaign one could say that there was nothing exceedingly eye-catching or thought-provoking. The ANC that gained a huge majority in the election concentrated in its posters on the fight against unemployment and poverty as well as on workers' rights. These were indeed major issues for the majority of the population in Bloemfontein and in the greater Free State.

Interestingly, the fight against HIV/AIDS did not feature at all. One did not expect the ANC to propagate the issue, given the widespread criticism leveled at President Mbeki's stance on the matter. However, for all the other parties to keep quiet about it on their posters was quite astounding and most disappointing.

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