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Framing the democratic narrative: local and national voting patterns in South Africa

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While it is sometimes characterised as a dominant party, South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) has failed to demonstrate consistent dominance in provincial and municipal elections. It is argued that this incongruence is related to the ways in which the national political imaginary is successfully (and unsuccessfully) framed by ANC elites who have managed to make the story of the ANC largely inseparable from the national character of the post-apartheid state. At the local and municipal levels, the ability of the ANC to frame this inseparability is hobbled by more policy-oriented frames as well as the institutional character of South Africa’s constituent–legislator relationships.

Keywords: issue framing; dominant parties; South Africa; African National Congress; symbolic versus policy framing

Since South Africa’s first democratic election with universal suffrage in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has consistently won an outright majority in every national election. Put another way, in every election in the post-apartheid era of South Africa, the ANC has not faced meaningful electoral competition at the national level, despite the fact that more than 100 parties in every election have fielded candidates for national office in free and fair elections. This fact stands in sharp contrast to the local-level voting patterns in two of the country’s most populous provinces; KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape. In both of these provinces, the ANC has consistently failed to gain a majority at the local level and has been obliged to forge coalitions to achieve policy goals.

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What can explain the seemingly incongruent results of these elections? While it might be convenient to suggest that both KwaZulu-Natal and Western Cape are defined, at least partly, by their relatively large minority populations, this explanation belies the fact that in terms of national voting patterns the ANC performs very well in these provinces. Why do a majority of voters in two densely populated provinces choose to vote for the ANC at the national level yet vote against it in local and municipal elections? The literature on dominant party formation and consolidation looks almost exclusively at voting trends at the national level (Ames, 1970; Barnes, 1971; Arian & Barnes, 1974; Giliomee, Myburg, & Schlemmer, 2001; Magaloni, 2006; Greene, 2007). This paper will begin to investigate this particular case with an assessment of national and sub-national voting patterns in an emergent dominant-party system. We pursue this assessment with an eye to understanding how the intersection of policy-based incentives for strategic voting and the often undervalued incentives for strategic framing affect the emergence of a dominant party at the national level.

In order to explore the differences in voting at national and local levels, this study will investigate both the symbolic and policy frames that the ANC uses to attract voters at different levels of government. Despite the explanatory significance that the concepts of framing and frame resonance have brought to bear on questions pertaining to dominant parties at the national level, the effect of framing on sub-national voting patterns has been largely ignored. We focus on the ways in which symbolic framing, as opposed to a focus on policy goods, has structured the ANC’s political calculus at the national level and the extent to which such strategies are successful (or unsuccessful) at the municipal and provincial levels. Our findings suggest, consistent with other theories of framing and dominant parties, that the ANC has generally had mixed results at attaching nationally resonant symbolic frames at these levels. Critically, our argument suggests that the attachment of the liberation struggle to national-level vote choice possesses less resonance at the local level where, under the constitutional provisions of post-apartheid South Africa, policy-oriented preferences reduce the utility of such appeals to an idealised national community.

The ANC as mass movement
Present voting patterns in South Africa, at least at the national level, are widely felt to be a consequence of the legacies of colonialism and institutional racism. While segregation was central to the history of South Africa since some of the earliest settlements in the Cape of Good Hope in the mid-seventeenth century, it was not until the early twentieth century that such policies were formally codified by the Parliament of the then-British-controlled Republic of South Africa.
The formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 demonstrated the extent to which British promises of more equal participation and land access could be sacrificed when such assurances ran afoul of the economic interests of the state. Specifically, the creation of the Union granted substantial concessions to Afrikaner interests for the purpose of political stability and the growth of the mining sector (Worden, 2007, pp. 34–36). Given that the British legacy in the Cape Colony was characterised by a minimal degree of open representation, many African elites felt that British victory in the Second Boer War might portend a more enlightened and liberal rule (Thompson, 2001, pp. 66–67).

The disappointment in the terms of the new Union constitution was a critical dynamic in ushering in a more potent form of black political mobilisation. The ANC, originally the South African Native National Congress, was formed in 1912 by a group of mostly elite black African men to promote the causes and interests of the black African population in South Africa. As Lodge (1983, p. 2) makes clear, however, the ANC was a decidedly elite-driven organisation that remained effectively detached from the majority of the African population. Much like the Indian Congress Party or All-India Muslim League, the initial purposes of the organisation were restricted to lobbying for the interests of a small and precarious black middle class fearful of losing their hard-earned status in former British colonial holdings.

The transformation of the ANC into a broad mass movement occurred in the wake of the 1948 election that brought the Afrikaner-dominated National Party (NP) to power. The NP immediately introduced a set of legislative initiatives that, taken together, comprised the policy of apartheid, or ‘separateness’. The key objective of apartheid was the separation of ethnic communities and was justified by the assertion that South Africa was not a nation, but rather a collection of disparate communities whose mutual distinctiveness made common political life impossible. From 1948 until 1960, a series of legislative acts, mandating where people of certain races could live, who they could marry, and what facilities and services they could use were passed in an effort to completely separate the population of South Africa on racial lines. This separateness, however, was far from the benevolent custodianship professed by the government. Although formally defined as a way to provide for the ‘separate development’ of the different groups, apartheid was a blatant tool of white supremacist ideology, consisting of the forceful seizure of the vast majority of the viable land for a minority of the population and the assignment of second-class status to the vast majority.

In the years preceding the NP government’s election the ANC had been rendered ineffective owing to internal disputes, competition with competing black political organisations, and its elite-centred focus. The introduction of apartheid policies compelled the ANC to augment its strategies and in December 1951 it drafted its Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws. The Defiance Campaign,
as well as the 1955 drafting of the Freedom Charter with several other antiapartheid organisations, represented a foundational shift in ANC mobilisation (Lodge, 1991, p. 5). Both the Campaign and the Charter reflected the party’s commitment to extending its scope to the day-to-day struggles of Africans and membership grew rapidly.

No more an exclusive domain for elite interests, the ANC took advantage of three overarching dynamics to ensure mass participation. First, the formalisation of apartheid laws laid bare the supremacist ideology underlying NP rule. Whereas white settlements had always been largely exclusivist, as most colonial enterprises were, there was hope in the years following WWII that the more ‘liberal’ government of Jan Smuts would proceed with a gradual relaxation of racist policies. The rapid mobilisation of conservative Afrikaners in the wake of this threat made clear the intentions of the NP government and its co-ethnic beneficiaries among the English-speaking population.

Second, the rapid growth of the urban African population and the NP government’s attempts to manage urban migration greatly reduced the costs of collective action. Previous policies such as the Land Act of 1913 were intended to assist white capital owners in the cities by forcing blacks away from their farms and depriving them access to traditional forms of employment. Insofar as migration could be controlled and white capital benefited, such demographic shifts were tolerated. During WWII, however, the need for black labour increased and urbanisation rates steadily grew, expanding from 139,000 in 1936 to 390,000 in 1946 (Butler, 2004, p. 14–15). The demographic concentration of urbanised Africans, coupled with their justified rage at the new apartheid legislation, made collective action easier as evidenced by the rapid growth of urban protests in the 1950s (Worden, 2007, p. 110).

Third, the economic indispensability of black South Africans made their political mobilisation easier to achieve owing to the growth of a viable trade union wing of the ANC. A rudimentary glance at the demographic changes in South Africa suggests that the slow growth (and eventual decline) in the white population, coupled with the rapid growth of the black population, demanded the extension of better education opportunities to African populations. Indeed, under the Verwoerd administration the NP government relaxed certain obstacles to education and job advancement for some black South Africans. As Schrire (1991, p. 12–16) notes, while such policy shifts were intended to provide short-term solutions to underlying structural problems in the South African economy they had the long-term impact of forging a powerful black union movement.

The ANC was officially banned in South Africa in 1960, following persistent conflicts between ANC members and the South African police. ‘The Struggle’ as members of the anti-apartheid movement have characterised it, manifested in a broad array of mobilisation, including popular protests,
strikes, and violent insurgency. Beyond any doubt the ANC played a major role in organising anti-apartheid activity, both in training protesters and encouraging a low-level civil war aimed at destabilising the government (Clark, 2004). That said, the ANC did not act alone. The ANC worked in concert – though not always harmony – with other organisations like the United Democratic Front, the Pan-Africanist Congress, the Black Sash, the South African Communist Party, the Progressive Federal Party, and others (Worden, 2007). The differences in these groups’ ideologies and approaches to the Struggle generated substantial debate and, on occasion, violent reprisals. In terms of the arguments advanced in this paper, such antagonisms are vitally important given the ANC’s later attempts to either monopolise the claim to anti-apartheid activities or in terms of its propensity to retroactively adopt the legacies of individuals who, like Steve Biko and Desmond Tutu, were decidedly on the outside of ANC organisational activity.

Regardless of the contributions of other organisations, no other domestic anti-apartheid group could reasonably rival the strength, resources, and respect that the ANC commanded during this time. The vast majority of ANC-directed military activity was in the form of internationally trained guerilla fighters carrying out missions after having been smuggled back into the country, a paramilitary resource that the United Democratic Front, PAC and AZAPO clearly lacked. Beyond this, the ANC’s powerful labour wing, the Coalition of South African Trade Unions, gave the organisation a decidedly potent negotiation tool. As noted by Schrire (1991), the dependence on black labour made the threat of labour strikes a hotly contested issue within the NP government. While hardliners would be willing to either repress strikers or wait out the labour negotiation process, the general inelasticity of demand for workers on the part of capital owners forced the hands of even the most strident Afrikaner politicians. Mass mobilisations inside the country provided serious challenges for the South African apartheid state and its international appeals spearheaded divestment campaigns and large-scale international boycotts that crippled the apartheid economy and ultimately led to the liberalisation of South Africa in the early 1990s.

The purpose of this short history is twofold. First, we seek to establish the historical context in which the ANC makes broad appeals to the South African public that it, and no other organisation, is the face of the anti-apartheid struggle. These efforts were largely reinforced in the post-apartheid era on the basis of the Truth and Reconciliation process and in the establishment of redistributive programmes that portend the creation of future patronage networks. While other organisations existed that fought against the apartheid regime, there remains a tendency to downplay these contributions or to retroactively characterise them as being ‘fellow travellers’ of the ANC when, in reality, anti-apartheid groups often warred with one another.
The second purpose is to identify the key arenas within which the ANC organises its appeals. Given its strength in labour and youth wings the ANC has long relied on (and sometimes come into conflict with) the organised sections that represent these communities. In addition, the ANC retains potent political strength in former townships. The ethnically mixed nature of such areas, a consequence of NP governments’ long-term strategy of putting blacks into small ‘Bantustans’ with little regard to ethnic or linguistic commonality, have made the ANC the only game in town in terms of organised political activity. Not surprisingly, our analysis tends to confirm the generally held notion that the ANC retains immense local and national-level support in those provinces where townships were located.

**Dominant parties in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa**

With the ANC’s national victory in the most recent election (22 April 2009), it officially ranks as a dominant party, according to Greene’s (2007, p. 3) definition which ‘... combines genuine elections with continuous executive and legislative rule by a single party for at least twenty consecutive years or four consecutive elections’. Other scholars have defined the ANC’s control over South Africa as ‘emerging dominant’ (Giliomee, 1998, p. 128), ‘consolidating’ dominant (Lanegran, 2001, p. 81), or ‘electorally hegemonic’ (Heller, 2001, p. 134). Because the ANC has consistently faced legitimate and internationally certified free and fair elections on a consistent basis since 1994, the party is not classified as authoritarian, nor the system as inherently anti-democratic (Lane & Ersson, 2007). The scholarly consensus remains, however, that the ANC is moving in the direction of a dominant party. In Sartori’s (1976, p. 173) classification, the ANC would be considered ‘predominant’, as it faces free and consistent elections, operates in a theatre of competition and consistently wins the absolute majority of seats. In contrast, ‘dominant parties’ operate within single party or authoritarian contexts. According to this schema, then, the ANC would not fulfil the role of a dominant party. However, since Sartori’s classification, much of the work on electorally dominant parties in multi-party democracies has labelled those parties as ‘dominant’ (Giliomee, 1998; Heller, 2001; Lanegran, 2001). Consequently, this study will be undertaken based on the assumption that the ANC’s actions can be considered using the previous literature on ‘dominant parties’ like Israel’s Labor Party (Levite & Tarrow, 1983), Italy’s Christian Democratic Party (Levite & Tarrow, 1983), India’s Congress Party (Kothari, 1964), and Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (Ames, 1970).

Over the course of the three election cycles since the introduction of universal suffrage, the ANC has won consistently in national-level elections, gaining more of the vote share with each passing election (with the exception of 2009 when a splinter group eroded a small part of ANC support). Local-level vote
share gained by the ANC, however, has consistently lagged behind the national-level vote share. Again, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on three of the largest and most politically significant of South Africa’s provinces, Western Cape, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal (Figures 1–3).

In each case, we observe the general dominance of ANC national-level vote choice. Particularly in Gauteng, a region long-noted for pro-ANC affiliation, we observe a fairly close relationship between national-level and local-level support for the ANC. In Western Cape, by contrast, we observe ANC local support decidedly lagging behind national trends. In part, this is a consequence of Western Cape’s traditional affiliation with the Democratic Party. Western Cape was a hotbed of anti-apartheid activity organised by English speaking whites whose support for the NP government was tempered by both ethnic

![Figure 1. Vote share gained by the ANC in the Western Cape.](image)

![Figure 2. Vote share gained by the ANC in Gauteng.](image)
and socio-economic differences with the ruling party’s Afrikaner voting base. With the decline in the political fortunes of the Mbeki wing of the ANC in 2008 Western Cape voters responded with their lowest support for the ruling party since 1994. Interestingly, however, in the 2011 municipal elections, voters in the Western Cape voted almost identically for the ANC at the local level as at the national level. With only one percentage point difference between the two outcomes, there is still marked decline in support for the ANC in the province, however.

KwaZulu-Natal reflects even more interesting set of features. Given the fact that the province is the homeland of South Africa’s large Zulu-speaking minority it is scarcely surprising that ANC support in the first national and local elections was low. The traditionally acrimonious relationship between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), coupled with the strong personal rule institutions of the IFP, meant that the ANC fared quite poorly in national, provincial, and municipal elections in the first two independent elections. That said, by 2004 the ANC had established itself as a prominent political actor in the province based on the erosion of the IFP as a viable political party owing to internal frailties. The fact that the ANC was itself led by a Zulu-speaker (Jacob Zuma) further eroded the image of IFP as the party most powerfully situated to advance Zulu interests.

A dominant party, according to Greene (2007, p. 4), gains ‘... initial legitimacy from spearheading nation-building projects (e.g., revolution, independence, reconstruction after defeat in war, or sustained struggles between rival political forces over modernisation) [which underwrite] their long-term dominance’. Following a successful nation-building project, the consolidating dominant party seeks to successfully capture and instrumentalise the history of that project.
Through this capture of a nation-building project, the dominant party frames its own rule as being congruent with the newly (re)formed nation (Zarinski, 1965; Ames, 1970; Barnes, 1971; Arian & Barnes, 1974; Giliomee, 1998). The entire project of consolidating a dominant party, therefore, depends on ‘... [the dominant party’s] ability to make identification with the political system and support for the party interchangeable’ (Arian & Barnes, 1974, p. 608).

This process of tying partisan identification to affirmation of the nation-building project fundamentally undercuts the legitimacy of opposition players in democratic elections (Levite & Tarrow, 1983; Aronoff, 1986). In the case of South Africa, the ANC has sought to frame voting against the party as voting against the ‘New South Africa’ or the post-apartheid state (Ferree, 2011, pp. 126–133; Giliomee et al., 2001). A dominant party seeks to make itself the only legitimate party in electoral competition and because this legitimacy is a direct result of a re-understanding of history the dominant party must create and disseminate frames that resonate with the voting public to achieve and maintain electoral dominance.

**Contributions of this study**

The contributions of this study, then, are twofold. First, it brings to bear social movement theories of framing on the study of dominant parties. Ferree (2011) has thoroughly demonstrated the potency of the ANC’s framing strategies in terms of its capacity to define opposition parties as ‘white’ and, therefore, decidedly attached to apartheid era policies. We seek to analyse the ability of such framing strategies to carry comparable weight at the local and municipal levels and the extent to which it impacts the propensity for strategic voting in these provinces.

Second, it begins to explore the genesis of dominant parties and how and why they sustain themselves. Because the dominant party uses nation-building frames to assert authority and claim legitimacy in electoral competition, the frames disseminated by that party lack power and salience for local-level issues. Despite success at the national level electorally, the dominant party could, in this formulation, face a local-level crisis of legitimacy because of the lack of salience of their legitimacy frames. Consequently, the present literature reveals, as dominant parties age, they increasingly turn to resource distribution (either through public or private channels) to maintain electoral dominance (Panebianco, 1988; Kaufman, 1999; Magaloni, 2006; Greene, 2007). Thus, this study implies that because of the peculiar contradiction of legitimacy frames at different levels of government that the dominant parties must adopt resource distribution as a strategy for wooing voters.

Goffman pioneered theories of frame creation and resonance in the study of contentious politics, defining frames as ‘schemata of interpretation’ that shape, at the most basic level, the way that people think about, label, and categorise
occurrences in their lives (1974, p. 21). The purpose of studying frames, therefore, is because of their capacity to ‘... organise experience and guide action, whether individual or collective’ (Snow & Benford, 1992, p. 464). Effective frames, those that resonate, serve as a compelling basis for individual and collective action. In order to serve as a basis for action, however, the frames must be salient and effective at shaping thoughts and opinions (Snow & Benford, 1988).

Frame resonance is a direct product of people’s thoughts and opinions aligning with the frame (Benford & Snow, 2000). Without frame alignment and resonance, the distribution of frames by elites is largely ineffective, even if the frames themselves are logical (Diani, 1996). Frame alignment and resonance is dependent on three interdependent aspects: (1) the completeness and robustness of the framing effort, (2) the relationship between the larger belief system held by the audience and the frame itself, and (3) the relevance of the frame in the lives of the members of the audience (Snow & Benford, 1988). This list, according to the authors, presents necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the resonance of frames.

Despite the vagueness of the concepts of frames and resonance, there have been a number of studies that have sought to capture the impact that framing and frame resonance have on voting patterns (Petrocik, 1996; McCammon & Campbell, 2001; Dugan, 2004; Büttler & Maréchal, 2007). Framing, in these studies, produces statistically and practically significant differences in voting patterns. Büttler and Maréchal (2007), for example, found that presenting the same referendum to two identical electorates with different frames resulted in a difference in support for the referendum. Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998) also find that support for a particular party or policy is directly tied to the efficacy of frames’ ability to shape dialogue. As a basis for action, therefore, frames have been proven to have a significant effect on voting behaviour.

The synthesis between the literatures on dominant parties and on framing, then, becomes obvious. Dominant parties employ frames to undergird their legitimacy when they are ascendant. The frames employed by the dominant party employ national historical events tied to nation-building. It is the primary hypothesis of this paper, therefore, that it is a lack of frame resonance at local levels of government that can explain the lower levels of support in local elections, as compared to national elections:

**H₁** – Dominant Party frames will resonate positively at the national level (be reported with more frequency in the News media and party press releases), which will result in a larger vote share gained by the ANC. *Frame resonance at the national level is positively correlated with vote share gained by the ANC at national level.*

**H₂** – Dominant Party frames will not resonate as strongly at the local level (be reported with less frequency in the News media and party press releases), which will result in a relatively smaller vote share gained by the ANC.
Frame resonance at the local level is negatively correlated with vote share gained by the ANC at the local level.

Voting patterns have also been studied as a gauge of policy satisfaction and the result of strategic voting. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2000), for example, argue that voting for different levels of government is the product of differential strategic calculi, meant to produce maximally satisfying policy outcomes at different levels. Split-ticket voting does not, in many cases, signal voter confusion, but rather calculated decisions about candidate feasibility and selection of preferred policies (Karp, Vowles, Banducci, & Donovan, 2002). Much of the literature on split-ticket rationale coming from political scientists in the American politics tradition discusses the expectations of resource delivery as an important indicator of vote choice (Stein, 1990; Stein & Bickers, 1995). Further, and consistent with comparative analyses in other democracies, South African voters tend to demonstrate frustration with legislative assemblies at both the national and local level but tend to also demonstrate support for their municipal councilors, particularly when they feel that their councilor is responsive to their concerns (Bratton & Sibanyoni, 2006, pp. 11–13). Because voters respond to different needs and wants at different levels of government, and because they have different levels of interaction with representatives, it is possible that the voters are expressing preferences for ANC policy at the national level, but choosing alternative parties at local levels based on the goods and resources delivered. Thus, ticket splitting is a consequence of differential satisfaction with the policies of the party.

\[ H_{A1} - \text{Close association between voter's policy preferences and policies pursued by a given party is positively correlated with Vote Share gained by any given party.} \]

\[ H_{A2} - \text{Large variation between voter's policy preferences and policies pursued by a given party is negatively correlated with Vote Share gained by any given party.} \]

**Variables and case selection**

This study investigates the national, local, and provincial elections of 1994, 1999, 2004, and 2009. The model attempts to capture the resonance of frames put out by the dominant party and their effect on voting patterns. The dependent variable throughout the study is the vote share gained by the ANC in elections for each level of government. The information on election returns is gleaned from the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa. National voting percentages are measured in absolute percentage of voters voting for the ANC. Local voting percentages are aggregations of local voting in all municipal elections.

The independent variable in this model is the frames put out by the ANC for the local and national levels. This is measured by the relative percentage of press releases put out by the ANC that are coded as ‘symbolic’
versus those coded as ‘policy-oriented’. The coding of these types of press releases was undertaken by the author and premised on the following criteria.

- A press release was coded as ‘symbolic’ if:
  1. it explicitly referenced apartheid and/or the struggle for liberation,
  2. it included references to ANC members as comrades, a title used during the liberation struggle, rather than by their official titles in office,
  3. it attacked campaigning by other parties on the grounds that they were ‘illegitimate’ or labelled them as apartheid supporters,
  4. it included references to the ANC as ‘South Africa’s Liberation Movement’ or as ‘the party of the people of free South Africa’.

- A press release was coded as ‘policy-oriented’ if:
  1. it explicitly referenced policy choices and priorities of the ANC, such as housing policy, health policy, national security, etc.,
  2. it engaged in criticism or support of other parties based on policy grounds,
  3. it discussed specific policy outcomes secured by either the ANC or other parties.

- A press release containing both policy and symbolic elements is coded according to the dominant themes in the press release, including number of incidents of each kind of speech.

All of the press releases for 100 days before the date of the general election were examined. Some press releases put out by the ANC, such as those disseminating travel schedules of officials, were coded as neither symbolic nor policy-oriented. These pieces were not considered in the final percentage calculations for two reasons: (1) these press releases were not specifically designed to effect change in electoral returns or to garner votes and (2) they were not meant for publication in newspapers, but as a guide for journalists wishing to cover appearances made by officials. Therefore, these pieces were meant not as electioneering tools but rather as a dissemination of factual information.

The intervening variable in this design is media coverage of the ANC as symbolic – and therefore picking up on frames disseminated by the ANC – or policy-oriented. Newspapers were coded into ‘symbolic’ and ‘policy-oriented’ coverage of the ANC based on roughly the same criteria employed to code press releases. The concept that is being captured here, however, does not directly relate to the media. This study uses media coverage as a proxy variable to get at frame resonance in the general public and public opinion more generally. This measure is not, by any means, a direct or unproblematic measurement of public opinion or public response to frames disseminated by the ANC. However, previous research on newspaper coverage and
public perception of events shows that opinion poll data maps fairly neatly onto coverage of events by major, non-governmentally owned newspapers (Soroka, Young, & Bodet, 2008). Behr and Iyengar (1985, p. 53) argue that ‘... news coverage of issues is to a significant extent determined by actual conditions, analyses of media agenda-setting that ignore real-world conditions will arrive at severely inflated estimates of media influence’. Although the causal arrow between newspaper coverage and public opinion is not directionally decisive, it is clear, given the empirical analysis that the two are intimately linked and map closely onto one another. According to one author,

> It may not always be clear which role the media is performing at any given time, but regardless of the direction of the relationship, the result is the intricate binding of what is presented in newspapers and what is present in the public sphere. (Daku, 2009, p. 5)

Stemming from this literature, this research will employ newspaper coverage as an appropriate and externally supported proxy variable for frame resonance in the general public. The causal model of this relationship is depicted in Figure 4.

Newspaper articles were selected using the Factiva database. Using exclusively domestic, non-governmentally owned newspapers and newswires, the authors analysed and coded the 100 articles published most closely to the date of the election that made reference to the phrase ‘ANC’. In the 1994 elections, however, there was a significant amount of missing data, due to newspaper restructuring, lack of digital archives, etc. Therefore, the sample size for the 1994 election newspaper coverage is significantly smaller than for the other three elections. The newspapers sampled were The Mail & Guardian, The

![Figure 4. Frame resonance model.](image-url)
Several variables are held constant throughout this project, including past history, national political situation at the time of the elections, presence of a major urban area in the data aggregated, and parties running in a given election. By holding constant history and national political situation, it is possible to divorce fact from framing in the case of the first hypothesis. Urban municipality is a control variable because all of the cases under investigation are urban wards with significant national government presence, independent press and racial heterogeneity. All three of these aspects, as subsets of the urban setting non-variable, control for issues of informational availability (to make informed voting decisions), diverse voter base (which disallows the possibility of strict ethnic voting), and proximity to both national and local governmental institutions. The cases under investigation all have competitive local elections while having increasingly non-competitive national elections.

Several factors serve as qualifications for the findings listed above and threats to the validity of the study as a whole. The potentially most threatening is that municipal- and ward-level elections are conducted on different days than the national election in South Africa. Therefore, the comparisons of public sphere dialogue are not completely aligned, as it could be that voters are choosing different parties based on different events surrounding the election. However, voter turnout for the municipal- and ward-level elections is approximately the same as turnout for the national election. While it is almost certainly not an identical electorate voting in both elections, the numbers of voters are so large as to flatten major inconsistencies.

**Results and analysis**

When completed, the test yields results that largely conform to the hypotheses as stated above. Full tables reflecting results from the content analysis are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

We provide a brief outline of the sample size for each of the data points for all elections under consideration. The newspaper coverage of symbolic frames at the local level is markedly lower than at the national level. The policy frames put out at the local level received the majority of the attention. On average, 41.57 per cent of the newspaper articles regarding local issues reflected symbolic frames as compared to 55.44 per cent of articles at the national level that reflected symbolic frames. The frames at the national level seem to resonate more consistently and show up more often in national-level political discussions in newspapers than they do at the local level (Tables 3–6).
Table 1. Symbolic frame references by the ANC – national level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANC press releases (per cent symbolic)</th>
<th>Newspaper Stories (per cent symbolic)</th>
<th>Vote share for the ANC: national</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>73.85%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>62.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>67.27%</td>
<td>58.82%</td>
<td>66.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>63.64%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
<td>66.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>61.11%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>67.86%</td>
<td>56.86%</td>
<td>65.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Symbolic frame references by the ANC – local level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ANC press releases (per cent symbolic)</th>
<th>Newspaper Stories (per cent symbolic)</th>
<th>Vote share for the ANC: local</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32.6% 37.1% 52.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>56.9%</td>
<td>42.86%</td>
<td>33%   39.7% 58.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>58.67%</td>
<td>41.86%</td>
<td>44.94% 42.11% 63.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>76.92%</td>
<td>45.16%</td>
<td>62.95% 31.55% 64.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>68.96%</td>
<td>42.47%</td>
<td>43.37% 37.62% 59.82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, 68.25 per cent of the frames at the national level were coded as symbolic, as compared to 66.3 per cent at the local level. An extreme high value of ‘Local Symbolic’ ANC statements in the 1994 elections does skew this finding slightly. Therefore, looking at the average relative difference between local and national symbolic frame incidence sheds more light on the difference. When examining the average relative difference, National Symbolic frames occur approximately 7.67 per cent more than their local-level counterparts.

Table 3. 1994 incidents of framing in newspapers and ANC press statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC Press = 10</td>
<td>ANC Press = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KZN = 3</td>
<td>KZN = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAU = 2</td>
<td>GAU = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC = 3</td>
<td>WC = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other = 2</td>
<td>Other = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 2</td>
<td>Newspaper = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC = 48</td>
<td>ANC = 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 4</td>
<td>Newspaper = 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
calculated by averaging the differences between ‘local symbolic’ and ‘national symbolic’ ANC statements for each election cycle. Therefore, the ANC is consistently putting out fewer frames at the local level. However, the gap between symbolic frame coverage at the local and national levels is almost twice that. In an examination of Symbolic frames, the average relative difference between the local and national levels is 13.87 per cent, calculated by averaging the

Table 4. 1999 incidents of framing in newspapers and ANC press statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC Press = 33</td>
<td>ANC Press = 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KZN = 8</td>
<td>KZN = 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAU = 8</td>
<td>GAU = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC = 15</td>
<td>WC = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other = 2</td>
<td>Other = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 15</td>
<td>Newspaper = 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC = 37</td>
<td>ANC = 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 20</td>
<td>Newspaper = 14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. 2004 incidents of framing in newspapers and ANC press statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC Press = 44</td>
<td>ANC Press = 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KZN = 35</td>
<td>KZN = 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAU = 4</td>
<td>GAU = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC = 5</td>
<td>WC = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other = 0</td>
<td>Other = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 18</td>
<td>Newspaper = 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC = 28</td>
<td>ANC = 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 23</td>
<td>Newspaper = 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6. 2009 incidents of framing in newspapers and ANC press statements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbolic</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC Press = 10</td>
<td>ANC Press = 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KZN = 6</td>
<td>KZN = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAU = N/A</td>
<td>GAU = N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WC = 4</td>
<td>WC = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other = 0</td>
<td>Other = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 14</td>
<td>Newspaper = 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC = 8</td>
<td>ANC = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper = 33</td>
<td>Newspaper = 21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
differences between ‘local symbolic’ and ‘national symbolic’ Newspaper Stories for each election cycle. In other words, on average, symbolic frames are covered 13.87 per cent less at the local level than the national level.

It is this gap that most clearly confirms the importance of framing in this analysis. The ANC employs largely identical frames at the local and national levels. However, the gap in their coverage at the local level is significantly larger than the gap in their transmission. The outcome of lower frame resonance, therefore, is lower voter support for the ANC at the local level. The higher levels of vote share gained by the ANC in national elections, therefore, can also be seen to be connected to the higher levels of frame resonance found in this experiment at the national level. These findings, therefore, confirm the hypotheses as stated earlier in the paper. Frames seem to resonate more at the national level than at the local level. The voting population of South Africa votes for the ANC more at the national level than the local level. Therefore, there is a positive correlation between frame resonance and voting patterns.

Of equal significance, we find that the frames put out by the ANC at the local and national levels are almost identical in symbolic content. Little or no difference exists, on average between the frame content at different levels of governance. As the theory predicts, therefore, the lower frame resonance at the local level seems to be a product of a less aligned frame. The content of the symbolic frame disseminated by the ANC is directly tied to a national-level set of historical events. The ANC has successfully captured and instrumentalised the national history of the anti-apartheid struggle. By doing this, the theory predicts that it has linked its legitimacy with that of the new South African state. However, at the local level, this frame resonates far less, because electoral competition at the local level is not exclusively connected with the nation-building project, but rather is buttressed by questions of service production and delivery. The frame created by the ANC, therefore, delegitimises voting for competitors at the national level, but fails to resonate at the local level where the stakes of electoral turnover are much lower. This could mean, then, that voting preferences at the local level are a product of much more complex calculations, including strategic voting and preference satisfaction.

Conclusion
The findings presented here provide a different perspective on dominant parties and the political utility of monopolising the narrative of the national imaginary. Because dominant parties, on the whole, use nation-building projects and national-level frames to ‘capture history’, the frames in dominant parties can fail to resonate at the local level, particularly when local political competition is characterised by different ethnic and linguistic groups. By examining the language used to garner votes at the national and local levels of government, and how that language aligns or fails to align to produce behaviours, it is
possible to begin to understand the dynamics that dominant parties experience at different levels of government. The literature on dominant parties employs the concept of frame resonance to explain and justify the retention of power by a certain party. By looking at how those frames resonate below the national level, it is possible to understand why and how dominant parties begin to transform their strategies in order to maintain electoral dominance.

This study has corroborated that symbolic frames put out by the ANC at the national level are picked up in newspapers more frequently, and are therefore more present in the public sphere, than are similar frames at the local level. Indeed, in the wake of its electoral losses in the past two electoral cycles the IFP has reoriented its strategies in order to focus almost exclusively on municipal policy production. In part, such a shift recognises both the inherent limitations of competing with the ANC’s capacities to mobilise voters who view the party as the ‘only game in town’ at the national level. The symbolic frame employed by the ANC to garner support and votes fundamentally speaks to the ways that the ANC has made its narrative inseparable from the narrative of post-apartheid South Africa.

That said, our findings tend to suggest that this national imaginary is just that – national. At the provincial and municipal levels many South Africans differentiate between the ANC as a nationally dominant party but a locally ineffective policy producer. Indeed, consistent with the findings of Bratton and Sibanyoni (2006) our conclusions suggest that policy positions trump ideational disputes at the local level. This has important implications for other post-colonial states, particularly where procedural democratic practices are often in conflict with the pull of autochthonous claims of political authority.

Again, there is a fine line to be drawn between truly dominant parties, especially those who routinely use the authority of formal institutions to hinder the opposition (Levitsky & Way, 2010), and parties who compel widespread allegiance by virtue of a broadly perceived moral and technocratic legitimacy. That said, persistent electoral victory can potentially generate a sense of entitlement on the part of winning parties who may come to see the opposition as a dispensable nuisance, easily dismissed by virtue of their inability to command widespread public support. Hence, the capacity of opposition parties to compete in multiple venues and advance a policy-centred opposition in light of national-level disadvantages serves as a potent institutional buttress that can sustain democratic competition in an otherwise dominant party system.

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References


