

Issue-Based Politics vs Personality-Based Politics

A Tale of Two Nations

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The question of whether the South African and American political environments have been dominated mostly by personality-based politics as opposed to issue-based politics is important to address. The argument in this paper is that although there is not a cold separation between personalities and issues, in the case of South Africa, while issues have largely defined politics, there has also been a great focus on personality-based politics. As for the United States of America (US), issues are primarily prioritised to the extent that there is a powerful personality to champion the issue. While the two countries have different experiences, they offer lessons to learn from each other.

INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL SETTING IN BOTH COUNTRIES

South Africa is currently governed by the African National Congress (ANC), which came into power after the demise of the apartheid regime in 1994. The party was founded in 1912 in response to the injustices faced by black South Africans, and operated as a mobilising force in the struggle for liberation against the oppressive apartheid government.¹ The overwhelming 62,65% victory that the party secured at the first democratic general elections in April 1994, changed the course of the country's history and augured well for the future of the South African people, particularly the black majority. The last two decades since 1994 have continued to witness the rise of the ANC as the dominant party.² The country is currently

ruled by President Jacob Zuma, who serves as both head of state and head of government.

In the US, while the majority political parties were not always called 'Democrat' and 'Republican', these two parties have existed in competition with one another for the past 100 years and more. The two-party system in the United States of America (US) has seen multiple phases and shifts, and the early Democratic and Republican parties have nearly completely swapped their ideological bases since they were founded. Currently, the Democratic Party is seeing an upswing in support from demographics that the Republican Party has lost over the years, including women, Hispanics, African Americans, and the youth.³ The Democrats have secured the past two presidential elections and the Senate majority. Today the country is led by President

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Barack Obama, a democrat, who was elected as the 44th President of the US with a decisive victory of 52,9% of the vote through the 'yes you can' campaign in 2008.⁴

A political party, perhaps unavoidably, tends to craft an image and create a means whereby voters can identify with the party and vote accordingly. However, a more mature and fully functional democracy must be able to craft an identity that links it more deeply with issues facing the people than with factors such as race and gender or the personalities of the politicians within those parties. The ANC in South Africa and the Democratic Party in the US offer excellent examples of what it means to be anchored to a party image and how those conditions shift, making the issue of personality-based versus issue-based politics particularly relevant in both countries.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

In the current global dispensation, it is wrong to assume that there is a cold separation between personality-based politics and issue-based politics. The two go together; issues have to be popularised, as they do not speak for themselves. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this paper, conceptual clarification of these terms is necessary.

Issue-based politics

Issue-based politics is a programmatic style of politics. In an issue-based political environment, values, principles, ideologies, policies and issues of the day – rather than personalities – are the main focal points.⁵ This type of politics focuses on issues that affect the everyday lives of the citizens of a country and provides solutions that enable them to play a leading role in effecting the change they want to see in their community or country. In the South African context, such issues would include unemployment, poverty, access to education and housing. It would be much the same in the US, though these issues are much less pressing there than in South Africa. Education and unemployment have recently played large roles in the American political arena and voters have been adamant about having them addressed. In South Africa as well as in the US, the issues mentioned above are crucial at grassroots level, most often affecting the disenfranchised black majority. In this sense, issue-based politics plays out mostly at the bottom, where the masses want to see an improvement in their conditions of living. This is

the trend in most developing countries across the world, where the interests of ordinary voters lean towards issue-based politics rather than party loyalty.⁶

Personality-based politics

In politics, personality matters. Heads of state rely on the weight of their personality – intellect and stature – to persuade gatherings to support their national positions. Contrary to issue-based politics, personality-based politics is dominated by personality and patronage.⁷ A predominantly personality-based political environment is one in which the background, personality, character and views of a political leader have the potential to influence issues within the country. This type of politics is very often found in, but by no means restricted to, African countries, where the Big Man syndrome tends to be entrenched in the political culture.⁸ Personality politics also occurs when, instead of addressing policies or issues, a politician attacks the personality or character of another politician. One factor at play in such a situation may be a lack of understanding of the issues by leaders so that they are unable to constructively engage in them and accordingly prefer to engage in the politics of personal destruction. In an electoral context, personality-based politics refers to a style of politics in which voters are not given real policy choices at elections. They will vote for a candidate without sometimes knowing which party he or she stands for. In such cases, the policies that the candidate stands for are not in any way of concern to anyone.⁹

The case study of the current South African and American administrations serves to show how issue- and personality-based politics play out in respect of the welfare of the citizens.

THE ZUMA ADMINISTRATION

The current state of South Africa's political set-up is the product of an accumulation of the last twenty years of democracy. The ruling ANC party has significantly improved the lives of South Africans since the advent of the democratic dispensation in 1994. The South African President, Jacob Zuma has made his presence known both at home and abroad since his appointment as the nation's leader in 2009. Having grown up in a rural community in KwaZulu-Natal, his attachment to the traditional way of life of his people can be seen in his tendency to wear traditional apparel on some occasions as well as in the manner in which he interacts with the

people in song and in dance.¹⁰ This trait endows him with charismatic power through which he has been able to attract the votes of millions of South Africans for the ANC. While it can be assumed that Zuma's leadership style is strongly influenced by his charismatic nature and his ability to pull crowds, he has been able to combine his cultural and charismatic persona with the requirements of his official position in order to transform himself into the president that he was elected to be.¹¹

In seeking to reveal how issue-based and personality-based politics have played out in respect of the welfare of South African citizens, it is important to keep in mind that Zuma cannot be separated from the views of the party he represents. Therefore, the policies and issues that he pushes are not his own; rather, they are the collective policies of the organisation which he represents and which was given the mandate by the South African electorate to run the country.

Since his inauguration, one of the primary issues that President Zuma's administration has articulated is to change the lives of the previously disadvantaged. In his State of the Nation address for 2011, Zuma accentuated the need for higher levels of education, pertaining especially to an increase in national senior certificate pass rates; better health care, particularly with regard to the HIV/Aids pandemic; and a crackdown on unemployment.¹² These issues have undoubtedly been the same as those brought forward since the dawn of the democratic government, as mentioned earlier. It is important to acknowledge the issues that Zuma has brought to the table since he came into power.

Finding solutions to these problems has always been an objective of the ANC, as evident in the party's manifesto. In working towards achieving these goals, during the last twenty years there has been a noticeable change in access to basic facilities such as housing, electricity and education. The ANC, over the past twenty years, has built 3,3 million houses, benefiting 16 million of our people. The number of people receiving social grants has increased from three million to 16 million. Millions of people who were shut out of the government system before now have access to basic services and the state machinery.¹³ Another issue that has been pushed by the Zuma administration is that of gender balances, which is an ANC policy promoting the view that women should be equally represented in all structures of organisations and the government. There is a noticeably high level of growth in the number of women in power. This is particularly evident in Zuma's 2014 cabinet appointment of 15 women

as full ministers.¹⁴ This came before Zuma's open statement that South Africa is ready for a woman president.¹⁵

While these issues continue to be put on the table, we cannot run away from the fact that personality still plays a central role in South African politics. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that personality politics is restricted to the ANC. The actions and extravagances of the entire political class as an elite class have impacted on the direction that the country has been taking. A case in point is how events played out as a result of Zuma's 2014 State of the Nation address in parliament, when parliamentarians personally attacked one another. In a sense, we were treated to a soap opera with political actors in the roles of characters. The antics of the Economic Freedom Fighters' leader, Julius Malema, on the opening day of parliament drew attention to the foothold that personality politics has in South African politics.¹⁶ South Africa is being applauded across the globe for its ability to avoid stumbling too greatly since 1994, but the lack of a "truly pluralist system" that unifies by personalities rather than by issues may prove dangerous while South Africans, continue to vote for the past.¹⁷ Politicians' practice of degrading their counterparts and not focusing on the issues at hand does not bode particularly well for the welfare of the South African citizens. It reveals the cracks in the South African political system and raises questions about the state of the two decades of democratic dispensation.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Many studies have been conducted on, and papers written about, President Barack Obama of the US, who was elected in 2008. Similarly to South Africa's Jacob Zuma, Obama has been described as a man of the people, having been elected to power under the slogan 'Yes we can'. It has been interesting to observe the effect of President Obama's charismatic appearance, personality, and speaking style on the American political scene. A study by Takala and Tanttu examined President Obama's first six months in office after the 2008 election and found that the media overtly portrayed him as charismatic.¹⁸ However, it has been difficult for President Obama to accomplish many of the things he said he hoped to do during his time in office, and he seems to have caused "more mixed feelings than either his cheerleaders or fiercest critics would like to admit".¹⁹ This makes it difficult to examine whether the US, its

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voters, and its politicians employ issue-based or personality-based politics.

In *Issue Coalitions, Issueless Campaigns: the Paradox of Rationality in American Presidential Elections*, Carmines and Gopoiian discuss this very subject when it comes to voter behaviour, and whether campaigns truly focus on the issues at hand and provide a divisive voice for their candidate.²⁰ They acknowledge that many studies of this kind have examined voter activity but that there must first be an examination of the parties and candidates who make up the voters' options. They explain that "parties and candidates structure the parameters of mass electoral choice by virtue of defining the alternatives available to voters".²¹ They then go on to discuss the Democratic and Republican parties and their divisive issue stances, particularly how clearly the two parties divide themselves among liberals and conservatives. Democrats are, in large part, liberal, while Republicans are conservative, meaning that the voters within these parties have distinguishing preferences. Therefore, they claim, there is an 'issue base' to each party.

However, through the examination of many presidential elections, the authors found that when candidates have a strong showing in an election, they have to have won votes among liberals as well as conservatives. They found what they call 'electoral reinforcement', where "increased support by voters on one side of an issue normally is coupled with increased support by voters on the other side".²² The authors found that the US's political system works mainly through personality-based political appeals, and that candidates "de-emphasise divisive policy issues" because otherwise it may cost them votes. This makes sense, because in the American society there exists a general consensus as to what makes a good leader and the attributes that Americans want to see in a president. Much like in the case of the Big Man theory syndrome discussed earlier, the American public and media perpetuate an image of what it means to be a leader in a political office, one that is then utilised in campaigns in order to win votes; "a candidate who emphasises love, honesty, and hard work is likely to please almost everyone".²³

A fitting example is the battle to provide government-subsidised healthcare in the US, a cause championed by President Obama. What is officially known as the Affordable Care Act was dubbed 'Obamacare', and it quickly became inextricably linked to President Obama himself. Critics of Obama and critics of the bill were virtually one and the same, and personal attacks

became mixed with attacks on the legislation. Politics become convoluted when voters are unable to distinguish the policies from the politician, because while a country needs strong leaders to champion the issues, ideally the issues must stand alone. There are cases where the US's voting public has focused solely on issues. For instance, movements in support of the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the legalisation of marijuana have progressed largely without a championing personality figure.²⁴

Nonetheless, recent history reveals that there is undoubtedly reason to assert that issues are primarily pushed to the extent that there is a personality championing them. This alludes to the fact that a political party, perhaps unavoidably, tends to craft an image and create a means by which voters may identify themselves with the party, its representatives, and key issues on the table, and vote accordingly. However, a more mature and fully functional democracy must be able to craft an identity that links itself more deeply with issues than with factors such as race and gender or the personalities of that party's politicians.

THE WAY FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS

An ideal political system is one in which personality-based politics does not silence the voices of the masses by neglecting the issues faced by them. A comparison between the democracy indexes of the US and South Africa seems to suggest the need for improvements in both countries. The ANC in South Africa and the Democratic and Republican parties in the US offer excellent examples of what it means to be anchored to a party image.

The Economist's Intelligence Unit compiles a Democracy Index each year to categorise and measure the democracy (or lack thereof) experienced by every nation across the globe. The table below compares the 2012 rankings for the US and South Africa. The democracy index uses a scale of 0–10, with 0 ranking as the least democratic and 10 as the most democratic, based on various categories and factors. The figures are based on 60 indicators, grouped into the five categories shown below, and are determined based on surveys and statistics on voter participation.²⁵

Many of these scores are an astounding accomplishment for South Africa's government; the country has to date held only five democratic elections "which have carried conviction at home

Table 1: Democracy Index

	Rank	Overall Score	I Electoral process and pluralism	II Functioning of government	III Political participation	IV Political culture	V Civil liberties
United States of America	21	8,11	9,17	7,50	7,22	8,13	8,53
South Africa	31	7,79	8,75	8,21	7,22	6,25	8,53

(Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. Democracy Index 2012.)

An ideal political system is one in which personality-based politics does not silence the voices of the masses by neglecting the issues faced by them

and stood up well to international scrutiny. It is reported that many new democracies, not just in Africa, have failed even at this first hurdle”.²⁶ Over half the country’s population – more than 25 million South Africans – voted in the May 2014 elections.²⁷ This, for South Africa, is an enormous step forward from an apartheid government that ravaged civil liberties for decades.

For the purposes of this policy brief, the focus is on the political culture category. This category is closely related to public opinion, which is determined by societal consensus and cohesion, and the degree of popular support for democracy. The US scored 8,13 on ‘Political culture’ as compared to South Africa’s 6,25.

South Africa’s lower ranking in ‘Political culture’ can be explained with reference to the time that the US has had to develop their political culture, while South Africa has had only two decades to begin to recover from a harshly oppressive lack of voting rights for black citizens. While identity and loyalty serve many useful purposes, particularly because no political party and no country can afford to lose its electorate, it is of crucial importance for newly democratic countries such as South Africa to bring the electorate together through the use of identity tactics. However, maturation into a more fully functioning democracy occurs when political parties and the politicians within them can move beyond identity and image. For the US, these indicators suggest mounting problems, including a severe lack of confidence in government and a deep mistrust of political parties.

The US is currently plagued by stagnant party politics and could benefit from a rejuvenation as found in South Africa’s innovative young democratic spirit. South Africa, conversely, has centuries of experience in the US from which to learn so as to develop a stronger political culture and ensure that voter participation does not become stationary or decline. As such, both countries currently find themselves in the position that they need to shift into deeper maturation, incite youth participation, and ensure that they

do not lose their electorate. While it is true that through their personalities politicians convince voters that their issues matter more than those of others, both countries require resilient leadership and a critical examination of the issues. In so doing, these leaders have to embody these issues and values, and attend to the issues that are raised or championed.

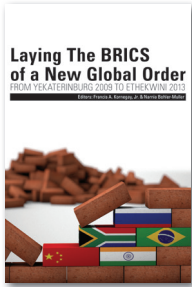
CONCLUSION

There is a difference between a political environment characterised mostly by issue-based politics and one characterised by personality-based politics. However, the two cannot be entirely separated. In cases where the Big Man syndrome has kicked in, we see that the personality of the person in charge overrides the issues at hand. In the case of South Africa, although issues have largely defined politics, there has also been a great focus on personality-based politics. In the US, on the other hand, issues are primarily prioritised to the extent that there is a powerful personality to champion the issue. When left unattended, personality politics oftentimes dilutes issues within a country and creates political divisions in that society. While both countries are attempting to find a balance across the divide between issues and personalities, it is clearly still necessary to reconcile the issues and the personalities in the political systems of both countries.

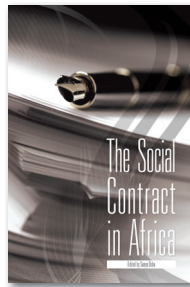
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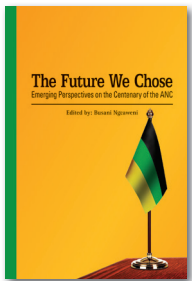
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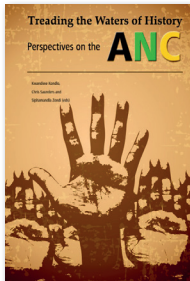
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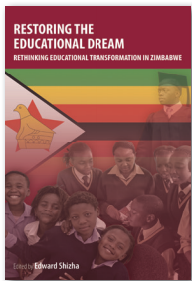
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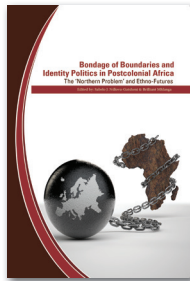
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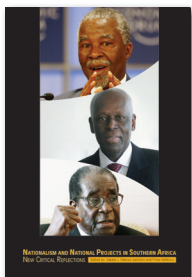
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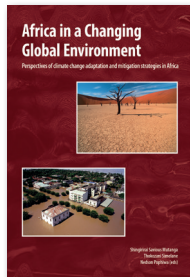
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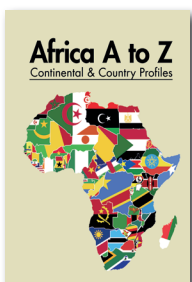
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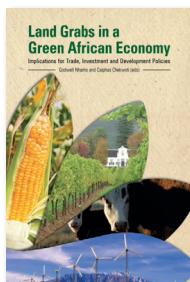
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