

BOOK REVIEW

Spoilt Ballots: The Elections that Shaped South Africa, from Shaka to Cyril,
by Michael Blackman and Nick Dall, Penguin, Cape Town, 2022.
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One lazy way to explain the prevalence of clean and fair elections in today's South Africa is to suggest that both electoral managers and political organisers can draw upon conventions and habits shaped by two centuries of orderly electoral contests. *Spoilt Ballots* is an effective antidote to such beliefs. As Blackman and Dall show, even within the restricted racist democracy of white minority rule there was plenty of cheating.

Their story begins, though, with black South Africans, specifically those clan-heads and elders who assembled at the royal kraal in 1828 to confirm Dingaan's appointment to the Zulu kingship. Whether the ceremonial *ukubuzane* can be equated with an electoral choice is open to question, especially as Dingaan had ensured that his most likely rival was dead, a murder in which Dingaan was complicit. However, its inclusion helps to supply the authors with the rationale for a snappy title for their book. More tellingly, the ethnic solidarities that such collective decision-making institutionalised remain very much part of modern South African politics, as is evident from Blackman and Dall's discussion of the role played by Zulu ethnic mobilisation both in the 1984-1994 transition as in Jacob Zuma's ascendancy.

What follows is a lively, entertaining and insightful anecdotal treatment of South Africa's political history, well-informed by recent scholarship and organised around the electoral contests that in one way or another represented decisive moments. The first of these, the non-racial qualified franchise vote for the new parliamentary assembly in the Cape Colony in 1854, was one of the more creditable episodes. The constitutional ordinance that set up the assembly and the ballot was instituted by a relatively liberal colonial secretary in London; but they had plenty of local support, arriving as they did after several years of tumultuous agitation. Despite a hostile local administration and local elite opposition, advocacy favouring quite low franchise qualifications prevailed. One third of the adult male population in the colony voted, including substantial numbers of coloured men, enfranchised through energetic efforts to register them as citizens. Subsequent efforts to remove them from the voting roll remained a key preoccupation for white South African politicians for the next hundred years.

After such promising beginnings things could only get worse. Blackman and Dall take us through a succession of now largely-forgotten but at the time

arguably game-changing contests. The 1893 'Battle of the Beards', Piet Joubert's 'progressive' effort to displace President Kruger, was notable for the introduction of party politics in the Transvaal, the efforts to influence voters through the press, and the restriction of the ballot to citizens (burghers) in a setting in which most whites were recently arrived 'Uitlanders'. Kruger won, probably through the enrolment of unqualified voters in the countryside. His victory, the authors argue, helped make inevitable the Anglo-Boer War. Kruger, though, was a model of propriety compared to his contemporary, Cecil Rhodes, a 'Trump-style populist' who tried to regain his prime-ministership in the Cape in 1898 with an orchestrated campaign of bribery and press libels as well as vicious anti-black racism. He failed, but only just.

South Africa's Act of Union included a constitutional provision that weighted rural voters favourably through constituency delimitation, a systemic electoral provision that helped to ensure the triumph of Afrikaner communalism in 1924 (in the 'Pact Lunch' election) and which endured until 1994. The constitution itself was a rush job, opposed, to its credit, by the Labour Party in Westminster; though, as Blackman and Dall note, their sister party in South Africa almost outdid its rivals in its racial hostilities in the 1910 poll. One lonely edifying feature of the 1910 election was the victory of a black South African, Walter Rubusana, in winning a seat in the Cape Provincial Assembly, with more white than black voters supporting him. Such vestiges of the Cape liberal tradition would soon disappear. As South Africa's party politics settled into a two-bloc system, both sides were very ready to mobilise voter support around racial anxieties. One way of reducing the significance of any remaining black and coloured voters was to enfranchise white women, duly accomplished in 1930. This was a step that 'took democracy backwards', Blackman and Dall note somewhat ungraciously, though they then take care to supply a captivating pen portrait of one of South Africa's most successful women politicians, Cissie Gool. The possibility of coloured women like Cissie Gool contesting municipal elections ended in the 1950s after the government packed the Appellate Court and the Senate, thereby enabling the required constitutional changes to take coloured citizens off the roll.

Readers familiar with the chronology of successive apartheid regimes will find little that is fresh in the treatment of elections between 1948 and 1994. Not everyone will be aware that it took until 1966 for the National Party to win the popular vote: before then their parliamentary majorities reflected rural constituency weighting. Not that supporting the opposition was any indication of any real reservations about minority rule; through the 1960's the United Party would accuse the government of jeopardising white security through creating 'mini-Congos' in the homelands. During the 1970s and 1980s, increasing proportions of English-speaking South Africans supported the governing

party. Blackman and Dall are perhaps a little too dismissive of the success of an increasingly liberal Progressive Party in maintaining their support from former United Party voters. It's a story worth telling not least because their successors remain a key group in today's South African Parliament.

In the final section of their narrative, Blackman and Dall switch their focus from general elections proper to concentrate their analysis on the underlying dynamics that determine the outcomes of the ANC's internal polls for party leadership. After all, as they explain, since 1994 South Africa's political future 'has been decided not at the national polls but at the ANC's electoral conferences'. In the short term this is probably right, but the consolidation of a relatively strong and quite cohesive opposition has been an important trend that deserves more explanation. South Africa's record since 1994 of efficient and clean electoral management also merits consideration. However, to make up for these shortfalls, Blackman and Dall supply a lucid analysis of the rise of factionalism within the ANC, attributable they suggest to organisational changes during Thabo Mbeki's presidency as well as the role played between 2007 and 2017 by the 'slate' system. Their perceptive treatment underscores the fragility of the ANC's post-1999 leadership, a feature so entrenched it has become almost systemic, both a guarantor of democracy and a source of democratic vulnerability.

*Tom Lodge,
University of Limerick*