

## BOOK REVIEW

*Everyday Identity and Electoral Politics: Race, Ethnicity, and the Bloc Vote in South Africa and Beyond*, Adam S. Harris, OUP, Oxford & New York, pp. 247, 2022

Author Adam Harris is an associate professor in Development Politics in the Department of Political Science and School of Public Policy at the University College London, who studies ethnicity, race, development, and African politics, focusing on political participation. In this recent publication he tackles the uncomfortable (in South Africa) subject of race or identity politics and how it relates to voting in post-apartheid South Africa.

In South Africa a book of this nature could be dismissed as yet another rant on race and politics. Yet, one way of understanding Harris's argument is to go beyond this traditional (South African) attitude and to examine how it closes the research gap and contributes to knowledge on identity and electoral politics in South Africa, as well as in the US, Uganda, and Zambia. The book straddles the usual binaries of race and non-racialism in the debate on electoral politics. It therefore tackles one or more issues on both sides of the debate, with implications for the relevant stakeholders (Chapter 8).

Using a combination of survey data, survey experiments, interviews, and focus group discussions, Harris skilfully outlines his argument on identity politics in South Africa, with a specific focus on the coloured community<sup>1</sup> in this country, and elsewhere, using a few other examples (e.g., Uganda and the US). The book examines ethnic identities in elections and the extent to which such identities are fluid or outstanding. Relying largely on sociological theory, Harris unpacks the empirical relationship between ethnic distance and voter behaviour (Chapter 6). This chapter also underscores much of the book's qualitative and quantitative argument on everyday identities and electoral politics.

The book's main message regarding the interface of politics (specifically elections) and race or racial identity, will probably appeal to readers who are interested in elections and racial issues. In addition, its social-psychological and sociological approaches and arguments should also be welcome among many

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1 This term, which describes South Africans of mixed descent, is used here as it appears in Harris's book. South Africa's post-apartheid legislation and the country's population statistics agency (Statistics South Africa) stipulate the country's four main race groups as black, white, Indian and coloured. Critics of the latter term often claim that the term is ambiguous at best, and racially offensive at worst as it also includes the indigenous Khoesan. Moreover, many in the 'coloured' community often decry the fact that post-1994 South Africa retained this apartheid-derived racial term that some argue perpetuates their marginalisation. Yet, other sections of this community sometimes accept the term and do not see anything wrong with its use.

social scientists and social science researchers, especially given Harris's insistence (p. 36) that 'Theory seeks to explain how peripheral members [of racial groups] construct their identity and vote rather than explain how those of mixed ethnic heritage construct identity and vote'. Its topic will resonate in particular with readers in the country's Western Cape, parts of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces, and the Northern and Eastern Cape provinces where many of the so-called coloured population reside.

While the country's election management body (the Electoral Commission of South Africa) does not collect voting statistics according to race, this topic clearly appeals to researchers and those who are interested in the relationship between voting and race, given the country's painful racial past. Furthermore, any book about race, racial or identity matters in South African politics should appeal to a wide spectrum of readers since the country still suffers a serious hangover from the era of apartheid and institutionalised racism.

Harris tackles the sensitive and, in South Africa controversial subject with a meticulous and systematic interrogation and clearly challenges even the oft-taken-for-granted racial issues about racial voting in South Africa. In Chapter 7 (pp. 155-172), he cites the US and Uganda as two examples with which to examine the concept of ethnic distancing in relation to electoral politics in South Africa, which provides a stark but summarised contrast.

Cynical South Africans might see the book as another example of their country as a race-obsessed society. Furthermore, given the fact that the coloured people are a minority in South Africa's population of population of 62 million,<sup>2</sup> some critics might wonder why the author selected this group for intense study, excluding others such as Indians or even Afrikaners. Another limitation of the book is that its narrative falls into the trap of using the term 'coloureds' for everyone who used to be lumped together under this term.

Those who maintain that South Africa has not resolved its racial legacy and societal racism will be keen to find out whether (and how) this book confirms their fears or anxieties. Yet, they would probably be disappointed to learn that this is not part of the book's argument. Admittedly, the book does not seek to interrogate new forms of racism in the post-1994 era, especially in relation to the coloured community. Neither does it make inferences about coloured identity in relation to the question of the power, role and status of the public representatives of this community after each election.

Harris certainly attempts to explain how identity construction and reconstruction within the coloured community are related to their conceptualising and reconceptualising of electoral politics in South Africa. Yet, the fluidity of

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2 (Census 2022, <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=16716>).

this community (i.e., the ambiguity of the concept of race specifically as derived from apartheid South African lexicon) could find some readers questioning the rationale of slotting communities into racial pigeon-holes, ostensibly to assess their pre-determined voter behaviour and voter preferences.

Vigilant readers might notice several (though minor) typographical errors e.g., a country that 'fit' the description', p.16); and [Patricia] De Lille as the 'Major' of Cape Town. This includes the use of phrases such as 'ruling party' (p.14) to refer to the governing African National Congress, the renaming of AZAPO (Azanian People's Organisation) to 'APO' (Table 4.2, p.74, fn.), and the use of 'Sub-Saharan Africa', which the scholarship on decoloniality and Pan-Africanism increasingly criticises.

Observant readers who perceive the country as a 'rainbow nation' might wonder why the book focuses on racial identity in electoral politics as South Africa does not collect voting statistics by race. In addition, the use of the US and Uganda as examples of ethnic distance might find some readers wondering why other equally relevant examples of race or racial identity in electoral politics, e.g., in Europe, Australia, India, and some parts of Latin America, are not cited prominently but merely alluded to.

Finally, the book seemingly overlooks how the traditional voters' penchant in South Africa for historical loyalty to certain parties, irrespective of the parties' campaign messages or political manifestoes, affects the 'typical' coloured voter. The concept of the 'undecided/vacillating voters' within the coloured community is also not discernible in the book. Its fundamental argument of the effects of ethnic distance on voter behaviour and preference also appears to overlook the question of absentee voters or abstentions, especially in 'ethnically charged and ethnic census elections' (p.7), such as are often held in South Africa.

The book's main contribution is Harris's assertion that 'Identity politics still plays a key role in SA's democracy' (p. 61). Its message will be welcomed as a fresh scholarly contribution to electoral politics and elections in Africa, with new insights into ethnic identity and ethnic distance in relation to one of South Africa's minority communities. Researchers in the areas of elections and electoral democracy will be keen to find out what proportion of 'ethnically distant voters' contributes to the continual voter apathy in South African elections. Some will also be interested in confirming (or questioning) the significance of the 'coloured vote' for parties to win in the Western Cape and other provinces, wards, and municipalities in the country.

The book's strong argument is presented in a readable but simple style that many general readers will find appealing. The cover illustrates the question and contradictions of identity and electoral politics. Its many data tables, graphs and graphics also enhance its appeal to policymakers and public officials, university

and other higher education institution students, election management bodies, members of diplomatic and public administration institutions, as well as disciplines in social science, humanities, arts, and researchers and intellectuals globally.

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