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Abstract

Due to the legacy of apartheid segregation South Africa remains a highly divided society where most voters live in politically homogenous social environments. This paper argues that political discussion within one's social context plays a primary role in shaping political attitudes and vote choice in South Africa. Specifically, the extent of partisan homogeneity or heterogeneity within one's social context has important, yet distinct implications for voting behaviour. Using data from the Comparative National Elections Project 2004 and 2009 South African post-election surveys, the paper explores the extent of social context partisan homogeneity in South Africa and finds that voters are not overly embedded in homogenous social contexts. The paper then demonstrates the consequences of partisan homogeneity on voting behavior. Homogenous social contexts tend to encourage stronger partisan loyalties and fewer defections in vote choice while people in more heterogeneous contexts show less consistency in their attitudes and behaviour during elections. Finally, the analysis shows how momentous socio-political events at the time of a particular election can change the nature of social contexts, with important consequences for electoral outcomes.

Introduction

Citizens derive much of their political information from people in their immediate social context (Berelson *et al.*, 1954; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1987; Beck *et al.*, 2002; Richardson and Beck, 2007; Beck and Gunther, 2012). As political information flows to voters via these discussants, they help to shape perceptions about political parties and election campaigns. The result, scholars argue, is that the social context has an important bearing on enduring political attitudes like partisanship and voting choice (Dalton, *et al.*, 1984; Beck *et al.*, 2002).

This paper's central argument is that, through political discussion, the social context can play a primary role in shaping political attitudes and vote choice in South Africa. More specifically, the extent of partisan homogeneity or heterogeneity within one's immediate social context has important, yet distinct implications for voting behaviour. Using data from the Comparative National Elections Project 2004 and 2009 South African post-election surveys, the paper explores the extent of social context partisan homogeneity in South Africa and finds that voters are not overly embedded in homogenous social contexts. Controlling for other important predictors, including satisfaction with government's performance, party identification, campaign interest, age and race, the paper then demonstrates the consequences of partisan homogeneity on voting behavior. Homogenous social contexts tend to encourage stronger partisan loyalties and fewer defections in vote choice. In contrast, people in heterogeneous networks show less consistency in their attitudes and behaviour during elections. They are more likely to defect from their party identification when they vote; are more likely to defect from their previous vote choice in subsequent elections; have weaker partisan ties; and are more likely to consider alternative political homes. Finally, the analysis shows how momentous socio-political events at the time of a particular election can change the nature of social contexts, with important consequences for electoral outcomes.

The social context and voter behaviour

The social context consists of people with whom individuals maintain ongoing relationships and with whom they discuss important matters, even political matters. Some are discussants that individuals *choose* to engage with frequently and they are often intimates such as a spouse/partner or a friend or family member. These discussants form a *social network* for the individual. However, the flow of political information to an individual can also occur through weaker, less intimate ties within his/her wider social context and may include neighbours, co-workers, family members and friends.

The social context is said to have an especially strong influence on electoral decisions when political messages contain a distinctive 'political bias' (when they are perceived as favouring one or another political party) that is 'congruent', or in agreement, with an individual's political preferences (Richardson and Beck, 2007: 188). Since people are likely to adopt the political views of those around them, the stronger the convergence of similar political influences from their sources the more likely the voter is to follow suit (Beck *et al.*, 2002; Richardson and Beck, 2007).

People often exercise discretion in the selection of their discussants, usually preferring to discuss politics with those who hold agreeable preferences. Moreover, the choice of discussants is often socially constrained to those within their wider social setting. The result is that the information gleaned by voters from these people reinforces rather than dilutes pre-existing political preferences (Berelson *et al.*, 1954; Franklin, 2004: 45). Nevertheless, many individuals are limited in the control they have over their exposure to political communication within their social setting. One's inherent self-selection mechanism is counteracted by those more distant social interactions within the workplace or neighbourhood where political opinions may not always be congruent with the individual. Thus, for most voters, the choice over and construction of a communication network occurs with pronounced constraints on the supply of similar political attitudes (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004: 21).

In the context of a highly divided or polarised society there are likely to be fewer societal constraints on the supply of agreeable discussants. The high levels of political homogeneity (and low levels of political disagreement) within social groups (juxtaposed by high levels of political polarization between groups) may mean that the transmission of political information through personal discussants is likely to be channeled by the dominant cleavage structure that characterizes the social setting. Voters, caught up in their social cleavages, will be primarily exposed to the prevailing political biases of that cleavage. Accordingly, two interconnected processes transpire – both of which encourage group uniformity in behaviour (Rose and McAllister, 1990: 109). The first is that, through inter-personal contacts and flows of communication, discussants in highly homogenous communities will in all likelihood provide political messages that compliment an individual's existing partisan beliefs. The second is that repetitive exposure to these 'supportive' partisan messages will reinforce and strengthen prevailing partisan beliefs. Consequently, when the social group context is highly homogenous, common partisan responses are generated more effectively. Conversely, when communities are more politically heterogeneous and the partisan cues emanating from discussants are diverse, partisan behaviour is less predictable and mass volatility should increase. Evidence from Japan and Sweden suggests this is the case – their most heterogeneous communities are the least effective at mobilizing votes for the dominant parties (Dalton *et al.*, 1984: 18). Thus, social contacts reinforce group awareness, encourage individual voters to align their voting intentions with group interests, and inform voters of the likely voting behavior of other group members (Franklin, 2004: 45).

South Africa – A model case for social context effects?

South Africa presents an ideal case for exploring the effects of the social context on voter behavior. Due to the legacy of apartheid segregation, South Africa remains a highly divided society where most voters live in politically homogenous social environments. Highly stratified racial and political contexts predetermine the social context. As a result many voters are likely to reside in homogenous political information networks where their partisan identities reflect widely among their personal discussants.

During an election campaign, voters receive repetitive partisan messages from a multiplicity of sources within their social context, each imparting their particular partisan bias. One can therefore perceive of individual voters as being embedded in social contexts that take on particular partisan characteristics. In this paper, I examine the extent of partisan congruence within the social context. I refer to two types of social contexts. The first is a more 'homogenous partisan social context, which exists when half or more of the respondent's discussants support the same party. The second type is a more 'heterogeneous partisan social context' where half or more of the respondent's discussants support a political party different to his/hers. In other words, under scrutiny is the *diversity* of the respondent's social context in terms of the *political opinions and attitudes of people within that context*.

When an individual's social context is politically homogenous the chances of his voting behaviour reflecting others in his immediate context increases. This context type encourages conformity of partisan attitudes and behavior and it is unlikely that voters will support a different party to the one supported by those around them. Similarly, political disagreement is less likely where strong partisan attitudes prevail and political passions are intense (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004: 23). Moreover, in politically charged environments where strong partisan attitudes prevail, conformity to the attitudes and norms of the dominant group bring with it social rewards, while deviation can elicit social sanctions including rejection and derogation. In these situations, political discussions that support one's partisan views may suitably be regarded as 'safe discussions' whereas conflict with prevailing political views may constitute 'dangerous discussion' (Eveland and Hively, 2009: 206).

When the social context exposes a voter to a more heterogeneous mix of political viewpoints - where the respondent is exposed to a greater diversity of political information and partisan attitudes about campaigns, candidates and parties – it should stimulate more complex thinking about politics. So, while

one's political knowledge and decisions should become more informed, one's electoral behaviour should become less predictable or less consistent. These voters should deviate more frequently from their party identification and previous vote choices, and they should demonstrate weaker partisan ties. Heterogeneous partisan social contexts are not expected to be as common as their more homogenous counterparts in South Africa, but where they exist, their collective action should present as macro-level electoral volatility.

The paper therefore proposes an alternative theoretical sociological explanation, not only for individual-level voting decisions, but also for the appearance of racial or ethnic census-style election results in South Africa. In South Africa, voter loyalty to racial or ethnic group identities is attributed as the reason for repeated 'census-style' electoral outcomes (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967; Horowitz, 1985). This perspective raises a range of concerns about democratic politics. If voters are unquestionably loyal to their parties, are unmoved by incumbency performance and are unwilling to move their support elsewhere elections cannot function as a sanctioning mechanism over elite behaviour. From a 'social context' perspective, however, census-style or racial bloc voting is less a consequence of enduring, identity-based loyalties, but rather a macro-level result of an overload of partisan bias in the political information voters receive from highly homogenous, 'sealed' political environments. Within the context of South Africa's racially and politically divided society, patterns of social interaction are such that many voters seldom encounter other ethnic counterparts within their closely held networks of political communication, apart from within the workplace. Therefore, the partisan bias received by individual voters reflects and corresponds with the society's dominant cleavages, giving the appearance of cleavage style voting with the typically characteristic fixed or rigid electoral outcomes.

However, unlike sociological explanations that emphasize the influence of 'fixed' or static identities, the social context may change over time. When profound socio-political events reverberate throughout a society they can transform the nature of social networks by changing the flow and political content of information gleaned through intermediary exposure. When this happens there are bound to be important consequences for electoral behavior. Scholars have argued that the precise nature and context of a particular election may have profound effects on political attitudes and behavior. For instance, turnout variations have been partly explained by the differences in the political contexts surrounding each election (Franklin, 2004: 44). The institutional, social and political context in which individuals are embedded at the time of an election can make one election more salient over others. As Franklin states, "It seems that citizens generally understand the "stakes" of any given election, either through their political discussants, media coverage, or the effects of

respective campaigns" (Franklin, 2004: 44). Elections that are perceived as particularly competitive and especially those that may result in substantive policy change tend to increase the political interest of the individual and bring more people to the polls (Franklin, 2004: 151).

The 2009 national and provincial election in South Africa is arguably the most competitive elections to date. In the years that preceded the elections, a series of developments brought about several important changes to the political landscape that all posed significant challenges to the ANC's electoral dominance. Few expected the ANC to lose the 2009 elections. Nevertheless, many thought that the ANC faced new hitherto unseen challenges that might threaten the party's overwhelming electoral victories of the three previous democratic elections. Although the ANC went on to win the 2009 elections, they did so with a smaller percentage of total votes (which declined from 69.6% in 2004 to 65.9% in 2009) despite an increase in voter turnout (which increased from 76.7% in 2004 to 77.3% in 2009) (Daniel and Southall, 2009: 234).

Jacob Zuma's rise to the presidency of the ANC had fuelled the formation of a new opposition party, the Congress of the People (COPE), by dissidents from within the ruling party who remained loyal to former president Thabo Mbeki (Southall, 2009: 1). Many regarded the newcomer to the political scene as a long-awaited legitimate alternative political home to the ANC, especially for black African voters. As for the ANC, following a chaotic internal party succession struggle and the victory of Jacob Zuma as party president, the party inherited a controversial leader that faced charges of corruption, and later, allegations of political interferences aimed at quelling the National Prosecuting Authority's attempts to prosecute him.

A changing political landscape also saw the largest opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA) re-launch the party, under a new 'brand' and a new style of campaigning in 2009. Under the leadership of Helen Zille, the DA started to project a more racially inclusive image in an attempt to broaden its support base in 'non-traditional' (black) constituencies, and reach new audiences. The party also sought to build upon its reputation for competence by showcasing its performance track record in local government in the City of Cape Town (Southall, 2009: 6; Schulz-Herzenberg, 2009: 45). As Jolobe says, 'The specific goal was to wrestle with the party's negative image as a white minority party, to recreate a new DA that would be more diverse, more reflective of South Africa's racial, linguistic and cultural heritage' (Jolobe, 2009:138). The DA's 2009 campaign presented a marked departure from previous campaigns that had merely aimed to consolidate the support of minority or middle class interests.

Other processes also generated uncertainty about the 2009 election outcomes. An increase in voters from the born-free generation, those who came of age politically after 1996 and have little experience of Apartheid, introduced a new cohort of less predictable voters (with potentially weaker party identification) into the electorate. Moreover, trends in electoral participation since 1994 show a noticeable withdrawal of eligible voters at the polls, which, if remobilized, present a significant force for change (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2009: 24). In addition, rising social discontent with the delivery of basic essential services culminated in a wave of service delivery protests across local communities prior to the elections raising the possibility that voters once loyal to the governing party may switch to other political homes.

Finally, a distinctive feature of the 2009 elections was the introduction of free campaign advertising on television to political parties (Glenn and Mattes, 2010). This gave South African electoral contenders, particularly ill-funded opposition parties, new opportunities to reach beyond traditional constituencies. Political advertisements, mainly through electronic media adverts, exposed millions more voters to a richer diversity of political coverage and information than ever before.

The social and political context in South Africa at the time of the 2009 elections was at its most precarious since the founding democratic elections in 1994. Far-reaching changes in political landscape, which included a dramatic splinter from the incumbent party, a new legitimate political contender with potential mass appeal, a rejuvenated and re-focused opposition party, and the uptake of free television campaign advertising by the largest political parties, undoubtedly provided heightened stimulus for voters, raising levels of political interest and discussion about politics during the 2009 campaign. Most importantly, however, the combined effect of these factors should have *diversified the partisan content of political information flowing through intermediaries*, *thereby increasing the levels of partisan heterogeneity in many people's social contexts, and potentially changing the way these voters learnt about and responded to parties and candidates.* In short, during the time of the 2009 elections, the proportion of voters living within a more heterogeneous partisan social context should have increased compared to the earlier elections, with fewer voters exposed to highly congruent partisan messages. Subsequently, the 'reinforcing' effects of homogenous social contexts on voting decisions should have declined from previous years.

Research questions

The paper is guided by three research questions:

1. *What types of social contexts predominate in South Africa and how much partisan congruence or diversity do they provide?*

I examine levels of partisan homogeneity versus heterogeneity within social contexts and the overall distributions of the two context types across two elections and expect to find a higher proportion of respondents in politically congruent social contexts in South Africa.

2. *Do social context types affect voting behavior differently?*

I explore the effects of the two context types on individual-level vote behavior and partisan attitude strength. Individuals in homogenous partisan social contexts should show greater consistency in their voting behavior, with fewer deviations from partisanship and previous vote choices, as well as stronger partisan attitudes. In contrast, voters in heterogeneous contexts are expected to show lower levels of partisan attitude strength and less consistency in their vote choices.

3. *Are there significant differences between the 2004 and 2009 elections regarding: a) political engagement with discussants; and b) the extent of heterogeneity within social contexts?*

I compare the frequency of political discussion among voters and the distribution of context types across the two elections to evaluate whether, as is expected, political engagement increased, and social contexts became more politically heterogeneous in 2009.

Significance of the study

The findings hold important implications for democracy. Competitive elections, where incumbents are unsure of the outcome, are essential to the quality of democracy because they encourage greater elite responsiveness and accountability to citizens. However, if the flow of political information for most voters is so excessively homogenous that it simply reinforces existing partisan attachments, and eclipses consideration of short-term factors like policy or government performance, the ability of voters to make independent and informed choices is undermined, and the likelihood of inter-party shifts remains

low. This scenario inadvertently consolidates the position of a dominant party by reducing chances for competitive, unpredictable elections. The implications for democracy are unfavorable. After all, vote shifts are a prerequisite for the 'two turnover' test, a phenomenon widely regarded as the litmus test of democratic consolidation in countries like South Africa (Huntington, 1991).

However, if a significant proportion of the electorate is not embedded in politically homogenous social contexts they are more likely to be exposed to a diversity of political communication and contrary opinions. This, in turn, should produce greater levels of political deliberation and disagreement among citizens, which then encourage greater political tolerance, increase the quality of opinion formation, and ultimately, enhance opportunities for electoral change (Huckfeldt *et al*., 2004: 2). Indeed, the vitality of democratic politics is said to depend on the presence and survival of political heterogeneity and disagreement among citizens (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004: 2). And, according to Huckfeldt and his colleagues, it is within politically heterogeneous social networks that political disagreement can best survive (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004: 18). Accordingly, among these voters, partisan loyalties are less fortified, and they are more receptive to political alternatives. This uncertainty is the essential ingredient of competitive democratic elections.

Methods and data sources

In this paper, I analyze data from the Comparative National Election Project (CNEP) 2004 and 2009 South African post-election public opinion surveys. The CNEP is a multi-national project that studies political communication and social structure within the context of election campaigns using compatible research designs and a common core of survey questions (Gunther *et al.*, 2007: 15). The surveys are designed to explore the impact of the social context and personal discussion networks and includes batteries of questions that tap exposure to political information through a range of intermediaries, as well as partisan congruence between respondents and intermediaries. The similarity of question items allows for systematic comparisons across two South African election campaigns. The South African CNEP surveys were conducted nationally following each election and each included 1 200 personal interviews. The samples were drawn using multi-stage, stratified, area cluster probability sampling.

Results

1. Types of social context in South Africa

The Comparative National Elections Study (CNEP) post-election survey asks respondents a range of questions about their discussions regarding the election campaign with their discussants, including family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, as well as chosen intimates such as a spouse/partner or primary discussant. In particular, CNEP asks respondents about the political preferences of these discussants and whether the respondent perceives that they support the same party as him/herself. The analysis starts by assessing the extent of 'partisan congruence', or fit between a respondent's self-declared partisan preference and his/her discussants.[1]

1.1 Partisan congruence and the social context

The data shows that highly congruent partisan relationships exist between voters and members of their social context. When asked in 2004 whether their family, friends, neighbours and co-workers supported the same party as themselves, 65 percent responded positively for family, 46 percent for friends, 45 percent for neighbours, while 31 percent thought their co-workers supported the same party. This is in stark contrast to news media where no more than 5 percent of respondents perceive that they are ever exposed to congruent partisan messages from their news media sources. In 2009, perceived levels of partisan congruence with neighbours and co-workers decreased, congruence with friends changed little, and congruence with family rose slightly (Table 1). The confidence intervals (with a 5% error) around the percentages suggest that the increase in perceived partisan congruence with family members, as well as the decrease in congruence with neighbours and co-workers are increases that can be found in the wider population. The percentages also move in the expected direction over the consecutive elections. The two-sample t-test statistic between the two percentages for each year in each discussant category shows a significant difference at the .05 level for family, neighbours and co-workers.[2]

[1] See Appendix for information about the operationalization and coding of all variables.

[2] Family: t(2398)=3.245, p=.001; Friends: t(2398)=0.787, p=431; Neighbours: t(2398)=6.599, p=.001; Co-workers: t(2398)=2.996, p=.002. The maximum margin of error at 95% confidence for sample sizes of 1200 is 2.8%.

Table 1: Percentage of perceived partisan congruence between respondent and discussants

Social Context	**2004**	**2009**	**% change**
Family	65 (*n*=634) (CI=±2.712)	71 (*n*=912) (CI=±2.580)	6
Friends	46 (*n*=579) (CI=±2.826)	45 (*n*=866) (CI=±2.818)	-1
Neighbours	45 (*n*=336) (CI=±2.819)	32 (*n*=609) (CI=±2.640)	-13
Co-workers	31 (*n*=195) (CI=±2.619)	25 (*n*=395) (CI=±2.467)	-6
Total *n*	*n*=1200	*n*=1200	

Percentage of respondents who believe family, friends, neighbours or co-workers supported the same party as themselves in the last election.

In response to a slightly different set of questions, when asked about perceptions of partisan congruence with one's spouse or partner 19 percent and 20 percent of respondents over the two campaigns respectively thought their spouse/partner supported the same party as themselves (Table 2). A small percentage thought otherwise, confirming highly congruent relationships between respondents and their spouse/partners when people declare that they have partners.

Table 2: Percentage of perceived partisan congruence between respondent and spouse/partner

Spouse/partner	**2004**	**2009**
No partner/ non-identifiers/ don't know	80 (*n*=958)	78 (*n*=928)
Agreement	19 (*n*=229)	20 (*n*=243)
Divergence	1 (*n*=13)	2 (*n*=29)
Total %	100 *(n*=1200*)*	100 *(n*=1200*)*

A simple correlation between the respondent's partisanship and the spouse/partners partisanship confirm strong matches between their supported parties.[3] In addition, among only respondents that declare a spouse/partner, further cross tabulation between the partisan direction (ANC vs. opposition) of the respondent and spouse's party affiliations (in Table 3) again shows a good fit. Among ANC identifiers 87 percent thought their spouse supported the ANC, while only 3 percent thought they had supported an opposition party.[4] Likewise, 72 percent of opposition identifiers thought their partners supported an opposition party, while 6 percent thought their spouses had supported the ANC. [5] In 2009, the figures remained high with 80 percent of ANC partisans declaring a match with their spouse[6] and 70 percent of opposition partisans doing the same.[7]

Table 3: Percentage fit between respondent and spouse/partner by party identification

Year	**Respondent's PID**	**Spouse: ANC**	**Spouse: Opposition**	**Did not vote**	**Don't know**	**Total %**
2004	ANC	87	3	2	8	100
	Opposition	6	72	9	13	100
2009	ANC	80	6	3	11	100
	Opposition	12	70	6	12	100

[3] 2004: Contingency Coefficient: .769**. In 2009 the statistical fit between the respondents and spouses party support strengthens: Contingency coefficient: .896**.
[4] 1.9% thought their spouse/partner did not vote and 8.5% did not know. Cramer's V: .809**.
[5] 9% thought their spouse/partner did not vote and 13.4% did not know. Cramer's V: 809**.
[6] 3.2% thought their spouse/partner did not vote and 11% did not know. Cramer's V: .727**.
[7] 5.8% thought their spouse/partner did not vote and 12.5% did not know. Cramer's V: .727**.

Respondents and their primary discussant (usually the respondent's mother, father, sibling or close friend) are also highly likely to be congruent and share party preferences. In 2004, 23 percent of respondents thought their primary discussant supported the same party as themselves, increasing dramatically to 45 percent in 2009 (Table 4). Yet, as congruence rises in 2009 so does a divergence of partisan views with one's primary discussant. Again, a simple correlation between the respondent's partisanship and their primary discussant's partisanship confirm high congruence.[8] Furthermore, cross tabulations (Table 5) between the partisan direction of the respondent and primary discussant show strong matches across both elections.

Table 4: Percentage of perceived partisan congruence between respondent and primary discussant

Primary discussant	**2004**	**2009**
Non-identifiers/ no discussant/ don't know	71 (*n*=891)	47 (*n*=561)
Agreement	23 (*n*=280)	45 (*n*=541)
Divergence	2 (*n*=29)	8 (*n*=98)
Total %	100 (*n*=1200)	100 (*n*=1200)

Table 5: Percentage fit between respondent and primary discussant by party identification

Year	**Respondent's PID**	**Primary discussant: ANC**	**Primary discussant: Opposition**	**Did not vote**	**Don't know**	**Total %**
2004	ANC	82	4	1	13	100
	Opposition	12	64	0	24	100
2009	ANC	76	6	1	17	100
	Opposition	22	41	7	30	100

[8] 2004: Contingency Coefficient: .743**. In 2009 the statistical fit between the respondents and primary discussant strengthens: Contingency coefficient: .799**.

1.2 Homogenous vs. heterogeneous social contexts

During an election campaign, individuals receive repetitive partisan messages from within their respective social contexts. This section extends the analysis of partisan congruence with individual discussants to explore the overall extent of partisan homogeneity in the respondent's social context. Since there is less reason to suspect partisan change within the respondent's most intimate discussant network dyadic relationships are excluded from the analysis (spouse/partner and primary discussant). Instead, the respondent is most likely to experience partisan change within his wider social context. Using discussants that characterize the wider social setting I calculate a total score for each respondent that measures the extent of partisan homogeneity/heterogeneity in his/her social context. The analysis employs this score to produce an aggregate impression of the type of networks that predominate in South Africa.[9]

In what types of political information contexts do South African voters reside? Do most live in mono-partisan worlds? Using the overall distribution scores, the 2004 data shows that just under half of the respondents (49%) were embedded in more homogenous political environments, where their partisan identity reflected widely within their immediate social context. A sixth (16%) were uncertain about the majority of their discussants' party affiliations, while just over a third of respondents (35%) lived in more heterogeneous/pluralistic political environments where almost all their discussants held different partisan allegiances to themselves (Table 6). The 2009 survey data shows a decline for those living in highly congruent relationships to 41 percent; a small decline of 1 percent in those uncertain about most of their discussants partisan preferences (to 15%); and an increase of 9 percent in heterogeneous networks (to 44%). It appears, therefore, that during the 2009 election campaign less people lived in homogenous environments, far more had incongruent, pluralistic political relationships, while slightly less were uncertain about their regular discussant's party support. The confidence intervals (with a 5% error) suggest that the eight percent decrease in homogenous networks between 2004 and 2009 can be inferred to the wider population. Similarly, the confidence intervals suggest that the percent increase in heterogeneous networks also hold true for the wider population. In addition, the two-sample t-test statistics between the percentages for 2004 and 2009 were significant at the .05 level for both the homogenous networks and heterogeneous networks categories.[10]

[9] See Appendix for more information about the operationalization and coding of the dependent variable.

[10] Homogenous networks: $t(1248)=2.794$, $p=.005$; Heterogenous networks: $t(1248)=3.213$, $p=.001$; Don't know: $t(1248)=0.525$, $p=.599$.

Table 6: Percentage distribution: Social context types (scale includes family, friends, neighbours and co-workers)

Social context types	**2004**	**2009**	**% change**
Homogenous context	49 (CI=±4.528)	41 (CI=±3.468)	-8
Don't know	16 (CI=±3.312)	15 (CI=±2.501)	-1
Heterogeneous context	35 (CI=±4.311)	44 (CI=±3.496)	9
Total %	100 (*n*=472)	100 (*n*=778)	

The overlap of racial and partisan differences in South African social spaces implies that one's most immediate discussants are likely to have similar political opinions while exposure to a diversity of political opinions is most likely to occur in the more distant workplace. In South Africa, the workplace is the site of most cross-racial interaction. Similarly, the literature has noted the capacity of the workplace to introduce a more heterogeneous mix of viewpoints (Huckfeldt *et al.*, 2004: 24). When data on co-workers are excluded from the analysis the overall patterns observed in table 6 remain, but partisan homogeneity increases as we might expect (Table 7). This reaffirms that co-workers are the most pluralistic partisan element within a respondent's immediate discussant network and that people who have employment and discuss politics with co-workers are more likely to reside in heterogeneous networks. The effects of this network type will be discussed shortly, albeit to state at this point that the workplace may therefore have important consequences for the individual political behaviour. While the confidence intervals (with a 5% error) suggest that the percentage changes seen in table 7 between 2004 and 2009 cannot be inferred to the wider population they are in the expected direction. However, the two-sample t-test statistics between the year percentages were significant at the .05 level for the heterogeneous networks and 'don't know' categories.[11]

[11] Homogenous networks: t(1152)=1.056, p=.291; Heterogeneous networks: t(1152)=2.520, p=.011; Don't know: t(1152)=2.107, p=.035.

Table 7: Percentage distribution: Social context types (scale includes family, friends and neighbours only, excludes co-workers)

Social context types	**2004**	**2009**	**% change**
Homogenous context	55 (CI=±4.692)	51 (CI=±3.665)	-4
Don't know	15 (CI=±3.357)	11 (CI=±2.267)	-4
Heterogeneous context	30 (CI=±4.340)	38 (CI=±3.556)	8
Total %	100 (*n*=436)	100 (*n*=718)	

1.3 Who lives in mono-partisan worlds?

Which voters reside in mono-partisan worlds? And, do those who live in politically heterogeneous contexts share common characteristics? Results from 2009 CNEP survey indicate that people living in mono-partisan worlds tend to live in rural areas,[12] and have lower levels of education.[13] Age and gender hold no statistical significance. In terms of race, white (45% CI=±3.50), followed by black South Africans (44% CI=±3.49) and then Indian/Asian South Africans (43% CI±=3.48) have the highest proportions living in homogenous partisan environments, and coloured voters the lowest (18% 2.69).[14] While black African, coloured and white voters live in homogenous contexts in similar proportions, the confidence intervals suggest that smaller proportions of coloured voters do in fact live in homogenous contexts. Conversely, coloured voters have the highest proportions in pluralistic contexts (77% CI±=2.95) while

[12] 2009: 34% of urban residents live in homogenous networks compared to 53.8% of rural residents, while 49.3% of urban residents live in heterogeneous networks compared to 34.6% of rural residents. Cramer's V: .194**. [2 x 2 = Phi -.195**]

[13] Bivariate correlations show that people with no formal schooling or lower levels of education live in homogenous networks have while those living in heterogeneous networks have higher educational levels. 2009: Cramer's V: .146*. In addition, an independent sample T-Tests was conducted to compare the mean education scores for homogenous and heterogeneous networks and results show a statistically significant difference in the mean. Homogenous networks (M=3.67, SE= 0.99) and heterogeneous networks (M=3.94, SE = .096). This difference was significant $t(661) = -1.982$, $p>.05$. The effect is small at .076.

[14] 2009: Cramer's V: .168**. Pearson Chi-square: 43.77**

black African (41% CI±=3.46), white (34 CI±=3.34) and Indian/Asian (29 CI±=3.18) populations follow thereafter. Confidence intervals suggest no real differences between proportions of Indians/Asians and whites, while the proportions of black African and coloured voters living in heterogeneous contexts are significantly different to each other and to the other racial groups. This finding corresponds with previous research which argues that the 'coloured vote' is not homogenous and is divided among a number of political parties since 1994 (Eldridge and Seekings, 1996; Faull, 2004; Seekings, 2006). Finally, Indian/Asian (29%) and white voters (21%) have the highest proportions of voters who do not know the political preferences of members within their social contexts while there are far lower levels of political ambivalence or uncertainty among black (15%) and coloured voters (5%).

The results of a multivariate logistic regression analysis using the 2009 data (Table 8) confirm that one's spatial location matters independently of other factors in that rural people are more likely to live in homogenous political spaces while urban residents live in heterogeneous contexts. The results for race once again confirm that coloured voters have a higher chance of living in heterogeneous contexts compared to black Africans, whites and Indians. A new variable, which stands as a rudimentary proxy for poverty status, taps 'type of house', and shows that poorer people have higher odds of living in highly homogenous political environments. Education loses statistical significance in the multivariate analysis, and, once again, gender and age remain insignificant.

Table 8: Logistic regression: Social context type and demographics

DV: Partisan context type *(0) Homogenous context (1) Heterogeneous context*			***95% CI for Odds ratio (Exp B)***		
Variables	**B (SE)**	**Sig.**	***Lower***	***Odds Ratio***	***Upper***
Urban (0) rural (1)	-.629 (.183)	.001	.372	.533	.763
Age	-.001 (.002)	.765	.994	.999	1.004
Race (black-ref)		.000			
(coloured)	1.237(.314)	.000	1.860	3.444	6.378
(Asian)	-.763 (.673)	.257	.125	.466	1.746
(white)	-1.048 (.318)	.001	.188	.351	.654
Education (0) No formal schooling (8) Post grad	.049 (.050)	.329	.952	1.050	1.157
Male (0) Female (1)	-.144 (.165)	.384	.626	.866	1.197
Type of house (1) Luxury (6) Shack	-.310 (.079)	.000	.628	.733	.856
Constant	1.320 (.415)	.001		3.744	

Note: R^2 = .107 (Cox and Snell), .14 (Nagelkerke), Model x^2 (8) = 74.96, p<.01**

2. The influence of the social context on voter behaviour

Does partisan homogeneity within social contexts affect individual level voting behaviour? Voters embedded within politically congruent or homogenous social contexts are more likely to be exposed to repetitive partisan messages that not only support their prevailing partisan beliefs but also serve to reinforce and strengthen them. When most of these messages support the voter's partisanship they can have a cumulative effect on the formation of attitudes about the campaign and subsequent behaviour. As Beck and Richardson argue, 'as exposure to partisan sources that reinforce one's own partisanship increases so voters become more embedded into a homogenous partisan information context' (Richardson and Beck, 2007: 194).

I explore the implications of being embedded within the two context types for individual level voting behavior and expect to find that living in these two very different political information networks have different effects on voter behavior. Individuals in homogenous partisan contexts should show greater consistency and strength in their voting behavior and attitudes, while those living in heterogeneous contexts are expected to be less so. The analysis explores differences in the effects of the two contexts on the following aspects of voter behaviour:

1. When a voter decides to vote;
2. If a voter is a partisan or non-partisan;
3. Strength of partisan attitudes;
4. If a voter would consider voting for another party;
5. Defections between partisanship and vote choice in the 2004, and 2009 elections; and
6. Changes in vote choice across consecutive elections (party loyalists versus defectors).

2.1 When did you decide to vote?

When asked *'when did you decide to vote for that party?'* the bivariate correlations in Table 9 show an association between early and decisive voting decisions and homogenous partisan contexts, and late decisions and heterogeneous partisan contexts in both elections (2004: Spearman's rho .207**; 2009: .253**).[15]

2.2 Partisan identification

Perhaps the most significant political attitude for voting behavior is partisan identification (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Dalton, 2002: 174). When asked if the respondent identifies with any particular political party the bivariate correlations in Table 9 show an association between being a partisan and living within a homogenous partisan context and being a non-partisan and living within a heterogeneous context (2004: Spearman's rho .248**; 2009: .120**).

[15] Spearman's rho is used repeatedly as the non-parametric equivalent of Pearson's R in this paper.

2.3 Strength of Partisan Attitudes

Social contexts are recognized for their effects on individual-level attitude strength. Higher levels of congruence within social contexts increase the strength of attitudes or opinions because they are validated when anchored in one's context. Conversely, heterogeneity decreases attitude strength by reducing the confidence that people have in the correctness of their attitudes (Visser and Mirabile, 2004: 780). When asked how close the respondent feels towards that particular party the bivariate correlations in Table 9 show an association between being a strong party identifier and living within a homogenous partisan context (2004: Spearman's rho .247**; 2009: .202**). Data also confirm that the strength of party identification increases with exposure to congruent partisan communication with particularly influential personal discussants such as one's spouse/ partner (2004: Pearson .430*; 2009: .263**) and one's primary discussant (2004: Pearson .510**; 2009: .466**). So, when a voter agrees politically with a regular discussant, or when they live in highly homogenous partisan discussant contexts, the intensity of their partisanship increases.

Table 9: Correlation coefficients between homogenous social contexts and voter behaviour

Homogenous social context	**2004**	**2009**
Early voting decision	.207**	.253**
Partisan (or not)	.248**	.120**
Strong party identification	.247**	.202**
Unwilling to consider voting for another party	.133**	.132**
Loyalist (vs. party switcher)	.048	.262**

Spearman's rho ** = Correlation is significant at the p <0.01 level.

* = Correlation is significant at the p<0.05 level.

2.4 Consider voting for another party

When asked *'did you consider voting for another party?'* the bivariate correlations in Table 9 show an expected association between an unwillingness to consider other party options and living in a homogeneous context and being a potential party switcher and living within a heterogeneous context (2004: Spearman's rho .133**; 2009: .132**).

2.5 Consistency and deviation: party identification and vote choice

A vast literature argues that while vote choice is strongly influenced by party identification the two remain theoretically and conceptually independent (Campbell *et al.*, 1960; Dalton, 2002: 174.) So, while party identification and vote choice should correlate strongly regardless of context type, we can expect to find a stronger match for respondents in homogenous contexts. In contrast, variance between party identification and vote choice should be more pronounced for respondents in heterogeneous contexts. The data in Table 10 supports this observation. The differences in the strength of the coefficients between the respondents self-declared party identification and party support at the time of the two elections shows that respondents in heterogeneous contexts are more likely to vote for a party that differs from their partisanship. For the 2004 elections, the strength of consistency between party identification and vote choice is stronger for homogenous contexts (Spearman's rho .738**) than for heterogeneous contexts (Spearman's rho .341**).[16] Again, for the 2009 elections the pattern remains the same with voters in homogenous contexts showing a higher match between their partisanship and vote choice (Spearman's rho .597**) compared to those in heterogeneous contexts (Spearman's rho.557**).[17]

Table 10: Bivariate correlations: Consistency or match between declared partisanship and vote choice

	Homogenous Contexts	**Heterogeneous Contexts**
2004	.738**	.341**
2009	.597**	.557**

2.6 Defection in vote choice across elections: switchers versus standpatters

Both CNEP 2004 and 2009 surveys ask respondents which party they voted for in the last (most recent) election and then also the election that preceded it to obtain a retrospective impression of the respondents vote choice across two

[16] Don't know: .773**
[17] Don't know: .489**

consecutive elections. When I examine shifts in party support between two consecutive elections, where the respondent defects from the vote choice of the previous election to a new political party in the subsequent election, there is support for the hypothesis that vote shifting is more frequent among voters in heterogeneous contexts.

Looking at vote shifts between the 1999 and 2004 elections (or the match between the respondent's choice of political party at both elections) bivariate correlations for homogenous contexts in table 11 are far stronger (Spearman's rho .662**) compared to heterogeneous contexts (Spearman's rho .531**).[18] Reported vote shifts between the 2004 and 2009 elections shows that respondents living in homogenous contexts are far less likely to shift their support to a new party. The match shown in table 11 between their chosen parties in both elections has a higher likelihood of being the same (Spearman's rho .501**) compared to respondents in heterogeneous contexts (Spearman's rho .332**).[19]

Table 11: Bivariate correlations: Social Context Types and Defections in Vote Choice

	Homogenous Contexts	**Heterogeneous Contexts**
1999-2004	.662**	.531**
2004-2009	.501**	.332**

Using a different coding on the vote choice variable where respondents are coded as (1) ANC supporters, (2) opposition supporters, (3) did not vote or (4) don't know, similar results emerge. Cross tabulations for vote choice in the 1999 and 2004 elections show that among ANC supporters 90% (CI=±2.20) who reportedly voted for the governing party in 2004 said they remained loyal once again in 2009 if they lived in homogenous contexts, compared with 88% (CI=±2.36) who remain loyal in heterogeneous contexts. A lesser percentage of voters who support ANC in 2004 shift their support to an opposition party (3% CI=±1.18) if they are in homogenous contexts, compared to voters in heterogeneous contexts (4% CI=±1.47). Similarly, among opposition party supporters, a greater proportion of respondents who supported an opposition party in 2004 are likely to do so again in 2009 if they lived in homogenous

[18] Don't know: .656**
[19] Don't know: .540**

contexts (79% CI=±2.94 vs. 70% CI=±3.34).[20] These differences are less compelling among ANC voters in 2004 than among opposition voters whose percentages, according to the confidence intervals, are significantly different.

Results for the second election are more pronounced and most likely reflect the more competitive nature of the 2009 election and the increase in the diversity of choice for many more voters. Cross tabulations for vote choice in the 2004 and 2009 elections show that among ANC supporters 93% (CI=±2.42) who voted for the governing party in 2004 remain loyal once again in 2009 if they lived in homogenous contexts, compared with 77% (CI=±4.05) who remain loyal in heterogeneous contexts. A far lesser percentage of voters who support ANC in 2004 shift their support to an opposition party (3% CI=±1.49) if they are in homogenous contexts, compared to voters in heterogeneous contexts (20% CI=±3.80). [21]

2.7 Loyalists vs. Party Switchers

Finally, I test my hypothesis in a slightly different manner by dividing voters into 'loyalists' (voters who support the same party across two consecutive elections) and 'switchers' (voters who shift their support to another party). Bivariate correlations with social context types show again (see Table 9) that in 2009 'loyalists' tend to live in homogenous partisan contexts while 'party switchers' associate with heterogeneous partisan environments (Phi .244**; Spearman's rho .262**). The findings are not significant for the 2004 election (Phi .062; Spearman's rho .048).

2.8 Multivariate analysis: do social contexts make an independent contribution?

A number of theoretical explanations for voting behaviour in South Africa appear both reasonable and possible. Arguments suggesting that sociological reasons motivate South African voters are convincing. After all, domestic politics has pivoted around racial dynamics for many years. The economic and political performances of government are also important factors: good economic performance will determine job-creation in the medium term while good governance, proper socio-economic delivery and institutional and leadership performances are key measures of any democratic regime. Partisanship remains a strong indicator of support and the cognitive abilities and voters mediate the

[20] Cramer's V: 568**
[21] Cramer's V: .507**

way people perceive and process political information. To estimate the unique, independent contribution of social contexts it is imperative to ensure that the effects of one's context type stand up independently against other important predictors of voting behavior.

Using the 2009 data, I perform four separate regressions to explore the various attitudinal and behavioural elements of voting that are explored in the bivariate analyses above. Predictors include widely accepted theoretical indicators of voting such as party identification, level of interest in the election campaign, an evaluation of government performance, and several pertinent demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, education and urban-rural residence). These variables are entered together with a set of dummy variables that tap the two context types. Each multivariate analysis is run twice – in the first regression all the above-listed variables are entered into the regression. In the second instance, the insignificant predictors are removed from the model and only the statistically significant results are included in the analysis. These secondary results are presented in Tables 12 to 15. The results of the four regressions conclusively demonstrate that the effect of one's context type continues to make an independent and statistically significant contribution towards predicting various aspects of voting behavior (and in the hypothesized direction) even when other salient factors are considered. Moreover, social context types often make relatively larger impacts than these other important predictors.

2.8.1 Loyalist or defector

The odds of a voter in a heterogeneous context being a 'defector' or 'swing' voter are 5.8 times higher than for a voter living in a homogenous context (Table 12). The only other statistically significant predictor is whether one is a party identifier or not. As we might expect, the chances of a non-partisan switching their vote is 2.3 times higher than a partisan supporter. The model's effect size is .144 (Nagelkerke).

Table 12: Logistic regression: Loyalist or defector

DV: Loyalist (0) or defector (1)			***95% CI for Odds ratio (Exp B)***		
Variables	**B (SE)**	**Sig.**	***Lower***	***Odds Ratio***	***Upper***
Homogenous context (Ref group)		.000			
Don't know	.434 (.621)	.485	.457	1.543	5.210
Heterogeneous context	1.764 (.408)	.000	2.622	5.833	12.979
Partisan or not	.869 (.350)	.013	1.200	2.385	4.738
(Constant)	-3.461 (.370)	.000		.031	

Note: R^2 = .067 (Cox and Snell), .144 (Nagelkerke), Model x^2 (3) = 34.15, p<.000. Excluded insignificant variables: level of interest in the election campaign, government performance evaluation, age, gender, race, education, and urban-rural residence.

2.8.2 Consider voting for another party?

The chances of voters from heterogeneous contexts considering voting for another party than his/her usual political party choice is 1.8 times higher than for voters living in homogeneous contexts (Table 13). In addition, the literature on voter behavior suggests that voters move their support based on their evaluations of incumbent performance (Downs, 1957; Fiorina, 1981). Table 13 shows that if voters perceive that government's handling of the most important problems was poor they are more likely to consider voting for another party. In other words, evaluations of government's performance make an independent contribution from context type to one's decision about voting for a different party. Furthermore, younger people are more likely than their older counterparts to consider voting for another party. The model's effect size is .092 (Nagelkerke).

Table 13: Logistic regression: Consider voting for another party?

DV: Consider voting for another party?			***95% CI for Odds ratio (Exp B)***		
Variables	**B (SE)**	**Sig.**	***Lower***	***Odds Ratio***	***Upper***
Age	-.020 (.007)	.004	.967	.981	.994
Homogenous context (Ref group)		.000			
Don't know	-.880 (.383)	.022	.196	.415	.878
Heterogeneous context	.612 (.197)	.002	1.254	1.844	2.711
Government performance evaluation	-.322 (.118)	.007	.575	.725	.914
(Constant)	-.064 (.374)	.864		.938	

Note: R^2 = .062 (Cox and Snell), .092 (Nagelkerke), Model x^2 (4) = 42.22, p<.000. Excluded insignificant variables: partisan identifier, level of interest in the election campaign, gender, race, education, and urban-rural residence.

2.8.3 Strength of partisanship

Undoubtedly, the strength of partisanship can be explained by whether one is a party identifier or not. In addition, however, social context types also matter – voters in homogenous contexts have stronger partisan attitudes (Table 14). Finally, the intensity of partisan attitudes increases when levels of interest in the election campaign increase. The model explains 77 percent of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 14: OLS regression: Strength of partisanship

DV: Strength of partisanship					**95% CI for B**	
Variables	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**Sig.**	**Lower**	**Upper**
(Constant)	-.679	.059		.000	-.795	-.562
Partisan or not	2.151	.038	.823	.000	2.077	2.225
Homogenous context vs. others (dummy)	-.188	.037	-.073	.000	-.261	-.116
Don't know vs. others (dummy)	-.118	.055	-.030	.034	-.226	-.009
Interest in campaign	.136	.017	.120	.000	.103	.168

Note: R^2 = .775, Adjusted R^2 = .774, ΔR^2 = .775, (p <.000) Excluded insignificant variables: evaluation of government performance, age, education, urban-rural, gender and race.

2.8.4 When did you decide to vote for that party?

Finally, social context types also make an independent and statistically significant contribution to the timing of a voter's decision making to support a particular party. Voters in homogenous social contexts are more likely to make earlier decisions about which party to vote for compared to individuals living in heterogeneous contexts (Table 15). Partisan voters tend to make earlier decisions than non-partisans, as do voters who are interested in the campaign; younger; more educated; and rural voters. In terms of race, black voters are more likely than coloured voters to make early, decisive decisions about which party to vote for, as are white voters compared to their black African counterparts. The model explains 12 percent of the variance in the dependent variable.

Table 15: OLS regression: When did you decide to vote for that party?

DV: When did you decide to vote for that party?					**95% CI for B**	
Variables	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**Sig.**	**Lower**	**Upper**
(Constant)	5.603	.238		.000	5.136	6.069
Partisan or not	-.659	.106	-.200	.000	-.867	-.450
Interest in campaign	-.118	.044	-.088	.007	-.204	-.033
Homogenous context vs. others (dummy)	.406	.093	.140	.000	.223	.589
Don't know vs. others (dummy)	.079	.141	.018	.573	-.197	.356
Age	-.002	.001	-.068	.028	-.003	.000
Education	.053	.024	.072	.028	.006	.101
Urban-rural	.314	.091	.116	.001	.136	.493
Black vs. Coloured	-.357	.153	-.074	.020	-.659	-.056
Black vs. Indian	.348	.278	.039	.211	-.198	.893
Black vs. White	.309	.144	.071	.032	.027	.592

Note: R^2 = .127, Adjusted R^2 = .118, ΔR^2 = .127, (p <.000) Excluded insignificant variables: evaluation of government performance and gender.

3. Changes to the social context: comparing the 2004 and 2009 elections

If the unique events that preceded the 2009 election affected the partisan content of political information flowing through communication networks, we can expect to see higher levels of political discussion and engagement with regular discussants compared to the previous election. Moreover, if the partisan content of political information was more heterogeneous in 2009 the social context should reflect this. There should be a noticeable decline, at the aggregate level, in homogenous social contexts, and an increase in heterogeneous contexts. Finally, if discussion contexts were more heterogeneous in 2009, more voters should have deviated from their previous vote choice. Electoral volatility should have therefore increased in 2009, a proposition that is tentatively supported by

the shifts in party support seen in that election, particularly the decline in vote share for the governing party, and growth in support for opposition parties. This section explores differences between the 2004 and 2009 elections in a) frequency of political discussion with regular discussants; and b) the extent of heterogeneity within social contexts.

3.1 Frequency of political discussion: 2004 versus 2009 elections

The most frequent discussants with which to 'talk politics' are one's 'primary discussant', then one's spouse/partner, followed by family, friends, neighbours and lastly, co-workers. The low levels of discussion with co-workers may be partly due to high unemployment levels. For example, in 2004, 31.5 percent of respondents reported being without a job and were not actively seeking employment, while 37.9 were without employment and actively seeking employment (a total of 69.4 percent). And as expected of both groups 88.7 % and 87.2% respectively reported 'never' engaged in discussion with co-workers. Among employed respondents who report 'never being engaged in discussion with co-workers' was only between 62 and 55 percent.

Nevertheless, the overall distribution of campaign closely reflects global patterns (Beck and Gunther, 2012: 27). A noticeable feature in table 16 is the increase in political discussion across the two elections. Those who frequently discussed politics with family (often or sometimes) increased from 31 percent in 2004 to 58 percent in 2009. Similarly, frequent discussion with friends rose from 35 percent to 53 percent, for neighbours from 17 to 28 percent, and for co-workers from 15 to 23 percent. There is also a slight increase of 3 percent in political discussion with respondent's primary discussant from 57 to 60. Again when asked how often the respondent discussed the election campaigns with their spouse or partner 47 percent reported they did frequently, increasing to 64 percent in 2009 (a 17 percent increase).

Table 16: Percentage of respondents who self-declare exposure to campaign discussion with discussants

	2004	2009	% change
Family	31	58	27
Friends	35	53	18
Neighbours	17	28	11
Co-workers	15	23	8
Primary discussant	57	60	3
Spouse	47	64	17

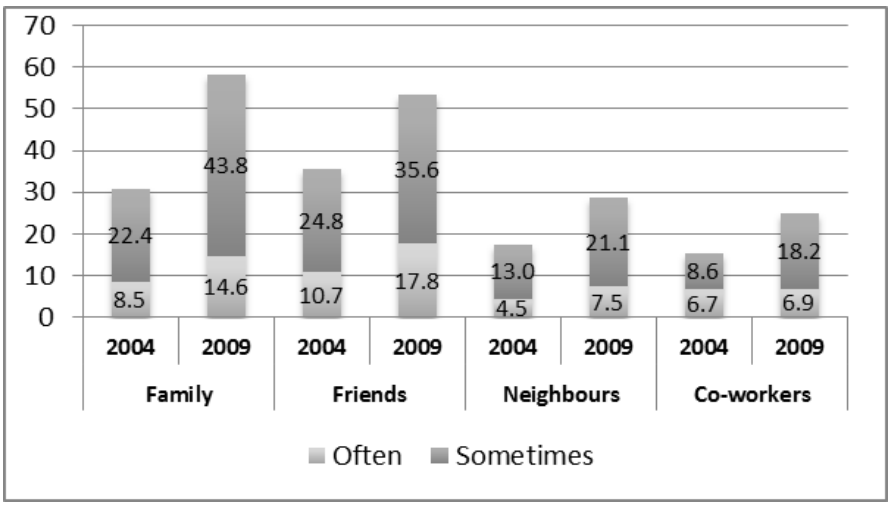

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who self-declare exposure to campaign discussion with discussants

Political discussion is always likely to be higher during an election campaign and these figures therefore reflect higher than normal engagement since they specifically tap the two election phases (Huckfeldt *et al*., 2004: 16). The increase in interpersonal discussion in the 2009 campaign makes South Africa one of the most politically interactive electorates, ranking at sixth place alongside other CNEP countries. The increase is an encouraging sign of a renewed demand for deliberation among citizens. In 2004, South Africa's levels of political discussion ranked low compared to other countries (Beck and Gunther, 2012: 27). Beck and Gunther concluded then, drawing on work by Mattes (2005), that the low levels of discussion in South Africa was a symptom of a decline of interest in partisan politics due to a lack of competition in the political system. This was said to relate to the hegemonic position of the dominant ANC party (Beck and Gunther, 2012: 26; Mattes, 2005).

During the 2009 campaign, however, a majority or more of respondents report discussing politics with their first discussant, spouse, family and friends. Few countries match this level of discussion (Beck and Gunther, 2012: 26). For instance, political discussions with one's spouse/partner at 64 percent is a comparatively higher score than the United Kingdom (42 percent), Germany (43 percent), Hong Kong (26 percent), Japan (32 percent), Chile (47 percent), the United States (61 percent), and Spain at 62 percent, while falling below Italy (77 percent) and Greece (65 percent) (Richardson and Beck, 2007: 186). But why the overall increases in frequency of discussion in the 2009 election? Drawing on Mattes' earlier point, perhaps changes in perceptions about the hegemonic position of the ANC and the increasing potential for electoral competition in the 2009 election had bearing on voters' levels of political engagement during the campaign. The change in ANC leadership and the ushering in of a controversial president, as well as the associated split in the governing party and the emergence of COPE increased expectations that party fortunes could change and, in turn, may have heightened engagement among voters. Free television space for political party advertisements and media coverage of the fiercely fought campaigns, especially between the ANC, COPE and the DA, should have provided further stimulus for discussion. By contrast, in the 2004 election the parties offered the voters little that was novel.

The 2009 CNEP election campaign data also shows substantial increases in exposure to political news from newspapers and television compared to the earlier 2004 campaign. While 22 percent of respondents received political news via newspapers at least once or twice a week in the 2004 election this increased to 31 percent in 2009. And while 41 percent received political news from TV at least once or twice a week in the 2004 election this increased to 54 percent in 2009. Overall, the increases in exposure to political news and political discussion suggest that voters in 2009 had access to greater amounts of political information and were more engaged compared to the previous election.

3.2 Context types: 2004 vs. 2009 elections

Finally, the data supports the proposition that there was an erosion of 'hermetically sealed' homogenous partisan social contexts during the 2009 election, and a significant increase in heterogeneous contexts. Data in Table 6 shows an overall decline of 8 percent in homogenous contexts (from 49% to 41%); a slight decrease of 1% in those uncertain about their discussants partisan preferences (from 16% to 15%); and an increase of 9% in heterogeneous contexts (from 35% to 44%) and these changes can be inferred to the wider population.

Discussion

In South Africa, many voters reside within highly homogenous partisan discussant contexts, where their partisan identities are congruent with almost all their personal discussants. Data from the 2004 election found this phenomenon to be widespread, affecting almost half of the electorate (49%) decreasing to 41 percent in 2009. Yet, many more voters are not embedded in homogenous political information contexts. Some exist in social contexts where uncertainty or ambivalence prevails. The rest are subject to cross-pressures as they receive a mix of contradictory partisan signals from their politically heterogeneous contexts. The surprisingly low within-group homogeneity regarding political discussion is important for democratic politics because, as previously noted, when people are exposed to political deliberation, and even political disagreement, the quality of opinion formation and, ultimately, the chances for electoral change increase (Huckfeldt *et al*., 2004: 2).

The data also shows that the level of partisan homogeneity within social contexts can influence individual-level electoral behavior, even after other salient influences are considered. Voters that reside within highly homogenous discussion contexts tend to be far more consistent in their behaviour, deviating less frequently from their party identification, or their previous vote choice. They are also stronger party identifiers making them core supporters for any political party. Their attitudes towards parties and politics will likely continue to be shaped by those closest to them as they experience ongoing reinforcement of their existing partisan attachments. They are likely to continue to conform to the dominant partisan norm, and are the most unlikely voters to move their support to another party.

Their behavior at elections also provides a plausible explanation for the appearance of strong cleavage voting in South Africa, even when people are not explicitly expressing their racial identities. Outcomes are simply a reflection of racially defined information contexts, which remain politically homogenous because of ongoing reinforcement and behavioural conformities. In other words, the appearance of racial voting simply reflects the compounding effects of the high levels of partisan bias of the information context within which the voter resides. As Beck *et al.* (2002) conclude, '…voters do not operate in the social vacuum that much of the contemporary literature seems to assume. Rather, voters' enduring personal characteristics interact with the messages they are receiving from the established social context in which they operate' (Beck *et al*., 2002: 69).

In contrast, voters with politically diverse or heterogeneous discussion contexts are more likely to defect from their party identification when they vote; are more

likely to defect from their previous vote choice in subsequent elections, have weaker partisan ties and are more likely to consider alternative political homes. This finding has particular importance for electoral competition in South Africa's one-party dominant democracy. For a substantial proportion of the electorate, while political discussion and opinion formation is shaped by partisan attitudes and everyday experiences, it is also profoundly influenced by the extent of diversity of political communication with those around them. And the mere presence of deliberation, debate and occasional disagreement within these contexts should enrich the quality of opinion formation at elections. Ultimately, these voters are more receptive to short-term political developments, are more willing to adjust their political attitudes and therefore inject much-needed degree of electoral uncertainty when they do vote.

Finally, the decrease of partisan homogeneity in discussant contexts across the two elections suggests that momentous socio-political developments – if sufficiently powerful – can change the nature of social contexts in a society. In the case of South Africa, the events leading up to the 2009 election that brought about the ANC's leadership change and the rise of COPE challenged voter loyalties especially among black South Africans. These events diversified the partisan content of political information flowing to voters, affecting the way they learnt about and responded to political parties and candidates. Survey data supports the notion of an exceptional campaign in 2009 – illustrated in the increases in exposure to political news, increases in political discussion, and importantly, the overall decline in politically congruent social contexts. This potential for increased competition among the major political parties, plus free television and radio space for political party advertisements, was suitably inspiring for voters to intensify their political discussions and exposure to media coverage. With many more voters exposed to more partisan diversity, their discussant contexts became less politically congruent, accounting for the overall decline in homogenous contexts. With more heterogeneous contexts, electoral volatility should have increased as more voters deviated from their previous vote choice. This proposition is tentatively supported by the shifts in party support witnessed in that election, particularly the declines in ANC support, new support for COPE, and increases in support for the DA as voters sought new political homes.

Overall, this decline in homogeneous contexts during 2009 presents an encouraging sign for South Africa's democratic future. If the content of political information flowing through social contexts continues to diversify in future election campaigns, the 'buttressing effects' of partisan congruence on voting decisions should decrease as homogeneous partisan contexts erode further. This development should foster new opportunities for political competition.

Appendix

1. Types of Social Contexts in South Africa

1.1 Partisan congruence and regular discussants

Family, Friends, Neighbours, Co-workers:
Table 1: Cell percentages are respondents who engage in discussion (either rarely, sometimes or often) with the regular discussants and support the same party as the respondent. Respondents who state that they never discuss politics are unlikely to have regular discussants and are unlikely to know which party they support, and are excluded from the analysis.

Partisan congruence is operationalised by the following item:
Question item: *Do you think each of these groups supported the same party as you, supported another party, or is their support divided among several different parties, or don't you know enough about their views to say? A. Family; B. Friends; C. Neighbours; D. Co-workers. (1) Supported same party; (2) Supported another party; (3) Support is divided among different parties; (9) Don't know.* Recoded as follows: *(1) Same party (2) Don't know (3) Different party.* Total *n*=1200.

Spouse:
Table 2: Cell percentages in the first row indicate levels of partisan congruence between respondent and spouse/partner as a percentage of the entire sample.

Partisan congruence is operationalised by a match between the respondents' self-declared party identification and the party the respondent believes the spouse supported in the previous election.
Question item: If married or living with partner: *Which party did he/she support in the last election?*
Party support is coded so that each individual party has the same response code number for both respondent and discussant and also the categories 'did not vote' or 'do not support a party'.

Primary Discussant:
Table 3: Cell percentages indicate levels of partisan congruence between respondent and primary discussant as a percentage of the entire sample.

Question item: *Now I would like you to think of someone else with whom you most frequently talk about matters that are most important to you. Which party did he/she support in the last election?*
Party support is coded so that each individual party has the same response code number for both respondent and discussant and also the categories 'did not vote' or 'do not support a party'.

1.2 Homogenous vs. heterogeneous social contexts

A total score of context heterogeneity is calculated for each respondent's discussant context by tallying the congruence scores of four of the respondent's personal discussants. Each respondent is assigned to a category depending on the extent of congruence within his/her context group. The less heterogeneous/ more homogenous context category (1) requires that respondents perceive at least two or more of their four discussants support the same party as they do. The more heterogeneous/ less homogenous context category (3) requires that respondents think that at least two or more of their four discussants support a different party to theirs. If respondents have three or more discussants of which they do not know their party preference they coded into the 'don't know' category (2). The scale that excludes co-workers is based on the same requirements; respondents had to respond positively for at least two or more of three discussants before being placed into a category.

Table 17: Frequency distribution of dependent variable: Social Context Type 2004

2004	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid percent**	**Cumulative percent**
More homogenous (1)	233	19.5	49.4	49.4
Don't know (2)	75	6.3	15.9	65.3
More heterogeneous (3)	164	13.7	34.7	100.0

Total	472	39.4	100.0	
Missing	723	60.6		
Total	1200	100.0		

Table 18: Frequency distribution of dependent variable: Social Context Type 2009

2009	**Frequency**	**Percent**	**Valid percent**	**Cumulative percent**
More homogenous (1)	321	26.8	41.3	41.3
Don't know (2)	115	9.6	14.8	56.1
More heterogeneous (3)	341	28.5	43.9	100.0
Total	778	64.8	100.0	
Missing	422	35.2		
Total	1200	100.0		

Table 19: Distribution of Partisan Congruence for Social Context Scales 2004

2004 Aggregate congruence	**Friends, Family & Neighbours %**	**Friends, family, Neighbours & Co-workers**
0 – Respondent has no congruent relationships	62.8 (753)	62.6 (751)
1 – Respondent has 1 congruent relationship	17.5 (208)	16.7 (200)
2 – Respondent has 2 congruent relationships	11.6 (140)	10.8 (130)
3 - Respondent has 3 congruent relationships	8.2 (98)	7.3 (88)
4 - Respondent has 4 congruent relationships	N/A	2.5 (30)
(Missing)	1	2
Total	100% (1200)	100% (1200)

Table 20: Distribution of Partisan Congruence for Social Context Scales 2009

2009 Aggregate congruence	**Friends, Family & Neighbours %**	**Friends, family, Neighbours & Co-workers %**
0 – Respondent has no congruent relationships	32.6% (391)	31.8 (381)
1 – Respondent has 1 congruent relationship	29.7 (357)	27.9 (335)
2 – Respondent has 2 congruent relationships	22.9 (274)	22.7 (272)
3 - Respondent has 3 congruent relationships	14.8 (178)	9.5 (114)
4 - Respondent has 4 congruent relationships	N/A	8 (95)
(Missing)	-	.2 (3)
Total	100% (1200)	100% (1200)

1.3 Who lives in mono-partisan worlds?

Respondents Demographics:

Location: *Urban (1) Rural (2)*
Education: *What is the highest level of education you have completed? (0) No formal schooling; (8) Post graduate.*
Age: *How old were you at the time of your last birthday?* Interval variable
Gender: *Male (1), Female (2).*
Race: *What is your ethnic group or tribe? Black African (1); Coloured (2); Asian/Indian (3); White (4).*
Poverty status: Type of house: *(1) Luxury, (2) Semi luxury, (3) Middle, (4) Lower middle, (5) Poor, (6) Shack.*

2. Context types and their influence on voter behaviour

Bivariate Correlations:
Dependent variable: Context type: *(1) More homogenous context (2) Don't know (3) More heterogeneous context.*

2.1 When did you decide to vote?

'When did you decide to vote for that party?' (1) Always intended voting for this party, (2) Before the election campaign started, (3) At least a month before election day, (4) A few weeks before election day, (5) In the last week before election day, (6) On election day.

2.2 Partisan identification

Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party? (1) Partisan, (2) Non partisan.

2.3 Strength of Partisan Attitudes

Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close? (1) Very strong, (2) Somewhat strong, (3) Not very strong, (4) No allegiance.

Political agreement with spouse/partner
If married or living with partner: When you talk to him/her, do you agree (about the recent election) (0) never (1) rarely (2) Sometimes (3) Often (5) not married/living with partner (9) don't know. Recoded to (*1) Extensive agreement between respondent and source, (2) Difference of opinions between respondent and source, (3) No party allegiances/non partisan.*

Political agreement with primary discussant
When you talk to him/her, do you agree (about the recent election) (0) never (1) rarely (2) sometimes (3) often (9) don't know. Recoded to (*1) Extensive agreement between respondent and source, (2) Difference of opinions between respondent and source, (3) No party allegiances/non partisan.*

2.4 Consider voting for another party

'Did you consider voting for another party? (1) No, (2) Yes.

2.5 Consistency and deviation: partisanship and vote choice

Bivariate correlations show the 'match' between two variables, the respondent's self-declared party identification and the political party that the respondent voted for in the recent election. Both the party identification and party support variables have identical response category codes and include a category per individual party, and a category for 'did not vote/do not support a party'. The dataset is split or layered by the Context Type dependent variable to obtain separate bivariate correlations for the 3 categories (homogenous contexts, don't know, and heterogeneous contexts) for comparison.

Respondent's Partisanship
Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party? Which party is that?
(1) African Christian Democratic Party
(2) African Muslim Party

(3) African National Congress
(4) Afrikander Unity Movement
(5) Azanian People's Organisation
(6) Congress of the People
(7) Democratic Alliance
(8) Freedom Front
(9) Independent Democrats
(10) Inkatha Freedom party
(11) Minority Front
(12) Pan Africanist Congress
(13) United Christian Democratic party
(14) United Democratic Movement
(95) Do not think of themselves as close to any party
(96) Other party
(98) Refused
(99) Don't know

Respondent's Vote Choice
For which party did you vote for national government?
Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party? Which party is that?
(1) African Christian Democratic Party
(2) African Muslim Party
(3) African National Congress
(4) Afrikander Unity Movement
(5) Azanian People's Organisation
(6) Congress of the People
(7) Democratic Alliance
(8) Freedom Front
(9) Independent Democrats
(10) Inkatha Freedom party
(11) Minority Front
(12) Pan Africanist Congress
(13) United Christian Democratic party
(14) United Democratic Movement
(95) Do not think of themselves as close to any party
(96) Other party
(98) Refused
(99) Don't know

2.6 Defection in vote choice across elections (switchers versus standpatters)

Bivariate correlations show the 'match' between two variables, the political party that the respondent voted for in the most recent election and the previous election. Both party support variables have identical response category codes and include a category per individual party, and a category for 'did not vote/do not support a party'. The dataset is split or layered by the Context Type dependent variable to obtain separate bivariate correlations for the 3 categories (homogenous contexts, don't know, and heterogeneous contexts) for comparison.

Respondent's Vote Choice: 2004 and 2009
For which party did you vote for national government?
(1) African Christian Democratic Party
(2) African Muslim Party
(3) African National Congress
(4) Afrikander Unity Movement
(5) Azanian People's Organisation
(6) Congress of the People
(7) Democratic Alliance
(8) Freedom Front
(9) Independent Democrats
(10) Inkatha Freedom party
(11) Minority Front

(12) Pan Africanist Congress
(13) United Christian Democratic party
(14) United Democratic Movement
(95) Do not think of themselves as close to any party
(96) Other party
(98) Refused
(99) Don't know

Respondent's Previous Vote Choice: 1999 and 2004
Do you recall what party you voted for national government in the previous general elections in 1999?
Do you recall what party you voted for national government in the previous general elections in 1999?
(Same coding categories and numbering)

Cross tabulations in this section use a different coding for the vote choice variable where respondents are coded as (1) ANC supporters, (2) opposition supporters, (3) did not vote or (4) don't know.

2.7 Loyalists vs. Party Switchers

Bivariate correlations test the match between loyalists and party switchers and context types. The 'loyalist vs. party switcher' variable was recoded using the respondent's vote choice variables for 1999 and 2004; and 2004 and 2009. If the respondent voted for the same political party across two consecutive elections (1999 and 2004 or 2004 and 2009 they were coded to the *(1) Loyalist* category on the new variable. If they moved their support across either of the two sets of elections they were coded into the *(2) Party switcher* category.

2.8 Multivariate analysis: do social contexts make an independent contribution?

The selection of predictor variables is based on sound theoretical grounds. Only after the initial first round of analysis are insignificant variables excluded from the repeated regression analysis.

Party identification: *Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular political party? (1) Partisan, (2) Non partisan;*
Government performance evaluation: *Thinking of the most important problem facing South Africa at that time, how well or badly would you say the ANC government handled that issue over the previous year? (1) Very badly (2) Badly (3) Well (4) Very well.*
Interest in the campaign: *How closely did you follow this election campaign? (1) Very closely (2) Fairly closely (3) Not very closely (4) Not closely at all.*
Demographic variables: age, gender, race, education and urban-rural residence. Coding of the demographic variables is identical to that shown above.

3. Changes to the social context: comparing the 2004 and 2009 elections

3.1 Frequency of political discussion: 2004 versus 2009 elections

How frequently did you talk about the candidates, parties or issues with your: A. Family B. Friends C. Neighbours D. Co-workers (0) Never (1) rarely (2) Sometimes (3) Often.

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