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From ‘White Liberal’ to ‘Rainbow Nation’ and Beyond:

The Dynamics of Party Adaptation in a Racialised Environment

Abstract

The Democratic Alliance (DA) has been the only opposition party in democratic South Africa to demonstrate consistent growth in every election since 1994. In order to achieve this growth, it has had to adapt its label from a ‘White Liberal’ party to a Rainbow Nation party in a racialised environment where race still affects voter choice. The party’s greatest challenge has been to attract black voters and this has formed a central feature of its adaptation since the late 1990s. Although the DA’s growth is well-documented in the literature on elections in South Africa, there has been little scholarly interrogation of the dynamics of the DA’s growth from a party behaviour perspective. The thesis seeks to fill this gap by providing an explanation for the DA’s growth through party behaviour theory. Using the Party Evolution Model (Lamprinakou, 2008), the thesis examines the party’s origins, its identity and its political marketing adaptation from 1994 to 2017. Beginning with the formation of the Progressive Party in 1959, the thesis follows the party’s several reoriginations which led to the formation of what is now the DA. It identifies the party’s organisational type and ideological identity and how this is beginning to shift as the party attempts to attract black voters. The adaptation of the party into a modern, diverse party occurs at the organisational and political marketing levels. Through an exploration of party communications, policies and internal documents from 1994 to 2017, the thesis argues that the DA has adapted from a policy-seeking, product-oriented party to a vote-seeking hybrid of sales- and market-orientation. The thesis explores the DA’s organisational and party label adaptation; its attempts to balance its racial markets since 1994; the realignment of politics in South Africa; and the connection between the DA’s history and its present trajectory.