

Opinion '99 was a series of opinion polls conducted prior to the 1999 election. They aimed to provide as complete a picture as possible of South African's views of the political, social and economic developments in the country since 1994. The polls covered key issues related to the conduct of free and fair elections, voter participation, and other economic, political and partisan trends.

Opinion '99 was run by Idasa, Markinor and the SABC, along with the Electoral Institute of South Africa to increase credibility of the results and to utilise the best range of data collection and analysis expertise available.

Several key findings of the surveys had important impacts on the electoral process:

The surveys confirmed the existence of a large proportion of citizens who lacked the correct identity documents to register. The increased public debate after the release of these results was followed by an extension of the registration process as well as the creation of Temporary Registration and an intensified public advertising campaign.

The results helped identify the issues that ordinary voters think are most important (ie job creation, crime-reduction, education, housing, the economy and health care). This helped re-orient the way that the media covered the campaign and focussed government and opposition attention on these key issues.

The surveys also revealed the existence of quite a sophisticated electorate and who differentiate between a range of dimensions of political performance and who look to real-world events such as the economy, government performance, and how the country is doing to help them make political choices.

In terms of accuracy of predictions, KwaZulu-Natal was the only place where there a significant difference in party support compared to the survey results. A range of opinion surveys in early 1999 a potential sharp shift away from the IFP and toward the ANC, especially in rural areas. All surveys conducted in this period over-estimated ANC support and had difficulty tapping IFP support. Idasa is currently undertaking a detailed statistical analysis of the results in KwaZulu/Natal with a particular emphasis on the profiles of undecided and undeclared voters to re-examine this issue

The surveys performed very well in suggesting the general shape of the election results at the national level. The surveys revealed the growth of ANC strength toward the two-thirds threshold, a rapid rise in DP strength, a decline in NP support and the declining fortunes of UDM, PAC and FF. On the provincial level the surveys performed well in estimating party support in eight of the nine provinces.