

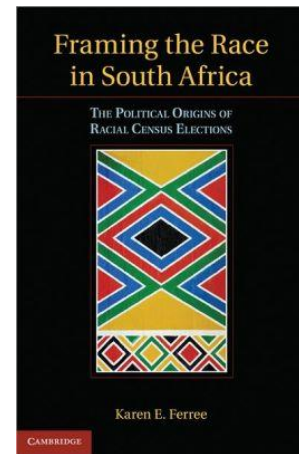
Karen E. Ferree, **Framing the Race in South Africa: The Political Origins of Racial Census Elections**, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 291 pp., \$29.00 (paperback).

Review by

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From the first sentence of *Framing the Race in South Africa*, author Karen E. Ferree hooks the reader by laying out the popular storyline that “post-apartheid South African elections bear an unmistakable racial imprint: Africans vote for one set of parties, while whites support a different set of parties . . .” The brilliance of her argument, however, is in how quickly she challenges this notion and asks, “What role can persuasion play if voters simply register their social identity when they enter the polling booth?” Proceeding from this question she shows how persuasion functions, framing her debate around political party strategies, party images, and the never-ending yet never-lasting party marriages.



I was skeptical about Ferree, a white American Harvard graduate writing about South African politics. The tendency of authors from developed countries is to reproduce the familiar, all-knowing narratives of the paternal West about African countries. A fitting example is *The Shackled Continent: Power, Corruption, and African Lives*, a book by Robert Guest. Guest laments the ruin that is the African continent.

Distancing colonists from the damage caused on the African continent, Guest writes, “the colonists left deep scars. But they also left behind” helpful things such as roads, clinics, and laws. If colonialism was what held Africa back, you would expect the continent to have boomed when the settlers left. It didn’t.” Throughout this book Guest uses a language that forcefully personifies Africa as a place of barbarism. Yet Guest admits to leaving “out a lot of good things about Africa,” an acknowledgment he downplays. Such mischief is absent in *Framing the Race*, as Ferree does not delve into apportioning blame. Rather, she sticks to analyzing each national general election since 1994, tracing political campaigning and voting spanning a 10-year period.

Readers will also find *Framing the Race* differs from other books authored by South Africans. On May 7, 2014, South Africans voted in national general elections. Ahead of the elections, bookstores displayed books written about politics and voting. One example is *The Fall of the ANC: What Next?*, a book by Prince Mashele and Mzukisi Qobo. In this book, Mashele and Qobo argue that “the ANC has been corrupted beyond repair by the seductions of power.” Further, they add that “unlike the sea, the party has no self-cleansing mechanism.” The recurring theme in this book and those in its category is the failure of the African National Congress (ANC) to govern. The ANC has clenched election victory since the first democratic elections in 1994.

Unlike *The Fall of the ANC* and the other books in its category, *Framing the Race* stays grounded on the mechanisms of voter persuasion. Ferree does not narrate stories of incompetence, something that undergirds the content of the other books.

The book is divided into nine chapters. From the third chapter, Ferree opens with a vignette that outlines key arguments made in the first two chapters. While she discusses the negative framing strategies of South African political parties, she also looks into El Salvador and Israel to provide a comparative analysis. She does this to show how political parties "in both countries used image control and negative framing strategies to discredit their opponents" in order to claim election victory.

In chapters 3 to 5, Ferree gets into each of the election years 1994, 1999 and 2004 and elaborates on the different campaign tactics of persuasion and mobilization used by the political parties to entice voters. Analyzing the ANC tactics, for instance, she says that the party "fought fierce persuasion campaigns" against other African-led parties. Mobilization tactics were used in "areas where African challengers were weak." She also discusses other major parties that contested elections in each year. However, she spends more time writing about the ANC; the Democratic Alliance (DA), which was at one time the Democratic Party; and the National Party (NP), which changed its name and became the New National Party (NNP).

Ferree discusses campaign tactics, events, rhetoric used, and messages disseminated, but pays more attention to analyzing the role of party images. In the section covering the 1994 election in chapter 3, Ferree examines the attempts made by the parties to modify their images "to be more attractive" to voters. Party image is the central theme of the book and is carried forward in subsequent chapters. Using this theme, Ferree shows how parties such as the DA, the main competitor of the ANC for votes, and the NP (NNP in later years) struggled to invent new images. As Ferree discusses, in part these two parties were unsuccessful because the ANC in public platforms "preserved" its link to black oppression during the apartheid years.

In the 1999 election, things did not turn out differently for the parties opposing the ANC because it was able to fight back at each level. The DA (then Democratic Party) launched a "Fight Back" campaign to emphasize the shortcomings of the ruling ANC and to implore voters to wrest power from the ANC. In response, the ANC "attacked" the DA with a "Don't Fight Blacks" slogan. While the campaign posters with this slogan were eventually pulled down, the message received major media attention.

The analysis of party images culminates in chapter 5 when Ferree ties party images to performance. She illustrates how race took center stage in the campaign altercations of 2004 when the DA criticized the ANC for failing to live up to its election promises. The ANC reacted by arguing that "criticizing the ANC was tantamount to claiming that all governments headed by Africans were doomed to failure . . . that Africans were incapable of competent governance." Critics, according to the ANC, were "racist."

The final chapters 6 to 9 are not organized according to election years. Rather, these chapters enlarge the analysis of party images. Ferree does this by teasing-out the importance of "candidate characteristics" to voters and the difficulties political parties face when attempting to transform their party

images especially considering the negative tactics parties use to frame opponents. In the final chapter, the reader travels to El Salvador and Israel to taste the framing strategies used by ruling parties in those countries. There are no real missed opportunities in the book. However, Ferree could have phrased her debate more elegantly. The reader gets a cut-and-paste feel of the same words used in the introduction and the vignette reappearing in the text of each chapter.

Undergraduate students in the fields of political science and mass communication would find this book useful for its attention to research methodology and the analysis of political strategies. Some of the research methods Ferree uses in the book include content analysis of newspaper articles, and document and rhetorical analyses. In addition, political party campaign strategists could use this book to mitigate past election mistakes, especially in the lead to the 2014 elections.

As a South African and a mass communication scholar, I am interested in dialogue about South African politics. *Framing the Race* is grounded in communication theory and focuses on politicians as performers, voters as an audience, and the effects of the actions of the political performances on voters. I am also a member of the Midrand Group, an association of South African intellectuals actively engaged in stimulating dialogue about a range of social issues. As part of my activities, I write and publish articles about the South African society and politics for South African newspapers.

Although *Framing the Race* contextualizes South African politics, voting, and persuasion tactics, it allows a reader to generalize and understand voter persuasion tactics in other countries with a similar history of colonial rule, similar demographics, and domination by a single political party that "delegitimizes" the opposition. Readers will find this book both timely and timeless.