



The mystery of the 'don't knows'

More and more South Africans are telling pollsters they 'don't know' which party or leader they support. Likewise, a growing number flatly refuse to be interviewed by pollsters.

BOB MATTES untangles the quandaries this phenomenon poses for politicians

WHO ARE THE "DON'T KNOWS" and the "won't tells"? Why are their ranks swelling? Are they uncertain about the electoral choices? Or do they represent rising disenchantment with political parties, with the political process, or with politics itself? Or are we witnessing one more symptom of increasing political intolerance and intimidation throughout the country?

Since September 1991, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) "don't know" category (let's call it DK for short) has grown from 13% to 23% when people have been asked which leader they support. In roughly the same period, Markinor recorded a rise of DK among whites from 9% to 21%, and among urban blacks from 11% to 15%. When Markinor has asked people which political party they would vote for, the DK has increased markedly since May 1992; among whites from 4% to 12%, and among urban black voters from 11% to 16%. Research Surveys, too, has encountered a dramatic rise of DK among, for example, its black female sample (2% in February 1992, rocketing to 17% eight months later).

These figures are beginning to approach the levels of DK recorded during the dark days of bannings, restricted political activity and naked repression. In 1984, for example, HSRC recorded a 27% DK when they quizzed blacks in the PWV about their leadership preferences. A year later, a CASE survey posing more or less the same question found a 38% DK.

It's worth noting, though, that this phenomenon is not evenly distributed across all potential voters. The increase in DK detected, for example, by the HSRC has been:

- 10% to 24% among black South Africans.
- 13% to 17% among potential Asian voters.
- 14% to 22% among potential white voters.

The DK rate also differs markedly according to gender. The most recent

Markinor survey found that 12% of white men refused to say which leader they would vote for; in contrast, twice as many women (23%) refused to answer. DK responses also seem to differ drastically according to region and language.

What can we glean from this? On the one hand, the DK rate is related to the survey method. When you're interviewing people by telephone, it's difficult to draw them to reveal opinions on sensitive issues (like who they will vote



for). Mind you, personal interviewers have been known to badger (however politely) respondents who claim not have an opinion on an issue — a sort of “well, then get an opinion, quickly” attitude.

When the HSRC shifted from phone to personal interviews in September 1991, DK rates dropped dramatically:

- Among blacks from 26% to 11%.
- Coloureds from 46% to 20%.
- Asians from 46% to 21%.
- Whites from 14% to 12%.

A high rate of “don’t knows” obviously turns electoral predictions into a minefield. In order to compensate for the lower support levels recorded by surveys (due to the DK responses) and to make the projections more realistic and newsworthy, pollsters often provide the news media with estimates of each parties’ share of the total vote in an actual election. What they tend to do is assume that the people who land in the “refuse/don’t know” categories are distributed among the political parties in the same pattern as people who do divulge their choices. So, if 40% of respondents say they’ll vote for the ANC, then it is assumed that 40% of the DK category actually also supports the ANC.

This reasoning is not a problem if the DKs are “randomly” distributed among the sample. But, as we have seen, this is simply not the case. DK respondents seem to differ systematically from those who do divulge their opinions.

On top of this, DK responses can have a lot of different meanings. They can represent a form of “non-response” and apathy. “I don’t know” might actually mean, “Go away, you’re bothering me”; or, “My political opinions are none of your business”; or, “I don’t trust you”.

Or they signify overlooked features of social and political life in SA. In a recent omnibus survey among 8 000 blacks (in non-metropolitan and rural areas, squatter camps, hostels, Ciskei and Venda) HSRC found that:

- 4% of the total sample said they did not support or belong to any party because it was against their religion.
- 3% said they did not “believe” in politics.
- 12% said they were not interested in politics.

A glimpse at the ‘don’t knows’

The HSRC’s omnibus survey in February this year offered a glimpse of the ‘don’t knows’, dividing them by region. The first column reflects the percentage of ‘don’t knows’ on the question of which leader they support; the second column which party they support.

	Leader	Party
Venda	2%	?
Eastern Cape	?	?
Natal	6%	?
Western Cape	17%	14%
Northern Tvl, Gazankulu & Lebowa	22%	11%
PWV & Kwandebele	24%	10%
Orange Free State	31%	5%
Western Transvaal	40%	30%
Eastern Transvaal & Kangwane	43%	12%
Northern Cape	51%	15%

This suggests that about 20% of that HSRC sample seem to be out of reach of the usual mobilisation by political parties. A further 2% said it was too dangerous to support a political party.

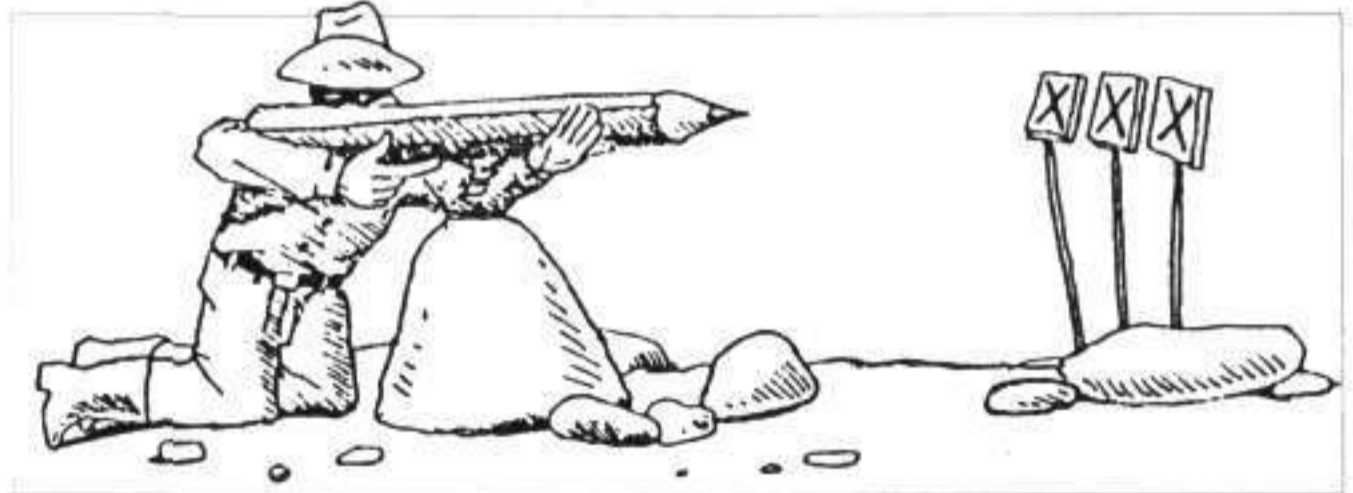
Intimidation appears to be most prevalent in specific areas. For example, a February 1992 Research Surveys poll found the DK response among

that voters have simply not made up their minds yet, or that they are uniformed. In the HSRC’s omnibus survey, 30% could not name more than three political parties, and 55% admitted they were uncertain or did not know the policy differences between the parties they *could* name.

So, at this point it might seem that the bulk of the DK phenomena is related to apathy. And, around the world, apathy and indifference often impacts on turnout on election day. Increasing rates of DK may give a rough indication of the problems confronting some political parties as they try to mobilise voters.

A related mystery is the “non-response”: people who simply refuse to be interviewed. This reaction rises dramatically in areas racked by violence and tension. Research Survey’s Jannie Hofmeyr has noted that in certain areas, such as Durban, 50% of black men and 60% of black women declined to discuss their political opinions with interviewers in a February 1992 poll.

It’s almost impossible to know for certain, but it seems likely that those who refuse to be interviewed differ from the rest of the sample in very



black women was 30% in Durban — compared to 4% in Port Elizabeth and 12-13% in the PWV and East London. At the same time, only 3% of black women in Durban professed to support the IFP (considerably lower than the rate of support suggested by other polls).

Interestingly, another 30% in that same poll said they supported some “other” party, one not listed by name in the question. In February 1993, Research Surveys found *no* black men in Durban who admitted to supporting the IFP (this poll had a DK rate of 27% in Durban compared with 6-9% elsewhere).

“Don’t know” could also mean

important ways (precisely because of the hostile or suspicious attitudes which lead them to avoid the pollster).

What this suggests is that certain sections of the public are not well-connected to the political process at the moment. And the evidence indicates they are not going to be brought into this process soon — at least not by simply providing them with more information.

A good part of the “don’t knows” seem to be unavailable for political mobilisation. Whether politicians can persuade these South Africans otherwise before next April remains to be seen. ■