

# Forging anti-colonial identities: African franchise and the making of anti-colonial Blackness in colonial South Africa, 1874-1890

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SSHA 2022

How do anti-colonial movements build a shared political identity to ground their struggle against colonialism? Although anti-colonial movements and new post-colonial nations often naturalize the identity of ‘the people of the nation’ who stood against the empire, history shows us that such shared political identities are hard to make. Despite such challenges, anti-colonial movements the world over worked to inaugurate new visions of political unity, overcoming pre-colonial political divides to unite people in a struggle for political independence. These anti-colonial identities both created powerful conceptual spaces from which to decry the evils of colonialism and continue to ground demands for justice into the post-colonial present. How are these powerful new identities made and how do they spread?

This paper examines these questions by looking at the early period of African Nationalism in South Africa, focusing on the surprising role that African voter rights played in building a shared Black identity in the emergence of African nationalist politics.

It is well known that in South Africa’s racist system of apartheid Africans were denied voter rights, and one clear symbol of post-apartheid liberation was the granting of franchise to all Black South Africans. Yet, it is less well known that Black franchise existed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century under British colonial rule. In this paper I will argue that the earliest emergence of African nationalism in South Africa was bound up in Africans seizing opportunities to vote as a tool to defend African interests in the Cape colony, and that the political efforts to strip away African voter rights played a powerful role in amplifying and spreading a Black political identity and uniting urban and rural movements in a shared political struggle.

To do this, I follow the transforming discursive foci of African political debates in the *isiXhosa* press through the early period of African franchise and disenfranchisement. I draw on a novel dataset of digitized *isiXhosa* newspapers which captures the total extent of the African language press in South Africa between 1874-1890, and thus reflects the earliest textual evidence of the proto-nationalist movement. Focusing on emerging *Ntsundu* (Black) and *Isizwe* (national/ethnic) identities and their links to African franchise, I follow newspaper debates through a period of rapid African voter mobilization (1880-1886), and a subsequent period of African voter suppression through new disenfranchisement laws (1887-1890). Here I use computational text analysis to trace how appeals to political identities changed over time, and to identify key historical moments which marked significant shifts in such identification. I complement this analysis with a close textual analysis of appeals Black and national identities to examine how a new vision of a unified struggle against racial exclusion emerged.

This discursive analysis, when placed into its historical context, shows how the proto-nationalist movement had to struggle to bridge many internal political cleavages, and was ultimately able to call forth a new collective community to face colonialism. I show that in the early 1880s voter registration was but one of a host of political strategies the proto-nationalist movement was experimenting with. It was primarily driven by urban missionary educated political leaders, but they were increasingly reaching to rural African voters—the largest group eligible to register and vote. However, the disenfranchisement laws of 1887 prompted a significant political realignment in proto-nationalist politics, drawing urban and rural African political movements together. In 1887, the Cape colony was poised to incorporate a new region which was home to a large number of potential rural African voters. This offered political opportunities to both urban and rural elites to build democratic force to pursue African interests—opportunities which were being denied due to the exclusion of rural

African voters. As such, it offered a new context of alliance between missionary-educated, liberal leaning African intellectuals and rural political leaders including chiefs and headmen. This was one turning point where the emerging political imagination of both missionary-educated and rural leaders were intertwined, and new political organizations which fought to defend African voter rights now for the first time united urban and rural African political organizations under a common umbrella. The clear attack on rural African voter rights ultimately fostered a new urban-rural political alliance and placed *abantsundu* (Black) identity at the center of political debates, creating the first urban-rural cross-regional movement and uniting the proto-nationalist movement in a shared Black identity.

This case offers insight into the larger possibilities and challenges of making anti-colonial identities and political movements. The early period shows how anti-colonial movements must grapple with the vastly different experiences, political communities, and knowledge frameworks which are present across a diverse colonized society. Yet as the impact of colonialism penetrates the lives of urban and rural alike, new common challenges emerge which foster a political and ideological intertwining of previously distinct political movements—these contexts of interconnection produce political innovation which merge many traditions into creative new whole. These processes also reveal the impacts of political exclusion more broadly in our post-colonial present (take for example voter suppression), showing how common exclusion offers the basis for the creation of new political identities which draw diverse excluded groups into a creative and innovative new political whole.