

VOTING BEHAVIOUR AND IDENTITY POLITICS: *Reflections on the 2024 National and Provincial Elections in South Africa*

**Simangele Dlamini¹, Odilile Ayodele², Yul Derek Davids³,
and Sarine Krovitz⁴**

Simangele Dlamini is a senior research specialist in the Developmental, Capable and Ethical State (DCES) division of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and a research associate in the Geography Department at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa.

Odilile Ayodele is a senior research specialist in the DCES and a senior research associate in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Yul Derek Davids is a research director in the DCES.

Sarine Krovitz graduated from Duke University, Los Angeles, USA, and is currently a Hart Leadership Fellow in Argentina.

ABSTRACT

The 2024 National and Provincial Elections marked a pivotal moment in South Africa's post-apartheid democracy, resulting in the African National Congress (ANC) losing its parliamentary majority for the first time. The shift in power dynamics necessitated coalition discussions and the possibility of a government of national unity, highlighting the intricate dynamics of voter behaviour. This article employs voter behaviour theory and document analysis to explore these complexities. The results reveal an intricate interplay of factors shaping electoral outcomes, with identity politics emerging as particularly salient. The emergence of new parties, such as uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party), together with ethnically charged campaign rhetoric, highlighted the potential for ethno-populist appeals. Hence the elections underscore the importance of comprehending voter behaviour within the context of the loss of power by a dominant liberation movement to a breakaway faction, whose support ostensibly exhibited ethnic undertones. Rational choice considerations around socioeconomic issues and growing

1  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8769-2860>

2  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7151-7080>

3  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8226-8937>

4  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2526-452X>

discontent with the ruling ANC also factored into voting decisions, indicating critical engagement by the electorate with political choices in 2024. Future elections will likely continue to reflect the complex interplay of identity, economic concerns, and evolving political loyalties in South Africa's maturing democracy.

Keywords: Voter behaviour, identity theory, African National Congress, uMkhonto weSizwe, political fluidity

INTRODUCTION

Analysing South Africa's 2024 elections requires a close understanding of voter behaviour and its implications. The 2024 South African National and Provincial Elections (NPEs) featured an unprecedented number of competing parties, with ethnically oriented parties such as uMkhonto weSizwe (MK Party) and the Patriotic Alliance (PA) achieving significant electoral gains among Zulu and coloured constituencies respectively. Additionally, there was a significant increase in the number of parties vying for seats in these elections, with many of them leaning towards identity politics and populist sentiment. These developments underscore the need to examine how voter identity – particularly race and ethnicity – shapes electoral behaviour in contemporary South Africa.

International literature indicates that identity politics play a significant role in determining voting behaviour. For instance, researchers have shown elections to be strongly influenced by racial ethnic identities and political attitudes in both the United States (Pérez 2015; Sides et al., 2018) and Western Europe (Kranendonk et al., 2018). Further research shows that partisan identities (Huddy et al., 2015) and religious group loyalties (Achen & Bartel, 2017) can significantly influence political behaviour, political decision-making, and emotional responses to campaigns. These studies collectively demonstrate that identity politics markedly influence voting behaviour across various contexts and demographic groups, highlighting how factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, and partisan affiliation shape political preferences and electoral choices.

Similarly, South African electoral behaviour is distinctly characterised by the strong influence of identity-driven political allegiances. Research by Seekings (2008), Ferree (2011), Schulz-Herzenberg (2019b), and Gordon et al. (2024) documented how racial and ethnic identities have shaped post-apartheid political attitudes and voting patterns in South Africa's national and municipal elections. Previous literature explored how class identity intersected with racial identity to influence political behaviour among black South Africans (Mattes, 2015) and how race and class identities shaped voting patterns in the first decade of South African democracy (Habib & Naidu, 2006). Southall (2013) explored polarisation

in South Africa, revealing how identity-based polarisation affected South African politics. While not exclusively about voting behaviour, Adhikari's (2005) book on racial identity in the South African coloured community provides insight on how complex racial identities can influence political allegiances.

South Africa's 2024 NPEs were widely regarded as the most competitive and unpredictable since the country's democratic transition in 1994 (Ofusori, 2024). In a historic shift in the country's political landscape, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) secured only 40.2% of the national vote, a dramatic decline from 57.5% in the 2019 elections. The ANC lost its parliamentary majority for the first time in the post-apartheid era. The electoral outcome signalled not merely a weakening of the ANC's longstanding hegemony but also a broader realignment of voters' allegiances. Notably, the MK Party, a new breakaway party led by the former president Jacob Zuma – and emerging from within ANC ranks – captured a surprising 14% of the national vote. The MK Party drew significant support particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. The fragmentation of the vote forced the ANC into complex coalition negotiations, introducing an unprecedented era of coalition governance at the national level.

While arguing that identity politics played a crucial role in the success of the MK Party and of the outcomes in the 2024 NPEs, we note that identity politics is not the sole determinant of voting behaviour in South Africa. Other factors such as economic conditions, policy preferences, populism, and perceptions of government performance also play important roles. The latter, for instance, is widely reported on in studies by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), which have shown a deterioration in government trust over the past few years. The HSRC's 2025 South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), using data from 1998 to 2024/25, indicates a broad decline in public confidence across various levels of government and specific institutions. Confidence in the national government, provincial government, and parliament all remained below the 50% threshold (Human Sciences Research Council [HSRC], 2025).

The interplay of these factors creates a complex landscape of South African electoral politics. This study builds on existing literature, using voter behaviour theory and document analysis, to analyse the outcome of the 2024 South African elections and point towards key lessons for future elections in the country.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a qualitative methodology aimed at obtaining insights on voting behaviour from the 2024 parliamentary and provincial elections in South Africa. The analysis predominantly focused on past studies conducted on voting behaviour in South Africa, to determine if the trends persisted in the 2024 elections.

Other sources, including international scholarly journal articles, newspaper reports, and press releases, and South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) reports were instrumental in scrutinising voting behaviour intricacies and identifying potential lessons that South Africa and the IEC could draw upon to enhance future electoral processes. Relevant voting behaviour theory is used to substantiate the generality of findings from these sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of Identity Politics: International Experience

Voting behaviour is multifaceted, shaped by socioeconomic, institutional, and identity-based factors. A substantial body of research shows that social identity – including ethnicity and race – remains a salient determinant of electoral choices across diverse political contexts, albeit with varying expressions regionally (Eifert et al., 2010; Harris, 2022).

In the Global North, identity-based voting manifests distinctively despite assumptions of post-materialist politics. Scandinavian democracies, traditionally characterised by class-based behaviours, have experienced growing ethnic polarisation following immigration. Gordon (2018) reported on literature that showed that among whites in America, racial attitudes and xenophobia were associated with support for certain policy positions and political candidates. The Sweden Democrats' electoral breakthrough in 2010 similarly reflected nativist identity mobilisation rather than economic grievances (Rydgren, 2008). Bjørklund and Andersen (2002) documented similar patterns in Norway's 2001 elections, where immigration attitudes significantly predicted support for the Progress Party. These findings corroborate broader European trends wherein cultural identity threats (such as those posed by minorities and immigrants) increasingly structure electoral competition along ethnic lines (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

In the Global South, identity politics operate with even greater intensity and institutional embeddedness. Chandra's (2004) seminal work on India's patronage democracy reveals how ethnic entrepreneurs mobilise caste identities to construct winning coalitions, with the 1996 and 1998 elections exemplifying caste-based bloc voting. Similarly, Wilkinson (2004) argued that India's federal structure enabled ethnic parties to leverage group identities to gain an electoral advantage, perpetuating what Horowitz (1985) termed 'ethnic census' voting patterns.

Identity Politics in Africa

In Africa, ethnicity constitutes the predominant axis of electoral mobilisation, although its political salience varies considerably across institutional contexts

(Posner, 2005). In Kenya, Bratton and Kimenyi (2008) analysed the disputed 2007 presidential election, revealing a near-perfect correlation between ethnic identity and candidate support. Kikuyu voters overwhelmingly backed Kibaki (96%), whereas Luo constituents supported Odinga (99%). This ethnic-bloc-based voting precipitated post-election violence, underscoring the destabilising potential of identity-based electoral competition (Bratton & Kimenyi, 2008).

Within the SADC region, Zimbabwe exemplifies how ethnic identity structures electoral behaviour. Raftopoulos and Savage (2004) documented how Mugabe's ZANU-PF mobilised Shona ethnic nationalism against Ndebele-associated opposition during successive elections from 1980 to 2005. The Gukurahundi massacre in the early 1980s against the minority Ndebele group still features prominently in Zimbabwean election rhetoric, 40 years after the country gained its independence. This example clearly illustrates the importance of ethnicity in determining voter behaviour (Raftopoulos & Savage, 2004).

Voter Participation in South Africa's Elections

Despite a consistent increase in voter registration in South Africa, from 18.2 million in 1999 to 27.7 million in 2024, voter turnout has declined successively over the same period. The 2024 elections saw only 58.6% of registered voters cast their ballots, a dramatic drop from 89.3% in 1999. This decline occurred even as the number of political parties contesting the elections increased, suggesting that IEC mobilisation and greater electoral choice has not translated into higher participation.

The 2024 elections also revealed significant provincial variations: KwaZulu-Natal recorded the highest turnout (62.3%), while North West had the lowest (51.4%). Gauteng experienced the steepest decline between 2019 and 2024, dropping 9.9 percentage points (from 71.8% to 61.9%). Analysts have interpreted voter abstention as a form of protest (Runciman & Paret, 2024). This pattern of declining turnout despite rising registration numbers reflects broader trends in democratic participation. Research on voter apathy suggests that low turnout often signals disillusionment with political systems, perceptions of ineffective governance, or a belief that electoral participation cannot produce meaningful change (Norris, 2002). In South Africa's case, the phenomenon may reflect growing frustration with service delivery failures, corruption, and a sense that expanded party competition has not yielded better governance outcomes.

That so few voters turned out to vote in the 2024 elections has been subject to academic introspection in terms of understanding the voting behaviour of the electorate. Ironically, the drop in voter turnout occurred within the context of an increased number of political parties, some of them growing from populist

and ethnic sentiment, as well as independent candidates, all vying for seats. The elections saw 14,889 candidates contesting for 887 seats, representing 70 political parties and 11 independent candidates (Independent Electoral Commission [IEC], 2024).

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey found widespread discontent with elected leaders. Many citizens called for stronger parliamentary oversight of the presidency and greater responsiveness to voter priorities. Weak trust in members of parliament, who were perceived as unresponsive and corrupt, further reinforced the public's disengagement.⁵ Recent HSRC surveys have confirmed that declining trust in government institutions contributes to voter disengagement. The SASAS has consistently documented a steep decline in public confidence, with trust in national government dropping from 62% in 2004 to just 29% in 2021 (Roberts et al., 2023).

This erosion of trust extends across key democratic institutions, including parliament, the presidency, and political parties. It reflects widespread public dissatisfaction over service delivery failures, corruption scandals, and perceived governmental unresponsiveness (Davids et al., 2021). The HSRC's research indicates that citizens who express little trust in government institutions are significantly less likely to participate in elections, viewing voting as futile because they perceive the political system as unresponsive to their needs (Mattes, 2015; Roberts, 2022). This pattern of institutional distrust has been particularly pronounced among young voters and urban residents, contributing to the marked decline in voter turnout observed in recent electoral cycles (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019a; HSRC, 2022).

Race as a Determinant of Voting Behaviour

Notwithstanding the above, South Africa has witnessed a growing trend of racial rhetoric in political campaigns since the democratic dispensation in 1994, particularly as the ruling ANC has been criticised for using race-based appeals to consolidate support among black African voters (Gordon, 2018). There has been a pattern in which party allegiance and voting choices are ostensibly racially based. Indeed, the 'race census thesis' posits that voting patterns in South Africa resemble a prism of racialised politics, because racial and ethnic political identities predominate among the citizenry, with black people voting for 'black parties' and white people voting for 'white parties' (Habib & Naidu, 2006).

The National Party (NP), for instance, the predominantly white governing party of South Africa from 1948 until 1994, was disbanded in 2005 to be replaced

5 <https://www.afrobarometer.org>

by the DA, which was formed out of the white-only and anti-apartheid Progressive Party. The NP's policies, in particular, included apartheid, the establishment of a South African Republic, and the promotion of Afrikaner culture. The NP was therefore formed to advance white Afrikaner domination. The ANC, on the other hand, was black-dominated and sought to advance the interests of the black population. Paret and Runciman (2023) found that black voters were significantly more likely to vote for the ANC, whereas coloured, Indian, and especially white voters were more likely to vote for the DA.

A study on voter behaviour linked to the University of Johannesburg found that black African respondents were 12 times more likely than Indian / Asian respondents, six times more likely than coloured respondents, and eight times more likely than white respondents to support the ANC over an opposition party (Patel et al., 2024, p. 3). In the main, the study concluded that racial identity remained correlated with voting decisions (Paret & Runciman, 2023).

However, other researchers have long challenged the race census theory. Habid and Naudi (2006), for instance, studied voter behaviour in the 1994 and 1999 elections and concluded that voter choices were largely rational; voters based their votes according to prevailing socioeconomic conditions that represented their material well-being and interest. They further pointed out that political parties tend to hold onto the racialised view of voter behaviour, thereby losing the opportunity to attract a wider cross-section of the electorate, resulting in poor performance during elections (Habib & Naidu, 2006).

Other researchers argue that identity politics, and voting along racial lines, are features that will continue to play a prominent role in South African voting behaviour because of structural inequalities that persist in the country, decades after the abolition of apartheid (Paret, 2018). The sociological model of voting behaviour is widely used to explain voting behaviour based on age, race, gender, income, employment / unemployment, geographic location, and education. For instance, black people remain generally poorer than white people; the World Bank estimates that 47% of black households live in poverty, compared with 1% of white residents (Patel et al., 2024). This economic disparity influences voting behaviour, with the electorate voting for parties that represent their aspirations, such as the ANC – whose promise since 1994 has been to lift black people from poverty (Patel et al., 2024). Tshishonga (2022) argued that the ANC frames the opposition as 'white', simultaneously reinforcing both its own dominance and the centrality of race. Tshishonga (2022) further argued that white elites promote the DA within affluent suburbs, while black elites promote the ANC within lower-income townships, as part of the localised power struggles.

In a study using public opinion data in South Africa, Gordon (2018), however, argued that interracial animosities are not strong predictors of support for the

ruling party in South Africa. He further stated that partisan identity in democracies develops through childhood socialisation and political experience, guiding both voting decisions and information processing. Strong partisans tend to resist attitude change despite new information. In multiracial contexts, the politicisation of racial identities creates opportunities for parties to play the 'race card' (Gordon, 2018). Political parties find expression in playing the race card due to persistent inequalities rooted in apartheid's legacy, as white South Africans continue to occupy the upper echelons of the post-colonial socioeconomic order, despite the end of minority rule in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, while the study showed that many black Africans viewed other racial groups as threats to their political power, economic prosperity, and cultural identity, it offered no data demonstrating that racial rhetoric effectively generated ANC support within this demographic.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON VOTING BEHAVIOUR

This study attempts to explain the elections in South Africa, particularly in 2024, using voting behaviour theory. Since the advent of the first democratic election, voting behaviour continues to be obscured by various dimensions that reflect the country's history and its shifting identity on the continent and in the world. Racial and ethnic identity politics are not a relic of the past but an enduring feature of the political landscape, which is also shaped by ever-deepening socioeconomic inequity (Sadie et al., 2016; Patel & Sadie, 2021; Paret & Runciman, 2023).

The results of the 2024 general elections in South Africa constituted a seismic shift in South African post-1994 politics for two reasons. First, the incumbent ANC lost its outright majority, and second, a newcomer, the MK Party, became a significant feature at the national and provincial levels. These changes relate to three major intersecting trends identified from past elections worldwide. The first is a change in traditional voting behaviour, which mirrors a similar shift across the continent (Khambule, 2021). The second is the erosion of long-term psychological attachments to liberation movements (Tshishonga, 2022). The third is the growth of ethno-populist politics (Morieson, 2024).

Given the complexity, one cannot use a single methodological or theoretical approach to understand these shifts. Using the sociopolitical, rational choice, and party identification theories, we contend that dominant voter behaviour and perceptions of elections – both pre- and post-voting – result from a complex interplay of factors. These include race, ethnicity, party loyalty, and populism, particularly within the South African context.

The development of theories explaining how voters make decisions has itself been shaped by multiple influences. Notably, André Siegfried's ground-breaking

electoral geography work in 1913 revealed spatial patterns in election results associated with economic, social, demographic, religious, and historical factors (Sanguin, 1985). Scholars and practitioners face the challenge of explaining and identifying determinants of social and political decisions made by the electorate. Given the complexity involved, multiple approaches and frameworks can be used to understand post-1994 voting behaviour in South Africa, especially during 2024.

Sociopolitical Theory

Paret and Runciman (2023) explained the sociopolitical model effectively; they argued that sociopolitical factors such as race, class, education level, and gender identity all influence electoral behaviour in South Africa. The model is intrinsically linked with issues of group identity, as all these factors can be linked to identity politics. Paret and Runciman (2023) offer empirical evidence illustrating the continued link between race and partisan alignment. In the South African context, the data reveal a strong correlation between black racial identity and support for the ANC, whereas coloured, Indian, and white demographics tend to align more with the DA. According to Ferree (2011), race remains the strongest predictor of party support in South Africa, with the ANC receiving approximately 60–65% of the black African vote in elections from 1994 to 2009, whereas the DA's support base has been predominantly drawn from white, coloured, and Indian communities. Schulz-Herzenberg's (2014) analysis of the 2014 elections found that the ANC secured 73% of black African votes, compared to only 4% of white votes, while the DA received 55% of white votes, 52% of Indian votes, and 53% of coloured votes.

More recent data from the 2019 elections confirms this pattern. Afrobarometer surveys showed that 57% of black South Africans identified the ANC as their preferred party, while the DA drew 61% of its support from coloured voters, followed by white and Indian voters (Afrobarometer, 2018, p. 5). The HSRC's post-election analysis of the 2024 results indicates that while the ANC's support among black voters declined to between 45% and 50%, it remained significantly higher than among other racial groups, where ANC support ranged from 5% to 15% (Roberts et al., 2024).

Similar patterns are evident in many African countries and extend to societies divided by religion or language. Voters in such societies tend to vote along identity lines for several reasons: to reinforce collective identity, ensure group safety, and maintain political relevance to negotiate their identities with other communities (Anyangwe, 2012). The persistent racial divide in voting patterns underscores the enduring impact of historical and social dynamics on contemporary electoral outcomes in the South African context.

Rational Choice Theory

The rational choice model formed the basis for Anthony Downs's (2018) seminal work titled *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. The theory explains individual voting behaviour economically, essentially proposing that voters use cost-benefit analyses when evaluating political parties and policies. In the South African context, previous research indicates that concerns about socioeconomic well-being significantly influence voter decisions. However, the importance of this factor decreased after a leadership change within the ANC (Sadie et al., 2016; Patel & Sadie, 2021) and the emergence and success of parties ostensibly formed along ethnic lines, such as MK Party and the PA. The presence of breakaway members from the ANC, such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), had a similar diluting effect (Morieson, 2024). The EFF, in particular, evidently benefits from its charismatic leader, who appeals to the youth; similarly, the MK Party benefits from its populist leader, Jacob Zuma (Morieson, 2024).

Party Identification Theory

The party identification framework posits that enduring party loyalty and identification are the primary determinants of voter preferences. Evidence from South Africa supports this notion, revealing that long-term party allegiance and perceived party performance were dominant factors shaping voters' decisions in economically disadvantaged communities, irrespective of geographical contexts (Sadie et al., 2016). The model emphasises several vital elements, including party identification, issue concerns, personal candidate attachment, group conformity, a sense of political efficacy, and the civic duty to vote.

Central to this paradigm is the concept of partisanship, which is theorised to stem from pre-adult socialisation, particularly parental influences (Hutchings & Jefferson, 2017). This perspective argues that voters maintain longstanding associations with political parties, often transcending specific candidates or issues in any election. This argument has been cited to explain the survival of liberation parties like Zanu-PF in Zimbabwe, Chama Cha Mapinduzi in Tanzania, and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) in Angola, among others (Southall, 2013).

RECENT EMPIRICAL STUDIES

In their paper titled 'Factors determining voter choice in South Africa's 2024 national general elections' published just before the 2024 general elections, Patel et al. (2024) reported that voter behaviour in South Africa was still very nuanced. They used the findings of a 2023 voter survey conducted by the Centre for

Social Development in Africa and compared these with previous surveys from 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. They highlighted three key findings regarding voter behaviour and party choice.

First, contrary to expectations, socioeconomic well-being did not significantly predict party preference. This factor included attitudes toward social grants, promises about improved living conditions, and service delivery. Voters supporting all parties seemed to universally anticipate these factors, implying that other considerations played a more decisive role in determining party allegiance.

Second, the fear of losing social grants was no longer correlated with voting patterns in the 2023 data. This change can be attributed to several factors. The grant system had been expanded to include more adults, youth, and unemployed individuals, and there was a growing awareness of the role of grants in poverty reduction. In addition, more opposition parties had endorsed the social assistance programmes.

Third, the determinants of party choice were related to several factors, including respondents who had strong trust in institutions such as parliament, the presidency, and the ANC government. Voters with high levels of trust were 2.5 times more likely to support the ANC. On the other hand, opposition parties benefitted from voters who valued anti-corruption efforts. Continued trust in party leaders thus influenced ANC support, and the ANC's historical role in creating democracy and freedom still served the party well. Finally, Patel et al. (2024) found that trust in President Ramaphosa led respondents to be 77% more likely to support the ANC; in addition, older voters supported the ANC more than younger voters did.

DISCUSSION

The emergence of race and identity politics in South Africa reflects transformed post-apartheid conditions. While the late 1990s featured reconciliation optimism and non-racialism anchored in constitutionalism (Anciano, 2016), the contemporary period exhibits democratic fatigue and deepening inequality. Racially stratified economic power and spatial segregation persist, transforming race into a language of grievance rather than reconciliation (Houston et al., 2023). Anciano (2016) demonstrated the decline of non-racialism that resulted from its failure to address distributive conflict, and Msimang (2018) argued that it now signifies elite denialism, incompatible with demands for redress.

Unlike in 1999, when transitional imperatives constrained race politics in South Africa, contemporary identity politics have emerged through economic stagnation, generational change, and declining faith in post-apartheid settlements. Race has therefore re-emerged as a central organising principle, reflecting

structural inequalities and stale hegemonic narratives (Anciano, 2016; Houston et al., 2023; Msimang, 2018). An understanding of voting patterns since the maiden 1994 elections in South Africa helps build this picture.

Voting Patterns in South Africa (1994–2024)

Multi-racial elections were introduced in South Africa for the first time in 1994, when the apartheid state made way for a democratic dispensation.⁶ Naturally, the ANC, a predominantly black liberation party that had been at the forefront in dismantling the apartheid state through armed struggle and popular insurrection, emerged victorious. White people, fearful of living under black rule, voted for predominantly white parties like the NP and Freedom Front (FF). Coloured and Indian people largely aligned with the white parties and therefore mostly voted for them (Anyangwe, 2012).

The period soon after 1990 was marked by devastating ‘black-on-black’ political violence, particularly concentrated in KwaZulu-Natal and the Witwatersrand; it resulted in approximately 14,000 deaths between 1990 and 1994 (Marks, 2001). The ethnically oriented Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi and drawing predominantly on Zulu identity and traditional authority structures, emerged as a central actor in this violence through its rivalry with the ANC for political dominance in KwaZulu-Natal and control over migrant worker hostels in urban areas (Bekker & Prinsloo, 1999). Scholarly analyses reveal that this conflict transcended simple ethnic antagonism, encompassing struggles over territorial control, competing visions of post-apartheid governance, and strategic manipulation by apartheid security forces through covert support for the IFP as part of counterinsurgency operations (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC], 1998).

The violence involved systematic political assassinations, massacres of civilians, and orchestrated attacks on communities perceived as rival strongholds. The IFP’s paramilitary structures and the ANC’s self-defence units engaged in cyclical retaliatory killings that destabilised the transition process (Jeffery, 1997). The TRC documented extensive evidence of third-force involvement. For example, the state security apparatus had armed and directed IFP attacks to undermine the liberation movements. It was clear that ethnicity functioned less as a primordial

6 In South Africa, *apartheid* (1948–1994), meaning ‘separate development’, was a system of racial segregation under an all-white government, which dictated that non-white South Africans – who made up the majority of the country’s population – had to live in separate areas from whites. Blacks also had to use separate public facilities, and contact between the two groups was legally limited. This system was legalised under the *Population Registration Act of 1950*, which classified all South Africans as either Bantu (black Africans), coloured (people of mixed race), Asians (including Indians), or white (Caucasians).

cause and more as a mobilising framework, which was instrumentalised by political elites and security operatives for strategic purposes (TRC, 1998).

The succeeding election, held in 1999, was also underpinned by a racialised view of electoral behaviour. The opposition parties, particularly the Democratic Party (DP) and the New National Party (NNP) 'prioritized... issues in relation to how particular issues correlated to the interests of their specific racial and ethnic group support as revealed in opinion poll data' (Taylor & Hoeane, 1999). Ostensibly, opinion surveys painted a picture of white people being under threat from crime and possible targeting by black people and the ANC, as well as coloured and Indian people being marginalised by the ruling party for 'not being black enough' and acting together with white people in suppressing the black majority (Anyangwe, 2012). With its campaign of 'fighting back' against black rule and *swart gevaar* rhetoric,⁷ the DP unseated the NNP as the official opposition in parliament and thereafter tactically positioned itself as the party of choice amongst conservative Afrikaner, English, Indian, and coloured voters (Ebrahim-Vally, 2009).

The 2004 elections further painted a picture of the complexity of voting behaviour among the South African electorate. Despite expectations that the Zulu-dominated electorate of KwaZulu-Natal would support the ethnically based IFP to advance Zulu interests, the ANC secured more than 47% of the black vote in the province. The trend continued in the 2009 and 2014 elections. Despite discontent with Zuma's rule,⁸ the ANC remained firmly in power, receiving 62.15% of the national vote. However, parties such as the DA and Congress of the People⁹ gained ground, in what appeared to be the start of a shift in the popular black vote away from the ANC. Discontent with the ANC government also expressed itself through voter apathy, particularly among the youth. The number of non-voters was the largest group among the South African electorate, surpassing even the number who voted for the ANC (Paret & Runciman, 2023).

The 2019 general elections that followed were viewed with much interest by the electorate. Most people expected the ANC to lose its majority, given the gain in popularity of the EFF and the growing public discontent with the ANC. In the final election results, the ANC emerged as the winner, with 57.5% of the vote, while the DA secured 20.77%; the EFF won 10.79%, the IFP 3.38%, and the

7 *Swart gevaar*, Afrikaans for 'black danger', was a term used during apartheid in South Africa to refer to the perceived security threat posed by the majority black African population to the white South African government.

8 Jacob Zuma was the fourth president of South Africa, from 2009 to 2018. His presidential term ended prematurely when he was recalled by his own party amid allegations of massive corruption and mismanagement of state funds.

9 COPE was a breakaway party from the ANC, formed by the erstwhile ANC members Mosiuoa Lekota, Mbhazima Shilowa, and Mluleki George, to contest the 2009 general elections.

FF 2.38%. The replacement of Zuma, whose rule was later labelled ‘the nine wasted years’ because of his involvement in state capture,¹⁰ saw the ANC lose 5% of its majority in parliament. Even more voters did not turn out to vote this time, with only 66% of registered voters turning up at the polls (a drop from the 73.4% of 2014).

The DA’s election strategy was that of criticising Cyril Ramaphosa for his complicity in state capture, since he was Jacob Zuma’s deputy during the state capture years. The DA, however, failed to attract more black voters. It also alienated conservative white voters, who opted for the FF+ instead (Bank & Hart, 2020).

The 2024 National and Provincial Elections and the ‘MKP Factor’

The 2024 NPEs deserve close attention because of their intense competitiveness and the influence of the MK Party, which Southall and Mchunu (2024) have dubbed ‘the MKP factor’. The newcomer MK Party under Zuma’s leadership achieved the largest single-election gain in post-1994 democratic history. It secured 58 of the 400 National Assembly seats, surpassing the DA’s previous record of 31 seats in 1999 (IEC, 2024). The MK Party also emerged as the dominant party in KwaZulu-Natal’s provincial legislature, with 46.25% of seats. In addition, it became the second largest party in Mpumalanga, with 17.65% of seats.

Scholarly interpretations of the MK Party’s electoral breakthrough offer two primary explanations. The first attributes the party’s success mainly to Zuma’s personal popularity and charismatic appeal (Peyton & Hlophe, 2024), while the alternative explanation suggests the party capitalised on widespread disillusionment among ANC voters by positioning itself as their new political home (Booyesen, 2024). Notably, other parties like the PA emerged, ostensibly to serve the coloured population. The emergence and performance of new parties, particularly MK Party, aligns with populist and ethnic frameworks of voter behaviour, underscoring identity politics as a critical determinant of electoral choices.

Formal analysis of the MK Party’s electoral performance indicates identity politics alongside other contributing factors. The Social Research Foundation conducted a survey of 7,196 registered voters between April and May 2024, and the results were reported with a 2% margin of error (Buccus, 2024). The results revealed a highly homogeneous supporter base: nearly all MK Party supporters were black (99%), with over three-quarters speaking Zulu as their home language

10 State capture occurs when individuals or groups operating in the public and private sectors influence government policies for their personal advantage. The term was first associated with former president Jacob Zuma’s rule, when the Gupta family influenced him in directing funds to the family for personal gain.

(78%) and the vast majority (87%) residing in rural areas. Economically, 68% of MK Party supporters earned below South Africa's median monthly income of R5,200 (Statistics South Africa, 2024), indicating significant representation among lower-income groups. The MK Party's age distribution demonstrated relatively balanced support across the generations. Voters aged 30–39 years constituted the largest demographic subgroup at approximately one-third of total supporters. Therefore, the average MK Party supporter was younger than 11 years old when apartheid ended and would have less nostalgia for the ANC's liberation days and therefore less partisan sentiment than their parents' generation. Yet they had inherited the economic and social burdens inflicted by apartheid and left unresolved under the ANC.

The ANC's poor performance in government – high unemployment, deep inequality, continuously rising poverty, crime, increasingly poor services, and the collapse of public infrastructure – provided fertile ground for the populist, ethnic, and opportunistic former president. He reclaimed the ANC's former armed wing, scavenged on ANC weaknesses, and wrought havoc in the ruling party (Southall & Mchunu, 2024). The MK Party's campaign platform of taking back the people's fight against economic and social injustice from a captured ANC perfectly positioned the MK Party as a home for disillusioned ANC voters. This could explain the level of support the MK Party received in KwaZulu-Natal and why it successfully penetrated Mpumalanga too. The demographics of MK Party supporters fit with this explanation and indicate why its campaign platform resonated with these voters (Social Research Foundation, 2024).

These demographic patterns collectively illustrate the significance of ethnic identity, linguistic affiliation, geographic location, and socioeconomic status in shaping the MK Party's electoral constituency. Gordon et al. (2024) demonstrated through multivariate regression analysis that ethno-racial identity, particularly Zulu identification, constituted the strongest predictor of MK Party support, eclipsing democratic discontent and institutional distrust once identity and provincial variables were controlled. Initially significant effects of democratic satisfaction and governmental trust lost statistical significance when identity factors were introduced. The MK Party's geographic concentration in Zulu-speaking areas – achieving 17.2% in Mpumalanga and 10.7% in Gauteng – substantiates the ethnic character of its coalition, consistent with earlier findings by Harris (2022) and De Kadt and Larreguy (2018) regarding the persistent influence of race and ethnicity in South African voting behaviour (Gordon et al., 2024). Contemporary scholarship emphasises political ethnicity's constructed nature (Posner, 2005) and the role of elite manipulation in activating ethnic identities (Wilkinson, 2004). Eifert et al. (2010) demonstrated experimentally that the political salience of ethnic identification intensified contextually near elections.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined voting behaviour in South Africa's 2024 elections through the lens of key theoretical frameworks, using a qualitative document analysis approach. The results reveal a complex interplay of factors shaping electoral outcomes, with identity politics emerging as a particularly salient influence, with the hitherto dominant political party losing its majority in the National Assembly.

Voter decisions in the 2024 elections have proven complex and nuanced, highlighting the challenge of interpreting electoral outcomes without enough empirical evidence to support any proposed explanations. The identity theory perspective proves valuable in explaining many aspects of voter behaviour. Results show that racial and ethnic identities continue to play a significant role in shaping political affiliations and voting patterns. It appears that black voters remain more likely to support the ANC, even though many of them shifted their loyalty to the breakaway faction, the MK Party; other racial groups tended to favour opposition parties such as the DA and the newly formed PA. However, there could also have been instances where voters switched between parties or between voting and abstaining, across elections, regardless of their race. This was evident in the low voter turnout and the retention of the dominant opposition status of the predominantly white DA. This point suggests that identity is an important but not entirely deterministic factor in determining voter behaviour.

On the other hand, voting behaviour could have been influenced by disillusionment among voters over failure by the ruling party to fulfil some of its promises. The electorate may have been incensed by constant power cuts, a high unemployment rate, and perceived corruption by the ruling elite, and therefore chose to either abstain from voting or to vote for other parties rather than the ANC. This is in line with the rational model, wherein voting behaviour is simply influenced by peoples' needs.

Even with the ANC losing its majority in the 2024 elections, some voters still show strong endurance and loyalty to the traditional liberation struggle party. However, the loss of the majority status indicates that such attachments may be weakening. In essence, the 2024 election voting behaviour presents several key lessons and findings. The election results indicate a shift in the political landscape of the country, with a party that had maintained its majority for almost 30 years losing it to a breakaway party. This is interesting regarding voter behaviour, as it shows the electorate is not only fluid but can be swayed by populist or ethnic politics. The emergence of new parties and independents indicates a more diverse political environment in the country, although there is a continued salience of racial identity in voting patterns, albeit with growing complexity and nuance.

Empirical studies after the 2024 elections are required to fully understand voting behaviour under such a complex political environment. The current study's

main limitation is its non-empirical nature, relying on perceptions, election commentator reports, and past electoral reviews rather than concrete data. Despite this constraint, the research underscores the ongoing importance of economic policies targeting inequality and unemployment, as these factors continue to exert significant influence on voting patterns in the country. Additionally, while identity politics remains influential, voters are demonstrating greater fluidity and critical engagement with political choices. As the political landscape becomes more competitive and diverse, there are both challenges and opportunities for strengthening democratic institutions and fostering more inclusive governance. Future elections will probably continue to reflect the complex interplay of identity, economic concerns, and evolving political loyalties that characterise South Africa's vibrant democracy.

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