

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

As 2024 drew to a close, so too did the biggest election year in human history (Riccardi et al., 2024). Highly anticipated and hotly contested election races have played out in many countries. Incumbents have been unseated in countries from Argentina to South Korea and Poland. Centrist and conservative parties gained ground in Finland, Panama, Belgium, Portugal and Germany. Unexpected outcomes, including a UK Labour Party victory and hastily convened leftist alliance in France, defied pollsters and pundits.

The South African general elections were among these closely observed polls. Thirty years after the country's first democratic elections, many questioned the ability of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) to maintain its majority and speculated about

what would happen if its support fell below 50 per cent for the first time. South Africans were dissatisfied with the state of the country, and an Afrobarometer survey conducted just weeks before the elections found that 85% of South Africans believed it was going "in the wrong direction" (Hofmeyr, 2024).

However, despite widespread uncertainty and discontent, the centre held and, later, 18 political parties filled the 400 seats of the National Assembly (NA). This suggests that in some areas in which South Africa has built a foundation of social cohesion, such as constitutionalism and shared national identity, it has protected against destabilising and anti-democratic forces.

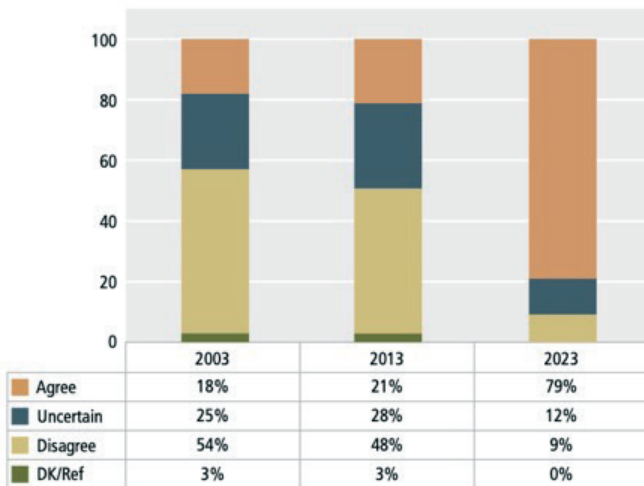
BACKGROUND

South Africa's national political landscape was profoundly reshaped when former President Jacob Zuma publicly announced his support for the newly-formed uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) party in early 2024. MK's radical manifesto, among other proposals, called for the constitution to be scrapped and a wide range of public and private institutions nationalised (MK Party, 2024). Its electoral debut also took some momentum away from the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which grew its support base from 6% of the national vote in 2014 to 11% in 2019 on a far-left party platform (Lefko-Everett, 2023).

After the proverbial dust settled on the 2024 polls, MK had won nearly 15% of the national vote as well as 45% of the provincial vote in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), Zuma's stronghold. Support for the EFF declined to just under 10%, while the ANC suffered an unprecedented loss, from 57% nationally in 2019 to only 40% in 2024 (IEC, 2024).

Figure 1: Leaders cannot be trusted, 2003-2023

Source: IJR SA Reconciliation Barometer



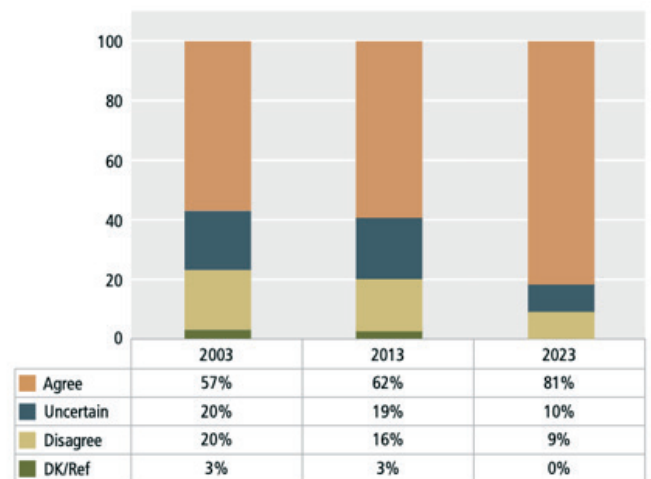
Demand for Political Change

Afrobarometer's pre-election survey data found that almost two-thirds (62%) of South Africans were dissatisfied with the way that democracy works in the country. According to the 2023 Reconciliation Barometer (see Figures 1 and 2), eight in ten South Africans (81%) believe that leaders are untrustworthy (79%) and unconcerned with what happens to ordinary people (Hofmeyr, 2024; Lefko-Everett, 2023).

As in many other countries in 2024, South Africans were perhaps more ready than ever for political change. Many new parties were established – with 31 of 70 parties contesting in the national elections for the first time – but few achieved even 1% of the national vote (South African Government, 2024). Both MK and the EFF benefited from positioning themselves as anti-establishment “change” parties – bolstered by populist and nationalist campaigns – as did the Patriotic Alliance (PA), which won 2% of the national vote and is now the sixth-largest party in the NA (IEC, 2024).

Figure 2: Leaders are not concerned about ordinary people, 2003-2023

Source: IJR SA Reconciliation Barometer



Deepening Social Divisions

Polarisation has become a growing concern globally and can be exacerbated during elections alongside frustration with political systems, misinformation and extremist rhetoric (WEF, 2024). One in five South Africans (19%) view differences between members of different political parties as the biggest source of division in the country, although this is secondary to income inequality (36%) (Lefko-Everett, 2023). Kreiss and McGregor (2024) suggest that polarisation and inequality go hand in hand, as individual political identities often align with the groups and structures that exist within a society.

Social Cohesion – The Antidote to Polarisation?

Social cohesion, often described as the ‘glue’ that holds societies together, is increasingly seen as an antidote to polarisation. The South African national

government has long prioritised social cohesion in policies such as the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, as cohesive societies often benefit from greater stability, improved social outcomes and economic prosperity (Lefko-Everett, 2016).

Some progress has been made, and the government's 30-Year Review highlights milestones and achievements including increased national pride and access to basic services (DPME, 2019). Yet advances in other areas have been haltingly slow and some gains made in the earlier years of democracy appear to have eroded. Trust in public institutions is low and most (82%) South Africans believe that government officials often get away with corrupt practices. Rather than voicing this discontent through ballot boxes, voter turnout – a key indicator of political participation and engagement – has also steadily fallen, from a peak of 89% in 1999 to around 59% in 2024 (IEC, 2024; Lefko-Everett, 2023).

POLICY ALTERNATIVES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the lead-up to the 2024 elections, South Africa's social cohesion seemed fragile. Low confidence in political leadership combined with fears of unrest sparked concerns about the country's stability. However, without discounting the severity of some incidents of conflict and violence, the elections were largely peaceful and the results were accepted.

The formation of the multi-party Government of National Unity (GNU) represents an unexpected path forward from the 2024 elections and a welcome result compared with some of the less peaceful

alternative scenarios. Although still too soon to assess its functionality and effectiveness, this new coalition government creates some important opportunities for South Africa going forward. With eleven diverse member parties and a carefully balanced cabinet, the national policy agenda is less fixed than previously and potentially more open and responsive to public priorities. As described by Professor Steven Friedman (2024, not paginated), the government is “no longer the preserve of only one party and politicians are realising that they have to show voters that they can improve people's lives.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations present potential opportunities for restoring and even increasing social cohesion within the country:

Recommendations for the Government of National Unity

- Income inequality directly threatens social cohesion and should be the focus of targeted policy.
- Significant work is needed to rebuild trust in public institutions, including through greater transparency and accountability.

- More practical opportunities are needed for citizens to be involved and engaged in public life and decision making, both during and outside of election times.

Recommendation for civil society

- There is an opportunity for those outside of government – civil society, community-based organisations and citizens – to reignite advocacy, exert pressure and seek more accountability from elected representatives.

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