Electoral and Party Engineering in South Africa after 1994: An Evaluative Study

Laouar Mohammed Bachir
University of Algiers 3, Algeria
Bachir.siyassa@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study examines the electoral and party engineering adopted by South Africa following the political transition of 1994 as an institutional mechanism for managing ethnic and racial pluralism. It asks to what extent the design of the electoral and party systems transformed racial and ethnic cleavages from potential sources of political conflict into peaceful institutional competition, and how this affected political stability and integration. The study proposes an explanatory model termed the "Model of Reorganizing Cleavages through Electoral Engineering." It argues that electoral engineering does not eliminate ethnic pluralism; rather, it determines the institutional channels through which pluralism is expressed. The study concludes that electoral and party engineering contributed significantly to managing political and social pluralism by broadening representation and establishing electoral competition as a principal institutional channel for managing conflict. However, this institutional achievement did not eliminate underlying social cleavages; it reorganized the ways in which they are expressed within political institutions.

Keywords: Electoral engineering; ethnic pluralism; proportional representation; ethnic voting; political stability.

Ingeniería electoral y de partidos en Sudáfrica después de 1994: un estudio evaluativo

Laouar Mohammed Bachir
Universidad de Argel 3, Argelia
Bachir.siyassa@gmail.com

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Resumen

Este estudio examina la ingeniería electoral y de partidos adoptada por Sudáfrica tras la transición política de 1994 como mecanismo institucional para gestionar el pluralismo étnico y racial. Analiza en qué medida el diseño de los sistemas electoral y de partidos transformó las fracturas raciales y étnicas, convirtiéndolas de posibles fuentes de conflicto político en una competencia institucional pacífica, y cómo influyó este proceso en la estabilidad y la integración políticas. El estudio propone un modelo explicativo denominado «Modelo de reorganización de las fracturas mediante la ingeniería electoral». Sostiene que la ingeniería electoral no elimina el pluralismo étnico, sino que determina los cauces institucionales a través de los cuales se expresa. El estudio concluye que la ingeniería electoral y de partidos contribuyó significativamente a la gestión del pluralismo político y social al ampliar la representación y consolidar la competencia electoral como uno de los principales cauces institucionales para gestionar los conflictos. Sin embargo, este logro institucional no eliminó las fracturas sociales subyacentes, sino que reorganizó sus formas de expresión dentro de las instituciones políticas.

Palabras clave: ingeniería electoral; pluralismo étnico; representación proporcional; voto étnico; estabilidad política.

Introduction

South Africa's political transition in 1994 marked a historic turning point in relations between the state and society. The country moved from apartheid to a pluralist democratic system, and the transition began rebuilding the political arena around formal principles of equal citizenship, political inclusion, multiparty politics, and democratic representation. The process faced a dual challenge: dismantling institutions and rules that had entrenched racial discrimination and exclusion, while building political institutions capable of accommodating a society marked by racial, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, and socioeconomic diversity.

The design of the electoral and party systems was among the most important instruments used in this process. Elections were not merely a means of selecting representatives; they formed part of a wider effort to reorganize the political arena, integrate previously excluded forces, and enable different groups to participate in new institutions. The translation of votes into seats is not a purely technical decision: it affects representation, the number of parties, elite incentives, mobilization

strategies, relations between voters and representatives, and the ways in which social cleavages become political competition.

This study proceeds from the view that electoral-system design in divided societies is not entirely neutral. Rules governing the conversion of votes into seats, the establishment of parties, participation in elections, and candidate selection shape the incentives faced by parties and voters. Electoral and party engineering may aggregate social divisions, translate them into organized political divisions, or limit their politicization, depending on the institutions and context.

South Africa is especially significant because the transition took place in a society emerging from a political system that classified the population and organized society according to racial identities. The central challenge was to create institutions that enabled broad participation without allowing democracy itself to reproduce exclusion or become a new arena for ethnic conflict.

1. Methodological, Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

1.1 Research Problem

The study argues that South Africa used elections not only to select political leaders, but also electoral and party engineering as part of a wider process of reorganizing a divided society and rebuilding the state after apartheid. Electoral engineering is therefore not treated as an absolute success or failure; rather, the study examines its functions, outcomes, and limitations.

The main research question is: To what extent did the electoral and party engineering adopted by South Africa after 1994 contribute to managing racial and ethnic pluralism and transforming social cleavages into institutionalized political competition, and what were the limits of its effects on political stability and social integration?

The subsidiary questions concern the meaning of electoral and party engineering and their relationship to the management of divided societies; the extent to which the electoral system broadened representation and reduced or reorganized identity-based voting; and the effects of these arrangements on stability and integration.

1.2 Main Hypothesis

The main hypothesis is that electoral and party engineering in South Africa contributed substantially to integrating political and social groups into the democratic system and transforming ethnic and racial divisions from potential sources of conflict into institutionalized political competition. Its capacity to achieve integration nevertheless remained limited by persistent social, economic, and spatial divisions, the dominance of major parties, and the behaviour of elites and voters.

- Incorporating competing groups into representative institutions reduces the need to express collective demands outside those institutions and thereby supports political stability.
- Proportional representation does not necessarily eliminate ethnic or racial voting; identity-based divisions may persist when they intersect with geography, history, and economic resources.
- Broader party representation may make the system more inclusive, but may also create problems of individual accountability and political competition, particularly under closed lists and one-party dominance.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The study's academic significance lies in connecting three bodies of literature often examined separately: electoral-system design; ethnicity and social cleavages; and state-building and democracy in societies emerging from conflict.

1.3.1 Theoretical Significance

- The proposition that proportional representation is more capable of ensuring the inclusion of groups and minorities.
- The proposition that systems encouraging candidates and parties to seek support beyond their own communities may be better able to limit ethnic mobilization.

1.4 Research Method

The study proposes a case-study method combined with a historical-institutional approach and interpretive-evaluative analysis. South Africa is suitable because it is a deeply divided society that negotiated a transition from an authoritarian and racially exclusionary system to pluralist democracy. Historical analysis helps explain the motivations behind the choice of representation system, while institutional analysis clarifies the rules and incentives shaping actors' behaviour and the resulting outcomes. The study also uses within-case comparison to examine change in South Africa over time rather than comparing it with another country.

1.5 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

1.5.1 Electoral and Party Engineering

Electoral Engineering

An electoral system is the set of rules that determines how citizens' votes are converted into seats and representative positions. These rules include the voting method, district magnitude, seat-allocation formula, electoral threshold, and type of electoral list. Electoral engineering goes beyond describing an existing system technically: it is the process of designing or modifying rules to achieve particular political or representative outcomes. Institutions are not entirely neutral, because their design creates incentives that influence parties, candidates, and voters. The distinction is therefore between an electoral system as a set of rules and electoral engineering as the process of selecting, designing, and modifying those rules.[1]

For this study, electoral engineering means the legal and institutional choices through which electoral competition is organized, votes are converted into seats, and access to political representation is regulated. These choices affect the nature of representation, the party system, competition, and the management of social cleavages. Electoral engineering is part of a broader process of reshaping political institutions rather than merely a technical set of voting procedures.

Party Engineering

Managing social and political pluralism involves more than choosing an electoral system and allocating seats. It also involves organizing political parties, which act as intermediaries through which social interests are aggregated and formulated into political demands and programmes. Parties perform functions of aggregation, representation, political socialization, and elite recruitment, linking society and state institutions.

Party engineering refers to the rules, institutions, and incentives that structure party politics, including the establishment and registration of parties, financing, electoral participation, candidate selection, list organization, party competition, and relations between party leadership, the electoral base, and legislative and executive institutions.[2]

Electoral and party engineering are interconnected dimensions of political institution-building. Electoral engineering determines the rules of competition and how votes become representation; party engineering shapes the actors entering that competition and how they organize, mobilize, and represent social interests. In South Africa, list-based proportional representation directly affected party organization and the relationship between parties and elected representatives. Closed lists made parties the principal units of competition and gave party organizations decisive influence over candidate

selection and ranking. This strengthened legislative party discipline but raised questions about representatives' independence from party leadership and accountability to voters.[3]

1.5.2 Electoral Engineering in Divided Societies

Consociationalism

The approach associated with Arend Lijphart holds that deeply divided societies require institutions encouraging power-sharing and broad representation rather than institutions allowing a majority to exercise complete control. It emphasizes proportional representation, power-sharing, coalitions, and recognition of different groups. In South Africa, this perspective helps explain the choice of proportional representation: during the transition, forces concerned that a majoritarian system would exclude them had to be reassured.[4]

Incentives and Behavioural Engineering

Another strand of scholarship argues that electoral design can create incentives for parties to move beyond narrow social bases and seek support from other groups. The issue is therefore not only how to represent groups, but also how to prevent parties from merely expressing the interests of a single community.[5,6]

Toward an Interactive Approach

These perspectives generate a debate over whether each group should have an almost guaranteed opportunity for representation or whether institutions should encourage parties to build cross-group electoral coalitions. South Africa did not adopt either option absolutely. It selected a highly inclusive system while allowing parties with different social bases to compete, subject to constitutional and legal restrictions against violence and discrimination. Electoral engineering operates within social structures, political history, electoral geography, party resources, elite behaviour, and constitutional institutions. The study therefore shifts from the idea of engineering that directly produces outcomes to engineering that creates incentives.

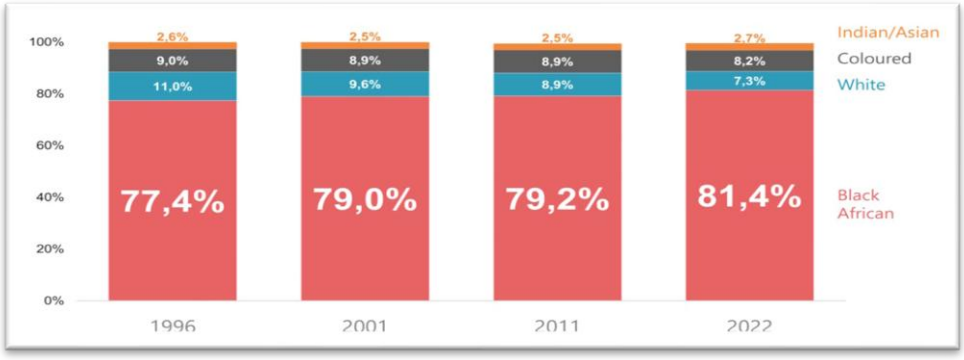
First Main Section: The Design and Practice of Electoral and Party Engineering in South Africa

First Subsection: General Context

First Branch: Ethnic Differentiation in South Africa

During apartheid, South African society was characterized by profound institutionalized racial and ethnic differentiation. The state legally classified the population into white people, Black Africans, Coloured people, and Indian/Asian people, attaching a broad range of rights, privileges, and restrictions to these classifications. Differentiation extended into the political, economic, and spatial spheres. Most Black South Africans were denied full participation in national politics, while restrictions were imposed on residence, movement, property ownership, education, and employment. White people occupied a dominant position in state institutions and the economy. Spatial segregation was reinforced through designated residential areas, entrenching unequal access to resources and services. Racial and ethnic division consequently became a structural feature of state and society.[7]

Figure 1. Population shares of racial groups, 1996–2022.[8]



Second Branch: The Electoral and Political Legacy before the Transition

The political system preceding the transition left an electoral and party legacy characterized by institutional exclusion on racial grounds. The political and electoral participation rights of most of the population were restricted, and non-white groups were denied effective representation in legislative institutions. Elections therefore formed part of a political structure that differentiated among population groups rather than serving a general representative function. Political parties and organizations faced legal restrictions, and some were banned, including the African National Congress in 1960. Electoral and legislative arrangements entrenched a system in which effective political representation was linked to racial identity.[9]

The electoral system was also marked by severe representational inequality. Despite limited participation by Black, Coloured, and Indian people—the privileges granted to Coloured and Indian representatives in the three-chamber Parliament established in 1983 were largely symbolic—effective legislative power remained concentrated in institutions dominated by white people. Parliamentary representation entrenched political dominance, and party competition was shaped largely by white voters and power balances within the National Party. Changes in the National Party's support base during the 1980s contributed to shifts in its orientation and helped move conflict management away from exclusion and toward political reform and negotiations with non-white political forces.

Third Branch: The Political Settlement over the Electoral System (How Proportional Representation Was Chosen after 1994)

South Africa's long history of apartheid created deep institutional and social divisions that had to be addressed to establish a durable democracy. Unrest during the 1980s revealed that a zero-sum solution was not viable. This study therefore adopts the view that a political settlement among actors or elites is a key instrument for resolving conflict and managing ethnic pluralism in countries that have experienced prolonged conflict. A political settlement can be understood as an enduring agreement among a society's most powerful groups on political and economic institutions expected to generate an acceptable level of benefits, thereby ending or preventing generalized civil war. This points to a balance or distribution of power among competing social groups and classes underpinning a state.[10]

Electoral-system design was not a technical matter separate from South Africa's transition negotiations. It was part of rebuilding the political system and defining competition and representation after apartheid. The negotiations provided a framework for discussing political institutions and the rules governing the first democratic elections in 1994. The choice among representation systems had direct implications for the representation of political forces and social groups, the party system, and the capacity to accommodate political pluralism. The negotiations resulted in proportional representation for the 1994 elections, not merely as a technical decision but as part of the political settlement accompanying the transition to democracy.[11]

Second Subsection: The Party System and Its Characteristics

In contrast to the exclusion and marginalization of groups under apartheid, and in keeping with the idea of a "Rainbow Nation," South Africa adopted policies intended to shape the party system so that it could aggregate social interests and translate them into political representation. The new laws sought to encourage multiracial and multi-ethnic parties. Chapter 1, section 1(d) of the 1996 Constitution provides for a multiparty democratic system to ensure accountability, responsiveness, and openness. The Constitution affirms equality and prohibits unfair discrimination on grounds including race, ethnicity, and language. Section 19 recognizes every citizen's right to establish and participate in a political party. Under the Electoral Commission Act of 1996, parties could register even if based on ethnic, religious, regional, or tribal identities, or if they advocated secession, provided they respected constitutional values. The manuscript reports that registered parties increased from 16 in 1994 to 48 in 2019.[12,13]

Some ethnically divided states prohibit parties organized on ethnic or racial lines in an effort to resolve social conflict. South Africa, by contrast, permitted parties explicitly based on particular ethnic and racial identities. This reflected a preference among the parties to the transition for avoiding restrictions on political organization. The decision not to ban anti-apartheid parties also carried symbolic significance: restrictions on political freedom were strongly associated with the former racial regime.

Party policies can support the state's efforts to manage social pluralism and promote tolerance. Parties may reshape their identities and support bases through ideology and their ability to attract members and supporters from diverse racial backgrounds. Appointing leaders from groups that have not traditionally supported a party may signal a more inclusive orientation and affect internal power dynamics. The Democratic Alliance pursued such a strategy by presenting itself as reflective of racial and ethnic diversity and appointing more leaders of African backgrounds to attract a broader Black electorate. These efforts culminated in the election of Mmusi Maimane in May 2015 as the party's first Black federal leader.[14]

Another feature was the changing regulation of party switching, or floor-crossing. Immediately after the transition, parliamentary floor-crossing was prohibited partly to protect small parties and ensure their continued participation. Limited resources or the absence of a concentrated ethnic or geographical base were not supposed to prevent democratic participation. In June 2002, however, four laws were passed to facilitate party switching, subject to conditions for lawful floor-crossing.[15]

Party switching changed parliamentary balances while the party system remained fragmented. Apart from the Congress of the People, established in 2008, and the Economic Freedom Fighters, established in 2013, parties formed after apartheid generally failed to exceed five per cent of the popular vote. This suggests limited ability among most new parties to expand their electoral bases. Some may be content with small vote shares if these secure parliamentary representation and the benefits associated with legislative office. Multipartyism therefore does not necessarily indicate stronger competition or broader popular representation; it may also encourage small parties to preserve a minimum level of institutional representation.[16]

Party operations are affected by party financing. The manuscript identifies the Public Funding of Represented Political Parties Act (No. 103 of 1997) and legislation adopted in 2018 as important parts of the funding framework. Eligible parties receive allocations through the Represented Political Parties Fund. To qualify for public funding in a financial year, a party must be represented in Parliament or a provincial legislature. Allocations are based proportionally on legislative representation at national and provincial levels, meaning that the majority party receives a substantial share.[17]

Public funds cover only a small proportion of total campaign expenditure, so parties depend heavily on private donors for campaigns and day-to-day operations. This funding structure has attracted criticism because proportional allocations may

impede democratic competition. The manuscript argues that the structure enabled the ANC to consolidate its dominance and gain a continuing advantage in securing future parliamentary seats, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.[18,19]

Third Subsection: The Electoral System and Its Characteristics

The type of electoral system was central to the settlement negotiations. The drafters of the interim Constitution agreed that closed-list proportional representation would produce a parliament reflecting the electorate's composition and allow diverse political groups to be represented. The 1996 Constitution deferred a final decision on a permanent system and retained the system used in 1994 as a transitional arrangement until the National Assembly adopted long-term legislation. Schedule 6, "Transitional Arrangements," states that the electoral provisions of the interim Constitution would apply to the first National Assembly election under the new Constitution. The drafters thus appear not to have intended the arrangement necessarily to be permanent and deferred finalization until after the 1999 election. Section 46(1)(d) of the 1996 Constitution states that the electoral system must generally result in proportional representation. In practice, parties receiving small shares of the national vote can win seats because there is no formal threshold; according to the manuscript, a party receiving 0.25 per cent of the national vote can secure one seat.[20,21]

The absence of an electoral threshold is an important feature. It can strengthen voters' sense that their votes matter and promote inclusiveness, which is important for stability. The system enables parties with very small national vote shares to win seats. Although the South African system is not particularly complex compared with some other forms of proportional representation, some voters may not understand technical seat-allocation details, including the use of a quota formula. Evidence cited in the manuscript suggests that most voters understand the basic principle that votes are translated proportionally into seats. Afrobarometer surveys from 2000 to 2015 reportedly found that most South Africans considered elections completely or largely free and fair. Apart from 2004, when agreement reached 83 per cent, the proportion remained around 70 per cent. The Electoral Satisfaction Survey cited in the manuscript likewise reported satisfaction with electoral freedom and fairness exceeding 90 per cent between 2009 and 2024.[22,23]

Second Main Section: Implications for the Electoral Process and the Party System

This section examines the effects and capacities of electoral and party policies through the factors South Africans consider when making electoral choices. With regard to party politics, particular attention is given to the context shaped by the ANC's dominance of the political process.

First Subsection: The Electoral Process and the Debate over Voting Behaviour (Ethnic/Rational)

Research on voting behaviour in post-transition South Africa is divided between two perspectives. One argues that voting is shaped by several factors but generally follows patterns found in other democracies, where voters make rational choices based on realized and expected benefits: they support parties that serve their interests and punish those that fail. The ANC's repeated victories despite shortcomings in expected development outcomes suggest, however, that rational-choice assumptions alone cannot fully explain behaviour. Some researchers therefore argue that voting is determined by race. They note that the ANC's declining vote share has not primarily benefited traditional opposition parties, but newer parties that split from the ANC. In this interpretation, Black South Africans form the social base of the ANC and breakaway parties, while traditional opposition parties are often perceived as supported by white voters.

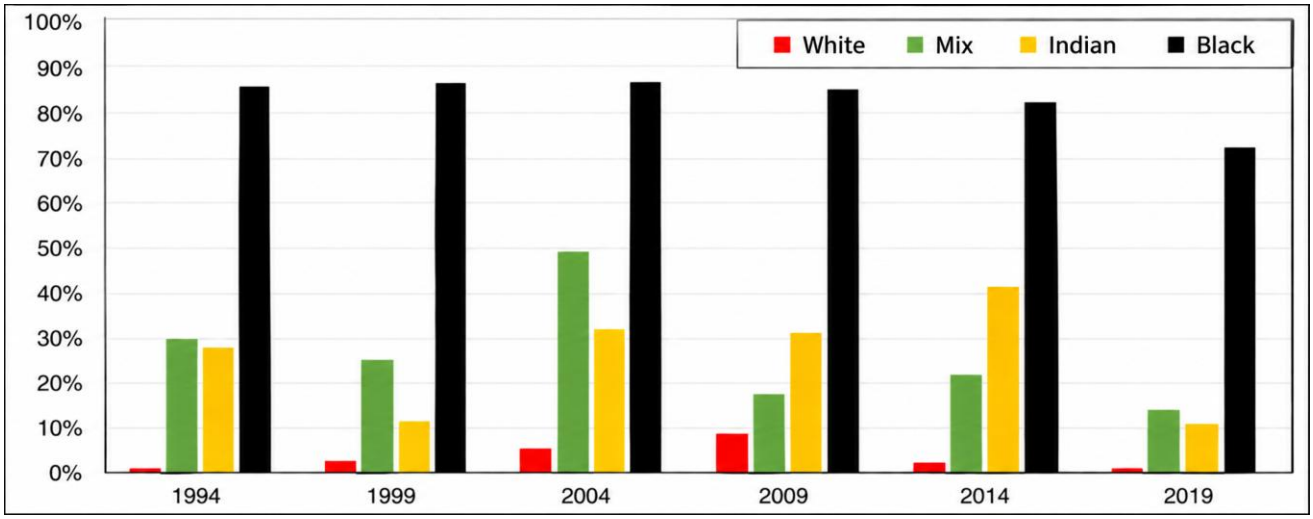
First Branch: Identity-Based Voting (Ethnic, Racial, Linguistic and Regional)

Proponents of the identity-voting perspective argue that the largest share of the ANC's social support comes from Black South Africans, while parties such as the Democratic Alliance are often described as having stronger support among white voters. The ANC's victories since 1994 are interpreted as evidence that racial affiliation is a major determinant of voting.

On this account, the correspondence between demographic proportions and electoral results suggests identity-based voting, particularly along racial lines.

Race has substantial explanatory power as an indicator of ANC support when other social and demographic characteristics are taken into account. The manuscript argues that racial identity has remained a major determinant of voting since the first elections in 1994. It reports that the ANC received support from more than 70 per cent of Black voters, compared with less than 10 per cent of white voters, across the years from 1994 to 2019.[24]

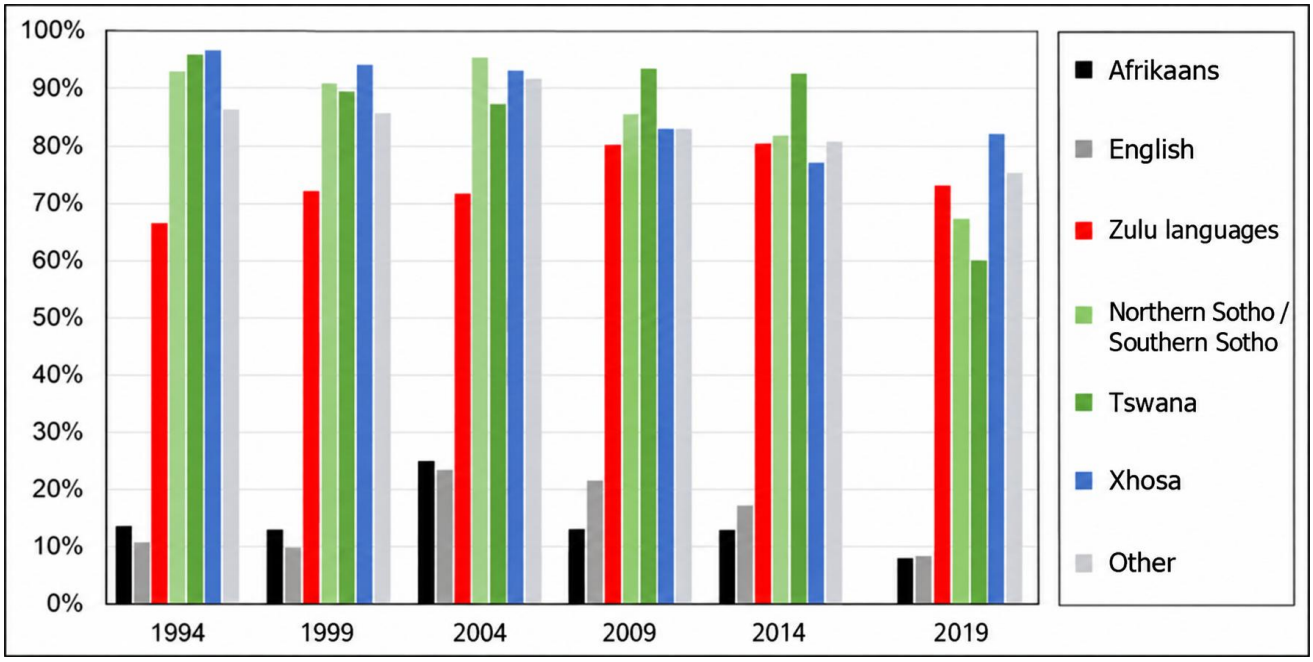
Figure 2. ANC voting by population group, 1994–2019.[25]



These patterns remained visible despite factional divisions within the ANC and the emergence of breakaway parties. Such parties also drew much of their support from Black voters, although their circumstances and outcomes differed. The manuscript describes the MK Party and the Economic Freedom Fighters as parties whose support was overwhelmingly Black, citing figures of 99.4 per cent and 97.6 per cent, respectively, in the 2025 elections.[26]

Linguistic differences also reveal disparities in party support between languages commonly spoken by Black South Africans and those spoken by other population groups. The manuscript reports that ANC support did not exceed 25 per cent among Afrikaans- and English-speaking voters, while it was consistently above 60 per cent among native speakers of Sotho, Tswana, and Xhosa.

Figure 3. Voting for the African National Congress by language, 1994–2019.[27]



Geographical differentiation is also important. Research cited in the manuscript points to spatial segregation as a factor reinforcing identity-based voting. Differences exist between urban and rural areas, both across and within provinces; urban areas are generally more racially diverse than rural areas. Some areas are dominated by relatively homogeneous population groups. For example, in the Western Cape, Coloured people constituted approximately 42 per cent of the population in 2022, alongside a substantial white population and a lower proportion of Black people than in other provinces. The ANC did not exceed 20 per cent of the provincial vote there. By contrast, areas where Xhosa speakers predominate have tended to record higher ANC support in local elections.[28]

Second Branch: Elements Supporting the Rational/Accountability Model

A strong association between race and voting behaviour does not mean that voters are irrational or vote solely on the basis of skin colour. Other scholars argue that government performance, policy implementation, campaign strength, and opposition parties' difficulty in persuading voters that they offer credible alternatives also shape electoral choices.

In the first three elections, voters did not appear to place substantial weight on rational-choice considerations when evaluating government performance on social and economic issues. Issue-based voting began to play a greater role in 2009. Government performance became increasingly important, as job losses and growing perceptions of corruption and cronyism appear to have affected ANC support in 2014. This was accompanied by declining trust in the party and its leadership and perceptions of poor local service delivery. The manuscript links this process to a substantial decline in the ANC's vote share between 1994 and 2024, interpreting it as consistent with retrospective electoral accountability.[29]

Rational-choice explanations also raise the issue of political alienation, reflected in high rates of non-participation through failure to register or vote. The Electoral Commission of South Africa reportedly found that approximately nine million eligible citizens were not registered, including around six million young people. Fewer than 20 per cent of eligible first-time voters had registered. Some voters turned to protest or new parties, while others abstained. This can be interpreted as voters withdrawing traditional support to signal dissatisfaction or express a preference for alternatives. The manuscript reports turnout of 58.64 per cent of registered voters in 2024.

Generational change also supports the rational-choice interpretation. A study by the Centre for Social Development in Africa at the University of Johannesburg, entitled "Election 2019: Socio-economic Performance and Voter Preferences,"

reportedly found that young people were less attached to the loyalties of the liberation era and placed socioeconomic well-being above democratic rights. Some believed that meeting their needs was more important than voting. The manuscript presents this as a worrying sign of declining confidence in democracy.[30]

Changes in party support and voter motivations may indicate growing electoral volatility that is obscured when analysis focuses only on aggregate results. South Africa may be approaching a more fluid party system. In either case, this "silent revolution" among voters has implications for democratic quality and consolidation.[31]

Second Subsection: Implications for the Party System

First Branch: Party Dominance (A Crisis of System Legitimacy)

Weakening social-party ties has implications for democracy. As permanent partisan loyalties decline, voters may become more willing to change their support, potentially making competition more effective. Greater electoral volatility increases uncertainty about outcomes and may encourage parties and candidates to respond more closely to voters' interests. Conversely, weakening party ties may produce political alienation, reflected in growing numbers of voters unwilling to support any party. High vote shares for the governing party alongside declining turnout may signal deterioration in democratic quality.

South Africa's post-transition party system was intended to be pluralist, implying competition among several parties and, in principle, alternation in office unless the incumbent continued to meet voters' expectations. In practice, access to national power remained with the ANC for a prolonged period. The party received more than 60 per cent of the vote in most elections, although its share fell to approximately 40 per cent in 2024. This pattern is commonly described as party dominance.

Scholarship on dominant parties identifies characteristics such as repeatedly winning a majority or plurality, enjoying a dominant bargaining position relative to other parties, and remaining in government for an extended period. Comparative studies have identified proportional representation and emergence during a mobilization crisis as common features. The manuscript argues that these features apply to South Africa: proportional representation strengthened multipartyism, while the struggle against apartheid and its eventual end constituted a mobilization crisis. The remaining feature is present, although the principal cleavage is racial rather than ideological.[32]

Party dominance contributed to what the literature describes as state capture. The manuscript discusses Roger Southall's account, identifying corruption that induces public officials to act against the public interest; elite networks linking ruling-party politicians with business actors; and kleptocracy, in which corruption is organized from the highest levels of government.[33,34,35,36]

Dominance had a dual effect on political legitimacy. The ANC's sustained parliamentary majorities provided stability and governability, which some scholars consider important to consolidating democracy in a divided society. However, prolonged dominance also raised challenges involving accountability, competition, and confidence in representative institutions. Combined with closed-list proportional representation, ANC dominance limited voters' ability to hold individual legislators accountable and weakened some mechanisms of effective interparty competition. The manuscript cites a decline in trust in MPs from 56 per cent in 2011 to 24 per cent in 2024; only 22 per cent reportedly approved of MPs' performance, compared with 67 per cent dissatisfied. It also reports that 63 per cent believed most or all MPs were involved in corruption.[37,38,39]

This decline in trust coincided with falling turnout: approximately 58.64 per cent in the 2024 national election, compared with 65.99 per cent in 2019 and 73.48 per cent in 2014. These indicators should not automatically be interpreted as a

collapse of democratic legitimacy. A study comparing public attitudes before and after the 2024 election reportedly found that the share preferring democracy to other forms of government rose from 45 to 55 per cent, while satisfaction with how democracy worked increased from 36 to 59 per cent. The relationship between dominance and legitimacy is complex: dominance contributed to stability and governability, but declining competition and concerns about performance and trust created challenges for performance-based and representative legitimacy. The ANC's loss of its parliamentary majority in 2024 was an important turning point, enabling a Government of National Unity and opening space for more competitive and negotiated governance.[40]

Second Branch: Weak Parties and the Turn to Ethnic Polarization

Many researchers maintain that South African electoral and party politics continue to be shaped by historical ties intersecting with racial identities. Many opposition parties are specialized parties: rather than seeking a national majority, they seek to represent particular racial or ethnic groups and defend their interests. Consequently, they may compete with one another for support from their respective constituencies instead of directly challenging the ANC.

South Africa's experience shows that racial, ethnic, and regional cleavages remain present in party competition, although they no longer operate in the exclusionary form characteristic of apartheid. Some parties, particularly the Inkatha Freedom Party, have retained a support base strongly associated with regional and ethnic identity in KwaZulu-Natal. The 2024 election also demonstrated the continuing relevance of racial and ethnic identity and regional residence in explaining support for the MK Party, although dissatisfaction with democratic performance and socioeconomic conditions also influenced voting.[41]

This situation creates an institutional dilemma for opposition parties that move from competing against the government to participating in it. They must reconcile the preservation of their identity and electoral base with participation in power-sharing and policymaking. This dilemma became evident after the 2024 election, when the Inkatha Freedom Party joined Government of National Unity arrangements alongside the ANC, the Democratic Alliance, and other parties, while the MK Party and other opposition forces remained outside the government.

Opposition participation in government does not necessarily eliminate the identity differences underpinning parties' support bases. Instead, it may require parties to revise their rhetoric and programmes to balance governing responsibilities with political distinctiveness. Opposition parties may shift from a clearly defined watchdog and programmatic role toward a more interactive one, particularly when coalition arrangements blur the boundaries between government and opposition. Party and coalition engineering may broaden participation without removing the social cleavages underpinning competition.

The manuscript identifies evidence of a relationship between ethnic polarization and electoral violence, including physical assaults, intimidation, and property destruction, often targeting political opponents and their supporters. Violence tends to intensify before elections and may involve clashes between party members, attacks on campaign events, and threats against voters. The data cited indicate 186 incidents across national and local election years since 2000: national elections accounted for 81 incidents, or 44 per cent, and local elections for 105 incidents, or 56 per cent.[42]

Violence also increased during campaign periods. During the 2016 local elections, the highest number of assassinations was recorded after parties announced their candidates, as competition among council members intensified. Further killings occurred during the 2021 campaign, associated with competition for desirable local government positions.[43]

The data also suggest a link between violence and the intensity of political competition. KwaZulu-Natal, where Zulu people constitute the ethnic majority and which historically served as a stronghold of the Inkatha Freedom Party, became a major ANC support base after Jacob Zuma became ANC president in 2007. Competition among parties contributed to increased

political violence. Later, violence also emerged within the ANC itself as factions competed for political office. Election-related violence in KwaZulu-Natal from early 2016 occurred amid tensions among parties in contested areas and serious internal disputes over ANC leadership and candidate nominations.[44]

Conclusions

South Africa's experience demonstrates that electoral institutions in divided societies cannot be evaluated solely according to technical criteria. The system adopted after 1994 formed part of a historic political process intended to prevent a return to political exclusion and reassure competing forces that the new democratic system would accommodate them. This supports the study's first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis is also supported. Proportional representation and party lists played an important role in integration by providing broad mechanisms of representation, enabling small parties and social and regional forces to participate, and transforming competition from a struggle over the right to participate into competition over the distribution of power within institutions. This does not mean the system eliminated ethnic pluralism. Voting continued to be influenced, to varying degrees, by race, ethnicity, language, and geography. Nevertheless, the continuing influence of identity does not mean that elections became merely an "ethnic census." Elite interests, government performance, leadership, corruption, public services, and trust also increasingly shaped electoral choice.

The electoral system generated a further paradox: proportional representation enabled broad multipartyism, but this coexisted with one party's prolonged dominance. Legal and institutional multipartyism does not necessarily produce equal competition for government. This is consistent with the third hypothesis.

Overall, the study finds that electoral and party engineering in South Africa has been more successful in managing political pluralism than in eliminating social pluralism. Electoral engineering did not abolish division; it reorganized it. Before the transition, division was embedded in exclusion and conflict. After 1994, it became part of electoral and institutional competition that could be managed and negotiated. The central theoretical conclusion is that electoral engineering in plural societies does not primarily remove cleavages; it reorganizes the channels through which they are expressed politically. Its effects depend on whether it transfers division from exclusion and conflict into representation, negotiation, and institutional competition.

Recommendations

Given the view that proportional representation is well suited to divided societies or societies emerging from conflict, the study recommends reforming the South African model by developing a mixed proportional-representation system that preserves national proportionality while introducing greater direct geographical representation.

One principal weakness of closed party lists is the limited direct relationship between voters and representatives. An MP's political future depends substantially on their position on the party list and decisions made by party leadership. The study recommends mechanisms to strengthen representatives' ties to voters and communities. One option is a gradual move away from entirely closed lists toward a format giving voters a greater role in selecting candidates, such as open or semi-open lists, accompanied by safeguards against elections becoming contests dominated by personal wealth or individualistic competition.

The study recommends against attempting to remove racial or ethnic identity from politics, as this is unrealistic in a society with a deep history of social division. Instead, parties should be encouraged to develop programmes that cross racial,

ethnic, and regional boundaries and connect different groups' interests to shared national issues such as the economy, public services, and the fight against corruption.

Footnotes

Original footnote sequence (1–44). Repeated citations and explanatory notes are retained rather than consolidated.

1. See Abdel Qader Abdel Ali, "Electoral Engineering: Objectives, Strategies, and Their Relationship to Political Systems," Daftar al-Siyasa wa al-Qanun, 6(10) (2014), 315–328.

2. Ibid.

3. Mohammed Ashour Mahdi, "Democracy in Africa: The Experience of Democratic Transition in the Republic of South Africa," Daftar al-Siyasa wa al-Qanun, 1(1) (2009), 77–111.

4. This approach is associated with Arend Lijphart and Andrew Reynolds. See Lijphart and Bernard Grofman (eds.), The Evolution of Electoral & Party Systems in the Nordic Countries (Agathon Press, 2002); Andrew Reynolds, "Constitutional Engineering in Southern Africa," Journal of Democracy, 6(2) (1995).

5. This approach is associated with Donald Horowitz. See "Electoral Systems and Their Goals: A Primer for Decision-Makers" (January 2003), ACE Electoral Knowledge Project.

6. Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds, Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies (accessed 19 March 2025).

7. Fatiha Habish, "Apartheid in South Africa during the Twentieth Century," Majallat Mitidja lil-Dirasat al-Insaniyya, 1(2) (2014), 308–336.

8. Statistics South Africa, Census 2022 Statistical Release (P0301.4) (2023).

9. United Nations, Economic and Social Council, Measures to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination and the Role of the Sub-Commission (1989), E/CN.4/Sub.2/1989/8.

10. Jonathan Di John and James Putzel, Political Settlements (University of Birmingham, 2009), pp. 4, 22.

11. Courtney Jung and Ian Shapiro, "South Africa's Negotiated Transition: Democracy, Opposition, and the New Constitutional Order," Politics & Society, 23(3) (1995), p. 269.

12. Christina Murray and Richard Simeon, "Recognition without Empowerment: Minorities in a Democratic South Africa," International Journal of Constitutional Law, 5(4) (2007), p. 699.

13. Hazel Nasiphi Moya, "The Negotiated Nation: Evaluation of Nation Building in Post-Apartheid South Africa," doctoral thesis, University of the Western Cape (2021), pp. 49–50.

14. John Rabuogi Ahere, "Party Politics in Kenya and South Africa: The Conundrum of Ethnic and Race Relations," Open Access Library Journal, 7(5) (2020).

15. Bertha Chiroro, Electoral System and Accountability: Options for Electoral Reform in South Africa, KAS Johannesburg Policy Paper No. 3 (2008).

16. Robert Mattes, Matthias Krönke, and Sarah Lockwood, "Political Parties and Democracy in South Africa," in Political Parties and the Crisis of Democracy: Organization, Resilience, and Reform (Oxford Academic, 2024), p. 489.

17. The 2018 Political Party Funding Act changed the allocation of funds, introduced a multiparty democracy fund for private donations, and required disclosure of donations. See Mattes, Krönke, and Lockwood, pp. 492–493.

18. Ibid., p. 498.

19. Luke Feltham, Should South Africa Regulate the Private Funding of Political Parties? Master's thesis, University of the Witwatersrand (2015), accessed 17 May 2025.

20. Sithembile Mbete, Electoral Reform: Research Report, prepared for OUTA and My Vote Counts (accessed 2 June 2025).

21. Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha, Ethnic Diversity and Federalism: Constitution Making in South Africa and Ethiopia (Ashgate, 2010), pp. 122–125.

22. Moya, "The Negotiated Nation," p. 163.

23. "30 Years of Electoral Democracy in SA: HSRC Survey Captures Voter Experiences and Informs Electoral Processes" (accessed 13 June 2025).

24. Ibid.

25. Amory Gethin, "Extreme Inequality and the Structure of Political Cleavages in South Africa, 1994–2019," World Inequality Database (2020), p. 30.

26. Gareth van Onselen, "Mapping ANC, DA, MK and EFF Support by Race," Inside Politics (24 June 2024; accessed 30 October 2025).

27. Gethin, "Extreme Inequality," p. 36.

28. Statistics South Africa, Census 2022 Statistical Release.

29. Yolanda Sadie and Leila Patel, "Zuma versus Ramaphosa: Factors Influencing Party Choice of South Africans in the Run-up to the 2019 Elections," Journal of African Elections, 19(1) (2020).

30. Leila Patel and Lauren Graham, "Study Shows Young South Africans Have No Faith in Democracy and Politicians," The Conversation (accessed 23 October 2025).

31. Marcel Paret and Carin Runciman, "Voting Decisions and Racialized Fluidity in South Africa's Metropolitan Municipalities," African Affairs, 122(487) (2023), 272–276.

32. Kahreen Celeste Tebeau, "ANC Dominance and Ethnic Patronage Politics in South Africa," doctoral dissertation, Yale University (2014), p. 28.

33. This does not imply a necessary causal relationship between proportional representation and party dominance; the same result could occur under other electoral systems. See Tebeau (2014), p. 29.

34. The term refers to elites undermining rules and constitutional safeguards to serve private interests. See Zenobia Ismail and Robin Richards, "State Capture and Serious Organised Crime in South Africa: A Case Study of the South African Revenue Service (2001–21)," University of Birmingham, SOC ACE Research Paper No. 12 (2023).

35. Roger Southall, "What's New about 'State Capture'?" in State Capture in Africa: Old Threats, New Packaging? (EISA, 2018), p. 35.

36. Ismail and Richards, "State Capture."

37. Ainara Mancebo, "Stability and Governability: The Benign Effects of Party Dominance in South Africa," Insight on Africa, 13(1) (2021), 56–75.

38. Mattes, Krönke, and Lockwood, "Political Parties and Democracy in South Africa," pp. 497–499.

39. Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma, "Low on Trust and Satisfaction, South Africans Want Their MPs to Listen," Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 921 (2024), pp. 2, 8.

40. Rorisang Lekalake and Matthias Krönke, "Was South Africa's 2024 Election a Win for Democracy?" Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 991 (2025), p. 2.

41. S. Gordon et al., "The Brick in the Ballot Box: The Relative Influence of Democratic Discontent and Identity Politics in the 2024 Elections in South Africa," Politikon, 51(3) (2025), p. 191.

42. Rumbi Matamba and Chwayita Thobela, "The Politics of Murder: Criminal Governance and Targeted Killings in South Africa," Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (May 2024).

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in the source and have not been independently corrected.