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Political Parties and Democracy in South Africa

Robert Mattes, Matthias Krönke, and Sarah Lockwood

Introduction

While a sustained wave of mass opposition eventually washed away the formal edifice of South Africa's apartheid regime, ordinary South Africans have yet to develop high levels of positive commitment to the institutions of liberal democracy (Mattes 2019). Instead, the survival of liberal democracy in South Africa has been based, thus far, on the actions of individual elite 'gatekeepers' (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018) located largely in the country's courts, parliament, and civil society organizations, and, sometimes, in political parties. While some individuals have worked to defend democratic practices within their parties, and some opposition parties have taken formal steps to counter specific acts of democratic erosion through legal action, we argue that South Africa's parties have, collectively, weakened the country's democratic experiment by failing to commit fully to all aspects of liberal democracy, engaging with voters, or offering voters a competitive electoral arena that provides them with effective choices. South Africa thus has a supply-side problem in its democracy, a problem exemplified by four important characteristics of the country's political party system, which in turn have their roots in a series of structural and contingent factors.

Four Key Features of South Africa's Party System

Two and a half decades after its transition to democracy, South Africa's political party system is characterized by four striking features, none of which bode well for the sustainability of high levels of representative democracy. The first and most prominent characteristic is its 25-year dominance by the African National Congress (ANC), which led resistance to the previous apartheid regime, culminating in the country's first democratic, non-racial election in

1994. The ANC won that election with a resounding 62% of the vote and saw its support rise even further in subsequent years, peaking at 69% in 2004 (Table 23.1). While its electoral support has receded somewhat in recent years, the ANC still dominates the political arena, gaining 58% of the vote in the most recent 2019 national election. This dominance raises concerns about the accountability of the South African government, as well as reducing the competitiveness of the electoral arena in problematic ways.

The second key feature of the country's party system is that it is dominated by organizations rooted in the pre-democratic, apartheid era, many of whom still embody worldviews from this period which undermine genuine liberal democracy. Although the ANC successfully ended apartheid, for example, it was by no means committed to bringing about liberal democracy when it did, and it continues to have a lukewarm commitment to many aspects of liberal democracy (Dubow 2012; Southall 2014, 2016). Moreover, a tendency to identify itself as the embodiment of the nation, common among national liberation movements like the ANC, means that the party often condemns those who oppose it as 'aliens or traitors', delegitimizing opposition in the political system, and limiting the competitiveness of the electoral arena.

The main opposition party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), similarly, traces its history back to the apartheid era, and specifically to liberal opposition

Table 23.1 National election results and effective number of parties, 1994–2019

Party	1994	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
ANC	62.7%	66.4%	69.7%	65.9%	62.2%	57.5%
DP/DA	1.7%	9.6%	12.4%	16.7%	22.2%	20.8%
IFP	10.5%	8.6	6.7%	4.6%	2.4%	3.4%
EFF	—	—	—	—	6.4%	10.8%
NP	20.4%	6.9%	1.7%	—	—	—
Other	4.7%	8.5%	9.5%	12.8%	6.8%	7.5%
VAP turnout	85.8%	63.9%	56.8%	56.6%	53.8%	47.3%
ENEP	2.33	2.16	1.94	2.09	2.23	2.49
ENPP	2.21	2.15	1.97	2.12	2.26	2.57

Note: ENEP—effective number of electoral parties; ENPP—effective number of parliamentary parties; VAP—voting age population turnout as share of all eligible voters

Source: IEC Election results (IEC South Africa 2022), Voter Turnout Database (International IDEA 2022)

parties in the old white parliament (the Democratic Party, and before that the Progressive Federal Party). From this time, it maintains a worldview based in the experience of the middle-class, white electorate, which often prevents it from seeing the world through the eyes of the majority of South Africa's citizens today. This reduces its ability to engage with voters and limits the role the DA can play as a truly competitive opposition party. Similarly, a second significant opposition party, the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), which governed the KwaZulu Bantustan during the apartheid era, continues to prioritize issues related to the preservation of Zulu culture and interests and has struggled to jettison the militant Zulu nationalism it became known for in the 1980s and early 1990s (Piper 2005).

Indeed, of all the parties with 10 or more seats in the current 400-seat legislature, only the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was formed since the end of apartheid in 1994. While however, certainly a new organization, the EFF is still strongly influenced by the apartheid era—it was formed largely by defectors from the ruling ANC—and it is also limited in its commitment to liberal democracy. Explicitly placing itself to the left of the ANC, with its main issue position focused on the rapid transfer of land to black people, it presents a militant image, with an informal costume of red berets and red shirts, and rhetoric that easily qualifies as 'populist' (Fölscher et al. 2021). Thus, the country's major parties all have at least some rooting in the apartheid era and limited commitments to liberal democracy in current times, weakening the democratic system in the new South Africa.

Third, the low effective number of elecotoral and parliamentary parties (ENEP/ENPP) reflected in the statistics in Table 23.1 shows the party system is also characterized by a proliferation of very small parties in the National Assembly, with 13 parties currently represented in parliament. With the exception of the Congress of the People (COPE) (2009), and the EFF (2014 and 2019), none of the parties formed in the post-apartheid period have ever won more than 5% of the popular vote, and they give every indication that they are satisfied with their limited vote shares so long as it guarantees party leaders a parliamentary seat and salary.

The fourth important characteristic of the system is a steadily declining rate of voter participation. Conservatively estimated at 86% in 1994, images of long snake-like lines of voters patiently waiting to cast their first ballots flashed around the world. But turnout has declined consistently in every election since then, falling under 50% of the voting-age population for the first time in 2019. This is not a problem unique to South Africa, of course, but it does have significant implications for the robustness of the young democracy.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will argue that these four characteristics (a still-dominant but declining governing party; the lingering shadow of apartheid; a plethora of smaller, weak opposition parties; and declining levels of voter turnout) have their roots in a series of structural and contingent factors, resulting in a supply-side issue for democracy—in which South African voters lack a truly competitive electoral arena, populated by engaged parties offering genuine alternatives. We turn first to the structural factors.

Structural Factors

Apartheid and its legacy

In their classic volume, Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan (1967) demonstrated that a country's current electoral cleavages reflect various political, economic, or social 'revolutions'. Such cleavages often 'freeze' and continue as the dominant electoral dividing line years after the underlying conflict has ceased to be important in and of itself. In South Africa, the apartheid regime created a stark and enduring division between the interests and values of the black, African majority and white, European minority (who constituted the subordinate and superordinate groups in South Africa's 'ranked' society) (Horowitz 1985). Given the relative size of those populations, moreover, it also created a vastly numerically imbalanced cleavage, with roughly two-thirds of eligible voters on one side versus approximately one-fifth on the other (with the balance comprising what Donald Horowitz (1985) called 'middle groups' consisting of 'coloured' and 'Indian' voters).

Because the proportion of voters previously oppressed under the apartheid system (plus their descendants) is so large, any political party linked to the apartheid government (or symbolically connected to it in some way) faces a huge challenge in gaining any sort of legitimacy among the wider electorate. On the other side of the coin, the ANC has profited from a massive reserve of credit from its successful opposition to apartheid but has worked hard to maintain its position as the champion of the previously oppressed and to position all opposition parties on the other side of the apartheid divide (see Ferree 2010).

The result is a stark racial cleavage in party support bases; a dominant ANC and a fractured, weak opposition struggling to capture the wider electorate; and the continued importance of apartheid-era legacies to modern party success. While actual votes cannot be broken down by race, and survey

results vary somewhat, the general trend is clear. Black voters have given and continue to give the lion's share of their votes to the ANC and to a few other parties whose leaders came out of the ANC (the United Democratic Movement, COPE, and EFF). In contrast, only a few black South Africans vote for any political party that has historical connections to the old white political system, and completely new parties have often struggled to gain legitimacy without liberation-era credentials. Conversely, white voters have largely voted for parties that worked within the apartheid system (albeit often in opposition), with the bulk of votes going initially to the National Party (NP), and, following its demise, to the DA, the current main opposition party.[1] Very few support any political party that has its roots in the liberation struggle.[2]

Given this demographic balance, and the cleavages that are a legacy of apartheid, South Africa has developed a party system that provides one of the largest known exceptions to 'Duverger's Law', with a closed party list formula of proportional representation (PR) producing one-party dominance and a very low number of effective political parties that could exercise any real sort of checks and balances on the ruling ANC.

Electoral system

As constitutional negotiations began in 1990, virtually all participants agreed on the necessity of replacing the existing 'first-past-the-post' single-member legislative districts with some form of PR, if only to bring as many political organizations as possible into the new dispensation and reduce the possibility of civil war. As a result of three decades of apartheid settlement policies, however, voters overwhelmingly lived in a complex pattern of homogenous racial and ethnic enclaves, thus complicating the demarcation of reasonably small multi-member districts that did not simply replicate apartheid divisions. Given the urgency of reaching an inclusive agreement and bringing closure to the protracted and violent transition, moreover, negotiators opted for the simplest form of PR possible, with half of the 400-seat National Assembly selected from national party lists and the other half from nine geographically large party lists corresponding to the country's new system of provinces. Because these lists are closed, South Africans vote for a political party, not a candidate, and that single vote is then used to calculate seats on both the national and provincial lists.[3] Moreover, the constitution specifies that elected representatives lose their seats (and hence their salaries and privileges) if they 'cease to be a member' of the party they were originally

elected to represent.[4] Thus, political parties 'own' the seats occupied by elected legislators at national, provincial, and local levels. And, again, due to the need to include as many political movements as possible in the tumultuous transition period, the new system has no de jure threshold for winning seats. In practice, as long as a party wins at least 0.25% of the national vote (or around 30,000 votes), it is guaranteed at least one of the 400 seats.

The consequences of these decisions have been threefold. First, elected legislators are accountable not to voters but to party bosses (who are themselves not always elected to parliament). During elections, candidates stand on long lists in very large electoral districts with virtually no 'personal vote'(Carey and Shugart 1995), and between elections, legislators lose their seat if they are expelled from the party for any cause, including challenging the party line. While one might expect at least some degree of indirect accountability if the ruling party had to worry about pleasing voters to retain its grip on power at the next election, the ANC has thus far had little reason to fear its electoral support dropping under 50%.[5] As a result, elected representatives have few structural incentives to seek out and listen to citizen preferences, perhaps explaining why South Africa has one of the lowest rates of popular awareness of the identity of their elected representatives, or contact with them, in Africa (Mattes 2002), as well as one of the highest rates of protest (Lockwood and Krönke 2021). At the same time, South Africans seem to be increasingly aware that they need to find some way to hold their members of parliament (MPs) accountable, whether through protesting, contacting them, or voting. When asked by Afrobarometer interviewers in 2006 'who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, MPs do their jobs', just 10% of respondents said this was the citizens' responsibility. By 2021, this proportion had almost tripled (28%).[6]

Second, although South Africa's chief executive is elected indirectly by the National Assembly, parties focus their campaigns almost exclusively around their 'presidential' candidate, who heads the party list. This forces voters to make package decisions about an entire government and focuses attention on national rather than regional dynamics where opposition parties might enjoy a relative advantage, reinforcing the dominance of the ANC and making it hard for opposition parties to build their based of supporters.

Finally, while low thresholds facilitate relatively easy entry for a wide range of small parties, often based around a single personality or issue, they also provide those parties with little incentive to expand their voter base so long as the key party leaders are able to guarantee their own high spot on the party list and, thus, re-election. This helps to explain the proliferation of very small parties and the weakness of the opposition as a whole.

Public party financing

Public financial support for South Africa's political parties takes two distinct forms. First, public funds have been available direct to parties since 1997. But while public funding is ideally intended to level the playing field and provide all significant parties with the means to put their case before the voters, South Africa's system does the opposite. Until very recently, the vast share of available funds (90%) was allotted to parties based on their national and provincial legislative representation. Only 10% was given out equally, divided proportionally among provincial legislatures—based on population size—with equal amounts given to any party represented in that assembly. While there have been attempts in recent years to improve this approach, more than two decades of this skewed disbursement pattern have reinforced, rather than reduced, the financial disadvantage of smaller and new parties vis-à-vis the older and larger ANC and DA.[7]

   Second, since 2009 all television broadcasting licence holders have been required to make a specified number of two-minute slots available for party advertisements on each day of the designated election campaign period.[8] In contrast to the distribution of public funding, free time is distributed based on the number of candidates a party fields rather than its number of currently elected legislative representatives (Independent Communications Authority of South Africa 2008)

   At least four points are salient. First, the already dominant ANC receives the vast majority of available public funds, reinforcing its dominance. In 2019, for example, the ANC received 59% of a total of R149 million (approximately US$10.3 million at the time), while the DA received 22%, and the EFF 8% (IEC South Africa 2019).

   Second, public funds cover only a small share of all campaign expenses. While the data are spotty, we know that in 1999, for example, all parties combined spent an estimated total of R300 million to R500 million (approximately US$48.8 to US$81.3 million at the time) during the campaign, with only R53 million (approximately US$8.6 million at the time) coming from the public purse (Schreiner and Mattes 2012). This means that parties still depend heavily on their ability to raise funds for campaign and daily operating expenses from private donors. Given the ANC's control over public policy and state contracts, as well as the operation of its own in-house investment firm, and the DA's historical links with the business community, it is not surprising that these two parties receive far more in private donations than any other political party (Butler 2010). Although South African legislation now imposes more restrictions than many other African countries

(International IDEA 2021), for more than two decades the ANC and DA were able to take advantage of undisclosed private donations, an advantage that will take many years to erase. Certainly, only the ANC and DA are able to employ substantial professional, permanent staff for activities like fundraising, market research, policy development, and publicity.

Third, the ANC's campaign spending has increased rapidly over the past few elections, making it more and more difficult for smaller parties to level the playing field. The ANC spent an estimated R300 million (approximately US$44.7 million at the time) on its campaign activities in 2004, rising to between R400 and R500 million (approximately US$38.8 to US$48.4 million at the time) in 2009 and 2014, and an estimated R1 billion (approximately US$69.2 million at the time) on the 2019 general election campaign (Thuynsma 2017; Sokutu 2019; Plessis 2021).

Fourth, while free television airtime is nominally distributed among all parties on a much more equitable basis than public funding, the allocation of these spots is only finalized fairly late in the campaign (once parties' lists of candidates are vetted and verified), thus limiting its impact. Additionally, because parties are responsible for organizing the resources and expertise to produce the television advertisements, most parties (beyond the ANC and DA) have been unable to take advantage of the free time slots, often leaving them unutilized (Schreiner and Mattes 2012; Duncan 2014).

There are some important changes afoot, however. In April 2021, the 2018 Political Party Funding Act (Republic of South Africa 2021) was finally signed into law. This changed the apportionment of funds, with one-third to be allocated equitably and two-thirds proportionally; established a Multiparty Democracy Fund to raise and distribute donated funds from the private sector to represented political parties (using the same formula); and established, for the first time, rules for mandatory disclosure of private donations to political parties (Ndamase 2020; Republic of South Africa 2021). Taken together, these changes have the potential to reduce the historical inequalities between parties and increase the transparency and accountability of party funding over time.

Looking ahead, social media might also offer political parties a more affordable way to connect with voters. However, smartphone penetration and social media use is still not as widespread in South Africa as one might expect. The most recent Afrobarometer survey found that only two-thirds of all people (64%) say they get news from social media on a frequent basis (compared to 87% for television, and 79% for radio) (Afrobarometer 2021; see also Krönke 2020). It is also unclear to what extent opposition party cam-

paign strategists will have the necessary organizational capacity and skill to develop coherent campaigns across new and old media channels that would in any realistic way close the gap with the dominant and better-resourced ANC.

Contingent Factors

Beyond these structural factors, South Africa's political parties are characterized by a range of organizational, performance, and strategic shortcomings that contribute to the striking characteristics of the party system and tend to limit rather than advance democratic practice.

Party organization

The ANC

By any standard, the ANC is a highly structured organization with a long pedigree. First organized by a small group of prominent Africans in 1912 (as the South African Native National Congress), the ANC as a mass organization dates back at least to the late 1940s (Butler 2012). Since its unbanning as an organization in 1990, the ANC has had four party presidents (Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa), with none serving more than two five-year terms, each (re)elected at quinquennial party conferences, at which several thousand delegates also elect the rest of the party office bearers and National Executive Committee. The fact that the party conference of the governing party takes place about 16 months ahead of the national election, however, introduces the possibility of prolonged periods where the party leader differs from the state president. Indeed, this has occurred on three separate occasions, with two of these instances creating considerable political tension and organizational paralysis within the party.[9]

The party has a relatively high degree of internal complexity, with functional subdivisions at the national level, nine provincial subdivisions, and thousands of local branches (African National Congress 2017). However, while South Africa is a federal system, the party's provincial structures are seen as co-equal in status to other functional subdivisions (e.g. Women's, Youth, and Veterans' Leagues) and have no special role in party decision-making. Rather party policies and key decisions are made by the National Executive Committee (which consists of 80 members elected at large and

six key office holders), and on a daily basis by a smaller National Working Committee. The ANC also has a set of policy bodies that shadow government ministries. Concerning the level of internal democracy, the ANC scores well in measures of intra-party democracy developed by the Political Party Database Project (see Figure 23.1), reflecting the involvement of local branches in both candidate selection and manifesto development.[10]

Yet despite being an organizationally complex, geographically widespread, and internally democratic organization, the ANC has not avoided episodes of excessive personal control of the party, and it has failed to rein in the autocratic tendencies of at least two of its leaders (Figure 23.2). In his first term as state president (1994–2004), Thabo Mbeki began to exercise increasing control over party policy—particularly with regard to the appointment of party personnel to government positions—and HIV/AIDS policy. Such was the extent of his obsessive control that senior cabinet members such as Kader Asmal refused to answer simple questions from reporters about the link between HIV and AIDS for fear of countering Mbeki's eccentric views on the subject. Following Mbeki's removal, the party underwent a very brief period of renewed openness during Kgalema Motlanthe's seven-month interim presidency (Kondlo and Maserumule 2011). However, his successor Jacob Zuma resumed and increased this authoritarian trend through frequent cabinet reshuffles and contentious appointments of senior civil servants, who rewarded Zuma's cronies with major state contracts and access to government policy-making processes (or what became known in South Africa as 'state capture'), sending the country into its deepest democratic crisis to date.
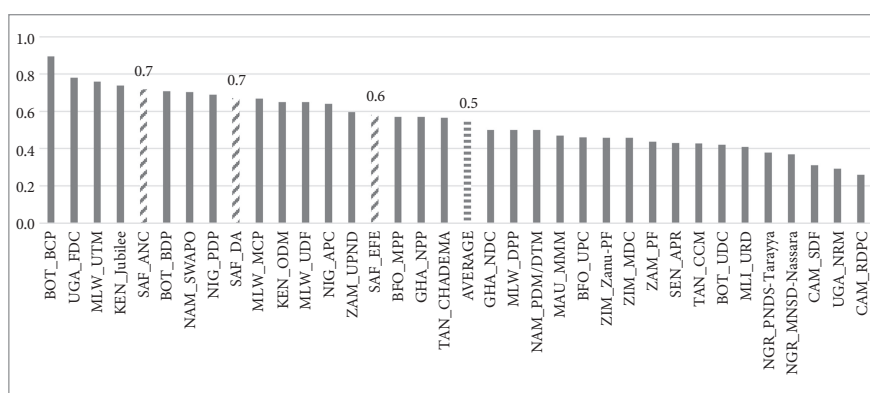

Figure 23.1 Intra-party democracy: South African parties in comparative perspective

The IPD index (0–1) incorporates three components: personnel, structure and manifesto; additional information can be found in footnote 10, and in Brause and Poguntke (2021)

Note: SAF_ANC = African National Congress; SAF_DA = Democratic Alliance; SAF_EFF = Economic Freedom Fighters; Horizontal dashed line = sample average.

Source: PPDB data (Poguntke et al. 2021)
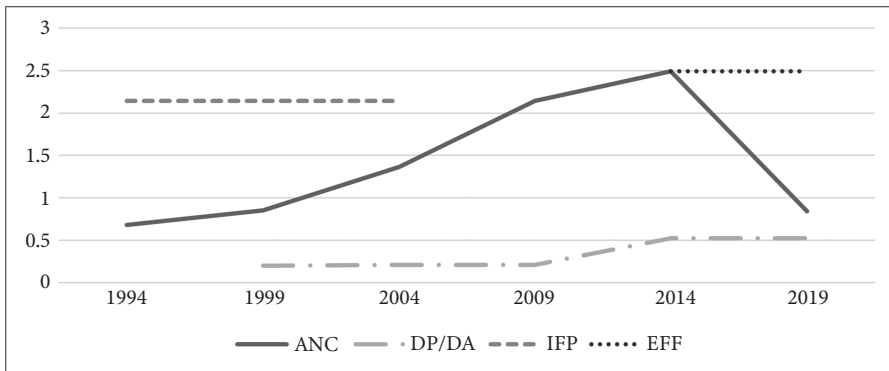
Figure 23.2 Party personalization, 1994–2019

Note: The scale runs from 0 (The party is not focused on the personal will and priorities of one individual leader) to 4 (The party is solely focused on the personal will and priorities of one individual party leader). Data for the IFP were not available for 2009–2019

Source: V-Party (Lührmann et al. 2020)

Despite grumblings from many in the ANC as this took place, old habits developed during its years in exile (including secrecy, strict discipline, and the privileging of loyalty above all else) meant that ANC caucus members were unwilling to support successive votes of no confidence in Zuma until the casting of a secret ballot became an option.

In addition to its failure to rein in autocratic tendencies, the geographically widespread organizational structure of the ANC has not prevented it from isolating itself from interactions with civil society and their associated accountability demands. In terms of its linkages with civil society, the ANC has strong and long-standing relationships with the trade union and local civic association movements. Yet it also has a strong degree of autonomy from civil society. Indeed, many question whether allied civil society organizations have retained sufficient autonomy from the ANC and, thus, space to criticize and hold it accountable. Reflecting its historic drive to present a broad united front against apartheid, the ANC has been the leading force in a tripartite alliance with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and, more informally, with the South African Civics Movement (SANCO)—linkages that provide the ANC with tremendous advantages during election campaign periods. In return for their work holding campaign rallies and canvassing and mobilizing voters, and their pledge not to run their own slate of candidates, the ANC has placed SACP and COSATU officials on the ANC list, who then take up their seats as ANC MPs. The number of such seats is probably much larger than either organization could win if they ran on their own, creating a disincentive for

these members to criticize ANC policy. For many years, for example, trade unions and grassroots civic organizations were strongly opposed to ANC economic policy, yet their MPs remained loyal to the party. In general, when COSATU and its allied organizations have publicly criticized ANC policy, the party has simply responded by condemning them as 'ultra left' rather than engaging with the critique and justifying its own economic policy.

At the citizen level, moreover, while the ANC has a large number of local branches, evidence suggests that those branches have a relatively limited presence in their communities. In the 2019 election, for example, the ANC attracted only 22% of South Africans to a party campaign meeting or rally,[11] far outpacing any other party in the country but well below averages elsewhere on the continent (Krönke et al. 2022). It also contacted 30% of South Africans as part of their canvassing or 'get out the vote' campaign. However, the ANC 'ground game' was reduced in 2019, with personal contact dropping from 21% to 15%, likely reflecting the losses of several key trade union allies (e.g. the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)) due to the policy tensions discussed above. The number of voters contacted by the ANC by telephone or SMS did increase, from 7% to 15%. Indeed, based on our party presence index (Krönke et al. 2022), in which we use survey data from Afrobarometer to measure the frequency with which voters at national or sub-national levels engage with parties during or between elections, South African parties (taken as a whole) have one of the lowest rates of local organizational presence in Africa [Figure 23.3]. This is most likely a consequence of South Africa's particular form of PR, which provides little incentive for local candidates to build or maintain local party organizations, combined with the historic dominance of the ANC and the role that the legacy of apartheid continues to play in voting patterns.

Opposition Parties

Of South Africa's three main opposition parties, only the DA has an organization that is both relatively internally complex and geographically widespread. Born from a 1989 merger of the liberal, anti-apartheid Progressive Federal Party with two factions that had broken from the ruling NP, it then became the DA in 2003 when it joined forces with the remnants of the NP and the small Federal Alliance. Currently, the DA controls the government of the Western Cape province and the majority of local councils in that province, as well as participating in executive coalitions in three large metropolitan municipal councils outside the province (Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg).

In contrast to the ANC, the DA is organized federally into nine provincial structures (as well as a youth and women's league) and led by a federal
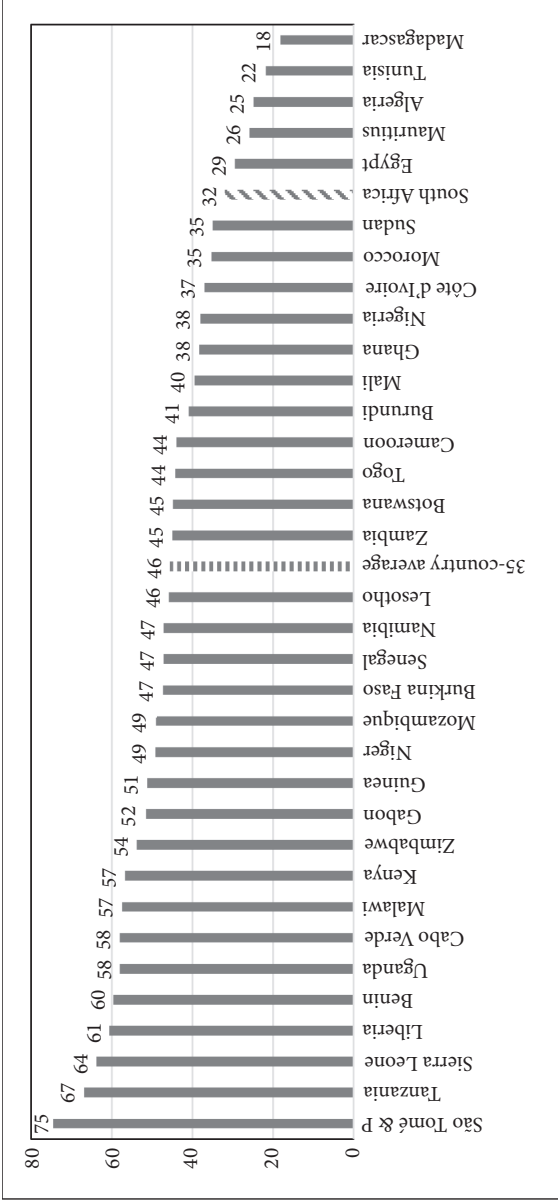
Figure 23.3 Party Presence Index, 35 countries, 2014–2015

Note: Scale represents the proportion of citizens who engaged with a political party in any one of four ways: attend rally, attend meeting, worked for party during last campaign, contacted party official

Source: Krönke et al. (2022)

council. Since 1994, the party has experienced regular turnover of leadership, with five party presidents (Zach De Beer, Tony Leon, Helen Zille, Mmusi Maimane, and John Steenhuisen) elected at quinquennial federal party congresses. As Figure 23.1 shows, moreover, the party has relatively high levels of internal party democracy (though lower than the ANC).

While the party is organizationally strong on paper, however, like the ANC it has relatively weak linkages with citizens. Compared to the ANC, the DA engages a far smaller share of the electorate in person during the campaign season. Nevertheless, the party has learned to contact voters virtually, which can be accomplished without a local organizational footprint. By 2019, for instance, the DA had caught up with and even passed the ANC, contacting 30% of all voters. While it made personal, face-to-face contact with only 8% of voters (compared to the ANC's 15%), it contacted 23% through, largely, telephone calls and SMS/text messages.[12]

Historically the DA has been seen as allied with the business community, and its roots in the old white political system and inability to develop any real connections to other mass-based organizations such as trade unions have also significantly hampered its ability to mobilize large numbers of voters, limiting its effectiveness as an opposition party. Over the past 25 years, moreover, while the party has had some success at transforming itself into an organization with growing numbers of coloured and black party officials in leadership positions, several promising black leaders have also left the party (e.g. William Mnisi, Lindiwe Mzibuko, Mmusi Maimane, and Herman Mashaba), in some cases amid claims that former DA leader Helen Zille continues to dominate party policy in troubling ways. While the DA scores relatively low on the V-Party Personalization Index (Figure 23.2), like the ANC it has struggled in practice to rein in the influence of dominant personalities.

The other two main opposition parties—the IFP and the EFF—are both far less complex and far more personalistic organizations. The IFP came into existence in 1975, initially formed as a Zulu cultural organization known as the Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement. The party was led for 45 years by its founder Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who, even when he handed over the leadership to Velenkosini Hlabisa in 2019, remained the leader of the party's parliamentary caucus in the National Assembly. Other aspiring senior leaders, such as Oscar Dhlomo, Frank Mdlalose, and Zanele kaMagwaza-Msibi, all saw their path to the leadership closed off by Buthelezi and eventually left the party for other pastures. A former member of the ANC youth league, and a member of the Zulu royal family, Buthelezi was Chief Minister of the Zulu Bantustan during apartheid and remains the Traditional Prime Minister of the Zulu Kingdom today. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

given this, the party's main societal linkage is with the traditional Zulu royal household. Despite trying to appeal to a broader constituency, the party's social and economic conservatism, combined with a continued focus on traditional leadership and close relations with the Zulu royal family, has continued to appeal primarily to Zulu-speaking South Africans, limiting its appeal as an opposition party. Organizationally, the party has relatively little presence outside of KwaZulu-Natal and the city of Johannesburg; however, within KwaZulu-Natal the IFP is relatively successful, controlling 9 out of 44 councils and representing the plurality of councillors in a further 16 councils.

Finally, the EFF, created in 2013 by the former leader of the ANC Youth League, Julius Malema, situates itself to the ideological left of the ANC, with its main issue position focused on the rapid transfer of land to black South Africans. It describes itself as part of a 'broad Marxist-Leninist' tradition and also draws influence from Fanonian schools of thought. The party presents a militant image, describing its party leader as 'President and Commander-in-Chief' and its organizational structures as national or provincial 'command teams'. Though it is the youngest of the major opposition parties, it has had some success at building local organizational structures in several provinces and on several of the country's university student councils, reflecting the party's appeal among many young South Africans (Lepule 2021). That said, during the 2019 campaign season the party only contacted 12% of the electorate overall (7% in person, and 5% by telephone or digital means), showing contact levels overall are still low. While it has captured sufficient support to be included in the executive councils of a number of local governments, its leader, Malema, has by far the highest profile among the party's leadership, and his charismatic personality dominates virtually all party activity, with relatively little done within the party to rein him in or hold him accountable in any way.

Taken together, therefore, this brief overview of the organizational structures of South Africa's main parties shows that all four parties struggle in some way to engage widely with voters, and they have failed to rein in dominant party members. This contributes to an environment in which voters are offered at best a limited competitive electoral arena while internal party dynamics raise the possibility that liberal democracy is far from the only game in town.

Party performance and strategy

Finally, we turn to consider the performance of the ruling party and the associated strategies of the major opposition parties. Over the past quarter of a

century, successive ANC governments have struggled to create jobs, reduce poverty, or narrow inequality in any appreciable way, issues consistently identified as the 'most important problem' by large proportions of citizens (Afrobarometer Network 2016). It has also presided over a spectacular policy failure in relation to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and a scandal of historic proportions in relation to the 'state capture' corruption scandal. In 2019, only 26% of people said that the ANC had done a good or very good job running the country over the previous five years.

Ordinarily, reviews like this should spell doom for any governing party, but the ANC remains hegemonic, and the opposition parties have repeatedly failed to capitalize on its declining popularity. Why? A number of factors already discussed almost certainly play an important role here. For example, the legacy of apartheid means that the ANC continues to command lingering support among those who credit it with liberation, even though its performance in office has been poor. Similarly, the electoral system and party financing system have both historically favoured the ANC to the detriment of other parties, while the lower levels of presence among opposition parties limits their contact with many voters. Additionally, the DA's white image and the IFP's Zulu image have undoubtedly turned off many South Africans, reducing their appeal among broad swathes of the population. But the strategies and associated images of the country's main opposition parties are also critical. Turning to the South African National Election Study (SANES) data, just 23% of those surveyed in 2019 felt that any opposition party could do a better job dealing with their most important problems than the ANC; only 29% rated an opposition leader higher than they rate President Cyril Ramaphosa; and just 31% give any opposition party a higher trust score than the ANC (SANES 2019).[13] While the ANC many not be doing a great job, therefore, the evidence suggests that the opposition parties are failing to provide a compelling alternative.

This is, in many ways, a damning indictment of opposition strategists' failure to use the resources available to them to implant a clearer image in the minds of voters about who they are, what they stand for, and their ability to govern. Indeed, none of the opposition parties give strong evidence of any sort of well-thought-out strategy to court voters on a continuous basis by using their parliamentary platform or other events as opportunities to generate free media publicity between elections. Most wait and mount their campaign in the six to eight weeks leading up to the election, at which point it is far too late to shape or reshape their public image in any significant way (Africa 2019).

Additionally, South Africa's opposition parties have repeatedly shown themselves to be out of touch with broad swathes of the electorate, focusing instead in their campaigns on issues of interest to, at best, a small core of party voters. Let us consider the most recent national election of 2019. With Zuma's recent resignation and rapidly declining levels of voter satisfaction with government performance, the ANC was at its most vulnerable, particularly to a negative campaign focused on the tangible consequences of the massive corruption of the Zuma years, such as mounting deficits, shrinking development budgets, and neglect and damage to crucial development infrastructure (e.g. coal boilers for electricity generation, train rolling stock). Voters, as of the Afrobarometer 2018 survey, ranked unemployment, crime and security, and housing as the priority issues for government attention. Yet the DA responded by running a relatively anodyne, positive campaign focused on inclusiveness and national unity, in which the impact of corruption played a marginal role (Democratic Alliance 2018) The EFF, similarly, ignored the concerns of the majority of voters and chose to focus instead primarily on land redistribution and the nationalization of key industries—issues that few, if any, South African voters prioritized (South African History Online 2019).[14]

Summing Up: A Supply-side Issue for Democracy

For many years, the ANC played its role about as well might be expected. It entered the post-apartheid dispensation with a deep reservoir of goodwill. And given the numerically imbalanced cleavages stemming from the social and economic divisions created by the apartheid regime, and other structural advantages created by the electoral system and the party funding and campaign broadcasting rules, the ANC was rewarded handsomely at the ballot box. As Lord Acton might have predicted, however, the size of the ANC's electoral victories and legislative majorities generated arrogance at the highest levels of party leadership, leading to hesitance and a fear of questioning eccentric and misguided policies at all levels, and subsequently, malevolence and corruption spanning the entire breadth of the party. Predictably, public opinion surveys tracked consistent declines in citizen satisfaction with the performance of the ANC government and identification with the ANC as a party. But while the ANC has lost substantial voter support over the last several elections, it remains the predominant party.

As for the country's opposition parties, they have failed to play their role effectively. The evidence reviewed in this chapter shows that the growing ranks of dissatisfied South Africans feel they have nowhere to turn for a better alternative. While the chief opposition party (the DA) has improved its image in some respects, it—along with the rest of the opposition—has failed to convince a sufficiently sizeable share of the electorate that they are competent to govern, are inclusive, focused on the issues that matter, and trustworthy. Most dissatisfied voters thus face the choice of holding their noses and taking another chance with the governing party or staying home on election day—a choice that was made by a majority of South Africans in both the 2019 general election and the 2021 local council elections. While the dominant view of the problem of electoral democracy in ethnically or racially divided societies is therefore seen as a problem of demand—that is, voters who will not change their minds (e.g. Horowitz 1985, 1991; Johnson and Schlemmer 1996)—our conclusion is that the problems of South Africa's democracy are actually on the supply side. Providing voters with greater choice and accountability will require reforms in three different areas. First, South Africans must consider appropriate adjustments to the electoral system to reduce the size of electoral districts and provide legislators with greater autonomy and incentive to respond to local constituencies rather than national party bosses. Second, while recent changes have moved in the right direction, further reforms are necessary to the party funding model to provide the opposition with the means to take their message to the electorate, and to campaign broadcasting rules to allow parties to produce those messages in a more timely fashion. Finally, opposition parties need to increase their grassroots presence and improve their understanding of the electorate so as to produce more effective messages in terms of who they are, how they differ from the governing party, and the alternative they offer.

Notes

1. Ethnicity also plays an important role within racial groups in some areas. For instance, the support that the Inkatha Freedom Party receives comes overwhelmingly from Zulu-speaking black South Africans, and the votes for the Freedom Front Plus come overwhelmingly from Afrikaans-speaking whites. Even allowing for this, however, the general trend still applies.
2. Coloured and Indian voters have been more likely to cross these historical dividing lines—splitting their votes over time, as a group, between the ANC, NP, and DA. They form a relatively small part of the South African electorate, however (9% and 3%, respectively), leaving the dominant trends as above (Statistics South Africa 2016).

3. Voters are also able to cast a second ballot for representatives to their provincial assemblies.

4. The ANC briefly changed the constitution in 2002 to allow members to switch parties during specific periods and according to a complex set of rules. However, the measure proved to be highly unpopular and was abolished by a subsequent constitutional amendment in 2009.

5. While the ANC's vote share fell under 50% in the 2021 local council elections, it has so far maintained a dominant majority at the national level.

6. This figure falls well below the 34-country average (38%) for Round 8 (2019/2021) of the Afrobarometer survey.

7. Parties with representation in the national legislature also received an annual subsidy from Parliament for constituency work and outreach, which can obviously overlap with general party activities. In 2014, the overall total was R243 million (US $22.4 million), again distributed proportionally (the ANC received R160 million, DA R41 million, COPE R20 million, and the IFP R10 million) (Thuynsma 2017).

8. For the 1994, 1999, and 2004 elections, television advertising was not allowed in South Africa (with the exception of very short 'public election broadcasts' in 2004, allocated on the basis of existing legislative representation and the current number of candidates) (Davis 2005).

9. From 2007 to 2009, Zuma was party president and Mbeki state president. From 2017 to 2019, Cyril Ramaphosa was party president (having narrowly defeated Zuma's former wife Nkosozana Dlamini-Zuma) while Zuma was still state president. The third occasion (1997 to 1999) saw Nelson Mandela as state president and Thabo Mbeki as party president, but this did not create any significant tensions.

10. The Political Party Database Project (PPDB) provides a comparative measure of intra-party democracy based on formal party rules. Specifically, it identifies how inclusive three types of intra-party processes are: (1) the extent to which grassroots party members are able to influence the selection of parliamentary candidates and the party leader; (2) the development of the national party manifesto; and (3) the prerogatives of party leaders to make decisions on policy and personnel without widespread consultation. See Berge and Poguntke (2017) for more detail on the conceptualisation of the index and Brause and Poguntke (2021) for full details of variable construction, including all question phrasing,

11. The data for the 2019 election were collected by the South African National Election Study (2019) (conducted as part of the Comparative National Election Project https://u.osu.edu/cnep/). Data for South Africa are also available via the Data First repository (https://www.datafirst.uct.ac.za/).

12. Here, personal contact only refers to canvassing. According to SANES (2019) data, the difference is even more stark when comparing rally attendance (ANC = 22% vs. DA = 3% of the electorate).

13. It should be noted, however, that these numbers do not necessarily mean that the balance of the electorate see opposition parties as exclusive: rather, almost one-third (29%) say they simply do not know enough about the DA to say one way or the other. Even larger proportions said the same thing about the rest of the opposition (35% in case of the EFF, and 56% for the IFP).

14. According to Afrobarometer data, land redistribution was only seen as a key issue by 7% of South Africans in 2018 (Nkomo 2018).

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