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VOTING DECISIONS AND RACIALIZED FLUIDITY IN SOUTH AFRICA'S METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITIES

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Abstract

Do racial identities determine voting behaviour in post-apartheid South Africa? To address this question, we draw from a representative sample of 3,905 registered voters in five metropolitan municipalities: Johannesburg, Tshwane, Durban, Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela Bay. Our findings are mixed. On the one hand, Black voters were significantly more likely to vote for the African National Congress, whereas Coloured, Indian, and especially white voters were more likely to vote for the Democratic Alliance. This contrast comes into particular focus when we examine how voters acted over the course of a three-election period. On the other hand, race was far from a guaranteed predictor, not the least because many chose to abstain from voting—a trend that extended, though unevenly, to all racial groups. Importantly, though, the electorate did not split between party loyalists and consistent abstainers. Instead, fluidity predominated: About half of the electorate changed positions between elections, either by switching between parties or between voting and abstaining. Our findings thus demonstrate what we call ‘racialized fluidity’: Many voters are changing their voting decision from one election to the next, but in the aggregate, racial identity remains correlated with voting decisions.

DOES RACE CONTINUE TO DOMINATE SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICS? Throughout the twentieth century, colonialism, apartheid, and racial conflict in South Africa appeared to affirm W. E. B. Du Bois’ famous prediction that,

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‘the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea’.¹

While the dismantling of apartheid ushered in portrayals of South Africa as a ‘rainbow nation’, racial divisions persisted. Early on in the democratic era, Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins characterized South Africa as having a dominant party system, defined by the unwavering loyalty of Black voters to the African National Congress (ANC).² This was, and remains, a contested claim—it is a claim that we will contest in this article.³ Nonetheless, in line with the dominant party thesis, support for the ANC at the polls increased from 63 percent in 1994 to 70 percent in 2004. After two decades of democracy, many worried that widespread Black loyalty to the ANC was reinforcing government corruption and authoritarianism.⁴ As the ANC came to dominate the state apparatus, white electoral support began to consolidate around a new political party, the Democratic Alliance (DA), which grew out of the white-only and anti-apartheid Progressive Party. Since 2004, the ANC and the DA have been the two primary political parties.

Race continues to structure South African society. Especially significant is the persistence of economic inequality. Most white residents are affluent, and the poor are almost exclusively Black Africans. The World Bank estimates that 47 percent of Black households live in poverty compared to only 1 percent of white households.⁵ This economic disparity reinforces ongoing residential segregation, and racial discrimination also continues, for example, in the private sector of the economy.⁶ There is some debate about the role of race in elections. Some argue that race is a central factor, stemming from a mixture of residential segregation and the manoeuvres

1. William E. B. Du Bois, *The souls of Black folk* (Dover, Mineola, NY, 1994 [1903]), p. 9.

2. Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins, *The awkward embrace: One-party domination and democracy* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1999).

3. For a challenge to the dominant party thesis, see Steven Friedman, ‘No easy stroll to dominance: Party dominance opposition and civil society in South Africa’, in Hermann Giliomee and Charles Simkins (eds), *The awkward embrace: One-party domination and democracy* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1999), pp. 97–126. For discussion of the persistent relevance of the dominant party thesis, see Carin Runciman, ‘The “ballot and the brick”: Protest, voting, and non-voting in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 34, 4 (2016), pp. 419–436.

4. David Everatt, ‘The era of ineluctability? Post-apartheid South Africa after 20 years of democratic elections’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 41, 1 (2016), pp. 49–64.

5. The World Bank, *Overcoming poverty and inequality in South Africa: An assessment of drivers, constraints and opportunities* (The World Bank, Washington, DC, 2018), p. 13.

6. Roger Southall, *The new black middle class in South Africa* (James Currey, Suffolk, 2016), pp. 83–84.

of political party actors.⁷ Though not necessarily discounting the importance of race, others underscore the growing instability of elections and the significance of swing voters without clear loyalties.⁸ These positions mirror long-standing views within political science and studies of African elections. One might understand South Africa's racial politics as a specific variant of party identification⁹ or what Donald Horowitz calls the reduction of African elections to 'ethnic censuses'.¹⁰ Conversely and consistent with retrospective voting,¹¹ others have noted that African voters across the continent frequently weigh government performance, service delivery, and electoral campaigns alongside ethnic identity.¹²

In this paper, we ask, to what extent do racial identities determine voting behaviour in post-apartheid South Africa? We draw from a telephone survey of registered voters, conducted by Ask Afrika on behalf of the Centre for Social Change at the University of Johannesburg, in the 2-week period immediately following the 1 November 2021 municipal or local government elections. The survey features a representative sample of 3,905 registered voters in five metropolitan municipalities: Johannesburg, Tshwane, Durban, Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela Bay. With a focus on urban areas, these five 'metros' account for nearly one-third of the entire South African population. They have also become a key political battleground. This became clear in 2016 when the ANC lost control of key metros, including Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay.

7. Karen E. Ferree, 'Explaining South Africa's racial census', *The Journal of Politics* 68, 4 (2006), pp. 803–815; Karen E. Ferree, *Framing the race in South Africa: The political origins of racial census elections* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010); Steven Friedman, 'Archipelagos of dominance: Party fiefdoms and South African democracy', *Comparative Governance and Politics* 9, 3 (2015), pp. 139–159; Daniel de Kadt and Melissa L. Sands, 'Racial isolation drives racial voting: Evidence from the new South Africa', *Political Behavior* 43, no. 1 (2021), pp. 87–117.

8. Adam S. Harris, *Everyday identity and electoral politics: Race, ethnicity, and the bloc vote in South Africa and beyond* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022); Collette Schulz-Herzenberg, 'The decline of partisan voting and the rise in electoral uncertainty in South Africa's 2019 general elections', *Politikon* 46, 4 (2019), pp. 462–480.

9. Paul Goren, 'Party identification and core political values', *American Journal of Political Science* 49, 4 (2005), pp. 881–896.

10. Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2000).

11. Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, 'Retrospective voting reconsidered', *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013), pp. 285–306.

12. Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes, and Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, *Public opinion, democracy, and market reform in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), pp. 304–308; Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, failures, and the struggle for political reform* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015), pp. 189–191; James D. Long and Clark C. Gibson, 'Evaluating the roles of ethnicity and performance in African elections: Evidence from an exit poll in Kenya', *Political Research Quarterly* 68, 4 (2015), pp. 830–842; Kingsley S. Agomor, Samuel Adams, and William Asante, 'Anatomy of Ghana's parliamentary elections and democratic consolidation', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 38, 3 (2020), pp. 399–414.

The survey has several key advantages. As a representative sample of registered voters within the five metros, not only does it capture the voting decisions of various racial groups, but it also includes both voters and non-voters, thus enabling us to examine patterns of abstention. Another advantage is that, in addition to a host of questions related to social background, the survey asked respondents about historical voting decisions. We are thus able to trace the voting trajectories of individual voters across three elections—2016, 2019, and 2021.¹³ Finally, the survey also included open-ended questions about the reasons why respondents chose to vote for a particular party or abstain, thus enabling us to probe deeper into the motivations behind voting decisions.

Our findings are mixed with respect to the race–voting nexus. On the one hand, Black voters were significantly more likely to vote for the ANC, whereas Coloured, Indian, and especially white voters were more likely to vote for the DA. This contrast comes into particular focus when we expand the view to a three-election/5-year period: More than three-quarters of Black African respondents voted for the ANC at least once, while among both Coloured and white voters, more than three-quarters voted for the DA at least once. On the other hand, race was far from a guaranteed predictor, not the least because many chose to abstain from voting—a trend that extended, though unevenly, to all racial groups. Importantly, though, the electorate did not split between party loyalists and consistent abstainers.¹⁴ Instead, fluidity predominated: About half of the electorate changed positions between elections, either by switching between parties or between voting and abstaining. Our findings thus demonstrate what we call ‘racialized fluidity’: Many voters are changing their voting decision from one election to the next, but in the aggregate, racial identity remains correlated with voting decisions.

The concept of ‘racialized fluidity’ offers a way of characterizing elections that extend well beyond South Africa, with particular relevance for the rest of the continent. Across Africa, one finds phenomena similar to those that underpin ‘racialized fluidity’ in South Africa, namely the intermingling of party loyalties linked to ethnic or racial identity, political fragmentation, and growing rates of abstention. Indeed, when compared with other world regions, evidence suggests that Africa has the lowest voter turn-out in the world.¹⁵ Keeping this blending of factors in mind, Nic Cheese-man, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis develop an approach to elections

13. The 2016 and 2021 elections were for local government elections, and 2019 was a national and provincial election.

14. See also Martin Bekker, Carin Runciman, and Benjamin Roberts, ‘Beyond the binary: Examining dynamic youth voter behaviour’, *Politikon* 49, 4 (2022), pp. 297–317.

15. Abdurashid Solijonov, *Voter turnout trends around the world* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Stockholm, 2016).

in Ghana, Kenya, and Uganda. They show that voters explain their choices with reference to a contradictory mix of civic virtue and patrimonial ties, even though such claims appear to pull in opposite directions.¹⁶ Pointing to a parallel tension in South Africa, the ‘racialized fluidity’ approach may be useful for scholars seeking to make sense of similarly complex and apparently contradictory voting patterns. As we discuss in the conclusion, the concept also applies to situations beyond elections.

Racial voting and political fragmentation in South Africa

Our study puts into conversation two bodies of literature related to South African elections. One pertains to the ongoing significance of race in shaping voter decisions. The other concerns the process of political fragmentation associated with declining support for the ruling party, the ANC.

Racial voting in South Africa

Focusing on elections from the 1990s, Karen Ferree provides the most prominent evidence of racial voting in South Africa. She characterizes South African elections as a ‘racial census’ due to the fact that Black and white voters largely choose from different sets of parties, with little overlap.¹⁷ She places particular emphasis on what she calls ‘racialized party images’ and ‘racial heuristics’: Voter perceptions that particular parties acted primarily in the interests of specific racial groups. She further argues that the ruling ANC frames the opposition as ‘white’, simultaneously reinforcing both its own dominance and the centrality of race. In making this argument, Ferree rejects what she terms the ‘expressive hypothesis’, in which voters primarily understand their vote as an expression of racial identity.¹⁸ While underscoring the centrality of race, therefore, Ferree thus suggests that performance evaluations and expected economic or service delivery outcomes may shape voter decisions.

Others point to the role of residential segregation in reinforcing patterns of racial voting. Drawing from census and election data as well as attitude surveys, Daniel de Kadt and Melissa L. Sands find that white voters who are more racially isolated—less contact with Black residents—are

16. Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis, *The moral economy of elections in Africa: Democracy, voting and virtue* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2022). On the centrality of ethnic division and swing voters in Kenya, see Jeremy Horowitz, *Multithnic democracy: The logic of elections and policymaking in Kenya* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022).

17. Ferree, ‘Racial census’; Ferree, *Framing the race*.

18. Ferree, ‘Racial census’, *Ibid.*

more likely to vote against the ANC.¹⁹ They propose that this may reflect a combination of identity expression, racial heuristics as per Ferree, and processes of ideology formation within residential areas.²⁰ Emphasizing the importance of localized ‘social power’, Steven Friedman also underscores the significance of residential segregation in shaping voter turn-out.²¹ He argues that white elites promote the DA within the affluent suburbs, while Black elites promote the ANC within the lower-income townships as part of localized power struggles. Crucially, though, his analysis suggests that white support for the DA is substantially more stable: ‘while the black African majority is repeatedly portrayed as an unthinking herd, willing to vote for the ANC whatever it does, electoral politics in the ANC’s strongholds is currently far more contested than that in the DA’s fiefdoms’.²² Adam Harris provides a counterpoint, noting that one-third to one-half of voters in sub-Saharan Africa do not vote for their ethnic group’s party.²³ His position resembles our emphasis on racialized fluidity in the sense that he affirms both the significance of race and intraracial diversity.

The ANC depends significantly on a ‘liberation dividend’: The good will and support it derives from its long history as a national liberation movement and its role in securing the transition to democracy. This dividend underpins the centrality of racial politics, not the least because the ANC promotes racialized images of past oppression and the need for redress.²⁴ In order to sustain and reinvigorate racialized discourses of national liberation, however, the ANC also relies on material concessions.²⁵ Indeed, survey evidence suggests that ANC support stems from a combination of historical party loyalties and material provisions such as housing or social grants.²⁶ Opposition parties have begun to challenge these discourses, helping to accelerate processes of political fragmentation.

19. de Kadt and Sands, ‘Racial isolation’.

20. Ferree, ‘Racial census’.

21. Friedman, ‘Archipelagos of dominance’; Steven Friedman, *Prisoners of the past: South African democracy and the legacy of minority rule* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2021), pp. 15–22.

22. Friedman, ‘Archipelagos of dominance’, p. 156.

23. Harris, *Everyday identity*; Adam S. Harris, ‘At the borders of identity: Identity construction and racial bloc voting’, *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 5, 2 (2020), pp. 326–355.

24. Ferree, *Framing the race*; Gillian Hart, *Rethinking the South African crisis: Nationalism, populism, hegemony* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 2014).

25. Alexander Beresford, ‘The politics of regenerative nationalism in South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 4 (2012), pp. 863–884.

26. Marcel Paret, ‘Contested ANC hegemony in the urban townships: Evidence from the 2014 South African election’, *African Affairs* 115, 460 (2016), pp. 419–442; Marcel Paret, ‘Beyond post-apartheid politics? Cleavages, protest, and elections in South Africa’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 56, 3 (2018), pp. 471–496; Yolanda Sadie, Leila Patel, and Kim Baldry, ‘A comparative case study of the voting behavior of poor people in three selected South African communities’, *Journal of African Elections* 15, 1 (2016), pp. 113–138.

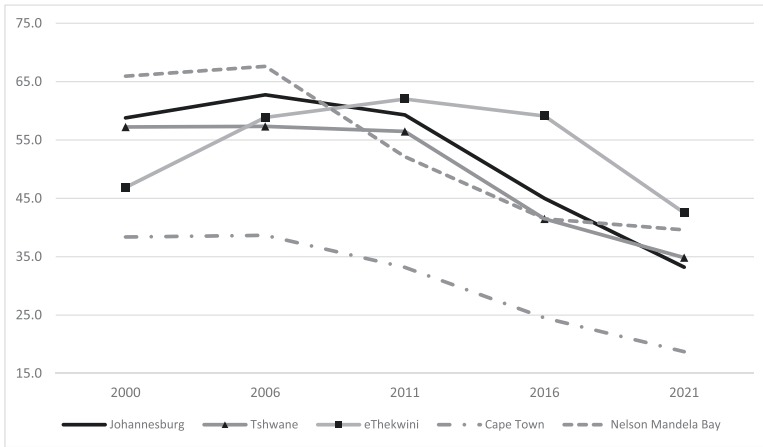


Figure 1 Support for the ANC in local government elections, by metropolitan municipality, 2000–2021 (source: Electoral Commission of South Africa, <https://results.elections.org.za/home/downloads/me-results>).

Political fragmentation

Fluidity reflects the volatility of the South African electorate, especially due to growing disenchantment with the ANC. Support for the ANC at the polls began to decline in the middle of the 2000s and accelerated in the 2010s: In national elections, ANC support dipped from 70 percent in 2004 to 58 percent in 2019; in local elections, ANC support dipped from 66 percent in 2006 to 46 percent in 2021. This decline was apparent in all five of the metropolitan areas that we focus on in this study (Figure 1). ANC decline started earliest in Nelson Mandela Bay and Cape Town and set in latest in eThekweni (Durban), but by 2021, the ruling party was a shadow of its former self in all five areas.

While it is difficult to pin down the precise sources of ANC decline, in broad strokes some of the factors are quite evident. One may point, for example, to persistent and extreme levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment, which underpin widespread protests in predominantly Black low-income areas.²⁷ Compounding economic insecurities, increasing evidence of internal party factionalism and corruption, which came to dominate headlines during the Jacob Zuma presidency (2009–2018) and have continued into the Cyril Ramaphosa era (2018–present), reinforces

27. Paret, *Fractured militancy*.

patterns of frustration and dissent.²⁸ Within this context, loyalty to the ANC declined. The proportion of voters feeling close to the ANC dropped from 51 percent in 2009 to only 29 percent in 2019.²⁹

The entry of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in the 2014 national election marked a profound shift. As a break-away from the ANC, founded by expelled former leaders of the ANC Youth League, the EFF created an option for those who wanted to move outside the ANC but remain within the fold of the national liberation movement. The EFF claims to be carrying on the process of national liberation, given that the ANC has deviated from the necessary path.³⁰ For many, it was a much more palatable alternative to the ruling party than the official opposition, the DA. Indeed, in some impoverished Black African townships and informal settlements, the EFF became the primary opposition, not the DA.³¹ Despite this promise, however, EFF growth has been modest. In four elections between 2014 and 2021, the party has failed to exceed 11 percent support nationally.

Edward Fieldhouse et al. note that, in the UK, the majority of the British electorate switches their political allegiances between elections.³² They trace the rise of swing voters to two factors, each of which applies quite well to South Africa: Party dealignment, defined by weakening attachments to particular parties, and the rise of smaller parties, which are more likely to lose voters from one election to the next.³³ In South Africa, these trends have gone hand-in-hand. Party dealignment stems not only from the weakening grip of the ANC but also the fact that less than 10 percent of the electorate identifies closely with either of the two main opposition parties, the EFF and the DA. Recent elections have also witnessed a rise in the number of smaller parties. In the 2021 local government elections, for example, 25 different parties secured at least 0.1 percent of the vote nationally compared to only 14 parties in 2016 and 13 parties in 2011.

28. A brief period of 'Ramaphoria' from 2018 helped the ANC to briefly recover from disaffection under Zuma, but this proved relatively short-lived and voter turn-out was especially low in the 2021 local elections. See Yolanda Sadie and Leila Patel, 'Zuma vs Ramaphosa: Factors influencing party choice of South Africans in the run-up to the 2019 elections', *Journal of African Elections* 19, 1 (2020), pp. 1–27; Susan Booysen, 'Hegemonic struggles of the African National Congress: From cacophony of morbid symptoms to strained renewal', *Africa Spectrum* 53, 2 (2018), pp. 5–35; Collette Schulz-Herzenberg, 'The 2021 municipal elections: Rise of the volatile voter or disaffected citizen?', *Politikon* 49, 4 (2022), pp. 318–336.

29. Schulz-Herzenberg, 'The decline of partisan voting', p. 465.

30. On the origins of the EFF, see Noor Nieftagodien, 'The Economic Freedom Fighters and the politics of memory and forgetting', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 115, 2 (2015), pp. 446–456.

31. Paret, 'Beyond post-apartheid politics?'

32. Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Geoffrey Evans, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser, Hermann Schmitt, and Cees van der Eijk, *Electoral shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019), pp. 50–73.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Taking the specific example of Johannesburg, 18 parties won at least a single seat in 2021 compared to only 11 in 2016 and 13 in 2011. Across the 2021 elections, smaller parties made gains at the expense of larger ones.³⁴ Taken overall, declining party identification amplifies the significance of performance assessments, as opposed to long-standing party loyalties, and generates uncertainty in electoral outcomes.³⁵

Perhaps even more significant than the rise of opposition parties, however, is growing abstention. The national government elections of the 1990s in South Africa were remarkable displays of democratic participation, garnering 86 and 72 percent turn-out of eligible voters in 1994 and 1999, respectively. Between 2004 and 2014, turn-out dipped to 57–60 percent, before plummeting even further to 49 percent in 2019.³⁶ Local government elections had a somewhat different trajectory but landed in the same place. Following the restructuring of local government in the late 1990s, the municipal elections of 2000 and 2006 secured 33–35 percent participation. Turn-out jumped up to 44–45 percent in 2011 and 2016, only to fall back down to 31 percent in 2021.³⁷ Underpinning the abstention trend is what Collette Schulz-Herzenberg terms the ‘youth bulge’: The growing proportion of younger eligible voters within the electorate, particularly those below the age of 30 years.³⁸ Coming of age under democracy, this group tends to be less partisan, less mobilized by mainstream institutions such as churches and schools and media, and more prone to ‘short-term economic and political evaluations when deciding whether or not to vote’.³⁹ They are also more likely to abstain from voting.⁴⁰

Political fragmentation stands in tension with racial voting. To the extent that the racial identities of individuals and political parties are stable, racial voting points to the stability of election results. In contrast, political fragmentation—the emergence of smaller parties, the decline of party loyalties, and growing rates of abstention—suggests fluidity at the level of both individual voters, who may change their mind between elections, and the system, due to the shifting distribution of votes among political parties as well as among voters and abstainers. It may be that current realities reflect a transition period in South Africa, in which political fragmentation has begun to weaken the grip of racial categories without having rendered them fully irrelevant.

34. Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The 2021 municipal elections’.

35. Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The decline of partisan voting’.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 472.

37. Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The 2021 municipal elections’, p. 322.

38. Collette Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The new electoral power brokers macro and micro level effects of “born-free” South Africans on voter turnout’, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 57, 3 (2019), pp. 363–389.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 328.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 364–371.

The argument: Racialized fluidity

Building on these two bodies of literature, we argue that South African elections reflect a combination of racialized voting and voter volatility, or what we call ‘racialized fluidity’. We propose this paradoxical concept—racialized voting implies stability, voter volatility implies change—to distinguish current patterns from two counterfactuals: A racial census, in which voters simply show up to the polls to mark the party that matches their racial identity, and a situation of perfect fluidity, where voters show up to the polls as empty vessels, devoid of history and socialization, and choose the party that seems to have the best policies or performance record. If election results in the former are a foregone socio-demographic conclusion, in the latter we would expect individuals to shift their allegiances as new parties emerge and existing parties change their policies or performance. While neither counterfactual is plausible in South Africa today, each one suggests an important corrective to the other.

The idea of ‘racialized fluidity’ refers to a situation in which many individuals act differently from one election to the next (fluidity), but where voting patterns at the aggregate level remain highly correlated with racial identities (racialized). Empirically, this means the following conditions must hold: (i) A substantial proportion of voters must act differently across elections, whether this means voting for a different party or moving between voting and abstaining, and (ii) at any given moment or over a specified period of time, there is a statistically significant difference between the voting patterns of two different racially defined groups. As we show later, these two conditions held for South Africa’s metropolitan municipalities during the 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections.

One may apply the concept of racialized fluidity to varied cases. In the South African case, though, it is useful to recognize both the endurance and limits of ANC power and influence. There is little doubt that the ANC assumed a hegemonic position in the 1990s, and this legacy continues to shape the present. Yet, ANC domination was never total. On the one hand, Black African residents always produced alternative political organizations—from the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union in the 1920s, to the Non-European Unity Movement in the 1940s and the Pan Africanist Congress from 1959, to the Azanian People’s Organization and the Inkatha Freedom Party in the 1980s, and to break-away parties in the post-apartheid period such as the United Democratic Movement, Congress of the People, and the EFF. Each of these organizations challenged the ANC. On the other hand, there were always Black African residents who did not necessarily align with the ANC or its rivals. With respect to contemporary voting, growing rates of abstention illustrate the persistence of this option.

What is the meaning of race in the context of racially fluid voting in post-apartheid South Africa? We understand race as a complex signifier that represents and crystallizes a wide range of experiences and contradictions. Foremost among these is class, given the persistently close links between racial identities, on the one hand, and income and employment on the other. Yet, racial identities also correlate—never perfectly, and to varied extents across contexts—with phenomena such as housing, friendship, and many other aspects of post-apartheid life.⁴¹ Racial identities and their meanings are far from stable, reflecting a constant interplay between processes of ascription and self-identification.⁴² We thus follow Stuart Hall in understanding race as a ‘sliding signifier’, a language or ‘discursive system’ of culture and meaning that organizes and regulates our social interactions, but that is also constantly in flux.⁴³ Through a focus on voting decisions, our investigation provides a very narrow, but nonetheless crucial, window into how racial divisions are reproduced or undermined, and how they organize society or not, in the post-apartheid period.

Data

This study uses data from a phone survey of 3,905 registered voters. Conducted between 2 and 16 November 2021, the survey deployed stratified random sampling, with strata based on socio-economic status, race, gender, and age. When weighted, the data are representative of the registered voting-age population in five metropolitan municipalities: Johannesburg, Tshwane, Durban, Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela Bay. The registered voting-age population is more restrictive than the total eligible voting-age population due to the fact that many people do not register in the first place. The sample is further limited to those with a telephone line, but as of 2021, only 2.2 percent of households in South Africa had neither a functional landline nor a cell phone.⁴⁴ Table 1 presents the basic characteristics of the sample.

Our sample underrepresents those who abstain, which is a problem common to many election surveys. As Peter Selb and Simon Munzert⁴⁵

41. On residential segregation, see Anthony Lemon, Ronnie Donaldson, and Gustav Visser, *South African urban change three decades after apartheid: Homes still apart?* (Springer, Cham, 2021). On friendship, see Jon Soske and Shannon Walsh, *Ties that bind: Race and the politics of friendship in South Africa* (NYU Press, New York, NY, 2016).

42. On the multiple dimensions of race, see Wendy D. Roth, ‘The multiple dimensions of race’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, 8 (2016), pp. 1310–1338.

43. Stuart Hall, *The fateful triangle: Race, ethnicity, nation* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017), pp. 45–46.

44. *Statistics South Africa*, ‘General Household Survey’, 2021, <<https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182021.pdf>> (13 December 2022).

45. Peter Selb and Simon Munzert, ‘Voter overrepresentation, vote misreporting, and turnout bias in postelection surveys’, *Electoral Studies* 32, 1 (2013), pp. 186–196.

Table 1 Sample characteristics ($N = 3,095$).

<i>Variable</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Age (years)</i>	
18–22	3.5
23–25	3.1
26–35	35.3
36–45	21.5
46–55	17.5
56–65	11.5
66+	7.6
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	54.3
Male	45.7
<i>Race</i>	
Black/African	68.8
Coloured	14.1
Indian	6.0
White	11.1
<i>Home language</i>	
IsiZulu	24.5
IsiXhosa	13.1
Sepedi	7.8
Setswana	7.8
Sesotho	5.2
IsiNdebele	1.3
SiSwati	1.2
Tshivenda	2.9
XiTsonga	3.6
Afrikaans	10.3
English	22.4
<i>Education</i>	
Less than matric	27.2
Matric completion	34.9
Post-secondary	37.9
<i>Monthly income</i>	
No income	19.1
R1–R2,500	32.9
R2,501–R10,000	23.2
R10,000 or more	24.8
<i>Employment status</i>	
Employed	54.6
Unemployed	27.3
Not in the labour force	18.1
<i>Dwelling</i>	
RDP house	13.3
Shack	11.3
Other	75.5

(continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Variable	%
<i>Receives social grant</i>	
Yes	27.4
No	72.6

Note: The term “RDP house” refers to a house provided by the state, free of charge. The name comes from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the first macroeconomic policy of the ANC adopted in the early 1990s.

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

note, post-election surveys tend to over-represent voters compared to non-voters because non-voters are more likely to decline participation in surveys focussed on voting. In addition, some non-voters may misreport their electoral participation due to the pressure of social desirability. Similar concerns apply to personal accounts of voting histories, especially for previous elections that individuals may remember incorrectly. While we may never know the extent to which participants answer questions about voting accurately, we believe a key strength of the survey is the fact that it was conducted in the 2-week period directly after the election. This minimizes the reported effect that the time between an election and the fielding of a survey may have on the answers of participants.⁴⁶

To measure race, we use the four official categories that the state refers to as ‘population groups’: Black/African, Coloured, Indian/Asian, and white. The survey followed this convention by asking respondents, ‘What population group do you belong to?’ These categories stem, of course, from the legacy of colonial and apartheid rule. They are the same four categories that the apartheid state used to classify residents in accordance with the Population Registration Act of 1950. The Act was repealed in 1991, but the post-apartheid state continues to use racial or population group categories for collecting statistics and allocating resources. Due to the symbolic and material power of state racial classification,⁴⁷ as well as the linkages between racial categories and ‘lived hierarchies of class and status’, the four racial categories remain the central aspects of subjective experience in post-apartheid South Africa.⁴⁸

Beyond race, the key questions in the survey pertain to voter decisions in the 2016 and 2021 municipal/local elections and the 2019 general/national

46. Shane P. Singh and Judd R. Thornton, ‘Elections activate partisanship across countries’, *American Political Science Review* 113, 1 (2019), pp. 248–253.

47. Mara Loveman, *National colors: Racial classification and the state in Latin America* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

48. Deborah Posel, ‘Race as common sense: Racial classification in twentieth-century South Africa’, *African Studies Review* 44, 2 (2001), pp. 87–113.

elections. For each election, we classify respondents into five groups: (i) Vote for the ANC, (ii) vote for the EFF, (iii) vote for the DA, (iv) vote for a party outside of the top three, and (v) abstain from voting. For analysis of the 2021 election, we use the entire sample. For analysis of voting trajectories across the three elections, we only include respondents who were old enough to vote in the 2016 election. Approximately one-quarter of the respondents (28 percent on the 2016 and 2019 election questions and 27 percent on the 2021 election question) refused to indicate their voting decision. To the extent that respondents were afraid or unwilling to reveal an opposition vote, this likely accounts for the fact that the survey includes a somewhat higher proportion of ANC voters—about 15–17 percentage points depending on the municipality—compared to the official results.

We also examine the reasons that respondents gave for their voting decisions in the 2021 election. Depending on whether the respondents voted or not, the survey then asked either ‘Why did you vote for [fill in party]?’ or ‘Why did you not participate in the 2021 local government elections?’ We used a combination of inductive and deductive codes to analyse the qualitative data, drawing on codes previously used by the authors and the Human Sciences Research Council, as well as new codes to capture emergent themes.⁴⁹ For both sets of reasons, for voting and not voting, we group survey respondents into categories as elaborated in [Table 2](#).

The enduring significance of race amid fluidity

The survey results demonstrate the enduring significance of racial categories within South African elections. In this section, we show this significance in two ways by considering, first, the voting patterns of the four racial groups in the 2021 election and, second, the voting trajectories of the four racial groups across the 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections. The two analyses paint a similar picture: Race is highly correlated with voting decisions, but there is nonetheless plenty of variation within racial groups.

From the literature on racial voting, we would expect Black African voters to choose the ANC, and white voters to choose the DA. There is considerable evidence to support this prediction. [Table 3](#) shows the proportion of eligible voters within each racial group who voted for the major parties or abstained, both for the entire sample and for each of the metropolitan municipalities separately. The racial differences are stark: 33 percent of eligible Black African voters chose the ANC compared to only 2 percent of eligible white voters, and 55 percent of eligible white voters chose the DA

49. Paret, ‘Beyond post-apartheid politics’; Paret, ‘Contested ANC hegemony’; *Human Sciences Research Council*, ‘IEC voter participation survey 2013/14: An overview of results’, 2014, <<https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Downloads/Document-Library>> (3 August 2022).

Table 2 Category descriptions: Reasons for voting and not voting.

<i>Category</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Reasons for voting</i>	
Party loyalty	Personal loyalty to, trust of, familiarity with, or long-standing support of a particular party. This excludes the 'liberation dividend' category, elaborated below.
Liberation dividend	Support for the ANC based on its historic role in bringing about the democratic transition.
Material benefit	Emphasis on delivery of a particular resource such as housing, jobs/employment, wages, education, and social grants.
Performance	Assessment of political party performance, positive or negative.
Change	A general desire for change.
Values and policies	Emphasis on the values and policies of particular parties.
Leadership	Emphasis on a particular individual, such as a party leader.
Electoral competition	Emphasis on the competitive electoral environment, such as the need to provide a balance to the dominance of the ruling party.
Race/ethnicity	Emphasis on racial or ethnic categories.
Other	Reasons that do not fit any of the above-mentioned categories.
<i>Reasons for not voting</i>	
Disillusionment	A general disillusionment with the political system or the ineffectiveness of voting.
Party evaluation	Evaluation of the performance or potential of certain political parties.
Administrative barriers	Logistical obstacles related to registration and voting that prevented the respondent from casting a vote.
Individual barriers	Personal obstacles in the respondent's life that discouraged or prevented them from casting a vote.

compared to only 5 percent of eligible Black African voters. Coloured and Indian voters also chose the DA, though at much lower rates than their white counterparts. These patterns hold, with only slight variation, across the five municipalities.

High abstention rates reflect the other side of the story. In 2021, 69 percent of the eligible voting-age population abstained from voting, a 13 percentage point increase in the rate of abstention compared to the last local government election in 2016.⁵⁰ In our sample, about half (48 percent) abstained from voting in 2021. While this rate of abstention was lower than in the general population, our dataset nonetheless enables us to examine who abstained and why. Abstention was most prominent among Indian respondents, as about two-thirds (66 percent) stayed away from the polls. Approximately half of Black African respondents (48 percent)

50. Schulz-Herzenberg, 'The 2021 municipal elections', p. 322.

Table 3 Vote decision in the 2021 election, by race and metropolitan area.

	<i>Black/African</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>All five metros</i>					
ANC	33.3	5.2	6.2	1.7	25.1
EFF	5.3	0.9	0.2	0.2	4.0
DA	5.0	29.1	16.7	55.3	13.7
Other	8.3	12.0	11.4	12.1	9.3
Abstain	48.1	52.8	65.6	30.7	48.0
<i>Johannesburg</i>					
ANC	30.4	6.1	14.3	3.0	26.0
EFF	3.7	4.8	0.0	0.7	3.4
DA	4.9	19.7	11.9	51.8	10.1
Other	10.6	24.8	16.7	18.5	12.3
Abstain	50.4	44.7	57.1	26.0	48.2
<i>Tshwane</i>					
ANC	29.4	0.0	7.1	0.0	25.1
EFF	7.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0
DA	5.4	42.9	21.4	56.8	12.4
Other	5.6	9.5	14.3	14.4	6.8
Abstain	52.5	47.6	57.1	28.8	49.6
<i>Durban</i>					
ANC	37.6	3.0	4.0	5.8	30.3
EFF	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2
DA	4.3	15.2	15.0	46.0	8.3
Other	10.1	21.2	9.7	7.9	10.2
Abstain	42.5	60.6	71.3	40.3	46.9
<i>Cape Town</i>					
ANC	33.8	4.5	3.1	0.8	16.9
EFF	6.4	0.6	3.1	0.0	3.1
DA	6.6	30.8	21.9	57.5	23.1
Other	5.8	9.7	15.6	7.8	7.8
Abstain	47.5	54.4	56.3	33.9	49.1
<i>Nelson Mandela</i>					
ANC	43.9	11.8	N/A	0.0	31.4
EFF	4.1	0.0	N/A	0.0	2.7
DA	3.3	29.4	N/A	68.2	16.9
Other	4.8	11.8	N/A	6.8	6.3
Abstain	43.9	47.1	N/A	25.0	42.7

Note: The Coloured vote distribution in Nelson Mandela is omitted due to the low sample size.

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

and Coloured respondents (53 percent) chose to abstain, while just under one-third of white respondents (31 percent) did so. Again, these general patterns hold across the five municipalities. When combined with the high level of support for the DA, noted earlier, this suggests that white voters are the most stable racial group within the electorate. Yet, on the whole, the

high levels of abstention illustrate that racial identity is far from a guaranteed predictor of voting outcomes. None of the current political parties have guaranteed support from any racial segment of the South African electorate.

High levels of abstention raise the question of how voters change their minds over time. Are voters abstaining consistently, are they moving between abstention and one political party, or are their decisions more erratic? [Table 4](#) shows the trajectory of voters across three elections as they move among the ANC, opposition parties, and abstention. It shows that just under one-third of Black African respondents (32 percent) are loyal ANC voters, choosing the ruling party in all three elections. Considering that only one-third of Black African voters chose the ANC in 2021 ([Table 2](#)), this suggests that the ruling party relies heavily on loyal Black African voters and is not managing to convert Black African voters who previously chose abstention or an opposition party. Indeed, only 7 percent of Black African respondents fell into that latter group. Instead, the ANC appears to be shedding Black African voters: More than one-quarter left the ANC in 2021 after voting for the party in 2016 and 2019, either for abstention (18 percent) or for an opposition party (9 percent).

Perhaps the most remarkable finding, with regard to race, is that 76 percent of Black African respondents voted for the ANC ‘at least once’ between 2016 and 2021. This contrasts sharply with the other racial groups: Only 27 percent of Indian respondents, 22 percent of Coloured respondents, and 7 percent of white respondents voted for the ANC at any time during the three elections. Conversely, the overwhelming majority of Coloured respondents (78 percent) and Indian respondents (73 percent), and approaching the entirety of white respondents (93 percent), voted for the DA ‘at least once’ between 2016 and 2021. These dramatic differences affirm the importance of race to South Africa’s electoral politics, underscoring the racialization side of racialized fluidity. Racial identification, however, was not voting destiny. It is crucial to note, for example, that 25 percent of Black African respondents never voted for the ANC between 2016 and 2021. Compared to those who voted for the ANC at least once across the three elections, the never-ANC group was younger (an average age of 36 vs 43 years), more educated (40 percent vs 29 percent with some post-secondary education), and more affluent (an average monthly income of South African Rand (R) 7,488 vs R5,955).

Voter fluidity also challenged any simple narrative about South African elections as a ‘racial census’. While three-quarters (76 percent) of Black African respondents did vote for the ANC at some point across the three elections, 44 percent moved in and out of the ANC—including 27 percent who left the ANC in 2021 for abstention or an opposition party—and another 8 percent fluctuated between various opposition parties or between

Table 4 Voting trajectory 2016–2021, by race.

	<i>Black/African</i>	<i>Coloured</i>	<i>Indian</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
(i) Loyal ANC voter	31.6	4.8	4.7	1.7	23.7
(ii) ANC leaver—abstain 2021	18.0	3.5	4.7	0.9	13.6
(iii) ANC leaver—opposition 2021	9.0	3.7	4.2	1.0	7.2
(iv) ANC national election only	4.9	3.4	6.0	1.8	4.4
(v) ANC 2016 only	5.2	4.8	3.6	1.3	4.7
(vi) ANC joiner in 2021	6.8	1.6	4.0	0.2	5.3
(vii) Consistent abstainer	12.8	16.5	32.8	10.4	14.0
(viii) Loyal DA voter	1.2	24.8	13.3	52.3	10.2
(ix) Loyal EFF or Other voter	2.3	0.8	1.3	1.3	1.9
(x) Fluctuating opposition	1.6	8.1	6.3	10.9	3.7
(xi) Fluctuating opposition w/abstention	6.6	28.1	19.1	18.3	11.4
At least one ANC vote (sum (i)–(vi))	75.5	21.8	27.1	6.8	58.9
No ANC votes (sum (vii)–(xi))	24.5	78.2	72.9	93.3	41.1
Fluctuating (sum (ii)–(vi), (x), and (xi))	52.1	53.1	47.9	34.3	50.3

Notes: It only includes residents who were old enough to vote in 2016: (i) Voted for ANC in 2016, 2019, and 2021; (ii) voted for the ANC in 2016 and 2019, abstained in 2021; (iii) voted for the ANC in 2016 and 2019 and voted for the opposition party in 2021; (iv) voted for the ANC in the 2019 national election, but not in the 2016 and 2021 local elections; (v) voted for the ANC in 2016, but not in 2019 or 2021; (vi) voted for the ANC in 2021 and voted for the opposition or abstained in either 2016 or 2019; (vii) abstained from voting in 2016, 2019, and 2021; (viii) voted for the DA in 2016, 2019, and 2021; (ix) voted for the EFF in 2016, 2019, and 2021 or for another party in 2016, 2019, and 2021; (x) voted for varying opposition parties in 2016, 2019, and 2021, without any abstentions; and (xi) voted for varying opposition parties in 2016, 2019, and 2021, with at least one abstention.

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

opposition parties and abstention. This means that 52 percent of Black African respondents changed their vote choice between 2016 and 2021. Similar proportions of Coloured (53 percent) and Indian (48 percent) respondents fluctuated between elections. One might imagine that, given declining participation rates, the electorate is splitting between party loyalists and consistent abstainers. This was definitively not the case for the 2016–2021 period, as only 14 percent abstained in all three elections. Indian respondents stood out here, as one-third (33 percent) abstained consistently, but the rates of consistent abstention were much lower for Black African (13 percent), Coloured (17 percent), and white (10 percent) respondents. Instead, with party loyalties in decline and abstention on the rise, many voters are moving in and out of voting and between parties. Indeed, only half (50 percent) of eligible voters made the same decision across the three elections—voting for the same party each time or consistently abstaining—whereas the other half fluctuated in some way, whether

between parties, between voting and abstaining, or both. This is the fluidity side of racialized fluidity.

The analysis of voter trajectories affirms that white voters appear to be the most stable. Compared to the other racial groups, white respondents are by far the most loyal: 52 percent voted for the DA in all three elections. By contrast, only 32 percent of Black African respondents were loyal to the ANC, and even lower proportions of Coloured respondents (25 percent) and Indian respondents (13 percent) were loyal to the DA, their preferred party. These findings are consistent with Friedman's prediction that support for the DA within the affluent and predominantly white suburbs would be much more stable than Black African support for the ANC in the lower-income townships.⁵¹ It is important to note, however, that white residents account for less than 10 percent of the total population in South Africa, and this figure has been declining in recent decades. Given higher levels of fluidity among non-white groups, this demographic trend underscores the growing volatility of electoral politics in the foreseeable future.

Is racial divergence merely a reflection of underlying class differences? One might expect the Black African middle class, for example, to vote like their middle-class Coloured, Indian, and white counterparts. The survey reveals, however, that the racial divide endures even among the most educated and highest-income respondents. Among those with some post-secondary education, only 3 percent of Black African respondents chose the DA, contrasting with 27, 14, and 57 percent, respectively, of Coloured, Indian, and white respondents. The pattern held among the affluent, but with even more dramatic differences. Among those with at least R10,000 in monthly income, again only 3 percent of Black African respondents chose the DA, contrasting with 37, 21, and 62 percent, respectively, of Indian, Coloured, and white respondents. Even as Black African voters enter the middle class, they act differently at election time than do middle-class Coloured, Indian, and especially white voters.

Generational gap

In this section, we focus on Black African respondents, which account for 69 percent of the survey sample and more than 80 percent of the total population. Our analysis uses multinomial logistic regression to estimate a model with five possible outcomes: (i) Vote for ANC; (ii) vote for the EFF; (iii) vote for the DA; (iv) vote for all other parties (OTH); and (v) abstention. The multinomial logistic regression simultaneously estimates four different models, one for each outcome in comparison to the base category, which in this case is an ANC vote. The model takes the following

51. Friedman, 'Archipelagos of dominance'.

form:

$$\ln [P(\text{EFF} | x) / P(\text{ANC} | x)] = b_{1,0} + b_{1,i}x_i + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

$$\ln [P(\text{DA} | x) / P(\text{ANC} | x)] = b_{2,0} + b_{2,i}x_i + \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

$$\ln [P(\text{OTH} | x) / P(\text{ANC} | x)] = b_{3,0} + b_{3,i}x_i + \varepsilon \quad (3)$$

$$\ln [P(\text{ABS} | x) / P(\text{ANC} | x)] = b_{4,0} + b_{4,i}x_i + \varepsilon \quad (4)$$

where x_i represents an array of social background variables; $b_{1,0}$, $b_{2,0}$, $b_{3,0}$, and $b_{4,0}$ are the constants; $b_{1,i}$, $b_{2,i}$, $b_{3,i}$, and $b_{4,i}$ are the coefficients; and ε is an error term. The coefficients represent the effect of each variable on the log odds ('logit') of voting for one of the opposition parties, or abstaining, rather than voting for the ANC. [Table 5](#) presents the results, which pertain only to Black African voters in the 2021 election.

The most significant finding is the importance of age, particularly with respect to the question of whether to abstain or vote for the ANC. There were no statistically significant age differences in terms of voting for opposition parties. For abstention, however, the coefficients demonstrate a linear trend, with older voters more likely to vote. [Figure 2](#) presents the expected probability of a vote for the ANC or abstention, depending on age. It shows clearly that, when controlling for all of the other background variables, younger voters had higher rates of abstention and older voters demonstrated greater support for the ANC. The breaking point, at which the expected outcome in the 2021 election shifts from abstention to an ANC vote, appears to be in the late 40s. Future elections will reveal the extent to which today's youth continue to abstain, as they get older, or begin to vote for the ANC or opposition parties. As the generations of voters who experienced apartheid and the democratic transition begin to exit from the electorate, however, the ANC confronts the problem of losing potential Black African voters to abstention. The fact that younger Black African voters are choosing abstention over opposition parties does not bode well for the party of national liberation.

The survey provides a window into where the future may be headed for South Africa's youngest Black African voters. By adjusting the age group, we can identify those respondents who were aged 18–25 years in each of the three election years: 2016 (23–30 years old at the time of the survey), 2019 (20–27 years old at the time of the survey), and 2021 (18–25 years old at the time of the survey). In other words, rather than tracing how the same

Table 5 Multinomial logit regression on 2021 vote choice, Black African respondents ($N = 1736$).

	<i>EFF</i>	<i>DA</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
<i>Age (years)</i>				
18–25	0.0817	-0.1141	0.3319	0.1975
36–45	-0.0049	-0.3311	0.0723	-0.4801**
46–55	-0.4829	-0.4421	-0.1772	-0.9503**
56–65	-0.6985	-0.4204	-0.7931	-1.2043**
66+	-0.9588	-0.6785	-0.1026	-1.3743**
Female	-0.6753**	-0.0719	-0.2108	-0.1103
IsiXhosa	0.1459	0.2885	-0.5092	-0.0314
Sepedi	0.6097 [^]	0.0102	-0.5594	0.2612
Setswana	0.1486	-1.3237*	-0.3747	0.2870
Sesotho	0.1947	0.2909	-0.5534	0.0361
XiTsonga	0.3651	-0.1169	1.1087**	0.6803*
Tshivenda	-0.3821	-0.7508	-0.3778	0.2279
Other ethnic/language group	-1.2587	-0.6021	-1.0575 [^]	0.3761
Completed matric	0.4878	0.2362	-0.0533	0.2861 [^]
Post-secondary education	0.3756	-0.3059	0.5185	0.4005*
Unemployed	0.3254	-0.4399	0.1615	-0.2481
Not in the labour force	0.0825	-0.2862	0.2142	0.2036
RDP house	-0.2434	-0.0140	0.1591	-0.1064
Shack	-0.1349	-0.1101	0.2931	-0.1770
<i>Income</i>				
R1–R2,500	-0.1475	-0.1327	-0.5249	-0.3723*
R2,501–R10,000	-0.1361	-0.5538	-0.2283	-0.3504
R10,000 or more	0.5473	-0.3107	0.4857	-0.1091
Missing	0.7202	0.1417	0.1670	0.5007
Constant	-1.8571**	-1.1634*	-1.2052**	0.7754**

Notes: The base outcome is a vote for the ANC. The reference group includes the following: 25–34 years old; male; IsiZulu; no matric; employed; housing other than RDP house or shack; and no income; The term “RDP house” refers to a house provided by the state, free of charge. The name comes from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), the first macroeconomic policy of the ANC adopted in the early 1990s.

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; and [^] $p < 0.10$.

group of voters shifted over time, we can leverage the three voting questions in the survey (about voting decisions in 2016, 2019, and 2021) to estimate how the cross-section of 18–25 years old shifted over time—that is, a comparison of three different groups of individuals who were aged 18–25 years, respectively, at the time of each of the three elections. The results suggest that ANC support among Black Africans aged 18–25 years declined considerably: 42 percent chose the ruling party in 2016 compared to only 36

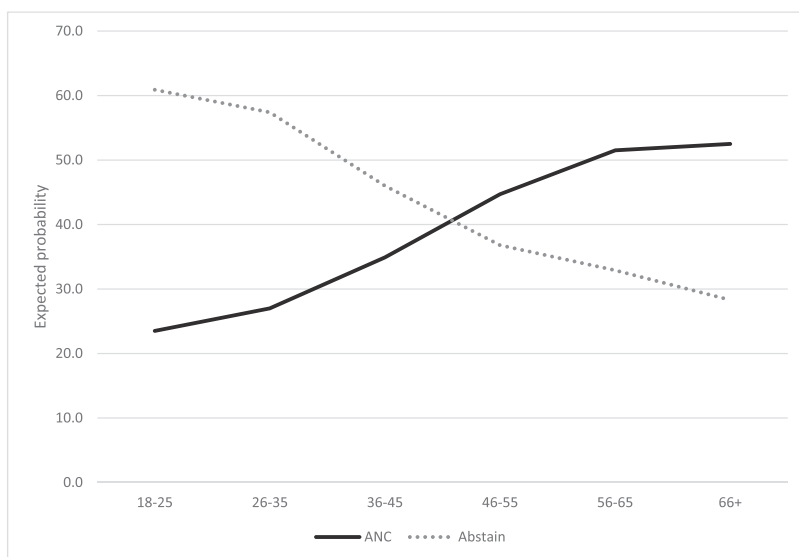


Figure 2 Expected probability of ANC vote or abstention in 2021, Black African voters, by age. The post-estimation calculations based on the multinomial logistic regression are presented in [Table 4](#) (sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey).

percent in 2019 and 23 percent in 2021. Conversely, abstention is growing among this age group, especially in the most recent election: 46–47 percent abstained in 2016 and 2019, jumping to 60 percent in 2021. Support for opposition parties among Black African voters aged 18–25 years increased slightly, from 12 percent in 2016 to 17 percent in 2019 and 2021. This suggests further volatility in the future as all parties compete to recruit newcomers to the electorate, many of whom prefer to abstain rather than vote.

Taking a longitudinal view, rather than a cross-sectional one, the ANC also lost support over time among the 2016 ‘youth cohort’: Black African respondents who were aged 18–25 years in 2016. Whereas 42 percent chose the ANC in 2016, jumping to 47 percent in 2019 (when they were aged 21–28 years), ANC support among this group dipped to 24 percent in 2021 (when they were aged 23–30 years). Of those in the youth cohort who left the ANC after 2019, the vast majority (79 percent) chose to abstain in 2021. The ANC thus confronts a double problem among young voters. Not only is the youngest group of potential Black African voters (aged 18–25 years) increasingly choosing abstention over the ANC, but it also appears that young Black African voters who do initially choose the ANC

are then leaving the party as they grow older. While it is certainly possible that some of these voters will return to the ANC in the next national election (2024), this is not simply a case of voters straying from the ruling party during local elections: The drop in ANC support among this cohort between 2016 and 2021, two local elections, underscores a trend of ANC decline.

A handful of other variables were also significantly correlated with voting choices among Black African voters, including abstention. Women were less likely than men to vote for the EFF. Ethnicity may also play a role in shaping voting choices. In South Africa, the language predominantly spoken at home is most often used as a proxy for ethnicity. In previous elections, the EFF was more likely to draw support from Sepedi speakers, who mostly come from Limpopo, the home province of EFF leader Julius Malema.⁵² In this election, Setswana speakers were less likely to vote for the DA, and XiTsonga speakers were more likely to vote for a party outside the top three or abstain compared to isiZulu speakers. Those with higher levels of education were more likely to abstain, and those with limited income (R1–R2,500 per month) were less likely to abstain than those with no income.

Reasons for voting and abstaining

In this final empirical section, we turn to the reasons that survey respondents gave for their voting decisions, whether that decision entailed the choice of a particular party or abstention. For this analysis, we distinguish respondents in terms of both their race and their voting history. We focus on Black African voters who were loyal to the ANC, left the ANC in 2021, or joined the ANC in 2021 and Coloured and white voters who were loyal to the DA. These groups had large enough sample sizes to generate reliable estimates. [Table 6](#) considers the reasons that these voters gave for their voting decision in 2021. We can break the various reasons into two broad sets. On the one hand, some respondents pointed to more personalized assessments, focusing on their own particular relationship to political parties. This includes those who strongly identify with a particular party, including loyalty to the ANC based on its historic role in dismantling apartheid and bringing democracy: The so-called ‘liberation dividend’. It also includes the receipt of particular material benefits, such as housing, jobs, or social grants. We might also include within the group those who cited reasons related to race or ethnicity. On the other hand, some respondents emphasized more detached assessments of political parties, their leaders and policies, electoral competition, and the need for political change (see detailed descriptions of the reason categories in [Table 2](#)).

52. Paret, ‘Beyond post-apartheid politics’.

Table 6 Proportion giving select reasons for voting, by race and voting history.

<i>Reason for voting</i>	<i>Black/African</i>			<i>Coloured</i>	<i>White</i>
	<i>Loyal ANC voter</i>	<i>Leave ANC in 2021</i>	<i>Join ANC in 2021</i>	<i>Loyal DA voter</i>	<i>Loyal DA voter</i>
Party loyalty	35.9	14.6	30.6	23.1	10.7
Liberation dividend	6.4	0.9	9.5	0.0	0.0
Material benefit	21.3	14.1	20.3	8.2	5.5
Performance	18.6	26.7	14.0	41.1	58.1
Change	7.6	24.0	10.6	12.5	7.4
Values/policies	1.8	2.4	0.0	2.9	1.9
Leadership	0.7	5.0	0.7	0.0	0.6
Electoral competition	0.0	1.8	0.0	6.0	9.3
Race/ethnicity	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	6.7	10.7	14.3	6.3	6.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Notes: Loyal ANC voter = voted for the ANC in 2016, 2019, and 2021. Join ANC in 2021 = voted for the ANC in 2021 and voted for the opposition or abstained in either 2016 or 2019. Leave ANC in 2021 = voted for the ANC in 2016 and 2019 and voted for an opposition party in 2021. Loyal DA voter = voted for the DA in 2016, 2019, and 2021. For descriptions of the reasons, see [Table 2](#).

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

The results demonstrate that personalized assessments were especially prominent among Black/African voters who chose the ANC in 2021. Three-fifths of Black/African voters who were either loyal to the ANC across the three elections (64 percent) or joined the ANC in 2021 (60 percent) cited party loyalty, the liberation dividend, or material benefits in explaining their vote. This finding is consistent with previous research, which shows that the ANC relies on a combination of historical loyalties—shored up by national liberation discourses regarding the democratic transition—and the provision of benefits through the welfare state to maintain support.⁵³ Conversely, just under one-third of Black African voters who left the ANC (30 percent) and Coloured voters who were loyal to the DA (31 percent) gave such reasons, and only 16 percent of white voters who were loyal to the DA did so. Among Coloured voters who were loyal to the DA, however, nearly one-quarter (23 percent) did point to party loyalty—a non-trivial proportion—contrasting with only 11 percent of white voters who were loyal to the DA. None of the white or Coloured voters who were loyal to

53. *Ibid.*; Paret, ‘Contested ANC hegemony’; Beresford, ‘The politics of regenerative nationalism’; Hart, *Rethinking the South African crisis*.

the DA cited the liberation dividend as the reason for their vote, unsurprisingly given that this is largely the terrain of the ANC, and less than 10 percent explained their vote by pointing to material benefits.

If party identification and material benefits were prominent among Black African supporters of the ANC, performance assessments were especially central for Coloured and white supporters of the DA: 58 percent of DA-loyal white voters and 41 percent of DA-loyal Coloured voters cited reasons related to party performance. Reasons related to party performance were not uncommon among Black African voters—for example, 19 percent of ANC-loyal Black African voters cited them—but they were not nearly as prominent as among white and Coloured voters who were loyal to the DA. The latter were also more likely to cite reasons related to electoral competition, though at relatively low rates of less than 10 percent. The greater reliance on performance assessments may reflect the class differences of these groups, but likely only for white voters. Among Black African respondents loyal to the ANC, only 24 percent had some post-secondary education and only 13 percent had a monthly income over R10,000. In contrast, among white respondents loyal to the DA, 63 percent had some post-secondary education, and 73 percent had a monthly income over R10,000. This is a dramatic difference. In class terms, DA-loyal Coloured respondents were only slightly better off than their ANC-loyal Black African counterparts, primarily in terms of income: Only 29 percent had attended post-secondary, and only 30 percent had a monthly income over R10,000. This suggests that the racial gap between Coloured and Black African voters is about more than underlying class differences.

Black African voters who left the ANC in 2021 stand out from the other groups in terms of the reasons they provided for their vote. Very few (less than 1 percent) cited the liberation dividend, and only 14–15 percent cited each of party loyalty and material benefits. These are low proportions compared to Black African voters who were loyal to or joined the ANC. At the same time, this group was more likely than the others to express a desire for change (25 percent) or point to particular leaders (5 percent). Participants mostly expressed a desire for change with the simple statement, ‘I want change.’ Where participants did give more detail, their desire for change reflected their disappointment in the ANC. For example, a formerly loyal ANC voter, turned DA voter, said, ‘I voted because I believe there will be changes, our children are unemployed, we have been voting for ANC but there are no changes.’ Similarly, other formerly loyal ANC voters expressed their belief that other parties may be able to make the changes that the ANC had failed to do: ‘I think they can change things in my area, because we have too much problems.’ This extended to individuals, such as former DA mayor Herman Mashaba, who founded the ActionSA party in August 2020. One respondent noted, ‘I liked how Herman Mashaba did

things the time he was a Mayor for DA', and another explained, 'Because Herman Mashaba is of the people, creates better income.'

Especially notable is the absence of reasons that point directly to issues of race or ethnicity. A handful of loyal Black/African ANC voters did give such reasons—for example, 'I'm a Venda person and will always vote for ANC', and 'I am a Black person that's why I voted ANC'—but even here they only account for 1 percent of respondents. As [Table 6](#) shows and discussed earlier, there are important differences across racial groups, such as the different reasons provided by Black/African voters loyal to the ANC and white voters loyal to the DA. Yet, voters rarely explain these differences in explicitly racial terms. This is an important finding for research on racial voting. It suggests that, to the extent that racial identities matter for voting patterns, they operate through other categories and explanations, whether long-standing party loyalties and histories, performance evaluations and policy assessments, material concessions, or otherwise. While race clearly continues to matter in South African elections, the situation is not so straightforward that voters link their support for particular parties to particular racial identities.

[Table 7](#) moves to reasons for abstention. Once again, we can group the reasons given into two broad groupings. One group of reasons points to political assessments. This includes reasons focussed on both evaluations of specific parties, as well as more generalized disillusionment with the political system and the political parties on offer. The other group of reasons includes technical or logistical obstacles that prevented the respondent from getting to the polls. This includes both administrative barriers related to the system of registration and voting and individual barriers concerning life circumstances outside of this system. It is important to note that pointing to such barriers may reflect a lack of commitment or disillusionment among certain individuals.

Abstainers were split in the reasons they gave for staying away from the polls, with some noting political assessments and others noting logistical obstacles. Black African respondents who stayed away from all three elections were especially likely to explain their abstention with political assessments, whether generalized disillusionment (29 percent) or party evaluations (31 percent). This was also the case for many Coloured (18 and 26 percent, respectively), Indian (24 and 18 percent, respectively), and white (21 and 14 percent, respectively) consistent abstainers. Furthermore, many Black African respondents who left the ANC for abstention in 2021 also pointed to political assessments, with the majority citing party evaluations (31 percent) rather than disillusionment (10 percent). Performance evaluations related to service delivery and a lack of socio-economic transformation were important to this group in explaining their reasons to abstain. For example, one Black African abstainer remarked, 'I didn't see any reason to vote because they don't deliver anything, they don't

Table 7 Proportion giving select reasons for abstaining, by race and voting history.

	<i>Disillusion</i>	<i>Party evaluation</i>	<i>Admin barriers</i>	<i>Individual barriers</i>
<i>Black/African</i>				
Consistent abstainer	28.7	30.9	15.7	22.0
Leave ANC in 2021	10.6	30.6	16.3	41.5
<i>Coloured</i>				
Consistent abstainer	17.5	26.2	34.1	10.7
Fluctuating opposition	10.3	14.2	21.6	49.0
<i>Indian</i>				
Consistent abstainer	23.6	17.7	35.3	16.1
Fluctuating opposition	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>White</i>				
Consistent abstainer	21.0	13.6	42.6	15.8
Fluctuating opposition	10.4	14.5	34.3	39.1

Notes: Consistent abstainer = abstained from voting in 2016, 2019, and 2021. Leave ANC in 2021 = voted for the ANC in 2016 and 2019 and abstained from voting in 2021. Fluctuating opposition = voted for an opposition party in either 2016 or 2019 and abstained in 2021.

Sources: The Centre for Social Change and the Ask Afrika 2021 Election Survey.

provide jobs, so what is the reason to vote?’ Another noted, ‘I was so angry because I did not get the social relief distress grant and I am not working. Our local Government is not helping us with anything, I am 43 years old and unable to get jobs and I have more than 15 years on code 14⁵⁴ truck driving.’ These findings suggest that a substantial portion of eligible voters—especially those who abstained consistently—stayed away from the polls due to disaffection with the political system or the parties on offer. Interestingly, such reasons were somewhat less common among Coloured and white respondents who fluctuated between opposition parties and abstention: Only one-quarter of respondents in these groups emphasized political assessments.

Many abstainers, though, did point to logistical obstacles. Consistent abstainers were most likely to highlight administrative barriers, with the exception of Black African respondents. Among those who abstained in all three elections, 34 percent of Coloured abstainers, 35 percent of Indian abstainers, and 43 percent of white abstainers pointed to administrative barriers in 2021. Research on voter registration reveals that most people who do not register to vote cite disinterest in politics and elections—very

54. A category of driving licence that permits you to drive larger trucks.

few cite administrative barriers.⁵⁵ Rather than a systematic effort to create administrative barriers for racial minorities, therefore, our findings may reflect a pre-emptive disengagement from electoral democracy rooted in deeper disillusionment with existing parties or electoral democracy itself. Conversely, Black Africans who left the ANC in 2021 (42 percent), as well as Coloured (49 percent) and white (39 percent) respondents who fluctuated between opposition parties and abstention, were more likely to cite individual barriers. In these instances, particular situations may have kept individuals from voting for their preferred party, or volatile personal situations may align with their fluctuating vote decisions, including abstention. Further research is needed on the social situations and worldviews that lie behind the administrative barriers cited by Coloured, Indian, and white abstainers and the individual barriers cited by Black African abstainers who previously supported the ANC.

Why are Black African voters leaving the ANC? Previous research underscores the rational decision-making of voters, who are increasingly turning towards evaluations of political parties—their policies, their performance, their organizational integrity, and the quality of their leaders.⁵⁶ The results here affirm this finding. Taking together the reasons for voting and abstaining, many Black African voters who left the ANC in 2021 pointed to their evaluations of political parties, the political system, and the need for change. More than half of those who left the ANC for another party cited either party performance (27 percent) or ‘change’ (24 percent) as their reason for doing so, and over 40 percent of those who left the ANC for abstention cited either generalized political disillusionment or specific party evaluations. These patterns demonstrate that the ANC can no longer rely on historical loyalties. They must now compete for voters with their policies, their political leadership, and especially their performance in government.

Conclusion

The first decade of democracy was a remarkable period in South Africa, particularly with respect to the electoral system. A very high proportion of eligible voters chose to cast a vote, at least in the first two national elections, and over the first three elections, the ANC steadily increased its support base. It is in this context that theories of racial voting began to take shape.⁵⁷ Ferree went as far as to suggest that elections were a ‘racial census’,

55. *Human Sciences Research Council*, ‘High-level results from the Electoral Commission of South Africa’s voter participation survey 2018/19’, 2019, <<https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Downloads/Document-Library>> (13 December 2022).

56. Sadie and Patel, ‘Zuma versus Ramaphosa’; Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The decline of partisan voting’; Schulz-Herzenberg, ‘The 2021 municipal elections’.

57. Giliomee and Simkins, *The awkward embrace*; Ferree, ‘Racial census’; Ferree, *Framing the race*.

with different racial groups choosing different parties. Such a view implies that elections are a relatively foregone conclusion. If voting decisions are tied to racial identities, and the racial composition is relatively stable, then electoral outcomes should remain fairly consistent. If this narrative made sense for the first decade of democracy, however, it makes little sense now. Two trends underscore its flaws: Growing rates of abstention and declining support for the ANC among those who cast a vote.

If the notion of a racial census goes too far, scholars are nonetheless correct to underscore the durable significance of race within South African elections. In the third decade of post-apartheid democracy, growing fluidity is articulated with racial imbalances. We offer the notion of 'racialized fluidity' to capture this phenomenon. On the one hand, eligible voters are unstable. Roughly half of the electorate shifts between elections, whether this means switching between parties or alternating between voting and abstaining. On the other hand, race remains highly correlated with voting decisions. To take one of the most significant examples, 75 percent of eligible Black African voters cast at least one vote for the ANC between 2016 and 2021, while 93 percent of eligible white voters cast at least one vote for the DA during the same period. If one cannot assume how somebody will vote based on their race, knowing a potential voter's racial identity is a good starting point for making a prediction.

While it is always challenging to predict the future, the results presented here point in the direction of further volatility. One of the most dramatic findings is that younger Black African residents are much more likely to abstain than their older counterparts, who remain avid supporters of the ruling party. White voters are the most stable, but they are a small and shrinking portion of the total population, thus limiting their influence over the direction of electoral politics. Furthermore, an analysis of the reasons that respondents provided for abstaining suggests that there is considerable political disaffection. Taken together, these patterns point towards growing levels of abstention. If this is the case, then political parties will be fighting for the favour of a dwindling group of voters. At the same time, though, abstention appears to be an important release valve for the ANC: Many Black African voters are choosing abstention, rather than punishing the ANC by voting for the opposition. This pattern may, somewhat counter-intuitively, help the ANC hold onto power.

Beyond South Africa, the concept of 'racialized fluidity' provides a point of departure for future research on elections across the African continent. It may be especially useful in the varied contexts where dominant party regimes are losing their previously tight grip on the electorate, where political fragmentation and voter abstention are beginning to take hold, and where ethnic or racial identities have been particularly salient. In such

volatile and transitory contexts, one may find a parallel combination of stability and change, with the former marked by persistent patterns of ethnic or racial voting at the aggregate level and the latter marked by the shifting decisions of individuals from one election to the next. With respect to fluidity, an important area for future research—in South Africa and beyond—is to better understand the changing voting decisions of particular individuals. Why, for example, do people abandon parties that they were previously loyal to, and how do they decide whether to abstain or vote for a different party? The situation of racialized fluidity opens a window into the complex terrain of ethnicity and electoral change in Africa.

Finally, the concept may also prove useful beyond the sphere of political parties and elections. While we have focused narrowly here on racial identities and voting decisions, the idea of racialized fluidity may be applicable to a wide range of situations where durable group differentiation coexists with volatility at the individual level. Take, for example, the issue of housing segregation. In certain places, for example, substantial portions of individuals and families may move between neighbourhoods with different levels of racial isolation. This may reflect patterns of upward mobility among certain racial groups or government policies that facilitate home ownership or particular kinds of rentals. At the same time, despite a certain level of fluidity at the individual level, racialized housing segregation may persist at the aggregate level. This is just one illustration of how racialized fluidity may characterize situations beyond the context of elections.