

Voter fluidity in the 2021 Local Government Elections: Evidence from five metropolitan municipalities

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Introduction

The 2021 local government elections marked the consolidation of a new era in South African politics. Most crucial were the trends of ANC decline and growing abstention. These trends have been growing louder over the past decade, but they reached new proportions in 2021. ANC support dipped below 50%, nationally, for the first time since 1994, with less than half of the registered voting population turning out to vote, and only around a third of all eligible voters casting their votes on Election day. The party of national liberation also fell below 50% in six of the eight metropolitan municipalities, bringing into full bloom a pattern of coalition-building that first began to emerge in 2016.

This report examines the voting trajectories of individuals in five metropolitan municipalities: City of Johannesburg, City of Tshwane, eThekweni, City of Cape Town, and Nelson Mandela Bay. It is based on a telephone survey of 3,905 residents in these five municipalities who were eligible to vote in the 2021 local government elections, conducted in the days immediately following the election.

The survey asked voters to indicate which party they voted for in the 2021 local government election, as well as who they voted for in the 2016 local government election and the 2019 national government election. Some respondents refused to indicate their voting decisions at some or all of the elections. The sample sizes thus include the following: 2,777 in 2016; 2,787 in 2019, and 2,820 in 2021.

The findings presented in this report are representative of the South African population in the five municipalities noted above. They demonstrate growing fluidity within the South African electorate, as indicated by movement between different parties, and by movement from electoral participation to abstention, across the three elections.

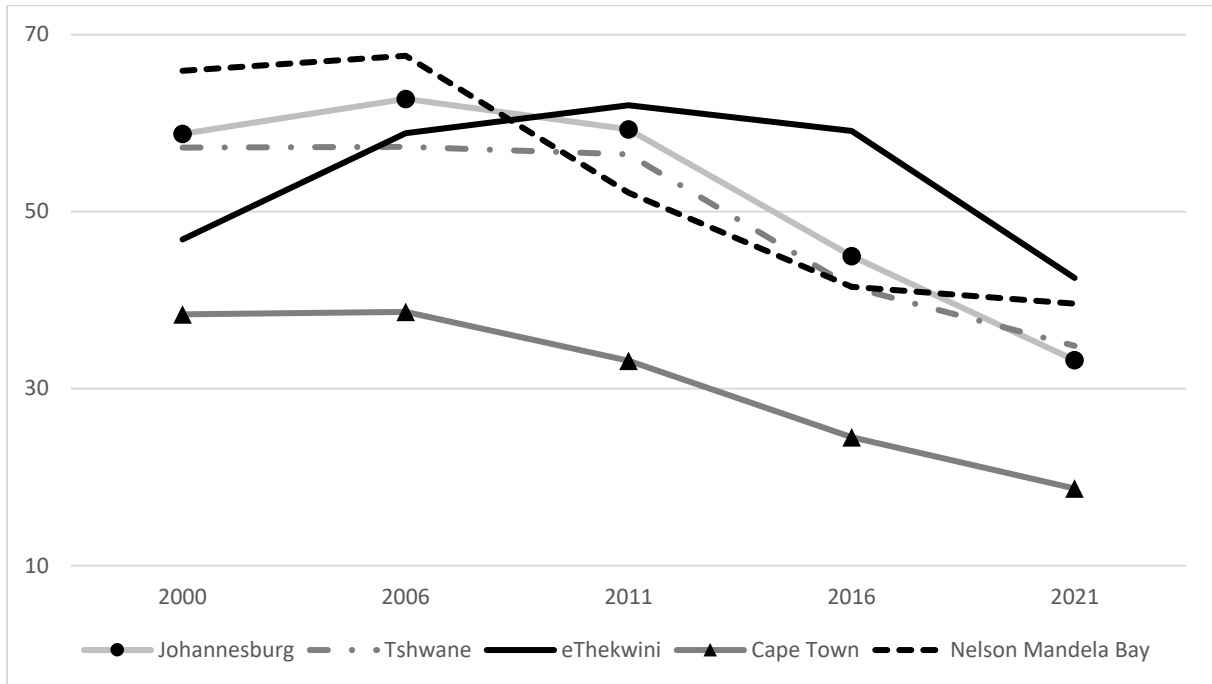
Loyalty in decline

In contrast to growing support for the ANC during the first decade of democracy, the South African electorate has been moving away from the governing party over since the middle of the 2000s. This pattern is evident within the metropolitan municipalities, though the onset of ANC decline varies. Figure 1 draws from the official election results. It shows the level of ANC support over time, in local government elections, in the five metropolitan municipalities that we focus on in this report. The figure shows the onset of ANC decline emerged first in Cape Town and Nelson Mandela Bay in 2011, then moved to Johannesburg and Tshwane in 2016, and then finally to eThekweni in 2021.

Weak voter loyalty, however, was not only a problem for the ANC. Turning to the survey results, Figure 2 shows the proportion of voters who made the same voting decision across the 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections. The figure shows that only about half of the electorate remained loyal to a political party or to abstention. Roughly one-third of the electorate was loyal to either the ANC (23%) or the DA (10%). Another 16% were “hardened abstainers,” staying away from all three elections. Notably, only about 1% each of the electorate was loyal to either the EFF, or to political parties beyond the big three (note that the latter group includes those who moved between different parties outside of the big three). The

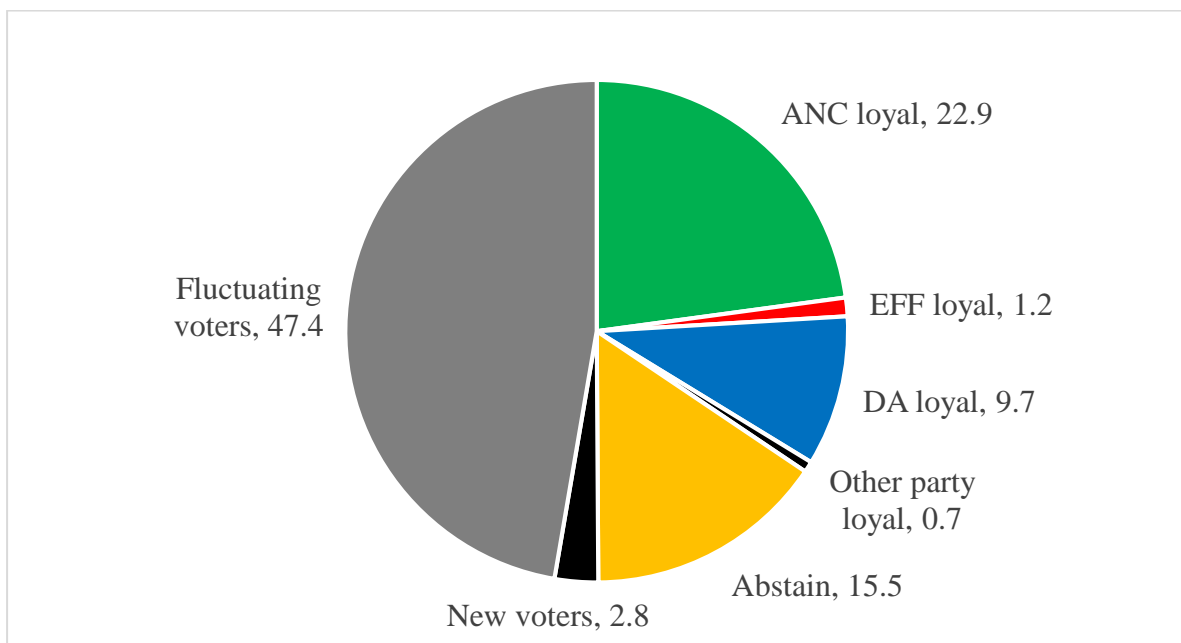
“new voters” category, accounting for just under 3% of the electorate in 2021, includes those voters who were too young to vote in 2016 (and possibly in 2019 as well).

Figure 1: ANC performance in local elections, by metropolitan area, 2000-2021



Source: IECⁱ

Figure 2: Percentage of voters who voted the same way, or who fluctuated, across the 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

These findings suggest that approximately half (47.4%) of the South African electorate is fluctuating between different options from one election to the next. This may mean their switching parties, or it may mean voters choosing a particular party in one election and then choosing to abstain in another election. Among those in the “fluctuating voter” category – those who did not vote the same way in all three elections – 18% abstained in 2016, 11% abstained in 2019, and 54% abstained in 2021.

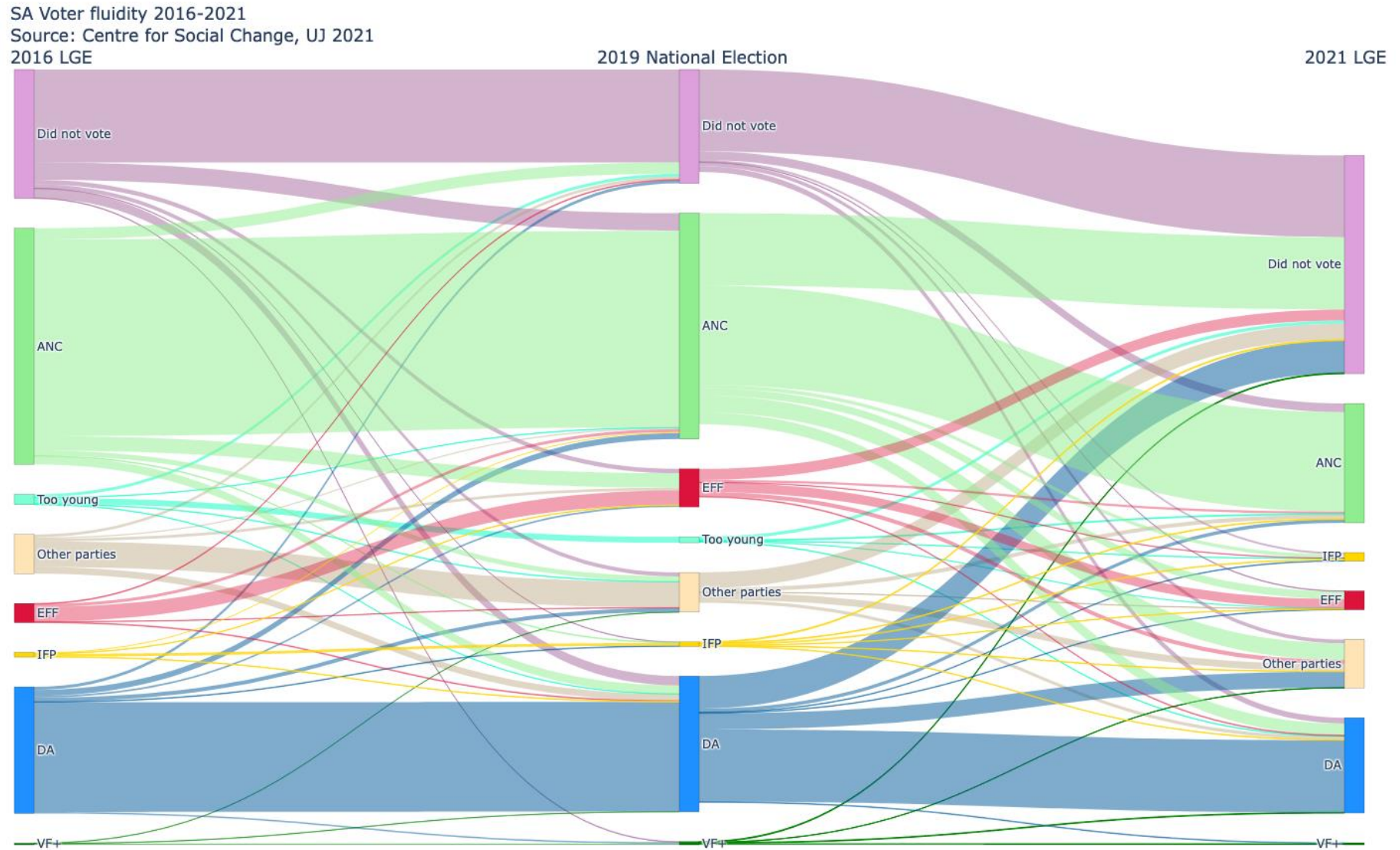
These findings indicate that abstainers do not represent a fixed group that is steadfastly committed to not voting. Instead, many of those who abstained also voted for a political party in one of the three elections. At the same time, though, the substantial increase in abstention in the 2021 election does hint at a growing disillusionment with electoral politics.

Visualizing voter trajectories

One way of analysing voter fluidity is by visualizing the aggregate of individual voter choices over successive elections. The alluvial flow chart, below in Figure 3, is one way of demonstrating this phenomenon. The nodes on the left-hand side represent the relative proportions of votes (or non-voters, in the case of abstention) among the parties in the 2016 Local Government Election. The nodes in the middle represent the relative support for parties at the 2019 National Government elections, the outcome of the 2021 LGE is represented by the nodes on the right-hand side. The links running from the nodes on the left to those in the middle show the continuation of support or shifting of votes from one party to another.

Such a visualization allows one several reflections. First, the graph confirms that many people tend to vote for the same party over time, and most parties draw most of their support from those that voted for them in the previous election. Second, there is a notable amount of flux – votes shift at every period, not only from party to party, but also towards and away from voter abstention. Abstention is but one of the political choices, as opposed to a permanent state. Third, the conventional trend, whereby National elections draw more voters, appears to hold out; the ‘Did not vote’ node is larger for the two LGEs. Fourth, many voters appear less ‘ideological’ than ‘practical’, in the sense that voters shift among the political spectrum, including movements between, say, the EFF and the DA. Finally, the trends around the smaller parties (albeit based on smaller Ns) provide insight. For instance, instead of building up a coherent and loyal base, the EFF seems to be gaining and losing a commensurate number of voters at each election, while slowly increasing their overall percentage. Regarding the IFP, in our limited sample, the party received more support in 2021 from former ANC-supporters, than from IFP-supports (at the time of the 2019 elections). Apropos the VF+, it appears that the party is taking voters away from the DA (as often speculated), but also, that they did not successfully retain new voters

Figure 3: Flow diagram of voter choice, 2016-2021



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey data

The subsequent two sections pay closer attention to voter trajectories, first by contrasting voter decisions in 2016 and 2019 – a local government election (2016) and a national government election (2019) – and second by contrasting voter decisions in the 2016 and 2021 local government elections.

Continuity and consolidation: comparing votes between 2016 and 2019

The results show considerable continuity between the 2016 local government elections and the 2019 national government elections. In 2019, more than three-quarters of voters who previously voted for one of the big three parties remained loyal to the party of their 2016 vote: ANC (87%), EFF (79%), DA (86%). Among the survey sample, abstention was lower in 2019 (23%) than it was in 2016 (27%) and 2021 (48%). This suggests that parties did not lose a substantial proportion of their voters to abstention in 2019. Indeed, the ANC was the biggest victim of abstention, and even here only 5% of ANC voters in 2016 chose to abstain in 2019.

Among the big three, the EFF base proved the least loyal during the 2019 national government election, with 16% of those who voted for the EFF in 2016 choosing a different party in 2019. In contrast, only 8% of ANC voters and 11% of DA voters, as per the 2016 election, switched to a new party in 2019. Also notable was consolidation around the big three: one-third of those who voted outside the big three in 2016, and one-quarter of those who did not vote in 2016, chose one of the big three in 2019. This affirms a process of voters ‘closing ranks’ around the major parties during national government elections, while exploring alternative options during local government elections.

Rising fluidity: comparing votes between 2016 and 2021

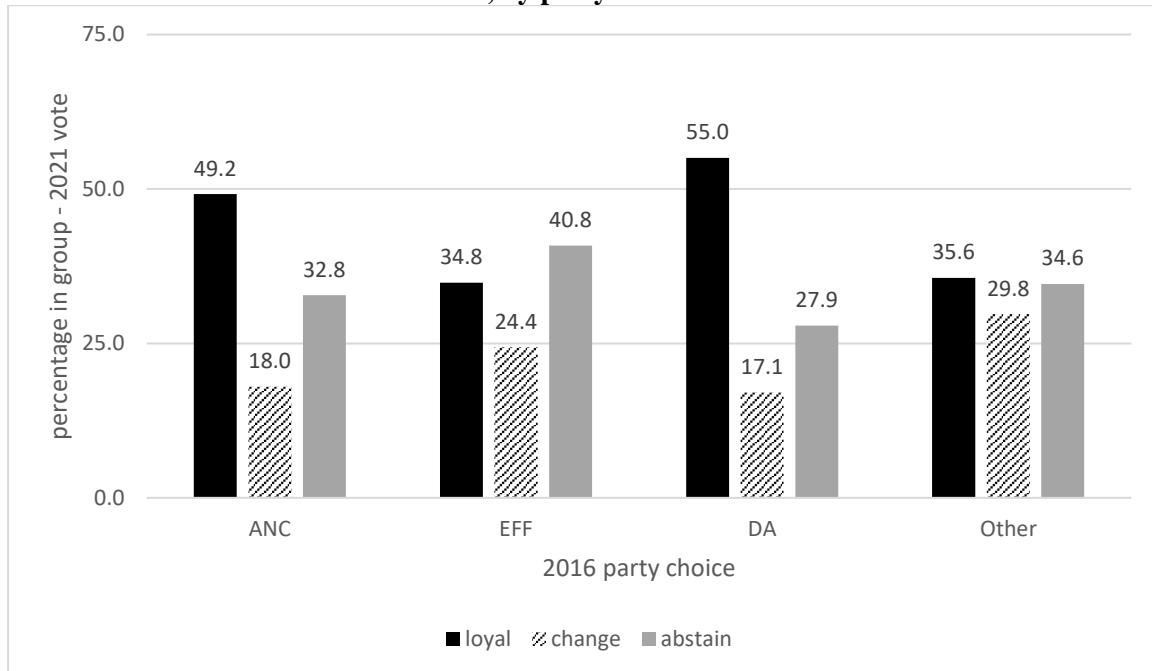
Rather than continuity and consolidation around the big three parties, the 2021 election illustrated fluidity. Not only did many voters turn to new parties, but also the spectre of abstention grew notably. It is important to mention that the 2021 elections took place amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, and associated lockdowns. Not only did this disrupt voter registration processes, but it also likely discouraged some people from turning out to cast a vote.

To illuminate this growing fluidity, this section compares how individuals voted in two different local government elections in 2016 and 2021. Figure 4 differentiates between three types of voters who a) voted for the same party in 2021 as they did in 2016 (loyal voters), b) voted for a different party in 2021 than they did in 2016, or c) abstained from voting in 2021. The figure shows the percentage of voters who fell into each of these three categories, disaggregated by party choice in the 2016 election.

The results further illustrate declining party loyalties and growing fluidity with respect to voter choices. Just under half (49%) of those who voted for the ANC in 2016 returned to the governing party in 2021, and just over half (55%) of those who voted for the DA in 2016 returned to the main opposition party.

Loyalty was even lower for the EFF (35% returning in 2021) and parties beyond the big three (36% returning in 2021). These findings suggest that, not only did voters change their minds considerably between elections, but they also took this change to the polls by effectively punishing all of the political parties. No party was left unscathed.

Figure 4: Percentage of voters who remained loyal, switched to a new party, or abstained in 2021, by party choice in 2016



Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey.

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Many voters switched to new parties in 2021, compared to the previous local government elections in 2016. The proportions were lowest among ANC (18%) and DA (17%) voters, and somewhat higher among EFF voters (24%) and those who voted for a party beyond the big three in 2016 (30%).

Even more important, however, was the growing spectre of abstention. More than one quarter of those who voted in 2016 chose to abstain from voting in 2021. The ANC lost 33% of its voters to abstention, the EFF lost a remarkable 41%, the DA lost 28%, and parties beyond the big three lost 35%.

This pattern of growing abstention does not reflect the level of the election, as the 2016 and 2021 elections were both local government elections. Instead, it underscores the growing disaffection of the electorate with either the voting process or the parties on offer.

The rise of ActionSA

The rise of ActionSA, founded by Herman Mashaba, represented one of the success stories of the 2021 elections. Mashaba was previously a leading figure within the DA, and served as Mayor of the City of Johannesburg between 2016 and 2019. Mashaba resigned from his mayoral post in late 2019, due to internal differences within the DA, and went on to found ActionSA in August 2020. Action SA votes were concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Gauteng province. The new party secured 18% of the proportional representation vote in the City of Johannesburg, 9% in Tshwane, and 7% in Ekurhuleni.

What is the political background of ActionSA voters? The survey enables us to track the previous voting patterns of ActionSA voters in the 2016 and 2019 elections. The results show that, among ActionSA voters:

- 58% voted for the ANC in either 2016 or 2019;
- 21% voted for the EFF in either 2016 or 2019;
- 31% voted for the DA in either 2016 or 2019;
- 5% voted for a party outside of the big three in 2016 or 2019;
- 22% did not vote in either 2016 or 2019, including abstainers and those who were too young to vote.

This demonstrates that Action SA pulled voters away from the big three parties – especially the ANC – and also helped to usher previous abstainers or new voters into the electorate.

Voter demographics

Table 1 reports the average characteristics of different groups of voters, depending on their voting trajectory across the 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections. It shows, for example, the percentage of loyal ANC voters who were female, Black African, completed matric, etc. The groups include those who voted for the same big three party in all three elections (here termed ‘loyal’), who abstained in all three elections (‘hardened abstainer’), or those who fluctuated between different voting choices (including abstention), whom we call ‘fluctuating voters’. We do not include loyal EFF voters because there were too few cases to obtain reliable estimates.

The results show that racial divisions continue to resonate within South African politics. Loyal ANC voters were overwhelmingly Black African, whereas loyal DA voters were primarily Coloured and

White. Majorities of consistent abstainers and fluctuating voters were also Black African, but these groups also included non-trivial proportions of Coloured, Indian/Asian, and White voters.

Table 1: Percentage of voters with select characteristics, by voting trajectory (2016-2021)

	ANC loyal	DA loyal	Hardened abstainer	Fluctuating voter
Mean age (in years)	41.2	44.8	34.7	39.1
Female (%)	55.0	55.1	53.8	48.5
Black/African (%)	96.4	9.6	71.0	76.6
Coloured (%)	2.7	39.1	15.0	13.7
Indian/Asian (%)	0.5	4.6	8.9	3.8
White (%)	0.4	46.6	5.0	5.9
Completed matric (%)	65.1	87.9	74.1	74.0
Some higher education (%)	26.8	46.4	41.4	38.3
Employed (%)	56.7	87.2	61.9	64.2
RDP house (%)	20.1	4.8	14.6	16.4
Shack (%)	17.7	3.1	13.6	13.3
Mean income midpoint estimates, in ZAR per month)	6,237	16,985	8,342	9,240

Source: Centre for Social Change 2021 Election Survey

Loyal ANC voters were also socioeconomically disadvantaged, relative to loyal DA voters. They had lower levels of education, lower rates of employment, and lower average income. They were also more likely to live in either an RDP house or a shack. The hardened abstainer and fluctuating voter groups fell in between those who were loyal to either the ANC or the DA. On average, they tended to be better off socioeconomically than loyal ANC voters, but worse off relative to loyal DA voters.

Conclusion

Voter abstention is a growing phenomenon in South Africa, having reached new proportions in the 2021 Local Government Elections. However, abstention is not a straightforward issue of a once-off decision never to vote. Instead, among those who do, from time to time, take to the polls, we witness a marked degree of fluidity – fluctuating between voting and not voting, as well as between political parties. Less than half of all registered voters voted in the 2021 elections, and of those who voted, only half appear to be party-loyal, given our data. Both phenomena intimate a polity in flux, with a large degree of unease over political choices, and perhaps a general distrust in established politics altogether. With voter fluidity apparently increasingly sharply, more research into the factors driving this is warranted, alongside a better understanding of trust in both political parties and the very institution of participative democracy in South Africa.

ⁱ South Africa Independent Electoral Commission (<https://www.elections.org.za/pw/>)