




Social Discontent and Voting Behaviour in South Africa's 2024 General Elections: The Transition from One-party Dominance to a Multi-party Coalition



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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper was to analyse South Africa's transition from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition government, with specific reference to the 2024 general elections in South Africa. Through the use of secondary data collection, the paper critically analysed the nexus between social discontent and voting behaviour in South Africa's 2024 general elections. Using rational choice theory, the paper argued that voting behaviour in the 2024 elections was influenced by people's choice to vote for a political party that promised to improve their welfare by addressing existing socio-economic challenges. The study found that the African National Congress (ANC), which has been a single dominant party in national government for 30 years, has failed to address pressing challenges that cause social discontent such as poor service delivery, poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and the energy crisis. As a result, the party fell below the threshold to govern on its own, leading to the formation of a multi-party coalition government with former opposition parties named the Government of National Unity (GNU). The paper concluded that parties that form multi-party coalition government should prioritise people's interests such as mitigating existing social discontents, because failure to do so shall influence voting behaviour in the upcoming election cycles, which might affect their electoral support as was the case with the ANC's decline of support post-2024 general elections. This study anticipates making a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge by offering practical insights into the nexus between social discontent and voting behaviour in South Africa's elections. In addition, the study provides recommendations on how the newly formed government of national unity can mitigate the existing social discount among electorates.

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INTRODUCTION

Elections are at the heart of democratic societies, as they shape the composition of government and determine policies that govern the country.¹ The year 1994 marked a new era in South Africa as the

¹ Waiphot Kulachai, Unisa Lerdtomornsakul, and Patipol Homyamyen, "Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review" *Social Sciences* 12, no. 9 (August 22, 2023): 469, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12090469>.

country was declared a democracy following multi-party contestation in the general elections. Since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC), a former liberation movement translated into a political party, has been a dominant party in South Africa's parliament and government.² This has had an implication for the consolidation of democracy within the country.³ Although the ANC has been dominant in national government and the parliament. In the 2024 general elections, the party suffered a great decline in terms of its electoral support.⁴ Prior to elections for many South Africans, the year 2024 was regarded as the new 1994, as change within the political spectrum was bound to take course. Due to the fact that a lot of South African people lacked confidence in the ANC-led government as they were let down by its poor governance and lack of accountability.⁵ This was evident in the 2024 election outcomes, where the ANC lost its status of dominant one-party in government, following the decline of electoral support to them, in which they fell below 50%, leading the ANC to enter into a multi-party coalition government which is referred to as a 'Government of National Unity' (GNU) with former opposition parties.⁶

In previous elections, party support, identifications, loyalty, race, and socio-economic status of voters were strongly associated with the electoral outcome and voting pattern in South Africa.⁷ However, social discontent has not been focused as a major seismic factor that influences voting patterns and election outcomes. This has been concerning as Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou alludes that social discontent is one of the key factors that affect voting behaviour and election outcomes.⁸ South Africa is plagued with growing social discontent among its citizens that has manifested through protests. Mongale asserts that the ANC which has been the incumbent government for the past 30 years has been the one that has contributed to this growing social discontent as its government throughout the years has failed to address persistent challenges of inequality, poverty, unemployment, crime, corruption and basic provision of services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and access to healthcare and etc.⁹

A survey conducted by Patel et al. focused on factors that are likely to influence voter choice in the 2024 general elections in South Africa. Socio-economic factors played a key role in individuals' decisions to vote for a certain political party.¹⁰ In their survey amongst the four top reasons that determined party choice in the wake of the 2024 general elections reflected that 55% of respondents were likely to vote for a political party that will create jobs, a party that promised to improve the quality of people's lives (49% of respondents), improved service delivery (48% of respondents), and pay of social grants (44% of respondents). While some respondents were of the view that the incumbent ANC government is corrupt and is relatively not doing enough to root out corruption, thus they will vote for opposition parties that are anti-corruption. In this regard, it is clear that socio-economic challenges remain some of the key issues that influenced voting behaviour in the 2024 general elections, since people's participation in the 2024 elections and their voting choices were influenced by what every political party was promising once voted into power.

² Pierre Du Toit and Nicola de Jager, "South Africa's Dominant-Party System in Comparative Perspective.," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 2 (2014).

³ Heidi Brooks, "The Dominant-Party System: Challenges for South Africa's Second Decade of Democracy," *Journal of African Elections* 3, no. 2 (2004): 121-53; Du Toit and de Jager, "South Africa's Dominant-Party System in Comparative Perspective."

⁴ IEC (Independent Electoral Commission), "2024 National Election Results," 2024, <https://results.elections.org.za/home/>.

⁵ Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, Thabang Motswaledi, and Phemelo Marumo, "Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19.," *African Journal of Development Studies* 13 (2023).

⁶ IEC (Independent Electoral Commission), "2024 National Election Results"; H. Isilow, "South Africa's Ruling ANC Falls Short of Getting Majority for First Time since 1994.," Anadolu Ajansi, June 1, 2024; SAGNA (South African Government News Agency), "The Strength of Democracy," 2024, <https://www.sanews.gov.za/south-africa/strength-democracy>.

⁷ Adam Habib and Sanusha Naidu, "Race, Class and Voting Patterns in South Africa's Electoral System: Ten Years of Democracy," *Africa Development* 31, no. 3 (2006): 81-92; Sydney Letsholo, "How the ANC Won the 2004 Elections: Perspectives on Voting Behaviour in South Africa," 2005; Yolanda Sadie, Leila Patel, and Kim Baldry, "A Comparative Case Study of the Voting Behaviour of Poor People in Three Selected South African Communities," *Journal of African Elections* 15, no. 1 (2016): 113-38; Joleen Steyn Kotze and Narnia Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?* (Routledge, 2020).

⁸ Sofia Vasilopoulou and Daphne Halikiopoulou, "Democracy and Discontent: Institutional Trust and Evaluations of System Performance among Core and Peripheral Far Right Voters," *Journal of European Public Policy* 31, no. 9 (2024): 2397-2421.

⁹ Collin Olebogeng Mongale, "Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021)," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 4 (2022): 865255.

¹⁰ L. Patel, Y. Sadie, and J. de Klerk, "Factors Determining Voter Choice in South Africa's 2024 National General Elections," Centre for Social Development in Africa, 2024, <https://news.uj.ac.za/news/uj-study-reveals-complex-dynamics-influencing-voter-choices-in-sas-national-election/>.

Thus, leading up to the 2024 general elections, people were staunch about voting for a political party that would address their social discontent. This being the case, the study adopted the rational choice theory which explains voter behaviour in the 2024 general elections. The theory posits that people's behaviour is motivated by self-interests and utility maximization; thus, voters make a choice to vote for a certain political party that will improve their welfare.¹¹ Based on this backdrop, this study investigated the nexus between social discontent and voting behaviour in South Africa and its effects on the 2024 General election leading to the country's transitioning from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition. The findings are presented subsequently.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice theory

This study was grounded on the rational choice theory to explain voter behaviour in the 2024 general elections in South Africa. When looking at voting and its importance, it can be argued that voting is a rational choice, because voting gives individuals an opportunity to express their preferences in terms of who should lead them since individuals are concerned about social welfare and human development.¹² According to Lee et al. in order for democracy to be functional, there is a need for citizens to make rational decisions predominantly when exercising their voting rights during elections such as selecting capable candidates who can deliver public goods in an equitable and sustainable manner.¹³

In its conceptualization, rational choice theory explains people's behaviour when faced with several causes of action, whereby people tend to do what they believe is likely to produce the best overall outcomes that serve their interests.¹⁴ Therefore, the rational choice approach in politics assumes that people's behaviour is motivated by self-interests, utility maximization or simply put, goal-oriented fulfilment.¹⁵ In support of this, Abell explained that the first viewpoint of rational choice theory is that of individualism, whereby individuals' interests serve as a basis of the theory.¹⁶ In the assertions by Abell, individuals make decisions and act upon them based on their preferences as well their primary concern is to improve their own welfare.¹⁷

In this regard, these assumptions are expounded on the notion of individualism, whereby an individual as an electoral actor is primarily concerned about him or herself when participating in a course of action. For instance, in the context of this study, people are likely to participate in elections for utility maximization as elections can bring about change in the political arrangements, especially through the election of leaders who will provide social welfare to the constituents. Although, in a large election, it can be argued that a vote can be decisively small, however, the social benefits of participating in elections are large, thus rational individuals tend to exercise their voting right because they acknowledge that voting presents an opportunity for people to express their social preferences hence voting remains significant.¹⁸

In the 2024 general elections in South Africa, people expressed their social preference by voting for alternative political parties with the intention of removing the ANC as a single dominant political party since it has failed to mitigate social discontent such as unemployment, poverty, crime and deteriorating service provision. In previous election cycles, majority of South Africans expressed irrationality in their voting, as they would usually vote for the ANC because of racial issues and ethnicity, whereby the decision to vote was more focused on political parties with whom people identified through ethnic and racial lineage. Consequently, due to the fact that demographics in South Africa point to the fact that black people

¹¹ Peter Abell, "Sociological Theory and Rational Choice Theory," *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory* 2 (2000): 223–44.

¹² Aaron Edlin, Andrew Gelman, and Noah Kaplan, "Voting as a Rational Choice: Why and How People Vote to Improve the Well-Being of Others," *Rationality and Society* 19, no. 3 (2007): 293–314.

¹³ I-Ching Lee et al., "Are We Rational or Not? The Exploration of Voter Choices during the 2016 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Taiwan," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 1762.

¹⁴ Michael I Ogu, "Rational Choice Theory: Assumptions, Strengths and Greatest Weaknesses in Application Outside the Western Milieu Context," *Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review (Nigerian Chapter) Vol 1*, no. 3 (2013): 90–99.

¹⁵ Mark P Petracca, "The Rational Choice Approach to Politics: A Challenge to Democratic Theory," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 2 (1991): 289–319.

¹⁶ Abell, "Sociological Theory and Rational Choice Theory."

¹⁷ Abell, "Sociological Theory and Rational Choice Theory."

¹⁸ Lee et al., "Are We Rational or Not? The Exploration of Voter Choices during the 2016 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Taiwan."

form the majority of the population, many of the people voted for the ANC as it was perceived as the political party that sought to advance the interests of the black racial group.

In order to assess voting rationality, Lee et al. (2017), proposed two criteria which assist in integrating important elements of rationality (or candidates' capabilities) and subjective rationality (in this case, intention to vote).¹⁹ In the evaluation by Edlin, Gelman and Kaplan voter's decisions are rational if their behaviour towards voting is based on (a) the intention to vote (intention-behaviour consistency).²⁰ Also, evaluation can be done to judge people's intentions when voting based on (b) voter's evaluations of the capabilities of the candidates who can advance their social welfare including their track record (candidate evaluation). Thus, any decision that does not conform to these two criteria can be regarded as irrational.²¹

Taking these two criteria into the context of the 2024 elections in South Africa, it can be argued that voters expressed rationality in their voting choice because the intentions of the voters to cast their votes on opposition parties were done after evaluating political parties or candidate's potential to address their social discontents, based on what they have proposed on their party manifestos and campaigns. For, individuals were disgruntled by the longstanding government of the ANC which has fallen short in keeping up the social contract, which is the hypothetical agreement between the citizens and their government which should protect individual rights through the provision of socio-economic and political security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors that contribute to social discontent in South Africa and voting behaviour in South Africa.

Briefly mentioned above there are a number of variables that contributed to social discontent in South Africa that are a concern among the citizens that contributes to loss of confidence or trust in the country's government or political authorities.²² These concerns have led to people turning to different measures to voice their concerns ahead of the government's failure to keep its commitments.²³ The ineffectiveness of the government and its policies to transform South Africa have resulted in social discontent that can be traced through protests.

a. Poor Service delivery

In 1994, South Africa transitioned from an apartheid government to a democratic government that is non-racial and sexist. At the time, the Government of National Unity (GNU) which was forged to unite the country was confronted with the monumental task of undoing apartheid's policy legacies.²⁴ A legacy that is entrenched in decades of racial segregation and discrimination that have left large disparities in the living conditions of South Africans.²⁵ Due to the incompetence of the government, protests particularly due to service delivery grew intensively after 2004.²⁶ The inability of the government to address and provide basic infrastructural and basic service delivery became discontent among most South Africans who expressed their dissatisfaction through protesting.²⁷

¹⁹ Lee et al., "Are We Rational or Not? The Exploration of Voter Choices during the 2016 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Taiwan."

²⁰ Edlin, Gelman, and Kaplan, "Voting as a Rational Choice: Why and How People Vote to Improve the Well-Being of Others."

²¹ Lee et al., "Are We Rational or Not? The Exploration of Voter Choices during the 2016 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Taiwan."

²² Nicolás M Somma, "Discontent, Collective Protest, and Social Movements in Chile," *Malaise in Representation in Latin American Countries: Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay*, 2017, 47–68.

²³ Bhuda, Motswaledi, and Marumo, "Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19.," 2023.

²⁴ Azwifaneli Managa, "Unfulfilled Promises and Their Consequences," *A Reflection on Local Government Performance and the Critical Issue of Poor Service Delivery in South Africa. Africa Institute of South Africa: Policy Brief*, no. 76 (2012).

²⁵ Tina Fransman and Marisa von Fintel, "Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery," *Development Southern Africa* 41, no. 1 (2024): 71–90.

²⁶ Lucius Botes, "South Africa's Landscape of Social Protests: A Way Forward for Developmental Local Government?," *African Journal of Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (2018): 241–56.

²⁷ Fransman and von Fintel, "Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery"; Tebogo Daniel Ntjanyana, "The Relationship between Service Delivery Protests and Voter Turnout in South Africa between 2004 and 2015: The Case of the North West Province, South Africa" (North-West University (South Africa), 2016); Carin Runciman, Martin Bekker, and Terri Maggott, "Voting Preferences of Protesters and Non-Protesters in Three South African Elections (2014–2019): Revisiting the 'Ballot and the Brick,'" in *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections* (Routledge, 2020), 26–46.

b. The Triple Socio-economic Challenges

South Africa has been experiencing a challenge of addressing three distinct challenges which are high unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The World Bank notes that reducing poverty and inequality in South Africa has been an overriding developmental policy and programme concern since the beginning of democracy with the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the current National Development Plan: Vision 2030 (NDP).²⁸ The NDP has noted that Unemployment, poverty, and inequality are imperatives which the country must overcome.²⁹ However, in the last decade, these imperatives have been increasing drastically. The unemployment rate in the country stands at 32.9 percent with youth unemployment at 63.2 percent which is the highest in the world.³⁰ Moreover, the country ranked among the most unequal nations in terms of income and wealth distribution rated with a Gini-coefficient of 0.63 by the World Bank.³¹ Poverty in the country is one of the factors contributing to social discontent as 55 percent (~30.3 million) of its population is living under the poverty line.³² Mongale, Enaifoghe et al., Bhuda et al. and Phungula maintain that the triple socio-economic challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality are the factors that contribute to violent protests in South Africa that have criminal elements of looting, damaging private and public assets.³³

c. Crime Rate

For the purpose of the study at hand, reflecting on the crime rate is significant, as South Africa is noted to be the 3rd country with the highest crime rate following behind Papua New Guinea and Venezuela.³⁴ The country is notably having soaring high rates of assault, rape, homicide, and other violent crimes.³⁵ Mongale notes that with the increase in unemployment among the active population, the crime rates surge as destitute people tend to resort to criminal activities to make ends meet.³⁶ In the case of South Africa, the country suffers from a high rate of poverty, inequality and youth unemployment.³⁷ Thus, young people who are unemployed and who are in fragments that are highly stricken by poverty resort to criminal activities to survive. The level of crime in the country has made it an unsafe place to live in and this has caused protests to erupt as citizens feel unsafe and unprotected by the government.³⁸

²⁸ Victor Sulla and Precious. Zikhali, *Overcoming Poverty and Inequality in South Africa : An Assessment of Drivers, Constraints and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2018), <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/530481521735906534/Overcoming-Poverty-and-Inequality-in-South-Africa-An-Assessment-of-Drivers-Constraints-and-Opportunities>.

²⁹ National Planning Commission (NPC), "National Development Plan 2030," n.d.

³⁰ Noluthando Phungula, "Understanding the Dynamics of South Africa's July 2021 Social Unrest," *Journal of Nation-Building & Policy Studies* 8, no. 1 (2024): 71–87; StatsSA (Statistic South Africa), "Beyond Unemployment – Time-Related Underemployment in the SA Labour Market," 2023.

³¹ E. Stoltz, "South Africa Remains Most Unequal Country, World Bank Report Finds," 2022, <https://mg.co.za/news/2022-03-10-south-africa-remains-most-unequal-country-world-bank-report-finds>.

³² Mongale, "Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021)."

³³ Mongale, "Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021)"; Andrew Enaifoghe et al., "The Prevalence of Gender-Based Violence against Women in South Africa: A Call for Action," *African Journal of Gender, Society & Development* 10, no. 1 (2021): 117. Monicca Thulisile Bhuda, Thabang Motswaledi, and Phemelo Marumo, "Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19.," *African Journal of Development Studies* 13 (2023); Phungula, "Understanding the Dynamics of South Africa's July 2021 Social Unrest."

³⁴ World Population Review, "Crime Rate by Country 2024," 2020, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>.

³⁵ World Population Review, "Crime Rate by Country 2024."

³⁶ Mongale, "Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021)."

³⁷ Phungula, "Understanding the Dynamics of South Africa's July 2021 Social Unrest"; StatsSA (Statistic South Africa), "Beyond Unemployment – Time-Related Underemployment in the SA Labour Market."

³⁸ Engel. K., *Angry Cosatu Members Take to Streets to Protest against the High Crime Level in Western Cape* (IOL, 2022); H. Isilow, "Hundreds Protest over Rising Crime in South Africa," *Anadolu Ajansi*, April 7, 2022; A. Gouws, "Violence against Women Is Staggeringly High in South Africa – A Different Way of Thinking about It Is Needed," 2022, <https://theconversation.com/violence-against-women-is-staggeringly-high-in-south-africa-a-different-way-of-thinking-about-it-is-needed-195053#:~:text=South Africa has notoriously high,rape incidence in the world>.

d. Corruption

The ANC as the party that governed South Africa for the last 30 years has acknowledged significant policy weaknesses to transform the colonial industrial structure and ownership of the economy.³⁹ This lack of transformation is rooted in the view that the implementation of its policy agenda has not sufficiently delivered on the version of South Africa as captured in the Freedom Charter. The party has noted that corruption is a key factor that has contributed.⁴⁰ South Africa has been plagued by an elevated level of corruption in which the public sector and its organs are mismanaged and looted by politicians for personal gain at the expense of ordinary citizens.⁴¹ In 2022, The Auditor-General of South Africa (AG) Tsakane Maluleka has called on the government to entrench a culture of accountability as billions are being lost because of corruption and this affects millions of ordinary South Africans. Kali argues that citizens of South Africa have engaged the government in protests as a form of frustration to challenge what they regard as a corrupt government that is ineffective and that cannot address societal challenges due to its rampant corruption.⁴²

e. Energy Crisis

South Africa has been experiencing an energy crisis throughout the years, Eskom a state-owned national power utility supplier has failed to keep pace with the electrification rollout demand resulting in schedule blackouts, known as Loadshedding being implemented.⁴³ Several factors that have contributed to this energy crisis are corruption, sabotage, and infrastructure deterioration.⁴⁴ According to Motswaledi et al. the inability of Eskom to provide a stable energy supply particularly to ensure economic and social development has affected the livelihood of people across different communities and sectors as the implementation of load shedding has caused job loss that consequently contributed to the increase in unemployment and poverty in the South Africa.⁴⁵ The looming energy crisis has caused distress and dissatisfaction in South Africa as it has reached an extreme level where lights go off several times a day. This has caused protest demonstrations against Eskom and the government.⁴⁶

Voting behaviour in South Africa

Election and its outcome can be traced to voting behaviour, which is the action and inaction of citizens with respect to participating in elections⁴⁷. Mongale, Enaifoghe et al. and Phungula have argued that South Africa is characterised by social discontent that usually proliferates into protests rooted in the frustration and dissatisfaction of the citizens based on the socio-economic turmoil, lack of transformation, progress and deterioration of the country in which citizens exhibit grievance through protesting.⁴⁸ South Africans have utilised protests as a method of showing disapproval and dissatisfaction against the ANC-led democratic government. As the political party has degenerated, it has lost its moral stature and integrity through its disillusion-driven governmental performance.⁴⁹

³⁹ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁴⁰ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁴¹ Collin Olebogeng Mongale, "War Party: How the ANC's Political Killings Are Breaking South Africa by G Arde" (New Contree Editorial Board, 2021).

⁴² Moeketsi Kali, "A Comparative Analysis of the Causes of the Protests in Southern Africa," *SN Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2023): 28.

⁴³ P. Magakoe, "Hundreds Protest Incessant Power Cuts in South Africa.," *Al Jazeera*, January 25, 2024.

⁴⁴ Jacklyn Cock, "'Beware of the Crocodile's Smile': Labour-Environmentalism in the Struggle to Achieve a Just Transition in South Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Environmental Labour Studies* (Springer, 2021), 177–97.

⁴⁵ Thabang Richard Motswaledi, Phemelo Olifile Marumo, and O Adeyemi Oluwatobi, "Eskom's Lack of Energy Provision and Human Insecurity in South Africa: A Critical Analysis," *African Renaissance* 2023, no. si1 (2023): 71–93.

⁴⁶ Magakoe, "Hundreds Protest Incessant Power Cuts in South Africa. "; M. Swilling, "South Africa's Electricity Crisis: A Series of Failures over 30 Years Have Left a Dim Legacy," *The Conversation*, April 18, 2024.

⁴⁷ S. Rule, "Voting Behavior," in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, ed. A. C. Michalos (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 6985–87

⁴⁸ Mongale, "War Party: How the ANC's Political Killings Are Breaking South Africa by G Arde"; Phungula, "Understanding the Dynamics of South Africa's July 2021 Social Unrest."

⁴⁹ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*; Mongale, "Social Discontent or Criminality? Navigating the Nexus between Urban Riots and Criminal Activities in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces, South Africa (2021)."

Various scholars have maintained that there is a correlation between protests with the election outcome and voting behaviour in South Africa.⁵⁰ They have argued that protests have negatively affected the electoral support of the incumbent (ANC) government. The rise in protests has contributed to the decline of the party in the elections throughout the years. Runciman et al. have demonstrated that protests have become a means of political engagement for the ANC supporters, who protest the governing party and continue voting for it because of their political loyalty.⁵¹ However, Steyn-Kotze and Bohle-Muller as well as Fransman and von Fintel have argued that the decline in the ANC electoral support in previous elections can be attributed to protests and dissatisfaction of the citizens.⁵² Ntjanyana further argues that the citizens of South Africa do not vote based on the daunting socio-economic realities of the country but rather vote on other plausible political reasons such as loyalty, ethnicity, race, and party support.⁵³ However, the ANC suffered an electoral decline when protest activities increased, and party loyalty became a less binding factor to sustain electoral support as most citizens were dissatisfied with its poor governance. Ntjanyana, as well as Steyn-Kotze and Bohle-Muller have importantly noted that the ANC has remained the party of choice for voters who have not engaged in protests while those who protested have looked to opposition parties as alternatives.⁵⁴

South Africa has been experiencing a decline in voter turnout throughout the years. Steyn-Kotze and Bohle-Muller argue that ordinary South African voters who do not engage in protests but are dissatisfied with the disappointing socio-economic condition of the country choose to rather not participate in the election as they are loyal to the ANC or sensing that their vote will not make any change.⁵⁵ Steyn-Kotze and Bohle-Muller as well as Fransman and von Fintel demonstrated that the decline in voter turnout has mostly negatively affected the ANC compared to the opposition parties as they significantly benefited from the ANC decline.⁵⁶

Another compound factor that impacts voter turnout is age.⁵⁷ Younger voters are psychologically disengaged and less motivated to cast their votes compared to other voters. Molotana argues that young voters in South Africa have a mistrust toward the electoral system. She further maintains that youth in South Africa are comfortable engaging in protest as a form of activism rather than an election.⁵⁸ Based on Molotana's argument, the youth choose not to vote and rather protest to express their grievance regarding the poor governance of the country.⁵⁹

METHODOLOGY

The study primarily relied on secondary data from various databases as a source of data collection by extensively reviewing available literature relevant to this study. The study adopted a qualitative research approach. This includes existing data being summarised and compiled to improve the overall research efficiency. The paper presents an in-depth investigation of social discontent and its effects on voting behaviour leading to the country's transitioning from one-party dominance. The purpose of the article is

⁵⁰ Ntjanyana, "The Relationship between Service Delivery Protests and Voter Turnout in South Africa between 2004 and 2015: The Case of the North West Province, South Africa"; Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*; Runciman, Bekker, and Maggott, "Voting Preferences of Protesters and Non-Protesters in Three South African Elections (2014–2019): Revisiting the 'Ballot and the Brick'"; Fransman and von Fintel, "Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery."

⁵¹ Runciman, Bekker, and Maggott, "Voting Preferences of Protesters and Non-Protesters in Three South African Elections (2014–2019): Revisiting the 'Ballot and the Brick.'"

⁵² Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*; Fransman and von Fintel, "Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery."

⁵³ Ntjanyana, "The Relationship between Service Delivery Protests and Voter Turnout in South Africa between 2004 and 2015: The Case of the North West Province, South Africa."

⁵⁴ Ntjanyana, "The Relationship between Service Delivery Protests and Voter Turnout in South Africa between 2004 and 2015: The Case of the North West Province, South Africa"; Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁵⁵ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁵⁶ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*; Fransman and von Fintel, "Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery."

⁵⁷ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁵⁸ A. Molotana, "Democracy in South Africa Is Futile without Youth Participation and Inclusion. ." Faculty of humanities news: University of Pretoria, June 22, 2022, https://www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-humanities/news/post_3082918-democracy-in-south-africa-is-futile-without-youth-participation-and-inclusion.

⁵⁹ Molotana, "Democracy in South Africa Is Futile without Youth Participation and Inclusion. ."

to critically analyse the link between social discontent and voting behaviour and provide social discontent as one of the underlying reasons that South Africa is transitioning from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition.

DISCUSSION

The study found that there are various factors in South Africa that contribute to social discontent such as triple socio-economic challenges of unemployment, poverty, and inequality, as well as, poor service delivery, crime, corruption and energy which can be observed through protests. It further finds that this social discontent affects voting behaviour in the country. Through this finding, this section presents a detailed discussion of findings on the effects of social discontent on voting behaviour in the 2024 General Elections leading to South Africa transitioning from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition.

2024 General Election: The transition from one-party to a multi-party coalition in South Africa

According to the election outcome, the ANC got 40.18% of support, followed by the DA with 21.81%, then the Umkhonto We Sizwe party (M.K.) with 14.58, and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) with 9.52% of support.⁶⁰ Therefore, the failure of the ANC to attain a threshold to govern on its own has necessitated the party to enter into a multi-party coalition government with parties such as the DA, IFP, PA, FF+, UDM, Rise Mzansi, Al-Jama, GOOD and PAC. However, the extent to which this multi-party coalition government will mitigate social discontent is yet to be seen. This is because these political parties share some differences in their ideological beliefs and policy direction, which might bring disputes in terms of championing policies that will alleviate social discontent such as unemployment, poverty, inequality, crime, corruption and poor service delivery.

The transitioning of South Africa from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition can be attributed to social discontent and voting behaviour in the country. The ANC, the incumbent government which has governed South Africa has been dominant in parliament and in government for the last 30 years and has not been effective through its policies in transforming South Africa.⁶¹ Throughout the election seasons, the ANC has been promising the South African voting population through its campaigns and manifesto “a better life for all.” By addressing underperforming municipalities, improving basic service delivery, developing infrastructure, fighting corruption, and reducing socioeconomic challenges, particularly poverty inequality and unemployment.⁶²

The present study argues that social discontent affected voting behaviour when looking at the 2024 general election outcome in South Africa. Since the ANC-led government has failed to address the existence of these social discontents, the party suffered a decline in its electoral support, as people voted for alternative political parties that promised to improve their lives and the provision of public goods. The ANC fell below the threshold to govern on its own as the party, a decline which led the ANC to form a multi-party coalition government with former rivals such as the DA and the IFP.⁶³

In turning the argument somewhat, on previous occasions people of South Africa have expressed their social discontent by embarking on protest actions, which has negatively affected the electoral support of the ANC.⁶⁴ The increase in service delivery protests in previous years has contributed to voters abstaining or voting against the ANC leading to declining support in the previous election.⁶⁵ This has consequently benefited opposition parties such as the DA and the EFF as they have significantly gained support in previous election cycles.⁶⁶ Elections have been used as a bargaining tool by South Africans to

⁶⁰ IEC (Independent Electoral Commission), “2024 National Election Results.”

⁶¹ Bhuda, Motswaledi, and Marumo, “Moral Decay, Government, and Looting in South Africa during COVID-19,” 2023.

⁶² Managa, “Unfulfilled Promises and Their Consequences.”

⁶³ Alex Vine, “South Africa’s New Coalition Government Heralds Change for the Region and Its Leaders,” Chatham House, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/south-africas-new-coalition-government-heralds-change-region-and-its-leaders>.

⁶⁴ Runciman, Bekker, and Maggott, “Voting Preferences of Protesters and Non-Protesters in Three South African Elections (2014–2019): Revisiting the ‘Ballot and the Brick.’”

⁶⁵ Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*

⁶⁶ Fransman and von Fintel, “Voting and Protest Tendencies Associated with Changes in Service Delivery”; Kotze and Bohler-Muller, *Reflections on the 2019 South African General Elections: Quo Vadis?*; Ntjanyana, “The Relationship between Service Delivery Protests and Voter Turnout in South Africa between 2004 and 2015: The Case of the North West Province, South Africa.”

illustrate their frustrations and disgruntlement towards the government or seek consensus from the government in addressing their challenges.⁶⁷

Over the years, there has been a growing disillusionment with the ANC perpetuated by perceptions of endemic corruption and patronage, diversion of state resources, and anti-democratic practices which stem from the ANC's factional disputes.⁶⁸ Due to the politics of patronage and impunity in South Africa, the country remains compromised as a constitutional state and continues to be fragmented.⁶⁹

Leading up to the 2024 general elections, the issues of corruption and malpractices under the ANC-led government were too much to bear for not only ordinary citizens but also top ANC stalwarts. For instance, the former president Thabo Mbeki in August 2023 alluded that "How am I going to ask people to vote for an ANC led by local criminals?"⁷⁰ These remarks by former president Thabo Mbeki are complementary to what Mongale had argued before, as he expounded that when the forefathers of the ANC met in Mangaung (Bloemfontein) in 1912 to form the organization, never in their wildest dreams did they ever think that they were in actual fact creating a monster to society, a criminal enterprise of syndicates.⁷¹ For, the post-apartheid ANC-led government seems to have shifted from its mandate of preserving a better life for all, as the political party seem to exist for no other purpose but to loot and squander state resources.⁷²

South Africa has been challenged with debilitating power outages (famously known as load shedding), which is reportedly linked to systemic corruption and mismanagement at the power utility ESKOM.⁷³ The prevalence of load shedding can also be attributed to the ANC's failure to upgrade ESKOM power plants, meanwhile, acts of sabotage by senior officials have been practised to settle factional scores.⁷⁴ Another reason for sabotage at ESKOM could be attributed to contracts awarded to those who provided services to the power utility.

The alleged modus operandi can be traced to the same lines as those found guilty of sabotage in the past, whereby conspirators would deliberately damage power stations, which would require various services tied up to the parties involved, who would score government contracts to repair those damaged power stations.⁷⁵ In his words, Andre De Ruyter (former CEO of ESKOM) said "This is a pattern. We found it at another power station as well. At Tutuka, for example, people deliberately break equipment because that results in a maintenance call-out which puts money back into the pockets of the maintenance contractors."⁷⁶

The challenges facing South Africa in its 30 years of democracy under the ANC-led government are captured in six volumes of the 76, 206-page Final Report of the Independent Judicial Inquiry into State Capture. The commission with its findings revealed that the ANC top leaders and government officials including former state president Jacob Zuma have colluded with private interests to capture the levers of state institutions for personal financial gains. A capture which had cost South Africa an estimated \$26 billion between 2009 and 2018.⁷⁷

The failure of the ANC government to address voters' grievances in the past years has influenced voting behaviour during election day of 29 May 2024 which led to the ANC losing majority in parliament and in government. Voters in the 2024 general elections were already frustrated and disgruntled by the government of the ANC. They used the 2024 election cycle as an opportunity to act out their social

⁶⁷ Norman Sempijja and Collin Olebogeng Mongale, "Protests as a Form of Electioneering? A Comparative Study of the 2016 and 2021 Local Government Elections Protests in Gauteng and Kwa-Zulu Natal," *Politikon* 49, no. 4 (2022): 457–75.

⁶⁸ Collin O Mongale and Jan C Venter, "The African National Congress's Factionalism and Targeted Killings as Risks to Human Security in KwaZulu-Natal Province," *Jambá-Journal of Disaster Risk Studies* 16, no. 1 (2024): 1502.

⁶⁹ Mongale, "War Party: How the ANC's Political Killings Are Breaking South Africa by G Arde."

⁷⁰ Unathi Nkanjeni, "Ask the ANC: What Justifies That I Vote for You?", Mbeki Tells Young Voters," Times Live, 2023, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/politics/2023-08-28-ask-the-anc-what-justifies-that-i-vote-for-you-mbeki-tells-young-voters/>.

⁷¹ Collin Olebogeng Mongale, "War Party: How the ANC's Political Killings Are Breaking South Africa by G Arde" (New Contree Editorial Board, 2021).

⁷² Mongale, "War Party: How the ANC's Political Killings Are Breaking South Africa by G Arde."

⁷³ A. Harding, "South Africa Load-Shedding: The Roots of Eskom's Power Problem," BBC News, May 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65671718>.

⁷⁴ Business Day, "Top Eskom Executive Linked to Sabotage at Power Stations," 2023, https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2023-06-04-top-eskom-executive-linked-to-sabotage-at-power-stations/#google_vignette.

⁷⁵ Andre De Ruyter, *Truth to Power: My Three Years Inside Eskom* (Penguin Random House South Africa, 2023), 195.

⁷⁶ Business Day, "Top Eskom Executive Linked to Sabotage at Power Stations."

⁷⁷ Harding, "South Africa Load-Shedding: The Roots of Eskom's Power Problem."

discontent by voting for alternative political parties with hopes that their grievances would be heard. The rationale choice theory argues that people's voting choice is influenced by their self-interests, thus they are likely to vote for a political party that will advance their welfare.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the 2024 election outcome presented a paradigm shift in terms of voter behaviour during elections, instead of embarking on protests to seek concessions from the government. What has become apparent is that the voters acted rationally as they voted for alternative political parties who have promised to address their social discontent or not participate in elections to benefit opposition parties as they are loyal to the ANC. Unlike preceding years, when people would vote for the ANC based on their lip services, loyalty and party support, the dynamics have changed. The 2024 elections marked the end of the ANC dominance as the ANC failed to secure its position as the single dominant party in the government and in the national assembly following its decline in electoral outcome which caused a transition from one-party dominance to a multi-party coalition.

Discussion Summary

As South Africa was gearing up for the 2024 general elections, the country was challenged with socio-economic and political discontent such as unemployment, crime, corruption, poor service delivery, and inequality to name a few. Sadly, these social discontents served as key factors that influenced voting behaviour in the 2024 general elections in South Africa. For one, through various surveys and media interviews conducted by researchers and journalists, the people of South Africa had alluded that they would vote for a political party that would bring change and improve their socio-economic status. As such, people used their rationality to determine their party of choice based on the political party's track record, and manifestos which outline the goals of certain political parties once voted into government. Hence, the study adopted rational choice theory to make sense of voting behaviour in the wake of the 2024 general elections. The theory argues that people are likely to vote for a party that will improve their welfare, thus failure by the ANC-led government to address social discontent has affected its electoral support since people channelled their votes to alternative political parties. The decline of the ANC electoral support led the party to fall below the threshold to govern on its own since the party obtained 41.82% of support in the elections, leading the party to form a coalition government with former rivals such as the DA and IFP.

RECOMMENDATIONS

How the newly formed government of national unity can mitigate the existing social discount among electorates.

- It is recommended that the political parties that are part of the GNU government should be transparent and accountable to increase trust among citizens and electorates.
- The GNU government should improve the welfare of citizens by addressing pressing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, inequality, corruption, and poor service delivery to mitigate social discontent among the electorate.
- The GNU should foster constructive and inclusive dialogue to encourage respectful fact-based discussion about the state of the county to boost morale among the citizens and electorates.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the paper argues that the 2024 elections in South Africa have presented a paradigm shift in the political landscape, as the ANC lost its status as a single dominant political party in the national government and parliament. This was influenced by the failure of the ANC-led government to satisfy not only the general populace of South Africa but some of its party supporters. Thus, the breakaway of the Zuma faction which formed the M.K party (due to ANC's internal strives) had negatively impacted the support for the ANC. Moving forward, the paper takes a position that, failure by the newly formed multi-party coalition government to address social discontents shall affect the legitimacy of parties that are in a coalition government, and this will present an opportunity for people to vote for alternative parties outside those who formed coalition government post-2024 general elections such as the M.K. and EFF. As the rational choice theory argues, people are driven by their interests, and their choice to vote for a political

⁷⁸ Abell, "Sociological Theory and Rational Choice Theory."

party is motivated by the gains that come with voting for such a political party. Therefore, the people will always seek alternative political parties that seek to maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs.

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