



From dominant-party rule to coalition politics: A qualitative thematic review of Governance in Post-ANC South Africa

Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula¹ 

¹ Department of Education Studies, University of Limpopo, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the governance implications of South Africa's transition from dominant-party rule to coalition politics following the declining electoral dominance of the African National Congress (ANC). The purpose of the study was to analyse how this political shift reshapes democratic accountability, political stability, policy coordination, and public service delivery within an increasingly fragmented multiparty system. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive design informed by a systematic thematic literature review. Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and policy documents were purposively selected from Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Sabinet using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. The selected literature was analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework, supported by Dominant-Party System Theory and Coalition Governance Theory as the guiding analytical lenses. On the one hand, coalition arrangements enhance political pluralism, broaden representation, and strengthen democratic oversight by dispersing power across multiple political actors. On the other hand, coalition politics is associated with instability in governance characterised by fragile alliances, leadership turnover, policy fragmentation, and administrative uncertainty, particularly at the municipal level. The analysis further shows that the effectiveness and sustainability of coalition governance depend on institutionalised coalition agreements, effective conflict-resolution mechanisms, and strengthened administrative capacity. The study concludes that South Africa's shift from dominant-party rule to coalition governance reflects a structural transformation in its democratic system, requiring new institutional and political arrangements to balance inclusivity with governance stability. By integrating dominant-party and coalition governance theories, the study contributes a consolidated conceptual framework for understanding governance dynamics in post-dominant-party South Africa.

Keywords: Coalition governance, Dominant-party Systems, Democratic Accountability, Governance, Political transition.

INTRODUCTION

Following the democratic transition of 1994, South Africa's political system has been predominantly characterised by the continued electoral dominance of the African National Congress (ANC). The ruling party of the Liberation Movement, the ANC, has for almost three decades been winning with huge

CORRESPONDENCE – Nkarhi Excellent Mathebula **Email:** nkarhi.mathebula@ul.ac.za

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majorities nationally, provincially and municipally, a practice which has allowed the party to govern without the formality of cooperating with the other parties in the opposition. At that time, South Africa was seen as a perfect example of a dominant-party system in comparative democratic scholarship.¹ In dominant-party systems, one political party during a long period repeatedly wins elections while opposition parties remain electorally marginal, thus influencing the institutional and political dynamics of governance.² Although dominant-party systems can be democratic in nature, they still concentrate much political power in one ruling organization which then naturally limits the development of coalition governance practices.

However, it has been observed that the political terrain of South Africa has changed considerably in recent years. The decline in the share of the ruling party's votes, the ANC, along with the rise in political pluralism, has led to more competitive elections and fragmentation of legislative institutions. This shift in the politics of South Africa is most visible in local government, where the elections have resulted in broken majorities. In fact, the scattered electoral support of several metropolitan councils has made it necessary for political parties to come together and form coalition governments by concluding formal or informal agreements. Coalition government is, therefore, an extreme change in pattern after almost three decades of dominant-party governance.³

Coalition governance deeply modifies the nature of political power and the decision-making processes of the political arena. In the dominant-party system, one party holds/the single party exercises, unequivocal control over government structures and directives, whereas in coalition governments power must be shared, and policy priorities must be negotiated among the different actors involved. Power-sharing as a sign of a three-party agreement involves not only agreements but also some kind of distribution of the executive positions.⁴ On the one hand, the cooperation among partners in a coalition leads to democratic practices and strengthens representation, but on the other hand, if these partners have different ideologies, the partnership may create governance challenges.

Coalition politics in South Africa has been mainly confined to the metropolitan municipalities where election results have been fragmented to the extent that the ruling party can no longer command the majority in the council. It has been the case that these municipalities are constantly having changes of alliance leadership, and even facing no-confidence motions, which are the result of weak coalition agreements.⁵ This kind of political volatility has made people question the stability of governance, the continuity of policies, and whether municipal service delivery is still efficient. Conversely, coalition politics should not be completely blamed for the concerns raised, as it is a way of democratizing by disseminating political power, thus making the executive authority more closely supervised.

In a wider democratic context, the rise of coalition politics is seen as a great stepping stone in South Africa's political development. As the political realm becomes more competitive and party dominance is no longer a given, the country must be prepared for a more pluralistic multiparty political system to emerge step by step. Such a situation is fraught with both possibilities and difficulties for democratic consolidation, governance stability, and institutional development. Even though coalition governments are increasingly playing a pivotal role in politics, there is still not much academic focus on what such governments mean for the overall governance of post-dominant-party South Africa.

This study looks at the change from a dominant-party system to coalition politics in South Africa, focusing on governance issues. It will cover how such an arrangement handles political accountability, achievable stability, and other facets of governance that emerge from living in a two- or more-party era by means of a qualitative inquiry and analysis.

Although coalition governance has received increasing scholarly attention in South Africa, much of the existing literature has concentrated on electoral outcomes, coalition formation, political instability, or the performance of individual metropolitan municipalities. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to developing an integrated conceptual understanding of the broader governance implications

¹ Roger Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa* (Boydell & Brewer, 2016).

² K. F. Greene, *The End of Dominant Party Rule* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³ S. Booyesen, "Coalition Government and Political Instability in South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 6 (2018): 1095-1112.

⁴ D. Kadima, "Coalition Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Africa," *African Journal of Political Science* 12, no. 1(2017): 45–63.

⁵ S. Mbete, "Coalition Governments and Governance Challenges in South African Municipalities," *Politikon* 50,no.2(2023):210–27.

arising from South Africa's transition from dominant-party rule to coalition politics. Existing studies often examine isolated dimensions of coalition governance, such as electoral behaviour, party negotiations, or service delivery, without synthesising these perspectives into a comprehensive governance framework.

This study addresses this gap by undertaking a systematic thematic review of the literature to provide a holistic interpretation of how coalition politics is reshaping governance in post-dominant-party South Africa. Rather than focusing on a single municipality or a particular coalition arrangement, the study synthesises diverse theoretical and empirical scholarship to explain the interrelationships between political stability, democratic accountability, policy coordination, institutional adaptation, and public service delivery within coalition governments. In doing so, it moves beyond descriptive accounts of coalition politics by identifying the structural conditions, institutional dynamics, and governance processes that influence the effectiveness and sustainability of coalition governments.

The study further contributes to scholarship by integrating Dominant-Party System Theory and Coalition Governance Theory into a unified analytical framework for understanding South Africa's evolving political landscape. The combined application of these theoretical perspectives demonstrates that coalition governance is not only a consequence of declining electoral dominance but also an institutional adaptation that requires new forms of political cooperation, governance arrangements, and administrative coordination. This theoretical integration provides a more comprehensive explanation of both the opportunities and the governance challenges associated with coalition politics than either perspective independently offers.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study offers practical insights for policymakers, political parties, municipal administrators, and democratic governance practitioners by identifying institutional mechanisms that may strengthen coalition stability, improve policy coherence, and enhance democratic accountability. Therefore, the findings contribute to ongoing debates on democratic consolidation, governance reform, and institutional resilience in South Africa and other emerging democracies transitioning from dominant-party systems to more competitive multiparty political environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction: From Dominant-Party Stability to Fragmented Pluralism

The transformation of South Africa's political system from dominant-party governance to increasing electoral fragmentation has become a central focus in contemporary political scholarship. Since 1994, the ANC has maintained continuous electoral dominance in national, provincial, and local spheres, shaping both the architecture and the trajectory of post-apartheid governance. However, recent electoral cycles indicate a gradual but measurable erosion of this dominance, signalling a potential shift towards a more competitive and fragmented multiparty system.

This transition has significant theoretical implications. It challenges long-standing assumptions in dominant-party theory on durability, legitimacy, and institutional reproduction. It also raises questions about the governance capacity of emerging coalition arrangements in contexts historically structured around single-party majorities. The literature reviewed in this section therefore engages three interrelated strands: dominant-party systems, electoral realignment and fragmentation, and coalition governance with its associated institutional consequences.

Dominant-Party Systems and Institutional Entrenchment

Dominant-party systems are typically defined as competitive electoral regimes in which one party consistently maintains power over extended periods, despite the formal existence of opposition parties. Greene conceptualises dominant-party rule as a condition sustained not merely through electoral popularity but through *institutionalised advantage*, including access to state resources, organisational depth, and historical legitimacy.⁶

In the South African case, the dominance of the ANC has been widely interpreted through this analytical lens. Southall attributes the party's electoral supremacy to its liberation credentials, which

⁶ Greene, *The End of Dominant Party Rule*.

functioned as a powerful source of symbolic capital in the immediate post-apartheid era.⁷ This legitimacy was reinforced by its extensive organisational reach and its embeddedness in state institutions, enabling sustained electoral success across multiple cycles.

However, the literature also emphasises that dominant-party systems reshape governance structures in ways that extend beyond electoral outcomes. At the same time, Mattes presents a more ambivalent interpretation, suggesting that dominant-party systems may contribute to short-term governance stability by reducing the uncertainty associated with coalition bargaining.⁸ However, this stability may come at the cost of reduced democratic responsiveness and declining institutional adaptability over time.

Comparative literature further suggests that dominant-party systems are inherently transitional rather than permanent. Greene argues that such systems often erode under conditions of declining economic performance, rising inequality, and generational shifts in political identity.⁹ These pressures gradually weaken ruling-party dominance and open space for opposition consolidation.

Electoral Realignment and the Fragmentation of Party Dominance

Recent electoral developments in South Africa increasingly reflect processes of party system fragmentation and voter realignment. This literature departs from earlier accounts of stable partisan identification and instead emphasises volatility, performance-based voting, and declining loyalty to liberation movements.

Ferree argues that South African voters increasingly engage in retrospective performance evaluation, in which electoral choices are shaped by perceptions of service delivery and governance outcomes rather than historical allegiance.¹⁰ This shift represents a fundamental transformation in the logic of political support, undermining the durability of liberation-based legitimacy.

Schulz-Herzenberg extends this argument by identifying rising electoral volatility, characterised by increased voter switching between parties across electoral cycles.¹¹ Such volatility indicates weakening partisan anchoring and increasing openness within the electorate.

These dynamics are particularly pronounced at the local government level, where fragmented electoral outcomes have become more common. Booyesen observes that metropolitan municipalities increasingly produce no outright majorities, necessitating inter-party cooperation for governance formation.¹² This marks a structural departure from the post-1994 governance model, which was largely predicated on single-party control.

Importantly, this fragmentation is not solely political but also socio-economic in origin. Hart links electoral volatility to structural inequalities, unemployment, and uneven service delivery, arguing that these conditions erode political trust and intensify demand for alternative political representation.¹³ In this sense, electoral fragmentation is both an expression of democratic maturation and a symptom of unresolved developmental contradictions.

Coalition Governance as Institutional Response to Fragmentation

Coalition governance emerges in the literature as an institutional adaptation to fragmented electoral systems. Kadima defines coalitions as governing arrangements formed when no single political party achieves an electoral majority, requiring negotiated cooperation among multiple actors to ensure governmental functionality.¹⁴

From a theoretical perspective, coalition politics is closely associated with proportional representation systems, where fragmented party systems are structurally incentivised. In such contexts,

⁷ Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*.

⁸ R. Mattes, "Voter Behaviour and Democratic Attitudes in South Africa," *Democratization* 27, no. 3 (2020): 456–472.

⁹ Greene, *The End of Dominant Party Rule*.

¹⁰ Karen E. Ferree, "Electoral Systems in Context," in *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Systems*, ed. Erik S. Herron, Robert J. Pekkanen, and Matthew S. Shugart (Oxford University Press, 2018), 942–64, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258658.013.38>.

¹¹ C Schulz-Herzenberg, "Voter Alignment and Political Change in South Africa," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, no. 1 (2018): 1–18.

¹² Booyesen, "Coalition Government and Political Instability in South Africa."

¹³ T. Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities," *Development Southern Africa* 38, no.4(2021):567–82.

¹⁴ Kadima, "Coalition Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Africa."

governance depends on bargaining, negotiation, and formal or informal coalition agreements that define policy priorities, leadership distribution, and conflict resolution mechanisms.

In South Africa, coalition governance has become increasingly visible at the municipal level, particularly in metropolitan councils. Mbete demonstrates that these coalitions are often highly fluid, characterised by shifting alliances, strategic repositioning, and unstable governing agreements.¹⁵ Coalition formation is therefore not merely a technical response to electoral outcomes but a dynamic political process shaped by both ideological and strategic considerations.

While coalition governance can enhance inclusivity by broadening participation in decision-making, it simultaneously introduces governance complexity. Decision-making processes are slower and more contested, as policy agreement must be negotiated across divergent party interests. This tension between inclusion and efficiency constitutes a central paradox in coalition governance literature.

Governance Instability and Institutional Fragmentation

A dominant theme in the coalition governance literature is political instability. Klüver and Bäck argue that coalition governments are structurally vulnerable to internal conflict due to ideological heterogeneity and competing political ambitions among coalition partners.¹⁶

In South Africa, this instability is particularly evident at the municipal level, where coalition arrangements frequently collapse due to shifting political alliances and motions of no confidence. Mbete notes that coalition breakdowns are often strategically motivated, as parties exit agreements to reposition themselves electorally.¹⁷ This behaviour contributes to what can be described as *institutional fluidity*, where governance arrangements lack durability and predictability.

This instability has direct implications for policy continuity and administrative coherence. Strøm et al. argue that coalition governance often produces negotiated policy outcomes that reflect compromise rather than coherence.¹⁸ While this may enhance deliberation, it can also dilute policy clarity and reduce implementation effectiveness.

Hart further highlights the administrative consequences of coalition instability, noting that frequent leadership changes undermine bureaucratic continuity and weaken service delivery systems.¹⁹ Municipal administrations often have to repeatedly adapt to new political directives, resulting in inefficiencies and institutional uncertainty.

Democratic Value and Normative Justifications of Coalition Governance

Despite concerns about instability, coalition governance is also defended in the literature as a mechanism for democratic deepening. Arriola et al. argue that coalition systems disperse political power, thereby reducing executive dominance and strengthening horizontal accountability mechanisms.²⁰

From a deliberative democratic perspective, coalition governance may improve policy quality through structured negotiation and compromise. The need to agree among multiple parties encourages policy scrutiny and reduces unilateral decision-making, thereby improving transparency and inclusion.

Furthermore, coalition systems expand political representation by enabling smaller parties to participate in governance structures. This inclusivity improves democratic legitimacy by ensuring that a wider spectrum of political preferences is reflected in executive decision-making.

However, the literature also cautions that these democratic benefits are conditional. Their realisation depends on institutionalised coalition norms, enforceable agreements, and political maturity among actors. In their absence, coalition governance risks degenerating into instability, short-termism, and policy incoherence.

¹⁵ Mbete, "Coalition Governments and Governance Challenges in South African Municipalities."

¹⁶ Heike Klüver and Hanna Bäck, "Coalition Agreements, Issue Attention, and Cabinet Governance," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 13–14 (November 11, 2019): 1995–2031, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019830726>.

¹⁷ Mbete, "Coalition Governments and Governance Challenges in South African Municipalities."

¹⁸ K. Strøm, W. C Müller, and T Bergman, "Cabinets and Coalition Bargaining," *Oxford University Press*, 2017.

¹⁹ Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities."

²⁰ L. R Arriola, J DeVaro, and A Meng, "Coalition Governments and Democratic Performance," *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 4 (2021): 1502–16.

Synthesis and Analytical Gap

The reviewed literature reveals a central tension between two competing interpretations of coalition governance. On one hand, coalition politics is viewed as a democratic advancement that enhances inclusivity, accountability, and deliberation. On the other hand, it is associated with instability, fragmented governance, and weakened policy coherence.

What remains underexplored in the South African context is how these tensions manifest specifically within municipal governance systems that undergo rapid political fragmentation. In particular, there is limited empirical synthesis on how the decline of dominant-party rule structurally conditions coalition instability and governance outcomes at the local level.

This gap is significant because it suggests that coalition governance in South Africa is not merely an institutional arrangement but a transitional governance regime emerging from the erosion of dominant-party stability. Understanding this transition is therefore essential for explaining contemporary governance performance, institutional uncertainty, and democratic consolidation trajectories.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines dominant-party theory, electoral realignment theory, and coalition governance theory to explain South Africa's transition from prolonged single-party dominance to fragmented multiparty governance.

Dominant-party theory provides the starting point for understanding the ANC's sustained electoral supremacy in the post-1994 era. Greene conceptualises dominant-party systems as competitive regimes in which one party maintains long-term electoral superiority through organisational strength, historical legitimacy, and access to state resources.²¹ In South Africa, the ANC's liberation credentials and extensive mobilisation networks enabled it to dominate elections at national and subnational levels.²² However, this dominance is not static; prolonged rule may weaken accountability, blur party-state boundaries, and gradually erode legitimacy, thereby creating conditions for decline.²³

Electoral realignment theory explains the transitional dynamics underlying the weakening of dominant-party rule. It emphasises shifts in voter behaviour from identity-based loyalty to performance-based evaluation. Ferree argues that South African voters increasingly assess parties on governance delivery rather than historical affiliation, while Schulz-Herzenberg highlights rising electoral volatility and voter switching.²⁴ These patterns reflect declining partisan attachment and increasing political fluidity, producing fragmented electoral outcomes and weakening single-party majorities.

Coalition governance theory explains the institutional response to this fragmentation. Kadima defines coalition governments as negotiated arrangements formed when no single party secures a majority under proportional representation systems.²⁵ Governance under coalitions is characterised by bargaining, compromise, and shared decision-making authority.²⁶ In South Africa, Mbete shows that municipal coalitions are often unstable due to shifting alliances, weak institutionalisation, and strategic party behaviour.²⁷

Finally, the perspectives on governance and institutional stability highlight the consequences of coalition arrangements. Political instability often disrupts administrative continuity, weakens policy implementation, and undermines service delivery effectiveness.²⁸ Coalition governance therefore introduces both democratic inclusivity and administrative uncertainty.

Collectively, these theories explain South Africa's political trajectory as a transition from dominant-party stability to electoral fragmentation and coalition-based governance, with significant implications for institutional performance and democratic consolidation.

²¹ Greene, *The End of Dominant Party Rule*.

²² Southall, *The New Black Middle Class in South Africa*.

²³ Isaac Khambule et al., "Coexistence as a Strategy for Opposition Parties in Challenging the African National Congress' One-Party Dominance," *Politikon* 46, no. 4 (October 2, 2019): 427–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589346.2019.1682784>.

²⁴ Ferree, "Electoral Systems in Context." Schulz-Herzenberg, "Voter Alignment and Political Change in South Africa."

²⁵ Kadima, "Coalition Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Africa."

²⁶ Strøm, Müller, and Bergman, "Cabinets and Coalition Bargaining."

²⁷ Mbete, "Coalition Governments and Governance Challenges in South African Municipalities."

²⁸ Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive research design underpinned by a systematic thematic literature review to examine the governance implications of South Africa's transition from dominant-party rule to coalition politics. The qualitative interpretive paradigm was considered appropriate because the study sought to generate an in-depth understanding of complex political and governance processes by interpreting and synthesising existing scholarly knowledge rather than through the collection of primary empirical data. Within Political Science and Public Administration, interpretive qualitative inquiry is widely recognised as an appropriate approach to explore institutional change, democratic transformation, and governance dynamics, particularly where the objective is to explain patterns, meanings, and relationships that emerge from existing bodies of knowledge.²⁹

The study was therefore positioned as a systematic qualitative literature review rather than an empirical qualitative investigation. Unlike narrative reviews, systematic literature reviews use explicit, transparent, and replicable procedures to identify, select, evaluate, and synthesise relevant scholarship. This methodological approach improves the credibility of the review by minimising selection bias while ensuring that conclusions are grounded in a comprehensive and balanced appraisal of the available evidence. Furthermore, the interpretive orientation enabled the integration of diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives into a coherent explanation of the governance opportunities and challenges associated with coalition politics in post-ANC South Africa.

Literature Search Strategy

The identification of relevant literature followed a systematic and transparent search process designed to ensure comprehensive coverage of scholarship on dominant-party systems, coalition governance, democratic transitions, and governance in South Africa. Searches were conducted on four major academic databases, namely Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Sabinet, because these databases collectively provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature in Political Science, Public Administration, Governance Studies, and African Studies. To maximise the retrieval of relevant studies, combinations of keywords and Boolean operators were used, including terms such as coalition governance, dominant-party systems, electoral fragmentation, political transition, democratic accountability, governance, and South Africa. These search terms were combined using operators such as AND and OR to broaden and refine the search while maintaining relevance to the study objectives.

To strengthen the comprehensiveness of the review, backward citation tracking was undertaken by examining the reference lists of key publications, while forward citation searches were used to identify more recent studies that cited influential foundational works. This iterative search process ensured that both seminal theoretical contributions and contemporary scholarship were incorporated into the analysis, thereby providing a robust conceptual foundation for understanding the changing governance landscape in South Africa.

Literature Selection

After the initial database search, all retrieved records were exported and screened through a structured selection process. Duplicate publications were removed before titles and abstracts were examined for their relevance to the research objectives. Studies were retained where they addressed coalition governance, dominant-party systems, democratic transitions, or governance processes within South Africa or comparable democratic contexts. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and reputable policy reports published primarily between 2014 and 2026 to capture contemporary debates surrounding coalition politics while still incorporating earlier foundational works that contributed significantly to the theoretical development of dominant-party system theory and coalition governance theory.

Studies consisting primarily of newspaper articles, opinion pieces, conference abstracts, unpublished manuscripts without scholarly review, duplicate publications, or literature unrelated to

²⁹ J.W. Creswell and C.N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design Choosing among Five Approaches*, 4th Edition, 2018.

governance or coalition politics were excluded from the analysis. The final body of literature comprised studies that demonstrated clear conceptual, theoretical, or empirical relevance to the research questions and collectively provided a sufficiently broad evidence base from which meaningful thematic interpretations could be developed.

The literature identification and selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) reporting framework. Figure 1 summarises the sequential process of identifying, screening, assessing eligibility, and selecting studies included in the thematic review. The structured selection process enhanced methodological transparency by documenting the flow of records from the initial database search to the final corpus of literature analysed in this study.

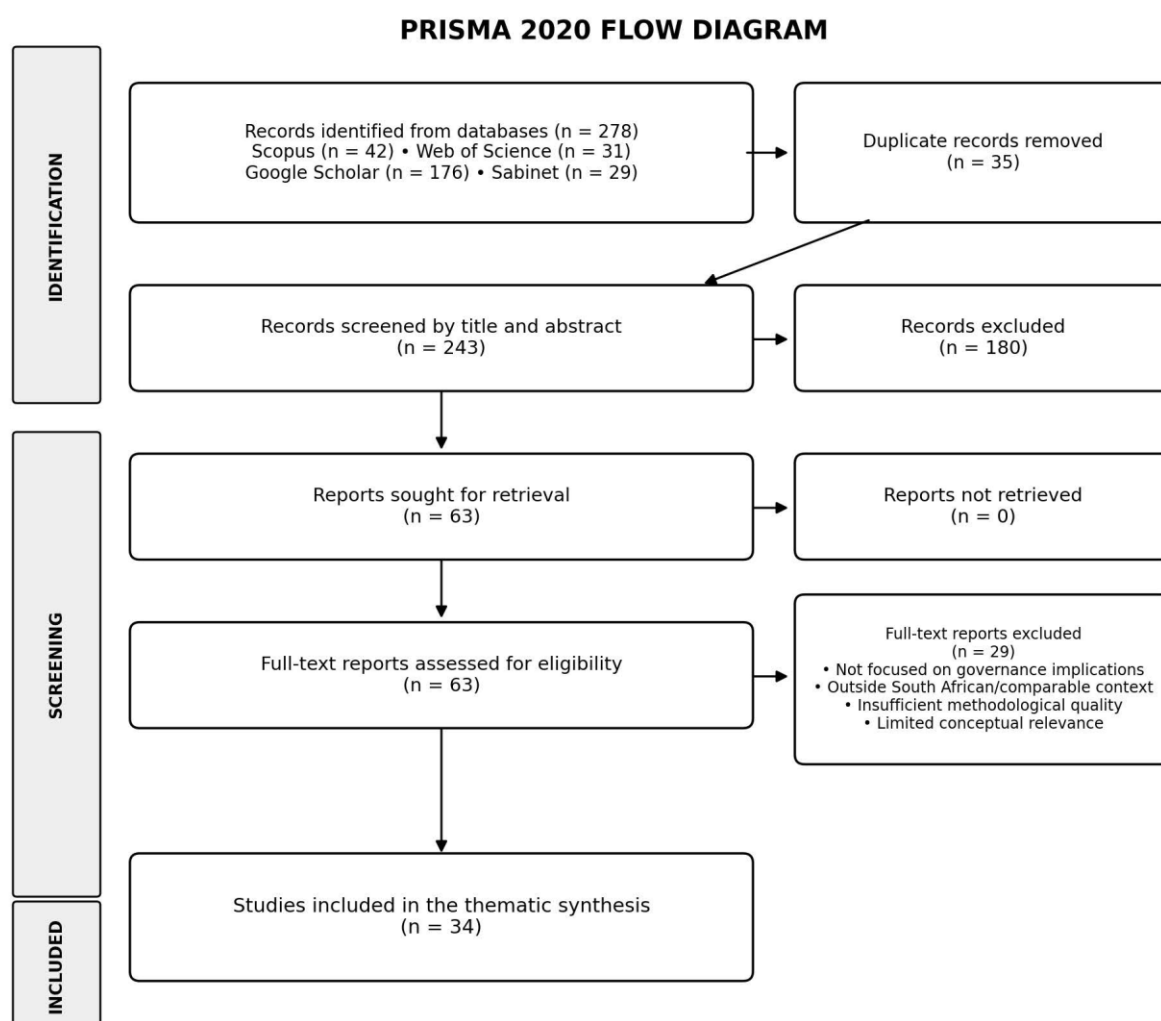
As illustrated in Figure 1, the systematic screening process resulted in the inclusion of 34 studies that collectively provided the conceptual and empirical foundation for the thematic analysis.

After the initial database search, all retrieved records were exported and screened through a structured selection process. Duplicate publications were removed before titles and abstracts were examined to determine their relevance to the research objectives. Studies were retained where they addressed coalition governance, dominant-party systems, democratic transitions, or governance processes within South Africa or comparable democratic contexts. Preference was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and reputable policy reports published primarily between 2014 and 2026 to capture contemporary debates surrounding coalition politics while still incorporating earlier foundational works that contributed significantly to the theoretical development of dominant-party system theory and coalition governance theory. Studies consisting primarily of newspaper articles, opinion pieces, conference abstracts, unpublished manuscripts without scholarly review, duplicate publications, or literature unrelated to governance or coalition politics were excluded from the analysis. The final corpus comprised studies that demonstrated clear conceptual, theoretical, and empirical relevance to the research objectives and collectively provided a sufficiently robust evidence base from which meaningful thematic interpretations could be developed. The literature identification and selection process followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) reporting framework to improve methodological transparency and replicability. As illustrated in Figure 1, the systematic screening process included 34 studies that formed the evidence base for the thematic synthesis carried out in this study.

Table 1: Summary of the Literature Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

Component	Description
Research approach	Qualitative interpretive research using a systematic thematic literature review
Purpose of the review	To synthesise scholarly evidence on the governance implications of South Africa's transition from dominant-party rule to coalition politics
Databases searched	Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Sabinet
Search period	January 2014–June 2026, with seminal theoretical studies published before 2014 included where conceptually relevant
Search keywords	<i>Coalition governance, dominant-party systems, coalition politics, electoral fragmentation, political transition, democratic accountability, governance, and South Africa</i>
Search strategy	Keywords were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) and supplemented by backward and forward citation tracking to identify additional relevant studies.
Types of sources included	Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, book chapters, and reputable policy reports
Language	English
Inclusion criteria	Publications addressing coalition governance, dominant-party systems, democratic transitions, governance, or political institutions in South Africa or comparable democratic contexts, with clear theoretical, conceptual, or empirical relevance to the study objectives

Exclusion criteria	Newspaper articles, opinion pieces, conference abstracts, unpublished manuscripts without peer review, duplicate records, and studies that lack relevance to governance or coalition politics
Screening procedure	Titles, abstracts, and full-text articles were screened sequentially in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to determine eligibility for inclusion
Data analysis method	Reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase analytical framework
Theoretical framework	Dominant-Party System Theory and Coalition Governance Theory
Studies included in the final synthesis	34 studies



Data Analysis

The selected literature was analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework, a widely recognised qualitative analytical approach for identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring patterns within textual data.³⁰ Thematic analysis was considered particularly appropriate because it facilitates the systematic synthesis of findings across multiple studies while allowing broader conceptual

³⁰ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis," *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11, no. 4 (August 8, 2019): 589–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

insights to emerge from diverse sources of evidence. Rather than simply summarising existing literature, the analysis sought to interpret relationships among governance concepts and develop an integrated understanding of coalition governance within South Africa's evolving democratic context.

The analytical process began with repeated reading of the selected literature to become familiar with the content and to identify preliminary patterns related to governance, institutional change, democratic accountability, and coalition politics. Initial codes were then generated to capture recurring concepts and governance issues reported across the literature. Subsequently, these codes were compared, refined, and grouped into broader analytical categories that represent shared conceptual meanings. Through an iterative process of reviewing and refining these categories, four overarching themes emerged: the structural drivers of coalition governance, governance instability and policy fragmentation, democratic accountability and political pluralism, and institutional adaptation for sustainable coalition governance. The final themes were interpreted through the complementary lenses of Dominant-Party System Theory and Coalition Governance Theory, enabling the study to explain both the structural conditions that gave rise to coalition politics and the governance implications associated with this political transition. This analytical strategy moved beyond descriptive synthesis by generating an integrated conceptual explanation of governance in post-dominant-party South Africa.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

The reliability of the study was improved through several complementary strategies consistent with established principles of qualitative research. Credibility was strengthened by drawing exclusively on peer-reviewed scholarly publications, authoritative academic books, and reputable policy documents, ensuring the analysis was informed by reliable and academically rigorous sources. Dependability was promoted through the systematic application of clearly defined search procedures, literature selection criteria, and analytical processes, allowing the review to be replicated by other researchers. Confirmability was enhanced by maintaining transparency throughout the research process and ensuring that interpretations were grounded in documented evidence rather than personal opinion or ideological preference. Transferability was supported by including literature representing diverse governance contexts and theoretical perspectives, allowing the findings to contribute to broader scholarly debates concerning coalition governance and democratic transitions beyond the South African case. Collectively, these strategies strengthened the methodological robustness and scholarly credibility of the study.

Ethical Considerations

As the study relied exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, formal institutional ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adhered to recognised principles of academic integrity throughout the review process. All sources were accurately acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the requirements of APA (7th edition), while the findings of previous scholars were faithfully represented without distortion or selective interpretation. Every effort was made to ensure that the synthesis remained balanced, evidence-based, and free from partisan or ideological bias. The transparent documentation of the research procedures further reinforces the ethical integrity of the study and supports the credibility of its contribution to scholarship on coalition governance and democratic transformation in South Africa.

Emergence and Structural Drivers of Coalition Governance

The findings reveal that coalition governments have become a constituent part of South Africa's metropolitan municipalities, especially where electoral fragmentation has made it impossible for any single party to secure a majority. Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay are among the municipalities where coalition governance practices have been put into operation effectively to meet the needs of changing voting behaviour and political competition, which the situation in these cities corresponds to very well.

For a long time, voter support for the ANC has been waning whilst opposition parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA), Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)

have gained considerable strength, which has finally resulted in municipal councils where forming a majority governing coalition through negotiation is the norm.

Among the structural reasons for the rise of coalition politics are South Africa's proportional-representation electoral system and the country's political decentralization. Proportional representation allows multiple political parties to achieve representation in proportion to their electoral support, which almost always leads to coalition arrangements given that no single party obtains a majority of seats. Besides, socio-economic factors like loss of faith in political parties and institutions, unwillingness to keep voting for the same parties, and discontent with public service delivery continue to drive the fragmentation of the political landscape.³¹ These factors help to understand the institutional and social environment that supports the shift from dominant-party governance to coalition politics.

Political Instability and Governance Fragility

Persistence of instability and resulting political violence is a concern that is quite often raised in the literature about coalition governments. Coalition partners often represent ideologically disparate groups and have their competing political interests, which might lead to conflict and a lack of joint concerted governance.³² Municipal examples show that coalitions usually result in administrative instability, with various leadership coups, no-confidence motions, and changes of alliances happening so frequently that even political players and institutions get confused.

Political instability within coalition governments poses a major challenge to policy continuity and service delivery. When an executive keeps changing its leadership, municipal staff may face difficulties in implementing development plans that span longer periods of time or in ensuring the continued provision of public services. This can lead to loss of public trust in governance and worsen socio-economic problems, especially in localities where there is a scarcity of resources.³³

Policy Fragmentation and Decision-Making Challenges

Coalition politics brings with it a very complex decision-making landscape. To make any policy that involves agreements, coalition partners usually need to negotiate and make concessions, which may lead to weak or partial policy implementations.³⁴ Negotiations may sometimes serve, however, to open the process to a variety of interests and voices, but they can also be a major source of delay in the execution of policies, leading to continuous uncertainty over the most important policy issues needed in the strategic orientation of the municipality. For instance, coalition municipalities have been coming up with very late budgets, service delivery plans, and infrastructure priorities mostly because of the difficulties of harmonizing the political interests of different parties.³⁵

The findings also shed some light on the fact that coalition politics in South Africa still suffer from a lack of proper institutionalization. Without formalized agreements, parties can always fall apart (or become more aggravated), resulting in disputes, which can cause paralysis, especially at the executive level. If there are not clearly laid down provisions for dispute resolution, coalitions can be a source of unpredictability in governance processes, which ultimately leads to both administrative inefficiency and lack of political accountability.³⁶

Democratic Accountability and Political Pluralism

Coalition politics has been demonstrated to promote political pluralism and enhance democratic accountability. One way it does this is by dispersing power among several political parties rather than concentrating authority in a dominant party, thus leading to a system of checks and balances.³⁷ In addition, opposition parties that are part of coalitions can keep the government accountable through their capacity to monitor executive decisions. This creates an environment of transparency and deliberation.

³¹ Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities."

³² Klüver and Bäck, "Coalition Agreements, Issue Attention, and Cabinet Governance."

³³ Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities."

³⁴ Ström, Müller, and Bergman, "Cabinets and Coalition Bargaining."

³⁵ Booyesen, "Coalition Government and Political Instability in South Africa."

³⁶ Kadima, "Coalition Politics and Democratic Consolidation in Africa."

³⁷ Arriola, DeVaro, and Meng, "Coalition Governments and Democratic Performance."

Besides, by allowing smaller parties to become active players in decision-making, coalition governments serve the purpose of political inclusion. This form of inclusiveness not only increases representation but ensures the incorporation of a variety of views into governance. Ferree points out that coalition configurations have the capacity to inspire the policymaking process to be more in tune with the public, as the partners involved in the coalition must consider the public view and align the different policy proposals to get broad political support.³⁸

Institutional and Governance Adaptation

The fact that coalition governments are now a feature of the local South African political scene highlights the need for institutional adaptation. To keep coalition governance going requires a formalisation of coalition agreements, establishment of conflict resolution mechanisms, and development of cooperative political norms among partners.³⁹ Those institutional frameworks that can help negotiation and dispute resolution may have a significant impact on reducing political instability and improving policy coherence.

On the other hand, coalition politics is not possible without adaptive administrative capacity. Political officials and municipal administrators are struggling to perform their tasks in the political arena with various parties, and at the same time they must ensure the continuity of service delivery. Several studies show that there is a strong link between the success of coalition governance and the level of maturity of politics as well as administrative competence.⁴⁰

Balancing Opportunities and Risks

The conclusion drawn from the analysis is that coalition governance in post-dominant party South Africa is a double-edged sword. For one thing, coalition formations promote democratic debate, political inclusion, and responsibility. For another, unstable coalitions, ideological disparities, and poor institutionalisation are very likely to lead to governance instability, policy fragmentation, and administrative uncertainty.

In conclusion, the literature reveals that robust institutional mechanisms, formalised coalition agreements, and cooperative political norms are key to the sustainability of coalition governance. Once these structural and institutional challenges are addressed, coalition governance is expected to play a role in democratic consolidation and even achieve better governance outcomes in South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of coalition governance in South Africa, several interconnected initiatives have been proposed. Primarily, political parties that form coalition governments need to focus on the creation of elaborate coalition agreements which would explicitly indicate the policy focus areas, leadership arrangements, decision-making mechanisms, and dispute resolution procedures; such documents will greatly contribute to reducing uncertainty, increasing predictability, and establishing an accountability framework.

Secondly, institutional avenues for conflict handling should be built and strengthened both at the local and regional levels so that intra-coalition disagreements can be addressed proactively to a minimum level of interventions in governance caused by alterations of alliances or ideological divergences. Thirdly, political players should foster a culture of collaborative governance focusing on dialogue, compromise and consensus building rather than zero-sum competition. Due to the stabilising effect of coalition norms on governance processes, their consolidation over time is key. Next, administrative capacity must not only be retained but also developed to ensure service delivery continuity and good policy implementation despite political changes. This may also include the professionalisation of local government officials as well as better coordination between political and administrative leadership. Reforms in electoral and political systems which may motivate

³⁸ Ferree, "Electoral Systems in Context."

³⁹ Klüver and Bäck, "Coalition Agreements, Issue Attention, and Cabinet Governance."

⁴⁰ Hart, "Governance and Accountability in South African Municipalities"; Mbete, "Coalition Governments and Governance Challenges in South African Municipalities."

stable coalition formations, such as the introduction of binding provisions for coalition conduct or capacity-building support for smaller parties, may serve to raise governance outcomes further. Lastly, performance monitoring and evaluation of coalition governance, aided by research and public accountability mechanisms, should be regularly conducted, institutionalised and used for improvements. Taken together, these initiatives can bring about a transformation in the political landscape, turning coalition governance from a cause of instability into a source of pluralistic, accountable and effective democratic governance in post-ANC South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The change from dominant-party rule to coalition governments in South Africa marks an important point in the country's democratic development. It shows the slow disappearance of the ANC's electoral dominance and the rise of a more politically pluralistic environment. This work highlights that coalition governments reflect the dual nature of reality: on the one hand, they create opportunities for the enhancement of democratic accountability, political inclusiveness, and deliberative decision-making; on the other hand, they also bring about significant governance problems that include political instability, policy fragmentation, and administrative uncertainty. Various cases of municipalities, as well as the support of scholarly research, point to the evidence that fragile alliances, leadership changes, and ideological differences between coalition partners are factors that may disrupt policy continuity and, therefore, can undermine service delivery efforts. However, coalition governance also helps to disperse political power; it opens the doors for participation of smaller parties, and it strengthens the instruments of oversight, thus leaning towards a system where democracy is more balanced and participatory. Therefore, coalition governance will be effective and sustainable only if the coalition agreements are formally done, institutional mechanisms for conflict resolution are set up, and cooperative political norms are nurtured. Also, public services must continue seamlessly, and political fluctuations should be effectively managed by adapting the administrative structures. Taken together, the rise of coalition politics captures both the challenges and the opportunities of a maturing democracy: properly institutionalised and professionally implemented coalition governance can bring about pluralism, accountability, and good governance in post-ANC South Africa.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr Nkarhi Mathebula is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Limpopo. He is currently teaching Adult Education in the Department of Education Studies at the University of Limpopo (South Africa). He holds a PhD from the University of Limpopo. Dr Mathebula has published 47 papers. He has presented papers in both national and international conferences and chaired various conference sessions. Dr Mathebula's key areas of research interest include Adult Education, Higher Education, Teaching Practice, and Public Administration.