VOTER FLUIDITY IN THE 2024 NATIONAL ELECTIONS

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Introduction

The 2024 national and provincial elections brought about a new era of national coalition governance. For the first time since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) failed to secure an outright majority at the polls, dropping its vote share from 57.5% in 2019 to 40.2%[1] in 2024, and leading to the creation of a coalition government.

While a decline in the support for the ANC had been predicted by several polls preceding the election, the scale of the loss was surprising to many and seemed to represent shifts in voting patterns that had seemed stable over the last 30 years. In particular, much focus was drawn to the new uMkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK Party), which gained 14.6% of the vote nationally and secured the largest share of the vote in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (45.9%), just short of an outright majority.

While the 2024 elections provided some of the most significant shifts in voting patterns since democratic elections began, voter fluidity – people shifting their votes from one election to the next – has been a growing trend among the South African electorate.[2]

Another trend has been increasing voter abstention. In 2024, 41.6% of the registered voter population chose not to vote. This is an increase of 7.6 percentage points from the 2019 national elections, when 34.0% chose not to participate despite being registered to do so.

Since 2014, the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg, has run a series of exit polls and post-election surveys seeking to understand voting patterns over time in select geographical regions. In 2024, we repeated this work with a post-election survey. This report focuses on the two key dynamics that were influential in the 2024 elections, namely, voter fluidity and voter abstention. The report provides a brief methodological note before examining voter trajectories and voter abstention.

Methodological note

With Ask Afrika, we conducted a telephone survey of 1,565 citizens in three municipalities: the City of Johannesburg, the City of Cape Town and eThekwini. Although this was a national election, we decided to focus on these three municipalities due to our past research working in these areas. Therefore, the findings we present are representative of those municipalities and not the national picture as a whole. However, we believe that the findings from these significant municipalities provide important insights into the broader national picture.

The survey was conducted between 11 July 2024 and 22 August 2024. It asked participants about their voter participation between 2019 and 2024 and what drove these choices. The survey instrument was developed from previous work we have conducted.[3]

Table 1 provides an overview of the sample. As you will see, the sample over-represents the proportion of voters and under-represents non-voters. The under-representation of non-voters is a common challenge in post-election surveys, as non-voters are likely to decline participation in surveys related to voting. In addition, some non-voters may misreport their electoral participation for social desirability reasons. As a result, the number of non-voters in this sample is relatively small.

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[1] All official election results cited in this report are drawn from the official IEC results portal.

[2] Within our own data we have seen this trend since, at least, 2016. But Collette Schulz-Herzenberg identifies this trend as early as 2009. See Schulz-Herzenberg, C. (2009) Trends in party support and voter behaviour, 1994-2009. In Southall, R. and Daniel J (eds) *Zunami: The 2009 South African Elections*. Auckland Park: Jacana.

[3] See Runciman, C., Paret, M., Bekker, M. and Mbeche, C. (2021) Survey of voters and non-voters in the 2021 local government elections: Methodological brief: Johannesburg: Centre for Social Change.

Table 1: Selected characteristics of the sample

Variable		n	%
Age	18-34	658	42
	35-49	493	32
	50-64	282	18
	65+	132	8
Race			
	Black African	1036	66
	Coloured	228	15
	Indian or Asian	139	9
	White	162	10
Gender			
	Male	785	50
	Female	780	50
Voted in 2024			
	Yes	1119	12
	No	150	88

Some of the difficulty in collecting data from non-voters may be related to the timing and the survey mode. In previous iterations of this survey, we were able to field the survey in the days following the election, with data collection for a larger sample size being concluded in around three weeks compared to six weeks of data collection for this survey.

The delay in fielding the survey impacted our data collection, with the desired sample size taking much longer to achieve, with potential participants being more reluctant to undertake the survey and participants much more reluctant to answer questions about vote choice. Our experience conducting this survey suggests that the timing of a post-election survey is crucial and that questions about voting behaviour appear to be becoming more politically sensitive.

Voter trajectories

We analysed the voting choices that our sample had made between the last three elections: the 2019 national elections, the 2021 local elections and the 2024 elections to build a picture of voter histories and trajectories.

Figure 1 shows that between 2019 and 2024, nearly half (48.8%) of the electorate in these three municipalities voted differently across the last three election cycles. This could be moving between voting for different political parties, choosing not to vote or a combination of the two.

The patterns we found in this data were consistent with our previous findings that demonstrated that DA voters are the most loyal, with 17.1% of voters in the three municipalities voting for the DA over the last three election cycles. 14.9% of the electorate in Johannesburg, Cape Town and eThekwini were loyal to the ANC, and only a small proportion of the electorate were loyal to the other political parties.

Figure 1 also shows that there is a section of the electorate who can be described as hardened abstainers (14.7%) of the electorate within the three municipalities. You will note that the proportion of the electorate who are hardened abstainers is similar to the proportion of the electorate who are loyal to the two largest parties.

Figure 1: Voter trajectories 2019-2024 (%)
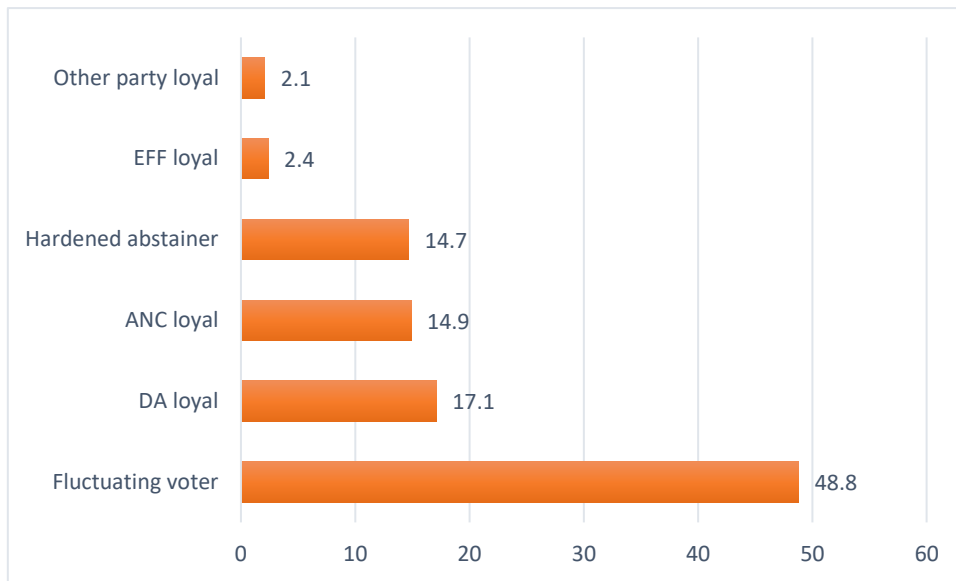
Looking at the three municipalities in more detail, we can see some variations in the voting patterns between municipalities. Figure 2 illustrates that the rates of party loyalty, abstention and voter fluidity in Johannesburg and eThekwini are broadly comparable. The City of Cape Town provides a slightly different picture to these other municipalities, with a considerably higher loyalty to the DA and lower levels of loyalty to the ANC, as one would expect in a municipality that has been DA-dominated for some time.

Figure 2: Voter trajectories 2019-2024 by municipality (%)
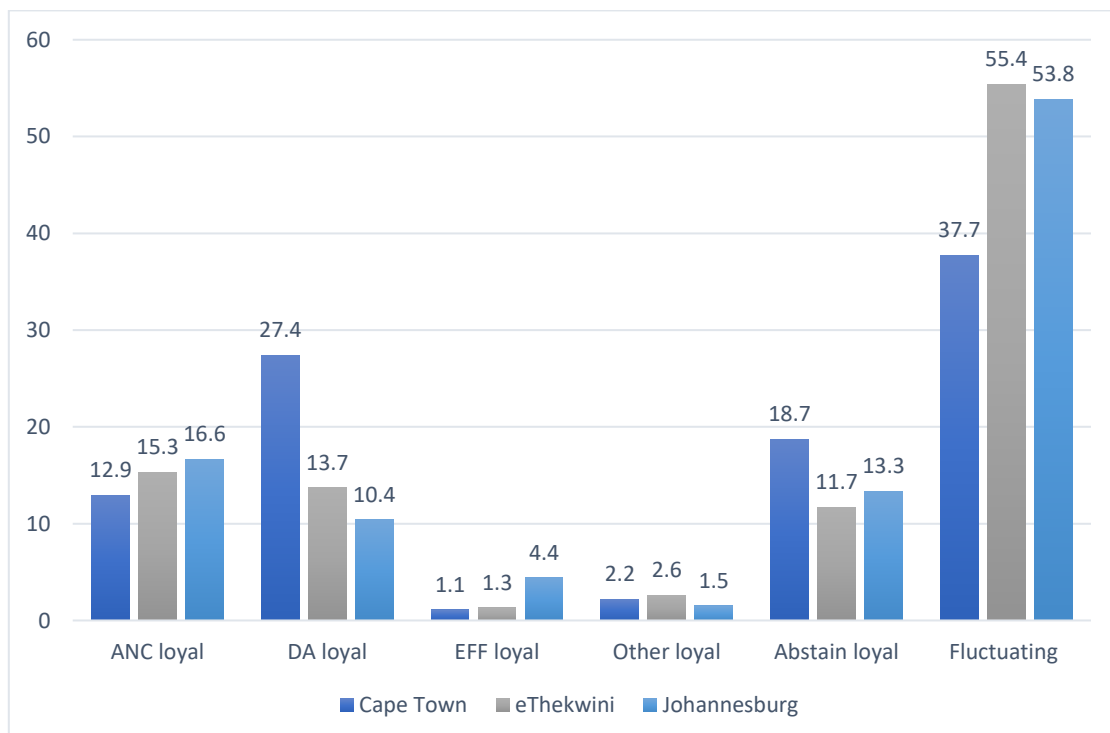
While the City of Cape Town has higher levels of loyalty to the DA, it also has a larger proportion of the electorate that could be described as hardened abstainers; 18.7% of the electorate abstained from voting across the last three elections compared to 11.7% in eThekwini and 13.% in the City of Johannesburg.

As a result of the higher degrees of DA loyalty and hardened abstainers in the City of Cape Town electorate, we also see lower levels of voter fluidity in the City of Cape Town. More than a third (37.7%) of the City of Cape Town electorate are fluctuating voters compared to 53.8% for the City of Johannesburg and 55.43% for eThekwini.

Our findings from this election survey support and elaborate on our previous findings. Contrary to widespread public opinion, elections in South Africa do not represent static voting patterns. From at least 2016, if not earlier, the South African electorate has demonstrated significant degrees of fluidity within individual voting patterns. In addition, we can see that there is some geographical variation in the degrees of voter fluidity between municipalities. This underscores that while nationally representative surveys are important for building the general picture, they, by design, neglect a focus on critical geographical differences that are equally important to building an understanding of the South African electorate.

Racialised fluidity

While our findings highlight the fluidity of individual vote choices, they also reveal that race remains a significant predictor of vote choice at the aggregate level. To explain this phenomenon, we developed the concept of 'racialised fluidity' based on our analysis of the 2021 election survey, and this concept has continued to be relevant to the analysis of the 2024 data.

Figure 3: Voter trajectories 2019-2024 by race (%)
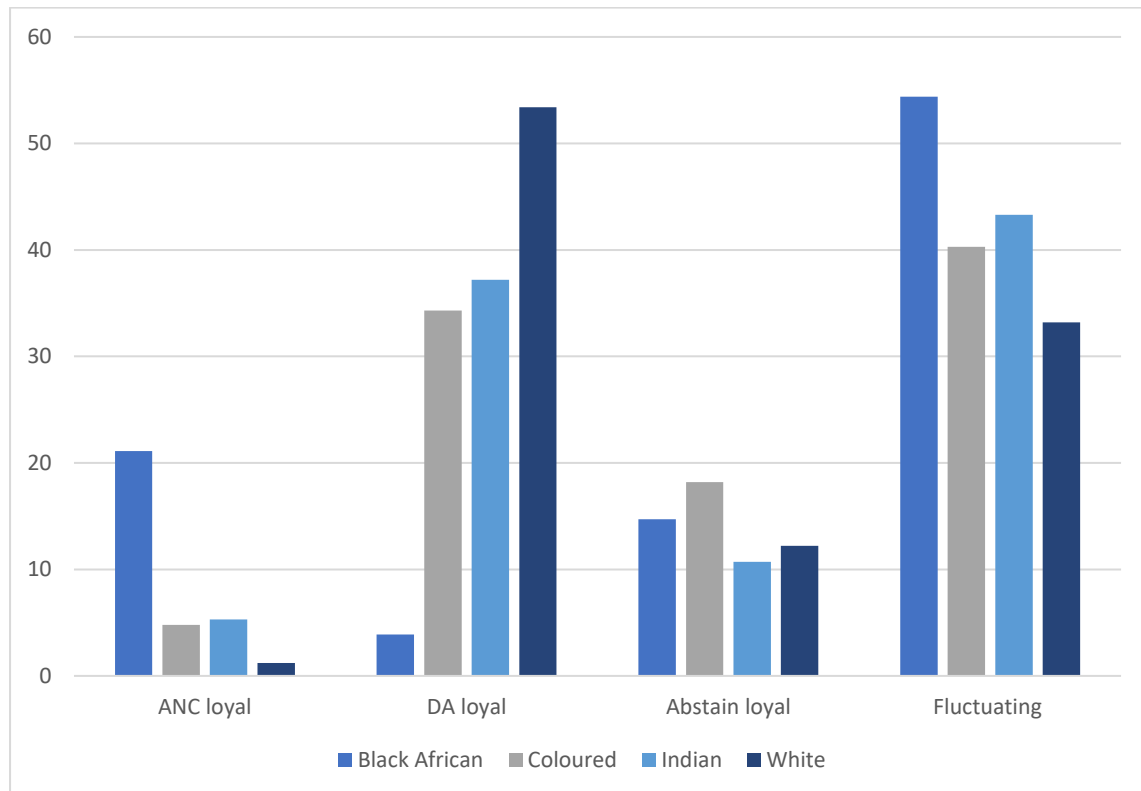
We use the term "racialised" to highlight that, at the aggregate level, Black African, Coloured, Indian and white people tend to vote in distinct ways. However, as revealed by the findings above, we also find that many individuals act differently from one election to the next, hence "fluidity".

Figure 3 provides an analysis of voter trajectories by race. As you would expect, it demonstrates that Black African voters were most loyal to the ANC, with just over a fifth (21.1%) of Black African voters in the three municipalities remaining faithful to the ANC across the last three election cycles.

White voters were the most loyal to the DA, with over half (53.4%) of white voters in the three municipalities remaining loyal to the DA between 2019 and 2024. Coloured and Indian voters also demonstrated high levels of loyalty to the DA; 34.3% of Coloured voters were loyal to the DA and 37.2% of Indian voters.

Looking at abstention, we see that Black African and Coloured voters had larger shares of hardened abstainers, with Coloured voters having the largest proportion of hardened abstainers, 18.2%, compared to 14.7% for Black African voters among the three municipalities. Comparatively, white and Indian voters demonstrate lower levels of continued abstention from electoral politics.

As Figure 3 demonstrates, Black African voters are the most fluid voting group. Over half (54.4%) of Black African voters changed their voting choice across at least one of the last three elections. In contrast, only a third (33.2%) of White voters changed their vote choice across the same election period within the three municipalities. Coloured and Indian voters had similar rates of fluctuating voter patterns, with 40.3% and 43.3% of Coloured and Indian voters, respectively, changing their vote choices between 2019 and 2024.

Explaining voter abstention

The 2024 national election witnessed the highest levels of voter abstention since democratic elections began. In 2024, 41.6% of the registered voter population chose not to vote. This is an increase of 7.6 percentage points from the 2019 national elections when 34.0% chose not to participate despite being registered to do so.

As noted above, it is challenging to capture non-voters in telephone survey research, and, as a result, our sample of non-voters is relatively small. It can offer limited insights into who non-voters are, but we can provide insight into the reasons for voter abstention. We asked people who did not vote to explain their reasons why. We presented them with a list of possible options and provided them the opportunity to explain in their own words why they did not vote.

We grouped these reasons into three main themes, building upon our previous analysis in 2021: individual and administrative barriers, disillusionment and lack of political alignment. Figure 4 demonstrates that the most commonly provided reason is related to individual and administrative barriers. This included reasons such as not having an ID, not having time to go and vote, and not being near to their registered voting station on election day.

A quarter of our non-voters reported reasons related to disillusionment and feeling that their vote does not make a difference. 17% said they could not find a political party to vote for.

When we analysed these reasons by race, we found that white and Coloured voters were more likely to cite a lack of political alignment as their reason for not voting. When analysing the data by age, we found that the reasons for not voting were mostly consistent across age groups. Similarly, there was little variation by gender.

Figure 4: Reasons for not voting in the 2024 national elections
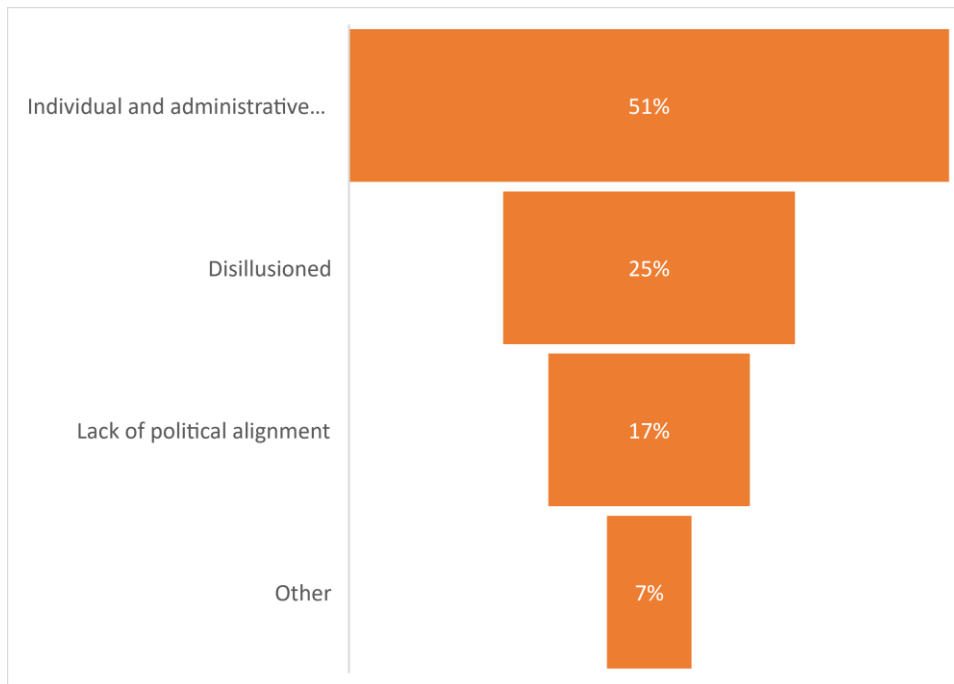
As in 2021, the primary reasons provided for voter abstention were individual and administrative barriers, while being disillusioned only featured in a quarter of explanations. This seems at odds with more qualitative explorations of citizen attitudes towards voting, which highlights the complexity of voter abstention. Explanations such as being 'too busy' suggest that electoral democracy is not strongly valued by some, signalling a different kind of disinterest and disengagement from electoral democracy.

Conclusion

This report summarises the main findings from the 2024 Centre for Social Change post-election survey. It demonstrates that voter fluidity is a continued trend but that this fluidity remains racialised, meaning that race remains a good predictor of vote choice in South Africa.

The findings of this report also illustrate that while voter abstention is on the rise overall voter abstention is also a fluid voting behaviour. A small proportion of voters are hardened abstainers. Instead, as our findings illustrate, citizens move between voting and not voting across different election cycles. Indeed, the motivations for not voting illustrate than, in the main, voter abstention is not necessarily a result of disillusionment. However, as noted above, voter abstention is also a complex phenomenon in need of further explanation.