



Research Briefing | South Africa

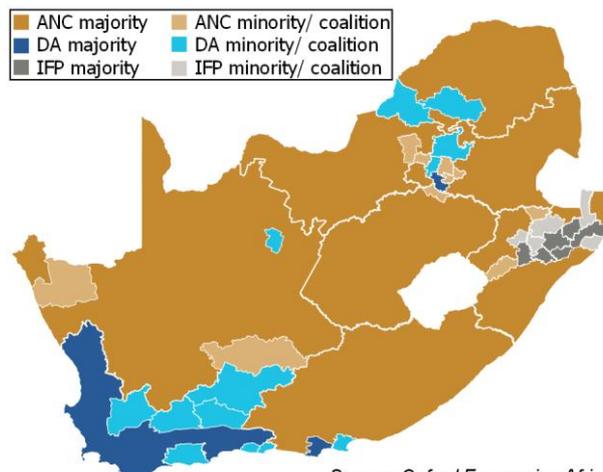
Local government elections: What to expect in 2021

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- South Africa will hold its local government elections (LGEs) on Monday, November 1. The Covid-19 pandemic threatened to postpone the polls, but the Constitutional Court had the final say and ordered the Electoral Commission (IEC) to forge ahead. All eyes will be on the ruling African National Congress (ANC) which is facing an acid test and will be looking to avoid the ignobility of dropping below 50% for the first time.
- The ANC and official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) captured some 80% of all votes in the previous LGEs in 2016, as several established parties continued their decline and the leftist, populist Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) announced their arrival.
- The declining popularity of the ANC and discontent over government's many failures mean its share of the vote will once again shrink, though **we believe it will – just – keep its score above the 50% threshold nationally**. The DA, burdened by the failure of its coalition governments in key metros, will not repeat its successful 2016 campaign. This opens the door for the EFF to continue to grow its footprint and for new parties to make a successful debut.
- Popular discontent with government also means that identity-based politics and crude populism are on the increase, with political parties across the spectrum seemingly incapable of rising above it.
- South Africa's voters' roll has shrunk since 2019 and **voter turnout is expected to be low** as voter apathy keeps many would-be voters home on November 1.

LGE2016: Election results



Support for the ANC declined to 53.91% in 2016 and the party lost control of the crucial metros of Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay to DA-led coalitions.

Dysfunction in these metros has diminished voter appetite for coalition governments.

The 2016 elections changed the face of politics in South Africa

Johannesburg is the country's prize metro

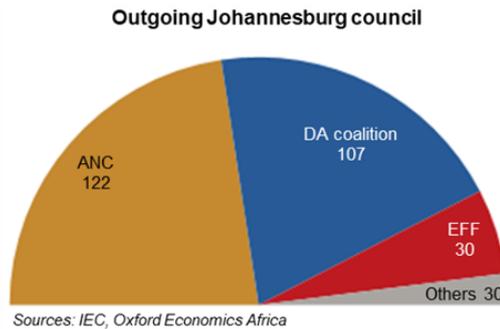
LGE2021 will be difficult to call, but the ANC and DA both have reason to worry

As in Johannesburg, the ANC and DA are fairly evenly matched in Tshwane

What happened in 2016 and will it reverberate into 2021?

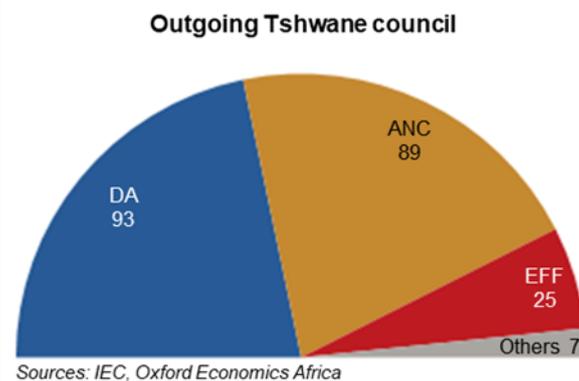
The ANC and DA captured a combined 80% of the vote in South Africa's previous LGEs in 2016 but had contrasting fortunes: the former plumbed new depths at 53.91% of total support and the latter reached a high-water mark of 26.9%. It represented an 8.1-percentage point (ppt) decline for the ANC and a 2.8 ppt gain for the DA from their 2011 results. It was also the first election hit-out for the EFF, which announced itself as a force by capturing 8.19% of the total vote and becoming the country's third largest party. Voter turnout was at 57.04%, an uptick on previous elections.

Herman Mashaba became DA mayor for Johannesburg in 2016 with the help of the EFF. After he resigned and left the DA in 2019, the late Geoff Makhubo became ANC mayor with the EFF supporting his candidature. The current mayor also hails from the ANC.



But total votes do not tell the full story. For the first time, **support for the ANC dropped below 50% in four of the seven metros they had controlled:** in Johannesburg (44.8%), Tshwane (41.6%), Ekurhuleni (48.7%) and Nelson Mandela Bay (NMB, 41.7%). The DA – having won in Tshwane (43.5%) and NMB (47.5%) and placed second in Johannesburg (38.5%) – assumed control of these metros in partnership with other opposition parties, but the ANC managed to retain control in Ekurhuleni (East Rand) thanks to the support from the African Independent Congress (AIC), mainly. The fate of Johannesburg and Tshwane (the metro that includes national capital Pretoria) was decided by the EFF which opted to vote with the DA, but the parties' ideological incompatibility meant that this relationship of convenience was never going to go the distance. Following the polls, the ANC took up the unfamiliar mantle of opposition in four metros: the three mentioned above and Cape Town where the DA increased its majority to 66.7%.

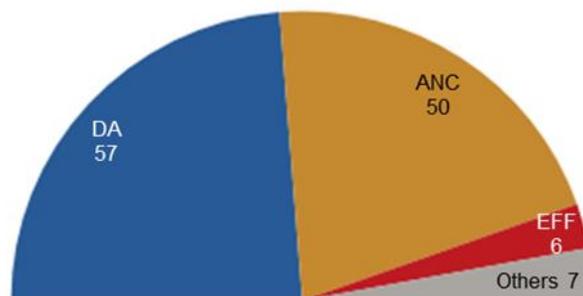
The DA's Solly Msimanga became mayor in 2016 with the help of the EFF but handed the reins over to Stevens Mokgalapa to run (unsuccessfully) as premier candidate in 2019. The DA's Randall Williams is the current mayor, but Tshwane has been massively dysfunctional and was placed under administration in 2020.



Part of the explanation for the ANC's electoral misfortunes was the declining popularity of former President Jacob Zuma, whose administration had become mired in allegations of State Capture and grand-scale corruption. His successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, arrested the decline in the 2019 general elections with the ANC capturing 57.5% of the vote. This was still an 8.4 ppt decline from the 2014 general elections and **a record low at national level where the ANC historically performs better**. The DA's return of 20.8% was disappointing and represented a 1.5 ppt decline from 2014. It was the first time since its formation that the party lost vote share. Once again, the ANC's loss was the EFF's gain with an impressive 10.8% of the vote going to the red berets.

NMB was also the scene of a dramatic fallout between coalition partners

Outgoing Nelson Mandela Bay council



Sources: IEC, Oxford Economics Africa

The DA's Athol Trollip became mayor in 2016 with the help of the UDM, Cope and ACDP. Mr Trollip's relationship with his deputy, the UDM's Mongameli Bobani, broke down and the latter replaced him following a vote of no confidence in 2018. Mr Bobani was removed a year later with the Nqaba Bhanga taking back the mayor's chain for the DA.

The 2021 LGEs are certainly the most unpredictable yet. The ANC is in a desperate battle to convince communities to give it another five years, the DA is struggling under new leadership, and the EFF – in only its third election – remains an enigma, mainly due to the chasm between what it says and what it does. Debutants ActionSA and Good will be keen to make a splash, and the field of independent candidates is the largest yet.

The strangest election yet: how do they stack up?

The African National Congress (ANC)

The ruling party is in disarray: hobbled by factionalism, a lack of funds, organisational dysfunction, corruption and a dismal track record of mismanaging countless municipalities to the brink of collapse. However, the ANC has a significant ace up its sleeve: Mr Ramaphosa remains the best known and – by some distance – the most popular politician in the country. This has informed the decision to make him the face of the campaign: his smiling likeness adorns posters and campaign material, and he has embarked on a breathless tour of the country. Meanwhile, the ANC has decided to not announce mayoral candidates in the metros, because few candidates will genuinely boost its electoral fortunes but also to keep the party's options open in selecting mayors once councils are constituted – to allow for horse-trading (and possibly coalitions) and to avoid the kind of internal contestation that caused chaos during its candidate registration process. Disaffected elements in the party may even look to undermine its electoral fortunes to damage Mr Ramaphosa's bid for a second term in 2022. ANC leadership would have sighed a sign of relief when Mr Zuma released a video on October 5 urging supporters to cast their vote for the party. His endorsement will carry significant weight in KwaZulu-Natal where the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) stands ready to profit off any potential weakness.

It's cold outside the ANC, as Zuma liked to warn

The ANC election manifesto was a stark illustration that **the party has nothing novel to offer, but historical allegiances and its status as the liberation party means that the majority still consider the party as the only choice come voting day. In some places, party affiliation and the associated promise of public office is the only hope of a better future, and support for an alternative party is certain to be punished.** Its main challenge will be turning out its base, which will not be easy considering high levels of voter apathy, growing discontent over government failures and fears over the pandemic.

The Democratic Alliance (DA)

The DA laid the blame for its 2019 failures at the feet of its then-leader, Mmusi Maimane, and has been haemorrhaging senior leaders, especially black leaders, ever since. The current leadership nexus of federal leader John Steenhuisen and chairperson of the federal executive Helen Zille has steered the party towards the right of the political spectrum, undoing efforts by Mr Maimane to make the party more social democratic in outlook and broaden its appeal beyond minorities. The DA's attempts to woo back the voters it lost in 2019 – mainly to the minority rights-party, the Freedom Front Plus (VF+) – does not seem to be bearing fruit and significantly limits its electoral fortunes. **The DA has positioned itself as a party with a superior governance record and pragmatic vision, a compelling offer in places where municipalities are mismanaged and service delivery is collapsing. However, the challenge for the DA is and has historically been to convince voters that it is not beholden to and preoccupied with minority interests, a perception not helped by the party's own gaffes.** Its current campaign is case in point: it was launched with familiar professionalism only to run aground after its provincial chairperson in KwaZulu-Natal went rogue and erected a series of racially divisive posters in Phoenix, a predominantly Indian suburb in eThekweni that experienced [some of the worst inter-communal violence during the July civil unrest](#). The messaging indiscipline has only worsened since, laying bare divisions within the party and doubts over Mr Steenhuisen's leadership. In addition, the party is disproportionately burdened by the dysfunction that characterised the coalition governments in Johannesburg, Tshwane and NMB following the highs of 2016.

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF)

The EFF's main talking points have historically been and remain on national issues, and few people genuinely trust them to run the tedious, day-to-day operations of their municipalities. Nonetheless, **they have successfully positioned themselves as a party representing the aspirations of black South Africans, engaging in rhetoric that alienates moderate voters but appeals to voters looking for radical change.** Its messaging is divisive, but undeniably effective when considered with its potential voters in mind. The EFF will, once again, hope to leverage its popularity in some metros – notably those in Gauteng and eThekweni – to become kingmakers on city councils: a familiar role that sees the party vote on an issue-to-issue basis and engage in spoiling behaviour when it does not get its way. With no real desire to govern and illustrate its viability as a self-professed "*socialist alternative*," a successful campaign will be measured in registering sustained growth.

Regional and 'constituency-based' parties

The United Democratic Movement (UDM) will hope to once again become the kingmaker in its Eastern Cape stronghold of NMB but will continue its march to obscurity elsewhere. Its relationship with the DA has been damaged by its unsuccessful coexistence and shifting allegiances, but an accommodation is possible should it suit both parties. Its reputation has been tarnished by its unwavering support for the late former NMB mayor

Both the DA and EFF are more concerned with the national game

Mongameli Bobani who was implicated in serious wrongdoing. In northern KwaZulu-Natal, the **IFP** is on the ascendancy and is looking to take advantage of ANC weakness in the province. Less positively, the party's inability to move beyond its founder, the nonagenarian Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose face appears on election materials instead of its current leader, Velenkosini Hlabisa, limits its prospects. So too its clumsy attempt to co-opt the presumptive heir to the late King Goodwill Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu, Prince Misuzulu kaZwelithini. The **VF+** will be licking its lips and hoping to convince more Afrikaner voters to defect from the DA in places like Tshwane and the J.B. Marks local municipality (centred on Potchefstroom) in the North West province. The party captured less than 1% of the vote in 2016 but earned its highest return (2.38%) in the 2019 national elections. A repeat is possible. The Patriotic Alliance (**PA**) has caused a few upsets in recent by-elections, successfully targeting coloured (mixed race) communities in the south of Johannesburg and pinching two wards off the DA in Eldorado Park and Kliptown in May by-elections. It got only 0.06% of the vote in 2016, so will not be running any municipalities anytime soon.

The new kids

The DA's ugly fallouts with Patricia de Lille and Herman Mashaba, the party's former mayors in Cape Town and Johannesburg, saw the establishment of new political parties, **Good** and **ActionSA**. Both individuals have used their personal brands to good effect to give their new political vehicles a fighting chance, especially in the cities where they previously governed. Good contested the general elections in 2019 and its 0.4% of the national vote translated into two seats in the National Assembly. In 2021, the party is mainly targeting Cape Town where it is certain to pinch votes off the DA in strategic wards. Leading the charge is its mayoral candidate, Brett Herron, who as former mayoral committee member for transport and urban settlements is well placed to challenge the DA on its Achilles Heel: housing and spatial transformation. Its target will be to become the second-largest opposition party on Cape Town's city council – something we believe is wholly achievable – and then use that as a platform to challenge in the 2024 general elections. In Tshwane, ActionSA has poached Abel Tau, a former DA councillor with a good profile in the capital, as its mayoral candidate, along with former ANC MP Makhosi Khoza who will do the same in eThekweni. Like Good in Cape Town, ActionSA will look to win seats on the Johannesburg and Tshwane city councils, likely at the expense of the DA, and use that as a launching point for 2024. The DA has started to aim broadsides at both Good and ActionSA, betraying its concern that both parties are starting to resonate with some communities.

Rise of the independents?

At 1,725, the upcoming elections will see the largest number of independent candidates to date, up from less than 1,000 in 2016. Independent candidates who have done well in elections and by-elections in the past have typically been individuals that have defected from established parties. A case in point is the ten councillors who successfully ran as independents in Maluti-a-Phofung in the Free State in 2019 after being expelled from the ANC. Genuine independents – individuals with a good profile in the wards they are contesting – remain anomalies in South Africa and voters have tended to overlook them in the past. Disillusion with mainstream political parties means that independents have a better chance than ever before, but still face an uphill battle to sway a voting public that often does not know how the voting system works. Many voters are still confused by having two votes – one ward and one proportional representation (PR) – which become three where voters also have to cast a vote for the composition of district municipalities, a conglomerate of local municipalities. Faced with this complexity, many voters simply opt

Two offshoots of the DA are seeking to establish themselves...

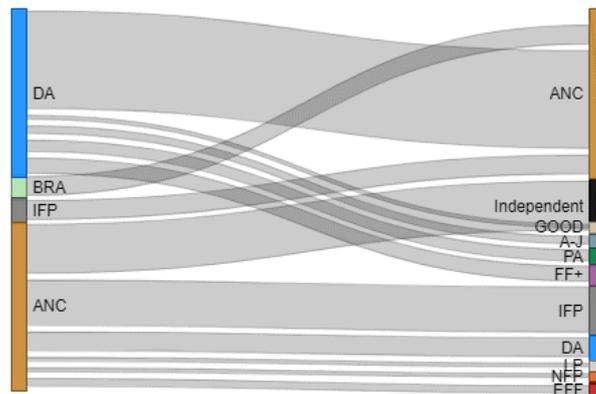
...while other disgruntled councillors are among the 1,725 independents running

for the political party they know best. Mr Maimane, the former DA leader, has launched the One South Africa (OSA) movement to support independents through training and public endorsements. On October 6, he joined some 200 independents at an event in Midrand where they signed a pledge. Such a show of solidarity among civic organisations and independent candidates is practically unprecedented but will not, we think, translate into votes come November 1.

Coalition country

Public sentiment on coalitions is overwhelmingly negative. This is partly because of the experiences of constituents in Johannesburg, Tshwane and NMB, where infighting, shifting alliances and dysfunction saw all three councils collapse. In the process, the DA lost control of Johannesburg to the ANC, held on in Tshwane, and lost control of NMB to the UDM only to get it back again. Voters have also taken note of the growing animus and ideological divide between political parties, and the distrust of coalitions is not helped by the fact that the deal-making that underpins them is done out of the public eye. The DA is, ironically, trying to take advantage of these concerns by telling voters in places like Johannesburg to “*not split the vote.*”

By-elections since 2016 illustrate the rise of smaller parties and independents



This graphic shows wards that have changed hands in by-elections between 2016 and 2021 – from left to right. It suggests a trend whereby representation is splintering: smaller parties, including some newly created ones, managed to steal seats from the DA in particular, but also the ANC. The DA lost more wards than any other single party; the ANC gained as many as it lost.

The DA is adamant that it will not partner with the EFF again

In the Western Cape, the DA knows it will likely need to partner with the VF+ or other small parties/civic organisations to retain Hessequa and have any hope of winning back Knysna and Beaufort West. But the DA will be wary of how it does business this time around. In 2016, senior party leaders (including its current leader) expressed scepticism about entering into all the coalitions that were on offer with some arguing that the party should focus on making a success of Tshwane and NMB with future growth in mind, i.e. pass over the opportunity to lead Johannesburg with a political novice/rogue like Mr Mashaba in charge. Hindsight is 20:20, as they say, and a repeat of its cooperative governance pact with the EFF is now out of the question – the strategy backfired and turned away some of the party’s base, probably permanently. The DA has historically counted on support from the Congress of the People (Cope), but that party is in massive decline. Traditional kingmakers, the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) and the UDM, have both worked with the DA before, but will jump ship if presented with a good opportunity.

The ANC may not have a choice but to enter into coalitions in places where it drops below 50%, and smaller parties will be seduced by their kingmaking powers should the situation shake out that way. In these instances, the ANC will need only a small number of seats and it knows it will have more partners to choose from than the DA: it has a recent history

of working with the IFP and smaller parties like Al Jama-ah and the AIC. A big question mark hovers over the EFF. They will not be able to repeat the ‘we’ll-vote-with-you-on-specific-issues’ trick of 2016. Will they find the promise of coalitions too tempting, even if it means siding with the ANC and sacrificing some of its revolutionary chops?

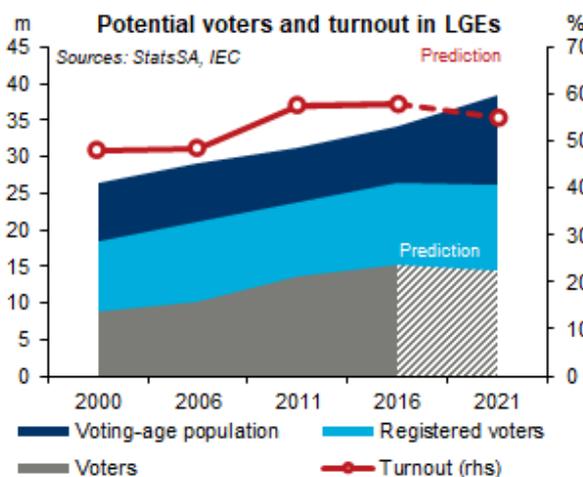
The biggest voting block: non-voters

South Africa’s voting-age population (VAP) numbers about 38.5 million people. With only 26.2 million registered to vote in 2021, a staggering 12.4 million people have already voted, by opting out altogether. In 2019, less than 50% of the VAP voted and only 17.7 million of the country’s 26.8 million registered voters showed up on voting day. There is every reason to believe that that number will be even lower this time around as voter apathy grows. Having the elections on a Monday, for the first time, also does not bode well. The IEC’s latest voter registration figures made for troubling reading: a decline of some 1.1 million people as a result of natural attrition (deaths) and the addition of only 433,000 new voters means the voters’ roll has shrunk by some 650,000 potential voters.

A closer look at the final registration weekend, in mid-September, shows a slightly better performance in traditional DA areas than ANC strongholds, suggesting that the former might have marginal more success in turning out its voters than the latter. Ultimately, that will be the final test: amid voter apathy, popular discontent, and a fair bit of anger, which parties will manage to convince their supporters to leave their homes on November 1.

The voters’ roll has shrunk as South Africans newly eligible to vote opt not to

Turnout will decline slightly in 2021



We expect that turnout will decline slightly, from 57.9% in 2016 to 55%.

This translates into 14.4 million voters going to the polls, compared to 15.2 million in the previous LGEs.

Prediction

The ANC’s total vote does not dip below 50% in this election, but nor does it exceed 50% by more than a couple of percentage points. The party again fails to get more than 50% of the vote in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni, but leads an administration in all three with the support of smaller parties. The ANC wins an outright majority in eThekweni again, despite the challenge posed by the opposition parties there. It wins in Mangaung and Buffalo City, but with a reduced majority. The ANC remains the main opposition in Cape Town. The number of coalition governments it leads in smaller municipalities across the country rises.

The DA does not repeat its stellar 2016 performance, getting a total vote in the 19%-21% range. It retains Cape Town with a reduced majority, and comes second in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni. A coalition government in these metros is a non-starter as Mr Steenhuisen made clear with a tweet on October 17 that “the DA will not be entering into

The ANC stays above 50% of the vote at national level – just

The DA achieves its main aim of hanging on to Cape Town

any coalitions with the EFF under my leadership ... we would rather serve our voters as an excellent opposition." So in these metros it remains in the opposition, using its platform to market itself with a view to retaining vote share in the general election in 2024. The DA also loses Modimolle/Mookgophong and Thabazimbi in Limpopo without the EFF. Nqaba Bhanga returns as the mayor of NMB – the DA won 57 seats in the 120-member council in 2016 – heading a coalition that involves the UDM and a clutch of smaller parties. Considering that the party is in a consolidation phase, it is relieved by its ability to hold on to councils in its Western Cape stronghold, as well as Midvaal, a safe municipality in Gauteng, and Kouga, a crucial beachhead in the Eastern Cape.

The EFF wins between 10% and 13% of the total vote – maintaining its handsome growth trajectory – and has a significant presence on the councils in Johannesburg, Tshwane and eThekweni. In all three places it avoids the formal entanglements (and obligations) of coalition membership and prefers, like the DA, to focus on national-level politics.

The IFP beats the 4.25% it got in 2016 and retains control of several municipalities in northern KwaZulu-Natal - a few of them with an outright majority. The VF+ does not win a significant presence anywhere, but grows its share of the overall vote to over 2.5% and becomes a vocal minor player in some councils, including Tshwane. Good comes third in Cape Town after the DA and ANC, and increases the vociferousness of the opposition on that council. ActionSA proves its viability by earning seats on the council in Johannesburg, Tshwane and maybe Ekurhuleni. Here and there, independents or breakaway movements manage to negotiate control of municipalities in smaller towns.