

Election results 4 November 2021

The biggest vote in the election was the stayaway vote. Some 26 million people were registered, but only about 46% chose to go out and vote. This is as powerful a political statement as you can get. Fikile Mbalula, Head of Elections for the African National Congress (ANC), appropriately described it as 'a warning shot' for the ruling party. Many South Africans chose not to vote against the ANC; instead, they withheld their vote from it.

Stayaways hurt

The impact of this stayaway vote is that the ANC is expected to end up with about 46% of the vote, compared with 54% in the previous local government elections held in 2016, and 62% in 2011. The decline over 10 years is enormous. Shifts of this magnitude do not just come and go.

In 2016, the ANC also lost considerable ground. Most notably, it lost control of four major metros: Johannesburg, Tshwane, Nelson Mandela Bay and Ekurhuleni. This was a big shock to the ANC system, happening as it did when then-President Jacob Zuma boasted the ANC would rule 'until Jesus comes'. The 2016 elections shattered that arrogance. Those results also helped pave the way for a sea change (or 'self-correction') in the ANC, manifesting in the 2017 election of Cyril Ramaphosa as president at Nasrec. As one ANC leader put it now: 'We were humbled in 2016'.

Deputy President David Mabuza is on record as saying that the election trajectory of the ANC was downwards and needed to change – therefore, he threw his support behind Ramaphosa. The Zuma faction lost at Nasrec, and the rest is history.

Now the ANC has lost another 7% of its support. It also lost another metro, eThekweni, and lost further ground in Ekurhuleni, dropping from 49% to 38%. Ten years ago, the ANC controlled seven of the country's eight metros – but now, they are down to only two (with only 50% in Mangaung).

Will the 2021 results also have a self-correcting impact like in 2016? Jessie Duarte said yesterday the vote is a message to the ANC to 'shape up'. That is undoubtedly what the Ramaphosa supporters in the ANC are working towards. These results will strengthen their hand because more people will make the calculation Mabuza made in 2017.

The DA gained and lost – and the IFP gained

One winner from the stayaway vote is the Democratic Alliance (DA). It is expected to end with 22% of the national vote, slightly shy of party leader John Steenhuisen's target of 24%. It is considerably lower than the 27% the party got in 2016, but given the acrimonious disruptions the party has suffered over the last two years, it is a satisfactory result. It was handed to them by ANC supporters not voting.

The national number of 22%, however, camouflages a loss of ground in local municipalities. In its stronghold of the Western Cape, the party lost Cederberg and a range of wards in other municipalities to local ratepayer organisations, the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), the Patriotic Alliance and the GOOD Party.

The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) did very well in KwaZulu-Natal and increased its provincial support to 24%, contributing to take the ANC towards 40% of the support.

Making sure everybody gets into the tent

South Africa's proportional system allows smaller parties to capture representation they would never have in a purely ward-based system. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), for example, is expected to garner 11% of the national vote, but has so far only managed to take 17 wards. If we had a purely ward-based system, that would be all they would get in numbers of councillors. But the proportional system has given them an additional 701 councillors.

Nobody admitted it, but the EFF must be very disappointed with its performance. At 11%, they are at the same level as in the national elections in 2019. The EFF trails the DA by two-to-one and is four-to-one behind the ANC. It seems like South Africans simply do not have the appetite for radical rhetoric and abusive behaviour. The EFF claims it is the party of the future, but if so, that future has not arrived yet.

The FF+ also did well, largely at the expense of the DA. Like the EFF, it benefits from the proportional system: so far they have won eight wards and got 164 proportional councillors.

Herman Mashaba's Action SA wisely only fielded candidates in four metros and two municipalities, so its national vote is a bit meaningless. However, in Johannesburg, they moved into third place with 17% of the vote.

ActionSA's performance is contrasted with Mmusi Maimane's One South Africa Movement. The latter put up independent candidates in Emfuleni and in Ekurhuleni. Although independent, they ran under common banners. In both cities, however, they played fourth fiddle to the ANC, DA and EFF.

In parts of the Free State, independents did better. In Maluthi-a-Phofong, the Mapsixteen Civic Movement (16 former ANC councillors who were expelled by the Free State leadership) garnered only 28% of the vote but reduced the ANC's share to 40%. The pattern was repeated in some other dysfunctional areas where local resident organisations generally came in at third or fourth place and ANC majorities fell.

Coalitions – what now?

The proportional system ensures that bigger parties cannot use the first-past-the-post system to keep smaller players out. In principle, that is good, particularly in South Africa. But it complicates matters. It means that coalitions must be formed to govern. After the 2016 elections, there were 27 hung municipalities and metros. There are now 52 (this number may go up).

The haphazard way in which coalitions were done after 2016 and the resulting dysfunctionality was not a good experience for South Africans. There is no legislative framework regulating coalitions. The South African Local Government Association (Salga) has put out a guidance framework of 15 critical areas on which parties should agree before forming coalitions. This is, however, merely advisory, and parties can still do as they see fit.

The easiest would be if the parties negotiate the 52 coalitions at national level, but that may be easier said than done. The next few weeks will be interesting.

So what?

- Both the ANC and DA lost ground to smaller parties, but the ANC lost more in this way. Over the past 10 years ANC losses have been substantial.
- The ruling party has a simple choice: renew itself or regress further. Under President Ramaphosa's leadership, there will be a continued effort to renew.
- The EFF has not increased its number of votes since the 2019 elections, and its leaders' ambitious claims have not been realised. The party has some way to go to catch up on the DA and ANC.

- In a way, the election is not over yet – coalitions must now be formed, not least of all in five of the country's metros. There are interesting choices ahead.