**HOW DOES AN OPPOSITION PARTY BECOME SUCCESSFUL IN A DOMINANT PARTY SYSTEM? THE CASE OF SOUTH AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT**

The African National Congress has long been the brightest star in the firmament of the party system in South Africa, but its eminence is fading in the face of a rising Democratic Alliance. The success of the Democratic Alliance is instructive. The party barely survived the passage to majority-rule, but nonetheless escaped the gravitational pull of its historically narrow support base to challenge effectively for power across South Africa. The question is how has it come to present a credible challenge to the ANC, and whether there are broader lessons to draw from this example of a successful opposition in an African democracy. This article presents a theory explaining how the leadership of the Democratic Alliance made an expensive, unorthodox and risky investment in the party’s organization that centralized power in order to manufacture a new identity, which transformed the party’s capacity to appeal to new voters in South Africa’s political system. The rise of the Democratic Alliance demonstrates how, and under what conditions, the leadership of an opposition party can turn the debate at election time away from identityand on to issues and, in the process, disrupt the stability of a dominant party system.

The ANC has applied an ideological and institutional lock on South African politics since the country’s transition to democracy in 1994, but a series of crises has weakened the party’s moral and electoral grip on state power.[[1]](#footnote-1) The decline of the ANC corresponds neatly with the rise of the Democratic Alliance (DA), which has become the premier contender to the ruling party in urban South Africa. In the recent municipal and local elections, the DA secured on average 42 percent of the vote in urban areas and took control of four of the eight largest municipalities, including Johannesburg, Cape Town and Tshwane. It is of course too soon to make any declarative statement about the imminence of electoral turnover at the national level, but if this pattern persists, the logic of political accountability will change in South Africa. A two-party (or multi-party) system will produce electoral uncertainty, which will force – on paper at least – all political parties, including the ANC, to become more responsible and responsive in office.[[2]](#footnote-2)

How, then, did the DA do it? I contend that there were two interacting factors that led to its success. First, the DA had access to private resources, which the leadership used to make a significant investment in the modernization of its party organization. This modernization project proposed a new strategy to appeal credibly to black voters. The leadership sidelined white activists and local elites, centralized power in the national leadership, and created a ‘professional’ party organization to manufacture a new multi-ethnic identity. The modernization of the party was unorthodox, expensive, and risky, but it worked. The sidelined activists remained loyal, while the party increased vote-share outside its ‘ethnic’ heartland. This ‘re-engineering’ project, however, would not have worked had the party not been able to secure an institutional foothold in municipal and provincial elections. This second factor, a decentralized political structure, allowed the party to demonstrate that the DA was not an unrepresentative party of an ethnic minority, but in fact a broadly representative party that could govern in the national interest.

This case study speaks directly to an old and important debate about how, under what conditions, and to what extent, elections in Africa have an ‘ethnic’ character.[[3]](#footnote-3) There are two entry points to this debate in the literature on ethnicity and political parties: demand-side, individual accounts of why, if at all, voters select candidates along ethnic lines; and how parties supply (or promote) this demand for ethnic representation. I contribute to this latter side of the debate by developing a theory that explains how an opposition leadership can design its organization to artificially manufacture a ‘new’ party that can mobilize cross-ethnic support. I challenge the empirically dismal, and theoretically vacuous, perspective that African voters are closed inside a ‘primordial’ logic, which demands that individuals vote instinctively for ‘their’ candidate.[[4]](#footnote-4) This case study underscores how an opposition party – provided it has access to private resources and operates in an open political system – can invest strategically in party organization to *deconstruct* the salience of ethnic identity as the primary cleavage of the party system.

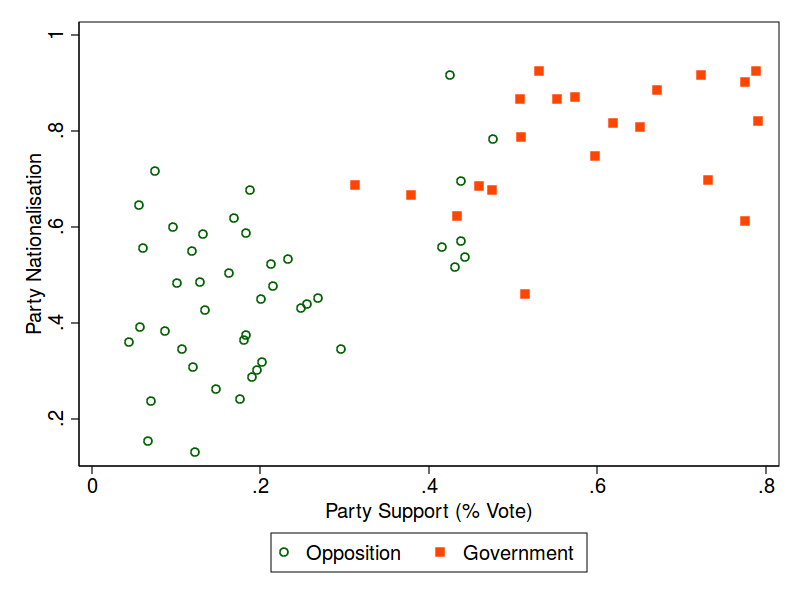
If the DA was not born, but rather became successful, this case study also provides important detail about how, and under what conditions, an opposition party can disrupt a dominant party system in Africa. There is a compelling *institutional* narrative that describes how the (dominant) party elite exploits its privileged access to state resources to ‘capture’ the social networks of political constituencies, which forces the opposition into relatively narrow ethnic enclaves. There is, however, a persuasive *ideological* (but much older) narrative that describes how the dominant party in a divided society writes a moral script to justify its dominance, which dismisses *all* opposition as morally illegitimate, unrepresentative ethnic chauvinists, who are unfit to govern in the national interest. If an opposition party is to disrupt the equilibrium of a dominant party system in a divided society such as South Africa, I contend that the party’s leadership must develop a strategy to pick both these institutional and ideological locks.

There are three sections in this article, which contribute to the production of a theory of how an opposition party can disrupt party dominance in a divided society. The first section discusses the set of institutional and ideological factors that underpin the ‘ethnic’ equilibrium of a dominant party system. There is a great deal of work on how dominant parties (re)produce dominance, but relatively little work on how the opposition can use party organization – rather than the apparatus of civil society – to launch a successful challenge in African democracies. The second section describes the methodological design of the article: a case study that draws on qualitative evidence (interviews and party documentation), but also makes limited use of quantitative data (two parliamentary surveys). In the third part, I develop an analytical narrative that explains how the DA’s leadership designed and implemented a radical programme to modernize the party, which in turn laid the basis for a successful electoral challenge to the ANC in the 2016 municipal and local elections.

*How do parties build cross-ethnic support in a divided democracy?*

It is not invariably true, but it is often the case in Africa that the opposition, if it is to win office, must unseat a dominant party.[[5]](#footnote-5) The dominant party is defined by consistent and convincing performances in elections, which allows it to control the formation of government, but it also has a spatial character. If we plot a political party’s ‘nationalization’ (the extent to which it draws support across a country) against its vote share (in national elections), we can see this spatial character graphically. Figure 1 shows a small cluster of ruling parties with broad geographic support in the upper-right quadrant, and a corresponding but larger cluster of small and geographically isolated opposition parties in the lower-left quadrant. This visualization does not contain any new descriptive information. Sebastian Elischer has demonstrated that the majority of African parties are multi-ethnic, while Nic Cheeseman and Robert Ford have shown that ruling parties have, on average, a significantly broader ethnic basis compared to the opposition.[[6]](#footnote-6) It does, however, underline that party dominance in Africa has a spatial equilibrium, which rests on the patterned capacity of the government to mobilize cross-ethnic support, while pushing the opposition into ethnic enclaves at the edges of society.

Figure 1: The spatial basis of party systems in Africa[[7]](#footnote-7)



Why do African party systems have this spatial character? Why do dominant parties have a ‘congress-like’ personality? What factors drive opposition parties into narrow(er) ethnic enclaves? And what factors, in turn, might allow the opposition to disrupt the spatial equilibrium that supports dominant party systems in Africa? The institutional narrative describes how a set of environmental factors, especially a toxic colonial legacy, hollowed out the legitimacy of the state in Africa. This account underlines the insecurity of African leaders, who respond to their institutional precarity – and the demands of a ‘strong society’[[8]](#footnote-8) – by building broad ethno-regional coalitions.[[9]](#footnote-9) These leaders then use an ideological narrative to justify the formation of this large coalition, which sets out a moral code of party competition in a divided society. The dominant party is characterized as the only viable, national institution of social reconciliation and economic modernization,[[10]](#footnote-10) while the ‘morally defective’[[11]](#footnote-11) opposition is branded as ‘antinationalist, and therefore illegal in spirit.’[[12]](#footnote-12) Samuel Huntington summarizes how the dominant party constructs this ideological lock on competition:

It [the dominant party] cannot permit another group to promote a compelling general interest, a competing image of the good society, or a competing view of the moral basis of political authority. It is for this reason that the party elite cannot tolerate the existence of ‘real’ opposition parties.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The institutional narrative, in turn, demonstrates how a dominant party can build an institutional structure on this ideological foundation.[[14]](#footnote-14) Kenneth Greene points to how a dominant party exploits its privileged access to state resources, which it uses to build and maintain a clientelistic network of supporters.[[15]](#footnote-15) Dominika Koter develops this theoretical insight by demonstrating how it works most effectively when state patrons target clients using the traditional ‘ethnic’ infrastructure of rural areas, such as the Marabouts in Senegal.[[16]](#footnote-16) It also explains why canny autocrats work diligently to narrow space for the opposition and, in particular, to undermine non-ethnic infrastructures, which the opposition might use to mobilize a rival alliance, such as trade unions in Kenya, Zambia and Zimbabwe.[[17]](#footnote-17) This strategy is both devious and compelling because it commercializes identity and deprives the opposition of institutional oxygen,[[18]](#footnote-18) but it is also risky. It turns local intermediaries into ‘kingmakers’, who can remain loyal to the incumbent (if the price is right), but might just as easily defect.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This institutional perspective offers a dramatic improvement on our understanding of how party leaders use local intermediaries to mobilize support across ethnic lines and reproduce electoral dominance. It also helps explain how the moral discourse around the identity intersects with the institutional processes that prioritize interests. If the leadership of a (resource-poor) opposition is unable to bolt onto extra-party structures to politicize a new, perhaps populist, issue – such as corruption or Chinese competition in the marketplace – it is more likely to make the tactical decision to ‘fall back’ on the support of a core ethnic group, which is relatively easy to mobilize.[[20]](#footnote-20) If, then, the ruling party is able to delegitimize the opposition – as a foreign stooge, or the puppet of a suspect minority – it becomes very difficult for the opposition to compete effectively at election time to win control of the institutional machine. The party becomes stuck inside its narrow ‘ethnic’ enclave, or small coalition of minorities – not out of any kind of spiritual conviction in the sanctity of its ethnic constituency, but rather because it is a more viable electoral strategy.

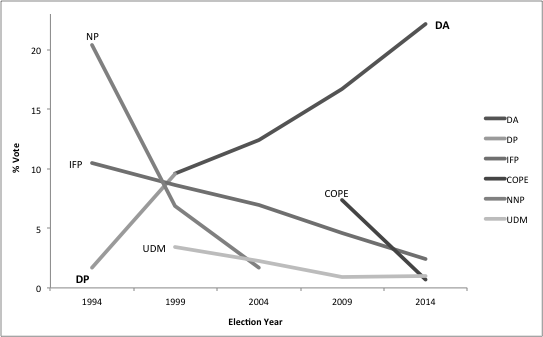
The institutional perspective offers a dynamic theory that explains how a dominant party constructs electoral dominance across ethnic groups, while marginalizing the opposition inside relatively narrow ethnic constituencies. It does not, however, have a great deal to say about how precisely the leadership of an opposition party – if it doesfind the resources to invest in a party infrastructure – can make an ‘intelligent investment’ to break the institutional and ideological locks that constrain the opposition in a dominant party system.[[21]](#footnote-21) In this article, I look at what happens when a party leadership operating in an open economy with access to private funding decides to invest in a party organization.

*Research Design*

The objective of this article is to develop a theory that describes how*,* if at all, the leadership of an opposition party can design a party to compete more effectively to broaden its electoral base. The case study is the obvious methodological choice: it is hard-wired to develop theory, rather than test it; it provides a natural control over structural variables; it opens a space to examine elite motivation; it is more sensitive to temporal variables of timingand sequencing; and it deals more coherently with causal complexity.[[22]](#footnote-22) The case study allows us to move away from the structure of the competitive arena to focus more carefully on the behaviour of the actors who inhabit it, and in turn to develop a compelling theoretical account of how the strategic behaviour of party elites influences party development in a new African democracy.

The Democratic Alliance is a substantively interesting case because the party was not born, but rather became successful. It is the only party to compete in the 1994 election that has increased its share of the vote (see Figure 2). Its electoral growth, moreover, makes it a methodologically useful case to develop theory. This is because there has been very little change in the structural factors that might account for the electoral growth of an opposition party: the electoral system remains proportional; there is even and proportionate access to public funding; a relatively high (and stable) level of fiscal and political decentralization; a large and robust private sector; and a vibrant media and civil society.[[23]](#footnote-23) These environmental factors remain constant, but there is evidently a great deal of change in the party system. The DA has emerged at the expense of all other parties, which suggests that structural factors alone do not explain why the DA became the main opposition party. This combination of control over structural variables and variation in the dependent variable allows us to isolate and develop the relative effect of how the leadership’s investment in party organization influenced the party’s electoral growth.

Figure 2: The Rise of the Democratic Alliance (1994–2014)[[24]](#footnote-24)



The case study rests on evidence gathered over the course of three fieldtrips, which were conducted between 2005 and 2013. I interviewed a wide range of DA personnel, including parliamentarians, unsuccessful candidates, activists, members, officials, and national and provincial leaders (past and present). I also conducted two surveys of the DA’s parliamentary caucus to capture a demographic profile of the 2004 and 2009 cohorts. I focused, in later fieldtrips, on the ‘reformers’ and interviewed the most prominent individuals involved in the ‘re-engineering’ of the DA on a number of occasions. These individuals also provided access to internal party documentation, which describes in detail the reform of the party’s organization and the regulation of electoral candidates. I provided standard guarantees of anonymity to my informants, but made clear that the product of interview, unless off-the-record, would be used in the production of public research.

*The Rise of the Democratic Alliance, 2000–2016*

The DA encountered the same problem as the ANC and indeed *all* political parties in a new democracy: how to adapt to a competitive electoral space.[[25]](#footnote-25) The DA had a strong root in the small (if prosperous) white community of Anglophone South Africa, but it faced an important threat from both the ANC and the National Party (NP), which provoked an existential threat in the party. ‘There was a moment [after the 1994 election]’, according to one senior figure, ‘where we thought: “should we pack this in?” Had the National Party taken [our] clothes? Had the ANC, you know, entered [our] liberal space with the constitution? What was the point of the DP?’ The party, at this point, was an outside bet to become the official opposition to the ANC. The smart money was on the NP, which had a much broader pool of support, control of provincial government in the Western Cape, and a prominent place in the national government. In the event, the opposite happened: the NP went into a state of terminal decline, while the DP emerged as the largest opposition party.

If we can talk of stages in the DA’s electoral rise, the party built its base in the white community of South Africa. The party became the ‘the effective mouthpiece and custodian of … minority interests’, but this process of consolidation did not happen automatically.[[26]](#footnote-26) It was the product of an astute tactical pivot under the leadership of Tony Leon, who launched the party’s ‘Fightback’ campaign in the 1999 election.[[27]](#footnote-27) The campaign, according to its architect, ‘was a beautiful thing – from a marketing point of view [because] we had clarity about our market and clarity about our message: it targeted a very specific market, it targeted white Afrikaaners.’[[28]](#footnote-28) In the narrowest, tactical sense, Fightback was a runaway success: the NP’s parliamentary caucus collapsed from 82 to 28 members, while the DP’s increased from seven to 38.[[29]](#footnote-29) In the long-term, however, this ‘hostile takeover’ of the NP’s supporters led the party into a strategic cul-de-sac. The rhetoric of Fightback had a viral appeal to many NP supporters, but it disgusted black voters, who saw it as a thinly veiled racist attack on the government of Nelson Mandela.[[30]](#footnote-30) One DP leader describes the trade-off in these terms:

The Fight Back campaign – and it was portrayed as “Fight *Black*” – had a strategy behind it. We were really on the brink of going out of existence and the only thing we could do was to consolidate the base, which is the first lesson in politics. And the way to consolidate that base was to consolidate the white vote, which was the Fight Back campaign, so we went with it and it was remarkably successful – but in that success were the seeds of defeat in the sense that it put a boundary on the party’s appeal to the wider market.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The DP completed its tactical consolidation of the white vote when it merged with the New National Party in early 2000 to form the DA, but the merger – endorsed, overwhelmingly, in the 2000 local and municipal elections – provoked a bitter factional conflict between the DA’s constituent components. The leadership of the NNP walked away in 2001 and later joined the ANC, a signature move that left the field to the DA (now firmly in control of the party),[[32]](#footnote-32) but also marked the end of Afrikaaner nationalism at the heart of parliamentary politics in South Africa. The victory was hard-won, if pyrrhic. The party, encumbered by debt, was hamstrung by infighting in the Western Cape, and haemorrhaging MPs and councillors in the floor-crossing windows, limped into the 2004 election, and performed dismally. Helen Zille, in her memoirs, describes the party in these early years as ‘deeply divided, politically paralyzed, strategically directionless’, which – in addition to the party’s status as pariah in the black community – brought the party to the brink of dissolution.[[33]](#footnote-33)

If 2005 is undeniably a low-point in the history of the DA, it is also a pivotal point at which the party leadership designed and implemented a set of radical reforms to address its core problem: the ‘boundary on the party’s appeal to the wider market’.[[34]](#footnote-34) The party, according to one reformer who took charge of the party’s national organization in 2005, ‘basically came to a crux. We were bankrupt. Literally bankrupt at the end of 2004.’[[35]](#footnote-35) The immediate cause of the financial crisis lay in the cost of the debt that the DA inherited from the NNP (one the more toxic legacies of the short-lived alliance) and of course the cost of the 2004 election, but the more long-term root lay in the party’s strategic and organizational disarray.[[36]](#footnote-36) One senior leader describes how the competition for positions inside the DA had become an ‘endemic cycle of cronyism and patronage’.[[37]](#footnote-37) The party leadership exploited cannily this organizational and financial crisis to justify the adaptation of the modernization project. It was, according to one party leader,

‘particularly useful that the party was facing extinction. I mean, in late 2004 the party was practically bankrupt and it was haemorrhaging through [MPs] floor-crossing [to the ANC]. Leon [the party leader] was leaving and, you know, there were a hundred and one reasons that allowed us to say: “Unless we take some fairly radical and desperate steps, we’re toast.”’[[38]](#footnote-38)

The crisis empowered reformers inside the DA, who set out in a series of ‘fairly radical and desperate’ steps a plan to modernize the party, which ‘was essentially about corporatizing and professionalizing the party, creating this organization that could take on the ANC’.[[39]](#footnote-39) This plan had both a strategic and a procedural dimension, which set down not just howthe party wanted to function but also whothe party wanted to represent. There was also, however, an elemental shift in party type: the DA became a party to win votes, rather than represent an ideological perspective. The modernization plan envisaged the party as a ‘centralized kind of business model that said “OK. We’re not a business, so we don’t want to make a profit, but our profit is in votes and that’s what everything should be geared towards”’.[[40]](#footnote-40) This vote-seeking principle is embodied in party documentation that describes the programme of reform. The opening paragraphs of the core text of modernization, ‘Building a New Majority’, outlines the ‘operational and organizational framework’ of the DA:

The main purpose of a political party is to maximize the votes it obtains in any particular election. It follows that anything the Party does must be aimed at achieving this objective. The organization of the Party, which is in fact the operational vehicle of the Party, must therefore be structured and operationalized in such a way as to most effectively achieve the objective of bringing the most votes to the Party.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The question became a procedural one: *how* do you implement reform? The short answer is: the leadership centralized power at the apex of the party. It conducted this process of centralization in two steps. First, it dismantled the power base of the party’s ‘myriad local barons’, [[42]](#footnote-42) who had reduced the party’s organization to ‘an incestuous husk, where MPs support councillors and councillors support MPs … and the whole thing becomes atrophied in a vicious circle of patronage and clientelism’.[[43]](#footnote-43) The leadership concluded that if the party was to penetrate new electoral territory, it needed to break the hold of the party’s local leaders. The party, according to one figure, needed to recognize and deal with the reality of its situation that ‘What we had, basically, was thirteen semi-autonomous organizations which, frankly, behaved like a teenager with a bottle of whiskey and the car keys. I mean, everything we said about how appallingly the ANC was running the country was reflected in how the DA ran itself.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

Second, the leadership set out to create a new corporate apparatus. This permanent party bureaucracy took monopoly control of a range of core party competencies, including fund raising and financial management, strategic planning and budgeting, media liaison and advertising, and human resources, which were then put beyond partisan control. The leadership used the language of new public management to justify the creation of the professional party, but there is also an important political story in its creation. The national leadership understood clearly that if it wanted to re-wire the party’s DNA, it needed total control of the party apparatus so it could implement reform. As a senior party executive noted:

… the project was called “re-engineering”, it was the most radical overhaul the party had ever known. It was essentially a professionalization of the party structures. Up until then, the party was a collection of branches, random bank accounts around the country, pulled together inside a federal structure – but the federal structure had very little penetration across the party. Re-engineering, among other things, completely separated the professional staff from the public representatives. We forbid public representatives to hold staffing positions in the party, we employed professional human resource people, directors for each province, brought in a system of operation managers for constituencies: professionals whose job is was to roll out the political programme of action in an area…You can imagine how the politicians didn’t like it [because] politicians in fact lost control over their local areas.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The establishment of a party bureaucracy run along the lines of an apolitical civil service removed provincial party elites from the chain of party command. It also provided the national leadership with not only greater strategic manoeuvrability, but also greater capacity to implement its new strategy. The leadership at the centre of the party accumulated power to perform a surgical transformation of the party’s unrepresentative and unresponsive parliamentary party. The ‘most fraught’ aspect of the modernization process centred on the leadership’s plans to centralize control over the system of candidate selection.[[46]](#footnote-46) The leadership understood that if it wished to position the party to appeal across ethnic lines, it needed to cast aside, or alter significantly, its public profile. The leadership, according to a senior leader, set out to design and implement:

a specific strategy to show to the community we want to infiltrate or penetrate that we are a party for all South Africans. You can’t go to a community with any kind of authenticity, a black community, and say “we would like you to vote for us” and have an all-white representative team, because that just doesn’t sell.[[47]](#footnote-47)

The leadership used its new-found power to introduce a brand new type of candidate selection system which, in spite of a series of stages, was quite simple. The locus of effective control shifted away from provincial and regional barons upwards towards the national level of the party (who set down the criteria for selection) and outwardstowards a team of independent recruiters contracted from a professional firm, Deloittes, who used ‘modern’ recruitment practices to rank-order the candidates in order of ‘professional competence’. The new system selected candidates in a three-step process: the branches convened to nominate a long-list of candidates, Deloittes, then rank-ordered the long-list (according to competence), and a small committee of so-called ‘wise men’ (vetted by the national leadership) intervened at the final stage to re-order the list to achieve a racial and ethnic balance. One of the key reformers describes the three stages of the new system in these terms:

We came up with a system that really, we said ‘Look, we've got to have a democratic element – you can’t do away with that’ – but then we said ‘You need an element that asks: can these people do the job?’ And in order to answer that question, we had to unpack ‘What is the job?’ and what are the competencies required to do this job. And that's where we brought Deloittes into it… So, that was the second part, and then the third part, we said ‘We need an aspect of political management of the list process where you can make adjustment for greater political ends that both the democracy part and the merit part don’t give you’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The earliest stage of the process is, indeed, not much more important than a ‘popularity contest’, which was designed to provide ‘an element of legitimacy’. The party membership had elected (in proportion to a branch’s number of members) an electoral college, which on paper at least rank-ordered the party’s list of candidates. The new system severed completely this (democratic) connection between party member and party representative: to take this ‘low hurdle’, a party leader confided, ‘you just need to be able to walk in a straight line’. The national leadership then set out the principles of how to select the ‘ideal’ parliamentarian, which Deloitte operationalized in a set of tests and exercises. The use of Deloitte was designed to promote ‘competence’ but it also, according to a participant in the process, removed the ‘potential for a small group of people to manipulate the outcome. How could you manipulate an independent psychologist from Deloitte’s?’[[49]](#footnote-49) A participant describes the process in these terms:

Deloittes was contracted nationally and had assessment centres set up all over the country. Each person in the pool had to spend one day at Deloittes. No political involvement. You rocked up and went through a series of tests for the entire day. There was an IQ test, a pre-assignment where you had to present off PowerPoint, a [psychometric] test, a writing test – yeah, and also a role play meeting with a member of the community. I remember I had to do a role play meeting with a principal of a very poor school.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The third stage of the reform of candidate selection procedures focused on the issue of diversity. The leadership in each province nominated a number of leaders, who – following vetting by the national leadership – comprised a committee that had the power to make a limited adjustment to each provincial list in order to increase the ‘representivity’ of the slate. The party wanted to make surgical adjustments to the list in order to present a party ‘brand’ that would resonate with its core supporters, but also the members of the black majority and in particular ANC voters. This process had a clear effect on the ethnic balance in the profile of the DA’s parliamentary party between 2004 and 2009. In a survey of the DA’s parliamentary 2004 and 2009 caucus, I asked respondents to identify group they identified with most strongly, in addition to what language they spoke at home.[[51]](#footnote-51) The party’s representation of non-white face increased substantially from 6 percent (2004) to 18 percent (2009).[[52]](#footnote-52)

The central contention of this article is that leadership matters: if an opposition is to challenge a dominant party and if it can secure private funding to invest in its organization, the leadership can make an intelligent investment, which will let it compete effectively. The DA’s modernization involved textbook centralization, which empowered the party’s leadership to create a new party identity that was attractive to all South Africans. This renewal, however, had a price: privileging (black) newcomers meant punishing (white) activists, who in many, but certainly not all, cases developed a strong grievance against the leadership. The selection of candidates by Deloittes, according to a pair of participants, ‘destroyed careers in a matter of hours’ and left a ‘trail of blood’ inside the party.[[53]](#footnote-53) It is important to point out that the national leadership did not always play fairly. One informant, a member of the national leadership, recalls his efforts to produce a ‘balanced’ list in one of the party’s provinces, which demonstrates the discord inside the party, but also suggests how this discord did not undermine the cohesion of the party:

[interviewee] due process is the sets of rules and regulations and procedures by which you [select candidates], but I’ll tell you: we did not follow due process in [name of province] in 2009 … We bent the rules because we a had a political crisis. I mean, if we followed due process…

[interviewer]: you would have ended up with a list which …

[interviewee]: which was entirely white. It was just unsustainable.

[interviewer]: And did the [national] management committee in that third stage go beyond its remit?

[interviewee]: It did.

[interviewer]: Significantly?

[interviewee]: It was basically allowed to have a double bite at the cherry.

[interviewer]: OK. And how upset were those people who lost out?

[interviewee]: Pretty upset! (laughter)

[interviewer]:Did they leave the party?

[interviewee]: No. You see, the great advantage of Zille’s leadership was that it created almost a tsunami of good results. We’re in a much better space, we win more votes … There’s a rising tide.’

Arguably the modernization of the DA was a necessary component in the party’s success because it allowed the party to resemble the electorate in terms of ethnic identity at least, but modernization alone does not necessarily lead to success and could plausibly destabilize a party. The DA’s modernization was, in comparative perspective, brutal and unprecedented.[[54]](#footnote-54) It was also risky: it could have backfired on the leadership. It did not, of course; this is a case where modernization works. But this was not because Helen Zille was a lucky general, although she had no small dose of luck in her election as mayor of Cape Town. It worked because the party operated in an open and competitive political system, which allowed the DA to gain a foothold in municipal (Cape Town 2006) and provincial elections (Western Cape 2009). These victories, in turn, provided the DA with the opportunity to govern, but critically to create a new electoral narrative as a party that can government effectively in the nationalinterest.

The DA reached its lowest point in the local and municipal elections of 2006, but its dismal performance became its ‘seminal moment’, in the mythology of the party’s rise, which allowed the party to begin writing its new narrative that it is a party that governs in the national interest, rather than a white, liberal opposition. This victory in Cape Town was won by the slimmest of margins. The DA won 42 percent of the popular vote, which meant it needed to cobble together an ends-against-the-centre coalition to elect Helen Zille as mayor. Had the Pan African Congress not abstained at the vital moment, the DA would not have won its maiden victory in Cape Town. If Helen Zille had not won Cape Town, it might have altered significantly the internal dynamic inside the DA. In any case, Cape Town and the Western Cape became the party’s electoral stronghold. The DA doubled its support in the 2009 provincial election (51.5 percent), grew further in the next provincial election (59 percent), and by 2014 had an iron-grip (63 percent in the municipal election in Cape Town).

These early victories played a vital role for a number of reasons. It broadened the supply of positions to party stalwarts; increased the leadership’s stock of political capital (while silencing critics); and crucially provided the leadership with an opportunity to ‘show rather than tell’ the (black) electorate how the DA would govern, if elected to office in other parts of the country.[[55]](#footnote-55) The immediate effect of victory in Cape Town registered insidethe party’s provincial structures. The DA in the Western Cape had been, according to one informant, ‘at war in the most brutal fashion’ – but the seizure of power in Cape Town (and later in the Western Cape) led to a sea change in the internal party dynamic. ‘The Western Cape’, according to this informant:

[Interviewee] … is no longer, as it were, the site of the contestation inside the DA.

[interviewer] What changed?

[Interviewee] We won. We won Cape Town and people got positions, everyone in the province became ministers. Once Helen became the mayor and the party leader, her response to winning that power was to be very generous and very conciliatory… She was very open, made sure everybody has a place, has a voice. And then of course winning the province really helped. Got [name of provincial party leader], [name of provincial party leader], all those people in the cabinet, etc. etc. So, you know, it [the Western Cape] is the structure of the DA that is the least fraught in South Africa. Helen [Zille] and I sometimes talk about it, it's astonishing really. I suddenly sit there and I pinch myself. You know “How did this happen?” These people were at war, in the most brutal fashion.[[56]](#footnote-56)

The importance of electoral victory in municipal and provincial elections mattered because it allowed the DA to use executive office to implement its policies and reward its local supporters and cadres. It brought, according to one informant, ‘real power, real patronage, real rewards’, which empowered the leadership, but it also allowed the party to begin to move beyond the politics of identity and to politicize (new) issues of governance. The DA used its record in office to refute directly the claim that ‘if the DA gets into power, they’ll bring back apartheid’, which had dogged the DA’s effort to persuade black voters to switch their allegiance from the ANC.[[57]](#footnote-57) The election of Helen Zille was also an important link in the party’s transition to this new politics of electioneering. A party activist describes how this new appeal worked:

we would tell people – they’d say “you’re going to bring back apartheid” – and we’d say “rubbish! Look at Helen [Zille], she fought against it, she sheltered [name of individual] in her house, she exposed the Biko murder, all this kind of thing.” But they [black voters] wouldn’t believe it. Might believe it in their head, but not in their heart. But when you actually get into power, and you can show them, I think that is really the principle point.[[58]](#footnote-58)

It is important to underline the centrality of Tony Leon in the evolution of the DA. Leon made the tactical pivot that knocked out the Nationalist Party, initiated and supported the process of modernization, and (crucially) picked the right point to retire as leader. The election of Helen Zille, however, marked a new state in the evolution of the party, precisely because her profile helped the DA to continue its strategic metamorphosis from a party that campaigned on issues of identity (champion of minority groups) to a party that campaigned on issues of competence in office. This combination is a critical link in the narrative of DA success. The increasingly attractive profile of the party’s leadership andthe party’s increasingly impressive track-record in government allowed the DA to appeal more successfully to black voters. A party leader underlines this dynamic in his description of the difference between Tony Leon on the one hand, and Helen Zille (and Lindiwe Mazibuko, elected leader of the party’s parliamentary party in 2011) on the other:

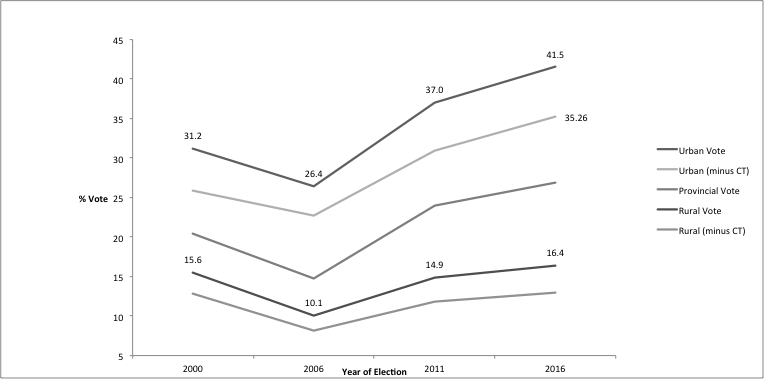
We needed [Helen Zille’s] liberation credentials in the party. That’s the greatest benefit that Helen Zille bring to the party: her liberation credentials. Tony [Leon], you know, is a private school type of guy – did national service [in the military], benefited from apartheid – in the way most people of our generation did – but Helen [Zille] is a different animal. She was a journalist, she was the one who exposed the Steve Biko murder. She was arrested, she has liberation credentials. And that’s the biggest advantage that she brings us. The ANC can’t actually discredit her as a person … who will take you back to apartheid. It’s the same with Lindiwe Mazibuko. She’s brilliant, but besides being brilliant, she’s a young dynamic black person.

The public face of the DA is now unrecognizable. The party elected its first black leader (Mmusi Maimane) in 2014; all its mayoral candidates in the Gauteng municipalities come from black communities; and the parliamentary party contains approximately twice the number of non-white faces in 2014 compared to 2004 (proportionate to the size of the caucus).

The immediate question is whether the new structure of the DA has changed the dynamic of electoral competition in South Africa, and in particular whether the ANC has been able to dismiss the DA as a party of ‘white privilege’. The politics of electoral competition in South Africa, according to Marcel Paret, has ‘crucial racial inflections’ which influenced heavily the DA’s modernization strategy.[[59]](#footnote-59) It seems indisputable that the DA’s ‘greatest impediment to gaining greater support has been its inability to appeal to the [black] African population in order to escape the label of it being a party for the minorities, particularly the white population’.[[60]](#footnote-60) But while the ANC still tries to play the ‘race card’, its effect has evidently diminished. It was relatively easy to paint Tony Leon as the scion of an opulent minority; it is much harder to dismiss Mmusi Maimane, a child of Soweto, in the same fashion.[[61]](#footnote-61)

This change in tone opened up space that allowed the DA to campaign relentlessly on their record of governance in Cape Town and the Western Cape, which appealed to disaffected black voters in the country’s largest municipal areas. The effect of the ‘new politics’, however, was uneven. The DA now stands toe-to-toe with the ANC in the cities, but the party has not made any electoral headway in the countryside. While the DA secured, on average, over 40 percent of the vote in the 8 municipal elections – an increase of just over 10 percent between 2000 and 2016 – the party’s share of the vote outside the major municipal areas did not change significantly. The DA achieved considerable success, especially in the Western Cape, Gauteng, and the major municipalities, but the new DA has not been able to penetrate the countryside. It is worth noting that the DA’s support is most evident in the Western Cape, a province with a significantly different ethnic profile to other provinces, which distorts the national picture of the party’s support (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The electoral performance of the DA in local and municipal elections (2000–2016)[[62]](#footnote-62)



*Conclusion*

This article is about how the DA successfully disrupted the stability of the dominant party system in South Africa. The ANC has dominated politics in South Africa in a prosaic institutional way: it wins elections consistently and convincingly; it uses its unassailable electoral majority to capture public institutions; and it re-tools these institutions to (re)produce dominance, turning public resources over to (loyal) partisan constituencies. ANC dominance, however, has also had a more subtle ideological character. It is not simply the only party that wins elections routinely; it is the party of Mandela, a moral movement that alone can govern in the national interest.[[63]](#footnote-63) If there is tragedy in the parable, we see it in the ANC’s struggle to retain its moral character, while governing a divided and unequal society. It was perhaps inevitable that the ANC would lose it moral status; dominance, as John Pempel warned, is ‘far more an art than an inevitability’.[[64]](#footnote-64) But when the ANC lost its moral legitimacy, it became electorally vulnerable.

The vulnerability of the ANC became an opportunity for the DA, which the party’s leadership exploited successfully. The DA could have remained a small liberal party, located comfortably in the opulent community of Anglophone South Africa, but its leadership made an expensive, unorthodox, and risky investment in its party organization that revolutionized the party’s capacity to compete with the ANC. The party’s intelligent design of a new organization worked, but only because the DA won municipal and provincial office, which in turn allowed the party to suffer its growing pains while demonstrating empirically that it could be relied upon to govern in the national interest. The DA then used this platform, secured in the late 2000s, to dismantle its characterization as an illegitimate party and launch a successful bid to win municipal office in Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Cape Town.

The DA’s victory speaks directly to the debate on the causal relevance of ethnic identity in African politics. There is an old-fashioned ‘primordial’ story about how identity determines behaviour, which contributes to dangerous and demeaning stereotypes about politics in Africa. If ethnicity does matter, it matters because political elites, operating in a precarious environment, weaponize identity to pursue, or defend, a political objective. The ANC wrote a plausible and persuasive script that cast the DA as an illegitimate character on the democratic stage; in order to compete credibly in elections, the DA had to deconstruct this characterization. When the DA’s leadership ‘re-engineered’ the party, it neutralized its toxic ethnic branding, and instead activated issues – rather than identity – as the basis of its successful electoral challenge to the ANC in 2016.

The DA’s rise to prominence also underlines the causal vitality of a party’s leadership, which is not invariably ‘at the mercy of institutional and social conditions’, but are in fact ‘active agents capable of navigating environmental conditions and influencing their performance through their internal structures’.[[65]](#footnote-65) This case study revises the prevailing narrative about ANC dominance, which attributes the party’s decline to a combination of structural factors (economic stagnation and persistent inequality) and systemic factors (the ANC’s poor governance record).[[66]](#footnote-66) The experience of the DA, however, suggests that rather than playing the ‘hapless victim’, an opposition can make small changes to its organization that can lead to a grand effect in how democracy is practiced in a dominant party system. The modern DA is a compelling example of the type of party ‘model’ that works in a divided democracy.

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   Roger Southall, ‘Democracy at risk? Politics and governance under the ANC’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 652 (2014), pp. 48–69; Tom Lodge, ‘Neo-patrimonial politics in the ANC’, *African Affairs* 113, 450 (2014), pp. 1–23; Public Prosecutor South Africa, ‘State of capture’ (Report No: 6 of 2016, Public Prosecutor South Africa) [http://www.pprotect.org/library/investigation\_report/2016-17/State\_Capture\_14October2016.pdf (6](http://www.pprotect.org/library/investigation_report/2016-17/State_Capture_14October2016.pdf%20(6) June 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic theory* (Praeger, New York, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a recent discussion on the political salience of ethnicity, see Elena Gadjanova, ‘Ethnic wedge issues in electoral campaigns in Africa's presidential regimes’, *African Affairs* 116, 464 (2017), pp. 484-507; and Ann-Sofie Isaksson and Arne Bigsten, ‘Clientelism and ethnic divisions in African countries’, *African Affairs* 116, 465 (2017), pp. 621-647. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See for instance Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I consider a party system to be ‘dominant’ when one party manages to win an absolute majority of seats in parliament, and exercise control over the political executive, over at least three consecutive elections. For a detailed discussion on how to define dominance, see Matthijs Bogaards, ‘Counting parties and identifying dominant party systems in Africa’, *European Journal of Political Research* 43 (2004), pp. 173–97. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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9. Philip Roessler, ‘Civil war’, in David Anderson, Nicholas Cheeseman and Andrea Scheibler (eds), *Routledge handbook of African politics* (Routledge, London, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James Coleman and Carl Rosberg, ‘Conclusions’, in James Coleman and Carl Rosberg (eds), *Political parties and national integration in tropical Africa* (Berkeley, C.A., University of California Press, 1964), p. 668. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Aristide Zolberg, *Creating political order: The party-states of West Africa* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966), p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Coleman and Rosberg, ‘Conclusions’, p. 663. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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14. For an excellent discussion of how a dominant party constructs a frame to support its electoral dominance, see Karen Ferree, *Framing the race in South Africa: The political origins of racial census elections* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Kenneth Greene, *Why dominant parties lose: Mexico's democratization in comparative perspective* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Dominika Koter, ‘Kingmakers: Local leaders and ethnic politics in Africa’, *World Politics* 65, 2 (2013), p. 187–232. See also Dominika Koter, ‘Urban and rural voting patterns in Senegal: The spatial aspects of incumbency, c. 1978–2012’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 51, 4 (2013), pp. 653–679. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rachel Beatty Riedl, *Authoritarian origins of democratic party systems in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014); Adrienne Lebas, *From protest to parties: Party-building and democratization in Africa* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011). See also Rakner and van de Walle on the contention that cities act as ‘springboards’ for a successful opposition, Lise Rakner and Nicolas van de Walle, ‘Opposition weakness in Africa’, *Journal of Democracy* 20, 3 (2009), pp. 108–121. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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19. Koter, ‘Kingmakers’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nic Cheeseman and Miles Larmer, ‘Ethnopopulism in Africa: Opposition mobilization in diverse and unequal societies’, *Democratization* 22, 1 (2015), p. 24; Leonard Arriola, *Multi-ethnic coalitions in Africa: Business financing of opposition election campaigns* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012). On the use of a ethno-populist strategy to mobilize voters, see Nic Cheeseman and Marja Hinfelaar, ‘Parties, platforms and political mobilization: The Zambian presidential election of 2008’, *African Affairs* 109, 434 (2009), pp. 51–76. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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28. Interview with a member of the party’s parliamentary party, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. On the early success of the DA, see Neil Southern, ‘Political opposition and the challenges of a dominant party system: The Democratic Alliance in South Africa’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 29, 2 (2011), pp. 281-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Fiona Anciano, ‘A dying ideal: Non-racialism and political parties in post-apartheid South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, 2 (2016), p. 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Interview with a member of the party’s national leadership, August 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. It left Tony Leon in control on a national level, but the DP faction was certainly not in control of the DA in the Western Cape. In their memoirs, both Tony Leon and Helen Zille wrote a dedicated chapter to deal with this fractious period in the party’s early history. Tony Leon, *On the contrary: Leading the opposition in democratic South Africa* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 2008); Helen Zille, *Not without a fight: The autobiography* (Random House, Johannesburg, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Zille, *Not without a fight*, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Interview with a member of the party’s national leadership, August 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Interview with a senior executive in the party’s new ‘professional’ organization, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In his memoirs, Tony Leon describes how the NNP’s debt – approximately (ZAR 6 million), which was apparently written off following political intervention – made the DA ineligible to use overdraft facilities. See Leon, *On the contrary*, p. 554. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Interview with a member of the party’s parliamentary party, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Interview with a member of the party’s national leadership, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Interview with a senior party executive, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Interview with a senior party executive, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Democratic Alliance, ‘Building a new majority’ (Party Documentation, Cape Town, 2006, p. 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In his memoir, Leon refers obliquely to the ‘long overdue but internally difficult re-engineering exercise to overhaul its structures and cut down the jealously guarded fortresses of its myriad local barons’. Leon, *On the contrary*, p. 671. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Interview with a member of the party’s national leadership, September 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Interview with a member of the party’s parliamentary party, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Interview with a senior party executive, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Interview with a member of the party’s national leadership, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Interview with a senior leader in one of the party’s provincial structures, September 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Interview with a leading reformer in the party, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Interview with an MP and senior party official in the party’s national administration, September 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Interview with an MP from one of the party’s provincial structures, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. There are obvious methodological problems that follow from inferring identity based on language, but this question generates a useful proxy to demonstrate how the public ‘face’ of the DA changed between 2004 and 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. These statistics, however, are based on a relatively low number of survey respondents – sixteen respondents (2004) and seventeen respondents (2009) – which reduces the accuracy of any inference about the demographic profile of the DA’s parliamentary party. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Interview with two party MPs, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. In her memoirs, Helen Zille describes proudly the new candidate selection system as ‘one of the great achievements of the DA, which may well be unique in the world’, before documenting a conversation with Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was ‘amazed’ the leadership had managed to implement the reforms. See Zille, *Not without a fight*, pp. 159–160. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The DA’s performance in the 2011 election also demonstrated how the party’s modernized electoral machinery could perform in the field, which now included sophisticated fundraising, public relations, and polling infrastructure. The emergence of the Congress of the People, which had split from the ANC in the aftermath of President Mbeki’s recall from the state presidency in September 2008, forced the party to change tack away from a direct challenge to the ANC’s record in office. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Interview with a senior leader in one of the party’s provincial structures, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Interview with an MP in one of the party’s provincial structures, September 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Interview with an MP in one of the party’s provincial structures, September 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Marcel Paret, ‘Contested ANC hegemony in the urban townships: Evidence from the 2014 South African election’, *African Affairs* 115, 460 (2016), p. 423. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Alexander Beresford, ‘The politics of regenerative nationalism in South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 38, 4 (2012), p. 868. See also Zwelethu Jolobe, ‘The Democratic Alliance: Consolidating the official opposition’, in Roger Southall and John Daniel (eds), *Zunami! The 2009 South African elections* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2009), pp. 131-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. On ANC depictions of the DA as the ‘Trojan horse of apartheid’, see Phillip de Wet, ‘#ThingsMmusiDid and Malema's flashbulb moment rattle the DA's efficient poll machine’, *The Mail and Guardian,* 3 August 2016. On the ANC description of the DA as the ‘offspring of the oppressor’, see Norimitsu Onishi, ‘South Africans head to polls amid fierce challenge to party of Mandela’, *The New York Times*, 2 August 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. I define the ‘urban vote’ as the ballots cast in municipal elections in the districts of South Africa’s largest (‘Category A’) cities, including Tshwane, Johannesburg, Ekerhuleni, Nelson Mandela Bay, Buffalo City, Cape Town, Mangaung, and eThekwini. The ‘rural vote’ includes the areas in these provinces *outside* these municipalities. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See Anthony Butler, *The idea of the ANC* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH., 2013), p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. John Pempel, *Uncommon democracies: The one-party dominant regimes* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NJ, 1990), p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
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66. Roger Southall, ‘Zuma: Party leadership as an electoral liability’, *Review of African Political Economy* 42, 140 (2014), pp. 323-331; Collette Schulz-Herzenberg and Roger Southall (eds), *Election 2014 South Africa: The campaigns, results and future prospects* (Jacana, Auckland Park, 2014); Hein Marais, *South Africa pushed to the limit: The political economy of change* (University of Cape Town Press, Cape Town, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)