



# **SOUTH AFRICA: ANNUAL BY-ELECTIONS REPORT**

An Independent Electoral Performance & Political Risk Assessment of By-Elections 2025

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# By-Elections Report

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# Executive Summary

South Africa's 2025 municipal ward by-elections confirm a structural shift toward a fragmented, competitive, and coalition-dependent local political system. While incumbency remains a statistically significant advantage, its protective effect has weakened materially compared to previous local government cycles. Our findings indicate a decline in the dominance of legacy parties, rising importance of ward-level campaigning and increased probability of complex coalition governance.



## Key Trends

### 01. Increased Electoral Volatility

31.5%

Of the 73 ward by-elections, incumbents retained 50 seats (68.5%), while 23 wards (31.5%) changed political control. This level of seat volatility signals accelerated political realignment ahead of the 2026 Local Government Elections.

### 02. New Players Emerge

69.6%

Two non-traditional parties - the Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK) Party and the Patriotic Alliance (PA) - emerged as the most consequential actors, jointly accounting for 16 of the 23 seat turnovers (69.6%). Their performance demonstrates an ability to convert national political sentiment into repeatable, ward-level electoral victories.

### 03. Uneven Voter Participation

48.9%

Voter participation remained uneven. Turnout ranged from 6.59% to 66.86%, with a median turnout of approximately 48.9%. Extremely low turnout in metropolitan "safe" wards suggests growing electoral disengagement, while competitive and rural wards displayed significantly higher mobilisation.



# Analytical Framework

## 01. Scope & Approach

This assessment covers all officially declared municipal ward by-elections in South Africa during calendar year 2025 and benchmarks outcomes against the 2021 Local Government Elections.

The report relies on:

- Seat retention and turnover analysis
- Vote-share delta comparisons (2021 vs by-election)
- Turnout distribution analysis (median and range)
- Party-specific net seat change calculations
- Spatial concentration analysis (provincial and metro focus)

Our approach appreciates that by-elections are inherently localised and influenced by a range of factors. This includes, but is not limited to, candidate visibility, service delivery dynamics, protest voting and differential mobilisation capacity. Results should therefore be read as directional indicators, not direct predictors of national or provincial election outcomes.





# Party Performances

## 01. The African National Congress



### Performance Indicators

- Seats retained: 34
- Seats lost: 13
- Seats gained: 5



### Key Dynamics

- Strong retention in rural Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga.
- Severe losses in KwaZulu-Natal to MK.
- Noticeable vote-share erosion in metropolitan wards, even when retaining seats.
- In multiple retained wards, ANC victories were secured with pluralities below 40%, increasing coalition vulnerability even where formal control remains intact.

## 02. The Democratic Alliance



### Performance Indicators

- Seats retained: 12
- Seats lost: 4
- Seats gained: 2



### Key Dynamics

- Extremely high vote shares in uncontested urban wards (up to 98%)
- Losses concentrated in Western Cape wards to PA.
- Low turnout in safe wards undermines mandate depth.
- High vote share combined with turnout below 20% (e.g., Tshwane, Johannesburg) suggests passive dominance, not active mobilisation strength.



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## 03. Mkhonto Wesizwe Party (MK)



### Performance Indicators

- **Seats gained:** 8
- **Net change:** +8 seats

### Key Dynamics

- Concentrated success in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Directly displaced ANC and DA incumbents.
- Achieved competitive vote shares (36%–62%) across all wins.
- MK's performance demonstrates high conversion efficiency.



## 04. The Patriotic Alliance



### Performance Indicators

- **Seats gained:** 8
- **Net change:** +8 seats

### Key Dynamics

- Cross-provincial gains (WC, EC, NC, GP).
- Effective targeting of marginal and coalition-sensitive wards.
- Successful challenges to both ANC and DA incumbents.
- PA's geographic spread and positioning significantly increase post-election bargaining complexity in hung councils.



## 05. Other Parties

- **The Inkatha Freedom Party:** Maintained relevance in northern KZN but have become increasingly squeezed between the ANC and DA.
- **The Economic Freedom Fighters:** Successfully defended Polokwane ward with improved vote share, albeit performed poorly in WC and GP.
- **ActionSA:** Secured Ramotshere Moiloa (NW), indicating selective expansion.
- **Independents:** Demonstrated continued localised appeal in Northern Cape.



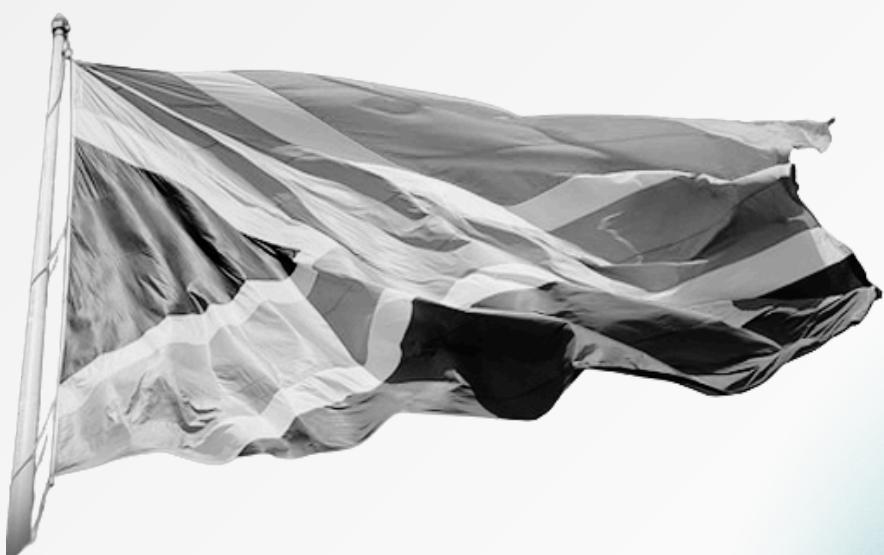
# Turnout & Voter Behaviour Analysis

## Urban vs Rural Turnout

- Metropolitan wards frequently recorded turnout below **30%**.
- Rural and competitive wards consistently exceeded **50%**.
- Importantly, turnout correlates more strongly with perceived contestation than with party loyalty.
- Internationally, turnout below 25% is considered a warning signal for weak representational legitimacy, volatile future vote swings and susceptibility to protest mobilisation.

## Strategic Trends & Forward Indicators

- While incumbents still retain most seats, the **margin of safety is shrinking**, particularly in metros and KZN.
- Added, the effective number of competitive parties at ward level is increasing - a classic precursor to **unstable coalition governance**.
- With respects to geographical polarisation, KZN offers a three-way battle between the ANC, MK and IFP.
- In Western Cape, DA dominance is increasingly contested by PA.
- Metros emulate persistent fragmentation and swing volatility.





# Conclusion: Towards the 2026 Local Government Elections



The 2025 municipal ward by-elections mark a **clear transition from dominant-party local governance to competitive, multi-actor municipal politics** in South Africa. While legacy parties remain structurally strong, their electoral insulation has weakened, and challenger parties have demonstrated the capacity to secure durable, geographically diverse gains.

For policymakers, investors, and governance stakeholders, these results underscore a future defined less by outright control and more by **coalition stability and negotiation capacity**.

As for the 2026 local government elections, the following outcomes are increasingly probable:

- More councils without outright majorities.
- Higher post-election coalition negotiation costs.
- Increased importance of ward-level candidate credibility.
- Strategic kingmaker roles for mid-sized parties.



# Thank You!



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