



SOUTH AFRICA: 2026 Mid-Year Municipal By-Election Analysis

An Independent Electoral Performance & Political Risk Assessment of By-Elections
January - June 2026

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By-Elections Report

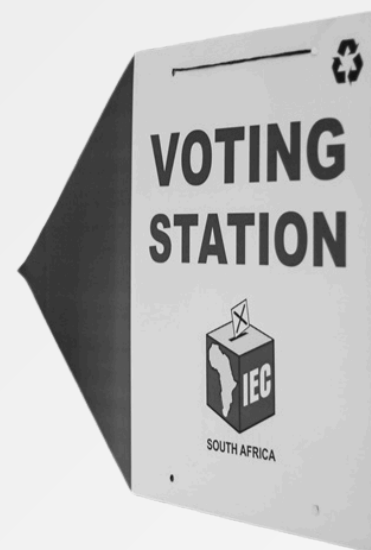
Executive Summary	01
Analytical Framework	02
Party Performances	03
Turnout and Voter Behavioural Analysis	05
Strategic Trends and Forward Indicators	05
Conclusion: Outlook Towards the 2026 Local Government Elections	06





Executive Summary

South Africa's municipal ward by-elections in the first half of 2026 reaffirm the structural shift towards a more fragmented and competitive local political landscape. The trend observed in previous years is not only continuing but accelerating. While incumbency retains a statistical advantage, its protective power has demonstrably weakened, with a significant number of seats changing hands and major parties experiencing substantial erosion in their vote shares. The findings highlight the growing importance of targeted, ward-level campaigning and the increasing likelihood of complex coalition negotiations.



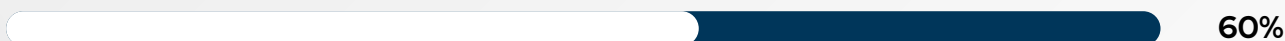
Key Trends

01. Heightened Electoral Volatility and a Declining Incumbency Advantage



Of the 34 ward by-elections, incumbents retained 19 seats (55.9%), while a striking 15 wards (44.1%) changed political control. This represents a significant increase in volatility compared to the full-year 2025 cycle (31.5%) and signals rapid political realignment. The 'incumbency advantage' is diminishing, particularly in key urban centres.

02. The Patriotic Alliance as the Primary Disruptor



The Patriotic Alliance (PA) emerged as the single most consequential actor, being responsible for 9 of the 15 seat turnovers (60.0%). The PA's ability to successfully challenge both the ANC and DA across multiple provinces demonstrates a sophisticated strategy of targeting marginal and coalition-sensitive wards, making them the key "kingmaker" party.

03. Regional Polarisation and Metro Disengagement



Voter participation remains deeply uneven, with a stark contrast between highly contested rural/competitive wards and disengaged metropolitan "safe" seats. Metropolitan turnouts were alarmingly low (e.g. 17.62% in Johannesburg), indicating a crisis of representational legitimacy, while competitive wards saw turnouts above 60%. The average voter turnout for the first half of 2026 is 45.%. This figure is slightly lower than the 48.9% median turnout observed in your 2025 report.



Analytical Framework

01. Scope & Approach

This assessment covers all officially declared municipal ward by-elections in South Africa during the period of January to June 2026. The report benchmarks these outcomes against the 2021 Local Government Elections, utilising the data provided for 34 distinct by-elections.

The report relies on:

- **Seat retention and turnover analysis:** A comprehensive count of how many seats were kept or lost by each party.
- **Vote-share delta comparisons:** A detailed calculation of the percentage point change between the 2021 election and the 2026 by-election for each party.
- **Turnout distribution analysis:** An analysis of the median and range of voter turnout to understand engagement levels.
- **Party-specific net seat change calculations:** A clear summary of each major party's overall gain or loss in seat count.
- **Spatial concentration analysis:** A focus on provincial and metropolitan trends to highlight geographical shifts.

Our approach appreciates that by-elections are inherently localised, influenced by candidate visibility, service delivery dynamics, protest voting, and differential mobilisation capacity. These results should therefore be read as directional indicators, not direct predictors of national or provincial election outcomes. The data provides a critical "stress test" of party support before the upcoming Local Government Elections.





Party Performances

01. The African National Congress

Performance Indicators

- Seats retained: 12
- Seats lost: 8
- Seats gained: 1

Key Dynamics

- The ANC experienced a dramatic drop in vote share, even in wards it managed to retain. For instance, in Mogale City, the ANC's vote share collapsed from 73.04% in 2021 to 57.19% in 2026, a delta of -15.85 percentage points.
- The party is losing its traditional dominance, particularly in metropolitan areas. Losses to the PA in Oudtshoorn and Stellenbosch, and to the DA in the Western Cape, signal an erosion.
- The ANC retains a firm grip in rural municipalities like Bushbuckridge (84.64%) and Matlosana (81.03%), showcasing a stark divergence between their rural strength and urban vulnerability.



02. The Democratic Alliance

Performance Indicators

- Seats retained: 8
- Seats lost: 6
- Seats gained: 4

Key Dynamics

- The DA effectively retained its seats in metros like Tshwane (53.20%) and Johannesburg (94.80%), often with massive vote shares. However, these victories were undermined by extremely low turnouts.
- The DA's home province is a key battleground. The party lost three seats to the PA in George, Stellenbosch, and Swartland, and one to the ANC in George. This indicates a strategic assault on the DA's dominance by the PA, which is successfully contesting the coloured vote.
- Although the DA was effective at flipping some seats in the Western Cape (Cederberg and Langeberg), it suffered a significant loss in a key target ward in Emfuleni, where it failed to convert its challenge.





CONT...

03. The Patriotic Alliance

Performance Indicators

- **Seats gained:** 9
- **Net change:** +9 seats

Key Dynamics



- The PA is the election's undisputed protagonist, winning nine seats, all from incumbents (ANC and DA). They are the most effective challenger party, converting political sentiment into victories.
- The PA's strategy is clear: target marginal and coalition-sensitive wards. By winning seats in George (three seats), Stellenbosch, Swartland, Oudtshoorn, and Dawid Kruiper, they have positioned themselves as a powerful kingmaker, gaining significant leverage for post-election coalitions.
- The PA's gains span the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, and Northern Cape, showcasing a national strategy, unlike MK's regional focus. This geographic spread significantly increases post-election bargaining complexity for other parties.

04. Other Parties

- **MK Party:** The complete absence of the MK Party from the 2026 by-election cycle is a significant and noteworthy development that requires careful interpretation. This stands in stark contrast to their remarkable performance in the 2025 by-elections, where they gained 8 seats (all in KwaZulu-Natal) and demonstrated high conversion efficiency with vote shares between 36% and 62%. The party has emulated weak by-election ward-level campaigning likely due to an overall poor political strategy.
- **The IFP:** The IFP demonstrated strong performance in KwaZulu-Natal, retaining two seats in Nongoma and Umzumbe, while successfully flipping two seats from the ANC in Nongoma and Abaqulusi. Further, the IFP's gains show a consolidation of support, particularly in northern KZN, where they are effectively squeezing out the National Freedom Party (NFP) and challenging the ANC's historical base.
- **The EFF:** Notably absent from this data set, marking a decline from their previous performance.
- **The Good Party:** Suffered a complete collapse of support in its former Western Cape strongholds, losing both its George Municipality seats to the PA. This signifies a dramatic decline in the party's electoral relevance.
- **The NFP:** Lost two seats to the IFP in the Nongoma Municipality, indicating a shift in support dynamics in KZN.



Turnout & Voter Behaviour Analysis

Urban vs Rural Turnout



- **Metropolitan Apathy:** Wards in major metros like Tshwane (21.04%), Johannesburg (17.62%), and Rustenburg (21.50%) consistently recorded turnout below 25%. This is a warning signal for weak representational legitimacy, as these governments serve the majority of the country's population.
- **Competitive Contestation Drives Turnout:** Wards where the outcome was genuinely in contest saw significantly higher turnout. The ANC's contest against the PA in Oudtshoorn (51.25%) and the DA's flip in Emfuleni (35.79%) drew greater voter interest.
- **Rural and Competitive Wards Lead:** The highest turnouts were recorded in competitive and rural wards, such as the DA's flip in George Ward 25 (58.23%) and the PA's win in Dawid Kruiper (63.01%). This demonstrates that voters are mobilised when they believe their vote can make a difference.

Strategic Trends & Forward Indicators

- **The Shrinking Incumbency Advantage:** While incumbents still retain seats, the margin of safety is shrinking. The average ANC vote share in retained seats dropped significantly, indicating that even victory comes with a weakened mandate.
- **The Rise of the PA as a National Kingmaker:** The PA's performance is the most significant trend. Their strategic targeting of marginal and coalition-sensitive wards in the Western Cape and elsewhere has transformed them from a niche player into a kingmaker capable of determining the governance of key municipalities.

Geographical Polarisation is Intensifying:

- **Western Cape:** The PA is actively contesting the DA's "blue wall," making it a multi-party battleground.
- **KwaZulu-Natal:** The IFP is consolidating its position against a seemingly weakened ANC, DA and MK, creating a dynamic that could lead to volatile coalitions.
- **Gauteng Metros:** Remain fragmented, with extreme voter apathy undermining the legitimacy of the democratic process.
- **The State of Opposition Parties:** The IFP shows renewed strength, while the EFF and Good Party have been completely absent or irrelevant in this cycle, raising questions about their capacity to challenge the established order.



Conclusion: Towards the 2026 Local Government Elections



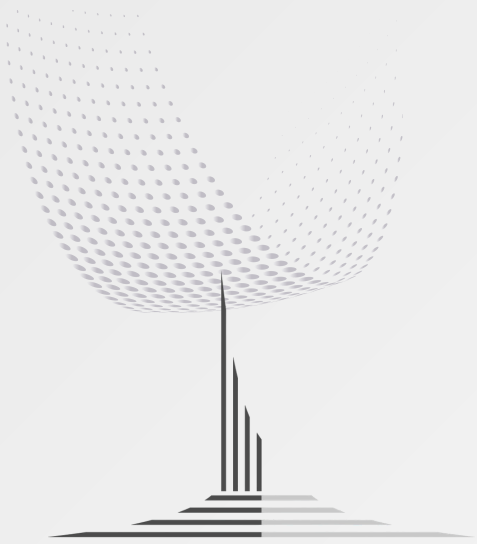
The 2026 by-election data is a powerful and urgent preview of the forthcoming Local Government Elections. It confirms the transition from a dominant-party system to a fragmented, competitive, and coalition-dependent political landscape is now the norm, not an anomaly.

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

As South Africa approaches the main event in October, the following outcomes are now highly probable:

- **More Hung Councils:** An even higher number of municipalities will have no outright majority, requiring complex coalition negotiations.
- **Protracted and Costly Coalition Formations:** The PA's kingmaker role will drive up "negotiation costs," making governance formation slower and more transactional.
- **A Crisis of Legitimacy in Metros:** Ultra-low turnout in metropolitan wards will produce local governments with extremely weak democratic mandates, potentially leading to unrest and policy paralysis.
- **The Importance of Ward-Level Candidates:** National image will matter less than local credibility. Parties with strong, visible local candidates will triumph over those relying on national brand loyalty.

The 2026 Local Government Elections will be a defining moment, testing South Africa's ability to manage the complex new reality of fragmented, coalition-driven democracy.



Thank You!



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