

The Dichotomy Between Large and Small Political Parties: A New Perspective on Electoral Volatility in South Africa

Pieter Labuschagne

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22151/politikon.44.3>

Pieter Labuschagne from Pretoria (South Africa) is an emeritus professor at the Department of Political Sciences at Unisa and former Chair of the Department between 2011-2015. He received the following degrees in Political Sciences from the Universities of the Free State and South Africa: BA (1983); BA (Hons) 1984; MA (with distinction) 1986; DPhil 1990; LLB 1997; LLM 2001; LLD 2007. Prof. Labuschagne's interests include political dynamics, sport and politics and criminal law. E-mail: labuspa@gmail.com.

Abstract

This article investigates new political party formation in South Africa within the broader context of voter volatility. The political party system has displayed high levels of stability, but the unrestrained and rampant formation of new political parties that contest in each election could destabilise the system. The number of entrants rose to an unprecedented 28 before the 2019 elections and contradicts the support for older, established parties in each election since 1994. In theory, the within-system stability in South Africa, with an on average 90% voter share between established parties, impedes the scope for the formation of new smaller parties. In reality, support for new parties remains low. This article explores why this does not serve as a deterrent for the formation of new parties. The article shows that despite the increasing number of new entrants, their impact on stability and consolidation in the country is negligible.

Keywords

Democratic Consolidation; Extra-System Parties; Proportional Representation; Vote-Share; Within-System Parties

Introduction

The first democratic elections in South Africa were held in 1994 and from the outset the country's political party landscape has displayed high levels of consistency and constancy. The stability of the political party system is the result of persistent, strong 'within-system' electoral support – a phrase coined by Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017, 612). The term 'within-system' describes electoral support that is channelled *to* established parties, while 'extra-system' support describes the flow of electoral support, in the form of votes, *away from* established parties to newly formed political parties. The perception of consistent stability in South Africa's political party system is the result of continued within-system electoral support that has chiefly been channelled to two or three parties since 1994.

The unrestrained formation of 88 new political parties since 1994 contradicts the initial perception of stability in the South African political party system. The strong within-system support, with an average of above 90 % votes shared between the established parties, should have allowed very little scope for the formation of new, smaller parties. However, during all six election cycles post 1994, despite very low electoral support (less than 7 %) for extra-system parties, increased participation of newly founded parties was not inhibited or discouraged.¹

The cycle of creation and subsequent disappearance of new parties after each election inhibits the potential consolidation, settlement and stabilisation of the political party system. The attrition rate (the rate at which parties disappeared) between 1999 and 2004 also stabilised around 30 %. However, the number of new entrants rose spectacularly over the next few election cycles and eventually peaked at 28 new entrants in the 2019 election. The attrition rate peaked in 2014 as 12 smaller parties disappeared after the 2014 elections, translating to an attrition rate of almost 50 %.

Background to the research question

The nature and role of political parties in a democracy are of critical importance and form an essential element of the political dynamics of a democracy. Political parties are in essence complex multilevel organisations, with varied elements, united by a common identity and shared objectives. They are key mobilising devices to pull millions of people into the realms of politics and political processes, and to shape and institutionalise public interests (Duverger 1994, 19).

Political parties perform many tasks in society, but predominantly they add an element of stability to the political system by legitimising the individuals and the institutions that control

¹ The vote share for extra-system parties (small parties) was 6.4 % (1999), 3.6 % (2004), 8.4 % (2009), 9.2 % (2014), 3.7 % (2019) with an average support of 6.26 % (cf. Marrian 2019; Brand South Africa 2014; The South African 2019).

political power. Duverger (1994, 21) explains that political parties are important instruments for societal interest aggregation and articulation because they coordinate and refine the demands that are made on the political system, allowing the system to respond more adequately to those demands. Political parties act as two-way channels for communication, by transmitting information upwards from grassroots level, and downwards from government and/or the party to the constituency.

It thus flows that when the demands of society change, political parties ought to or will change in reaction. If the within-system parties are unable to react successfully to the demands of society in the period leading up to the elections, the political party system will naturally flux. In most cases, this will lead to the formation of new parties.

Understanding how different knowledgeable voters engage in different types of voting behaviour is at the core of the normative democratic theory that underpins the article (Geers and Strömbäck 2018, 362). The volatility of political parties in South Africa remains uncharted territory. The aim of this article is to develop an analytical construct to be used as a benchmark to gauge acceptable levels of extra-system political party formations. This analytical construct will certainly benefit from a comparison of within-system and extra-system parties in selected countries.

The methodology of this article is to approach the research question from a comparative perspective when tracking the frequency of new political party formation in South Africa to determine whether it is acceptable and within international norms. The field of Comparative Politics is premised on the notion that comparisons of different sets of phenomena will uncover distinct patterns, enhance descriptive knowledge and help develop useful theoretical generalisations. This analysis will make possible qualitative judgements based on accurate description and explanation (Bak 2004, 119).

The methodology in this article will be a diachronic approach, which entails data collection over time from the first democratic elections to most recent 2018 general elections, with the aim to form useful theoretical generalisations of voter volatility and political consolidation in the country.

The data collected includes the number of political parties that participated in each election. The increasing phenomenon of new political parties during each election cycle in South Africa from 1999 to 2019 is outlined, and its potential impact on political stability and consolidation in the country is discussed. This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of electoral volatility in South Africa. It investigates the almost unrestrained formation of new political parties

in South Africa – 28 new parties participated in the 2019 elections and a total of 88 new parties have been formed in the post-1994 era.

One of the explanations offered for the high frequency of new political parties is that it is indicative of current dissatisfaction with the old established parties (Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera 2017, 612). However, the current political party system displays persistent high levels of within-system stability and support: the older, established political parties have consistently received more than 90 % of the votes in general elections since 1994. The vote share for new parties throughout the same period has remained well below 10 %, and in two cases that figure was boosted by the split of two bigger parties. In fact, if the split of two bigger parties had not affected voting, the vote share for extra-system parties would have been very low – between 3 % and 5 %. If dissatisfaction with the older, well-established parties contributed to the formation of new parties, why did it not contribute to a substantive increase in the extra-system vote share?

These two factors have been contradicting each other since the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994. The dissatisfaction argument certainly does not stand up to scrutiny in South Africa and is incompatible with the contemporary political party dynamics in the country. The benchmark for within-system parties in the discussion in the article was adapted to allow a political party that had partaken for the second time in an election to be included as an established party.

Why new political parties?

On a theoretical level, the question ‘Why are new political parties formed?’ is normally an uncomplicated challenge to address and explain. The functions, purposes and roles of political parties are *inter alia* to serve as important instruments for interest aggregation and articulation. Political parties coordinate and refine the demands that are made on the political system, allowing the system to respond more adequately to those demands. Additionally, political parties act as two-way conduits of communication by transmitting information upwards from grassroots level and downwards from government and/or the party to the constituency (Duverger 1994, xxv).

If political parties fail to meet the essential obligations warranting their existence, the political system then naturally requires new structures and processes in order to articulate the interests and demands that have been left unattended and unrepresented in society. However, political instinct is sufficient to appreciate that the formation of new political parties is not always noble, and that politicians’ personal interests, political opportunism and political ambitions often play an important role.

When scholarly literature on the formation of new political parties is closely scrutinised, it is surprising to see that the advent of small parties, outside the former communist countries, has

received very little academic attention (Szawiel 2009; Lipset and Rokkan 1967; Bértoa and Enyedi 2014). This might be the case because the first and second wave democracies in Western Europe and North America date back to 1776 and continued until the 1960s (before the third and fourth democratic waves of the 1970s and the 1990s), and yielded only limited new political party development. Older, well-established parties dominated in most of the older democracies in Western Europe and in the United States of America, where a historic two-party dominance has almost been institutionalised.

Between 1945 and 1991, on average only one political party emerged in within-system political party systems. Furthermore, the single new party's vote share was restricted to only 2 % of the vote (Szawiel 2009, 483–84; Tavits 2008, 113). Stability and the absence of new political entrants before 1970 in the older, more established democracies caused scholars to talk of the 'freezing' of political party systems.

However, global developments and new political party formation outside Western Europe and North America during the third and fourth wave of democratisation have surpassed all expectations. In post-communist countries in the post-1990 period (i.e. during the fourth democratic wave), an average of 5.6 new political parties emerged in each new election cycle for more than a decade (Szawiel 2009, 483). This number of new political entrants per election cycle is high, especially when contrasted with consolidated or advanced democracies where the occurrence of new parties is irregular, inconsequential and insignificant.

The average 5.6 new political parties in post-communist countries, however, pales in comparison to the South African experience with its multiple new political party entrants. The high number of new entrants in South Africa, an average of 15 parties per elections cycle,² has raised the bar significantly.

It is important to look beyond numbers to understand the impact and consequences of the formation of so many new entrants in the political party system. Tavits (2008, 113) emphasises the value of a stable political party system to ensure democratic consolidation in new and developing democracies. It is important to establish a well-balanced development pattern for new entrants and a fair balance between the within-system, extra-system parties. The argument presented by this article is not against the creation of new political parties, but that a sustainability of new parties should be achieved to consolidate the system and enhance its stability. It is important to establish and consolidate channels between voters and parties, but the continuous unbridled formation of new parties is contradictory to this theoretical principle.

² 9 (1999), 9 (2004), 14 (2009), 14 (2014) and 28 new parties (2019) for an average of 14.8 new parties per election cycle (cf. Marrian 2019; Brand South Africa 2014; The South African 2019).

In South Africa the continuous formation of new party entrants creates instability and uncertainty in a new and developing democracy. The 34 new political parties which competed in the most recent election in 2019 in South Africa is beyond reasonable comprehension. The number of new parties, their durability and their ability to expand, endure and persist to the next election cycle, play an important role in ensuring the consolidation of the system. When the percentage of votes awarded to within-system parties remains consistently high and at the same level, but new parties keep appearing on the scene, the logic and rationale behind the formation of these new parties should be questioned.

Explanation for electoral volatility

The extensive literature on electoral volatility dates back to the 1960s and many theorists have contributed to the corpus of knowledge (Birch 2003, 119–35; Powell and Tucker 2014, 105). A number of core hypotheses have emerged to explain electoral volatility or to a certain degree, ‘the absence of electoral volatility’, which could be largely attributed to the lack of new political party formation in first and second waves of democratization.

The limited and restricted formation of new parties in the political party system has prompted Lipset and Rokkan (1967, 115) to describe the phenomenon as the ‘freezing’ of political systems. However, the third and fourth waves of democratisation that swept across the world in the post-1970 period created many competitive democratic regimes. Within-system parties largely disappeared and extra-system parties were vying for political power in newly formed democracies.

In young democracies, newly formed political parties are not the exception but an integral part of the political system. In post-communist democracies (as mentioned earlier) an average of 5.6 parties emerged after the regime change, eager to flex their muscles in the new democratic era. The average share of votes received by new parties in the post-communist area was 19 %, but in some elections new entrants received as much as 50 % of the votes (Szawiel 2009, 483). In Bulgaria (2001), Estonia (2003), Latvia, (1998 and 2002) and Lithuania (2000 and 2004) new parties either formed the government or a government coalition soon after their formation (Tavits 2008, 104).

The upsurge of new entrants and the flow of electoral support to these extra-system parties in post-communist democracies were in sharp contrast to what was happening in more established democracies, where the formation and the impact of new political parties were largely inconsequential and ineffective. An average of only one new party would normally emerge in an advanced democracy, and that party would win only 2 % of the votes in any election (Tavits 2008, 104). Electoral volatility was restricted, with the vote share predominantly focused toward established parties.

Tavits (2008, 120) explains that in new democracies where the political party system is still developing, it is possible that ethnic and religious minorities have not been able to support or associate with a political party effectively. The party they have supported for lack of an alternative, may have suffered an electoral loss, and their demands and interests therefore remained unfulfilled and unrepresented. These ethnic and religious minorities then had to look to newcomers, who might have promised to represent their interests more effectively. This could explain the shifts and the volatility in some systems.

Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017, 612) explain that permeable institutional arrangements, such as fragmented party systems and permissive electoral systems, could also be associated with higher electoral volatility. Electoral volatility is much more likely in fragmented, diverse party systems because they offer more options to voters. The Proportional Representation electoral system makes it easy for new parties to function, because a relatively low number of votes can often guarantee parliamentary representation. In other electoral systems, such as First Past the Post in the United Kingdom, it is much more difficult for new parties to function, because a new party could attract a high number of votes but still lose against another party and fail to get a representative in parliament.

Voters do not easily abandon established parties when they know that their new choice has a limited scope for success. This is certainly the case in older, more established democracies, especially in single-member constituencies. Ferec (2010, 778) argued that African countries with one, and only one, majority group should have less volatility than countries with no majority group or countries with multiple nested majority groups.

Fluctuations in voter turnout normally indicate voter discontent, and mostly affects the electoral fate of parties. It has been pointed out in studies that when economically and socially marginalised sections of the population voice their discontent, turnout rises substantially, and voter fluctuation can be observed (Ferec 2010, 766). It is accepted that new parties benefit mostly from protest votes (Tavits 2008, 120).

However, the reality in stable democracies work against new entrants. Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017, 612) point out that strong organisations with deep connections with voters developed during the earlier waves of democratisation gave rise to consolidated and established democracies.

Geers and Strömbäck (2018, 363), referencing Dalton (2007) and Mair (2008), indicate that in Western democracies, voting behaviour patterns clearly show signs of volatility which was typified as 'changes in party preference within an electorate.' In Sweden this trend of electoral

volatility was largely the result of a greater choice of political parties. The number of parties in parliament has risen from five to eight parties.

The main explanation for the phenomenon was the declining importance of traditional cleavages and weakening attachment between parties and voters (Dalton 2007). This de-alignment of parties could also be attributed to the process of cognitive mobilisation whereby voters, as a result of rising levels of education, have the skills and resources to make independent political choices without reliance on traditional loyalties.

Recent research on the causes of electoral volatility has also found evidence supporting this view of emancipated voters (Feree 2010, 778). Geers and Strömbäck (2018, 363) also point out the role of election campaigns that have become more important to explain the choice voters made.

The declining factor of traditional loyalties is not the only theoretical explanation but another short term factor for electoral volatility is increased political knowledge. One of the first or earlier empirical studies of voting behaviour concluded that voters who switch parties are uninterested in and uninformed about politics. However, later research has shown that cognitive mobilization or increased political knowledge may be the reason and that voters are able to make autonomous informed political choices without reliance on traditional loyalties. The link between political knowledge and electoral volatility has also been established by various studies, although the evidence is mixed. With respect to intra-campaign volatility, some studies claim that the moderate knowledgeable voters are the least likely to switch from one party to another, whereas others claim that the most knowledgeable voters tend to make more independent choices, leading them to switch occasionally (Dalton 2007, 275). Hence, the group of voters which is most likely to be volatile are the moderately knowledgeable (Kefford 2018, 338).

Previous research has shown that voters with higher confidence in their political knowledge (i.e. political efficacy) are more likely to turn out (Möller et al. 2014, 690). The question remains whether this also applies to voters possessing actual political knowledge, besides having confidence in one's own political knowledge. This line of reasoning allows the following inference to be made: for different reasons, less knowledgeable and highly knowledgeable voters are less likely to change their opinions and preferences. Less knowledgeable voters are less exposed to the political information necessary to change their opinion and are inclined to remain with their historical choices. Highly knowledgeable voters, on the other hand, are more likely to receive this information but unlikely to accept it if it challenges their opinions and preferences. Therefore, both the least and most knowledgeable voters are more likely to remain stable in their party preference during election campaigns (Thapa 1999, 33).

The variance in extra-system and within-system volatility

The electoral success of new parties in democracies can be measured by comparing extra-system and within-system volatility after World War II. Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017, 612) state that the third and fourth waves of democratisation created more competitive and vibrant regimes, therefore it tended to produce many new parties that eventually became important contenders.

The mean vote shares of within-system parties in competitive regimes established before the third democratic wave in the 1970s, was only 2.4 % in all elections from 1945 to 2006 (Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera 2017, 612). The within-system and extra-system columns in Table 1 below indicate electoral volatility in selected countries, including first or second wave democracies and post-1970 third or fourth wave democracies (Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera 2017, 626). The second to last column reflects transfers of votes between within-system parties, while the figures in the last column represent transfer from within-system to new parties. This table shows that volatility is lower in democratic regimes that were established before the third wave of democracy. Higher electoral volatility can be observed for extra-system parties in democracies established during the third and fourth democratic waves in the post-1970 phase.

Table 1. Comparison of electoral volatility of within-system and extra-system parties

<i>Country</i>	<i>Democracy-year</i>	<i>Total volatility</i>	<i>Within-system vote share volatility</i>	<i>Extra-system vote share volatility</i>
USA	1776–1800	3.4%	3.3%	0.1%
Germany	1959	8%	7.8%	0.2%
United Kingdom	1837	7.6%	6.2%	1.4%
Italy	1945	15.4%	8.7	6.7
<i>Latin America</i>				
Chile	1990	13.9%	11.0%	2.9%
<i>Asia</i>				
India	1950	26.7%	13.1%	13.6%
South Korea	1988	36.6%	9.9%	26.7%
<i>Africa</i>				
Botswana	1966	10.6%	6.2%	4.5%
Namibia	1990	13.1%	6.8%	6.3%
Benin	1991	68.3%	26.5%	41.8%
<i>Eastern Europe</i>				
Bulgaria	1990	39.3%	15.5%	23.8%
Slovakia	1993	43.6%	19.5%	24.2%
<i>Other countries</i>				
Israel	1948	20.1%	12.5%	7.6%
Trinidad and Tobago	1962	27.3%	8.7%	18.7%

Source: Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017).

It is evident from this table that the third and fourth wave democracies in the post-1970 era experienced higher levels of electoral volatility. The extra-system parties in these countries were likely to attract more votes away from older, within-system parties.

New political parties in South Africa in the democratic era

The number of political parties that participated in the various elections exclusively for white voters from 1910 to 1994 seldom exceeded ten parties. The advent of new, smaller parties was irregular and ineffectual, and their vote share in the face of single-party dominance was severely restricted (Kleynhans 1986, 85).

The construction of a benchmark for comparing within-system with extra-system parties is a challenge because of the abnormality of the pre-1994 domestic political landscape. It was therefore decided to exclude the 1994 elections for comparative purposes and focus on the second (1999) election in this article.

The 1999 elections and voter volatility

Table 2. Electoral volatility in the 1999 elections

<i>Within-system – vote share of established parties</i>	<i>Extra-system – vote share of new parties</i>
7 parties	9 parties
93.3%	6.4 %

Source: Author.

The second electoral cycle gave clear indications that South Africa's political party system was consolidating because of the overwhelming vote share that went to within-system parties. The extra-system parties only managed to attract 6 % of the vote share. The number of new parties that failed to reach the quota for parliamentary representation dropped significantly from 12 to 3 parties. This high success rate of new entrants explains the relatively low attrition rate between the 1990 and the 2004 elections. The attrition rate dropped from 57 % in 1994 to 31 % in 1999 and only 5 of the new parties that had contested in the 1999 elections failed to register or to partake in the next elections (The Independent Electoral Commission 1999).

The number of within-system parties increased as more parties contested in an election for the second time, thus acquiring a more permanent presence in parliament. They started to institutionalise their presence in parliament when they also partook in the 2004 elections. The new within-system parties were the United Democratic Movement (UDM), African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), United Christian Democratic Party (UCSP) and Azanian People's Association (AZAPO). The one omission was the Keep it Straight and Simple Party (Kiss) Party that partook in the 1994 elections, disappeared in the 1999 elections and then reappeared in the next four elections.

2004 elections and voter volatility

The number of within-system parties expanded from seven to 12 with the UDM, ACDP, UCDM, AZAPO and Kiss Party participating in their second election. The number of new parties remained constant with nine new parties that contested in the 2004 elections and a total of 21 parties contested in the elections. The majority of voter support flowed again to the within-system parties who were participating in their second or third elections.

Table 3. Electoral volatility in the 2004 elections

<i>Within-system – vote share established parties</i>	<i>Extra-system – vote share of new parties</i>
12 parties	9 parties
96.4 %	3.6 %

Source: Author.

The only extra-system party that was able to attract some support was the newly formed Independent Democrats (ID) when their leader Patricia de Lille split from the PAC. The ID as extra-system party gained 1.73 % of the votes and obtained seven representatives in the National Assembly. However, the rest of the new parties were obliterated, with ten parties who failed to reach the quota for parliamentary representatives for an aggregate vote of less than 2% support. It was thus not a surprise that seven of the new parties disappeared in the five- year cycle to the next elections in 2009 for a stable attrition rate of 33 % (The Independent Electoral Commission 2009).

2009 elections and voter volatility

The 2009 elections were again hallmarked by another upsurge in the number of political parties that contested in the elections, which grew from 21 parties in the 2004 elections to 28. The number of new parties also increased from nine to 14 new parties. The within-system parties remained basically the same, with the only addition being the ID while the New National Party dissolved within the ranks of the DA. The extra-system parties now totalled 14 and their numbers were enhanced by the inclusion of a sizeable new party, the newly formed Congress of the People (Cope). Mosiuoa “Terror” Lekota, a senior ANC member and former premier of the Free State, broke away with a few ANC heavy weights to form a new party. The Cope Party had immediate success with a vote share of 7.42 % and 30 members in parliament. The new broke-away party boosted the ranks of the extra-system parties and resulted in a substantial number of votes that flowed from the within-system to the extra-system parties. This resulted in a higher electoral volatility of 8.4 %, higher than during previous cycles (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2019). However, the majority of votes were again cast for the more within-system parties that contested in their second or third elections.

Table 4. Electoral volatility in the 2009 elections.

<i>Within-system – vote share of established parties</i>	<i>Extra-system – vote share of new parties</i>
12 parties	14 parties
91.6%	8.4 %

Source: Author.

The fluctuation of support to the extra-system parties was predominantly caused by the split of COPE from the ANC and their 7.42% electoral support. The vote share for the rest of the 13 new parties remained at a very low level of only 1 %. The 14 new parties did not attract much support and 12 failed to reach the quota for parliamentary representation. It was thus hardly surprising that 13 parties that contested in the 2009 vanished during the next cycle before the 2014 elections (The Independent Electoral Commission 2014). However, the attrition rate of 13 parties escalated to 46 %, substantially higher than the international trend.

2014 elections and voter volatility

The upward trend in the number of political parties that registered for the 2014 elections broke the previous record of 28 parties when 29 parties registered and participated in the 2014 elections. The number of new parties remained stable at 15 new parties. The ID Party of De Lille amalgamated with the DA, which accounted for the party's non-participation in the 2014 elections.

The within-system parties remained numerically on the same level with two additions, but also two omissions. The two new parties that joined the ranks of extra-system parties were the Azanian People's Convention (APC) and Al Jamah-ah. An interesting newcomer was the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which had split from the ANC and attracted more than a million votes when it contested in the elections.

The trend established during the previous election cycles continued, with the majority of votes again flowing to within-system parties, which amassed 90.8 % of the vote share. In the 2009 elections, it was the newly formed COPE Party that boosted the support for extra-system parties. In the 2014 elections, the newcomer, the EFF, received 6.35 % of votes (The Independent Electoral Commission 2014). The EFF was therefore predominantly responsible for the loss of electoral support of within-system parties in 2014.

Table 5. Electoral volatility in the 2014 elections

<i>Within-system – vote share of established parties</i>	<i>Extra-system – vote share of new parties</i>
15 parties	14 parties
90.8 %	9.2 %

Source: Author.

The attrition rate of the new parties increased after the 2014 elections. The rate had remained in the 40% bracket in previous elections. With 12 parties that disappeared before the

2019 election, the attrition rate rose to 41 % (The Independent Electoral Commission 2019). The number of parties who failed to reach the quota necessary for parliamentary representation rose to 18 parties. They included the Kiss Party, which had again failed to attract substantial support and disappeared from the scene.

2019 elections and voter volatility

The number of parties continued to skyrocket from 29 parties that participated in the 2014 elections to 48 in the 2019 elections. The number of within-system parties dropped to 14 with the departure of the Kiss Party. The within-system parties again enjoyed overwhelming support, confirming the trend seen since the first elections. The extra-system parties were again annihilated and the attrition rate will certainly rise in the period leading up to the 2024 elections.

Table 6. Electoral volatility in the 2019 elections

<i>Within-system – vote share of established parties</i>	<i>Extra-system – vote share of new parties</i>
14 parties	34 parties
96.3 %	3.7 %

Source: Author.

The number of parties that failed to reach the parliamentary quota and thus lost their deposits rose to 33. It is highly likely that the attrition rate in the 2024 elections will exceed 55 % if the trend continues.

The electoral volatility trend in South Africa in comparison to the international trend

South Africa's electoral volatility within-system and extra-system since the first democratic elections in 1994 yields interesting inferences and extrapolations. To allow an analysis of the electoral volatility, it was essential to adopt an unconventional approach, because democracy and free political party formation were suppressed and impeded for many decades under the apartheid regime. The benchmark for within-system parties was adapted to allow a political party that had partaken for the second time in an election to be included as an established party. The reasons are twofold: South Africa's democracy is still in its infancy and the abnormal circumstances created during the apartheid era necessitate a more accommodating approach. In fact, a political party's second round of participation in an election normally excludes it from the new party category.

The findings of this investigation were that the vote share of the established political parties in South Africa from 1994 to the 2019 elections remained constant. The vote share for the established parties varied between 90.8 % and 96.4 %. The highest vote share deviation in the

extra-system was in 2014, when the votes earned by within-systems parties dropped to 90.8 %, which can largely be attributed to the EFF that had split from the ANC. The EFF got 6.4 % of the 9.2% vote share of extra-system parties. However, in the following election cycle in 2019, when the EFF moved to the within-system category, the vote share of extra-system parties dropped to 3.7 %, while the established within-systems parties' vote share was 96.3 % (The Independent Electoral Commission 2019).

A comparison of South Africa's electoral volatility with the international trend makes for interesting reading. South Africa's total electoral volatility is evidenced by the formation of 88 new political parties since 1994 (on average 15 per election cycle). This is much higher than the volatility experienced by established first and second wave democracies. However, the initial expectation was that electoral volatility in South Africa would be lower than in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere in Africa.

Although South Africa experienced a very high frequency of new party formation (on average 15 per election cycle), its political party system electoral volatility is still similar to that of a first and second wave consolidated democracy. The vote share in Europe between within-system and extra-system parties is 98 % to 2 %, while in South Africa it is 94 % to 6 %. In the United States the vote share is 98 % to 2 %, which is just marginally different from the pattern in South Africa.

The electoral volatility in Benin is 20 times higher than in South Africa – the ratio of votes earned by within-system parties to extra-system parties in Benin is 60 % to 40 %. It is interesting to observe that in the Eastern European post-communist countries, there is only about a quarter of South Africa's parties on average in every election, but in these new political parties attract almost 44 % of the aggregate vote share. This is in sharp contrast to South Africa, where only 6 % of the vote share is channelled to extra-system political parties.

Table 7. Electoral volatility comparison between regions and countries

<i>Country</i>	<i>Within-system volatility</i>	<i>Extra-system volatility</i>
First and second wave democracies in Europe	98 %	2 %
South Africa	94 %	6 %
Benin (Africa)	60 %	40 %
Third and fourth wave democracies in Eastern bloc (post-communist) countries	56 %	44 %

Source: Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017).

The problem of small parties

An intriguing aspect of South Africa's political party system is that it resembles first and second wave democracies where within-system parties enjoy high support. However, when it comes to the formation of new political parties, the South African system (unlike the political systems of first and second wave democracies) displays low levels of stability and high levels of flux.

The challenge is how to explain the continuous, almost perpetual formation of new political parties despite their low success rate and the high attrition rate. The failure and attrition of new parties does not seem to inhibit the formation of an ever-increasing number of new parties. In fact, the number of new entrants increased to a record 28 in the 2019 elections.

Table 8 contains the number of new political parties that appeared on the scene before each election cycle in South Africa. The number has increased incrementally year by year, from nine new parties in 1999 to 34 in 2019. Despite the lack of electoral support enjoyed by new parties and their high attrition rate, their numbers keep increasing. After an initial stabilisation during the middle period, when the attrition rate stabilised between 30 % and 40 %, the formation rate accelerated and rose sharply to an unprecedented 46 % after the 2014 election cycle.

Table 8. Attrition rate of small parties in South Africa

<i>Election year</i>	<i>New parties</i>	<i>Disappeared after election</i>	<i>Attrition rate</i>
1999	09 new	05 disappeared	31 %
2004	09 new	07 disappeared	33 %
2009	14 new	13 disappeared	46 %
2014	14 new	12 disappeared	41 %
2019	28 new	Not available	Not available

Source: Author.

The initial and reasonable expectation in the article was that the number of new parties would drop to a single figure to align with international trends, indicating that democratic consolidation was taking place. However, the graph pointed in the opposite direction – the figure actually rose to a new record of 14 new political parties before the 2009 elections. The record stood for only ten years. In the 2019 elections, there was a total of 28 new parties. It came as no surprise that more than half of the 28 parties failed to reach the required threshold for a parliamentary representative.

Lipset and Rokkan's (1967, 105) 'freezing' of political parties certainly did not happen in South Africa's dynamic political party spectrum. The average of 15 new entrants per election cycle distorts the picture, because the formation of new parties during the first few elections were certainly within reasonable limits and more restricted. The increase in the number of new parties

created during the 2009 and 2014 elections (14 new parties) and in the 2019 elections (28 parties) gives a much better picture of the phenomenon.

The formation of new political parties in South Africa

It is evident that the reasons for the upward trend in the number of new political parties are multifaceted and that the underlying motivations are difficult to narrow down. The reasons for new party creations observed in most democracies will most likely apply. These reasons include the poor socio-economic performance of the ruling party. New parties may be optimistic and think that they can rectify the country's economic woes and provide voters with an alternative.

Tavits (2008, 95) emphasises that fragmented party systems and permissive electoral systems are normally associated with higher voter volatility and allow the voters to defect to more options. In less fragmented systems, such as in established democracies in Europe, divisions among parties are rarer, it is harder to defect from established parties and voters are less likely to do so (Beetham 1994, 156).

The Proportional Representation electoral system that is used in South Africa certainly encourages new parties to form and participate in the elections (Hague and Harrop 2007, 187). Only a threshold of only about 45 000 votes may be sufficient to ensure a seat in parliament. During the pre-democratic era, the First Past the Post-electoral system yielded disproportionate representation, with parties such as the Herstigte Nasionale Party (HNP) (Reconstituted National Party) attracting 13% of the national vote in the 1960s without being able to win a single seat in parliament (Kleynhans 1986, 33). If the PR system was in operation, support for the HNP would have translated into 52 members in a 400-member legislative council.

Mainwaring, Gervasoni and Espana-Najera (2017, 612) explain that parties in long established democracies develop strong organisations with deep connections to voters and organised interests, whereas most third and fourth wave democracies lack strong political party systems. Studies point out that volatility was lower in Latin American democracies with strong within-system parties. These studies confirm that older democracies have lower electoral volatility and a lower vote share among new parties.

The formation of new political parties in South Africa is to a certain extent also the result of political opportunism and a varying degree of political naivety. There is also the contributing factor that political figures wish to retain relevance and the attention of the public. Two candidates from small parties certainly overestimated their support, namely Hlaudi Motsoeneng from the African Content Movement (fewer than 5,000 votes) and Andile Mngxitama (fewer than 20, 000 votes) (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2019). Motsoeneng declared at press conferences that he would be the next president of South Africa, but his support was well below the 1% mark

eventually while the latter was of the opinion that his party would obtain 24 seats in parliament (News24 2018).

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to develop an analytical construct as a benchmark for determining acceptable levels of new political party formation. The analysis of established and new democracies suggests that a number of less than ten new political parties is an acceptable standard.

The South African political party system behaves in much the same fashion as the within-system political party system in consolidated democracies that were formed before the third wave of democratisation in the 1970s. In earlier consolidated democracies, the vote share of extra-system parties was restricted and remained very low. However, it is curious that the formation of new parties defies the stability and democratic consolidation indicated by the limited support enjoyed by extra-system parties. There are multiple reasons for the phenomenon. In addition to the conventional reasons, political opportunism and political naivety contribute to the formation of new parties. However, despite the increasing number of new entrants, their impact on stability and consolidation in the country is negligible, and more research into the underlying reasons for this is required.

References

- Bak, Nelleke. 2004. *Completing Your Thesis*. Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers.
- Bértoa, Fernando, and Zsolt Enyedi. 2014. "Party System Closure and Openness: Conceptualisation, Operationalisation and Validation." *Party Politics* 22, no. 3: 265-277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068814549340>.
- Beetham, David. 1994. "Conditions for Democratic Consolidation." *Review of African Political Economy* 21, no. 60: 157-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249408704053>.
- Birch, Sarah. 2003. *Electoral System and Political Transformation in Post-Communist Europe*. New York: MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403938763>.
- Brand South Africa*. 2014. "A Look Back at National Election Results". *Brand South Africa*, May 8, 2014. Available at <https://www.brandsouthafrica.com/governance/developmentnews/a-look-back-at-national-election-results>.
- Dalton, Russel. 2007. "Partisan Mobilisation, Cognitive Mobilisation and the Changing American Electorate." *Electoral Studies* 26, no. 2: 274-286. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2006.04.009>.
- Duverger, Maurice. 1994. *Political Parties*. London: Methuen.
- Feree, Karen. 2010. "The Social Origins of Electoral Volatility in Africa." *British Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 4: 759-779. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000244>.

- Geers, Sabine, and Jeper Strömbäck. 2018. "Patterns of Intra-election Volatility: The Impact of Political Knowledge." *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 29, no. 3: 361-380. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2018.1531010>.
- Hague, Rod and Martin Harrop. 2007. *Comparative Government and Politics: An Introduction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kefford, Glenn. 2018. "The Minor Parties' Campaigns." In *Double Disillusion: The 2016 Australian Federal Election*, edited by Anika Gauja, Peter Chen, Jennifer Curtin, Juliet Pietsch, 335-357. Acton, ACT: ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/DD.04.2018.15>
- Kleynhans, Willem. 1986. *Die Volledige Verkiezingsuitslae van Suid-Afrika 1910–1986*. Pretoria-Wes: Aurora Drukkers.
- Lipset, Seymour, and Stein Rokkan. 1967. *Systems and Voters Alignments, Cross National Perspectives*. New York: Free Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott, Carlos Gervasoni, and Annabelle Espana-Najera. 2017. "Extra- and Within-System Electoral Volatility." *Party Politics*: 23, no. 6: 612–635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815625229>.
- Mair, Peter. 2008. "Electoral volatility and the Dutch Party System: a comparative perspective." *Acta Politica* 43: 235-253. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2008.1>.
- Marrian, Natasha. 2019. "Record number of Political Parties contesting 2019 polls." *Mail and Guardian*, March 20, 2019. Available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-03-20-record-number-of-political-parties-contesting-2019-polls/>
- Möller, Judith, Clause De Vreese, Frank Esser, and Ruth Kunz. 2014. "Pathway to Political Participation: The Influence of Online and Offline News Media on Internal Efficacy and Turnout of First-time voters." *American Behavioural Scientists* 58, no. 5: 689-700. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0002764213515220>.
- News24. 2018. "I'm SA's Future President – Hludi Motsoeneng." *News24*, November 21, 2018. <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/im-sas-future-president-hludi-motsoeneng-20181121>
- Powell, Elanor, and Joshua Tucker. 2014. "Revisiting electoral volatility in post-communist countries; new data, new results and new approaches." *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 1: 123-147. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123412000531>.
- Szawiel, Tadeusz. 2009. *Democratic Consolidation in Poland: Support for Democracy and the Party System*. Melbourne: ANU Press.
- The Independent Electoral Commission. 1999. "Election results of the 1999 election." <https://www.elections.org.za/content/NPEPublicReports/1/Detailed%20Results/National.pdf>
- The Independent Electoral Commission. 2009. "Election results of the 2009 election." Last modified December 17, 2014. <https://www.elections.org.za/content/NPEPublicReports/146/Detailed%20Results/National.pdf>.

- The Independent Electoral Commission. 2014. "Election results of the 2014 election." Last modified May 2014. <https://www.elections.org.za/content/NPEPublicReports/291/Results%20Report/National.pdf>
- The Independent Electoral Commission. 2019. "Election results of the 2019 election." Last modified December 10, 2019. <https://www.elections.org.za/content/NPEPublicReports/699/Results%20Report/National.pdf>
- The South African*. 2019. "2019 Election results: Final totals with all votes counted". *The South African*, May 11, 2019. Available at <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/2019-south-africa-election-results-national-provincial-all-votes/>
- Tavits, Margit. 2008. "Party Systems in the Making: The Emergence of New Parties in New Democracies." *British Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 1: 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000069>.
- Thapa, Manehs. 1999. "Politics of Fragmentation." *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 1: 2386–2387.