Abstract: Since democratization in 1994, South Africa has been widely recognized as a clear case of one-party dominance. What accounts for the electoral success of the African National Congress (ANC), despite South Africa’s diversity and multiple political cleavages? Drawing on the extant literature and semi-structured elite interviews, this paper argues that the ANC built party-voter linkages with a wide swath of the South African electorate, maintained the loyalty of a diverse group of elite factions, and has benefitted from alliances with key organizations able to deliver electoral support. Each of these factors has deteriorated since the mid-2000s, but this weakening has not produced changes in national election results. Instead, opposition parties have struggled to gain support, attempting to overcome both their lack of governing records and the ANC’s success in maintaining party images defined by race. So far opposition parties have made gains in only a few important, but demographically unusual, areas of the country. Thus the South African case highlights the importance of viable opposition parties emerging if party system change is to occur, and the possible importance of sub-national elections in them doing so.
Since the first multiracial, democratic election in 1994, South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC) has dominated every part of the country’s politics. In addition to winning four national elections with no vote percentage lower than 63 percent, the ANC has also enjoyed long stretches of governing all nine provinces and large proportions of municipal governments. If, as Duverger wrote, a dominant party is one whose “influence” is superior to all others for a generation or more so that its rule becomes “identified with an epoch” (1954: 308-9), the ANC is a clear and prime example of democratic dominance in the world today.

The ANC’s success can be found in the realization of a remarkable coalition of voters, interests, and aligned organizations. By the same token, South African politics since the mid- to late-2000s have been shaped by the weakening of this coalition and the resulting intraparty factionalism. However, such weakening has not yet translated into national shifts in electoral results. Instead, voters disenchanted with ANC rule have struggled to find alternatives. Thus the South African case highlights the importance of viable opposition parties in the process of dominant party decline, and the possible importance of sub-national elections in doing so.

**Maintenance of ANC Dominance**

The sources of ANC’s dominance can be found in each of the three groups of explanations put forward in the conference framework. As the foremost anti-apartheid movement, it came to power in 1994 with strong partisan loyalty amongst voters due to its role in bringing liberation. As a classic congress party, with an “electoral appeal… to national unity and integration rather than division” (Gunther and Diamond 2003: 184), its spatial position captured a large swath of the South African electorate. This positioning was reinforced by its pre-election coalition with the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African
Trade Unions (COSATU), co-opting the only groups that may have had the organizational strength to pose challenges to the ANC’s left. Most explanations for the ANC’s continued maintenance of its dominance since the early days of democracy lie with its management of its wide coalition, both within its own organizational structures and among voters.

South Africa’s pure proportional representation electoral system could have easily resulted in severe fragmentation of the party system. It was chosen in a context of remarkable levels of ethnolinguistic diversity and some ongoing conflicts along some of those cleavages. Instead, the main politicized cleavage remained race, not ethnicity. Casual observers of South African politics often see its elections as examples of “racial censuses.” In this account, most black South Africans vote for the ANC, occasionally one party enjoys support from one black ethnic group (such as the Inkatha Freedom Party’s success among Zulus in the 1990s), and voters from South Africa’s three racial minority groups (whites, Coloureds, and Indians) support a variety of opposition parties. In the local elections in which political parties are more evenly matched, results only turn on parties’ relative abilities to mobilize their supporters to vote.

However, several scholars have shown a more subtle dynamic at work than voters simply voting their identities. The number of survey respondents who self-identify primarily based on their race is much lower than the number of voters who appear to vote based on race (Mattes 1995; Ferree 2006). Instead, race predicts voters’ evaluations of parties’ policies and performances in office. In South Africa, if a party is perceived as a ‘white party,’ then its policies are likely perceived to benefit whites most and therefore those from other races do not support it (Mattes 1995; Mattes, Taylor, and Africa 1999; Mattes and Piombo 2001; Ferree 2006). Whites and Africans both perceive the “other’s” parties as racially exclusive. Presented with two political narratives about the sources and solutions of South Africa’s problems, voters believe the
party that appears to them to be inclusive and evaluate both the opposition and the ANC accordingly. These two perceptions in turn influence vote choice (Ferree 2006: 809, 814; see also Mattes, Taylor, and Africa 1999, Schulz-Herzenberg 2007). It is not race itself that drives voting behavior, but what race implies: vote decisions do not reflect loyalty to a group identity but rather use race as a heuristic for understanding party platforms.

After the transitional period of the Government of National Unity (GNU, 1994-1996), in which inter-party cooperation was institutionalized formally, the ANC sought to weaken its opposition opponents. Ferree (2011) argues that the ANC actively seeks to frame opposition parties as ‘white,’ increasing the salience of race in voter’s minds, rather than ethnicity, class, or another factor that would lead to weaker support for the ANC.¹ For much of the period of ANC dominance, opposition parties have lacked governing records to point to in campaigns, leaving voters without any information other than this framing on which to base their electoral choices (Schulz-Herzenberg 2007; Ferree 2011; Langfield 2014). The ANC’s successful assertion of itself as the party of inclusion, and the opposition parties’ failure to realign voters around other issues, has produced the voting patterns that largely continue to this day.

The ANC also sought to co-opt opposition leaders when it could. The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), an ethnic Zulu party that historically found itself at odds with the ANC (at times violently), was part of the GNU and held the provincial government of KwaZulu-Natal in the early years of democracy. This geographic and ethnic base challenged the completeness of ANC dominance. Rumors of an impending merger surfaced as early as 1997 (Piper 2002: 84) and IFP leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi was offered the deputy presidency in 1999. (Hardliners in the IFP made him turn it down.) Ultimately, changing demographic patterns weakened the IFP, as

¹ For an example of this framing strategy, see Jackson Mthembu, “Helen Zille and perpetuation of White domination,” *ANC Today*, 14: 5, 28 February-6 March, 2014. www.anc.org.za/docs/anctoday/2014/at05.htm
migration to urban areas weakened the loyalties and accompanying land distribution tied to traditional Zulu hierarchies (Piper 2002). The IFP struggled to survive much of the early 2000s, vacillating between shoring up its Zulu identity and trying to win over conservative voters from all over South Africa. Its support declined steadily over these years, winning less than five percent of the vote in the 2009 national elections (Piombo 2005; Piper 2005; IEC 2009). The nomination of a Zulu, Jacob Zuma, to lead the ANC has not helped its recovery.

Along with this widening and strengthening of its broad multiethnic support, the ANC also formed a wide coalition of economic interests and groups. In 1996, South Africa adopted a more neoliberal economic policy, the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan, in accordance with the Washington Consensus’s emphasis on attracting international investment. GEAR was designed and adopted within the President’s Office and finance ministry, with no input sought or expected from others. There was widespread questioning of how COSATU and the SACP might reconcile themselves to GEAR, but also widespread reports of the ANC leadership shutting down any dissent or debate about the policy (McKinley 2001; Prevost 2007). The results for the ANC were a clear expansion of the policy space it holds; the formation of a cross-class coalition of business interests, the working class, and the unemployed and informally employed poor (Seekings 2005); and the successful organizational cooptation by the dominant party of its possible challengers to the left.

The resulting policy of large business growth is also where a form of patronage can be seen. Some ANC leaders, particularly if they ran afoul of top leaders, would be – in the parlance of the ANC – redeployed to the business world. In fitting with the wider neoliberal policies, these corporate activities were rarely in state-run enterprises but instead often served to integrate South Africa’s corporate sector. But such “redeployments” also gave the ANC a way to manage
some potentially difficult factional divisions. For example, after Cyril Ramaphosa somewhat unexpectedly lost to Thabo Mbeki to become ANC President in 1997, he resigned his parliamentary seat and embarked on a business career that made him one of the richest men in South Africa. Only after Mbeki’s political career ended did Ramaphosa return to the ANC’s leadership, becoming the party’s deputy president in 2012. The ANC’s view that all aspects of South African life needed integration by top party leaders gave it another tool for managing factionalism.

The broader question of more traditional patronage spending or the use of clientelism to strengthen party-voter linkages is often dismissed by scholars of South Africa, who argue that the ANC does not use state resources to buy support as a primary strategy (e.g., Ferree 2011: 28-9). Others provide anecdotal evidence of some patronage spending, with political participation linked to access to housing or jobs (Staniland 2008), or the building of schools or health clinics used shore up support in particular areas (Seekings 2005). Opposition party leaders do accuse the ANC of using state resources to shore up support among their core supporters. Some admit that this can merely take the form of a state official attending an event opening (e.g. a new health facility) and making sure there are ANC banners also visible. In a context of a long backlog of needed development projects large and small, arguing that the placement or beneficiaries of a particular project is a partisan choice while other, similar partisan supporters do without becomes quite difficult. In sum, many are convinced that the ANC uses clientelism and patronage spending for electoral gain, while others maintain that, while a degree of such behavior must

exist, it does not serve as a primary means of maintaining or creating support for the dominant party.

Part of the problem with understanding the degree and nature of the ANC’s possible use of patronage is of course a lack of data that might allow these possibilities to be teased out. Additionally, there is a lack of transparency in campaign finance regulations so the amount of resources available to parties is also unknown. Campaign donations are legal with no reporting requirements whatsoever.\(^4\) Levels of state funding of political parties is based on the number of legislative seats a party won in the last election, grossly advantaging the ANC for ‘normal’ democratic campaign activity.

In contrast, there is widespread evidence of officials using state resources for personal enrichment, such as allegedly arranging kickbacks in an arms deal (Feinstein 2007), the current Nkandla controversy over the use of public funds to upgrade security measures at President Zuma’s private residence, and accusations of awarding state jobs to family members.\(^5\) While these scandals have posed some of the most high-profile threats to the ANC’s reputation and relationship with voters, opposition groups have yet to leverage them for any national electoral advantage.

In sum, the ANC built and maintained its dominance in elections and government through many of the mechanisms typically identified in the wider literature on dominant party systems. Dominance emerged through a wide coalition of interest united in their opposition to

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\(^4\) Sometimes a campaign donor will reveal information. For example, in February 2014, the bank Absa announced it would end all political donations. In the process, it disclosed that it had been giving to all parties with three or more seats in the National Assembly; it did not provide specifics on how much it had been donating nor for how long it had done so. Occasional anecdotes like this are the extent of our knowledge about campaign finance in South Africa. See “Absa announces end of political party funding,” Mail & Guardian, 24 February 2014. mg.co.za/article/2014-02-24-absa-announces-end-of-political-party-funding

\(^5\) For example, see Zukile Majova. “Jobs for pals’ claim at eThekwini council.” The Mercury. 21 April 2006, p. 1. The idea was echoed in interviews with: Cape Town DA Councilor, 9 February 2007a; Senior Durban DA councilor, 8 August 2008; Senior Durban MF councilor, 13 August 2008.
apartheid. It was solidified through broad, even bordering illogical, organization alliances and the maintenance of race as a key political factor in many voters’ minds. Therefore the management and coordination of the ANC’s intraparty coalition, both at an organizational and leadership level and among voters, is the key factor in maintaining its dominant position.

Decline of ANC Dominance?

When discussing the decline of ANC dominance, one must first acknowledge that the ANC has barely begun to do so. Its support in national elections peaked at 70 percent in 2004 and fell to 66 percent in 2009. It is, at the writing of this draft, expected to lose more support in the May 2014 elections; in November 2013, only 53 percent of voters said they would vote for the ANC, a decline of 10 percent compared to a similar time before the 2009 election. But no one expects support for the ANC to fall below 50 percent. However, these numbers do represent some lessening of support, and the patterns of declining support caused the ANC to lose control of the Western Cape provincial government in 2009 – a symbolically important milestone. In the 2011 municipal elections, the ANC faced the strongest challenges yet in its traditional stronghold of the Eastern Cape: it won only 51.9 percent of the vote in Port Elizabeth, the province’s largest city. Based on polling data, the question in 2014 is whether the ANC will lose its majorities for the first time in the Gauteng and Northern Cape provincial legislatures.

The sources of this nascent decline are found largely in the ruling party’s own organizational failures and intraparty factionalism. Some demographic change can also be seen to be harming the ruling party’s continued dominance, but this too can be seen as the result of

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6 “Support for political parties.” Ipsos. www.ipsos.co.za/SitePages/Support%20for%20political%20parties.aspx
7 Ibid.
failures of the party. Furthermore, so far the effects have resulted largely in declining participation rather than any shifts to support another party.

Surveys show that nearly half of black African voters are independents, not strong partisans for the “black” parties they tend to support in elections (Ferree 2006: 808; Schulz-Herzenberg 2007: 121). Those dissatisfied with the ANC do switch parties but not in great numbers and in patterns that do not contribute to significant growth for opposition parties. For example in 2009, when the ANC lost the Western Cape, the victorious DA gained large numbers of ANC voters but not many black African ones (Jolobe 2009). Additionally, both voter registration rates and voter turnout have declined significantly (Schulz-Herzenberg 2009). In short, the ANC’s electoral support still appears as nearly as broad as ever, but that support is shallow and increasingly uncertain.

Demographic changes contribute to perceived vulnerabilities in the ANC’s voter base. A third of the South African electorate came of age after the end of apartheid, while the 2014 election will be the first for the ‘Born Frees,’ the generation born after the end of apartheid. The literature on dominant party systems points to generational realignment as a possible source of party system change. However, survey research finds that the Born Frees are less committed to democracy and less satisfied with the functioning of their government than earlier generations are (Mattes 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, then, only about a third registered for the 2014 election, compared to an overall voter registration rate of 80.5 percent. So while the ANC is failing to mobilize new potential voters, so are opposition parties; in the short term, election results will be based on much the same voters as in the past.

Thus there is widespread dissatisfaction amongst the South African electorate, but that dissatisfaction has not coalesced into any coherent shift in politics. Its sources are two-fold and

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related. First, South Africans, especially the ANC’s traditional bases among the black poor, are increasingly unhappy with their economic prospects; the income gap between the richest and poorest blacks is now greater than between blacks and whites (Mattes 2012). The country entered its first recession since apartheid in mid-2009. Along with such macroeconomic struggles, dissatisfaction has focused on the government’s failure to deliver basic services, a decade of widespread and increasingly violent protests against this failure, and the purported failure of the government to respond to these protests productively (Letsholo 2006; Atkinson 2008; Alexander 2010; Grant 2014). Meanwhile, many of its leaders are caught up in corruption scandals, contributing to the public’s cynicism.

The second source of dissatisfaction is infighting within the ANC. Under Mbeki’s leadership, the party centralized its organizational structures. Much of the ensuing criticism focused on Mbeki’s personal leadership style, and potentially fractious disputes began to emerge. The ANC’s internal rules are perceived to silence dissent and have appeared to many to be used to stop grassroots critics of the leadership from gaining ground within the party (Mattes 2002: 25; Gumede 2005; Gevisser 2009: 325). With no way to productively cope with dissent internally, ANC candidate selection processes for provincial and municipal elections became difficult in several places in 2002 and 2004. Increasingly disputes and stalemates were resolved through ad hoc elite intervention. This produced an approach to dissent and debate within the party characterized by belated, inconsistent, and forced compromises. Not surprisingly, this approach proved unsustainable.

The degree of internal party democracy has long been an issue even for those near the top of the leadership hierarchy, as the ANC has transitioned from an underground liberation movement to a political party operating in a democracy (Prevost 2007). Part of the problem was
a difference in organizational cultures based around activists’ apartheid-era experiences. For example, one elected official who spent time in exile lamented party colleagues airing their opinions in public rather than working within disciplined structures to “sort things out.”

“Inxiles,” those activists who worked underground in South Africa, were more likely to echo another elected official who said, “I don’t know what’s the big deal; any political formation is going to have different strands of thoughts.” The debate was not just over economic policies or leadership styles, but also over what could be debated and whether public debate should be happening at all.

The most debilitating manifestation of the factionalism in the ANC was the 2007 party leadership battle between incumbent Thabo Mbeki and his erstwhile deputy Jacob Zuma, as many of the former’s “detractors coalesced in support of Zuma as a way of voicing their dissatisfaction with” Mbeki (Gevisser 2009: 323). In the first contested leadership contest in decades, the party became deeply paralyzed between the two camps. Tensions within the ANC became “volatile, not in the sense of violence, but in terms of ideological debate.” Zuma’s victory resulted in the resignation of Mbeki as President in September 2008. In the aftermath, some in the Mbeki faction resigned while others were pushed out of their leadership posts.

Despite the growing service delivery protests, the leadership fights, and the organizational problems, the ANC – with Zuma as its presidential candidate – still won the 2009 elections handily. It “successfully framed the 2009 election as a face-off between well-off blacks and whites on the one hand and the poor black majority on the other – rather than on an

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9 Interview. Durban ANC councilor. 6 March 2007.
10 Interview. Durban ANC councilor. 7 March 2007.
11 History had prevented contested leadership successions. Oliver Tambo was selected by a few fellow leaders in exile, since an internal party election could not be held. Mandela’s selection was simply a given after he was released from prison. The ANC departed from its “usual” procedures when Mbeki was made deputy president, with party heavyweights deciding among themselves prior to the ANC conference. For the formal party vote, Cyril Ramaphosa withdrew from consideration and Mbeki stood unopposed (Gumede 2005: 44-49).
examination of the government’s record in power” (Gumede 2009). To date, the ANC has lost control only of the Cape Town city government in 2006 (rather serendipitously on the part of the DA) and then the Western Cape provincial government in 2009 (where ANC infighting combined with the DA’s ability to use its governing record in Cape Town in the campaign). However, overall the ANC has not paid for its internal problems at the national polls.

Along with being a manifestation of the problems described above, intraparty factionalism is weakening the organizational capacities of the ANC and its allies. Those structures involved in voter mobilization, including local branches and candidate recruitment processes, are particularly affected. Candidate selection processes for provincial and municipal elections have proved fraught since at least 2000, with rejected candidates defecting from the party and the party leadership expelling those who do not follow its direction. In 2002, the ANC required its party branches to reorganize to align with municipal ward boundaries. This required the merger of smaller branches, rivalries for the resulting fewer leadership positions, and the collapse of ANC activity in several areas (Gumede 2009: 43). The Western Cape ANC party structures never recovered from the Mbeki-Zuma fight and became so paralyzed that in late 2008 the ANC failed to register candidates on time for local by-elections in the province.\textsuperscript{13} In the 2009 provincial election, it won just 26 percent of the vote.

The lead-up to the 2014 elections has seen renewed intra-party factionalism, but this time the divisions are along organizational lines rather than having the personalistic nature more common in the past. Like the ANC’s voting base, many within the ANC’s coalition are increasingly dissatisfied with the nature and lack of economic growth. The August 2012 shooting of 34 striking miners at the Marikana platinum mine and the subsequent apparent police

cover-up has become a key grievance for many. Two significant cracks have appeared in the ANC’s left wing.

First, former Zuma ally Julius Malema, who led the ANC’s Youth League – for decades one of the most organizationally important parts of the ANC – became publicly critical of the ANC’s leadership and its economic policies. He was eventually expelled from the ANC in February 2012 and founded the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party later that year. Malema’s populist appeal has produced some limited support in polls, especially in Limpopo and the Northwest, two provinces that have not previously seen any electoral challenges to the ANC’s electoral dominance. Perhaps more immediately important, in the aftermath of Malema’s expulsion the ANC also disbanded the Youth League’s national executive committee. The ANC’s ability to mobilize voters, especially younger ones, is curtailed by these events.

Second, the long-standing alliance with COSATU is weakening. COSATU has nine affiliate unions. In January 2014, the largest, the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), voted to withdraw its financial and organizational support of the ANC for the May elections over both the many scandals plaguing ANC leaders and the government’s economic failures. COSATU itself continues to support the ANC. However, COSATU is another vital piece of the ANC’s voter mobilization capabilities, so any weakening of the alliance between the party and the unions is cause for significant alarm amongst its electoral strategists.

One solution to intra-party factionalism is for one faction to defect from the ruling party and form a new party. In 2009, two months after Mbeki’s resignation, a small group of ANC leaders did precisely that, forming the Congress of the People (COPE). Many were Mbeki allies and the party’s base was clearly in the Eastern Cape among Xhosas, traditionally seen as the
ANC’s base. (Many of the ANC’s apartheid-era leaders, including Mandela, and Thabo Mbeki are Xhosa. Zuma is a Zulu.) COPE’s leadership and its base left it open to perceptions that it was the party of sore losers from the ANC leadership contest. COPE’s platform copied the ANC’s on most policy matters, but proposed a series of small institutional changes to temper the effects of single-party dominance.

COPE’s importance was symbolic, as the first significant post-apartheid breakaway from the ANC and the first South African opposition party with both a base in the black electorate and policies appealing to the median voter. But it also failed to overcome the challenge any elite breakaway from a dominant party must address: the new party’s leadership shared the ANC’s governing record and therefore was ultimately unable to distinguish itself from the ANC. Nevertheless, it arguably had some success. COPE won only nine percent of the 2009 national vote, but that was enough to make it the third-largest party in Parliament and it did join the ANC and DA as the only parties with seats in all nine provincial legislatures. COPE’s absolute results in the 2011 nationwide municipal elections were low, but they became key coalition partners of the DA in several municipalities in which no party won a majority of council seats. Their long-term role in the South African opposition is tenuous, however: in the November 2013 Ipsos poll, COPE had the support of only one percent of respondents.14

For a dominant party to lose power, however, it cannot just lose support. A significant proportion of its erstwhile supporters must vote for an opposition party. Thus far this has not occurred in South Africa. Another option is that opposition parties can merge to pool resources and voters. Attempts to do this in South Africa over the past 15 years have often ended in unmitigated electoral failure for the opposition parties, although the DA has had some success in recent years consolidating its power in the Western Cape in part by doing so (Langfield 2014).

14 “Support for political parties.” Ipsos.
The DA appears to have successfully turned the multiparty governing coalition in Cape Town into a vehicle for recruiting other party leaders to join with them. The 2010 announcement of a merger of the DA and the Independent Democrats (ID), with a strong support base among the Coloured population in the region, is the most significant of these.

Among South Africa’s political opposition, what is most common is new opposition parties emerging and winning over the supporters of older opposition parties. For example, in 2009, it appears the United Democratic Movement lost about half of its 2004 support to the new COPE. Opposition parties in South Africa have not yet determined a way to reliably expand the pool of opposition voters.

Despite its rhetoric to the contrary, the DA’s leadership appears preoccupied with the costs of its image as a white party. With candidate development among blacks proving slow, occasionally the DA’s leadership apparently tries to shortcut the process. For example, in January 2014, it announced Mamphela Ramphele, an anti-apartheid activist and the leader of the new Agang party, would be its presidential candidate. DA leader Helen Zille said,

It's difficult for me to say race should not be the issue, because people immediately say: 'oh yes, you are white and of course you would say that'... but when Dr Ramphele gets up there and says race is not the issue, fixing education is the issue; fixing healthcare is the issue; getting land reform right is the issue… then people don't focus on her race as they do with me. I’m hoping we can go beyond this and make the issues the issue in South Africa.¹⁵

Instead, the DA-Agang alliance collapsed within two weeks, when disagreements over the continued existence of Agang emerged. The episode furthered the ANC’s ability to argue that opposition parties are full of racists and co-opted opportunists. Factionalism may be hastening the ANC’s decline, but fragmentation and miscalculations are paralyzing the South African opposition’s rise.

Party System Change from Subnational Opposition Footholds

Dominant party systems become competitive when the dominant party loses electoral support and an opposition party or parties are positioned to gain at least some of its erstwhile voters. South African electoral trends show, for the most part, a relatively large decline in partisan loyalty to the ANC. This has manifested in less enthusiastic support for the party and in declining voter turnout. Neither former ANC supporters nor younger, new voters have shifted their support to opposition parties in any large numbers.

The only exceptions to this pattern are in subnational elections, in provinces and municipalities. A seven-party coalition, excluding the ANC, took control of Cape Town’s government in 2006. These parties recognized the opportunity that governing the such a large city presented, believing that if they could “demonstrate the alternative” to the ANC and create concrete governing records of what these parties actually do when holding office, their campaign promises might become more credible. Thus emerged a strategy to challenge the ANC’s racial framing of the partisan landscape: if voters were relying on race as heuristic for understanding party platforms, then providing voters with additional, different information might overcome the ANC’s framing and convince some voters to support an opposition party. The DA, the largest of the coalition partners, believes it successfully implemented the first stage of this new strategy when it won control of the surrounding province, the Western Cape, in 2009 (Langfield 2014).

Basing this strategy in Cape Town both was necessary – it was by far the largest place opposition had governed since the collapse of the IFP – and held significant drawbacks. Cape Town’s population includes proportionally many fewer blacks than any other large city in South

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16 Interviews, Cape Town Democratic Alliance councilors, 22 February 2007a, 22 February 2007b, 22 February 2007c, 4 August 2008; senior non-DA member of Cape Town government, 29 July 2008; Durban Democratic Alliance leadership member, 8 August 2008.
Africa and the Western Cape is similarly exceptional. The Ipsos poll ahead of the 2014 election shows the DA evenly matched with the ANC in the Northern Cape,\textsuperscript{17} but this province is demographically most similar to the Western Cape. Opposition control of these provinces, while potentially significant in terms of diversifying governing power in South Africa, can still be dismissed by the ANC as evidence of race-based politics. The DA’s governance record will not be enough if it comes only from primarily non-black areas.

The Cape Town coalition highlights what may become a key aspect of opposition growth over time: post-election governing coalitions between opposition parties are becoming increasingly common. After earlier democratic elections, if coalitions were necessary they were invariably between the ANC and an opposition party. Now, many of the largest opposition parties are willing – publicly and explicitly in the case of the DA and COPE – to form coalitions with one another when election results make a coalition necessary. The question is whether these coalitions will help the DA overcome its exclusive reputation or whether they will create a perception among voters that COPE is merely an illegitimate “Black DA.”\textsuperscript{18} Of course, any governance failure or scandal by such a coalition could irrevocably damage their reputations by demonstrating a failed ‘alternative to the ANC.’

Hence the emergence of COPE in the Eastern Cape (if it can escape its leaders’ ANC records), the EFF in Limpopo and North West, and the polling of the ANC below 50 percent and accompanying fragmentation of the party system in Gauteng are all seen as potentially important. They represent the possibility of an opposition party not as easy to dismiss as the DA governing a major city or even a province. If successful they would show voters how a party other than the ANC might govern and providing information to voters other than the heuristic of party labels.

\textsuperscript{17} “Support for political parties.” Ipsos.
\textsuperscript{18} Miranda Andrew. “Cosatu vows to spread anti-Cope booklet.” \textit{Mail & Guardian.} 28 January 2009.
These possibilities, at this writing, appear unlikely to materialize in the short term, with the possible exception of more frequent coalition governments. Nevertheless, they highlight an important path to the decline and even end of one-party dominance: an opposition party can gain ground when it is able to win an election for a subnational office and use the position to expand its support among voters. Many of the methods for maintaining dominance can be countered through such a strategy. In addition to providing more concrete evidence of the opposition party’s ability to govern well, controlling a city or state government can shift control of some state resources to the opposition and so begin to overcome the role of a dominant party’s patronage machine. Governing can even temper the extreme positions that can be common among opposition activists when a ruling party controls the broad center of the political spectrum (Schwedler 2006; Greene 2007).

A precondition for this source of party system change is a degree of decentralization of state structures. A fully federal system with much authority devolved to states, such as in Mexico in the waning days of the PRI’s dominance, clearly provides other parties with the ability to control taxation, policy and spending decisions that allow them to differentiate themselves from other parties (Rodriquez and Ward 1995; Bruhn 1997, 1999; Greene 2007). Some dominant party systems, like Italy and India, were decentralized just before or during the period in which the dominant party weakened and opposition parties gained (Spotts and Wieser 1986: 225; Chhibber and Kollman 2004: 137-141). In contrast, a fully centralized system, such as in Japan where the center controls fiscal policy and employs extensive clientelism, largely prevents any grassroots growth or differentiation of opposition parties (Scheiner 2006).

South Africa, without fiscal federalism but with some policymaking powers devolved to provincial and local governments, may prove sufficiently decentralized to allow such opposition
footholds to develop and grow. Thus far, only such a dynamic appears likely to capitalize on the ANC’s nascent decline. Just as the DA cannot win without shaking its exclusive (that is to say, ‘white’) reputation, a new opposition party will be unlikely achieve national change without a successful reputation to build on.

Conclusions

The ANC’s electoral strength and its potential weakening both can be attributed to its broad coalition and the dangers of factionalism contained therein. However, party system change is unlikely to come only from the deterioration of ANC support. It must be accompanied by the emergence of opposition parties able to make credible claims of offering viable alternatives; they need to be perceived as relatively centrist and representative with some concrete track records in office. While many of the largest South African opposition parties appear to understand this, they have struggled to consistently implement strategies to achieve it.

The South African case provides clear support for several of the literature’s extant theories of dominant party maintenance. The ANC’s success comes from party-voter linkages with a wide swath of the South African electorate, maintaining the loyalty of a diverse group of elite factions, and alliances with key organizations able to deliver electoral support. Any continued success will come from maintaining these factors and, conversely, the decline that can be seen is found in the weakening of each of them. Such weakening has not yet translated to much electoral change.

Other extant theories of dominant party decline find less support in South Africa. While generational change may create opportunities for opposition parties to gain support from new voters, the process of course is not automatic. If opposition parties cannot figure out how to
appeal to the Born Free generation, their coming of age will have little effect on electoral results. Similarly, neither gradual economic changes nor the 2009 recession have been significant sources of partisan change. The ANC appears able – thus far – to adjust to most of the political tests posed by these economic challenges; unless and until COSATU ends its alliance with the ruling party, the ANC seems able to respond to them.

The breadth of the ANC’s support and coalition makes the potential weaknesses of ANC dominance difficult to see in national elections. Instead, it is in the smaller ponds of sub-national government that opposition parties might build their reputations, ANC mistakes can have substantial effects, and the long-term threats to dominance can be seen. Decentralized government structures create an important opportunity both for opposition parties to build their strength, and for observers to see the strengths and weaknesses of dominant parties. The performance of parties sub-nationally indicates important information about the nature and extent of one-party dominance.
Works Cited


