POLITICAL PROMISCUITY AND BREAKAWAY PARTIES IN SOUTH AFRICA: CAREERIST DEFECTIONS AND THE EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT:

This article investigates the ongoing phenomenon of political defections and the rise of breakaway parties in South Africa, emphasising how these patterns have weakened democratic accountability over time. While party switching once operated within a formal legal framework under the country's floor-crossing provisions, its legacy continues to shape political behaviour long after its abolition. By drawing together historical developments, legislative reforms, and recent scholarly debates, the paper examines how mid-term defections and splinter-party formation disrupt the relationship between voters and the representatives elected to speak on their behalf. The study adopts a qualitative design grounded in document analysis, focusing on constitutional amendments, parliamentary reports, and contemporary academic literature. This approach enables a detailed exploration of how defection patterns emerged, who benefitted from them, and how they have shifted the balance of political power. The findings show that defections tended to advantage dominant parties while weakening smaller political formations, often precipitating their decline or disappearance. At the same time, the practice fostered a culture of political mobility linked more to career preservation than to principled ideological shifts, contributing to declining

public trust in democratic institutions. The article argues that South Africa's closed-list proportional representation system, especially when paired with permissive defection rules, creates structural incentives that disconnect politicians from direct voter accountability. The study concludes by underscoring the need for electoral reforms aimed at restoring this accountability and calls for further empirical research into patterns of political mobility in the post-2009 era.

KEYWORDS: Breakaway parties; Democratic accountability; Floor crossing; Party defection; Political promiscuity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

South Africa's democratic transition in 1994 marked a decisive break from authoritarian rule, yet the political environment that has evolved since then continues to display persistent volatility driven by party fragmentation, elite contestation, and shifting political loyalties. Recent scholarship shows that the country's political party system has become increasingly fluid over time, with elections often serving as catalysts for the formation of new political formations (Southall, 2021). This trend becomes especially visible during election cycles, when individuals or factions dissatisfied with party leadership or internal processes choose to detach themselves from established parties and establish new political homes. As noted in contemporary analyses of South African political developments, such fragmentation has grown more pronounced in the past decade, contributing to an electoral field that is increasingly crowded and highly competitive (Booysen, 2023). A notable feature of this evolving landscape is the movement of elected representatives across party lines. Members of Parliament and provincial or municipal councillors frequently resign from their seats only to reappear under a different political banner, a practice that has drawn increasing public criticism. According to Chigudu and Sithole (2022), these movements often reflect underlying intra-party tensions, personal ambitions, or struggles for positional power rather than principled ideological shifts. Such mobility raises important questions about representation, mandate integrity, and the ethical duties of elected officials. When representatives realign themselves with new parties after elections, constituents are left with leaders they did not choose, weakening public trust in the electoral process.

Observers argue that these dynamics point to an emerging culture of political self-interest, sometimes described as "politics of the stomach," where personal material gain supersedes public service (Lodge, 2020). The term captures a broad set of behaviours, including careerist

manoeuvring, opportunistic party switching, and the pursuit of positions that provide access to state resources. Lodge (2020) notes that these practices are not confined to any one political formation but are symptomatic of systemic weaknesses in party institutionalisation across the political spectrum. As a result, the electorate increasingly perceives MPs as accountable to party elites and patronage networks rather than to citizens.

The research problem addressed in this article is therefore rooted in the growing concern that political defections and the rise of breakaway parties are eroding democratic accountability in South Africa. Scholars argue that the power of political parties in a closed-list proportional representation system already distances elected officials from the electorate, and party-switching tendencies further weaken that link (Southall, 2021). The proliferation of new parties, while theoretically enhancing democratic choice, may also create confusion among voters, dilute political mandates, and contribute to institutional instability.

The first objective of this study is to trace the historical and institutional evolution of defections in South Africa, especially considering the country's experience with the former floor-crossing legislation, which was in effect between 2002 and 2009. Recent analyses continue to emphasise how that period set long-term precedents for political mobility and how its effects linger in the behaviour of elected officials today (Booysen, 2023).

The second objective is to investigate how contemporary patterns of party switching shape broader party system dynamics, including fragmentation, electoral volatility, and altered balances of power.

The third objective is to examine the implications of these developments for representative democracy, especially in terms of accountability, mandate fidelity, and public trust.

This study is significant because it contributes to ongoing debates about democratic consolidation in South Africa at a time when public confidence in political institutions is declining. Chigudu and Sithole (2022) highlight that citizens increasingly question whether political leaders act in the public interest, and such scepticism undermines the legitimacy of democratic processes. By examining defections and breakaway parties, this study sheds light on how elite behaviour can weaken institutional integrity. It also highlights the structural limitations of the country's electoral system, which may unintentionally incentivise careerism.

These dynamics are especially relevant as South Africa's multiparty system continues to evolve. The 2021 and 2024 electoral cycles demonstrated unprecedented shifts in voter support, with several new parties gaining traction and coalition governance becoming more common at local government level (Booysen, 2023). Such developments prompt a need for deeper scholarly engagement with the interplay between political behaviour, institutional design, and democratic accountability. The research question guiding the study is therefore:

How have careerist defections and the rise of breakaway parties in South Africa undermined democratic accountability in a closed-list proportional representation system?

Addressing this question provides an opportunity to advance understanding of how political actors navigate institutional constraints, how electoral systems shape incentives, and how these interactions influence the overall health of a democratic society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of political defections and the emergence of breakaway parties occupy an important space in democratic theory, institutional design, and African comparative politics. Internationally, the phenomenon is associated with instability, weakened representation, and increasing voter alienation from political institutions. In proportional representation (PR) systems in particular, party switching has been repeatedly identified as a structural challenge that can undermine the accountability chain between voters and elected representatives. Khosla (2024) emphasises that party switching erodes the principles of mandate and responsiveness, especially where legal frameworks do not protect the integrity of electoral outcomes. Even though Khosla's analysis is global, it provides a foundational lens for understanding South Africa's experience. While earlier works such as Nijzink (2013) highlight the conceptual roots of floor-crossing dynamics in PR systems, more recent scholarship demonstrates that these dynamics have evolved into complex forms of political mobility shaped by patronage, careerism, and strategic repositioning in young democracies (Sishuwa, 2024).

Defections as a Threat to Democratic Accountability

Recent African scholarship increasingly positions political defections as one of the most significant threats to representative democracy, particularly in contexts where political parties remain weakly institutionalised and where electoral systems prioritise party lists over direct voter–representative relationships (Booysen, 2023; Köllner & Basedau, 2021). Scholars argue that when party structures lack ideological depth, internal democracy, and organisational

discipline, elected representatives are more likely to treat political office as a personal asset rather than a public trust (Dube & Jankielsohn, 2022). This concern has gained renewed urgency in South Africa, where democratic institutions coexist with deep socioeconomic inequality, high unemployment, and declining public confidence in political leadership (Afrobarometer, 2023). Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis (2019) contend that in political systems characterised by weak party institutionalisation, politicians often prioritise personal advancement and survival over collective mandates and programmatic commitments. Although their work is continental in scope, the patterns they identify resonate strongly with the South African experience. Since the early 2000s, political defections in South Africa have displayed a recurring tendency toward strategic realignment with parties perceived to offer greater political security, access to power, or career continuity rather than clear ideological compatibility (Southall, 2021). The researchers support this interpretation, noting that defections in South Africa are rarely accompanied by substantive policy disagreements or principled ideological ruptures. Instead, they often coincide with leadership disputes, factional marginalisation, or electoral uncertainty.

The formal legalisation of floor crossing in South Africa during the early 2000s intensified scholarly and public interest in this behaviour, as it exposed the structural vulnerabilities of the country's closed-list proportional representation system (Khosla, 2024). While the constitutional amendments of 2008 formally abolished floor crossing, the underlying incentives that encouraged political mobility were not eliminated (Booysen, 2023). Rather, they were displaced into informal and legally compliant practices, such as resigning from office before joining or forming new political parties. This adaptive behaviour underscores an important insight emphasised in recent literature: defections are not solely the product of permissive legal frameworks but are deeply rooted in political ambition, patronage networks, and institutional fragility (Msimanga & Setlhabi, 2023). Booysen (2023) argues persuasively that the abolition of floor crossing addressed the symptom rather than the cause of political promiscuity in South Africa. According to this view, the culture of switching allegiances survived because the political economy of representation remained unchanged. Political office continues to provide access to income, status, and influence in a country where alternative opportunities are limited for many political elites (Dube & Jankielsohn, 2022). The researchers align with this argument and extends it by suggesting that political defections should be understood not merely as acts of opportunism but as rational responses to structural insecurity within the political labour market.

Civil society organisations were among the earliest actors to articulate the democratic risks posed by defections. Although early critiques by EISA (2007) and SAIIA (2006) fall outside the five-year window, their core arguments remain relevant and are echoed in contemporary scholarship. These organisations warned that floor crossing allowed elected representatives to effectively reallocate parliamentary seats without returning to the electorate, thereby violating the spirit of electoral accountability. Recent studies reaffirm this concern. Chigudu and Sithole (2022) observe that public perceptions of defections have hardened over time, with many South Africans viewing party switching as a betrayal of voter trust rather than a legitimate exercise of political conscience. This erosion of trust is occurring within a broader context of declining confidence in democratic institutions. Afrobarometer data show a steady decline in public trust toward political parties and Parliament in South Africa, with citizens expressing growing dissatisfaction with political responsiveness and integrity (Afrobarometer, 2023). In such an environment, defections intensify perceptions that political elites are disconnected from ordinary citizens and motivated primarily by self-interest. The researchers argues that this perception, whether entirely accurate or not, has profound implications for democratic legitimacy. When voters believe that their electoral choices can be undone through elite bargaining, their incentive to participate meaningfully in democratic processes diminishes.

The Impact on Party Systems and Electoral Competitiveness

A substantial body of literature examines how political defections reshape party systems and alter patterns of electoral competition. In dominant-party democracies, defections tend to reinforce existing power asymmetries by weakening opposition parties and consolidating authority within the ruling party or among politically advantaged actors (Southall, 2021). Although earlier scholarship identified this pattern primarily in relation to the African National Congress, recent research suggests a more complex and fragmented outcome. Southall (2021) argues that dominant-party systems create strong incentives for politicians to defect toward parties that control state resources, patronage networks, and legislative influence. This logic was evident during the period when floor crossing was permitted, as defections disproportionately benefited the ANC while contributing to the decline or disappearance of smaller parties. However, contemporary developments indicate that defections now also fuel party fragmentation rather than simple consolidation. Booysen (2023) demonstrates that since the 2016 local government elections, South Africa has

experienced a marked increase in party proliferation, with new political formations emerging in response to leadership disputes, factional conflicts, and declining voter loyalty.

The emergence of parties such as the Economic Freedom Fighters, ActionSA, Rise Mzansi, the African Transformation Movement, and the Umkhonto we Sizwe Party reflects a broader transformation in the political landscape. While these parties articulate distinct policy positions, their formation is also closely linked to the political trajectories of their founders, many of whom previously held senior positions within established parties (Booysen, 2023). Wahman and Larsson (2021) conceptualise this phenomenon as political entrepreneurship, where party switching becomes a strategy for ambitious leaders to create new political vehicles when opportunities within existing parties diminish. The researchers find this framework particularly compelling for the South African case. Many breakaway parties exhibit strong personalistic features, with leadership centralised around charismatic or well-known figures and organisational structures remaining relatively weak (Köllner & Basedau, 2021). This personalisation raises concerns about the long-term viability of such parties and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to democratic consolidation. Rather than strengthening pluralism, excessive fragmentation may complicate governance, destabilise coalition arrangements, and obscure accountability (Piper & Chigona, 2022).

Electoral competitiveness is also affected by defections and breakaway parties in more subtle ways. While increased party numbers may appear to enhance choice, they can dilute opposition coherence and make it more difficult for voters to assess policy alternatives clearly (Densham, 2023). In local government, coalition instability linked to party fragmentation has undermined service delivery and administrative continuity, reinforcing public frustration with democratic outcomes (Murombo & Masiya, 2022). The researchers argues that in this context, defections contribute not only to elite instability but also to tangible governance failures that affect citizens' everyday lives. Importantly, the relationship between defections and voter behaviour is reciprocal. As parties' fragment and politicians switch allegiances, voters respond with increasing volatility, abstention, or protest voting (Lekalake & Logan, 2023). This feedback loop further weakens party institutionalisation, creating a political environment where short-term survival eclipses long-term programmatic development. The researchers suggests that this dynamic represents one of the most serious challenges facing South Africa's democracy, as it undermines both representation and governability.

In summary, the literature indicates that defections and breakaway parties have far-reaching consequences for democratic accountability, party system stability, and public trust. While legal reforms have addressed the most visible mechanisms of floor crossing, the deeper structural drivers of political promiscuity remain intact. Addressing these challenges requires not only regulatory intervention but also broader reforms aimed at strengthening party institutions, enhancing internal democracy, and re-establishing a meaningful link between voters and their representatives.

Self-Interest, Careerism, and "Politics of the Stomach"

A significant emerging theme in contemporary scholarship on political defections is the close relationship between political mobility and personal incentives. Across a wide range of African democracies, researchers increasingly agree that party switching is less frequently driven by ideological disagreement and more often reflects calculations related to political survival, career advancement, and material security (Sishuwa, 2024; Wahman & Larsson, 2021). This pattern is particularly visible in systems where political office offers one of the few reliable pathways to stable income and social status. In such contexts, political behaviour is shaped not only by normative commitments to representation but also by the economic realities faced by political actors. Sishuwa (2024), in a comparative analysis of party switching across Southern and Eastern Africa, finds that members of parliament often defect when they anticipate declining influence within their parties, fear exclusion from future candidate lists, or seek proximity to dominant patronage networks. These findings resonate strongly with the South African case. Although South Africa possesses relatively robust constitutional institutions, the internal dynamics of political parties are frequently characterised by factionalism, leadership struggles, and competition for access to state-linked resources (Booysen, 2023). Within this environment, party loyalty becomes contingent and instrumental rather than principled.

In South Africa, the motivations for defection are further amplified by the broader socioeconomic context. The country continues to face persistently high unemployment, with official figures exceeding 30 percent, alongside widespread poverty and inequality (Statistics South Africa, 2024). For many political actors, particularly those without independent professional careers or private-sector prospects, a parliamentary or council seat represents a rare source of financial stability, medical benefits, pension security, and symbolic prestige. Lodge (2020) argues that political office in South Africa increasingly functions as a form of

economic insurance in an otherwise precarious labour market. From this perspective, the loss of political office is not merely a setback in public life but a potential descent into economic vulnerability. This reality helps explain the prevalence of what is commonly referred to as "politics of the stomach," a term widely used in African political discourse to describe political conduct driven primarily by material survival rather than public service. While the phrase is often employed normatively or pejoratively in public debate, contemporary scholarship supports its analytical relevance. Moagi and Setshedi (2022) demonstrate that economic insecurity and dependence on patronage profoundly shape political behaviour within South African parties, particularly in contexts of intense internal competition for leadership positions and list placements. According to their analysis, politicians operating within patronage-dominated systems are incentivised to align themselves with powerful factions or parties capable of guaranteeing continued access to resources.

The researchers support this interpretation and extend it by arguing that political opportunism in South Africa cannot be adequately understood without situating it within the country's broader political economy. Political actors operate in an environment marked by limited economic mobility, high social expectations, and intense pressure to provide for extended networks of dependants. In such conditions, the moral distinction between principled representation and self-preservation becomes blurred. Defections and party switching thus emerge not solely as ethical failures but as rational responses to structural insecurity embedded within the political system. The concept of political careerism is central to this discussion. Msimanga and Setlhabi (2023) find that among local councillors in South Africa, political ambition is closely linked to strategies of career survival, including factional alignment and strategic party movement. Their research shows that councillors often anticipate shifts in power within parties and reposition themselves accordingly to avoid marginalisation. While their study focuses on local government, its findings are highly relevant to national politics, where similar dynamics operate within parliamentary party lists. Political promiscuity, a term sometimes used to describe frequent and seemingly inconsistent party switching, has therefore become increasingly normalised within South African politics. Rather than being viewed as exceptional or scandalous, defections are often interpreted as predictable manoeuvres within a competitive and uncertain political environment. Politicians move between parties not because of substantive ideological divergence but because of the personal advantages associated with proximity to particular leadership factions, electoral coalitions, or institutional resources (Booysen, 2023). This normalisation has serious

consequences for democratic accountability, as it weakens the moral authority of political parties and erodes public confidence in representative institutions. Public attitudes toward such behaviour reflect growing cynicism. Afrobarometer surveys indicate that South Africans increasingly believe that politicians prioritise personal enrichment over public service, with trust in political parties and Parliament declining steadily over the past decade (Afrobarometer, 2023). When defections are perceived as acts of self-interest rather than principled dissent, they reinforce narratives of elite self-dealing and political alienation. The researchers argues that this erosion of trust represents one of the most damaging long-term effects of political mobility driven by careerism.

Breakaway Parties and Their Effects on Democratic Accountability

Despite the prominence of defections in public discourse, relatively few recent studies systematically examine how breakaway parties formed through defections affect democratic accountability over time. Much of the existing literature focuses on immediate outcomes, such as changes in parliamentary arithmetic, coalition instability, or the decline of specific parties (Piper & Chigona, 2022). However, a growing body of scholarship now turns attention to the deeper institutional and normative consequences of party proliferation driven by elite fragmentation. Southall (2021) argues that in dominant-party systems, breakaway parties rarely strengthen democratic accountability unless they succeed in building durable organisational structures, internal democracy, and programmatic coherence. In the absence of these features, such parties tend to function as temporary platforms for disgruntled elites rather than as vehicles for substantive political alternatives. This pattern is evident in South Africa, where several breakaway parties have struggled to translate initial electoral enthusiasm into sustained institutional presence (Booysen, 2023).

Booysen (2023) observes that many newly formed parties in South Africa exhibit limited ideological depth and rely heavily on charismatic or high-profile leaders. While personal leadership can mobilise short-term support, it often undermines long-term institutionalisation by centralising decision-making and discouraging internal debate. As a result, these parties frequently experience internal fragmentation, leadership disputes, or electoral decline after initial success. This instability contributes to continuous party turnover, which complicates voter decision-making and weakens programmatic competition. International comparative research reinforces these concerns. Hicken and Kuhonta (2020) demonstrate that personalistic parties, particularly those formed through elite defections, tend to weaken policy coherence

and reduce electoral accountability. When parties are built around individuals rather than institutions, voters struggle to develop stable expectations about policy positions, governance priorities, or accountability mechanisms. This undermines one of the core functions of political parties in representative democracies, namely the aggregation and articulation of citizen interests.

The researchers find this argument particularly compelling in the South African context, where many breakaway parties derive their identity from the political grievances, ambitions, or personal narratives of their founders. Rather than articulating clear ideological alternatives, these parties often define themselves in opposition to former leaders or factions. While such positioning may resonate emotionally with disillusioned voters, it does little to advance coherent policy debate or long-term democratic consolidation (Köllner & Basedau, 2021). Breakaway parties also affect democratic accountability by reshaping voter behaviour. Lekalake and Logan (2023) find that political fragmentation and party volatility contribute to voter confusion and disengagement, particularly among younger and economically marginalised citizens. When parties appear transient or opportunistic, voters are less likely to invest trust or loyalty in them. This can lead to declining voter turnout, protest voting, or increased abstention, all of which weaken the representative function of elections.

At the level of governance, the proliferation of breakaway parties has contributed to coalition instability, particularly in metropolitan municipalities. Piper and Chigona (2022) show that fragmented councils with numerous small parties often struggle to form stable governing coalitions, resulting in frequent leadership changes and administrative paralysis. These governance failures have tangible consequences for service delivery and reinforce public perceptions that political competition prioritises elite bargaining over citizen welfare. The researchers argue that the cumulative effect of defections and breakaway parties is a gradual hollowing out of democratic accountability. While formal democratic procedures remain intact, the substantive link between voter preferences and political outcomes becomes increasingly tenuous. When political actors can exit parties with minimal cost and re-enter the system through new vehicles, electoral mandates lose their binding force. This undermines the principle that elections serve as mechanisms through which citizens can reward or punish political behaviour. In this sense, breakaway parties represent both a symptom and a cause of democratic fragility. They emerge from weak party institutionalisation and, in turn, exacerbate that weakness by normalising fluid political allegiance. The researchers contends

that without reforms aimed at strengthening party institutions, regulating party formation, and enhancing internal democracy, South Africa risks entrenching a political culture in which accountability is secondary to elite survival.

Voter Trust, Representation, and the Accountability Gap

A growing strand of contemporary scholarship focuses on how political defections shape voter perceptions and, in turn, affect the legitimacy of democratic institutions. In South Africa, public trust in democratic governance has been in steady decline for more than a decade, and political defections appear to intensify this erosion of confidence (Afrobarometer, 2023; Roberts et al., 2022). While declining trust is influenced by multiple structural factors, including corruption scandals, weak economic performance, and persistent service delivery failures, defections add a distinct symbolic dimension to public disillusionment. They signal to citizens that electoral mandates are flexible and that political commitments are negotiable after votes have been cast. Chigudu and Sithole (2022) emphasise that South African voters increasingly interpret party switching as an act of betrayal rather than as a legitimate political strategy. This perception is grounded in the logic of proportional representation, where voters cast ballots for parties rather than individuals. In such a system, party affiliation is not merely a label but the central basis of representation. When elected representatives abandon the party under whose banner they were elected, voters experience this as a violation of the social contract that underpins democratic participation. The researchers concur with this view and argues that defections undermine the moral economy of elections by weakening the expectation that votes translate into predictable political outcomes.

Empirical evidence supports the claim that voter trust in political institutions has reached historic lows. Afrobarometer (2023) reports that trust in Parliament, political parties, and elected representatives has declined significantly, with large proportions of respondents expressing scepticism about politicians' commitment to serving the public interest. These attitudes are reinforced by repeated instances of political mobility, which appear to confirm popular narratives that politicians are motivated by personal gain rather than collective responsibility. While defections alone do not account for declining trust, they function as visible and easily interpretable symbols of elite self-interest. The accountability gap created by defections is particularly pronounced under South Africa's closed-list proportional representation system. In this system, members of parliament owe their positions primarily to

party leadership rather than to specific constituencies (Densham, 2023). As a result, the direct accountability link between voters and representatives is already attenuated. When defections occur, this link weakens further, as voters have no formal mechanism to sanction representatives who change party allegiance mid-term. The researchers argues that this structural feature creates a democratic deficit that is rarely addressed explicitly in debates about electoral reform.

Roberts, Bohler-Muller, and Struwig (2022) find that many South Africans feel disconnected from decision-making processes and perceive elected officials as distant and unresponsive. Defections amplify this sense of alienation by reinforcing the idea that political elites operate according to internal party calculations rather than voter preferences. In the absence of constituency accountability or recall mechanisms, citizens are left with limited avenues to express dissatisfaction other than abstention or protest voting. Lekalake and Logan (2023) observe that such disengagement is increasingly common, particularly among younger voters who view formal politics as unresponsive to their needs. The researchers finds that the accountability gap created by defections is one of the most underexamined dimensions of South Africa's democratic trajectory. While scholars frequently analyse the institutional mechanics of party switching, fewer studies interrogate how these practices reshape citizens' expectations of representation. Democratic accountability relies not only on formal rules but also on shared norms about political obligation. When defections become routine, these norms erode, and elections risk losing their capacity to function as meaningful instruments of accountability.

This problem is compounded by the absence of mechanisms that allow voters to directly influence the behaviour of individual representatives. Under a closed-list system, voters cannot reward or punish specific MPs based on their conduct. When an MP defects, the electorate has no immediate recourse, nor can it reverse the decision through by-elections or recalls. Köllner and Basedau (2021) argue that such institutional arrangements are particularly vulnerable to elite-driven politics, as they concentrate power within party hierarchies and weaken bottom-up accountability. The researchers support this argument and suggest that defections expose the limitations of party-centred representation in contexts of weak party institutionalisation.

Legacies of Floor Crossing and Contemporary Adaptations

Although formal floor-crossing legislation was abolished in 2009, its legacy continues to shape political behaviour in South Africa. Scholars widely agree that the early 2000s marked a critical period in which political mobility was normalised and institutionalised (Booysen, 2023). During this time, politicians learned that party affiliation could be renegotiated without immediate electoral consequences, provided that legal requirements were met. This experience had long-lasting effects on political culture, encouraging a view of party membership as conditional and instrumental rather than binding. While Butler's (2008) analysis of floor crossing falls outside the five-year window, its core insights are echoed in more recent scholarship. Booysen (2023) argues that the abolition of floor crossing removed the formal mechanism but not the underlying incentives that encouraged political movement. Instead, political actors adapted their strategies to comply with new legal constraints while preserving the substance of defection. Post-2009 behaviour suggests that South Africa shifted from formal floor crossing to informal practices of political mobility.

One such adaptation involves the strategic resignation of politicians from their parties or legislative positions, followed by re-entry into Parliament under a different party banner in subsequent elections. While this practice technically respects constitutional rules, it reproduces many of the democratic concerns associated with earlier floor crossing. The researchers notes that this pattern allows politicians to reset their political alignment without directly confronting the electorate about their change in allegiance. In effect, the accountability problem is deferred rather than resolved. Recent studies indicate that this form of informal defection has become increasingly common. Msimanga and Setlhabi (2023) document how political actors anticipate shifts in party power and reposition themselves accordingly, often well before elections. These manoeuvres are facilitated by weak internal party democracy and opaque candidate selection processes, which allow elites to negotiate list placements behind closed doors. As a result, voters remain largely unaware of the strategic calculations that shape party composition until after elections have concluded.

The persistence of political mobility despite legal reform highlights an important lesson about institutional design. As Khosla (2024) argues, democratic rules can regulate behaviour only to the extent that they align with underlying incentives. When political office remains a key source of economic security and social status, politicians will seek ways to preserve access to it, even if formal avenues are closed. The researchers support this view and contend that

meaningful reform must address both institutional arrangements and the political economy of representation. The legacy of floor crossing also continues to influence public perceptions of politics. For many citizens, the memory of widespread defections during the early 2000s has become part of a broader narrative about elite manipulation and democratic erosion. Afrobarometer (2023) data suggest that historical experiences shape contemporary attitudes, with respondents frequently citing past political behaviour as evidence that politicians cannot be trusted. This long shadow of floor crossing demonstrates how institutional experiments can have enduring normative consequences.

Furthermore, the adaptation of defection strategies underscores the limits of legalistic approaches to democratic accountability. While constitutional amendments can prohibit specific practices, they cannot easily transform political culture or elite incentives. Booysen (2023) notes that South Africa's party system remains characterised by high volatility and fragmentation, conditions that encourage political mobility even in the absence of formal floor crossing. The researchers argues that without broader reforms aimed at strengthening party institutionalisation and internal democracy, similar patterns are likely to persist. In summary, the legacy of floor crossing and its contemporary adaptations reveal a deeper structural problem within South Africa's democratic architecture. Defections are not merely historical anomalies but enduring features of a system that prioritises party elites over voter accountability. Addressing this challenge requires moving beyond narrow legal fixes toward a more holistic rethinking of representation, accountability, and political incentives.

New Dimensions in Recent Literature

Recent scholarship on political defections and breakaway parties in South Africa has moved beyond institutional mechanics to examine broader contextual forces shaping political behaviour. While earlier literature focused primarily on legal frameworks such as floor-crossing legislation and electoral system design, newer studies introduce additional dimensions that reflect changes in governance structures, political communication, party organisation, and voter behaviour. These emerging perspectives deepen understanding of why defections persist despite formal reforms and why they continue to undermine democratic accountability.

Coalition Politics and Defections

One of the most significant developments reshaping the incentives for political defection in South Africa is the rise of coalition politics, particularly at the local government level. Since

the 2016 and 2021 municipal elections, no single party has been able to secure outright control in many major metropolitan municipalities, leading to fragile coalition arrangements that depend on narrow majorities and shifting alliances (Southall & Langa, 2022). In this context, defections no longer merely alter party composition but can directly determine whether governments survive or collapse. This changing landscape has made individual councillors and smaller parties pivotal in coalition negotiations, heightening the political value of every legislative seat and increasing the likelihood of strategic defection as a rational survival tactic. Murombo and Masiya (2022) argue that coalition politics intensifies political mobility by magnifying the strategic importance of individual representatives. In coalition settings, a single defection can trigger a vote of no confidence, precipitate a change in executive leadership, or force renegotiation of coalition agreements. This dynamic places disproportionate power in the hands of political actors who may not have received broad electoral support, thereby distorting the principle of proportional representation. The researchers observes that this phenomenon shifts accountability away from voters and toward elite bargaining processes conducted behind closed doors, undermining the normative basis of representative democracy.

Coalition instability has had tangible consequences for governance and service delivery. Studies by Dube and Reddy (2023) demonstrate that frequent changes in municipal leadership disrupt administrative continuity, delay infrastructure projects, and weaken oversight mechanisms. Defections in coalition governments often occur at critical junctures such as budget approvals or mayoral elections, reinforcing public perceptions that political decisions are driven by personal or factional interests rather than developmental priorities. These patterns erode trust not only in individual politicians but in coalition governance as a whole, contributing to broader electoral cynicism. Recent literature also highlights how coalition politics creates new incentives for opportunistic behaviour. Siddle and Koelble (2023) note that smaller parties and independent councillors often leverage their pivotal position to extract concessions, including executive positions or policy influence, in exchange for loyalty. This environment encourages defections as rational career strategies, particularly in contexts where ideological differences between coalition partners are minimal. The researchers argues that such behaviour deepens the accountability gap by prioritising short-term political survival over long-term representation.

Importantly, coalition-induced defections expose limitations in South Africa's constitutional and legislative framework. While the abolition of floor crossing addressed formal party switching within legislatures, it did not anticipate the governance challenges posed by fragmented councils and coalition instability. As Murombo and Masiya (2022) observe, the legal system lacks clear safeguards to prevent opportunistic defections that destabilise governments mid-term. This regulatory gap underscores the need for renewed debate about anti-defection mechanisms suited to coalition contexts. These dynamics have become even more complex with the emergence of novel forms of coalition governance at the provincial and national level in the wake of the 2024 general elections. For the first time in the country's democratic history, no party secured a majority in the National Assembly or in several provincial legislatures, necessitating the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) at the national level and Government of Provincial Unity (GPU) arrangements in some provinces (South African History Online, as cited in Afrobarometer, 2023; Southall & Langa, 2022). The GNU brings together ten political parties, including the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and smaller parties such as Rise Mzansi and the Patriotic Alliance, in a broad coalition aimed at ensuring inclusive governance after the 2024 electoral stalemate (The Presidency, 2025; Southall & Langa, 2022).

The formation of the GNU represents a significant shift in South African politics, underscoring both the opportunities and challenges of coalition governance. Leaders within the GNU have reaffirmed their commitment to collaborative governance, framing the coalition as a demonstration of political maturity and a renewed focus on national priorities despite ideological differences (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2025). This broad alliance has sought to address urgent national issues such as unemployment, social inequality, and service delivery through a shared strategic framework. However, public surveys indicate lingering doubts about the GNU's effectiveness and cohesion, particularly following contentious budget negotiations that exposed deep rifts between coalition partners, especially on economic policy and tax reform (Ipsos, 2025). At the provincial level, Government of Provincial Unity arrangements have emerged as another response to electoral fragmentation. In KwaZulu-Natal, the ANC, DA, IFP, and other partners formed a GPU to govern after no party achieved a majority. Despite occasional tension within this coalition, including publicised threats by the National Freedom Party (NFP) to withdraw support due to perceived lack of meaningful consultation, senior leaders have stressed the government's

stability and commitment to shared governance (Eyewitness News, 2025; IFP, 2025). Discussions about GPU arrangements in other provinces reflect similar complexities, with coalition partners balancing collective governance against individual party interests.

The experience of the GNU and GPUs underscores how coalition politics has become a defining feature of South Africa's post-2024 political landscape. In contrast to earlier coalition experiences limited to local governance, these new arrangements highlight the challenges of multi-party cooperation in larger institutional contexts. Government of national or provincial unity arrangements require ongoing negotiation, shared policy platforms, and mechanisms for dispute resolution, conditions that are not yet firmly established within South Africa's political culture. These developments illustrate a broader truth: while coalition governments can enhance inclusivity and foster cross-party cooperation, they also create pressures that can intensify political mobility, heighten incentives for defection, and strain democratic accountability. The researchers concludes that these evolving forms of coalition government, from fragile municipal coalitions to broad national and provincial unity arrangements, reveal both the promise and peril of multi-party governance in a deeply divided political environment. They demonstrate that coalition governance is no longer a peripheral feature of South African politics but a central mechanism through which power is negotiated, contested, and exercised. Understanding the implications of this shift is essential for assessing the future of democratic accountability, institutional stability, and representative legitimacy in South Africa.

Social Media, Political Branding, and Personalised Politics

Another emerging dimension in recent literature concerns the role of digital political communication in reshaping political identity and loyalty. The rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed how politicians engage with voters, shifting emphasis from party-centred messaging to individual visibility and personal branding (Olorunnisola & Ojebode, 2021). This transformation has significant implications for political defections, as it weakens the traditional bond between party identity and voter support. Olorunnisola and Ojebode (2021) argue that social media encourages politicians to cultivate direct relationships with followers, often bypassing party structures altogether. Through platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram, politicians can present themselves as authentic, responsive, and relatable, independent of their party's broader ideology or performance. The researchers finds

that this personalised mode of political engagement lowers the reputational cost of defection, as loyalty increasingly attaches to individuals rather than parties.

South African scholars have noted that personalised politics is particularly pronounced among younger and opposition politicians, who rely on digital platforms to compensate for limited access to traditional media (Bosch, 2022). In such cases, a strong personal brand can survive party switching, provided that the politician maintains narrative consistency and frames the defection as principled rather than opportunistic. This dynamic complicates voter evaluation, as citizens are asked to assess individuals rather than party platforms. Recent studies also suggest that social media amplifies the performative aspect of defection. Mutsvairo and Bebawi (2023) observe that defections are increasingly announced and justified through carefully curated online statements, videos, and live streams. These performances allow politicians to control the narrative surrounding their departure, often portraying themselves as victims of internal party conflict or as champions of reform. While such framing can generate short-term support, it further entrenches personalised politics at the expense of collective accountability.

The researchers argue that the rise of political branding reshapes the normative meaning of representation. In a party-list proportional system, representation is meant to reflect collective ideological choices rather than individual charisma. However, digital communication blurs this distinction, creating hybrid forms of representation that are not adequately regulated by existing institutions. As Bosch (2022) notes, this disconnect raises questions about whether South Africa's electoral system remains fit for an era of individualised political communication.

Decline of Party Institutionalisation

A third dimension emphasised in recent literature is the decline of party institutionalisation across South Africa's political landscape. Party institutionalisation refers to the stability, organisational depth, and societal embeddedness of political parties (Southall, 2021). Well-institutionalised parties tend to exhibit coherent ideologies, disciplined leadership structures, and predictable patterns of competition. In contrast, weakly institutionalised parties are more vulnerable to internal fragmentation and defections. Southall (2021) characterises South Africa's contemporary party system as one of "deinstitutionalised pluralism," in which parties proliferate but lack durable organisational roots. This condition affects both the ruling party and opposition formations, albeit in different ways. The African National Congress has

experienced factionalism, declining membership cohesion, and contested leadership authority, while many opposition parties struggle with limited resources and personality-driven leadership (Booysen, 2023).

Recent empirical research supports the link between weak party institutionalisation and political mobility. Ferree and Vallabh (2022) find that politicians are more likely to defect when parties lack clear ideological boundaries or effective internal dispute-resolution mechanisms. In such contexts, party membership becomes transactional rather than normative, making defection a rational response to internal conflict or declining electoral prospects. The researchers concurs that defections should be understood not as isolated acts of disloyalty but as symptoms of organisational weakness. The decline of party institutionalisation also affects voter behaviour. When parties fail to present stable identities, voters struggle to develop long-term partisan attachments (Roberts et al., 2022). This volatility creates fertile ground for breakaway parties, which often promise renewal, ethical leadership, or internal democracy. However, as Booysen (2023) cautions, many breakaway parties replicate the same organisational weaknesses that prompted their formation, leading to further fragmentation and instability. Moving from an accountability perspective, weak institutionalisation undermines the capacity of parties to discipline defectors or enforce collective responsibility. Internal sanctions such as recall from party lists or exclusion from leadership positions lose effectiveness when parties themselves lack coherence. The researchers argue that strengthening party institutionalisation is therefore central to addressing the defection problem, yet it remains underemphasised in policy debates focused narrowly on electoral reform.

Generational Shifts in Political Participation

A final dimension highlighted in recent literature concerns generational changes in political attitudes and participation. Younger voters in South Africa display markedly different expectations of politics compared to older generations shaped by the liberation struggle (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2023). These voters are less likely to exhibit strong party loyalty and more likely to prioritise issues such as integrity, accountability, and authenticity. Research indicates that this generational shift creates both opportunities and risks for democratic representation. On one hand, declining partisan loyalty can open space for new parties and reform-oriented movements, potentially revitalising democratic competition (Resnick, 2021). On the other hand, weak attachments also make younger voters more

sceptical of political institutions, particularly when politicians defect or form breakaway parties perceived as self-serving.

The researchers finds that young voters tend to evaluate defections through a moral lens rather than an ideological one. Defections framed as opportunistic or career-driven are harshly judged, reinforcing cynicism about politics as a profession. Afrobarometer data analysed by Lekalake and Logan (2023) show that younger respondents are more likely than older cohorts to believe that politicians "never" act in the public interest. This scepticism contributes to declining voter turnout and increased political disengagement. At the same time, generational expectations for transparency and accountability raise the reputational costs of defection in the digital age. Politicians who defect face immediate scrutiny on social media, where narratives can quickly turn hostile. The researchers argues that this tension partly explains why some defections are now framed as ethical exits rather than strategic moves. Nevertheless, repeated cycles of breakaways risk exhausting public patience and reinforcing perceptions of political instability. Importantly, generational change underscores that defections are not merely internal party issues. They are shaped by broader social transformations, including shifts in media consumption, economic precarity, and changing conceptions of citizenship (Resnick, 2021). Addressing the democratic consequences of defections therefore requires engagement with these wider dynamics rather than reliance on institutional fixes alone.

Synthesis

Taken together, these new dimensions demonstrate that political defections in South Africa are embedded in a complex and evolving political ecosystem. Coalition politics intensifies the impact of defections on governance stability, digital communication reshapes political loyalty, declining party institutionalisation weakens collective accountability, and generational shifts alter voter expectations. The researchers concludes that defections should be understood as systemic outcomes of these intersecting forces rather than as isolated acts of political misconduct. This expanded analytical lens has important implications for both scholarship and reform. It suggests that restoring democratic accountability requires interventions across multiple levels, including party organisation, coalition governance rules, political communication norms, and youth political engagement. Without such a holistic approach, defections and breakaway parties are likely to remain persistent features of South Africa's democratic landscape.

Where the Literature Falls Short

Despite significant contributions, recent scholarship leaves several gaps that justify the focus of this study. First, few authors examine long-term democratic consequences of breakaway parties, especially in South Africa's increasingly fragmented political landscape. Second, limited research explores how defections may shape political culture over time, including whether they entrench careerism as a normalised political strategy. Third, while several works discuss voter trust, few connect defections directly to theories of democratic accountability. The researchers therefore identify a need for deeper synthesis between institutional history and normative democratic theory. Most studies analyse defections as discrete events, not as indicators of wider democratic erosion. A more holistic approach is necessary, one that examines defections not only as political acts but as signals of institutional weakness, socioeconomic pressure, and shifting political norms.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is framed within theories of representative democracy and party system institutionalisation. Representative democracy requires a stable link between electorates and their representatives so that voters can hold officials accountable (Pitkin, 1967). Party system institutionalisation theory posits that stable, structured parties are essential for democratic consolidation. When parties are weak, fluid, or dominated by individual ambitions, the party system becomes fragmented and unstable (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995). In the South African context, these theories suggest that defections and breakaway parties increase party system volatility, weaken party institutionalisation, and erode the principal-agent relationship between voters and their representatives. Under closed-list PR, MPs owe their seats to their parties, not to voters, strengthening incentives for careerism (rather than public service) when defections are allowed.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative document analysis. Primary sources include constitutional amendments, parliamentary reviews and historical records of defection legislation. Secondary sources consist of academic articles, civil society reports, and parliamentary assessments. The sample comprises official constitutional texts (2002–2008), parliamentary reviews on defections (pre- and post-abolition), and a curated set of peer-reviewed studies on South African party politics. Analysis follows process tracing, mapping institutional changes and their effects on party system composition and democratic accountability. Because the study

relies on publicly available documents and does not involve human subjects, it does not require ethical clearance.

RESULTS

The analysis demonstrates a consistent pattern of political mobility that has shaped South Africa's democratic landscape in ways that continue to reverberate long after the formal abolition of floor-crossing. Although the constitutional provisions that enabled floor-crossing were repealed in 2009, the underlying behaviours associated with opportunistic switching of political allegiance have persisted in various forms. Recent research shows that patterns established during the 2002 to 2009 period laid the foundation for what scholars now describe as a culture of persistent political fluidity, factional realignment, and career-driven defections within the broader party system (Booysen, 2021; Piper & Chigona, 2022). The results therefore draw together historical data and present-day patterns to illustrate how the combination of institutional design, party incentives, and individual career motivations has shaped political behaviour both inside and outside Parliament. During the formal floor-crossing era, the constitutional framework allowed members of legislatures to defect from one political party to another during two designated 15-day periods each year, as long as at least ten percent of a party's caucus defected simultaneously. This rule was established through the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Amendment Acts of 2002 and 2003, which altered the link between voters and representatives by permitting the transfer of seats between parties without requiring fresh elections. Evidence from civil society monitoring bodies noted that these provisions disproportionately affected smaller parties, whose already limited caucuses made them especially vulnerable to the loss of the ten percent threshold in absolute member numbers (EISA, 2007; SAIIA, 2006). The researchers finds that this threshold effectively acted as an incentive for defections to be strategically coordinated, further amplifying instability within minority parties.

The results indicate that the existence of this rule contributed to a significant consolidation of political power by larger and more established parties. During the floor-crossing window of 2003, for example, the African National Congress (ANC) gained a notable number of new MPs from smaller opposition parties, while several minority parties experienced fragmentation or organisational collapse. Scholars such as Booysen (2021) and Piper and Chigona (2022) argue that this consolidation strengthened dominant-party tendencies by weakening the diversity of representation that a proportional system is intended to protect.

The researchers interpret this outcome as a distortion of the proportional representation (PR) model, where the electorate's original distribution of votes was overridden by intra-legislative bargaining and individual political manoeuvring. Another result that emerges strongly is the decoupling of the elected representative from the voter mandate within the closed-list PR system. In South Africa, voters do not elect individual representatives directly; instead, they vote for a party, which then allocates parliamentary seats according to its ranked list. Once an MP defected, their continuation in Parliament no longer depended on direct voter support but rather on their status within the receiving party's hierarchy. Several scholars have criticised this arrangement for weakening accountability, arguing that representatives are incentivised to cultivate favour with party elites rather than maintain strong ties with the electorate (Sishuwa, 2024; Lodge, 2020). The researchers agrees that the results clearly point to a misalignment between democratic principles of representation and the operational mechanics of the electoral system.

An additional pattern identified in the results is the role of personal career incentives in driving political defections. South Africa's high unemployment rate, intense competition for political office, and the stability of parliamentary salaries have created what recent researcherss describe as "political labour markets" in which public office becomes an attractive economic opportunity (Dube & Jankielsohn, 2022; Msimanga & Setlhabi, 2023). The evidence suggests that political actors often rationalise their defections as principled realignments, but the consistency with which these moves occur around moments of organisational conflict, disciplinary action, or party list reshuffles indicates a strong careerist motivation. The researchers finds that these outcomes resonate with what the public commonly refers to as "politics of the stomach", a colloquial term describing decisions driven primarily by personal economic interest. The metaphor of "political promiscuity", although not a formal academic category, captures the recurring behaviour of elected officials who change political affiliation with little regard for ideological coherence or voter expectations. Recent findings by Piper and Chigona (2022) show that such unprincipled mobility has become more frequent in local government settings, where councillors routinely shift support within coalition arrangements to ensure continued access to income and political influence. The researchers observes that these localised forms of mobility mirror the earlier parliamentary patterns, suggesting that the abolition of formal floor-crossing did not eliminate the underlying incentive structures.

The results also show that public trust in political institutions has declined in response to these patterns of defection and fragmentation. According to the Human Sciences Research Council's Democracy Survey, public confidence in Parliament and political parties has fallen steadily over the past five years, with citizens frequently citing perceptions of self-serving behaviour and lack of accountability as central concerns (HSRC, 2021; Roberts et al., 2022). The researchers interpret this decline as a direct consequence of persistent political instability and the perceived erosion of democratic norms. Another important result concerns the impact of breakaway parties. Since 2009, South Africa has seen numerous new parties emerge from internal splits within established organisations, including the Congress of the People (COPE), Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), ActionSA, and the uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party. While these parties sometimes draw on ideological or organisational grievances, recent analyses reveal that personal leadership disputes and career aspirations play a central role in their formation (Booysen, 2021; Lodge, 2020). The researchers finds that although breakaway parties can revitalise political debate, many are short-lived, poorly institutionalised, and heavily dependent on charismatic leaders. This results in a pattern where parties often reflect individual ambition more than collective programme development. The emergence of such parties has contributed to a growing fragmentation of the party system, especially at local government level. The 2021 and 2024 elections demonstrated increased volatility, with a record number of parties contesting seats and a wider spread of small parties gaining representation. While proportional representation is designed to encourage multiparty participation, researchers argue that excessive fragmentation can undermine governance efficiency and policy coherence (Piper & Chigona, 2022; Densham, 2023). The researchers' analysis supports this interpretation, noting that many breakaway parties lack organisational depth and struggle to sustain coherent policy platforms. The results further reveal that the abolition of constitutional floor-crossing in 2009, through the Constitution Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendment Acts, was an important but insufficient measure to restore trust and accountability. Although these amendments removed the formal legal mechanism through which parliamentary seats could be transferred, the broader incentives for political switching remained intact. Contemporary studies show that politicians continue to engage in informal forms of defection, such as resigning from one party and reappearing under another label on new party lists before elections (Lodge, 2020; Piper & Chigona, 2022). The researchers concludes that while repealing floor-crossing was a necessary step, it did not reform the structural features of the PR system that allow careerism to flourish.

The results also indicate that voters feel increasingly detached from political representatives. Survey evidence from Afrobarometer shows that most South Africans believe elected officials "never listen" to ordinary citizens between elections, and many express frustrations that their votes do not influence the behaviour of MPs after elections (Lekalake & Logan, 2023). The researchers finds that this alienation is exacerbated when representatives defect without consulting the electorate, reinforcing the perception that electoral choice is overridden by elite political manoeuvring. Lastly, the results show that political accountability in South Africa remains weak, particularly because the closed-list PR system centralises candidate selection within party leadership structures. As long as political careers depend more on party gatekeepers than on voter approval, the incentives for opportunistic defection will continue to persist. Recent research argues for electoral reform that introduces constituency-based representation, greater transparency in candidate selection, or hybrid electoral models that enhance accountability (Booysen, 2021; Densham, 2023). The researchers recognises that although reforms are frequently debated, none have yet addressed the root causes of political instability.

Overall, the results provide strong evidence that political defections, party fragmentation, and breakaway formations have collectively weakened democratic accountability in South Africa. While these behaviours emerged most visibly during the formal floor-crossing era, they remain embedded in the political culture and institutional arrangements of the present system. The findings demonstrate how personal ambition, economic insecurity, weak party institutionalisation, and structural features of the electoral system combine to produce persistent political mobility that undermines voter trust.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study collectively demonstrate that political defections and the rise of breakaway parties continue to represent a significant challenge to democratic accountability in South Africa. Although these practices are sometimes framed as legitimate expressions of conscience, ideological disagreement, or internal party dissent, the researchers finds that the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that career interests, factional incentives, and strategic repositioning play a central role in motivating such moves. This conclusion resonates with recent scholarship that observes how political actors in emerging democracies often navigate their careers within systems where party institutionalisation is weak and political reward structures are unstable (Booysen, 2021; Piper & Chigona, 2022). The researchers interpret

these dynamics not as isolated episodes of political dissatisfaction but as recurring symptoms of deeper structural tensions within South Africa's political and electoral architecture. A key tension highlighted by the findings is the contradiction between proportional representation and the practice of political switching. In South Africa's closed-list proportional representation system, voters do not directly elect individual candidates but rather political parties that then allocate parliamentary seats according to internal lists. The researchers find this arrangement significant because it creates a democratic contract based on party support rather than individual personalities. When MPs defect from their parties, they effectively shift the political mandate without consulting the electorate. Scholars such as Sishuwa (2024) argue that this undermines representative accountability by severing the link between voters and the outcomes of their electoral choices. The system, therefore, becomes vulnerable to elite-driven political behaviour, where the actions of a few elected representatives reshape legislative outcomes independent of voter preferences.

The findings also suggest that the structural design of the closed-list system creates strong incentives for political careerism. Because parliamentary positions depend heavily on party leaders' decisions regarding list placement, politicians may feel pressured to align themselves with factions or leaders who can secure their future prospects. This incentive structure encourages behaviour that favours loyalty to internal power brokers rather than broader public accountability. Research on political ambition in South Africa confirms that MPs and councillors often make strategic decisions based on internal party positioning, patronage networks, and anticipated career paths (Msimanga & Setlhabi, 2023; Dube & Jankielsohn, 2022). The researchers therefore view political defections not simply as ideological realignments but as rational strategies in a political marketplace where economic security, prestige, and influence are intertwined with party allegiance. The abolition of formal floor-crossing in 2009 did address one component of the problem by eliminating the legal mechanism through which MPs could change party's mid-term while retaining their seats. However, the researchers find clear evidence that the underlying logic of political mobility persisted even after these reforms. Recent studies show that political actors continue to resign from their parties and reappear on the lists of new or existing parties during subsequent elections, enabling a form of deferred defection (Lodge, 2020; Piper & Chigona, 2022). This behaviour suggests that while the constitutional amendments removed the visible symbol of floor-crossing, they did not transform the institutional incentives that make political

switching attractive. The problem, therefore, is deeper than the mechanics of the constitutional framework.

The continued emergence of breakaway parties is one of the strongest demonstrations of this persistent trend. Since 2009, South Africa has experienced repeated cycles of fragmentation, where disputes within established political parties produce new political formations. Examples include the Congress of the People (COPE) after divisions within the ANC, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) following expulsions and internal conflict, ActionSA following deteriorating relations within the Democratic Alliance (DA), and the recent uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) Party emerging from deepening discord between senior ANC figures. Contemporary research emphasises that the creation of breakaway parties is often rooted in personal leadership contestation rather than ideological divergence (Booysen, 2021; Lodge, 2020). The researchers concludes that many of these parties reflect the ambitions of political elites seeking alternative vehicles for influence after losing internal power struggles. While the formation of new political parties can sometimes revitalise democratic competition by offering fresh voices and policy alternatives, the findings indicate that this pattern of breakaway politics has also contributed to fragmentation within the party system. Excessive fragmentation, particularly at local government level, has been linked to instability in coalition governance, policy inconsistency, slow decision-making, and increased vulnerability to political bargaining (Piper & Chigona, 2022; Densham, 2023). The researchers interpret this as a major concern, especially in municipalities where service delivery already suffers from resource constraints, administrative weaknesses, and governance failures. In such contexts, political instability exacerbates existing challenges and may further erode public confidence in democratic institutions.

Another important dimension revealed in the findings is the decline in public trust associated with persistent political switching. Surveys by both the Human Sciences Research Council and Afrobarometer show that citizens increasingly perceive politicians as self-serving and unresponsive to public concerns (HSRC, 2021; Lekalake & Logan, 2023). When representatives defect without public consultation, voters feel that their choices have been disregarded. The researchers argues that this perception erodes democratic legitimacy by fostering disengagement and cynicism. Public distrust may also depress electoral turnout, weaken political participation, and fuel support for populist rhetoric that exploits frustration with established institutions. From a theoretical perspective, this case underscores the critical

role of strong party institutionalisation for democratic consolidation. Political science literature emphasises that parties in stable democracies maintain coherent ideological positions, enforce predictable internal rules, and are able to regulate the behaviour of their members (Köllner & Basedau, 2021). In contexts where parties are organisationally weak or highly personalised, political loyalty tends to shift according to immediate incentives rather than long-term commitments. The researchers finds that South Africa's experience aligns with this theoretical insight. Many political parties remain heavily dependent on charismatic leaders, exhibit limited internal democracy, and struggle to maintain coherent organisational structures. These weaknesses enable patterns of elite-driven politics and factional realignment that undermine the stability of the broader political system.

The findings also highlight the need to revisit ongoing debates about electoral reform. Scholars have argued that South Africa's electoral framework may benefit from redesigns that strengthen the link between voters and representatives. Hybrid models or mixed-member proportional systems, which combine constituency-based elections with proportional representation, are frequently cited as potential solutions (Booysen, 2021; Densham, 2023). These models could ensure that while overall proportionality is preserved, some representatives are directly elected and thus more accountable to specific constituencies. The researchers acknowledges that such reforms are complex and politically sensitive, especially in an environment where established parties may hesitate to adopt changes that could dilute their control. However, the findings strongly suggest that electoral reform remains a promising avenue for mitigating the long-term effects of political fragmentation and opportunistic defection. Beyond elections, the discussion also points toward broader institutional and cultural changes that may be needed to strengthen accountability. Strengthening party internal democracy, enhancing transparency in candidate selection, regulating the formation of new parties, and instituting ethical guidelines for political mobility are potential avenues. Recent work argues that political culture in South Africa increasingly rewards strategic survival rather than ethical leadership (Sishuwa, 2024). The researchers agrees that without substantive reforms to political norms and incentives, structural modifications to the electoral system may only partially address the problem.

A final element identified in the findings concerns the future trajectory of research. While this study has demonstrated patterns of political mobility and fragmentation, there is a need for comprehensive empirical data on political switching after 2009. Much of the available

research focuses either on the formal floor-crossing period or on anecdotal accounts of defections and breakaway parties. Systematic tracking of resignations, reappointments, new party formations, internal disciplinary cases, and coalition shifts would provide a more complete picture of mobility trends. Similarly, more research is needed on how voters interpret political switching and whether breakaway parties succeed in establishing durable support bases or merely reflect short-lived personal ambitions. In conclusion, the discussion demonstrates that political defections and breakaway party formation represent both symptoms and drivers of broader political instability in South Africa. They emerge from the intersection of institutional incentives, personal career motivations, and weak party structures. Their persistence threatens democratic accountability by weakening the relationship between voters and their representatives. These findings point toward the urgency of electoral reform, the strengthening of party institutionalisation, and further empirical research to understand and address the consequences of political fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of political defections, floor-crossing, and the ongoing rise of breakaway parties in South Africa offers a clear illustration of how political ambition can overshadow the ethical responsibilities tied to public representation. The period between 2002 and 2009 is particularly significant because it marked a time when the legal framework openly permitted elected representatives to shift from one political party to another during specified floor-crossing windows. This arrangement created an environment where political mobility was not only possible but strategically advantageous for individuals seeking better career prospects, stronger internal influence, or more favourable party positions. Instead of anchoring political behaviour in public accountability, the system enabled a form of opportunism that blurred the meaning of electoral mandates and introduced serious questions about the integrity of democratic representation. Although the constitutional amendments passed in 2008 and implemented in 2009 formally abolished floor-crossing, the underlying dynamics did not disappear. The practice simply re-emerged in other forms. Breakaway parties continue to be established at regular intervals, often driven by internal disputes, leadership battles, ideological disagreements, or personal ambitions disguised as principled dissent. These new parties tend to proliferate around election periods, suggesting that opportunities for electoral competition and access to public office still serve as important motivators for political entrepreneurs. As a result, voters are presented with an ever-expanding array of political organisations whose longevity and ideological coherence vary significantly. This perpetual

fragmentation introduces uncertainty into the political arena and challenges the stability of South Africa's party system.

The contemporary political landscape shows that even in the absence of a formal mechanism for floor-crossing, political mobility persists through resignations from parliament, reappointments under new party banners, and the formation of splinter groups. These actions reveal that the deeper issue is not simply the existence of a legal tool but the broader political culture that normalises career-oriented political behaviour. When representatives are able to reposition themselves with little consequence, the connection between citizens and their elected leaders weakens. Voters may feel that their choices are easily overridden by elite manoeuvring, especially within a proportional representation system where the ballot is cast for political parties rather than individuals. This structural arrangement can leave citizens feeling detached from the legislative process, particularly when their preferred representative does not remain loyal to the party they supported. The long-term implications of these practices are significant. Political fragmentation dilutes party cohesion, complicates coalition-building, and heightens competition for limited resources within the political system. A constantly shifting party landscape also contributes to declining public trust, as citizens may perceive political actors as motivated primarily by personal gain rather than public service. When parties become vehicles for personal ambition instead of institutions built around ideology, policy consistency, and long-term planning, the democratic system risks becoming unstable and unpredictable. This instability slows policy implementation, frustrates administrative continuity, and undermines the broader goals of governance and development. For South Africa's democracy to deepen and mature, stronger institutional safeguards are required. These safeguards should address not only the legal gaps that enable political mobility but also the structural features of the electoral system that weaken accountability. Electoral reform has frequently been raised as a possible solution, and several proposals deserve careful consideration. One option is to adopt a mixed electoral system that combines proportional representation with constituency-based representation. Such a hybrid model has the potential to strengthen the direct connection between voters and representatives, making it more difficult for elected officials to act against the preferences of their constituencies without facing electoral repercussions. In addition to electoral reform, there is a need to reinforce internal party governance. Parties must become more transparent in their decision-making processes and more consistent in how they recruit, discipline, and promote candidates. Stronger institutionalisation would reduce the impulse to defect, as party cohesion

would rest on shared principles rather than shifting personal alliances. When party structures are weak or ambiguous, individuals can more easily justify leaving to form new political vehicles. Improved internal democracy could thus mitigate the constant cycle of fragmentation by offering clearer pathways for dissent, debate, and leadership renewal within existing organisations.

Public education also plays a crucial role in stabilising the political environment. Citizens who understand how electoral systems work, how parties function, and what their rights entail are better positioned to hold representatives accountable. Strengthening civic literacy can counteract voter apathy, which often grows when people believe that political manoeuvring diminishes the value of their vote. Engaged and informed voters are more capable of demanding accountability and transparency from political actors, thereby contributing to a more resilient democratic culture. Future research should explore the evolving forms of political mobility that have emerged since the end of formal floor-crossing. Detailed empirical studies can shed light on the motivations driving defections, the organisational characteristics of breakaway parties, and the broader impact on electoral outcomes. Additionally, studies examining voter perceptions of political mobility can provide valuable insights into the social legitimacy of these practices. Understanding how citizens interpret and respond to party-switching behaviour can help policymakers design reforms that better align political incentives with democratic principles.

In the final analysis, the history of defections and breakaway parties in South Africa reveals a persistent tension between personal ambition and public accountability. Although institutional reforms have attempted to resolve this tension, much work remains to ensure that elected officials uphold the mandates given to them by the electorate. The maturing of South Africa's democracy will depend on a combination of legal safeguards, institutional strengthening, and cultural change within the political sphere. Only through these measures can the country move toward a system where public representatives prioritise the interests of voters rather than their own career aspirations.

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