

# The cost of politics in **South Africa**

**Victoria Hasson**  
**Futurelect**

April 2025

# Disclaimer

The authors have acted with due diligence and expertise to ensure that the contents of this report are accurate at the time of publication.

The authors accept no responsibility for any loss suffered by any person as a result of the use of the content.

All rights in this book, including copyright, are owned by Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and are protected by UK and international law. No part of this book may be copied, distributed, translated or adapted without the prior permission of WFD. All rights reserved.

The information and opinions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of WFD, its founders or the UK Government. WFD or anyone acting on its behalf cannot be held responsible for the consequences of the use of the information contained herein.

## The authors

**Dr Victoria Ann Hasson** is an international democracy specialist with more than a decade of global experience in delivering political and parliamentary strengthening through senior strategic roles for major public institutions.

**Futurelect** is an independent, non-profit, public benefit organisation established in 2018 that aims to improve the public service for more people throughout Africa by supporting a new generation of 21st-century ethical and transformational civic, political, and government leaders. It designs and delivers nonpartisan, interdisciplinary leadership development programmes which cultivate a diverse pool of ethical and innovative leaders, particularly empowering the rising generation of young women leaders across Africa.

## Acknowledgements

This study is supported by an EU-funded project, WYDE Civic Engagement, led by EPD, the European Partnership for Democracy. The WYDE project is a component of the European Commission's Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDE). The aim of the project is to strengthen the participation of young people in democratic processes at national, regional and global levels.

Thozama Njobe and Michlene Mongae, both of Futurelect, provided key contributions to the development and review of this report.

# Table of contents

<b>Disclaimer</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>The authors</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Table of contents</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>List of acronyms</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Methodology</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Electoral politics in South Africa</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Political party funding .....	8
<b>The cost of politics in South Africa’s 2024 elections</b> .....	<b>9</b>
Pre-campaign phase .....	9
Campaign phase .....	11
Gendered costs of campaigning .....	12
Election day expenditures .....	13
Post-election costs .....	14
<b>Implications for representative democracy</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Barriers to representation for women and youth .....	15
Entrenchment of established parties .....	16
Impacts political engagement and democratic participation .....	16
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Strengthening political party support for candidates .....	17
<i>Fair allocation of public funding for political parties</i> .....	17
<i>Expanded voter education and political engagement</i> .....	17
<i>Institutional and post-election support mechanisms</i> .....	18
<b>References</b> .....	<b>19</b>

# List of acronyms

<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>DA</b>	Democratic Alliance
<b>EFF</b>	Economic Freedom Fighters
<b>IEC</b>	Electoral Commission of South Africa
<b>IFP</b>	Inkatha Freedom Party
<b>M.K.</b>	uMhonto weSizwe
<b>MPDF</b>	Multiparty Democracy Fund
<b>PPFA</b>	Political Party Funding Act
<b>PR</b>	Proportional Representation
<b>RPPF</b>	Represented Political Parties Fund
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollar
<b>ZAR/R</b>	South African Rand

# Introduction

South Africa's transition from apartheid to a constitutional democracy in 1994 ushered in a proportional representation electoral system to foster broad political participation and inclusivity. While this system has played a crucial role in enabling diverse representation, the financial and non-financial costs of participating in electoral politics continue to shape who can realistically contest elections and sustain a political career.

Globally, the role of money in shaping access to political office has become an increasingly prominent issue, underscoring how financial constraints can either enable or exclude different types of candidates from entering the representative arena. In the 2024 national and provincial election in South Africa, financial barriers faced by smaller parties and independent candidates highlighted ongoing concerns about the access to, and robustness of, participatory governance.

Adopting a whole-election-cycle approach, to analyse the financial and non-financial burdens candidates face before, during, and after elections, this study also takes a whole-human approach to understanding the costs of politics in South Africa. In doing so, it contributes to a deeper understanding of how structural barriers, personal sacrifices, and financial realities shape political participation.

# Methodology

This research gathered comprehensive information on the costs incurred by candidates standing for legislative office in South Africa, focusing on the 2024 general election. In line with the cost of politics approach developed by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), the study examines a broad range of expenses that candidates face throughout the nomination, campaign, election, and post-election stages. For incumbent candidates, this includes all expenditures related to their time in office, acknowledging the cyclical nature of political campaigning and the ongoing financial demands of maintaining a political career.

Qualitative research methods were employed to build a comprehensive understanding of these costs and their drivers. Desk-based research and analysis of existing literature, media reports, and public records on the costs of campaigning were strengthened by primary data collected through 16 in-depth interviews. These were conducted with a diverse group of candidates who ran for office in the 2024 elections, alongside experts and staff from the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC). Special attention was paid to the experiences of women and youth candidates, as previous WFD cost of politics studies have highlighted that these groups tend to face heightened barriers to political participation due to their limited access to financial resources and political networks.<sup>1</sup> All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed to identify patterns and themes related to the financial and non-financial burdens of candidacy.

**Table 1: Candidates interviewed by gender, incumbency and success**

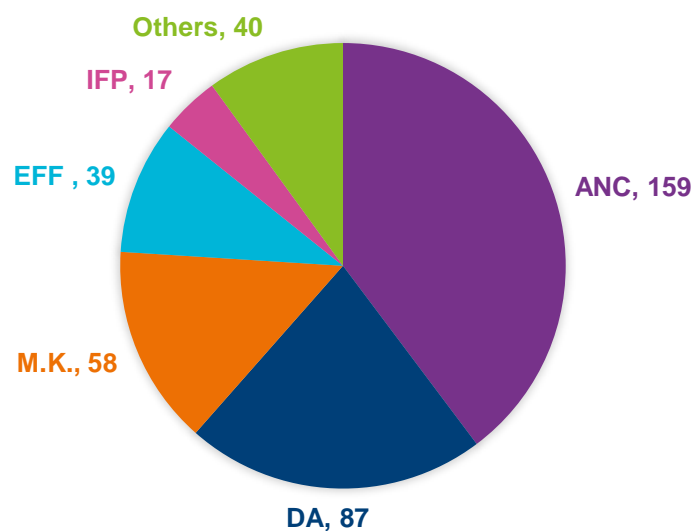
<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Candidate status</b>	<b>Success</b>
Female	40	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	55	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	39	First time candidate	Not elected
Male	27	First time candidate	Not elected
Male	21	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	43	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	45	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	42	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	42	First time candidate	Not elected
Female	38	Incumbent	Elected
Female	38	Incumbent	Elected
Female	35	Incumbent	Elected
Female	24	Incumbent	Elected
Female	32	Incumbent	Elected
Male	69	Incumbent	Not elected

# Electoral politics in South Africa

Electoral politics in South Africa are deeply rooted in the country's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994. This shift introduced a multiparty political system, underpinned by a constitutional commitment to inclusivity and equality, that until 2024 was dominated by one political party, the African National Congress (ANC). However, with no single party securing a majority in the 2024 elections, South Africa now has its first coalition government of the post-apartheid era.

The country's electoral framework, political party landscape, and campaign financing regulations are crucial in shaping political competition and access to office. The Electoral Act of 1998 governs electoral processes, ensuring fairness and transparency through an electoral code of conduct. South Africa employs a proportional representation (PR) electoral system with 400 parliamentary seats allocated based on the percentage of votes each party receives across two lists. The 200 regional seats, which are distributed based on a quota system, are spread across the country's nine regions based on the number of registered voters. Following a constitutional court ruling in 2023<sup>2</sup>, these seats can be contested by both political parties and independent candidates. The 200 national seats, contested only by political parties, are then assigned by subtracting the number of regional seats a party receives from their total national allocation to generate a maximally proportional result.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1: Parliamentary seats by political party (2024)**



Political parties in South Africa are free to decide how to compile their list of candidates and determine the order in which they appear, as long as they comply with IEC rules and regulations. But the structure of these lists and the processes behind them can significantly affect representation.<sup>4</sup> Whilst highly centralised selection processes often prioritise senior members or those with strong internal party connections – posing a disadvantage to grassroots activists or younger candidates - a candidate selection process involving community input and more grassroots party structures can open up opportunities for participation. Additionally, some parties

rotate candidates between national and regional lists to strategically secure seats for key figures, affecting geographic and demographic representation.

## Political party funding

South Africa has a system of state funding for political parties, with the introduction of the Political Party Funding Act (PPFA) in 2018 enhancing transparency and fairness in the distribution of these funds. The PPFA authorises the IEC to administer two funds to support political party financing, the Represented Political Parties Fund (RPPF) and the Multiparty Democracy Fund (MPDF).<sup>5</sup> The RPPF is allocated as follows:

- 33.3% equal distribution among all represented parties.
- 66.6% proportional distribution based on each party's seat share.

This fund aims to ensure that smaller parties receive a baseline level of support while rewarding electoral success.<sup>6</sup> The MPDF supplements this funding by allowing political parties to collect private and corporate donations, which must be disclosed and not exceed a specified threshold, to comply with regulatory requirements.<sup>7</sup> This approach aims to promote a more equitable political environment. However, concerns about the perceived neutrality of the IEC to enforce regulations transparently and evenly, along with the limited scope of the PPFA, have been the focus of criticism.

The Act applies only to registered political parties, excluding individual candidates and campaign organisations from its disclosure requirements. This gap leaves room for ambiguity in how campaign activities, such as private fundraising and expenditures, are regulated, raising concerns about opaque party finances and the influence of private donors.<sup>8</sup> A 2018 Constitutional Court ruling reinforced the need for greater transparency, emphasising that access to information on political funding is essential for the effective exercise of political rights.<sup>9</sup> However, these concerns have persisted. In February 2025, non-profit My Vote Counts initiated legal action to remove the R100,000 (USD 5,434)<sup>10</sup> donation disclosure threshold; an attempt to make all political donations publicly accessible.<sup>11</sup>

Although the PPFA currently mandates that political parties disclose donations exceeding this threshold, it does not impose spending limits on parties or candidates during election periods. The absence of spending caps allows well-funded parties to outspend their competitors, creating an uneven playing field in which smaller parties and independent candidates, who lack comparable financial resources, are disadvantaged. While South Africa's PR system is designed to promote inclusivity, the high cost of campaigning reinforces the dominance of established parties, limiting opportunities for new political entrants and weakening political diversity.



# The cost of politics in South Africa's 2024 elections

South Africa's 2024 national elections saw a broad and diverse array of candidates contesting for seats in the National Assembly. But whilst 41.9% were female, just 10% of all candidates were aged between 18-29, with the majority (54%) in the 40-60 age bracket.<sup>12</sup> This section examines the financial and non-financial costs associated with seeking political office these candidates incurred across the entire election cycle. It explores the pre-campaign phase, where aspirants begin investing in their political ambitions; the campaign period, during which candidates mobilise resources for outreach and visibility; the election stage, which brings heightened financial and logistical demands; and the post-election phase, where candidates, both successful and unsuccessful, grapple with the lasting financial and personal toll of political participation.

## Pre-campaign phase

Before candidates formally enter the race, they must make financial and personal investments to establish their credibility, secure party nominations, and lay the groundwork for their campaigns. While this phase presents challenges for all aspirants, those without established networks or financial backing, particularly young candidates, women, and those from smaller or newer parties, face the greatest barriers.

A key financial hurdle at this stage is the cost of internal party processes, including nomination fees, travel expenses for attending party meetings, and networking efforts to secure endorsements. Candidates must fund these activities personally, with no guarantee of electoral success. Formal party nomination fees are often relatively low, one candidate described an application fee of R300, however, the real burden comes from informal financial expectations. Attendance at meetings, contributions to party events, and even covering refreshments at branch gatherings can all influence a candidate's standing within the party and their chance of getting selected on either national or provincial lists. As one candidate put it, "you spend money not just on campaigning but also on showing up, integrating, and being seen." These financial pressures can serve as an implicit gatekeeping mechanism, favouring those with greater disposable income.

South Africa's closed-list PR model places significant power in the hands of party leadership, making internal selection processes highly competitive. This is true in provinces where parties have strong electoral support and a realistic chance of securing multiple seats and in opposition-dominated provinces, where competition for high-ranking positions on party lists can become especially intense given the reduced chance for electoral success. Only in provinces where a party has very minimal support and may struggle to secure seats, is the selection process likely to be less competitive.

Candidates stated that securing a favourable position required repeated travel for selection panels and party meetings, often at their own expense. One young female candidate recounted making multiple costly trips from Cape Town to Bloemfontein for in-person interviews. However, nomination processes are not explicitly transactional, nor do they require aspirants to pay high fees or fund party activities to secure a place on the ballot. The ANC, the dominant party since 1994, has played a significant role in shaping these norms that responded to the system of apartheid, which entrenched systemic exclusion and inequality. Its use of internal vetting mechanisms to ensure that candidates meet governance and integrity criteria, with these prioritised in selection processes, are largely replicated across the political spectrum. This means that whilst financial resources still play a role in candidate selection, they do not serve as an absolute barrier to political participation.

However, resource barriers are more felt by independent candidates, and those seeking the nomination for smaller parties who have less developed political machinery. Unlike candidates in larger parties, who may receive some financial support through covered IEC filing fees or access to existing party infrastructure such as offices, logistical support, and campaign materials, those in smaller parties often bear these costs themselves. For candidates running on the ticket of registered political parties that are not currently represented in parliament, they can even be asked to help the party pay the financial deposit required to be eligible to contest elections - the deposit amount varies depending on which ballots the party chooses to contest but can reach R300,000 if the party is to contest for all 400 National Assembly seats. In addition, many must cover their preliminary campaign expenses, such as community outreach and material preparation. In some cases, candidates resort to personal loans or family savings to fund their political ambitions.

In addition to financial costs, all aspirants must navigate significant psychological and social pressures. Entering the political space requires managing public scrutiny, balancing existing professional and personal responsibilities, and dealing with the uncertainty of electoral success. Female candidates, in particular, described facing unique personal challenges, especially in their home environments. Several women reported that their partners displayed resentment over the amount of time they spent attending party events, particularly first-time candidates for whom everything was new. Many recounted an increase in household tension as their frequent absence led to conflict with their spouses, who struggled with the disruptions to daily family life. As one candidate relayed;

*“I was constantly tired, and constantly exhausted, and I did not even have the energy to explain this to my husband. If I had a 10am meeting I would leave the house at 7am just to avoid the breakdown in tears of my daughter if she was awake as I left the house. So, my husband and I had to have a sit-down talk once the results were in, on the impact of the campaign on our marriage. The mental and emotional toil was not something I was prepared for”*

## Campaign phase

Once the campaign officially begins, financial demands became more acute, with candidates facing mounting costs for transportation, event mobilisation, and volunteer support. But the overall costs for individuals running for office in South Africa are to an extent mitigated by the combination of a PR system that focuses more on parties than candidates and state funding for political parties, which means the bulk of campaign expenditures, especially for candidates representing prominent parties, is covered. Still, aspirants often needed to top up these resources to varying degrees to stay competitive. Especially those representing smaller parties or standing as independents who lack access to centralised campaign resources that can be used to fund voter engagement.

Candidates interviewed reported campaign expenditures ranging from R17,000-1 million, with a median spend of R50,000 during the campaign period. For candidates operating in rural areas, a substantial portion of individual campaign expenses went toward logistics to cover travelling the vast distances between communities. All candidates reported spending significant percentages of total expenditure on fuel and vehicle maintenance to reach prospective voters. Unlike urban candidates, who can hold rallies in centralised locations, rural candidates claimed it was more effective to hold multiple smaller gatherings, each requiring investment in food, seating, and sound equipment. One candidate noted, “there’s no single stadium event here; you campaign village by village, which means fuel alone is a huge cost.”

In addition candidates felt compelled, or were expected, to provide material support to more impoverished rural communities: funding meals for community meetings or covering basic necessities for campaign volunteers. While larger parties sometimes had mechanisms to subsidise these costs, independent and small-party candidates bore the brunt of these informal but essential expenses. One interviewee explained, “it’s not bribery; it’s survival politics. If you can’t even provide food at a meeting, people will not take you seriously.” In wealthier provinces like Gauteng, expenditure was still required, but it was more focused on covering extensive social media efforts, campaign materials, and more frequent voter engagement activities.

The uneven distribution of financial resources, which favours incumbent MPs and candidates from well-funded parties<sup>13</sup> to the detriment of first-time candidates, those in newer parties, as well as independent candidates, means the latter bear a disproportionately higher personal financial burden. For example, posters, banners, and t-shirts, which are essential for visibility during campaigns, were funded directly by candidates in smaller parties and independents. One candidate bought traditional clothing when meeting tribal chiefs, while another described having to purchase cattle as a customary offering. As was explained by one aspirant, “if you are not visible, you do not exist. But visibility costs money—printing posters, getting banners, even just standing out in a crowd.”

The heightened costs for first-time candidates, which extended across political parties, were both financial and social. While incumbents were able to reclaim petrol costs, mobile phone charges, and could even draw on allocations for flights to support their campaign efforts and reduce out-of-

pocket expenses, all first-time candidates, regardless of the size or recognition of their party, had to balance their career with the demands of campaigning. The financial and personal risks of stepping away from their jobs were compounded by the lack of financial support, making standing for election a considerable personal gamble. As one candidate recounted, “I had to leave my job because my employer didn’t allow political involvement. I took a huge risk because I had no certainty of winning.”

## Gendered costs of campaigning

Female candidates encountered additional, gender-specific expenses. Nearly all female interviewees mentioned investing in wardrobe upgrades to project a professional and authoritative image. Unlike male candidates, whose campaign attire was typically limited to standard party t-shirts, women often had to purchase outfits to engage with different cultural or religious communities. Some female candidates even commissioned custom outfits to meet political and cultural expectations. Campaigning also placed unique safety costs on female candidates. Several reported hiring private security for late-night meetings or when they were campaigning in unfamiliar areas. In contrast, male candidates were often able to campaign alone without similar concerns. As one female candidate recalled, “I couldn’t just walk into a community and knock on doors like my male counterparts, it was too dangerous. I had to hire someone to accompany me, which was an extra cost.”

Furthermore, for women who were also mothers, the campaign phase introduced significant emotional, logistical, and financial burdens, tied to socio-cultural expectations about the role women should play in the household. Balancing political ambition with domestic responsibilities places an additional burden on female aspirants, as compared to men, that required additional financial and emotional resources. Many candidates spoke about the emotional toll of missing key family moments, including their children’s birthdays and other important milestones. The relentless campaign schedule - returning home after midnight only to leave again after a few hours of sleep - strained relationships, with many relaying frequent arguments with their partners about their prolonged absences. Single mothers faced additional expenses, often relying on private transport services to shuttle their children between school and family members when they could not be present. As one candidate put it;

*“running for office is expensive, but for women, it’s more than money. It’s safety, its family, its respectability, its fighting battles that men don’t even see.”*

## Sourcing the resources to compete

For non-mainstream candidates, the financial strain saw aspirants call on family support to cover campaign-related costs they had not anticipated. Several young candidates shared that they had to seek financial assistance from relatives to fund necessities such as car repairs, the purchase of food, and printing expenses. Others turned to loans. One candidate took out a loan of R20,000 while she knew others who borrowed between R40,000-50,000 to sustain their campaigns. In the ANC, this practice was particularly common in areas where local branches had exhausted funds allocated to them. Candidates viewed these loans as an investment in their future, believing the potential benefits of securing a political position outweighed the risks.

Candidates also encountered challenges accessing party funds, even where reimbursement systems existed. In some newer parties, such as Build One South Africa, unclear financial policies and bureaucratic inefficiencies led to candidates who initially self-funded their campaigns either receiving late reimbursements or none at all. “I was told I could claim back some expenses, but after the campaign was over, I realised nobody was actually getting reimbursed. You just accept it as part of the game,” explained one interviewee. Other political parties restricted their provincial branches from maintaining separate bank accounts, centralising funding at the national level. This resulted in delays and limited provincial leaders' ability to access resources for region-specific activities. Consequently, many candidates had to cover essential costs out of pocket. Several interviewees noted that an unspoken culture of reluctance around claiming refunds meant many did not seek reimbursement.

## Election day expenditures

Election day, and the days immediately preceding it, require further expenditure as candidates aim to undertake last-minute campaigning, provide transportation to voters, and deploy recruited observers and party agents to monitor polling stations. For candidates from established parties, the final stretch of the election was often backed by centralised party resources, but for candidates from smaller parties, and independents, the financial burden again rested on the individual. Candidates in highly competitive provinces like Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal invested in last-minute advertisements, including social media campaigns, to boost their chances, “we had to push harder in the last week, more posters, more airtime for radio interviews, even hiring people just to hand out flyers at taxi ranks...every vote counted” explained one candidate interviewed.

On election day, one independent candidate described how she “had to hire a minibus to get my people to the voting stations because we couldn't rely on public transport. That alone cost more than I expected”. Another candidate explained that;

*"if you don't have agents at the polling stations, you're at a disadvantage. But it costs money to have people sit there all day, you have to feed them, transport them, sometimes even give them a small stipend."*

Still, aspirants sought to use their remaining, and often depleted, resources as one aspirant explained, "at that point, you realise: If I don't win, all this money is gone. And no one is reimbursing me". Several candidates described this election phase as the moment where financial realities clashed with political optimism. One small-party candidate was clear that "the last days are the most stressful. You're still fighting, but you also have to accept that for many of us, this was a one-time gamble."

## Post-election costs

After the votes have been counted, financial pressures do not immediately subside. Candidates who had taken out loans, exhausted personal savings, or borrowed from friends and family found themselves in financial difficulty, particularly if they had not successfully secured a seat. Several candidates described experiencing post-election financial distress, with some struggling to repay campaign debts. One admitted that they had miscalculated the financial resources they needed, "I thought I could manage, but after the election, I was left with debts I hadn't planned for". For some, the financial strain extended beyond personal hardship, as losing candidates also had to deal with unpaid vendors and creditors, which led to reputational damage. A small-party candidate shared that they still owed money for printing costs and hall rentals and that "after the election, people stopped taking my calls because they thought I couldn't pay them back".

For those who did secure a seat, financial obligations also continued. Although no specific amounts were given, elected candidates interviewed explained that ongoing expectations from voters require them to contribute donations to local communities or to directly fund local development projects. As one newly elected representative explained;

*"the expectation doesn't stop once you're in office. People think you now have money, so they come to you with school fees, funeral costs, and all kinds of requests".*

Party contributions are also a continual cost of politics. Elected candidates are expected to continue financially supporting the party, particularly in smaller parties where institutional funding is reduced. As one parliamentarian explained, "you are expected to contribute a portion of your salary to the party, and that's before you even think about your own expenses. It adds up quickly." In the Democratic Alliance (DA), for example, elected representatives pay a mandatory tithe of 3.5% of their pre-tax salary to the party, which equates to a monthly payment of R3,719.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond monetary concerns, the emotional toll of running for office becomes acutely evident in the post-election phase. Many candidates spoke of experiencing exhaustion, disillusionment, and in

some cases, depression. Candidates who had sacrificed relationships, careers, and financial stability for the campaign now had to grapple with their new reality; whether that meant adjusting to political office or reintegrating into everyday life. Several candidates described the shift from daily public engagement to relative political irrelevance as a “silencing” experience requiring significant psychological adjustment. A first-time candidate who had campaigned intensely in her community shared, “People who cheered for me during the campaign wouldn’t even make eye contact with me after the results came out.” Another unsuccessful candidate was grappling with their change in status. “You go from being the centre of attention to being completely forgotten overnight. It’s like you don’t exist anymore.”

Candidates also faced practical challenges in returning to their personal and professional lives. Those who had left jobs to campaign full-time found it difficult to re-enter the workforce, particularly in industries where prolonged absence was viewed negatively. Business owners who had stepped back from their businesses to focus on politics often struggled to rebuild their client base. One entrepreneur-turned-candidate explained, “I neglected my business for months to focus on the campaign. After the election, I had to start from scratch because I had lost most of my customers.”

Social relationships were also strained. Some candidates experienced resentment from friends and family who felt neglected during the campaign period. One candidate described how her marriage suffered: “I was so focused on winning that I didn’t realise how much strain I was putting on my family. After the election, I had to repair a lot of broken relationships”. Many candidates spoke about the emotional and relational cost recovery process having financial implications. One candidate admitted, “after everything, I just needed to make it up to my kids, my partner, my friends. I spent more money on post-election recovery than I ever anticipated”. Reflecting on the journey, one unsuccessful candidate did not regret running but admitted that “had I known the real cost, financially, emotionally, and socially, I might have thought twice before starting”.

## Implications for representative democracy

While the cost of politics in South Africa remains lower than in many other African nations, financial barriers still limit inclusivity, constrain political diversity, and shape the behaviour of elected representatives in ways that may undermine democratic principles.

### Barriers to representation for women and youth

Despite South Africa’s constitutional commitment to political equality, financial obstacles continue to disproportionately affect women, young people, and candidates from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Although the PR system means candidates do not bear full financial responsibility for campaigning, many still incur significant personal costs, including travel,

accommodation, and constituency engagement, particularly in parties with decentralised financial structures or weak financial backing. Expenses that exceed R50,000 over a full election cycle, and which are to be incurred by the individual, remain prohibitive for many individuals especially younger South Africans without established financial networks or stable income sources. Women candidates also face unique financial and non-financial barriers when standing for office.

## Entrenchment of established parties

South Africa's closed-list PR system ensures that political parties, not individual candidates, are central to elections. While this reduces personal campaign costs, it also reinforces the dominance of established parties. Independent candidates and newcomers from smaller parties struggle to compete, as they lack financial resources and the party machinery necessary for sustained political engagement. Several candidates from emerging parties reported difficulties raising funds to compete effectively, explaining that "they [financial backers] only invest in parties that already have a foothold." This financial reality discourages political renewal and innovation. Many aspirants, particularly those who self-funded their campaigns without securing a seat, found that they could not remain politically active. The result is a political landscape where established parties continue to dominate, limiting the introduction of new voices, alternative policies, and fresh leadership.

## Impacts political engagement and democratic participation

The financial and personal toll of running for office extends beyond candidates to the broader democratic system. Many candidates, particularly younger aspirants, reported experiencing financial strain, emotional exhaustion, and post-election uncertainty. One unsuccessful candidate described the aftermath of the election as a period of "political isolation," explaining, "before the election, I had a team. After the election, I was alone, broke, and wondering what's next." If this experience becomes normalised, there is a risk that it can discourage broader participation in politics, particularly among young individuals who must invest more upfront and have fewer financial resources to fall back on. In turn, this can reinforce a perception that politics is only accessible to the well-connected and wealthier class. However, based on interviews with candidates for this study, even those who were unsuccessful, despite the significant emotional and social upheaval, remained motivated to stay in politics. Many had taken up positions within their party structures, and all said they would stand for office again. Therefore, while the cost of politics in South Africa is undeniably high, it has not yet reached the point of completely deterring a diverse array of candidates.



# Recommendations

Addressing the financial and non-financial costs of standing for office can further strengthen equitable political participation in South Africa. The following recommendations focus on party policies, public funding reforms, and institutional support mechanisms to lower entry barriers and sustain inclusivity in electoral competition.

## Strengthening political party support for candidates

- Political parties should establish and enforce clear policies on financial support for candidates, including standardised reimbursement processes and clear criteria for campaign funding allocations.
- Internal party regulations should set minimum standards to create a more level playing field for candidates across all parties, minimising, or removing completely, undue financial burdens.
- Parties should enhance financial transparency to ensure candidates, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are not unfairly disadvantaged by opaque funding structures.
- Parties should implement targeted financial assistance for qualified female candidates, including childcare stipends, travel cost subsidies for single mothers, and resources to ensure personal safety during campaigning.
- Internal party culture should actively acknowledge and address gendered financial barriers, fostering an environment that encourages more women to participate in politics.
- To encourage sustainable youth participation, parties should create youth-friendly campaign structures that reduce personal costs, such as localised campaign strategies that minimise travel expenses.
- Parties should establish micro-grants or financial aid programmes to support young, qualified candidates with political ambition.
- Training programmes on budget management, fundraising, and campaign strategy should be provided to younger candidates to enhance their competitiveness.

## Fair allocation of public funding for political parties

- Public funding for political parties should be linked to their commitment to advance women and youth parity in elected office in South Africa.

## Expanded voter education and political engagement

- Increase IEC funds to enable greater investment in its outreach programmes, particularly for voter education initiatives, targeted towards youth and rural and underrepresented communities, to increase voter awareness and engagement.

## Institutional and post-election support mechanisms

- Political parties, civil society organisations, and government agencies should collaborate to create post-election support programmes for unsuccessful candidates. These programmes could offer:
  - Financial counselling: Guidance on managing campaign-related debts and recovering financial stability.
  - Career transition assistance: Access to professional networks, job placement programmes, and leadership training.
  - Psychosocial support: Mental health resources and peer support networks to help candidates navigate the emotional toll of election campaigns.
- Organisations supporting women and youth to run for office could develop a post-campaign recovery fund that offers small grants to assist unsuccessful candidates, particularly women and youth from underprivileged backgrounds, to reintegrate into professional life.

# References

- <sup>1</sup> Ramshaw, G & Hitchen, J. 2024. 'What are we learning about the cost of politics?' *Westminster Foundation for Democracy*. 2 September. Available at <https://www.wfd.org/commentary/what-are-we-learning-about-cost-politics>
- <sup>2</sup> This ruling allowed independent candidates to contest for national and provincial seats. While this reform aimed to broaden political participation, its implementation in 2024 limited its effectiveness. The IEC was to provide clear procedural guidance, accessible nomination processes, and administrative support to level the playing field for independent candidates, who lack the internal party structures and financial backing made available to political parties. However, many independent candidates reported challenges in navigating the nomination requirements, securing ballot access, and financing their campaigns.
- <sup>3</sup> For more details see Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa. 'How the quota and distribution of seats is calculated for the 2024 national and provincial elections'. Available at <https://www.eisa.org/how-the-quota-and-distribution-of-seats-is-calculated-for-the-2024-national-and-provincial-elections/>
- <sup>4</sup> Electoral Commission of South Africa. (n.d.). 'How to Contest National and Provincial Elections'. Available at <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Parties-And-Candidates/How-To-Contest-National-And-Provincial-Elections>
- <sup>5</sup> Detailed financial disclosures for the 2024/25 financial year, including specific amounts allocated to individual parties under the MPDF and RPPF, have not been publicly released. The IEC has published the first quarter political funding disclosure report for the 2024/25 financial year, covering the period from April 1 to June 30, 2024. However, this report does not provide specific funding amounts allocated to individual parties.
- <sup>6</sup> Electoral Commission of South Africa. (n.d.). 'Represented Political Parties Fund'. Available at <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Party-Funding/Represented-Political-Parties-Fund>
- <sup>7</sup> Electoral Commission of South Africa. (n.d.). 'Party Funding'. Available at from <https://www.elections.org.za/pw/Party-Funding>
- <sup>8</sup> My Vote Counts. 2016. 'Guiding principles for political party reform in South Africa'. Available at <https://www.myvotecounts.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2016.10-Policy-Brief-Guiding-Principles-for-Political-Party-Funding-Reform-in-South-Africa.pdf>
- <sup>9</sup> Southern African Legal Information Institute. 2018. 'My Vote Counts NPC vs Minister of Justice and Correctional Services'. 21 June. Available at <https://www.saflii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2018/17.html>
- <sup>10</sup> This report uses the February 2025 South African Rand to United States Dollar rate of 18.41 to one.
- <sup>11</sup> Beaumont, M. 2025. 'Accountability needed for party funding transparency'. *ActionSA*. 25 February. Available at <https://www.actionsa.org.za/accountability-needed-for-party-funding-transparency/>
- <sup>12</sup> Electoral Commission of South Africa. (n.d.). 'Celebrating 30 Years of Electoral Democracy: The guide serves to introduce the reader to the Electoral Commission and its preparations for the 2024 National and Provincial.' 14 June 2024.
- <sup>13</sup> The top three-funded parties were the ANC, the DA and the EFF. See <https://myvotecounts.org.za/the-3-biggest-funders-behind-political-parties/>
- <sup>14</sup> Ordinary MPs in the National Assembly earn R1.28 million annually or USD 67,575.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

 [www.wfd.org](http://www.wfd.org)

 [@WFD\\_Democracy](https://twitter.com/WFD_Democracy)

 [@WFD\\_Democracy](https://www.instagram.com/WFD_Democracy)

 [\*\*Westminster Foundation  
for Democracy \(WFD\)\*\*](https://www.linkedin.com/company/Westminster-Foundation-for-Democracy-(WFD))



Scan here to sign up to WFD news



Westminster Foundation for Democracy is an executive Non-departmental Public Body sponsored by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.



Foreign, Commonwealth  
& Development Office