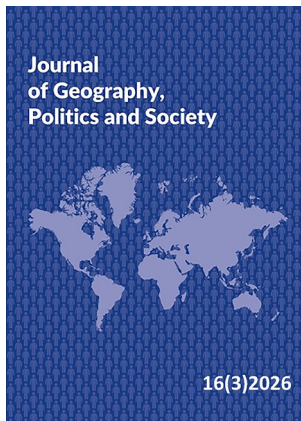




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ONE PROBLEM TWO PARTIES: THE ANC AND DA GOVERNANCE CRISIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that, despite their different constituencies, ideological orientations, and political narratives, the two political parties exhibit similar governance weaknesses, including institutional decay, centralised decision-making, policy inconsistency, and the erosion of public accountability. This paper explores the shared governance crisis of South Africa's two leading political parties, the African National Congress and the Democratic Alliance. While often positioned as ideological opposites, both parties demonstrate converging patterns of administrative inefficiency, political elitism and moral decay. Drawing on comparative evidence from national and municipal levels, the paper contends that South Africa's political dysfunction transcends party lines and is rooted in a deeper structural problem of political culture marked by weak accountability, performative democracy and citizen alienation. The paper highlights how both parties, in different contexts, reproduce inequalities rather than dismantle them, thereby undermining democratic consolidation. The paper concludes by calling for a reimagined political ethos that prioritizes ethical leadership, inclusive governance and civic empowerment over partisan dominance.

Key words

South Africa, Governance; African National Congress; Democratic Alliance; Accountability.

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1. Introduction

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has been hailed as a model of political transformation, transitioning from apartheid authoritarianism to a constitutional democracy grounded in equality, participation and accountability (Habib, 2013; Lodge, 2014a). The African National Congress (ANC), as the dominant liberation movement turned governing party, positioned itself as the custodian of national reconstruction and development. Its ideological orientation was framed around the notion of a

developmental state one capable of redressing the injustices of apartheid through state-led transformation and inclusive growth (Gumede, 2009).

Conversely, the Democratic Alliance (DA) emerged as the principal opposition party, espousing a liberal democratic ideology centred on market efficiency, constitutionalism and the protection of individual freedoms (Southall, 2019). Despite these apparent ideological contrasts, both parties have in practice struggled to deliver equitable and ethical governance. While the ANC's governance has been marred by endemic corruption, factionalism and bureaucratic inefficiency, the DA's administration has

often been criticised for technocratic elitism, racial insensitivity and the perpetuation of spatial and economic inequalities (McEwen & Mngxitama, 2020).

The central puzzle this paper interrogates is how two ideologically distinct parties one rooted in liberation history and the other in liberal modernity exhibit similar governance weaknesses. Evidence from both national and municipal levels suggests that despite divergent policy rhetoric, the ANC and DA converge in patterns of centralized decision-making, policy inconsistency and the erosion of public accountability (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Butler, 2022). These parallels reveal that South Africa's governance crisis is not merely a matter of ideology or party identity, but a deeper structural condition embedded in the political culture itself. The systemic normalization of patronage politics, weak oversight and elite-driven governance has created an environment where accountability is performative rather than substantive and where citizens are often alienated from meaningful participation (Madonsela, 2019a; Tapscott, 2021).

South Africa's political dysfunction transcends partisan or ideological lines. The persistent crises of corruption, inequality and declining institutional integrity reflect not just the failures of individual parties, but a broader culture of governance that prioritizes political control and image management over ethical leadership and democratic accountability (Masenya, 2023). In short, the problem lies not in ideology but in the moral and institutional decay of the political system itself a crisis that both the ANC and DA, despite their differences, have come to embody (Southall, 2021; Butler, 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is primarily informed by Historical Neo-Institutionalism, which provides a useful framework for explaining why the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA), despite their different ideological orientations, historical backgrounds and constituencies, demonstrate similar governance weaknesses. Historical Neo-Institutionalism argues that political behaviour is shaped not only by ideology and individual preferences but also by formal institutions, informal norms, established practices and organisational routines (March & Olsen, 1984; North, 1990; Hall & Taylor, 1996).

This perspective is particularly relevant to the South African context because both parties operate within the same broader political and institutional

environment. Although the ANC's political orientation is rooted in liberation, transformation and developmental governance, while the DA emphasises liberal democracy, constitutionalism and market-oriented governance, both are influenced by institutional conditions that shape how political power is exercised. The framework therefore enables this paper to move beyond a simplistic ideological comparison and examine the structural conditions underlying similar governance weaknesses.

Historical Institutionalism further emphasises path dependency, suggesting that historically established institutional arrangements and political practices can persist and influence contemporary governance even when political circumstances change (Pierson, 2000). In South Africa, the legacies of apartheid, liberation politics, post-1994 state-building, dominant-party governance and persistent socio-economic inequality have contributed to institutional and political practices that continue to shape governance outcomes (Lodge, 2014b; Chipkin & Swilling, 2018). These historical conditions are reflected differently in the governance experiences of the ANC and DA. The ANC's governance challenges have been associated with corruption, patronage, factionalism, cadre deployment and institutional deterioration (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Butler, 2022), while the DA has faced criticism concerning technocratic elitism, centralised decision-making and the persistence of racial and socio-economic inequalities (McEwen & Mngxitama, 2020). The theoretical significance of the comparison is therefore not that the two parties are identical, but that different political organisations can reproduce related governance weaknesses when operating within historically embedded institutional structures.

The paper is further supported by the concept of political culture, which focuses on the values, norms and practices that shape political authority, participation and accountability (Almond & Verba, 1963). This perspective helps explain how patterns such as elite dominance, centralised decision-making, limited citizen participation and weak accountability can extend beyond individual political parties. Although South Africa possesses formal democratic institutions, including regular elections, constitutional protections and mechanisms of political accountability, these institutions do not always translate into meaningful citizen participation or substantive accountability (Habib, 2013; Tapscott, 2021). This condition contributes to what the paper conceptualises as performative democracy, where democratic procedures exist formally but citizens remain marginal to substantive political decision-

making. The combined application of Historical Neo-Institutionalism and political culture therefore supports the central argument of this paper: that South Africa's governance crisis transcends partisan and ideological differences and is rooted in deeper institutional and political-cultural practices that reproduce elite dominance, weak accountability, inequality and citizen alienation (Southall, 2021; Masenya, 2023). Meaningful democratic renewal consequently requires not only changes in political leadership but also the transformation of the institutional practices and political culture through which political power is exercised.

3. Comparative Studies on Political Parties in South Africa

A large body of scholarship has examined the governance trajectories of South Africa's two leading political formations, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA), since the democratic transition. However, this paper does not compare the two parties simply on the basis of their current positions within the national political system. Rather, the comparison is primarily concerned with their respective governance experiences and institutional practices in contexts where they have exercised political authority. The ANC is examined principally in its historical role as South Africa's dominant governing party at national and provincial levels from 1994, while the DA is examined largely through its governance record in municipalities and provinces where it has exercised executive authority. The comparison therefore focuses on how each party translates its ideological commitments and political promises into governance practices, institutional performance, accountability, inclusion and service delivery.

This distinction is particularly important in the context of South Africa's changing political landscape following the 2024 general election and the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU). While both the ANC and DA currently participate in the GNU at the national level, this paper's central comparative framework is not primarily an assessment of their joint governance within the GNU. Instead, the GNU represents an important contemporary political context that illustrates the changing relationship between the two parties and the decline of the traditional distinction between a dominant governing party and a permanent opposition. The historical comparison remains centred on the ANC's extensive experience

as the national governing party and the DA's experience as the principal opposition party, as well as its governance record in areas where it has controlled government. This approach makes it possible to compare the parties despite their historically different institutional positions and spheres of political authority.

Research on the ANC's governance record identifies three recurring patterns: the institutionalisation of cadre deployment, the proliferation of corruption networks and the erosion of bureaucratic professionalism (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Butler, 2022). The cadre deployment policy, intended to align public administration with the political goals of transformation, has often resulted in the politicisation of the state, whereby loyalty to the party supersedes merit and competence (Booyesen, 2015). The State Capture Commission (Zondo Commission, 2022) further revealed how patronage networks facilitated the systematic looting of public resources, hollowing out state institutions and undermining service delivery. Consequently, ANC-led governance has become associated with institutional decline, factional conflict and the personalisation of political power (Madonsela, 2019b; Southall, 2021). The resulting administrative breakdown has not only eroded public trust but has also weakened the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic governance.

In contrast, the DA's governance record is assessed primarily through municipalities and provinces in which it has exercised executive authority, particularly Cape Town, Tshwane, Midvaal and the Western Cape. Its governance model has frequently been associated with managerial competence, financial discipline and administrative efficiency (Cameron, 2019; Ruiters, 2024). However, critical scholarship reveals a different set of challenges that complicate its claim to exemplary governance. The DA's emphasis on technocratic efficiency, bureaucratic rationality and performance management has, in some instances, translated into forms of governance criticised for privileging the interests of affluent and historically advantaged constituencies while inadequately addressing the needs of poorer and predominantly black communities (Pithouse, 2017; McEwen & Mngxitama, 2020). Spatial inequality and the slow pace of housing and infrastructure delivery in historically marginalised communities remain important challenges under DA-led administrations, reflecting criticisms associated with neoliberal urban governance and the prioritisation of fiscal prudence over broader social inclusion (Turok, 2019).

Moreover, the party's internal racial and ideological tensions have exposed limitations within its liberal-democratic identity, with critics arguing that it has yet to fully reconcile its historical legacy with the broader imperatives of transformation and substantive equality (Southall, 2019). The comparison between the ANC and DA should therefore not be interpreted as suggesting that the parties occupy identical political positions or govern under identical conditions. Rather, it examines whether their different ideological orientations and governance approaches produce substantially different outcomes in relation to institutional accountability, social inclusion, inequality and democratic responsiveness.

The comparative analysis suggests that, despite their divergent ideological foundations and historical positions as governing party and official opposition, both parties face significant governance limitations. The ANC's developmental and transformational rhetoric has often been undermined by institutional decay, patronage and weak accountability, while the DA's liberal managerial approach has faced criticism for its limitations in addressing structural inequality and achieving meaningful social inclusion. Thus, the central argument of this paper is not that the ANC and DA govern in precisely the same manner, but that their distinct governance approaches reveal different manifestations of broader weaknesses within South Africa's political system. The contemporary GNU further provides an emerging context in which these historically distinct parties must navigate shared responsibility for governance, making the question of political accountability and effective leadership increasingly complex.

4. Conceptual Lens: Governance Beyond Ideology

This paper adopts the conceptual position that South Africa's governance crisis is best understood through a governance beyond ideology framework one that transcends partisan analysis to interrogate the underlying institutional and cultural logics of power. The notion that governance failures are ideologically neutral is supported by comparative governance theory which highlights that both technocratic and populist systems can fall prey to institutional decay when political elites prioritize control over accountability (Fukuyama, 2014). Whether expressed through the ANC's patronage networks or the DA's bureaucratic insularity, the result is similar: a centralization of authority, erosion of citizen voice and governance outcomes that sustain rather than disrupt structural inequality.

Bertsou and Caramani (2020) warn that technocracy often celebrated for efficiency can become exclusionary, thus, disempowering citizens by framing political decisions as matters of expertise rather than democratic deliberation. Similarly, Chabal and Daloz (1999) show how neo-patrimonial cultures in Africa embed personal loyalty and informal networks into the functioning of formal institutions, leading to what they term "the politics of disorder." When these patterns coexist technocratic exclusion on one side and patrimonial corruption on the other, they reveal a systemic political culture that transcends ideology. Both parties, in different ways, perpetuate governance logics that place the party or elite interest above citizen welfare. This paper fills a critical gap in the South African political literature by offering a comparative analysis of the ANC and DA within a unified governance framework. Rather than contrasting "good" and "bad" governance through partisan lenses, it interrogates the shared institutional and cultural foundations of failure. It argues that South Africa's governance malaise is not the product of ideological divergence but of a normalized political culture characterized by elitism, weak accountability and performative democracy. This lens enables a deeper understanding of how the illusion of ideological opposition conceals the systemic reproduction of governance dysfunction across the political spectrum.

5. Methodology and Approach

The paper employs a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) situated within a descriptive-analytical framework to interrogate the governance trajectories of South Africa's two leading political parties the ANC and the DA. The qualitative comparative approach allows for the systematic identification of similarities and differences in governance practices across cases that differ ideologically but operate within the same constitutional framework. As Ragin (2014) notes, QCA is particularly suited for examining complex social phenomena where causal relationships are not linear but interwoven through institutional and cultural contexts. In this paper, the approach is used not to establish causality in the positivist sense but to unpack the structural and political mechanisms that produce converging governance outcomes in ideologically distinct parties.

For enhanced credibility, dependability, and transferability, the research is based on a qualitative framework. This approach ensures that the findings are contextually relevant and can be reliably applied

to similar situations. Primary sources include government performance reports, Auditor-General findings and municipal annual reviews that offer empirical insight into institutional performance, service delivery efficiency and financial management. These are supplemented by policy documents such as the ANC's National Development Plan and the DA's Manifesto for Change to capture the normative claims and governance philosophies of each party. In addition, secondary sources such as academic literature, scholarly articles and independent media investigations from News24, Daily Maverick and GroundUp provide context for understanding the socio-political dynamics underpinning governance failures. This diverse dataset strengthens the interpretive validity of the paper and mitigates the risk of partisan bias in data interpretation (Bryman, 2016).

The comparative scope of this paper encompasses both national and subnational levels of governance, reflecting the different domains where the ANC and DA exercise authority. For the ANC, the focus is on governance at the national and provincial levels specifically in the Limpopo, Free State and Eastern Cape provinces where patterns of corruption, cadre deployment and administrative collapse have been most evident (Chipkin & Swilling, 2018; Booysen, 2015). In contrast, the DA's governance performance is assessed primarily at the municipal level, with case studies drawn from Cape Town, Tshwane and Midvaal, where the party has had sufficient tenure to institutionalize its governance model. This division reflects the political geography of South Africa's democracy, wherein the ANC's dominance is national, and the DA's influence is subnational. By juxtaposing these cases, the paper captures both the breadth and depth of South Africa's governance crisis.

Analytically, the paper evaluates governance performance through four key variables: institutional integrity, accountability, policy coherence and service delivery outcomes. Institutional integrity refers to the degree to which public institutions operate autonomously, free from political interference and corruption. Accountability mechanisms encompass formal checks and balances such as oversight committees, internal audits and public participation processes as well as informal practices of transparency. Policy coherence examines the alignment between stated party policies and their actual implementation, assessing whether ideological claims translate into effective governance. Finally, service delivery outcomes measure the tangible impact of governance on

citizens' quality of life, focusing on infrastructure, housing, sanitation and public service accessibility (Cameron, 2019; Tapscott, 2021).

By integrating these variables within a comparative framework, the paper seeks to uncover how two political parties, operating under the same constitutional and economic constraints reproduce similar governance pathologies. The qualitative, interpretive design enables a nuanced reading of political behaviour, discourse and institutional practice, rather than relying solely on quantitative performance metrics. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue, qualitative inquiry provides the contextual sensitivity needed to grasp the moral, symbolic and institutional dimensions of governance. Ultimately, this methodology not only facilitates comparison across ideological lines but also reveals the systemic patterns rooted in political culture and institutional weakness that sustain South Africa's governance crisis.

6. Comparative Analysis: ANC and DA Governance Patterns

6.1. Institutional Integrity

Institutional integrity refers to the resilience, autonomy and ethical standards of public institutions that safeguard against political manipulation and corruption (Masenya & Kgobe 2019). Under ANC rule, institutional integrity has been systematically undermined by cadre deployment, a practice intended to align the bureaucracy with the party's developmental objectives, but which has instead eroded meritocracy and embedded political patronage into the state apparatus.

The Zondo Commission (2022) and analyses by Chipkin and Swilling (2018) expose how this system facilitated state capture, blurred lines between party and state and weakened oversight institutions such as the Hawks and National Prosecuting Authority. Provinces like the Free State and Eastern Cape illustrate how loyalty-based appointments perpetuated inefficiency and corruption, with procurement systems manipulated for political gain.

In contrast, the DA prides itself on promoting a professional and rules-based administrative ethos, often framing its governance as technocratic and efficiency-driven (Cameron, 2019). However, evidence from municipalities such as Cape Town and Tshwane indicates that institutional integrity under the DA also faces strain, although of a different nature. Critics argue that the DA's rigid managerialism and centralized control have created

bureaucratic silos that limit participatory decision-making (Ruiters, 2024). The party's emphasis on "clean audits" and procedural compliance has sometimes masked deeper inequities in institutional responsiveness and inclusivity (Tapscott, 2021). Thus, while the ANC's institutional decay stems from political patronage, the DA's institutional rigidity risks excluding marginalized voices, producing an "administrative elitism" that undermines institutional legitimacy. Both forms of dysfunction, though distinct in origin, compromise institutional integrity and weaken the democratic ethos of public administration.

6.2. Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability mechanisms form the backbone of democratic governance, ensuring that elected officials and bureaucrats answer for their actions (Masenya, 2017). In ANC-led administrations, accountability has been systematically weakened through the conflation of party loyalty with public responsibility. Internal mechanisms of discipline within the ANC have often shielded politically connected figures from consequences, creating a culture of impunity (Manyaka and Sebola, 2013). The Auditor-General's repeated findings of irregular expenditure and poor audit outcomes across ANC-governed provinces reflect the hollowing out of internal accountability (Auditor-General of South Africa, 2022). Moreover, parliamentary oversight has been compromised by majoritarian dominance, with the ruling party often prioritizing political unity over institutional accountability (Booyesen, 2015).

By contrast, the DA presents itself as a model of transparency and rule-based governance. Municipal performance reports and oversight processes under DA-led councils generally demonstrate higher administrative compliance (Cameron, 2019). However, the party's centralized control over caucus decisions and limited tolerance for dissent within its ranks reveal internal accountability deficits (Piper, 2020). In Cape Town, the consolidation of mayoral powers and top-down decision-making structures have led to accusations of technocratic authoritarianism, where managerial accountability eclipses democratic responsiveness (Ruiters, 2024). Thus, while ANC accountability erodes through politicization and patronage, the DA's accountability is constrained by over-professionalization and hierarchical governance. In both cases, formal mechanisms of accountability are maintained in name but compromised in practice, illustrating a shared crisis of political ethics rather than ideology.

6.3. Policy Coherence

Policy coherence refers to the consistency between a party's ideological commitments, policy formulation and implementation practices (Habib, 2013). The ANC's developmental state agenda, as articulated in the National Development Plan and successive manifestos, envisions an interventionist state that drives inclusive growth and social justice. Yet, in practice, policy inconsistency and implementation gaps have persisted. The tension between neoliberal macroeconomic policies (such as GEAR and later NDP fiscal austerity) and redistributive rhetoric has produced incoherence that undermines long-term developmental goals (Edigheji, 2010; Habib, 2013). This inconsistency is further exacerbated by factional politics and administrative instability, where leadership changes often derail policy continuity. Provinces such as Limpopo and Free State exemplify this misalignment with stalled projects and shifting priorities reflecting the absence of strategic coherence (Southall, 2013).

The DA's policy framework, on the other hand, emphasizes liberal democratic values, efficiency and market-oriented solutions. While this has produced instances of administrative stability and strong fiscal management (particularly in Cape Town and Midvaal), critics contend that the DA's policy coherence is limited to fiscal conservatism rather than social equity (Piper, 2020). Studies on urban governance in Cape Town reveal that spatial planning and housing policies often prioritize investment zones and tourism development over equitable urban integration (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014; Ruiters, 2024). The result is a governance model coherent in economic rationality but incoherent in social justice. Both parties demonstrate selective policy coherence: the ANC in its rhetorical commitment to transformation without effective implementation, and the DA in its pursuit of efficiency without substantive inclusion.

6.4. Service Delivery Outcomes

Service delivery represents the tangible expression of governance quality as experienced by citizens. Across ANC-controlled municipalities, service delivery failures have become a symbol of governance decay (Masenya, 2017). Chronic underperformance in water provision, housing, sanitation and electricity infrastructure particularly in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo, and Free State reflects institutional collapse exacerbated by corruption, mismanagement and cadre deployment (Booyesen,

2015; Tapscott, 2021). Service delivery protests, now endemic in South Africa's political landscape, express deep-seated frustration with unresponsive and politicized local governments. The ANC's inability to translate policy promises into efficient delivery has eroded its legitimacy, contributing to declining electoral support.

In DA-led municipalities, service delivery outcomes are generally more consistent, but they are unevenly distributed. Cape Town's internationally praised urban infrastructure coexists with persistent inequalities between affluent suburbs and underdeveloped townships such as Khayelitsha and Nyanga (Ruiters, 2024). Critics argue that the DA's service delivery model privileges middle-class efficiency over redistributive justice, reinforcing apartheid-era spatial inequities (Cameroon, 2019; Piper, 2020). While the DA's focus on technical competence and clean governance yields measurable outputs, it often neglects participatory processes and the inclusion of marginalized communities (Cameron, 2019). Consequently, both parties fail to deliver a democratic dividend that is socially inclusive and ethically grounded demonstrating that South Africa's service delivery crisis is less a function of ideology than of a shared governance culture characterized by elitism, technocracy and limited accountability.

6.5. Synthesis: Governance Convergence Beyond Ideology

The comparative analysis reveals that despite contrasting ideological narratives, both the ANC and DA reproduce governance patterns rooted in centralized control, elitist administration and weak participatory accountability. The ANC's governance deficits arise from politicized patronage and institutional decay, while the DA's stem from technocratic exclusivity and over-bureaucratization (Hyden, 2006). These patterns converge in outcomes of citizen alienation, service delivery inequities, and eroding trust in democratic institutions. The governance crisis thus transcends ideology it is embedded in the deeper political culture of South Africa's democracy, where the logic of control overrides the ethos of accountability and inclusion (Fukuyama, 2014).

7. Discussion and Implications

The comparative analysis of ANC and DA governance reveal a paradox that sits at the heart of South Africa's democratic experience: despite operating

under different ideological banners, both parties display convergent governance failures rooted in institutional weakness, elitist political culture and fragile accountability systems. This convergence challenges the conventional assumption that governance quality in South Africa is primarily determined by ideology or policy orientation. Instead, the evidence points to a systemic crisis of political culture one that transcends partisan lines and reflects deeper historical continuities in how power, authority and accountability are constructed and practiced.

At the centre of this crisis lies the erosion of democratic accountability. The ANC's governance style has evolved from liberation movement solidarity into a system of patronage-based control, where loyalty to the party supersedes commitment to constitutional principles. The DA, while priding itself on institutional efficiency and managerial competence, often replicates exclusionary hierarchies through its technocratic approach. Both tendencies reduce the citizen to a passive recipient of governance rather than an active participant in democracy. This finding aligns with Hyden's (2006) argument that African political systems frequently substitute vertical accountability (loyalty to party or leader) for horizontal accountability (responsibility to institutions and citizens). In South Africa's case, the result is a performative democracy procedurally intact but substantively hollow.

The persistence of institutional decay and elitism across ideological divides suggests that South Africa's governance problem is not a question of policy design but of political culture and institutional norms. Fukuyama (2014) argues that political decay occurs when institutions fail to adapt to changing social realities or when elites manipulate institutions for self-preservation. This theoretical lens explains why both the ANC's populist developmentalism and the DA's liberal technocracy have failed to generate inclusive governance: in both contexts, institutions serve the consolidation of political control rather than the diffusion of power. Thus, the underlying pathology is the centralization of authority a phenomenon equally visible in the ANC's cadre deployment networks and the DA's centralized caucus structures. In each case, decision-making is concentrated in elite circles, undermining participatory governance and weakening public trust.

The implications for democratic consolidation are profound. A democracy that sustains formal elections but fails to deliver ethical, participatory governance risks devolving into what Chabal and Daloz (1999) describe as a "virtual democracy," where the appearance of legitimacy masks the absence of

accountability. In South Africa, this dynamic is evident in declining voter turnout, rising social unrest and the proliferation of independent candidates who reject party-based politics altogether. The erosion of confidence in traditional parties indicates a legitimacy crisis not confined to one organization but affecting the political system as a whole. The ANC's moral decline and the DA's perceived detachment from poor communities both contribute to an expanding democratic deficit in which citizens feel politically excluded despite constitutional inclusion.

Moreover, the governance convergence between the ANC and DA has implications for the broader project of socio-economic transformation. Both parties, in different ways, have struggled to dismantle apartheid-era inequalities. The ANC's developmental agenda has been undermined by corruption and administrative incompetence, while the DA's market-oriented approach has often reinforced spatial and economic stratification (Parnell & Pieterse, 2014; Ruiters, 2024). The result is a dual failure: the ANC's inability to deliver equity and the DA's inability to deliver inclusion. Together, these failures sustain a political economy of exclusion, where governance serves elite interests rather than collective upliftment.

From a theoretical standpoint, the South African experience underscores the limitations of ideological analysis in explaining governance outcomes. Instead, the findings support a political-cultural and institutionalist perspective: governance quality depends less on whether a party is developmental or liberal and more on whether it cultivates institutional integrity, ethical leadership and participatory accountability. This view aligns with Bratton and Van de Walle's (1997) thesis that democratization in Africa often stalls when elites capture state institutions and instrumentalize them for political survival. The ANC and DA, though rhetorically opposed, converge in their failure to democratize power within their own structures, thereby reproducing the very hierarchies that democracy was meant to dismantle.

Finally, the implications for reform are clear. Addressing South Africa's governance crisis requires a reimagined political ethos that transcends party identity and re-centers the citizen as the core of governance. This entails institutional redesign to strengthen local participation, depoliticize public administration and embed ethical accountability into political culture. It also calls for cultivating deliberative democracy where governance is not merely about efficiency or loyalty but about moral responsibility, inclusivity and civic empowerment.

Only by transforming the political culture from elitist control to participatory accountability can South Africa's democracy move beyond the symbolic and toward the substantive.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper has demonstrated that the governance challenges facing South Africa are not confined to ideological divisions between the ANC and the DA but instead reflect a systemic and cultural crisis of governance. Despite divergent political narratives the ANC's developmentalist, liberation-rooted rhetoric versus the DA's liberal, technocratic approach both parties exhibit convergent patterns of institutional decay, centralization of authority, weakened accountability and policy incoherence.

Comparative evidence from national, provincial and municipal levels reveals that the ANC's governance weaknesses are largely rooted in patronage, political capture and administrative inefficiency, while the DA's are grounded in elitist technocracy, selective service delivery and spatially uneven inclusion. In both cases, the citizen is marginalised, and democracy is performed symbolically rather than substantively.

These findings underscore that South Africa's governance problem is not an ideological deficiency, but a political-cultural pathology. The replication of elitist control, whether through cadre deployment or technocratic managerialism, demonstrates how entrenched practices within political parties and institutions undermine the ethical, participatory and inclusive ideals enshrined in the constitution. Furthermore, the resulting service delivery gaps, institutional erosion and civic disillusionment threaten democratic consolidation and reinforce socio-economic inequalities, indicating that the failure is structural rather than incidental.

Recommendations

To address the cross-party governance crisis, the paper advances the following recommendations, aimed at institutional reform, ethical leadership, and participatory governance:

Strengthen Institutional Autonomy

- Depoliticise state institutions and protect professional civil service from patronage politics.
- Implement merit-based appointments and ensure independent oversight in both national and municipal governance (Fukuyama, 2014; Tapscott, 2021).

Enhance Accountability Mechanisms

- Institutionalise participatory accountability tools such as community monitoring committees, public hearings, and digital reporting platforms.
- Empower the Auditor-General, Public Protector, and other oversight bodies to operate free from political interference.

Promote Policy Coherence and Evidence-Based Governance

- Align policy design with long-term strategic objectives and social equity goals, ensuring consistency between rhetoric and implementation.
- Integrate participatory planning to balance efficiency with inclusivity, particularly in urban and township service delivery.

Foster Ethical Leadership and Political Culture Transformation

- Embed ethics and civic responsibility into political party training programs and candidate selection criteria.
- Encourage a shift from performative politics toward values-driven leadership that prioritizes public good over partisan dominance (Hyden, 2006; Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

Advance Inclusive and Participatory Governance

- Institutionalise mechanisms for meaningful citizen engagement in policy decisions at municipal, provincial, and national levels.
- Prioritise the redistribution of resources and services to historically marginalized communities to dismantle structural inequalities reinforced under both ANC and DA rule.

Overall, South Africa's governance crisis illustrates that partisan identity alone cannot guarantee democratic effectiveness. Both the ANC and DA demonstrate that without a political culture that values accountability, ethical conduct and citizen participation, institutions risk becoming instruments of elite control rather than vehicles for public service. The path toward substantive democracy requires more than alternation of power between parties; it necessitates a reimagined political ethos one that prioritizes civic empowerment, institutional integrity and social justice over ideological posturing or managerial efficiency. Only by confronting these structural and cultural deficits can South Africa move beyond the symbolic trappings of democracy to realize its transformative promise.

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