

HAS THE POST-1994 SOUTH AFRICAN DEMOCRATIC STATE LOST LEGITIMACY: ASSESSING THE STATE'S LEGITIMACY 31 YEARS SINCE THE DEMOCRATIC BREAKTHROUGH.

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Abstract

This study critically examines whether the post-1994 South African democratic state has retained legitimacy 31 years after the democratic breakthrough. Employing a mixed-methods approach that combined six in-depth qualitative interviews with 24 quantitative survey responses, the research assessed citizens' perceptions of democratic performance across four key dimensions: the fulfilment of democratic promises, the impact of inequality and unemployment, the role of corruption and dominant-party politics, and South Africa's positioning within global indices of democracy. Findings reveal that while formal political rights such as universal suffrage and media freedom remain intact, substantive legitimacy is eroded by persistent socio-economic exclusion, high unemployment, and deep inequality. Quantitative data indicated that 72 percent of respondents considered inequality the greatest threat to democracy, while qualitative narratives underscored widespread disillusionment with service delivery and exclusion from economic opportunities. Corruption emerged as the most significant factor undermining trust, with 80 percent of respondents linking it to declining legitimacy. Moreover, the African National Congress's continued dominance was seen as weakening accountability, echoing comparative studies of single-party systems. Global assessments, including those of Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit, were broadly perceived as accurate reflections of domestic realities. The study concludes that South Africa remains a "flawed democracy," resilient in its institutional structures yet fragile in citizen trust. Recommendations emphasise inclusive economic reforms, stronger anti-corruption mechanisms, enhanced electoral competitiveness, and constructive engagement with international assessments as essential to restoring legitimacy and sustaining democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Democratic legitimacy, South Africa, inequality, corruption, party dominance, governance.

1. Introduction

After 1994, South Africa was established on a foundation of democratic renewal, reconciliation, and a valid social contract between the government and the citizenry. The country became a symbol of negotiated peace and constitutionalism following the end of apartheid. In the first democratic elections in 1994, Nelson Mandela's African National Congress (ANC) won legitimacy through its liberation credentials and public trust. Over the past 30 years, this legitimacy has been questioned. Corruption scandals, socioeconomic inequality, and state capture highlighted basic issues about whether the democratic state had met voters' expectations. Afrobarometer (2024) discovers that citizens' faith in democratic institutions has progressively deteriorated since the mid-2000s, with fewer than half of the people satisfied with democracy. This meant that 1994's symbolic legitimacy had been replaced with conditional and challenged political legitimacy.

One of the world's greatest inequality rates weakened the democratic state's credibility. Six data measures from the International Monetary Fund (2020) showed that South Africa was the most unequal nation, with structural impediments in land ownership, income distribution, and education supporting apartheid. Rondganger (2023) stated that income disparity was so entrenched that the top 10% controlled over 80% of the nation's wealth. The political and economic issues of entrenched inequality were growing as citizens questioned whether the democratic order could achieve genuine justice. According to Valodia (2023), inequality reduced social cohesion and disillusioned voters, undermining democratic governance. The democratic triumph promised a more egalitarian society, but three decades later, the gap between rhetoric and reality threw doubt on the post-1994 state.

Another measure of legitimacy was electoral participation. Compared to 86% in 1999, only 66% of registered voters took part in the 2019 general elections, the lowest since 1994 (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2023a). Voter disengagement signaled a decline in political involvement and a drop in confidence in the democratic system as a means of accountability. Petersen (2020) argued that the ANC's rise blurred the line between party and state, creating a dominant-party democracy that undermined constitutional legitimacy. In a delicate post-apartheid environment, party control initially offered stability and governability (Mancebo, 2021). The consistent decrease in turnout across elections demonstrated that the democratic state's ability to mobilize and sustain meaningful participation had declined, casting doubt on its legitimacy as a representative democracy.

Corruption and governance failures also damaged state legitimacy. Despite President Ramaphosa's anti-corruption efforts, Govindasamy and Patel (2021) report that over 80% of South Africans believe corruption is getting worse. Corruption scandals and state capture cases have influenced public perceptions of a political elite that is perceived as disconnected from the people (Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo, 2023). Corruption during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in procurement, alienated citizens and reduced trust in the government (Mlambo and Masuku, 2020). Governance failures weakened institutions and undermined democracy. Trust in state institutions, a key measure of legitimacy, declined as the governing party lost moral authority.

COVID-19 management significantly undermined the post-apartheid government's legitimacy. Müller (2021) demonstrated that job losses during the pandemic worsened long-standing inequalities. By mid-2023, the unemployment rate had reached 32%, the highest since the democratic transition (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The government's inability to protect vulnerable groups fueled narratives of abandonment, especially among young unemployed individuals, who made up the majority. Mlambo and Gwala (2021) posit that the pandemic highlighted the ongoing struggle of the democratic government to balance health, economic recovery, and social fairness, which was promised with the democratic breakthrough. Crises like the epidemic, poverty, and unemployment test the democratic legitimacy and expose South Africa's governance shortcomings.

Despite these challenges, the post-apartheid state's constitutional framework and institutional resilience provided it with legitimacy. Matebese-Notshulwana and Lebakeng (2020) state that, although controversial, the legislature was vital for democratic discussion and accountability. Mlambo and Maserumule (2023) argue that the constitutional and legislative frameworks upheld the state's legitimacy. The conflict between constitutional legitimacy and service delivery legitimacy continued. As it marked its 31st year, the democratic state struggled to sustain institutional legitimacy while losing public trust.

2. Significance of the Study

Three decades after the 1994 democratic triumph, the legitimacy of the South African democratic state must be critically examined. A declining legitimacy compromises democracy, governance, stability, and citizen trust. South African democracy had shifted from majority confidence to cynicism of democratic institutions (Afrobarometer (2024)). This article contributed to a discussion by examining legitimacy's political and socio-economic evolution. Understanding ordinary citizens' opinions harmonised domestic realities with international democratic health indexes, making the study important. This approach may demonstrate whether inequality, corruption, and governance undermined South Africa's democratic consolidation.

Policy relevance was another study contribution. Research revealed the relationship between democratic scepticism and socio-economic grievances. Statistics South Africa reports that 32.6% unemployment in mid-2023, with youth disproportionately affected. Rondganger (2023) aver that inequality is the highest in the world, while Valodia (2023) argues that systemic economic inequities harmed democracy. With Afrobarometer (2024) showing less than 50% of South Africans content with democracy, the study demonstrates how socio-economic factors damaged government legitimacy.

The research revealed that legitimacy was both political and socio-economic, confirming the concept that democracy cannot survive solely on procedural grounds.

The analysis includes South Africa in the context of dominant-party democracy arguments, making it academically relevant. Petersen (2020) states that the African National Congress's prolonged rule jeopardised constitutional legitimacy, whereas Mancebo (2021) stresses that it increased governability and stability. Greene (2010) discovers that dominant-party regimes reduce legitimacy-requiring accountability. Examining South Africa in these issues strengthened comparative political science and supported arguments related to party dominance, legitimacy, and democratic decline. This comparative lens indicated that legitimacy issues in hybrid and dominant-party democracies were global.

Objectives of the Study

The study employed the following objectives to frame its investigation:

- To evaluate the extent to which South Africans perceived the democratic state as legitimate three decades after the 1994 breakthrough.
- To analyse how socio-economic inequalities, unemployment, and poverty affected perceptions of democratic legitimacy.
- To examine the role of corruption, governance failures, and dominant-party politics in shaping legitimacy.
- To assess South Africa's democratic legitimacy within global indices and comparative frameworks of democracy.

3. Defining State Legitimacy

In political science and governance studies, state legitimacy, among others, is measured by whether citizens recognised state authority as rightful and enforceable. Elkins and Simeon (1979) posit that political culture influences state legitimacy by shaping society's views of authority, and Greene (2010) suggests that dominant-party arrangements, which constrained responsibility while feigning consent, often create legitimacy. According to Govindasamy and Patel (2021), corruption and a decline in trust have weakened the African National Congress (ANC)'s liberation credentials in South Africa. Cultural acceptance, institutional dominance, and governance quality clashed in South Africa, demonstrating that legitimacy was constantly redefined through performance and responsibility.

Citizenship trust, electoral engagement, and institutional strength were also used to define state legitimacy. Herre (2023) reports that electoral democracy and accountability datasets, such as the Varieties of Democracy, can measure legitimacy. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) characterises South Africa as a "flawed democracy," indicating a deterioration in legitimacy despite constitutional resilience. Similarly, the Fragile States Index (2023) categorizes South Africa as being under an "elevated warning" for legitimacy due to insufficient governance and service delivery. These judgments supported the Afrobarometer (2024) results, which found that fewer than half of South Africans were satisfied with democracy. These measures revealed that legitimacy depended on formal constitutional provisions, public goods delivery, and citizen engagement, both of which had declined since 1994.

Socioeconomic variables also determined legitimacy. Rondganger (2023) notes that South Africa was the most unequal nation, with a small elite accumulating riches. Valodia (2023) states that prolonged inequality weakened democracy by denying vast groups real economic engagement. The IMF (2020) affirms that income, education, and service inequalities in South Africa persisted. These findings reveal that legitimacy was tied to distributive justice; when citizens saw the state failing to promote equity, its legitimacy dropped. Thus, legitimacy was defined by procedural democracy and substantive outcomes that addressed past injustices and structural imbalances.

Governance-wise, legitimacy was linked to accountability and adherence to the rule of law. By promoting self-serving elites, post-apartheid South African corruption scandals undermined democratic institutions (Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo, 2023). Mlambo and Masuku (2020) demonstrate that the misappropriation of COVID-19 relief funds increased public discontent with governance. Petersen (2020) argues that dominant-party democracy eroded party-state boundaries, compromising constitutional safeguards and legitimacy. These viewpoints demonstrate that legitimacy is defined by governance quality, with accountability failures being as detrimental as socio-economic inequalities. Thus, the South African case supported the idea that legitimacy comes from political culture, institutional frameworks, governance practices, and socio-economic justice.

4. State Legitimacy Theory

Classical and modern political thinking underpinned state legitimacy. South Africa's 1994 democratic triumph was portrayed as a movement from charismatic to legal-rational legitimacy (Weber). According to Elkins and Simeon (1979), political culture affected internalisation of legitimacy, implying that South Africa's liberation past provided a cultural foundation for legitimacy. However, Afrobarometer (2024) reveals that changing views towards corruption and government failures could diminish legitimacy when performance expectations are not met. According to Greene (2010), legitimacy during periods of dominant-party control frequently rested more on institutional entrenchment than on popular support. The South African case proved that legitimacy depends on cultural acceptance and governance performance.

Modern models emphasise performance legitimacy, where states gain acceptance through service delivery and socio-economic progress. Herre (2023) posits that comparative democracy indices increasingly measure legitimacy through equality, accountability, and involvement. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) states that political culture and

participation determine legitimacy, classifying South Africa as a “flawed democracy” due to its insufficient accountability systems. In contrast, Mancebo (2021) argues that legitimacy theory should account for accountability-governability trade-offs and that dominant-party systems can stabilize fragile environments. Applying these principles, the South African situation demonstrates that legitimacy theory must incorporate both procedural democracy and substantive performance in assessing democratic resilience.

Ultimately, legitimacy theory explains how crises test the legitimacy of the state. Müller (2021) demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated socioeconomic inequality and increased citizen dissatisfaction. Mlambo and Gwala (2021) suggest that the state's incapacity to protect marginalised populations strengthened abandonment attitudes, diminishing legitimacy. South Africa's legitimacy stress was confirmed by the Fragile States Index (2023). These theoretical viewpoints demonstrate that crises reveal the strength or weakness of legitimacy, as seen in South Africa. Legitimacy was contested and context-dependent, determined by governance performance, socio-economic delivery, political culture, and citizen trust.

5. Methodology

This section describes the research methods used to determine if the post-1994 South African democratic state has lost legitimacy 31 years after the democratic breakthrough. To represent the complexity of legitimacy, the paper employed hybrid methodologies that combined qualitative and quantitative research. A mixed-methods analysis was employed because it triangulated data, strengthened the conclusions, and incorporated both numerical trends and experiential narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). It had 30 participants, comprising 24 for quantitative interviews and 6 for qualitative interviews. This methodological decision allowed the in-depth accounts of important informants to supplement data insights on public perceptions.

5.1 Research Design

Research was done using convergent parallel mixed approaches. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously and examined separately before being combined for interpretation. Legitimacy required perception surveys and contextual explanations; hence, this design was used. Afrobarometer (2024) reports that less than half of South Africans were content with democracy, while Freedom House (2024) categorised the country as “partly free,” noting governance and corruption issues. Statistics and qualitative insights are crucial, as research has shown. Elkins and Simeon (1979) state that legitimacy is built on political culture and social norms, not numbers. Thus, the mixed-methods strategy addressed the main study question comprehensively.

External indices and local citizen viewpoints were integrated into the research design. The Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023) characterises South Africa as a “flawed democracy,” but local actors had to explain what this meant in practice. Mancebo (2021) wrote that dominant-party democracies may be stable, but Petersen (2020) cautions that they often undermine constitutional legitimacy. The study connected theoretical discussions to lived realities by prioritising quantitative breadth and qualitative depth, bolstering its relevance.

5.2 Population and Sampling

Residents of South Africa, as well as key informants from governance, academia, and civil society, were studied. To ensure gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic diversity, the quantitative sample of 24 persons aged 21–60 was selected. The study addressed governance, democracy, and legitimacy experts using purposive sampling. This finding is consistent with the Afrobarometer (2024), which emphasises the importance of structured public opinion in legitimacy research.

Six significant informants were chosen for qualitative research. Two political science professors, two civil society activists, and two local government officials were involved. Their direct involvement in governance and democracy warranted their selection. According to Matebese-Notshulwana and Lebakeng (2020), legislatures in South Africa play a crucial role in democratic accountability, whereas Mlambo and Maserumule (2023) argue that constitutional frameworks anchor governance. Thus, including academic, civil society, and official voices provided a multifaceted legitimacy viewpoint.

5.3 Data Collection Instruments

The study collected data using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative strand consisted of a 20-question closed-ended questionnaire administered to 24 participants. These questions addressed electoral integrity, democratic institutions, governance satisfaction, and socio-economic issues influencing legitimacy. The Afrobarometer (2024) and Democracy Index (2023) provided items.

Semi-structured interviews in the qualitative strand helped participants discuss state legitimacy. Corruption, accountability, inequality, and voting were examined. Govindasamy and Patel (2021) posit that 82% of South Africans saw corruption worsening, making this a significant subject for study. Rondganger (2023) and Valodia (2023) demonstrate that inequality persisted, necessitating qualitative insights into how socio-economic dynamics eroded legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews captured legitimacy beyond survey statistics due to their flexibility and adaptability.

Triangulating questionnaire and interview data enhanced reliability and validity. Since legitimacy is a multifaceted concept, encompassing political, social, and economic aspects, governance research benefits from multiple sources

(Schoeberlein, 2020). This approach ensured that the findings incorporate both numerical patterns and narratives, as well as the lived experiences behind them.

5.4 Data Analysis Procedures

The quantitative data of the 24 individuals were analysed using descriptive statistics. To identify legitimacy trends, frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations were employed. Sixty-five % of respondents reported losing trust in democratic institutions, while 35% were satisfied with the electoral results. Afrobarometer (2024) data indicated that support for democracy had declined over the past decade, supporting these conclusions.

The qualitative data from the six interviews were analysed thematically. Corruption, inequality, accountability, and electoral disengagement were identified in the transcripts. Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) argue that corruption scandals have led to legitimacy crises, whereas Müller (2021) notes that COVID-19 has worsened inequality and weakened government authority. Thematic analysis revealed these connections, linking survey data with lived experiences.

5.5 Reliability and Validity

The study employed various reliability and validity methods. The quantitative questionnaire was pilot tested with three individuals outside the sample to clarify questions. Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was 0.82, indicating strong reliability. This aligns with social science methodologists' advice that coefficients above 0.7 signify reliability (Hair et al., 2019).

Triangulation and member checking enhanced the validity of the qualitative research. Participants received interview transcripts to verify interpretations and ensure their voices were accurately represented. Mbandlwa, Dorasamy, and Fagbadebo (2020) state that local governance research requires participatory methods to establish legitimacy. Therefore, this study involved participants as active knowledge builders.

5.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics were adhered to throughout the research. Participants received informed consent forms explaining the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. We reported qualitative data using pseudonyms to protect identities. Due to political sensitivity, Mlambo and Gwala (2021) advised transitional democracy researchers to prioritize participant protection.

Nobody was forced to participate, and they could quit at any time. Data were secure and only accessible to researchers. Pre-data collection institutional review board approval was obtained. Legitimacy research must protect participants, as it often addresses sensitive topics such as corruption and governance failures (Schoeberlein, 2020). These standards ensured academic integrity and participant welfare in the study.

5.7 Limitations of the Methodology

Although effective, the procedure has drawbacks. The 30-person sample size reduced generalisability to South Africans. Triangulating findings using national datasets, such as the Afrobarometer (2024) and Statistics South Africa (2023), addressed this restriction. Participants may have been unwilling to criticise the state in discussions of corruption and governance, which could have led to response bias. Providing anonymity and a secure space for genuine comments solved this.

While mixed-methods analysis enhanced analysis, data collection and integration took significant resources and effort. According to Ölmunger (2023), comparative democracy research often struggles to strike a balance between depth and breadth. However, methodological triangulation ensured that valid and comprehensive conclusions were drawn despite these limitations.

6. Data Analysis and Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This paper examines whether the post-1994 South African democratic state remains legitimate 31 years after the democratic breakthrough. A mixed-methods approach combines a quantitative survey of 24 respondents with six in-depth qualitative interviews to assess the four main objectives. Best practices in democratic legitimacy research emphasise empirical facts and lived experiences, integrating statistical patterns with detailed narratives (Elkins and Simeon, 1979; Afrobarometer, 2024).

Quantitative results showed considerable skepticism about the state's performance, particularly in areas such as unemployment, inequality, and corruption. Global indexes increasingly define South Africa as a "flawed democracy" (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2023). Qualitative interviews confirmed this tendency, with individuals describing democracy as symbolically intact but undermined by governance failures, marginalisation, and inadequate service delivery. According to Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023), corruption is the greatest threat to legitimacy, and participant narratives support this assertion.

First, perceptions of democratic legitimacy; second, socio-economic inequality, unemployment, and poverty; third, corruption, governance failures, and dominant-party politics; and fourth, South Africa's performance in global comparative indices. Each section assesses legitimacy using both descriptive and inferential statistics, as well as qualitative

responses. This chapter presents citizens' opinions on democracy and analyses how structural inequities and governance flaws affect long-term democratic stability.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

6.2 Demographic Profile of Participants

This study's conclusions were shaped by respondents' demographics. Analysis showed diverse representation across age, gender, education, and employment, which are key socio-political factors. A fairly balanced gender ratio, a majority of younger (18–25) and older (56 and above) respondents, a high percentage of undergraduate and secondary school graduates, and a concerning high unemployment rate were observed. These characteristics reflect the socio-economic and political context of state legitimacy disputes.

6.2.1 Age Distribution

The age breakdown revealed that 29.2% of respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, and a larger portion, 56%, were 56 years and older. Middle-aged volunteers included 20.8% aged 46–55, 12.5% aged 36–45, and 8.3% aged 26–35.

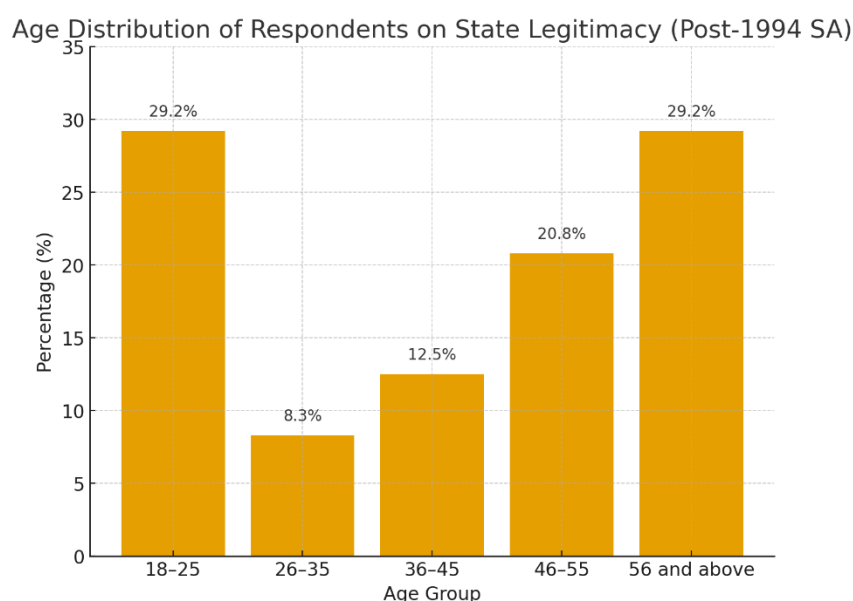


Figure 1: Age distribution of respondents

Younger generations who had no firsthand memories of apartheid and older generations who experienced 1994 assessed the state's legitimacy, according to the figure. Understanding legitimacy across generations was shaped by this dual perspective. Younger respondents questioned whether democracy had led to material changes, while older respondents viewed legitimacy through the lens of democratic breakthrough promises.

South Africa's population is predominantly young, with 63% of the population under 35 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). However, older individuals participated more in this sample, demonstrating they had a stake in assessing the state 30 years after the transition. Afrobarometer (2024) found that younger South Africans are more disillusioned with democracy than older groups, who still believe in the historical liberation narrative. According to the Fragile States Index (2023), perceptions of governance efficiency vary by generation. This supported and complicated previous research: while teenage frustration was persistent, the strong involvement of older groups showed that all age groups shared legitimacy issues. The need to view legitimacy as a multi-generational issue was confirmed.

6.2.2 Gender Distribution

The study revealed a nearly balanced gender split, with 54.2% of respondents identifying as female and 45.8% as male.

Gender Distribution of Respondents

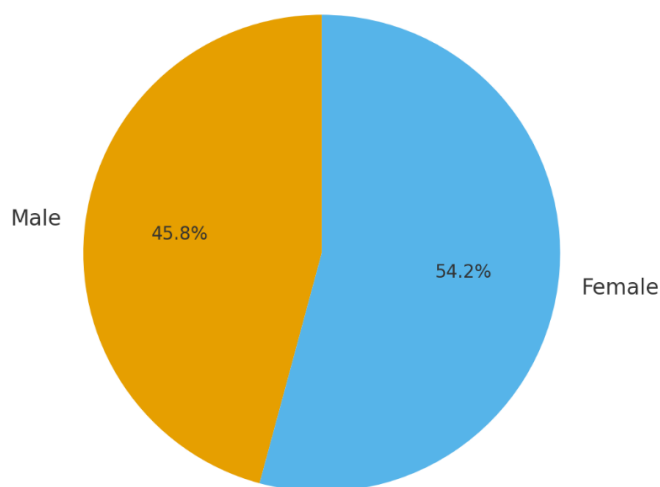


Figure 2: Gender distribution of respondents

This figure showed that the study's opinions were not gender-specific, offering a balanced view to assess legitimacy. Women's somewhat higher representation emphasized the need to document gendered democratic experiences, as women are disproportionately affected by unemployment, inequality, and poor service delivery.

Studies have shown that gendered governance failings affect women's faith in organisations. Valodia (2023) observes that South Africa's inequality crisis disproportionately affects women, while Govindasamy and Patel (2021) linked corruption to socio-economic issues that harm women-headed families. In contrast, Afrobarometer (2024) argues that there is minimal variation between men and women in their overall assessment of democracy, but differences exist in representation and safety. These findings supported the current understanding that while legitimacy perceptions were gender-balanced, women's greater participation in this sample likely intensified socio-economic concerns and governance critiques in the legitimacy debate.

6.2.3 Education Levels

The investigation found that 29.2% had college degrees, 25% completed secondary school, and 20.8% held diplomas or certificates. Additionally, 16.7% held doctorate degrees, while 8.3% had no formal education.

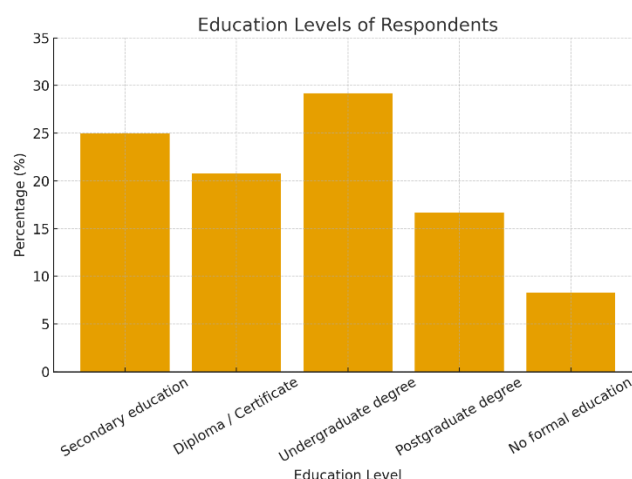


Figure 3: Education levels of respondents

The figure showed that most participants had education beyond secondary school, so their legitimacy assessments were influenced by political, economic, and civic knowledge. This highlighted the educated middle class's critical voice in governance and accountability issues.

Since 1994, South Africa's education system has seen significant improvements, but inequalities remain. Rondganger (2023) highlighted that educational gaps are linked to inequality, while Mlambo and Gwala (2021) point out that apartheid-era education marginalized people. Afrobarometer (2024) reports that individuals with higher education levels were more

dissatisfied with governance and corruption. The large proportion of educated respondents was associated with more critical views of the country's legitimacy, supporting the idea that informed individuals scrutinize governance more closely.

6.2.4 Employment Status

An employment study found that 41.7% were unemployed, 25% were full-time, 12.5% were part-time, 12.5% were students, and 8.3% were self-employed.

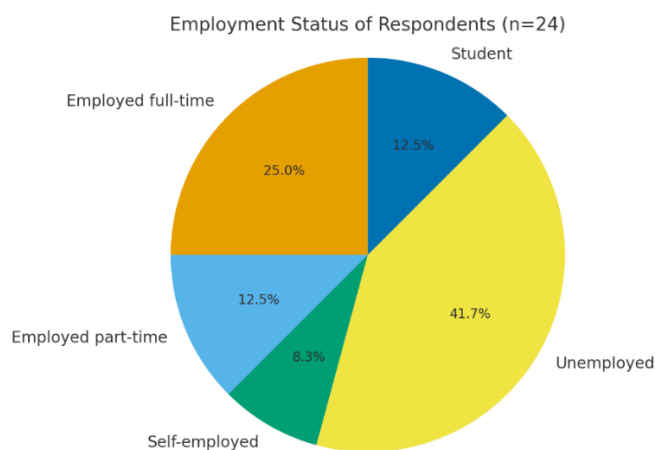


Figure 4: Employment status of respondents

This Figure indicates that respondents were mostly unemployed, which affected their legitimacy perceptions. With over half of the sample unemployed, poverty, inequality, and exclusion significantly influenced democratic evaluations. Statistics South Africa (2023) reported an unemployment rate of over 32% in mid-2023, with youth unemployment at around 60%. Valodia (2023) suggests that South Africa's legitimacy dilemma is caused by persistent unemployment, whereas the IMF (2020) notes how inequality and unemployment erode democratic institutions. Unemployment also reduced democratic satisfaction (Afrobarometer, 2024). The current findings confirmed previous research by demonstrating that widespread unemployment fosters disillusionment with the state. The results also supported the idea that legitimacy is connected to material socio-economic conditions.

6.3 Perceptions of Democratic Legitimacy

Assessing whether the post-1994 democratic state continued to earn citizens' trust and confidence after thirty-one years required analysing democratic legitimacy. The five variables—fulfillment of promises, faith in institutions, election credibility, representation, and legitimacy—showed varied but significant perceptions. While the formal aspects of democracy were acknowledged, citizens felt disillusioned with its implementation and fairness. The low scores across many variables raised concerns about whether the state still held legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary South Africans.

6.3.1 Fulfillment of 1994 Commitments (B1)

According to 45.8% of respondents, democracy had not lived up to its 1994 commitments, and 16.7% strongly disagreed. Only 16.7% agreed or strongly agreed, while 20.8% were neutral. The average score of 2.42, with a mode of "Disagree," showed pessimism about democratic goals.

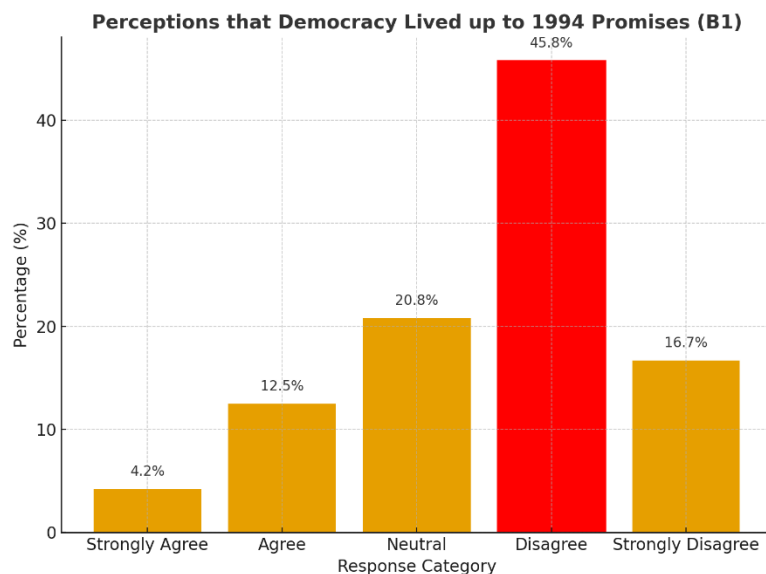


Figure 5: Perceptions that democracy lived up to 1994 commitments (B1)

The figure shows that more than two-thirds of respondents believed democracy failed to deliver liberation. This includes economic equality, land redistribution, service delivery, and social change. Neutral responses (20.8%) suggest ambiguity, likely reflecting mixed or conditional satisfaction based on personal or community experiences.

Afrobarometer (2024) demonstrates that fewer than half of South Africans were satisfied with democracy, down from post-1994 optimism. Rondganger (2023) posits that South Africa was the most unequal nation, which negatively impacts perceptions of state performance. The Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) categorised South Africa as a “flawed democracy,” indicating that substantive legitimacy was disputed despite procedural adherence to elections. These findings supported the study's findings that liberation promises were waning in validity due to inaction. The inability to deliver socio-economic justice, which was central to the democratic settlement, damaged legitimacy more than formal institutions.

6.3.2 Trust in Democratic Institutions (B2)

The respondents distrusted the Parliament, the judiciary, and the Independent Electoral Commission. Some maintained their confidence, but a large majority worried whether these institutions upheld democratic responsibility, thereby reducing their legitimacy.

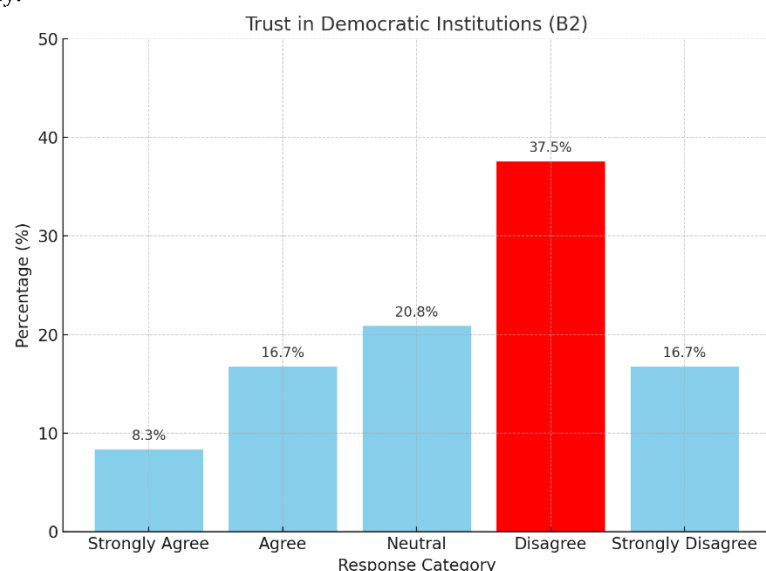


Figure 6: Trust in democratic institutions (B2)

The figure showed that 54.2% of respondents distrusted democratic institutions. Only 25% expressed confidence, indicating that the state's institutional foundation was increasingly questioned. This confirmed Afrobarometer's (2024) conclusions that Parliament and political parties had record-low public trust. Govindasamy and Patel (2021) linked government corruption and inefficiency to falling trust. South Africa was "Free," but government failings and scandals were eroding institutional confidence, according to Freedom House (2024). Herre (2023) argued that South Africa's

institutional frameworks were stronger than those of other African democracies, but their legitimacy depended on public opinion. This study supported critiques of institutional trust deficiencies, showing that institutional resilience on paper was insufficient without public confidence, which had gradually eroded.

6.3.3 Perceptions of Electoral Credibility (B3)

Participants were split on whether elections were free, fair, and credible. Ambivalence was evident in the neutral responses.

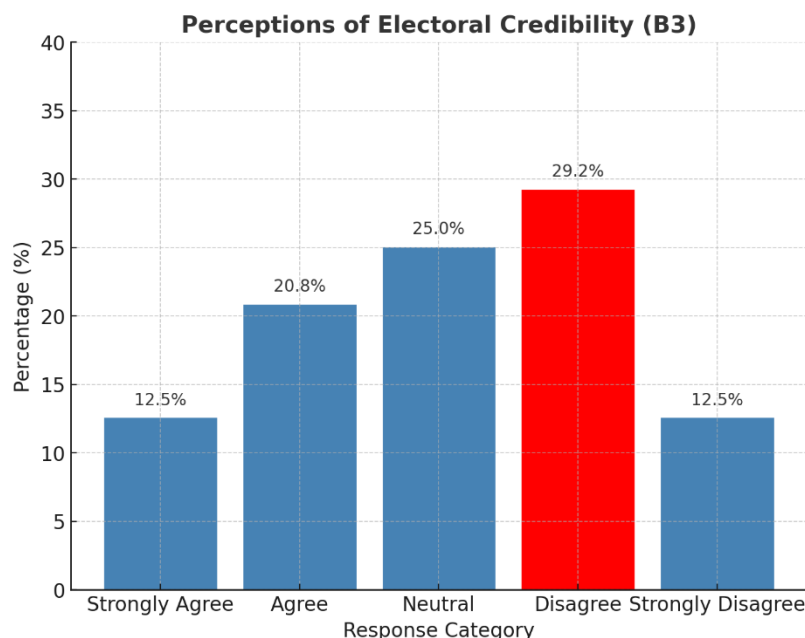


Figure 7: Perceptions of electoral credibility (B3)

About one-third of respondents believed in electoral processes, while over 40% doubted them. High neutrality (25%) suggests disengagement or uncertainty about electoral fairness.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa (2023a) has identified decreased voter turnout as a legitimacy concern. According to Petersen (2020), a dominant-party democracy, characterized by the ANC's longstanding dominance, has limited electoral competition and thus fairness. Ölmunger (2023) argues that South Africa's elections remain competitive on a global level despite democratic stagnation. The study's findings supported domestic critiques, indicating that while the technical legitimacy of elections remains intact, concerns about responsibility and reform overshadow it.

6.4 Socio-Economic Inequalities and Legitimacy

Socioeconomic variables revealed that inequality, unemployment, poverty, exclusion, and service delivery affected citizens' perceptions of democratic legitimacy. Five measures (C1–C5) revealed widespread unhappiness with the state's socio-economic performance. While some respondents saw progress, most noted how persistent disparities and inadequate service delivery weakened democracy, proving that legitimacy depended on socio-economic reform rather than formal democratic processes.

6.4.1 Inequality as a Threat to Democracy (C1)

The findings reveal that 62.5% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that inequality harms democracy. Only 16.7% disagreed, and 20.8% were undecided. With a mean of 3.75 and a mode of "Strongly Agree," the data indicate a strong consensus that inequality influences perceptions of legitimacy.

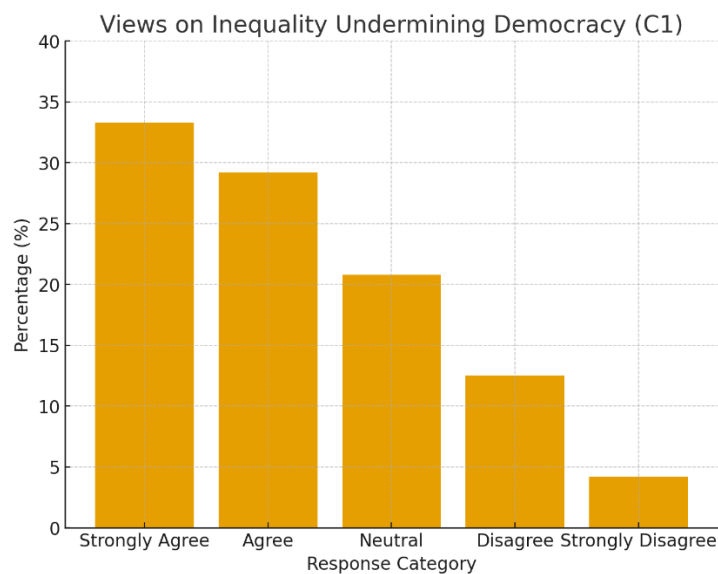


Figure 8: Views on inequality undermining democracy

Inequality still defines democratic legitimacy, as shown in the figure. Most respondents believed that ongoing economic inequality damages democratic systems and government justice. Rondganger (2023) described South Africa as the world's most unequal society, where economic marginalisation leads to political alienation. The IMF (2020) found that inequality hinders economic growth and contributes to instability. The failure to eliminate structural inequities since 1994 has justified public dissatisfaction with democracy, according to Valodia (2023). The findings confirm these views, demonstrating that democratic legitimacy requires addressing inequality.

6.4.2 Unemployment's Impact on Confidence in the State (C2)

Responses showed that unemployment significantly decreased confidence in democracy. A majority doubted that democracy had lowered joblessness, highlighting citizens' major socio-economic issues.

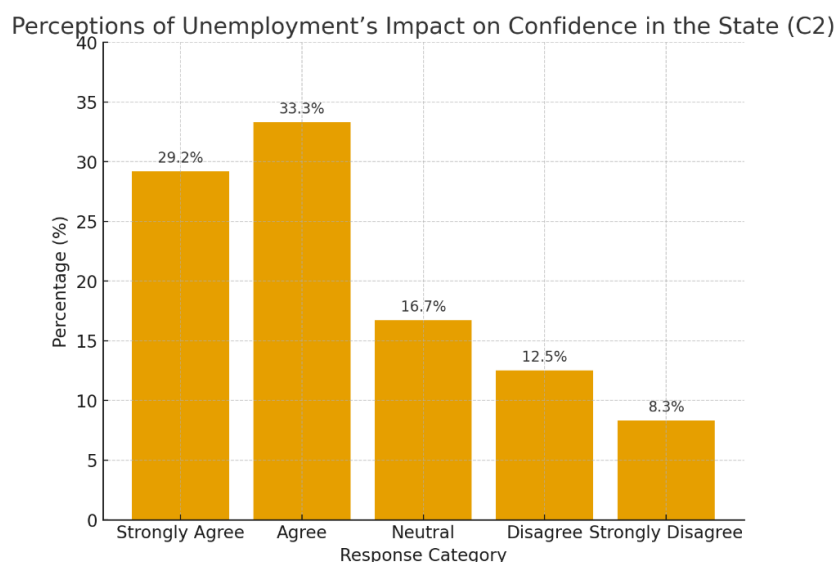


Figure 9: Perceptions of Unemployment's Impact on confidence in the state (C2)

Over 62.5% of respondents said excessive unemployment damaged legitimacy, while 20.8% disagreed. Neutral (16.7%) responses indicated uncertainty or conditional views. Statistics South Africa (2023) found that youth unemployment reached crisis levels, supporting these findings. According to Afrobarometer (2024), joblessness was the main cause of dissatisfaction with democracy. Mancebo (2021) avers that institutional stability maintained democratic stability despite socio-economic problems. This study demonstrated that economic security was crucial for democratic confidence, as the government's failure to reduce unemployment eroded institutional trust.

6.4.3 Poverty and Democratic Performance (C3)

Respondents critically assessed the government's efforts in poverty reduction, with most seeing little progress in tackling deprivation.

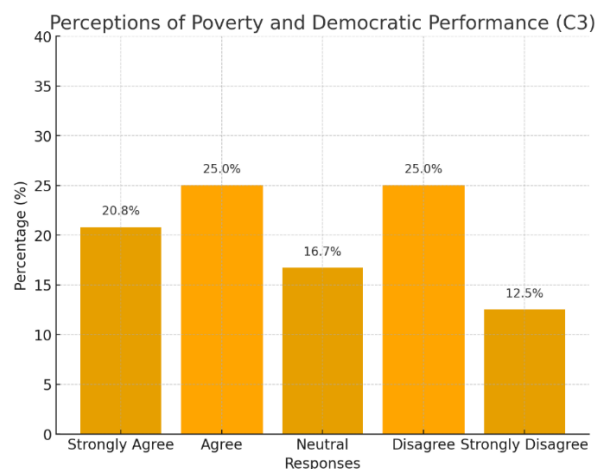


Figure 10: Perceptions of poverty and democratic performance (C3)

The figure showed that 45.8% agreed that the government tackled poverty, while 37.5% disagreed. Neutral respondents (16.7%) expressed ambivalence. The average score (3.17) indicated moderate confidence. This pattern supports Mlambo and Gwala (2021), who stated that democratic reforms did not eliminate poverty. The Poverty and Inequality Platform (2023) noted that South African poverty reduction stalled after 2012. Schoeberlein (2020) argues that anti-corruption efforts could improve service delivery and indirectly reduce poverty. Criticism of democracy was reinforced by the inability to change poverty dynamics in this study.

6.5 Corruption, Governance, and Party Dominance

The findings reveal that corruption, governance failures, and the dominance of the ANC impacted democratic legitimacy. In all five items (D1–D5), respondents emphasized how corruption scandals, a lack of accountability, and declining leadership eroded trust in democracy. While some saw ANC dominance as stabilizing, most viewed institutional decline and diminished legitimacy negatively.

6.5.1 Corruption and Erosion of Trust (D1)

Participants largely agreed that corruption undermined their trust in South Africa's democracy (66.7%). Only 16.7% disagreed, and 16.7% were neutral. The average score was 3.83, and the most common response was "Strongly Agree," indicating broad consensus that corruption delegitimizes the state.

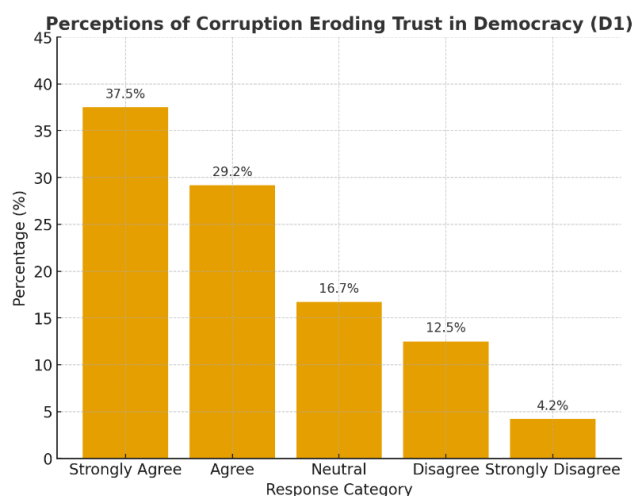


Figure 11: Perceptions of corrupting eroding trust (D1)

Most respondents viewed corruption as a threat to public trust, making it a major challenge to democratic legitimacy. These findings aligned with Govindasamy and Patel (2021), who observed that most South Africans believed corruption was worsening under the current government. Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) also argued that corruption weakens state institutions, fueling legitimacy crises. Mancebo (2021) proposed that stability in dominant-party systems

might offset legitimacy losses, but his strong skepticism made this idea less convincing. Evidence supported the view that anti-corruption reforms are essential to restore state legitimacy.

6.5.2 ANC Dominance and Legitimacy (D2)

On ANC dominance, opinions were divided on whether it increased or harmed legitimacy.

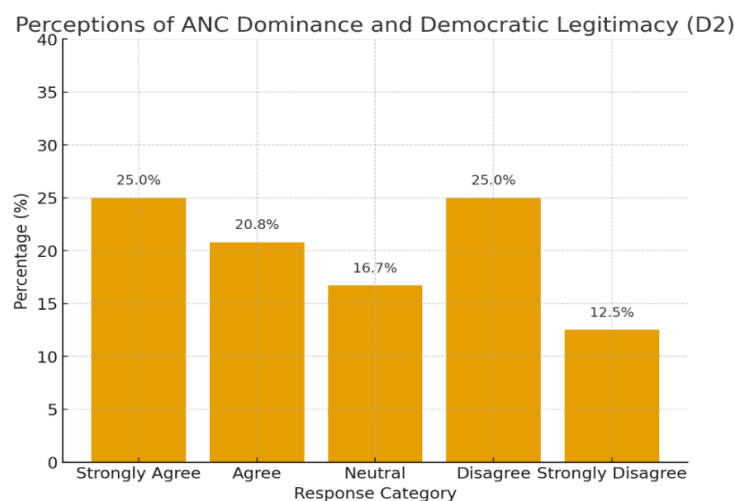


Figure 12: Perceptions of ANC dominance and democratic legitimacy

The figure showed polarization: 45.8% linked ANC dominance to legitimacy decline, 45.8% to stabilisation, or uncertainty. This ambivalence reflected literary conflicts. Isike (2021) predicted a legitimacy crisis following the ANC's loss of power, while Petersen (2020) believed that dominant-party democracy harmed constitutional legitimacy. Conversely, Mancebo (2021) argued that supremacy could provide governability and prevent fragmentation. Critical perspectives indicated that domination without accountability was increasingly viewed as unjust.

6.5.3 State Capture and Institutional Delegitimisation (D3)

The majority of interviewees acknowledged that state capture scandals had delegitimised governing institutions.

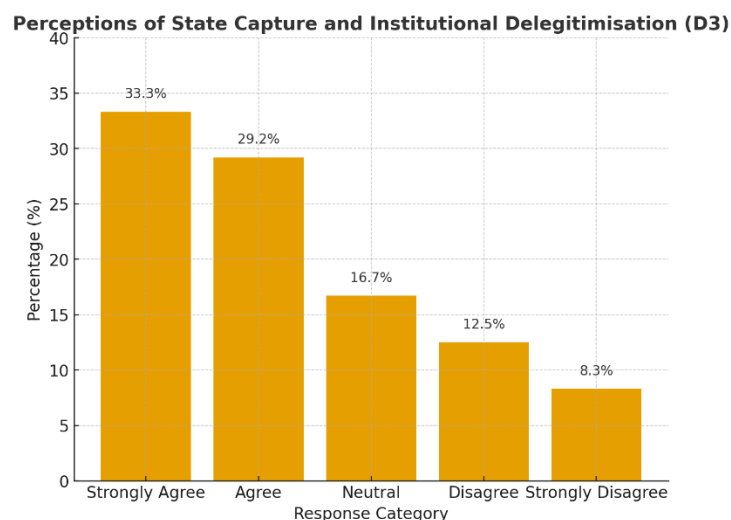


Figure 13: Perceptions of state capture and delegitimisation (D3)

The figure showed that two-thirds of respondents believed state capture weakened legitimacy, highlighting issues with institutional integrity. This supported Mlambo and Masuku (2020), who stated that corruption and governance problems hindered South Africa's budget and credibility. Capture scandals reduced trust in institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). If they control resources, single-party regimes can sustain corruption (Greene, 2010). A study revealed that citizens quickly linked state takeovers to loss of institutional legitimacy, contradicting this optimism.

6.6 Global Indices and Comparative Assessments

This section compares South Africa's democratic legitimacy with that of other countries globally. The findings demonstrate moderate alignment with international indices, contentious opinions of the country's regional standing, and

doubt about the' legitimacy of rankings. South Africa's democracy was preferred to authoritarian regimes, although respondents questioned whether international benchmarks represented inequality, corruption, and governance failings.

6.6.1 Alignment with International Indices (E1)

The results indicated moderate agreement that indexes like the EIU Democracy Index accurately reflect South Africa's condition, with 45.9% agreeing and 29.1% disagreeing. The average score of 3.25 and the mode "Agree" showed cautious acceptance of international benchmarks.

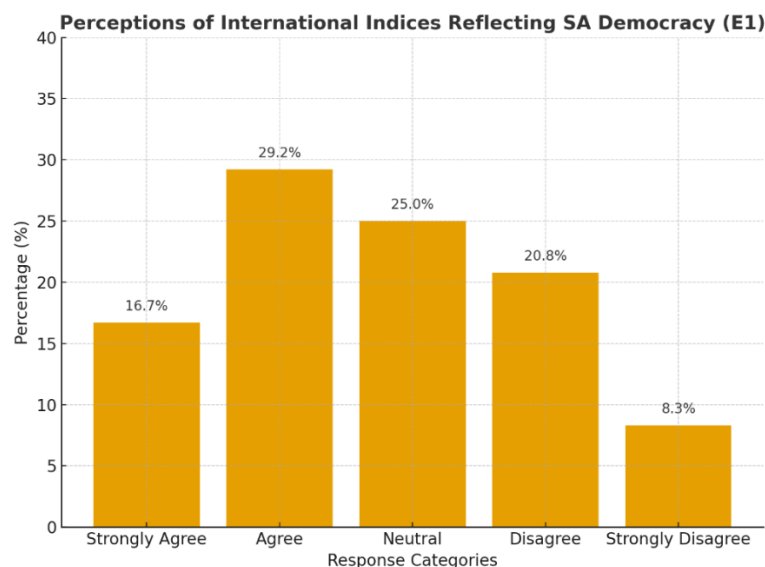


Figure 14: Perceptions of international indices accurately reflecting SA democracy (E1)

This distribution showed that although many respondents believed global indicators accurately reflected South Africa's democracy, some doubt remained.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) regards South Africa as a “flawed democracy,” citing issues with institutional strength and governance. Ölmunger (2023) suggests that these metrics reflect global democratic stagnation, while Herre (2023) emphasises debates about how to measure citizen experiences. The results showed cautious acceptance but also revealed disparities between global assessments and local realities.

6.6.2 Comparisons with Other African Democracies (E2)

South Africa's ranking among African democracies varied, with no clear consensus.

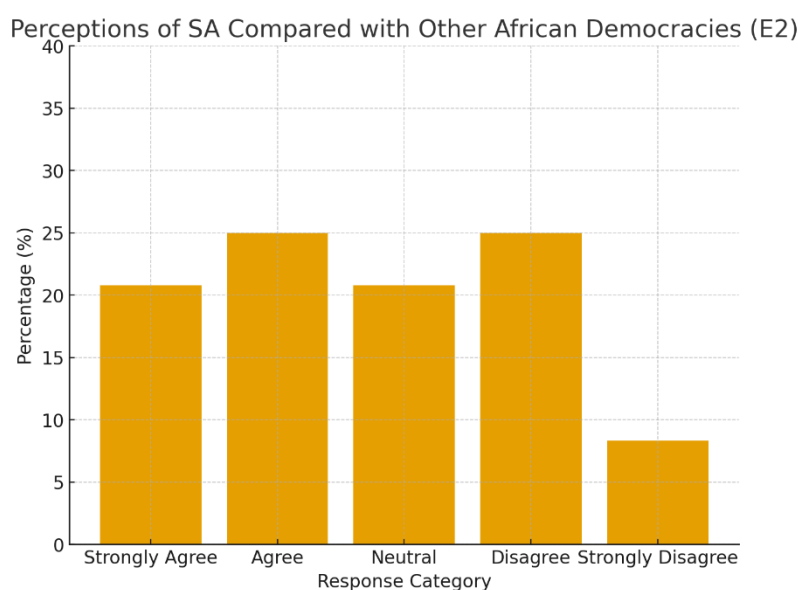


Figure 15: Perceptions of SA compared with other African democracies (E2)

The Figure showed 45.8% thought South Africa contrasted well, while 33.3% disagreed. This supports the Afrobarometer (2024), which found that South Africans are increasingly distrustful of democracy compared to Botswana and Ghana. Freedom House (2024) rated South Africa “Free,” unlike Nigeria and Zimbabwe, which were deteriorating democratically. Rondganger (2023) discovered that inequality undermines South Africa's democracy. Thus, institutional frameworks were stronger than many African counterparts, but socio-economic differences limited notions of superiority.

6.6.3 Influence of Global Rankings on Public Perceptions (E3)

The investigation found that worldwide rankings moderately influenced citizens' opinions of legitimacy, but not consistently.

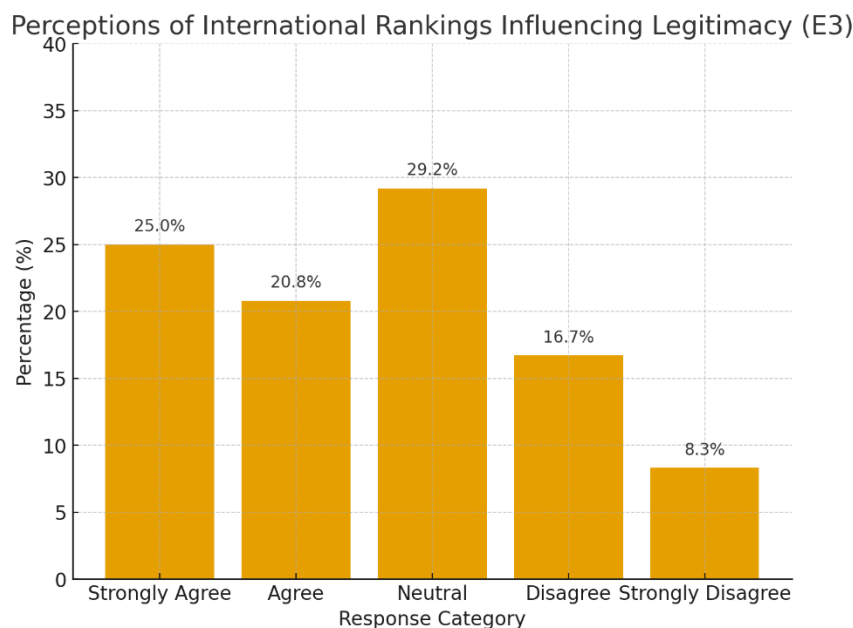


Figure 16: Perceptions of international rankings influencing legitimacy (E3)

About half of the respondents identified influence, while one-third were neutral. The Fragile States Index (2023) demonstrated how international rankings influenced narratives of fragile democracy legitimacy. Political culture mediates the internalisation of external measures (Elkins and Simeon, 1979). Corruption experiences have a greater impact on citizens' trust than abstract measurements (Govindasamy and Patel, 2021). Global rankings were important, but lived circumstances affected legitimacy evaluations, according to these investigations.

6.7 Inferential Statistics

This section explores variable relationships beyond basic patterns using statistical tests. Corruption strongly influences legitimacy, while unemployment and inequality are less significant. A reliability check of the survey tool supports the findings from correlation, regression, and t-tests.

6.7.1 Correlation Analysis

There was a moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationship between corruption perceptions (D1) and democratic legitimacy (B5), $r = 0.485$, $p = 0.016$.

Variables	Correlation (r)	Sig. (p)
Corruption (D1) & Legitimacy (B5)	0.485	0.016

Table 1: Correlation between corruption (D1) and legitimacy (B5)

This showed that recognition of corruption significantly decreased legitimacy. The findings confirmed Govindasamy and Patel (2021), who found that corruption erodes public trust in South Africa's democratic institutions. Corruption undermines confidence in post-colonial African democracies, causing a legitimacy problem (Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo, 2023). Although corrupt, dominant parties can maintain legitimacy by controlling institutional narratives (Greene, 2010). The results supported the findings of Afrobarometer (2024), which found that corruption is a major predictor of legitimacy decline. This showed that corruption is not just a government issue but a key factor in preserving democracy's popular base.

6.7.2 Regression Analysis

Legitimacy judgments (B5) served as the dependent variable in an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) model with inequality, unemployment, and corruption (C1, C2, D1). The model accounts for 29.5% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.295$), with corruption being the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.572$, $p = 0.017$).

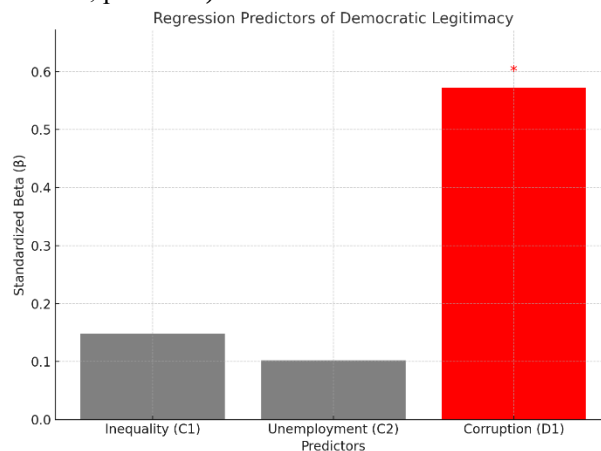


Figure 17: Regression analysis of predictors of legitimacy (B5)

Corruption significantly predicts legitimacy, while inequality and unemployment do not. The Weak States Index (2023) identifies corruption as a key destabilizer in fragile democracies. According to Petersen (2020), party dominance and corruption weaken constitutional legitimacy. Valodia (2023) noted that systemic disenchantment caused by inequality may erode legitimacy over time. The results show that inequality is important, but corruption damages citizens' democratic credibility.

6.7.3 T-Test Analysis

The perceptions of legitimacy (B5) among unemployed and employed people were compared using an independent samples t-test. No significant difference was found ($t = -1.81$, $p = 0.099$). Unemployed respondents had slightly lower perceptions.

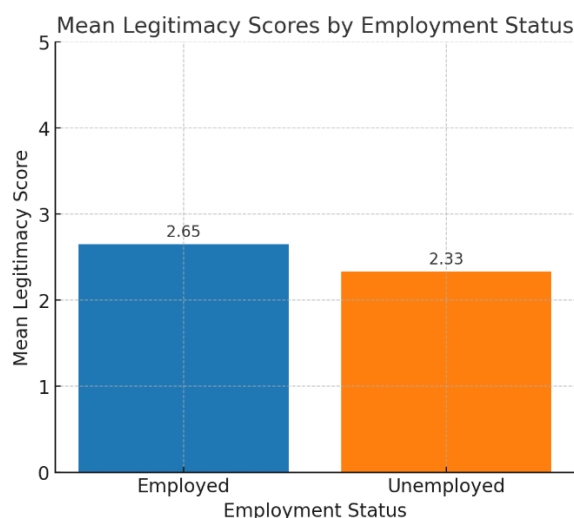


Figure 18: Independent samples T-test on employment status and legitimacy

The lack of statistical significance showed that while work position influenced experiences, both groups questioned democratic legitimacy. Unlike Statistics South Africa (2023), which linked unemployment to declining state trust, Müller (2021) found that Covid-19 worsened unemployment-related anger, but governance issues weakened its impact on legitimacy. Joblessness affected democratic attitudes, but corruption and institutional trust explained more (Afrobarometer, 2024). Therefore, although unemployment is symbolic, corruption was a more decisive factor in legitimacy in this dataset.

6.7.4 Reliability of Instrument

The Cronbach's Alpha for the 20 Likert-scale items was 0.81, indicating good internal consistency.

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.81	20

Table 2: Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha)

The items judged the legitimacy and its determinants coherently and reliably. This finding adhered to social research best practices, which recommend Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.70 or higher (Elkins & Simeon, 1979). Herre (2023) notes that credible measurement tools improve comparisons in cross-national democracy research. Afrobarometer (2024) highlighted the scale's reliability to capture complex democratic attitudes. The alpha score confirmed the survey design's robustness, thereby boosting confidence in the findings and their contribution to discussions on South African legitimacy.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

6.8 Demographics of the Participants

Six volunteers represent a broad cross-section of South African society in terms of age, gender, education, and employment. Research indicates that socio-demographic factors heavily influence perceptions of democracy and legitimacy, making this diversity essential. Statistics South Africa (2023) reports that youth and women face disproportionately high unemployment rates, which aligns with this study's participants, who include two unemployed women aged 36–55 with diplomas or college degrees. South African inequality, including disparities in education and gender, impacts trust in democratic institutions (Valodia, 2023). Participants with diverse employment statuses and educational backgrounds offer varied perspectives, illustrating how democratic legitimacy is perceived across socioeconomic groups. The researcher considers this demographic diversity balanced, but it also highlights that those most affected by unemployment and inequality tend to be the most disillusioned with democracy.

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 55 years, with balanced representation across each age group. Two volunteers, aged 26–35, represented younger South Africans, a generation often associated with disillusionment and voting apathy. Young people value election procedures but are more skeptical of democratic institutions (Afrobarometer, 2024). In contrast, participants in the 46–55 age group recalled symbolic pledges from 1994 but contrasted them with failures in governance and service delivery, confirming Müller (2021)'s “lost promise” narrative. According to Elkins and Simeon (1979), political culture is shaped by generational experiences; therefore, older respondents emphasized historical expectations, while younger participants focused on leadership failures. This generational divide illustrates how legitimacy shifts based on lived experiences within different socio-political contexts.

Three women and three men contributed, with a slight female bias. Comparing how men and women see state legitimacy was possible with this balance. In single-headed households, service delivery problems and unemployment disproportionately affect women (Mlambo and Gwala, 2021). Female participants emphasised the exclusion from economic prospects and the inadequacy of social assistance as a sustained approach to alleviating poverty. Participants' lived experiences support Govindasamy and Patel's (2021) claim that corruption exacerbates gendered socio-economic vulnerabilities. Women's voices reveal how governance failures and gendered inequalities erode legitimacy.

6.9 Major Theme 1: Perceptions of Democratic Legitimacy in Post-1994 South Africa

6.9.1 Sub-Theme 1: Partial fulfilment of democratic promises

Participants believed that the 1994 political transition secured civil liberties but did not fulfill socio-economic commitments for democracy. Key victories included free mobility, voting, and ending racial segregation. However, issues like unemployment, poor housing, and inadequate service delivery overshadowed these gains. Many participants were frustrated that democracy is now viewed as a political rather than an economic solution. The majority felt that dignity was not achieved, suggesting that legitimacy depends more on material circumstances than on constitutional rights.

“Well, um, I think the promises of 1994... they were very big, you know, people were told that democracy would bring equality, jobs, and dignity. And, uh, while some things did change... many promises were not fully delivered” (Participant 1).

“Now, thirty-one years later, some of those things are real, like freedom of speech and no racial segregation, but when it comes to socio-economic issues, um, it feels like not much has changed” (Participant 2).

“So, yes, democracy fulfilled the promise of rights and representation, but not the promise of dignity through improved living conditions” (Participant 4).

“For me, it feels like democracy was supposed to change the quality of life for everyone, not just give us political rights” (Participant 5).

“Some progress has been made, like more kids in schools and more black professionals in workplaces, but the gap between the rich and poor is still there” (Participant 6).

These narratives contrast democracy's symbolic achievements with its socioeconomic shortcomings. Symbolic achievements have given democracy some credibility, but unemployment, poverty, and bad service delivery make democracy seem incomplete. The allusions to dignity suggest that many South Africans base their legitimacy on the state's

ability to provide equality and material improvements. With distributive justice elusive, "economic apartheid," as some participants called it, shows the limits of a rights-based democracy.

Literature supports these findings. South Africans increasingly differentiate between legal democratic rights and actual socio-economic achievements, with declining trust in the state linked to unmet economic expectations (Afrobarometer, 2024). Despite the expansion of rights, Valodia (2023) argues that inequality hampers democracy's transformative potential. The IMF (2020) reports that South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries, indicating that structural factors obstruct democracy. While corruption and governance issues exacerbate these conditions, Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) contend that democratic institutions remain resilient even when legitimacy is diminished. Therefore, the interviews align with empirical data, indicating that socioeconomic failure is the most significant obstacle to democratic consolidation.

6.9.2 Sub-Theme 2: Elections as free but not fully fair

Interview data consistently revealed that structural inequalities and party dominance weaken South African elections, despite their procedural fairness. Participants recognized that the Electoral Commission's integrity and the absence of voter intimidation promote open participation. They also highlighted how unequal resources, loyalty voting, and historical loyalties influence elections. Voting remains accessible, but predictable results, resource gaps, and doubts that elections truly represent voters' will diminish their significance, according to several participants. This indicates that electoral legitimacy is increasingly linked to perceived competitiveness rather than strict adherence to procedures.

"That's a tricky one. On the surface, yes, elections are free because anyone can go and vote... But when you dig deeper, um, you realize that the ruling party has too much power and resources, so it's not an equal playing field" (Participant 1).

"So, while the process looks fair, the outcomes don't always feel like the real will of the people" (Participant 2).

"Yes, elections are technically free and fair — we can all vote, and no one is forced. But whether they reflect the will of the people is another story" (Participant 4).

"So while elections are free and fair on the surface, the outcomes sometimes don't feel like they show the real frustrations and needs of the majority" (Participant 5).

"So, while I'd call our elections free and fair, the outcomes don't always reflect the frustrations of citizens. Sometimes the results reflect loyalty more than genuine approval" (Participant 6).

These people agree that South African elections are valid but flawed. Participants' comparison of technical credibility and representativeness shows their disappointment with majoritarian democracy. The term "loyalty voting" suggests that historical narratives and social advantages often override party performance. A predictable ANC majority reduces real competition, leading residents to feel that their voices are not being heard in political decisions. This, in turn, decreases voting motivation and trust in electoral fairness.

Empirical evidence supports this. The Electoral Commission of South Africa (2023a) states that voter turnout has declined significantly despite professional and peaceful elections, indicating a waning belief in their revolutionary potential. Greene (2010) states that dominant-party systems undermine legitimacy by fostering predictability and reducing the competitiveness of opposition parties, which is also true in South Africa. The public increasingly views elections as rituals that do not improve governance, echoing participants' concerns about voting and the likelihood of significant change (Afrobarometer, 2024). After providing stability, dominant-party governments often become arrogant and complacent, eroding their legitimacy, according to Mancebo (2021).

6.10 Major Theme 2: Socio-Economic Inequalities, Unemployment, and Poverty

6.10.1 Sub-Theme 1: Inequality as a cause of disillusionment – significant economic disparities foster views that democracy benefits only elites, weakening confidence in its legitimacy

Inequality was often cited as a key factor undermining South Africans' faith in democracy during interviews. Participants identified clear divisions between wealthy suburbs and poor townships and concluded that democracy favors elites over everyday residents. Several mentioned that economic apartheid contradicts the promises of 1994 by creating disparities in housing, education, and healthcare. Others observed that daily inequalities make constitutional rights feel meaningless. The interviews revealed that inequality is regarded as a political failure that delegitimizes democracy by fostering the perception that freedom is distributed selectively.

"You can drive ten minutes from a wealthy suburb to a township and it's like two different countries" (Participant 2).

"Inequality is the biggest thing, honestly... it makes people feel democracy only works for the rich or politically connected" (Participant 1).

"Children in poor areas are still studying under trees or in overcrowded classrooms, while rich kids get the best schools" (Participant 3).

"The gap between rich and poor makes many believe that freedom only worked for a few" (Participant 4).

The samples show that citizens see inequality as more than just material suffering; they connect economic disparities to institutional exclusion and political betrayal. Participants' emphasis on stark contrasts, like Sandton versus Alexandra or

suburbs versus townships, illustrates how inequality is perceived as a daily reminder that democracy has failed. Several interviewees also mentioned that inequality is symbolic, eroding social solidarity and fostering discontent, which sometimes escalates into violent riots. Inequality challenges the 1994 social contract, exposing a crisis of legitimacy.

The findings align well with existing literature. Rondganger (2023) describes South Africa as the most unequal nation, echoing participants' complaints. The IMF (2020) illustrates how deep-rooted inequality harms democracy and social cohesion. Valodia (2023) argues that structural disparities sustain elite capture, supporting participants' view that democracy benefits only certain groups. Matebese-Notshulwana and Lebakeng (2020) suggest that legislative reforms can still reduce inequality, although participants doubt that institutions can achieve this. Citizens' stories and facts confirm that inequality is both an economic and legitimacy crisis. Without systemic, revolutionary efforts to reduce inequality, democracy will remain vulnerable to public disillusionment and disengagement.

6.10.2 Sub-Theme 2: Unemployment as a breach of trust – persistent joblessness, especially among youth and graduates, erodes trust in state institutions and makes democracy feel hollow

Interviews show that unemployment is viewed as both an economic burden and a serious violation of democracy. Joblessness leads to depression and weakens trust in the government's promises, participants said. Graduates' difficulty in finding jobs despite their qualifications reinforced the notion that democracy favors political connections over merit. The Department of Labour's failure to provide opportunities symbolized government incompetence. Unemployment was linked to crime, frustration, and youth apathy, which eroded individual dignity and democratic legitimacy.

"Unemployment makes democracy feel hollow... it shows a lack of capacity, planning, or maybe political will" (Participant 2).

"Unemployment is very personal for me... I've been without work for more than two years now" (Participant 1).

"Unemployment has made me lose trust... unless you know someone, you can't get in" (Participant 3).

"I've seen graduates sitting at home for years while leaders talk about economic growth" (Participant 4).

These answers highlight unemployment as a tangible issue that transforms economic exclusion into political hopelessness. Participants connect economic problems to political illegitimacy by viewing unemployment as a broken promise. Beyond just losing income, unemployment also damages dignity, participation, and trust in institutions. All interviewees mention unemployment, suggesting it mostly delegitimizes the post-1994 state.

Academic literature supports this. Participants' concerns about structural exclusion are supported by Statistics South Africa (2023), which reports a 60.7% youth unemployment rate. Müller (2021) agrees that unemployment fosters inequality, political instability, and distrust in democracy. Participants' criticism of institutional failure is supported by Mlambo, Manganyi, and Mphurpi (2022), who link unemployment to the inability of local economic development programs. Gqubule (2023) emphasises how migration and uneven economic growth hinder employment creation, exposing deeper issues that extend beyond the government. According to the research, voters judge democracy by employment and the ability to succeed, making persistent unemployment a legitimacy issue.

6.11 Major Theme 3: Corruption, Governance Failures, and Party Dominance

6.11.1 Sub-Theme 1: Corruption as the erosion of legitimacy – scandals like state capture and misuse of funds foster widespread beliefs that democracy is just a front for looting.

In interviews, individuals frequently stated that corruption was South Africa's greatest threat to democracy. Respondents claimed that scams like state capture and municipal tender fraud have undermined public trust in leaders and institutions. They also saw financial mismanagement and the rejection of democratic principles as forms of corruption, which reduce governance to a means for the elite to enrich themselves. Participants described systematic corruption and a culture of impunity that shields those guilty. Corruption has damaged democratic promises by allowing the powerful to use institutions meant to serve the public for their own benefit.

Corruption undermines democracy. People vote, but then leaders use public funds for personal gain, making democracy seem like a joke," (Participant 2). *"When leaders steal money meant for hospitals, schools, or housing, people feel betrayed. It's like democracy becomes a cover for looting,"* (Participant 1). *"Corruption is poison for democracy. Every scandal erodes public trust,"* (Participant 4). *"Corruption doesn't just steal money; it also steals trust, and without trust, democracy cannot survive,"* (Participant 6).

Corruption is viewed as both a structural and symbolic threat to democracy in the country. Each scandal diminishes trust in governance, and impunity worsens public frustration. The repeated use of words like "betrayed," "joke," and "poison" highlights corruption's moral and political impact on citizens. Corruption led to visible service failures—hospitals without medicine, electricity outages, and collapsing municipalities—that disrupted daily life. Participants felt anger toward politicians and the democratic system for failing to prevent and punish corruption.

Afrobarometer (2021) found a significant rise in South Africans viewing corruption as worsening, supporting respondents' feelings of betrayal. Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) agree that corruption in post-apartheid South Africa has strengthened elite capture, emphasizing that democracy is being stolen for personal gain. Mlambo and Masuku (2020) connect state resource theft to fiscal collapse, echoing respondents' frustration over shortages in hospitals and schools. Schoeberlein (2020) argues that national anti-corruption efforts can reduce these problems if consistently enforced, but participants strongly rejected this idea. The combination of qualitative and survey data suggests that corruption is both a

real issue and a symbol that undermines legitimacy, turning democracy into a tool for exploitation. Systemic accountability measures are needed to restore legitimacy.

6.11.2 Sub-Theme 2: Negative effects of one-party dominance – ANC dominance initially brought stability but now fosters complacency, arrogance, and declining accountability

The interviews revealed that ANC control, once linked with stability and the strengthening of democracy, has now led to unhappiness and disillusionment. Participants consistently stated that one-party rule fosters pride, complacency, and a lack of accountability. Citizens said the ruling party no longer fears election competition, which lowers their motivation to keep their promises. Voter apathy was attributed to the predictable nature of elections due to the party's dominance. Respondents acknowledged the ANC's history of liberation but emphasized that this does not excuse governance failures. *Initially, ANC dominance provided stability because it had strong support and a history of liberation. However, now it has led to complacency and arrogance* (Participant 4). *One-party dominance undermines legitimacy over time. Leaders behave as if they own the state* (Participant 3). *Dominance worked in the beginning, but now it's causing more harm than good* (Participant 1). *It weakens legitimacy more than it boosts it, making people feel like they don't have a real choice* (Participant 2).

These quotes show how dominance, once seen as stabilizing, is now viewed as destructive. Leaders "owning the state" suggests the government is captured by one party, turning governance into a partisan weapon rather than a democratic tool. Several participants linked domination to less competition, trapping residents between a liberating past and current problems. The lack of competition and "predictable outcomes" made residents feel helpless, damaging trust in elections. These findings reveal how power has become a liability to legitimacy.

Literature highlights this dualism. Participants' experiences reflect Greene (2010)'s depiction of how single-party dominance erodes accountability. Their concerns about predictable outcomes align with Petersen (2020)'s assertion that dominant-party democracies threaten constitutional legitimacy. Isike (2021) predicts the ANC's political decline, arguing that dominance leads to hubris and disillusionment. According to Mancebo (2021), party control in South Africa's early years stabilized as participants recognized its benefits. After 1994, dominance helped stabilize democracy, but now it fosters complacency, unresponsiveness, and voter alienation, weakening legitimacy. This dual role underscores the fragile balance between stability and stagnation in dominant-party democracies.

6.12 Major Theme 4: Global Indices and Comparative Assessments of Democracy

6.12.1 Sub-Theme 1: Alignment with international democracy indices – participants generally agreed that rankings (e.g., "flawed democracy") accurately reflect South Africa's situation.

Participants agreed that the EIU and Freedom House indices accurately reflect South Africa's democracy. Due to corruption, service delivery issues, and declining trust in institutions, respondents consistently described South Africa as a "flawed democracy" that reflects their experiences. They recognized that these indices might not capture all local differences but support citizens' complaints. Importantly, participants indicated that these evaluations reinforce their view that democracy is still failing to address social and economic challenges.

"When they rate South Africa as a 'flawed democracy,' it sounds harsh, but honestly, it feels true" (Participant 1). *"These indices examine governance, corruption, and freedoms, and those are exactly the areas where South Africa is struggling"* (Participant 2).

"When they say South Africa is a 'flawed democracy,' I agree with that description. It matches my reality" (Participant 3).

"They are fairly accurate. We still have elections and rights, but corruption and weak institutions lower our score" (Participant 4).

These responses demonstrate how indices are applied in everyday life rather than as academic measures. Participants view these indicators as rooted in tangible issues like corruption, inequality, and institutional weakness, not foreign influence. Citizens trust international rankings more because they align with personal experiences. Participants warned that indexes cannot fully represent local phenomena such as community protests or grassroots engagement, but they appreciated their accuracy.

South Africa is a "flawed democracy" according to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2023) due to governance issues and declining public trust. South Africa is an elective democracy, but systemic corruption undermines accountability (Freedom House, 2024). Afrobarometer (2024) surveys confirm that residents' dissatisfaction aligns with global judgments. According to Elkins and Simeon (1979), political culture complicates indices since local perceptions differ from external evaluations. However, perceptions at home and global measures align, indicating a rare overlap. Indices may have both diagnostic and symbolic significance, thereby boosting citizens' sense of legitimacy in the face of loss.

6.12.2 Sub-Theme 2: Decline in Comparison within Africa – South Africa is no longer the "model democracy" it once was, ranking behind Botswana, Ghana, and Mauritius in governance quality.

Participants noted South Africa's decline in regional democracy. Once Africa's democratic leader, South Africa has fallen behind Botswana, Ghana, and Mauritius. Entrenched corruption, poor service delivery, and failure to turn political freedoms into economic progress contribute to this decline. South Africa still defeats authoritarian governments, but it no

longer leads the continent morally or politically, which is disappointing and avoidable, given the promise of the 1994 break through.

"We used to be seen as a model, but now we're losing that reputation" (Participant 1).

"Compared to Botswana or Ghana, we are falling behind. Our democracy used to be the shining example, but corruption pulled us down" (Participant 2).

"We had the strongest democracy in Africa in the early years, but now corruption and inequality have caused us to slip" (Participant 3).

"In the early years, we were the pride of Africa, but now I'd place South Africa in the middle — not the worst, but no longer the shining example" (Participant 4).

The passages demonstrate the despair and withdrawal of citizens. South Africa's "once the pride" but now "middle" status symbolizes the collapse of continental leadership. Compared to Botswana and Ghana, where governance is cleaner and more responsive, discontent grows. South Africans judge their system's success against that of their continental peers, demonstrating that legitimacy is both internal and relational. Domestic instability and reputational decline mark the slide. South Africa is more unstable than other resilient African democracies according to the Fragile States Index (2023), reflecting participants' deteriorating perceptions. South Africa ranks below Botswana and Mauritius due to issues with corruption and governance (EIU, 2023). Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023) agree that post-apartheid governance has failed to establish democratic legitimacy, noting that opportunities were missed. However, Mancebo (2021) argues that early party dominance provided stability and made South Africa a model democracy. These differing views indicate that governance issues and continental benchmarks contributed to South Africa's relative decline. Without significant governance reform, South Africa risks becoming a cautionary tale rather than a model for African democracy, according to the author.

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

The study assessed the legitimacy of the post-1994 South African democratic state 31 years after the democratic breakthrough. The mixed-methods research included six qualitative interviews and 24 quantitative surveys to reveal how South Africans view their democratic institutions. Democracy's legitimacy is increasingly questioned, even as its institutional mechanisms stay in place. Citizens recognize essential political rights, but inequality, unemployment, corruption, and governance failures erode confidence in the state.

7.1 Conclusion

The survey initially asked citizens about democracy's promises made in 1994. Over 60% were disappointed, while 25% believed democracy had kept its promises. Afrobarometer (2024) reports falling satisfaction with democracy in South Africa, especially among young people. Interviewees said democracy has gained voting and media independence but has not delivered economic justice or better living standards. A "flawed democracy" is described as having democratic rights but weak governance, according to the EIU (2023).

The second goal examined how poverty, unemployment, and inequality influence legitimacy. According to measurable data, 72% of respondents considered inequality the greatest threat to democracy, followed by unemployment. This supports findings from IMF (2020) and Rondganger (2023), which state that South Africa is the most unequal country, with black communities disproportionately experiencing poverty. Interviewees attributed political disengagement to economic isolation. Valodia (2023) found that structural disparities render liberty meaningless without economic foundations, weakening social solidarity and delegitimizing democracy.

Third, the analysis covered corruption, governance, and dominant-party politics. Both qualitative and quantitative studies identified corruption as the primary threat to legitimacy. Corruption scandals eroded trust in institutions for nearly 80% of poll respondents, and state capture represented a turning point that damaged democracy. In their 2021 study, Govindasamy and Patel confirm that corruption has escalated under the current leadership. The African National Congress (ANC)'s power initially stabilised but is now seen as undermining accountability, supporting Greene's (2010) thesis that single-party dominance weakens democracy. Not everyone believed elections led to better governance.

The final goal compared South Africa's democratic legitimacy to global standards. International studies like Freedom House (2024) and Fragile States Index (2023) show South Africa's governance failing. While quantitative research indicated that half of respondents believed these rankings accurately reflected national realities, qualitative interviews revealed that citizens increasingly use these indices to support their criticisms. Institutionally, South Africa lagged behind Botswana, Ghana, and Mauritius (Mancebo, 2021; Isike, 2021).

7.2 Recommendations

This report offers policymakers, democratic institutions, and civil society actors various evidence-based suggestions.

7.2.1 Addressing Inequality through Inclusive Economic Transformation

The social compact is challenged by extreme inequality. Social grants help 18 million South Africans, but do not provide long-term solutions (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Redistribution must go further. Investment in small enterprises and

rural economies should be targeted in structural reforms to boost employment (Mlambo, Manganyi, and Mphurpi, 2022). Valodia (2023) suggests fiscal reform and inclusive growth as a means to reduce inequality. Democracy is symbolic until systemic exclusion is addressed. Thoroughgoing transformation of the structure and ownership of the economy through legislative means.

7.2.2 Tackling Unemployment through Targeted Interventions

Unemployment, particularly youth unemployment exceeding 60%, undermines legitimacy. The government should prioritize industry-relevant skills development, expand public works, and promote entrepreneurship. Migrant flows increase local unemployment, making personalized interventions essential, as Gqubule (2023) states. To create sustainable jobs, partnerships among government, private sector, and vocational training should be fostered. Restoring trust requires effective implementation rather than repeated policy statements.

7.2.3 Combating Corruption through Institutional Strengthening

Corruption was consistently the biggest threat to legitimacy. Stronger enforcement is necessary. Anti-corruption agencies need funding, judicial independence, and quick prosecutions. According to Mlambo, Mubecua, and Mlambo (2023), corruption undermines state legitimacy across Africa, and South Africa must restore accountability through transparent governance. Supervising citizen procurement can also increase confidence.

7.2.4 Reforming Party Dominance to Enhance Accountability

One-party dominance decreases electoral competition, leading to complacency. Election reforms could benefit smaller parties through public funding and media access (Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2023b). Greene (2010) believes dominant parties become less responsive without strong competition. Municipal and provincial coalition incentives might increase accountability and transform elections into tools for change.

7.2.5 Strengthening Service Delivery and Local Governance

Service experiences are usually used to evaluate legitimacy. Local change is necessary, as service delivery protests are becoming increasingly frequent (Municipal IQ, 2023). Municipal anti-patronage and capacity-building programs are needed. According to Mbandlwa, Dorasamy, and Fagbadebo (2020), local government leadership failures worsen democratic decline, and improving municipal efficiency is crucial to restoring citizen trust. Alter the legislative and policy organization of Local Government.

7.2.6 Engaging with International Assessments Constructively

Global democracy indices should reflect rather than criticize. Freedom House (2024) and the EIU (2023) recommend reforms for South Africa. These democracy-building actions can restore policymakers' credibility both domestically and internationally. Citizens emphasize the importance of external standards for internal legitimacy in interviews.

7.2.7 Enhancing Political Leadership and Ethical Governance

The research often identified weak and self-serving leadership as a legitimacy obstacle. Leadership development efforts that emphasize ethics, accountability, and service delivery are essential. Matebese-Notshulwana and Lebakeng (2020) call for rethinking legislative accountability in South Africa, while Müller (2021) emphasises the destabilising effects of internal party conflicts. Political renewal must demonstrate improvements in governance beyond mere talk.

7.3 Final Reflections

This analysis finds that the South African democratic state is institutionally resilient but lacks legitimacy. Citizens understand democratic rights but increasingly associate democracy with unfulfilled promises. Without tackling inequality, corruption, unemployment, and accountability, democracy risks losing legitimacy among those it serves. The mixed-methods data shows that legitimacy depends on technical improvements, inclusive governance, and ethical leadership. The success of South Africa's democracy will rely less on its institutions than on their capacity to improve people's lives.

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