



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Post-2021 Coalition Arrangement and the Governance of Service Delivery in South African Local Government

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Oct 11, 2025	<p>Municipalities continue to face ongoing challenges in governance and service delivery due to unstable coalitions among political parties. This coalition arrangement has so far lacked a shared ideological foundation, leading to frequent leadership changes, policy issues, and poor administrative oversight as coalition political partners compete for influence and power. This instability compromises service delivery planning and provision. As a result, communities bear the consequences through deteriorating service delivery. The article aims to examine the post-2021 coalition government and its effects on municipal governance and service delivery effectiveness, with a focus on how coalition instability influences service delivery planning and implementation, policy continuity, governance, and accountability. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analyses secondary data from government reports, academic literature, and policy documents to assess the impact of coalition politics on local governance and service delivery. Findings indicate that unstable coalitions have weakened municipal stability, intensified policy discontinuity, and compromised service delivery, thereby amplifying public distrust in local government. The study concludes that unless coalition governance is stabilised through codified frameworks, strengthened accountability mechanisms and professionalised municipal administration, the viability of developmental local government in South Africa will remain under threat.</p>
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INTRODUCTION

Despite the belief that coalition governments are uncommon in Africa, they are very prevalent, and South Africa exemplifies this phenomenon (Pholoma et al., 2024). The 2021 local government elections marked an important turning point in South Africa's democratic trajectory, one that is difficult to repudiate, leading to an era of coalition governments in the local sphere. As more political parties gain influence, coalition governments have become more common, thereby changing how municipalities are governed in South Africa (Gumede et al., 2025; Ntshangase et al., 2024; Tladi, 2024). Among the factors driving this transformation is the fragmentation of the political system, which resulted in hung councils in major metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni (Mofokeng et al., 2024). Coalition governments, in theory, promise inclusivity, shared governance, and broader representation, thereby potentially enhancing democratic consolidation and policymaking (Mithi & Banda, 2025). However, in practice, they have often been marred by ideological incompatibilities, persistent power struggles and leadership instability, which have collectively undermined administrative efficiency and institutional capacity (Zweni et al., 2024).

According to Mofokeng et al. (2024), a coalition government is formed when elected political parties bargain over and reach a coalition agreement when there is no overall majority. In this regard, coalitions are most effective when political parties are willing to compromise on ideological differences and cooperate in governance (Mnguni, 2023). Oktay (2022) further contends that for coalition governments to be successful, the governing political parties must cooperate over the

creation and implementation of public policies at that specific level of service delivery, which then becomes a binding factor for the coalition. Following the 2021 local government elections, an increasing number of councils have been governed through coalition arrangements. However, these coalition arrangements have been marked by instability, poor service delivery, policy inconsistency and greater service delivery challenges than expected (Mashamaite & Thusi, 2024; Mathonsi, 2024). As a result, unstable coalitions have become a central focus of contemporary scholarship on municipal governance in South Africa, with their inherent volatility eroding public trust and raising critical questions about the state's capacity to fulfil its developmental mandate (Mofokeng et al., 2024).

For instance, the coalition in Gauteng has been particularly chaotic after the 2021 municipal elections, with the metropolitan municipalities of Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Ekurhuleni secretly changing mayors and executive committees. This constant change has impacted municipal development programmes and the implementation of policies, resulting in delays in budget approvals and service delivery. This is corroborated by Setona (2023), who argues that coalition governments in urban municipalities have undergone substantial problems in their interactions with administrators at different political and bureaucratic levels. The paper contends that poor service delivery at the local government is attributed to coalitions in municipalities, resulting in poor local governance. Against this backdrop, the study examines the impact of post-2021 coalition governments on the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities, with a particular focus on how coalition instability influences accountability, policy continuity, and the quality of municipal services.

Problem Statement

Following the 2021 local government elections in South Africa, coalition governance has expanded. The total number of municipalities governed by coalitions increased from 27 in 2016 to 70 in 2021, indicating councils where no single party possessed an absolute majority (Zweni et al., 2024). As of October 2023, this number had risen further, with more than 82 municipalities administered by coalitions. Despite the development of coalitions, service delivery and governance performance remain significantly inadequate. Manyathi (2024) argues that during the 2022-2023 audit cycle, only 34 of 257 municipalities attained clean audits, where municipalities controlled by coalitions appear to be vulnerable to instability, poor service delivery and delay in implementation of policies (Mashamaite & Thusi, 2024; Thusi & Ndebele, 2024). According to Anon (2024), out of the 71 coalition municipalities, 34 have retained a single mayor throughout their term, 22 have experienced two different mayors, while 15 have undergone three or more mayoral changes, with some recording as many as five. These statistics highlight a concerning trend of unstable leadership and poor municipal performance in municipalities operating under coalition government. As a result, as coalition governments become increasingly common and are introducing a new norm in local governance, their effectiveness in promoting clean governance, ensuring reliable service delivery and maintaining leadership stability remains inadequate and inconsistent.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research methodology is a framework that outlines standards, principles, and techniques for executing research. Multiple scholars contend that there is no one-size-fits-all research strategy. Therefore, selecting a methodology involves both advantages and disadvantages and may not produce the expected results (Mabizela & Zwane, 2023; Malinga & Mabizela, 2025). This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing secondary data analysis to examine the impact of post-2021 coalition arrangements on the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities, with a particular focus on how coalition instability influences accountability, policy continuity, and the quality of municipal services.

A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables in-depth exploration of the research topic. The article relied on secondary data sources, including government publications, academic literature, media coverage, and archived research from several search engines such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Research Gate, ProQuest, EBSCOhost, Online Sources, Policies and other government publications. The keywords used in the data search included post-2021 local government elections, municipal governance in South Africa, municipal coalitions and local government coalitions. The study findings are drawn from synthesised literature rather than

empirical primary data. The keywords were derived from the study's conceptual focus, ensuring a comprehensive examination of both theoretical and contextual aspects of coalition governance in South African municipalities.

Thematic analysis, a qualitative research methodology employed to organize and examine intricate data sets systematically, was applied to analyze the data in the article. The thematic analysis entails identifying themes that capture the narratives within the data sets (Ragolane et al., 2025). This analysis method enabled the article to provide a detailed account of the impact of post-2021 coalition governments on the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse data and followed the model in the figure below.

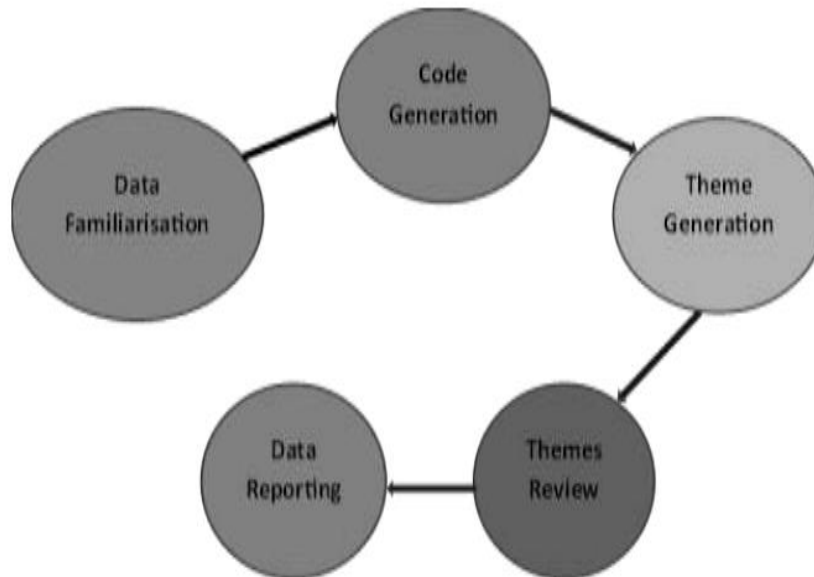


Figure 1: Thematic analysis process

Source: Mashamaite and Thusi (2024)

Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify and comprehend collective meanings and experiences by focusing on significance throughout a dataset (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Mashamaite & Thusi, 2024). The aim of thematic analysis is not to identify specific and unique meanings and experiences that can solely be found in a single data item. This technique facilitated the identification and interpretation of commonalities in the discourse surrounding a subject. Through thematic analysis, the researcher effectively focused on evaluating meaning across the entire dataset and on an in-depth examination of a particular aspect of the phenomenon.

Table 1. Outlines the criteria the authors used during the literature review; however, this paper is not a systematic review but rather a conceptual analysis

Item	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
Relevance	The inclusion criteria restricted the studies to those on coalition governments and the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities.	Studies unrelated to coalition governments on the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities were excluded.	To ensure that only studies directly addressing the relationship between coalition governance and municipal service delivery effectiveness in South Africa were analysed.
Recency	Priority was given to studies published between 2021 and 2025.	Studies older than 5 years were excluded.	Ensures the inclusion of recent, relevant studies on the governance and effectiveness of service

			delivery in coalition governments.
Credibility	Only peer-reviewed scholarly journals, government reports, credible media sources and official publications were considered.	Sources from blogs, non-peer-reviewed journals, and non-academic platforms were omitted.	Focuses on academic rigour and reliability, excluding sources that may lack in-depth or peer review.
Geographic focus	While the focus is on South Africa, relevant international studies that offer insights into coalition governments and service delivery were included.	Studies that did not focus on coalition governments and service delivery were excluded.	Provide a South African perspective, enriched by international insights, that enhances understanding of coalition governance and service delivery dynamics.
Language	The research exclusively utilised publications written in English.	Other languages were excluded from this study.	To ensure consistency, accuracy, and ease of interpretation in analysing the selected literature.

Table 1: Search criteria

Source: Authors (2025)

Theoretical Framework

This paper applied the coalition theory and veto player theory as theoretical frameworks to examine the impact of post-2021 coalition governments on the governance and effectiveness of service delivery in South African municipalities.

Coalition Theory

Setona (2023) defines a coalition as a connection or association between two or more political parties that collaborate in parliament or government, based on election results. Coalition theory offers an essential framework for comprehending the processes of political collaboration, power-sharing, and governance within multi-party municipal government systems. Evans (2018), argues that the theory outlines how political players establish coalitions driven by office-seeking, policy-seeking, and vote-seeking objectives to attain majority control and execute policy agendas. Coalition theory is relevant in the context of South African local government, especially following the 2021 municipal elections, which resulted in hung councils where no single party secured an outright majority in over 80 municipalities (Beukes, 2021).

The proportional representation system promotes coalition building but also heightens the risk of instability and policy discontinuity when coalition partners have conflicting interests. Coalition theory at the municipal level highlights the impact of institutional frameworks and veto players on policy decisions, administrative coordination, and service delivery outcomes. Unstable coalitions frequently lead to leadership transitions, delayed budgets, and governance deterioration, compromising accountability and the efficacy of service delivery (Mofokeng et al., 2025). This study utilises coalition theory to enhance the theoretical comprehension of the impact of political fragmentation and power-sharing arrangements on governance performance, emphasising the complex relationship among coalition stability, institutional efficiency, and the quality of municipal service delivery in South Africa.

Veto Player Theory

The Veto Player Theory, proposed by Tsebelis (1995), offers an essential framework for analysing decision-making and policy stability in coalition-governed municipal administrations (Oppermann & Brummer, 2019). The theory asserts that political outcomes are influenced by the quantity and arrangement of veto players, individuals or collective entities whose approval is necessary for changing the current policy status quo. A veto player is defined as a person or collective actor whose consent is necessary for changing the status quo (Angelova et al., 2018). The basic argument of this definition is that, for a substantial alteration to the policy status quo to occur, consensus among all

veto players is required. The presence of several veto players with different policy preferences complicates of a consensus on policy changes as the number of veto players and their ideological differences increase.

Within municipal government coalitions, each political party involved functions as a veto player, shaping the direction and pace of policy development. Bergman et al. (2024) are of the view that coalitions consisting of many parties with differing ideological perspectives and governance agendas face significant challenges in achieving agreement, leading to policy stagnation and governance outcomes. As a result, municipalities led by unstable coalitions often face challenges in service delivery, delays in budget approval, and inconsistent policy implementation. The Veto Player Theory explains why municipal coalition governments frequently encounter challenges in maintaining policy continuity and administrative efficiency, as the growing number of veto players increases political negotiation, reduces the likelihood of consensus, and constrains the government's ability to implement significant change. The Veto Player framework offers a vital analytical perspective for comprehending the challenges faced by post-2021 coalition governments in South Africa, particularly regarding fragmented decision-making, compromised accountability, and policy inconsistency in local governance. It directs the investigation of how different political actors, each functioning as a veto player, compromise policy consistency and the effectiveness of service delivery in coalition-led municipalities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing coalitions in South Africa

Kariuki et al. (2022) and Makubalo et al. (2025) describe a coalition government as a governance structure of “two or more political parties that unite to collaborate in ruling as a coalition.” They categorise several coalition types, including bare-majority coalitions, grand coalitions, national unity governments, and minority governments. A noticeable trend of minimum-winning and minority coalition arrangements has developed at the municipal level, propelled by the country's proportional electoral system, which enables smaller parties to secure legislative representation and exert significant influence in government formation (Hofisi & Chigova, 2023).

In the absence of structural reforms and more explicit institutional directives, coalitions are likely to encounter recurring governance challenges and functional instability, hindering inclusive and responsive local development. However, such achievements are not often ordinary and frequently ephemeral, as they rely significantly on the individuals involved rather than resilient institutional structures. In most instances, the impact of coalition governance on service delivery has been negative. Political instability, recurrent alterations in municipal leadership, and policy inconsistency have hindered long-term planning and project implementation.

Administrators often find themselves constrained by competing political mandates, which impair their ability to make unbiased, evidence-based decisions. Thus, service delivery becomes politicised and inconsistent, further undermining public confidence in local government institutions (Masuku & Jili, 2019). Coalition governments are frequently praised for their theoretical ability to enhance inclusivity and expand democratic representation (Makubalo et al., 2025). The South African experience demonstrates that without strong institutional safeguards, well-defined policy frameworks, and efficient conflict resolution mechanisms, such arrangements may exacerbate political fragmentation, undermine administrative continuity, and diminish municipalities' capacity to provide essential public services.

The rise and volatility of coalition governments

Coalition governance has existed in various forms in South Africa since the 2000 local government elections, but the 2021 polls marked a decisive shift. As the South African Local Government Association (SALGA, 2024) observed, at least 70 municipalities were governed through coalitions following the 2021 elections, compared to only 27 in 2016. However, these coalitions have proven highly unstable. Within a year of the elections, 11 municipalities experienced leadership changes, while several others faced internal disputes and motions of no confidence (SALGA, 2024).

PROVINCES	2000	2006	2011	2016	2021
EC	1	1	-	1	4
FS	-	-	-	1	4
GP	2	-	-	4	10
LP	-	-	-	2	2
KZN	10	9	20	7	19
MP	-	-	-	-	3
NC	2	-	5	3	10
NW	-	-	-	1	3
WC	14	21	12	8	15
Totals	29	31	37	27	70

Figure 2: Coalition governments since the 2000 elections

Source: SALGA (2024)

The instability of coalitions can be attributed to several interrelated factors. First, coalition agreements are often vague, lack enforceable mechanisms and fail to translate into coherent governance programmes. Second, ideological fragmentation among coalition partners, spanning from socialist movements such as the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) to conservative parties such as the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), makes consensus difficult (Tladi, 2024). Finally, coalitions are often driven by short-term office-seeking motives rather than long-term developmental objectives (Knowles, 2021). As Tladi (2024) demonstrates in the case of Johannesburg, coalition politics have produced unprecedented instability, with 10 mayoral changes and 3 council speaker turnovers within 8 years. This volatility hampers continuity in municipal governance, undermines planning and budgeting processes, and diminishes public confidence in democratic institutions. Similarly, Setona (2023) found that the coalition government in Tshwane failed to deliver efficient municipal services due to political interference, lack of coordination, and limited administrative capacity.

Post-2021 coalition governance in South Africa: Political reconfiguration

The post-2021 landscape in South African local government signifies a significant political reconfiguration characterized by declining single-party dominance, increased electoral division, and heightened competitiveness under proportional representation (Duvenhage, 2022). The 2021 municipal elections resulted in many ineffective councils, requiring coalition formation at the local level, while subsequent by-elections and realignments have maintained unstable coalition dynamics across the country. Historically, certain municipalities engaged in episodic coalitions before 2021; however, the scale and longevity of coalition governance post-2021 are unprecedented. An increasing number of councils have relied on negotiated alliances to establish executive committees, and many metropolitan councils, especially in Gauteng, have experienced frequent leadership transitions, mayoral changes, and executive restructurings. Empirical and case studies of Gauteng metros (Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni) demonstrate that coalition arrangements have consistently altered coalition partners, resulting in administrative disruption and delays in budget approvals and service initiatives (Mathonsi, 2024). These municipal case studies demonstrate a geographic concentration of instability within metropolitan areas, as well as the uneven distribution of coalition governance between provinces.

Merits and demerits of coalition governments

Dalmases (2021) defined a coalition as a governing system in which various political parties, often with differing ideas, unite to form a government. This cooperative agreement usually occurs when no individual entity obtains a majority of seats in an election. In these instances, political parties engage in negotiations to establish alliances or coalitions, thereby consolidating their resources for collective governance. De Vos (2021) argues that coalition governments may be established at either the national or provincial level, depending on the election circumstances. Coalition politics seeks to establish a functional majority capable of effective governance, despite the different policy beliefs of the constituent parties. The mechanics of coalition politics include compromise, negotiation, and the identification of common ground among the parties involved to guarantee governmental stability and functionality.

The primary merit of coalition politics is its capacity to amplify the voices of the nation's diverse demographic groups. Chaka and Adanlawo (2023) argue that South Africa is a nation characterized by a multitude of diverse cultures, languages, and ethnicities. Substantial inequalities exist among

areas; hence, coalition governments facilitate the amplification of previously marginalised voices. When political parties from diverse regions collaborate, they can ensure that their constituents' concerns are acknowledged and addressed in municipal decision-making. This enhanced representation results in a more complex and comprehensive approach to governance, considering the specific desires and requirements of each community (Islam et al., 2023). Coalition governments naturally promote a broader spectrum of policy proposals. Wonka (2024) notes that when parties with distinct views and constituencies contest for government, the policy agenda reflects a synthesis of varied perspectives. Involving all stakeholders in the policy-making process yields more comprehensive, complex recommendations. The collaborative decision-making process improves the implementation of policies. As decisions are reached through dialogue and negotiations, policies are more likely to be effectively implemented since coalition parties have a vested interest in the success of collaborative initiatives.

Islam et al. (2023) assert that one of the most challenging aspects of coalition politics is navigating the complex web of ideological differences among the participating coalition members. Upon forming a coalition, each party contributes its distinct beliefs, ideals, and policy preferences. Negotiating these disagreements is an art, as both parties must identify common ground on significant subjects while acknowledging and respecting each other's ideas. Disputes on economic policy, social reforms, or foreign relations might complicate matters. Leaders must possess the skills needed to maintain coalition cohesion over time, and communication lines must be effective. A challenge with coalitions is their tendency toward prolonged decision-making and slow operational processes. Klüver et al. (2023) claim that all significant decisions require a majority vote, which often prolongs conversations, especially when controversial topics are involved. Inclusivity in the decision-making process is joyful, but it may also diminish government effectiveness. The issue worsens when the coalition comprises multiple groups with distinct objectives and strategies. Coalition administrations consistently face the challenge of reconciling inclusivity with the expedient implementation of policy objectives.

RESULTS

Coalition governance dynamics

Coalition governments at the local level in South Africa originated from the first post-apartheid local government elections in 2000 (Beukes & De Visser, 2021; Mofokeng et al., 2025). The number of coalition governments has significantly increased in recent years. However, coalition governments in started to be common prior local government elections, in 2006 and 2016, when different municipalities, such as Cape Town, Nelson Mandela Bay, Tshwane, and Johannesburg, were operating under coalition administrations (Knowles, 2021; Setona, 2023). These prior experiences laid the foundation for understanding the complex nature of coalition governance in South Africa's proportional representation system, which often results in fragmented councils lacking an absolute majority.

Municipal instability

Municipal instability has become a characteristic trait of coalition-led councils in South Africa, particularly in major metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, and Nelson Mandela Bay. Coalition governments in these municipalities frequently lack the institutional cohesion and programme alignment necessary for stable administration, resulting in recurring governance breakdowns. Instability often originates from unstable coalition agreements, fluctuating political alliances, and a lack of adequate procedures for managing inter-party dispute (Beukes & De Visser, 2021; Mofokeng et al., 2025). This instability manifests through recurring disputes among coalition partners, contested power-sharing arrangements, and intermittent governance breakdowns that impede the municipality's capacity to perform basic statutory functions. Instability also weakens oversight systems, disrupts administrative coordination, and creates uncertainty among senior managers, resulting in governance paralysis. Municipal instability becomes both a symptom of systemic political fragmentation and a driver of declining institutional performance within coalition-governed municipalities.

Frequent leadership changes

Frequent leadership turnover is a prominent indicator of coalition instability in municipal administration. Tshishonga (2022) noted that coalition dynamics in the Western Cape, especially in the City of Cape Town, under the Democratic Alliance's alliances with small parties, displayed significant stability and policy consistency. In contrast, Setona (2023) point out that instability, power fluctuations, and recurrent leadership changes have characterized coalitions in the Gauteng metros of Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Ekurhuleni. Johannesburg, for instance, has seen more than ten mayoral changes between 2016 and 2024, while Tshwane has experienced repeated removals of speakers and MMCs, severely disrupting administrative continuity. This leadership instability undermines administrative continuity, weakens institutional memory, and destabilises long-term planning structures. Senior managers frequently work in a landscape of political instability, which undermines decision-making processes and accountability, as incoming political leaders often adjust priorities to align with new coalition arrangements. This constant change undermines public trust and reduces the municipality's credibility as residents encounter erratic leadership and unmet promises.

Policy discontinuity

Policy discontinuity poses a significant governance challenge in coalition municipalities, as changing political coalitions lead to conflicting policy priorities and fragmented implementation strategies. Coalition administrations, especially minority coalitions, encounter difficulties in sustaining stable policy agendas due to conflicting ideological stances and temporal interests among coalition partners (Hofisi & Chigova, 2023). As coalitions realign, service delivery plans, budget allocations, and developmental goals are modified resulting in delayed infrastructure projects, procurement delays, and compromised performance monitoring systems (Tladi, 2024). In Ekurhuleni, for example, ongoing coalition reconfigurations have led to delays in budget approvals, disruptions in procurement processes, and stalled infrastructure projects. This disruption compromises strategic planning cycles, hinders multi-year development frameworks, and diminishes the municipality's ability to attain sustained service delivery results. In contexts where administrative capacity is already constrained, policy instability intensifies institutional inefficiencies and fosters a reactive governance culture that prioritizes political compromise over coherent developmental objectives.

Compromised service delivery

Compromised service delivery has become a critical consequence of coalition instability in municipalities (SALGA, 2024). Coalition fractures have disrupted essential services, including water supply, electricity maintenance, waste management and infrastructure repairs. In Tshwane, political deadlock has contributed to delays in restoring water and electricity infrastructure, while Johannesburg has experienced waste collection backlogs and deteriorating roads during frequent coalition shifts (Setona, 2023). Nelson Mandela Bay has endured prolonged water and sanitation failures linked to unstable coalition arrangements and inconsistent administrative directives (Beukes & De Visser, 2021). These failures stem from policy inconsistency, weakened oversight, and the politicisation of administrative appointments, which together undermine municipalities' ability to implement and monitor service delivery programmes. Compromised service delivery erodes public trust, deepens community dissatisfaction, and weakens the developmental mandate of local government.

There are also observations of political instability and financial mismanagement in the municipalities. According to Zweni et al. (2024), the revenue streams of Gauteng's metropolitan municipalities have been under pressure since 2018 due to a combination of economic slowdown, poor debt collection, and unsustainable budgeting practices. Only the City of Ekurhuleni achieved an unqualified audit in the past decade, while Johannesburg and Tshwane regressed to adverse and disclaimed audit outcomes. These findings underscore the Auditor-General's repeated warning that poor financial governance translates directly into deteriorating service delivery. Municipalities under coalition governance face further constraints as budget approvals and procurement processes become politicised battlegrounds. Coalition parties frequently disagree on developmental priorities, delaying budget passage and leading to underspending on key infrastructure projects. Zweni et al. (2024) noted that budgets in coalition-led municipalities "do not respond to the needs of the poor"

and are “not passed in time,” leading to interruptions in essential services such as water, sanitation, and waste management.

The consequences of such dysfunction are visible in the rising frequency of service delivery protests. Municipal IQ (2023) in Figure 2 reveal a marked increase in protests from 2004 to 2022, with spikes corresponding to periods of heightened political instability. Citizens’ frustrations over unfulfilled promises and poor governance have transformed local grievances into national debates about the viability of coalition-led municipalities.

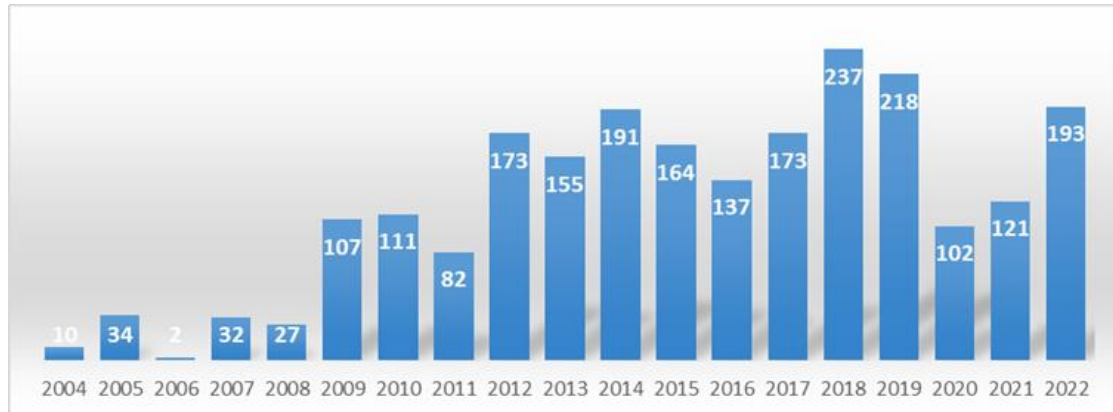


Figure 3: Service delivery protests in South Africa (2004–2022)

Source: (Municipal IQ, 2023)

Dysfunctional coalition government

The debate over whether coalition governments perform better than single-party administrations remain central to South Africa’s evolving democratic landscape. The 2021 local government elections ushered in an era of political pluralism, resulting in at least nine hung municipal councils (Zweni et al., 2024). The emergence of coalition governments has profound implications for governance and service delivery, Thus, the proliferation of coalition arrangements in South Africa, especially in metropolitan municipalities, has reignited questions regarding their functionality and impact on local governance. In 2021, the ANC’s dominance had significantly declined, losing control of major metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay (Tladi, 2024). This decline is symptomatic of a more profound crisis in governance, in which the inability to manage urban growth, provide reliable public services, and curb corruption has driven citizens to explore alternative political options. According to the MISTRA *Coalition Barometer* (Booyesen, Moyo & Beukes, 2023), the loss of trust in dominant parties coincided with the rise of smaller, issue-based political actors that increasingly shape the balance of power in hung councils.

The escalating dispersion of political power has directly impacted service delivery outcomes in South African municipalities. Coalition governments, especially in metropolitan municipalities, frequently face challenges in sustaining administrative continuity due to frequent leadership turnovers, unstable power-sharing arrangements, and conflicting party agendas (Pholoma et al., 2024). These dynamics undermine long-term planning and hinder the execution of essential service delivery programs in municipalities. Coalition partners often prioritise political negotiations over community needs, leading to delays in infrastructure maintenance, inconsistent management of waste, unstable water and electricity supply, and inadequate financial oversight. Governance instability often creates administrative inconsistencies within municipal management frameworks, limiting efficiency and undermining accountability mechanisms. SALGA (2024) report observes that unstable coalitions often impact municipal performance by shifting focus from service delivery targets to internal political conflicts, therefore jeopardising the municipality’s capacity to fulfil essential developmental responsibilities. Although coalitions may enhance representation, their instability frequently poses significant risks to the sustained and adequate provision of services in South Africa’s municipalities.

Citizen disillusionment and democratic fatigue

The cumulative effect of unstable coalition failures is growing citizen disillusionment. Tladi (2024) observes that frequent leadership changes in Johannesburg have eroded public trust in both political

institutions and elected representatives. Table 1 shows the change of leadership in the City of Johannesburg from 2016 to 2024.

Table 2: Timeline of coalition governance and political events in Johannesburg (2016-2024)

Year	Event
2016	Start of coalition-led governance in Johannesburg
2019	Motion of no confidence against Mayor Herman Mashaba
2021	Untimely passing of Mayor Geoff Makhubo
2021	Untimely passing of Mayor Jolidee Matongo
2021	Untimely passing of Mayor Mpho Moerane
2022	Motion of no confidence against Mayor Dada Morero
2023	Motion of no confidence against Mayor Mpho Phalatse
2023	Resignation of Mayor Thapelo Ahmad
2024	Formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) at national level, with continued instability at the metro level
2024	Resignation of Mayor Kabelo Gwamanda
2024	Dada Morero re-elected as Mayor of Johannesburg

Source: Tladi (2024)

As mentioned above, the change of leadership in the Johannesburg municipality shows the signs of instability and to an extent, has led to a rise in protests where political instability has taken a form (Ragolane, 2022). Further to this, protest activity is not evenly distributed across provinces.

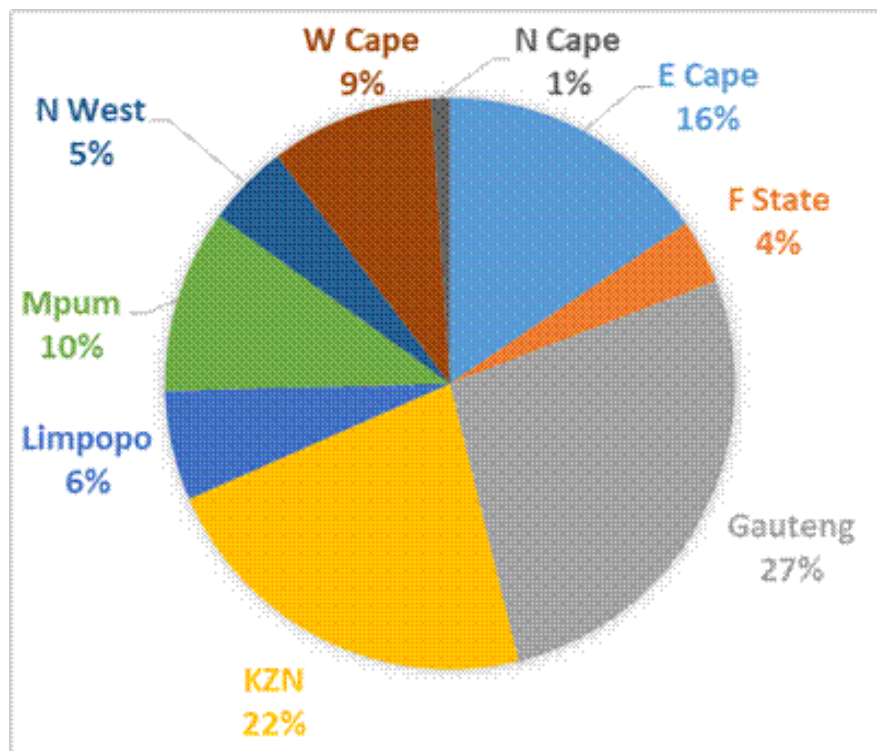


Figure 4: Service delivery protests by province

Source: Municipal IQ municipal hotspots monitor (2023)

According to Municipal IQ (2023) Gauteng remains the most prominent site of service delivery protests, accounting for approximately 27% of all recorded protests in 2022. It is followed by KwaZulu-Natal (22%) and the Eastern Cape (16%), illustrating that protest action is concentrated in provinces with large urban populations and high expectations for municipal service delivery (Municipal IQ, 2023). The decrease in public trust among citizens has led to the disillusionment which manifests in declining voter turnout, increasing apathy, and heightened protest activity. Gumede et al. (2025) note that while coalitions may theoretically promote democratic consolidation, their failure in practice contributes to what scholars describe as “democratic fatigue.” Citizens perceive politics as a self-serving enterprise detached from their daily realities. In this environment, populist movements and protest politics flourish, further fragmenting the political landscape.

DISCUSSION

Towards stable and accountable coalitions

To address these challenges, several scholars and institutions have proposed mechanisms for stabilising coalition governance. The *Framework for Coalitions in Local Government* (SALGA, 2024) provides practical guidelines for structuring and managing coalition partnerships, including the establishment of written coalition agreements, dispute resolution mechanisms, and transparency measures. Similarly, Mofokeng et al. (2024) advocate for enhanced civil society oversight, stronger legislative accountability, and reforms to enforce policy coherence among coalition partners. The experience of stable coalition governments elsewhere, such as Finland and Switzerland, demonstrates that political maturity, institutionalised agreements, and mutual accountability are prerequisites for coalition success (Mofokeng et al., 2024). In South Africa, adopting such best practices could help transform coalition governments from sites of instability into vehicles for inclusive governance and developmental progress.

Coalition governments in South Africa reflect the country's transition toward a more pluralistic democracy. However, without institutional safeguards, such coalitions risk entrenching instability, policy paralysis, and declining service delivery. Evidence from Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Nelson Mandela Bay illustrates that coalition politics, as currently practiced, often serve partisan interests at the expense of citizens' welfare. To reverse this trajectory, South Africa must move from *ad hoc* power-sharing to structured, accountable coalition governance. This includes formalising coalition agreements, professionalising municipal administrations, and ensuring that coalition politics translate into tangible developmental outcomes. Only through such reforms can coalition governments restore public trust and fulfil the constitutional promise of responsive, accountable, and effective local government.

Democracy, governance stability, and the future of coalition management

The deepening instability of coalition arrangements in South Africa has far-reaching democratic and institutional implications, extending well beyond episodic disruptions in municipal governance. To this end, we can almost (all) agree that unstable coalitions erode the foundational norms of democratic legitimacy by weakening public trust, undermining accountability, and diminishing citizens' belief that political institutions can deliver consistent, equitable governance (Mngomezulu & Phetha, 2025; Pholoma et al., 2024; Tladi, 2024). For example, in Gauteng's metropolitan municipalities, coalition volatility has repeatedly disrupted budget cycles, policy continuity, and administrative leadership, thereby reinforcing public perceptions of institutional fragility and declining legitimacy (Pholoma et al., 2024). Such governance failures contribute to what scholars describe as *democratic fatigue*, wherein citizens disengage from formal political processes as instability becomes normalised and political elites appear self-interested, fragmented, and inattentive to developmental needs (Mngomezulu & Phetha, 2025).

This brings us to the key question emerging from these developments: whether South Africa's institutional architecture is adequately equipped to manage increasingly complex, multi-party formations. The current constitutional-legal framework, while allowing for coalition governments, does not provide stabilising mechanisms such as mandatory coalition contracts, structured dispute-resolution mechanisms or timelines for forming and maintaining executive leadership, creating institutional vulnerabilities that are easily exploited during moments of political contestation (De Vos, 2021). Pholoma et al. (2024) argue that these weaknesses are neither inevitable nor intrinsic to proportional representation systems. They further mention that coalition democracies in Western Europe, such as Germany and the Netherlands, embed detailed coalition agreements, codified negotiation procedures, and formal inter-party coordinating bodies that substantially reduce volatility and enhance policy clarity (Pholoma et al., 2024; Kariuki et al., 2022).

South Africa lacks such institutionalised norms, resulting in coalition behaviour that is often opportunistic, transactional, and unanchored in shared policy commitments (Jolobe, 2018). Moreover, the political-administrative interface becomes increasingly strained under unstable coalitions, as shifting political alliances create fluid patronage networks, interfere with administrative professionalism, and weaken the autonomy of municipal management structures, further exacerbating governance failures (Mekgwe, 2024). These dynamics underscore the need to

debate whether South Africa should codify coalition formation and governance. Codification through legislation or binding inter-party protocols could introduce minimum stability clauses, formalise coalition agreements, protect administrative neutrality, and create predictable mechanisms for dispute resolution. Advocates argue that such reforms would align South Africa more closely with successful coalition democracies and help arrest the progressive erosion of institutional credibility. At the same time, critics caution that rigid codification may constrain political flexibility. Nonetheless, the cumulative evidence suggests that without structured rules governing coalition behaviour, South Africa's democracy will remain exposed to recurring instability, weakened public participation, and diminished institutional legitimacy (National Freedom Party Submission, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has demonstrated that post-2021 coalition governments have intensified long-standing governance challenges in South African municipalities, particularly those relating to accountability, policy continuity and developmental responsiveness. Coalition Theory and Veto Player Theory illuminate how fragmented coalitions multiply actors with veto power, resulting in policy deadlock, administrative instability, and interruptions in service delivery, effects clearly visible in metropolitan municipalities such as Johannesburg, Tshwane, and Ekurhuleni (Pholoma et al., 2024; Setona, 2023). These governance failures contribute to a deeper democratic malaise marked by declining trust, growing protest activity, and widening gaps between citizen expectations and state performance. As the findings indicate, unstable coalitions not only impede the execution of municipal mandates but also erode the legitimacy of local governance structures, thereby exacerbating citizen disillusionment and weakening institutional resilience.

These challenges must also be understood within the broader context of South Africa's evolving social contract. Ragolane et al. (2024) have argued, the post-apartheid social contract remains "a work in progress," strained by inequality, corruption, deteriorating state capacity and the state's persistent failure to provide equitable service delivery. Coalition instability compounds this deterioration by weakening the state-society relationship and reducing the credibility of democratic institutions. The increase in violent and non-violent service delivery protests, documented in both your findings and the social contract literature, signals deepening frustration with the state's inability to fulfil its constitutional obligations. The social contract's substantive elements protection, provision and participation Loewe et al. (2021) are undermined when unstable coalitions hinder municipal performance, dilute accountability and disrupt long-term developmental planning. Thus, the crisis of coalition governance must be read alongside the crisis of the social contract, both of which reflect eroding public confidence in the democratic project.

Furthermore, it demonstrated that unstable coalitions amplify the number of veto players, exacerbate leadership turnover, and compromise long-term planning, thereby deepening citizen disillusionment and protest activity, particularly in metropolitan municipalities where service delivery expectations are high (Tladi, 2024; Municipal IQ, 2023). The study argued that fragmented coalitions struggle to maintain policy coherence and administrative effectiveness. consequently, achieving stable and developmental coalition governance will require deliberate institutional reforms, strengthened administrative capacity, and political maturity among coalition partners. Without such changes, municipalities will remain vulnerable to cyclical instability, declining service delivery performance, and weakening public trust. The success of South Africa's coalition future, therefore, hinges on building structured, accountable, and ethically grounded coalition systems capable of supporting sustainable and responsive local governance.

Limitations and Direction for Future Studies

The study offers significant insights into the governance implications of post-2021 coalition administrations in South African municipalities; however, it is not without limitations. The reliance on secondary data and document analysis limited the depth of contextual understanding, especially of internal political negotiations and informal power dynamics that are not consistently reflected in official documents. Future studies should employ a mixed-methods approach that integrates longitudinal quantitative data with qualitative interviews with councillors, administrators, and community stakeholders to better understand the complex relationship between political instability and governance efficacy. Comparative analyses within provinces and across countries using proportional representation systems should enhance theoretical understanding of coalition

dynamics and their developmental implications. This research would enhance empirical understanding and help in developing institutional reforms that foster stability, accountability, and sustainable service delivery in coalition-led municipalities.

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