

Voting With Their Feet: Perceptions of Political Party Conference Delegates in South Africa: A Case of the African National Congress

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Abstract

The African National Congress held its 55th National Elective Conference on December 22nd at Nasrec in Johannesburg. When the Electoral Committee announced the top seven results, it revealed that 46th ballots were spoiled by delegates. There was anxiety about the impact of the spoiled ballots on the election results. A qualitative study used literature and KII to investigate the reasons for the spoiling of ballot papers by conference delegates. Several findings emerged from the study (i) spoiled ballots could not affect the outcomes of the conference elections since the gap between the competing candidates was wide (ii) If the gap was narrow among the candidates, they could certainly affect the outcomes (iii) lack of political education among the party delegates largely led to the incidence of spoiled ballots (iv) delegates used ballots to register protest action against some candidates (v) changing of mandate from branches also contributed to the spoiling of ballots (vi). Spoiling ballots showed some level of democratic maturity by not being forced to vote for candidates did not support. The study recommended that (i) the party should consider political education to enhance party members (ii) it also proposed a framework for mitigating future spoiling of ballot papers.

Keywords: African National Congress; 55th elective conference; spoiled ballots; conference delegates; Nasrec

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the factors that led party membership delegates to spoil their ballot papers at the elective conference for the top seven candidates. From the 16th to the 20th of December 2022, the African National Congress (ANC) the ruling party in South Africa convened its 55th elective conference at Nasrec in Johannesburg. According to its constitution, the party is required to hold elective conferences every five years. These conferences mandate elected leadership to run its affairs until the next conference. These conferences are marked by fierce contestations for leadership positions. In his book, “Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the African National Congress”, William Gumede (2007) unmasked the fierce contestation between the party’s former president Thabo Mbeki and his deputy Jacob Zuma that almost tore the party apart when a splinter faction, Congress of the People (COPE) was formed in 2008 after dissatisfaction with the win by Jacob Zuma over Mbeki. Since 2007, the party’s elective conferences have been heavily contested particularly the position of president since the one elected would become president of the country if the party won national elections. The contest for the position of president in particular generated hatred between the opposing sides known today as factions. Conference delegates cast their votes for their candidates of choice such as the president and the other six top candidates, namely deputy president, national chairperson, secretary-general, 1st deputy secretary-general, and 2nd deputy secretary-general. Before the 55th conference, the position of the 2nd deputy secretary-general was not there. These positions are referred to as officials of the party comprised of seven members contrary to the previous arrangement of six. However, it happens that some delegates do not cast their vote for any of the candidates who have been nominated and placed on the ballot paper and instead choose to spoil their ballots. At this conference, forty-six (46) ballots of the top seven positions were spoiled only for the top seven candidates combined. Therefore, this study was guided by the following objectives namely, to investigate factors that make party membership delegates choose to spoil their ballot papers in the election of the top seven candidates commonly referred to as officials of the party and to propose a framework to mitigate future spoiling of ballot papers in elective conferences for the top seven candidates or officials.

This number of spoiled ballots can determine the fate of an individual candidate. This is contrary to Toombs (2016:75) who postulated that votes cast individually could only make the difference if it is a single vote needed. According to Toombs (2016:75), votes could change the outcome of the results only if voters cast them as a group. The study sought to examine the following objectives namely why delegates spoiled their votes, if the spoiled ballots affected the outcome of the conference, and what delegates proposed to mitigate spoiling ballots in the future.

2. METHODOLOGY

This is a quantitative study based on a literature review and Key Information Informants (KII). The KII comprised those who were selected randomly to participate in the interview. KII enabled the study to obtain primary data from the respondents. Journal articles enabled the study to obtain secondary data. The KII was selected from a homogeneous population all from the ANC delegation to the 55th elective conference in December 2022. Simple random sampling was adopted for this study as it is suitable for quantitative research designs (Rahi 2017). The fact that the population was homogeneous, it allowed using random sampling (Bhardwa 2019). The ballots that were spoiled were 46 and the delegates came from all nine provinces of South Africa namely Limpopo, Mpumalanga, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape, Northern Cape, North-West, Gauteng, Free State, and Eastern Cape. The sample was 23 with only 19 agreeing to participate. According to Cresswell (1998) 20-30 is sufficient for a study. Sampling was confined to all the delegates who attended and not those who spoiled their ballots since no one would know their identity as voting is secret. Of course, the study did not focus on the biographical information of the respondents but was only limited to the two questions listed below. The study focused on the top seven officials namely the president, deputy president, national chairperson, secretary-general, first deputy secretary-general, second deputy secretary-general, and treasurer-general.

The responses from the respondents were segmented and thereafter thematically analysed. Graphs were used to show the categories /segmentation of the responses in the figures. Related literature was conducted to obtain a theoretical understanding of the factors that attributed to the spoiling of ballots at national elections since the reasons are related to whether it is national elections or political elections. The findings could be applied beyond political parties to assist even national elections. The literature review findings were compared with the perceptions of the respondents for analysis and reporting of the results.

3. RELATED LITERATURE

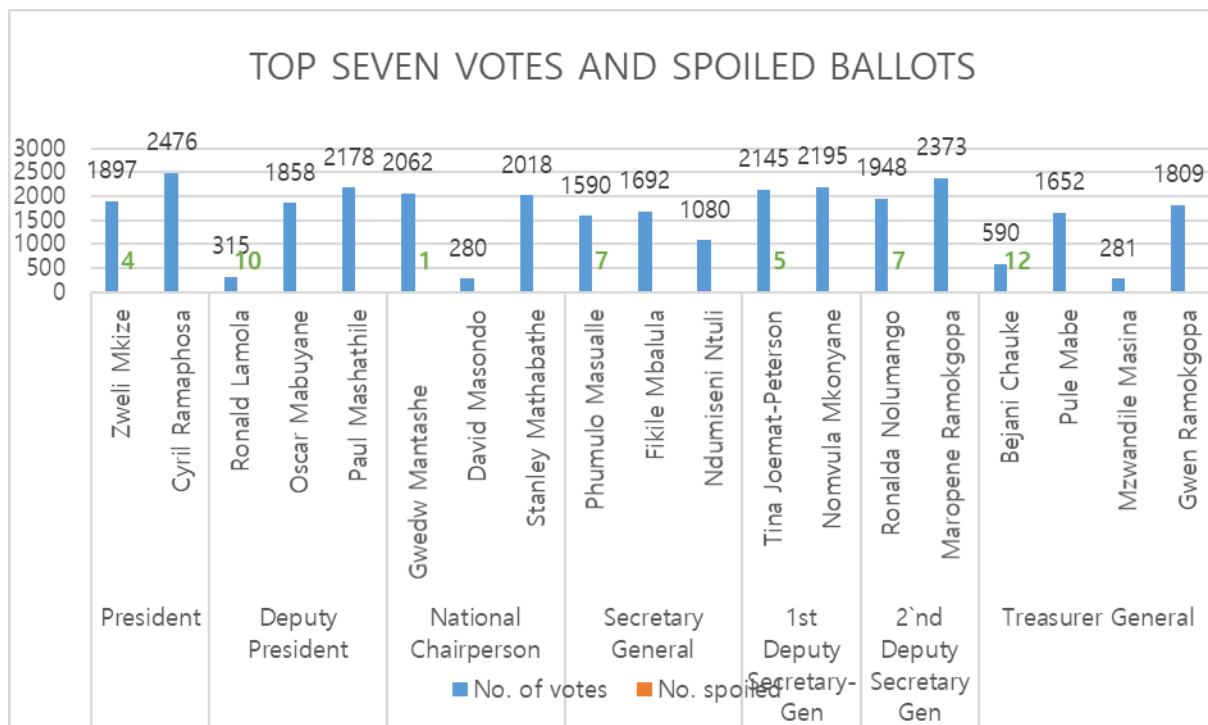
3.1 WHY DELEGATES SPOIL THEIR BALLOTS AT ELECTIVE CONFERENCES

Baloi (2019: 168) posits that political participation is “a legal instrument where spaces are given for everyone to participate in the inculcation of democracy, equality of opportunity about suffrage, organization of political parties and their right to avail themselves. To refuse this participation is apolitical immorality since it blocks the only authorized path for the promotion of the common good (Guirardi & Cunha, 2012). These results suggest that invalid voting is linked to socioeconomic grievances and that electoral abstention under non-compulsory voting transforms into invalid votes in the second round under compulsory voting when voters’ choices are limited (Haman, 2021). Voters may cast invalid votes as a form of political protest toward the political system, or low education may contribute to unintentional voter error (Kouba, 2019).

Pierzgalski et al. (2019) consider spoiled or invalid ballots as a reflection of political protest. Further, their study found that the cause might be voter error resulting from the poor design of ballot papers which then suggests that the design of ballot papers should be taken into consideration in election planning (Pierzgalski et al. 2019). Similarly, Katz and Levin (2016) found that they were informed by voter errors and political discontent. However, evidence from the literature on spoiled and invalid ballots included another interesting variable as voters in Brazil (Power and Roberts 1995), Germany (Stiefbold 1965), and France (Rosenthal and Sen 1973), among others, use a spoiled ballot to register their protest with the political system, or with the lack of political alternatives. It is thus important to provide voters with choices outside the establishments of the political parties to vote for to accommodate every one of the voters to limit the number of spoilt ballots. The study by Uggla (2008) found that political systems that failed to accommodate voters’ alternative political parties to vote enhanced the chances of high levels of spoiled ballots. However, spoiled ballots might not be lost for good. This was confirmed by the study by Bélanger (2004) who found that in Australia, Britain, and Canada, those parties that are in the periphery of the two main parties gain from the spoiled ballots since that is indicative that voters do not like the dominant parties.

The language barrier is also a factor in determining the correctness of voting. This reasoning was confirmed by Power and Garand (2007) who found that in the Latin American context, those who used the national language as a second language were likely to have their votes invalid because they did not understand the instructions to follow for voting. Mamabolo indicated that in South Africa there were vigorous education campaigns in the nation to reduce the number of spoiled ballots (Grant 2014). However, the high incidence of rejected ballots that have so far characterized elections in Ghana, if not checked, poses a severe threat to the realization of the minimum requirement for democratic consolidation in Ghana (Van Gyampo 2009, p. 293). In contrast, Mamabolo posits that irrespective of the number of spoilt ballots, the result of the election would not be affected (Grant 2014). Similarly, Toombs (2016, p.75) postulated that the vote could only make the difference if it was a single vote required to change the outcome. Votes could make an impact if they were cast as a group only (Toombs 2016, p.75). Spoiling high levels of ballots invalidates votes and reduces the democratic and legitimacy process (Martinez i Coma and Werner 2019). This is because staying away from the election process negatively affects the perceived legitimacy of the electoral process.

However, the ballot papers presented to each delegate were the same to assist with the validity and reliability of the votes cast. In other words, all delegates had similar names on the ballot. Figure 1. Below are the top seven votes and spoiled ballot papers.



4. FACTORS MITIGATING FUTURE SPOILING OF BALLOT PAPERS

Clause 5.1.4 of the constitution of the African National Congress (2017:7) instructs its members to take part in elections and also get elected or appointed to any committee, structure, commission, or delegation of the ANC. Section 12.9 provides that voting shall take place by secret ballot with delegates voting once on each ballot. Delegates are from the general membership of the ANC and are delegates who represent those who elected them but are not part of the conference. To develop them as cadres, at its 53rd Polokwane national elective conference, the ANC under its, “Organisational Renewal”, adopted a program to raise the level of their literacy, education, and skills as part of the nationwide campaign to make education and training a national priority (ANC 2007, p.5). Political education was considered important for the training of representing those in attendance (Berggren and Söderlund 2008). Similarly, Ahmad and Suryadi (2020, p. 481) concluded that political education could influence party members or cadres to be aware of rights and obligations and loyal and finally be responsible cadres which was evidenced in West Java. In their study, Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020) concluded that political education was still relevant, and it contributed to the understanding of representative democracy as was the case with Sweden. Similarly, Sirivunnabood (2016) postulated that the Puea Fah Din Party provided political education that was intended to strengthen the party’s ideology for its members.

The African National Congress as a leader of the working class in South Africa namely the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) and South Africa Communist Party (SACP) form part of the delegates of the ANC conferences due to dual membership. Pacho (2014) argued that good political knowledge was important to voting and engagement in political issues. The understanding of political education can be regarded as promoting an inclusive political understanding of voting to promote a credible free and fair electoral process (Boaduo 2013, p.201). Political education should not only be the domain of election bodies, but institutions of higher learning should collaborate to deepen political attitudes and behaviours (Hamad 2001). Bird (2008) concluded that in Scotland's Parliamentary elections for the local constituency and regional, there were 100,000 rejected or spoiled. However, the cause was that of limited understanding of the new form of the ballot paper where voters were required to mark it twice instead of once, and was blamed by political parties as unsatisfactory (Bird 2008). Similarly, in their study, Driscoll and Nelson (2014) found that in Bolivia, 60% of voters returned blank or spoiled ballots. The blank or spoiled votes are considered invalid votes, and they may be indicative of political protest (Pierzgalski et al. 2019).

5. THE NUMBER OF VOTES EACH OF THE TOP SEVEN CANDIDATES OBTAINED AND THE IMPACT OF THE BALLOT PAPERS ON THE CONFERENCE RESULTS

Research is awash with the conclusion that spoiling ballots has an impact on election results. Assessing the significance of spoiled ballots in the election process will be done through the comparison of the candidates who contested the same positions.

The candidates for the position of the president were two. The incumbent president, Ramaphosa obtained 2476 votes while his contestant received 1897 votes. The difference between the two is 580 votes. If four (4) spoiled ballots were added to any number either way, the results would not be affected. Similarly, Mamabolo cited by Grant (2014) indicated that spoiled ballots did not affect the election results. For the position of Deputy President, there were three candidates. Lamola, Mabuyane, and Mashatile received 315, 1858, and 2178 respectively. The spoiled ballots were 10. Between the two highest candidates the difference is 320 votes. If 10 votes were added to either of the two, there would not be any difference. The Chairperson position was also contested by three (3) candidates with Mantashe, Masondo, and Mathabatha receiving 2062, 280, and 2018 respectively. The spoiled ballot was one (1). One would not make any difference if added to anyone. When it came to the Secretary-General, there were three contestants as well with Masualle gaining 1590, Mbalula 1692, and Ntuli with 1080. If the seven (7) spoiled ballots were to be added to either of the three, the spoiled ballots would not make any difference. The position of the First Deputy Secretary-General was contested by two (2) candidates with Joemat-Pettersson receiving 2145 votes against 2195 for Mokonyane. Mokonyane beat Joemat-Pettersson by fifty (50) votes. It is clear that the five (5) spoiled ballots would not bring any difference if cast either way. Two candidates contested for the position of Second Deputy Secretary-General namely Nalumango and Maropene Ramokgopa who received 2373 against 1948 received by Nalumango. The two were separated by 425 votes suggesting that the seven (7) spoiled ballots would not bring any difference to the outcomes of the results. The last of the seven (7) positions was the Treasurer-General position contested by four (4) candidates. They were Chauke, Mabe, Masina, and Gwen Ramokgopa and they received 590, 1652, 281, and 1809 respectively. The two top candidates among the four (4), namely Mabe and Ramokgopa were separated by 157 votes. Twelve (12) ballots were spoiled. The twelve ballots would not help or anyone an opportunity to tip the scale differently. From the above, it could be deduced that spoiled ballots could not affect the outcomes of the 55th Nasrec elective conference convened in Gauteng in December 2022. The spoiled ballots for the top seven were narrow and as Van Gyampo (2009) found, only a high incidence of rejected ballots could affect the outcomes of the elections. Figure 2 below provides reasons for spoiling the ballot papers.

6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Figure 2: Perceptions of respondents on the reasons for not voting

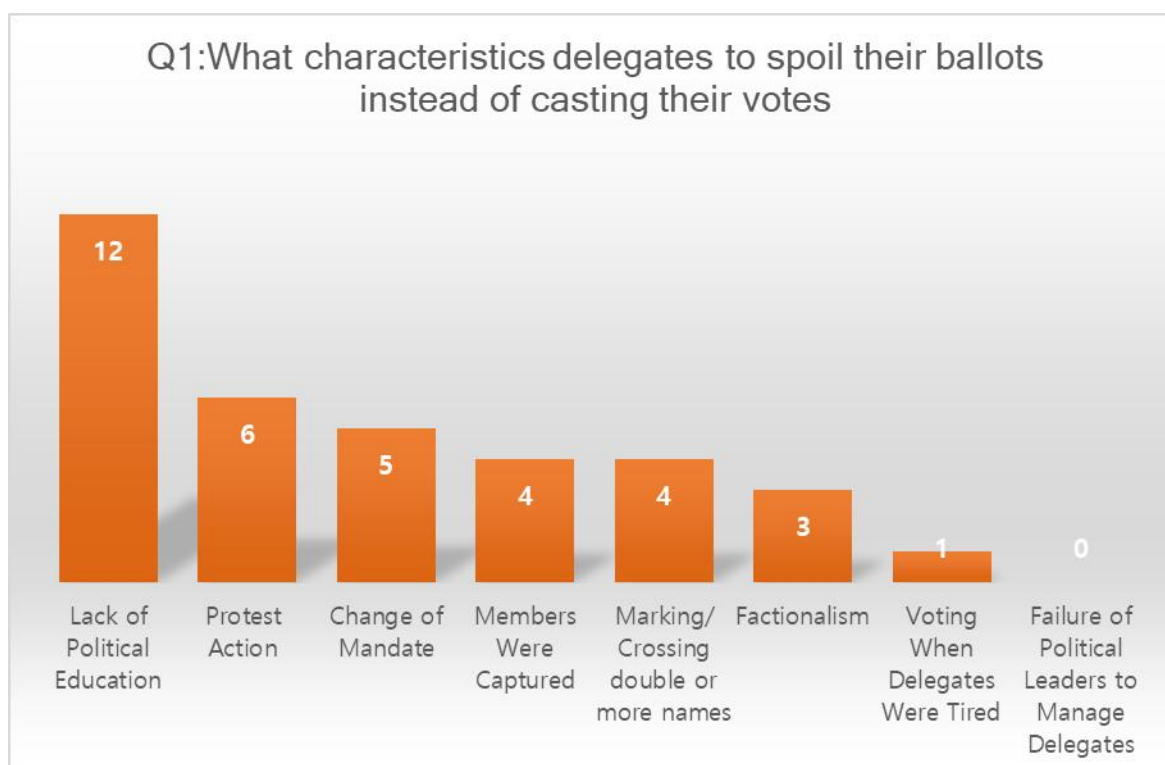


Figure 2 above discusses the perceptions of respondents for this study. In responding to this question, various perceptions were provided by the respondents. Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents twelve thought that the reason for spoiling ballots was a result of lack of education. In their study, Ahmad and Suryadi (2020:481) also came to a similar finding when they found that political education played a critical role in the regeneration pattern from the lowest level and training patterns namely cadre courses. Six of the respondents expressed that delegate spoiled their ballots as a protest action against the candidates on the ballot.

Similarly, Pierzgalski et al. (2019) in their study concluded that spoiled or invalid ballots were a reflection of political protest. News24 of the 2nd January 2023 also confirmed that protest action was shown by the members of the US Republican members who voted for candidates who were not on the ballot instead of voting for McCarthy to take the Speaker’s position in the US Congress. In their study, “Educating the “Good” Citizen: Political Choices and Pedagogical Goals” Westheimer and Kahne (2004) postulated that education is about the instilling of the functioning of a democratic system of government to allow them to analyse processes in political, economic and other institutions. This suggested that political education empowers cadres to become independent, to show signs that they could no longer confine themselves only to those candidates on the ballots. As perceived by five respondents, the change of branch mandate confused them to the extent that they decided against any candidates but to deprive candidates of their votes by instead making independent decisions of not being channeled (Westheimer and Kahne (2004). The African National Congress requires its members to be bound by democratic centralism principles which party members should abide by, and it becomes difficult to openly defy such hence four delegates equated such abiding by capturing and the only way was to spoil their ballots since voting was in secret. Their defiance, in this case, was by carelessly crossing several candidates at the same time to make it difficult to see the benefitting candidates as four respondents perceived which is consistent with Herbert and Edwards (2007) who considered “rejected ballot” as those ballots that could not be counted for one or more of a range of reasons. Similarly, Driscoll and Nelson (2014) found that in Bolivia, 60% of voters returned blank or spoiled ballots. Members of the society are not heterogeneous, and they cannot think the same way hence, party policies seek to confine members to one direction. As a response and democratic thinking of individual choices, some members or delegates feel that factionalism as three respondents expressed also contributed to the spoiling of ballots. They feel that quality candidates are excluded particularly if they are neutral and not belonging to groups. By their nature, and particularly where voting is still manual, delegates stand in long queues having travelled long hours to cast their votes and could no longer apply their mind properly as one respondent expressed. While this single perception might seem less important, it is instead important to the changing patterns of voting. The act of spoiling the ballot is considered a way of expressing and deepening democracy as Dahl (1971, p.3) argued. Figure 3 below presents a framework to mitigate the future spoiling of ballot papers for the top seven candidates.

Figure 3: Perceptions of respondents on mitigating spoiled ballots in the future.

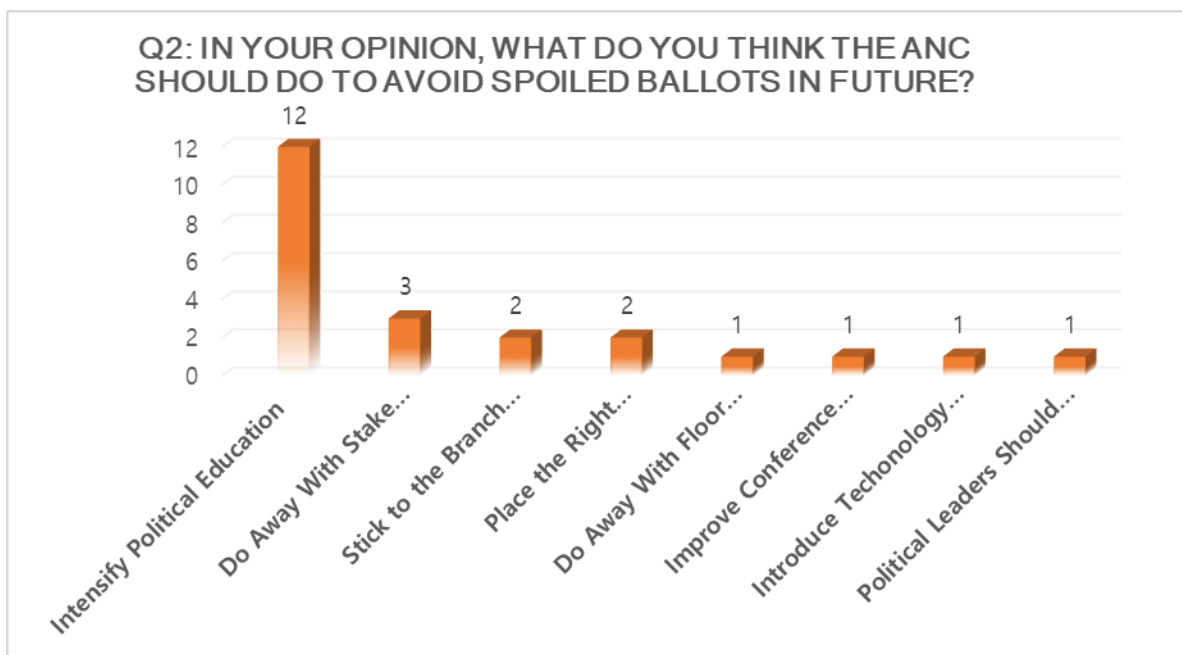


Figure 3 above shows that the majority of twelve of the respondents indicated that to mitigate this in future, there was a need for intensification of political education among the party members. The importance of political education was also confirmed by Ahmad and Suryadi (2020, p.481) who found that it played an important part in

the development of cadres. This is similar to the finding of the study by Nordvall and Pastuhov (2020) which found that in Sweden, political party-political popular education activities were central to representative democracy. This suggests that delegates at conferences do not represent themselves but those who elected them to represent them. The second majority of three respondents indicated that the party should do away with slate politics.

The second majority of respondents three expressed that the party should do away with slate politics where delegates go to the conferences with written agreed names of candidates for specific positions. The other two respondents thought that delegates should stick to their branch mandates instead of sticking to the names of candidates that the branches agreed upon. The other two respondents indicated that the party should place the right candidates. During the voting for the US Speaker, Republican Dan Bishop had issued a statement accusing McCarthy of not being the right candidate for the Speaker hence it took fifteen attempts for his party members to back him for the position (Watson, Kaplan, Linton 2023). This was not unique to the US as in Germany (Stiefbold 1965), and France (Rosenthal and Sen 1973), voters use a spoiled ballot to register their protest with the political system, or with the lack of political alternatives. The minority respondents one indicated that the party should do away with floor nominations, improve conference planning, and introduce technology to replace manual voting and that political leaders should manage their delegates at the conference since delegates were segmented into small categories from branches they come from.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This was a qualitative study that was based on a literature review and KII. The scope of this study was forty-six spoiled ballots on the top seven positions of the ANC. This study found that spoiled ballots could only affect the outcomes of the conference elections if there are high incidences of them. If the gap is narrow among the candidates, they can certainly affect the outcomes but in the case of the top seven candidates the gaps were wider hence the spoiled ballots were meaningless. The study found that a lack of political education among the party delegates largely led to the incidence of spoiled ballots. The study also found that the changing of mandate from branches also contributed to the spoiling of ballots which is related to protesting since delegates equated this with factionalism which excluded some candidates from running thus compromising quality candidates with mediocre ones. This study made an observation which showed that while political education was largely identified as the contributor to the spoiling of the ballots by the party delegates, it also revealed that some delegates had shown a level of maturity when they realised that they should not only blindly follow the dictates of the party for choosing candidates but upholding democratic principles of exercising their right by not taking their votes for granted. To them, the best strategy was not to benefit anyone by their votes. The recommendations of this study are as follows: the party should consider political education to enhance party members, the branch mandates should be respected and upheld to stop confusing delegates at conferences, factionalism in the party should be undermined and uprooted to foster unity of purpose in the party and lastly, the party must research on the possibility of online voting to move with the digital time. A large scientific study of the spoiling of ballots within political parties should be conducted to obtain broader perceptions.

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