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IRR POLLING 2026:

THE POLITICAL STATE OF PLAY – SA'S WOMEN VOTERS 2021-2026



HERMANN PRETORIUS

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Executive summary

Polling by the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR) from 2021 to 2026 shows that women remain consistently more likely than men to support the ANC, even as female support for the party has fallen sharply. In the IRR's 2026 polling, the ANC led the DA by 11 points among women (37% to 26%) but by only 1 point among men (27% to 26%). Race, township residence, welfare preference, and current satisfaction considerations do not adequately explain this observable gender difference. The clearest pattern with the most credible explanatory scope in the polling is greater female economic exposure and greater political weight placed on household security.

Note: For ease of reading, most numbers, with only a handful of deliberate exceptions, in the text of this report are presented without any decimal points. For visualisations and presentation of data, such as graphs and tables, numbers are provided to the first decimal.

Key findings

- 1. Women voters are keeping the ANC ahead of the DA.** In 2026 the ANC led the DA by roughly 11 points among women, but by only 1 point among men. The ANC's advantage among women voters is observable across all years considered in this report.
- 2. Yet, over the last few years, women have left the ANC almost as fast as men.** Female ANC support fell by roughly 18 points between 2021 and 2026, from 55% to 37%, almost the same decline as among men, from 44% to 27%.
- 3. Unlike the ANC, the DA gets the same levels of support from women and men.** In 2026 DA support was 26% among both women and men.
- 4. As of 2026, despite some fluctuations across the span of the data, the remaining major parties, the MK, EFF, and the IFP, all show slightly larger support from men than women.** 11% of men express support for the EFF compared to 10% of women. 13% of men express support for MK compared to 9% of women. 9% of men express support for the IFP compared to 5% of women.
- 5. Household-security related issue priorities offer the clearest explanation in the polling for the ANC's persistent advantage among women.** In 2025, 25% of women named abuse of women or children among their two top priorities, compared with only 8% of men; housing was 15% among women and 3% among men. Across the six-year series, this broader cluster of household-security issues consistently carries more weight among women than men, and more weight among ANC voters than DA voters.
- 6. Economic insecurity is more common among women voters.** In 2026, 80% of women who reported their household income lived on less than R8,000 a month, compared with 70% of men.
- 7. Women overwhelmingly want a government focused on job creation over welfare dependency.** In 2026, 82% of women said government should focus more on creating jobs than on social grants.

Introduction

This report is the second instalment in the IRR's 2026 opinion-survey research on South Africa's political and social condition. The first report examined race and race relations. This report turns to women as voters, using the IRR's March 2026 polling together with comparable polling from 2021 to 2025 to examine how the female vote has changed, how women seem to differ politically from men, and what may explain those differences as well as the political consequences.

The central purpose of this report, therefore, is to examine women as an identifiable electoral constituency in South Africa. It does so through an analysis of party support by gender, changes in female expressed political support since 2021, the economic position of women voters, the issues they prioritise, and their attitudes towards jobs, grants, taxation, economic opportunity, and government performance. These findings are then contextualised by the wider survey collection, particularly where those wider results help explain why the ANC continues to perform better among women than men, and what the female vote may mean for South African party competition ahead of the 2026 local elections. The purpose is not simply to document a gender gap. It is also to test competing explanations for it.

No repeated cross-sectional survey can by itself identify the private reasoning of individual voters. This report therefore distinguishes between what the IRR polling directly observes, what can be reconstructed exactly from published survey margins, and what is an interpretation consistent with several observed patterns. That distinction is particularly important when considering political memory, the 2025 VAT dispute and its political effects, and what might persuade women who still support the ANC to choose another party.

Objectives

This report seeks to answer several questions related to the female vote in South Africa. These include:

- How has party support among women changed from 2021 to 2026?
- How does the female vote differ from the male vote, and which party benefits most consistently from that difference?
- Is the ANC's female advantage stable, or does it expand and contract with the political environment?
- Can the advantage be explained by race, age, residence, turnout, current satisfaction, or a stronger female preference for welfare?
- Are women more economically exposed than men in ways that may change the political value of housing, health care, services and other forms of household security?
- Do women place greater weight on household-security issues such as housing, abuse of women and children, health care and service delivery?
- Do those issues also appear more strongly among ANC voters than DA voters?
- What does the 2024-2025 shift in the ANC-DA balance, during the VAT and Budget dispute, reveal about the different political priorities of male and female voters?
- Does the ANC's remaining advantage appear to contain an element of inherited political trust or credit associated with the post-1994 social floor?
- What can the polling legitimately say about the contestability of the female vote, and what remains beyond the evidence?

Methodology*

This report draws on six IRR national polling waves conducted from 2021 to 2026. All surveys covered registered voters. The 2026 fieldwork was conducted from 9 to 20 March 2026 and had a sample of 1,038 respondents. The earlier samples were 633 in 2021, 607 in 2022, 604 in 2023, 604 in 2024, and 807 in 2025. The surveys are repeated cross-sections rather than a panel and therefore do not follow the same individuals over time.

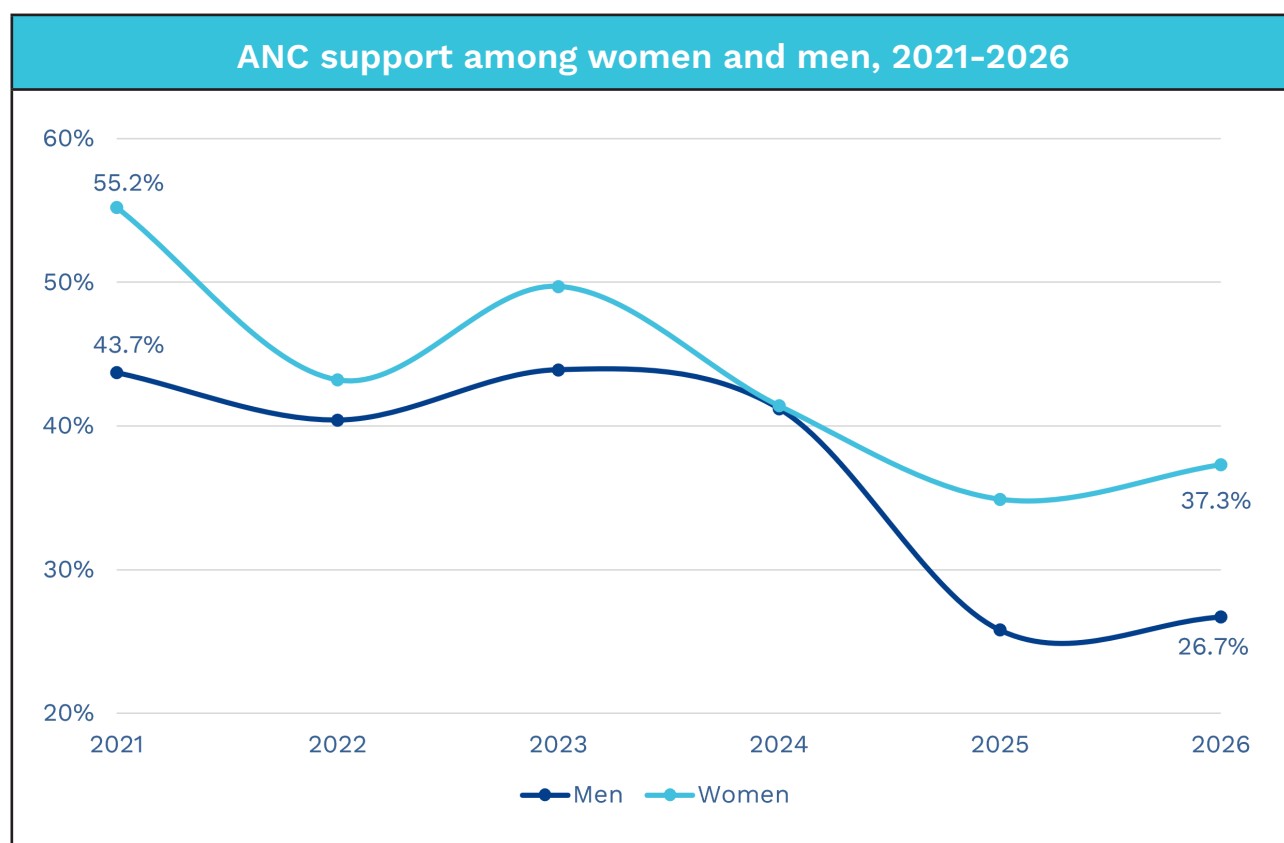
The analysis relies most heavily on repeated directional patterns, large within-wave differences, and findings that survive alternative explanations. Question wording and priority coding also change between some waves, which means comparisons are made only where the underlying measure is sufficiently similar, and some issue results are used as within-wave contrasts rather than as continuous trend lines.

**For further methodological and interpretive notes, see Addendum A.*

Analysis and findings

The gender gap: a persistent but politically elastic ANC advantage

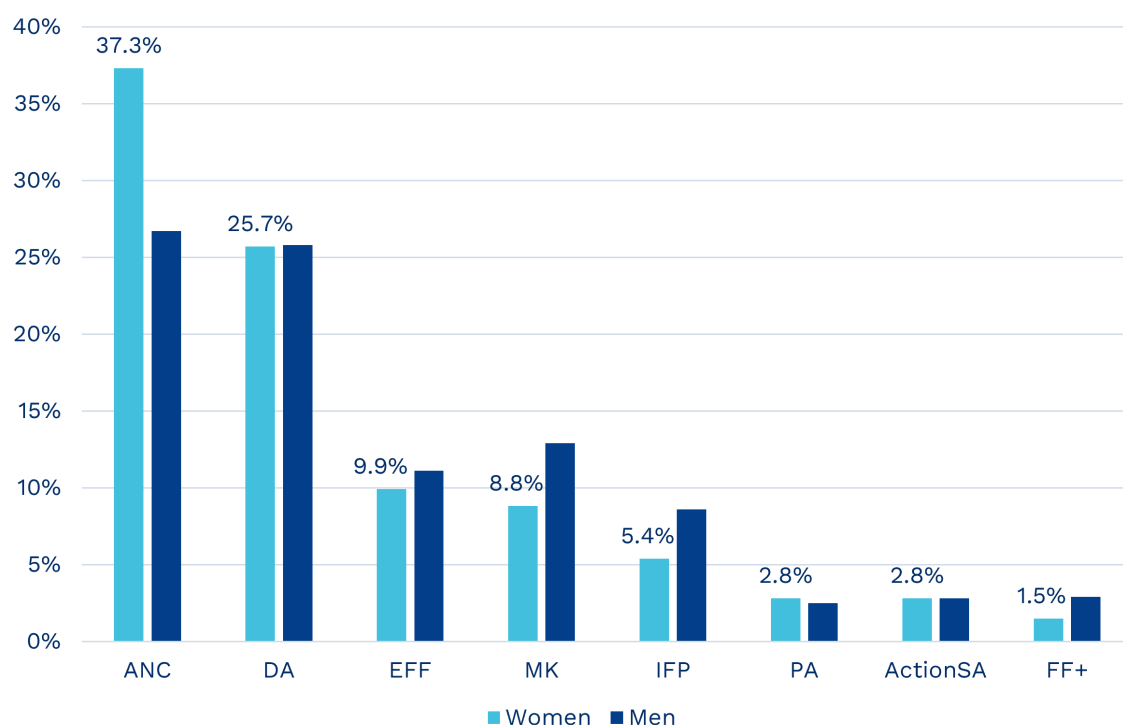
The clearest starting point to understand the situation of the women voter in South Africa in 2026 is the matter of party-support itself. In every IRR poll from 2021 to 2026, the ANC performs better among women than men. The size of the gap changes, but its direction does not. In 2021, ANC support stood at 55% among women and 44% among men. In 2022 it was 43% against 40%. In 2023 it was 50% against 44%. In 2024 the gap almost disappeared, at 41.4% among women and 41.2% among men, before widening again to 35% against 26% in 2025 and 37% against 27% in 2026.



The female-minus-male ANC advantage was therefore roughly 11 points in 2021, 3 in 2022, 6 in 2023, 0.2 in 2024, 9 in 2025, and again 11 in 2026. This is important for two reasons. First, the largest gender group of ANC voters never changes. In every survey, the ANC is at least marginally stronger among women than among men. Second, the magnitude changes dramatically. A female ANC advantage is therefore persistent, but it is not a fixed sociological constant. It can almost disappear and then re-open within a year.

No other major party displays the same repeated female advantage. The DA varies from slightly more female in some years to considerably more male in others, yet as of 2026, its support is effectively identical across gender. The EFF, IFP, and MK also change direction over time. The enduring gender feature of the South African party system is therefore not a general tendency for women and men always to choose different parties. It is more specifically the ANC's greater strength among women.

Party support by gender, 2026



The long-run movement is equally important. Women have not been insulated from ANC decline. Female support for the party falls from 55% in 2021 to 37% in 2026, a decline of 18 points. Among men it falls from 44% to 27%, a decline over the same period of 17 points. Women have therefore moved away from the ANC almost as quickly as men. The persistence of the female advantage therefore reflects a higher remaining floor, not an avoidance of female disillusionment.

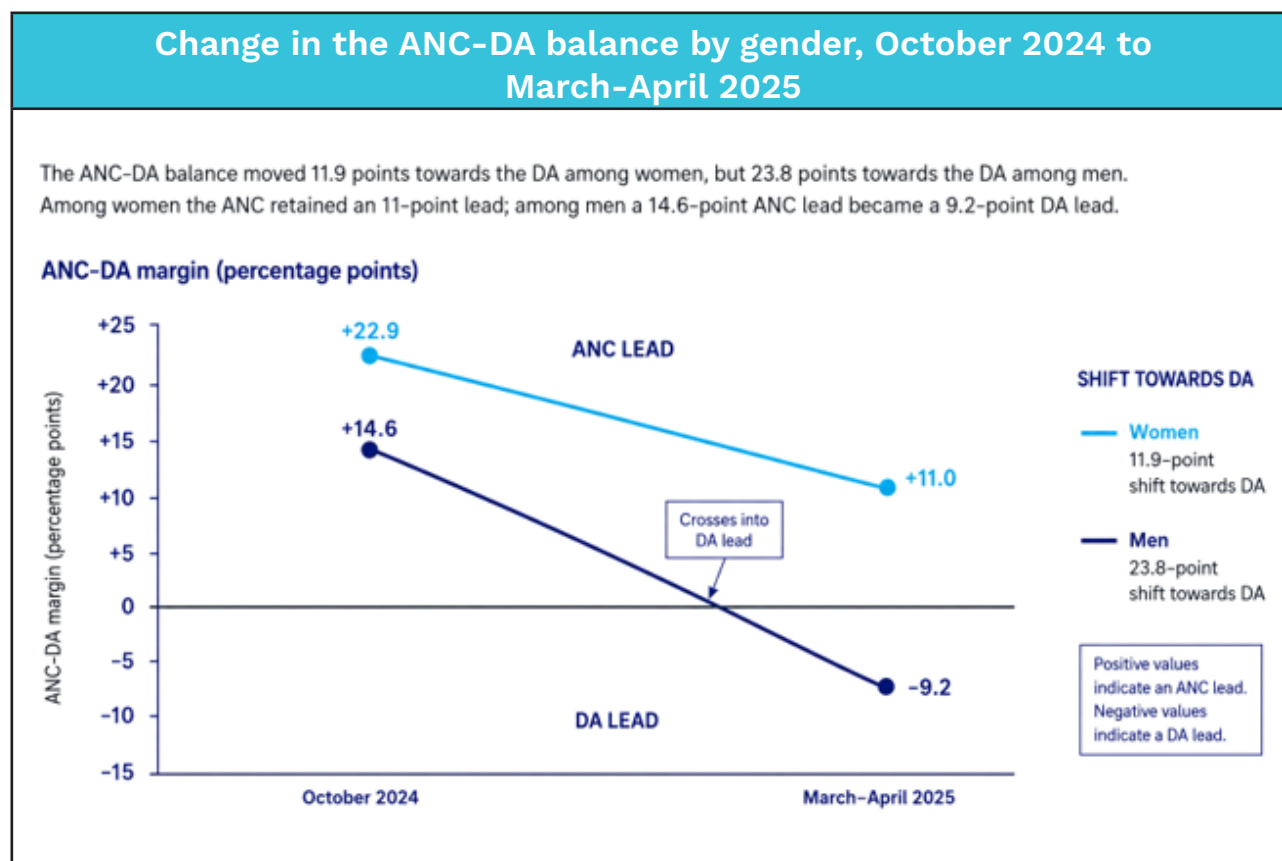
By 2026 the gender difference has become decisive in the ANC-DA contest for the position of largest national party. The ANC leads the DA by roughly 11 points among women, at 37% against 26%, but by only 1 point among men, at 27% against 26%. So, on the published weighted gender shares, roughly 94% of the national ANC-DA margin in the 2026 poll is generated by the larger ANC advantage among women. The calculation is sensitive to rounding, but the substantive point is not: without its female advantage, the ANC and DA would be essentially level going into the November 2026 Local Government Elections.

The 2025 30%-30% tie: one national result, two different electorates

In 2025, the IRR's polling, for the first time, showed a DA lead over the ANC. This lead was razor-thin and well within the survey's margin of error. Nationally the DA stood at 30.3% and the ANC at 29.7%, producing a statistical dead heat of both parties at about 30%. Beneath that result, however, were two very different gendered contests. The 2025 data provide perhaps the clearest illustration in the six-year series of how differently male and female voters can react inside the same political moment. Among women the ANC still led 35% to the DA's 24%. Yet, among men the position was reversed: the DA led 35% to the ANC's 26%. The national tie was therefore not produced by women and men converging on the same political choice, but by a momentary strong DA advantage among men being offset by a continuing ANC advantage among women.

The scale of the divergence becomes clearer when the IRR's March-April 2025 poll, taken at the sensitive moment of the national VAT debate, is compared with the IRR's October 2024 polling. Among men, between October 2024 and March-April 2025, ANC support fell from 41% to 26%, a decline of 15 points, while DA support among men rose from 27% to 35%, an increase of 8 points. The ANC's 15-point lead over the DA among men in 2024 therefore became a 9-point DA lead in 2025: an almost 24-point movement among male voters from the ANC to the DA.

Notably, over the same six-month period, women also moved towards the DA, but by about half as much. ANC support among women fell from 41% to 35%, while DA support rose from 19% to 24%. The ANC's lead among women narrowed from about 23 points to 11 points, a movement of 12 points towards the DA.



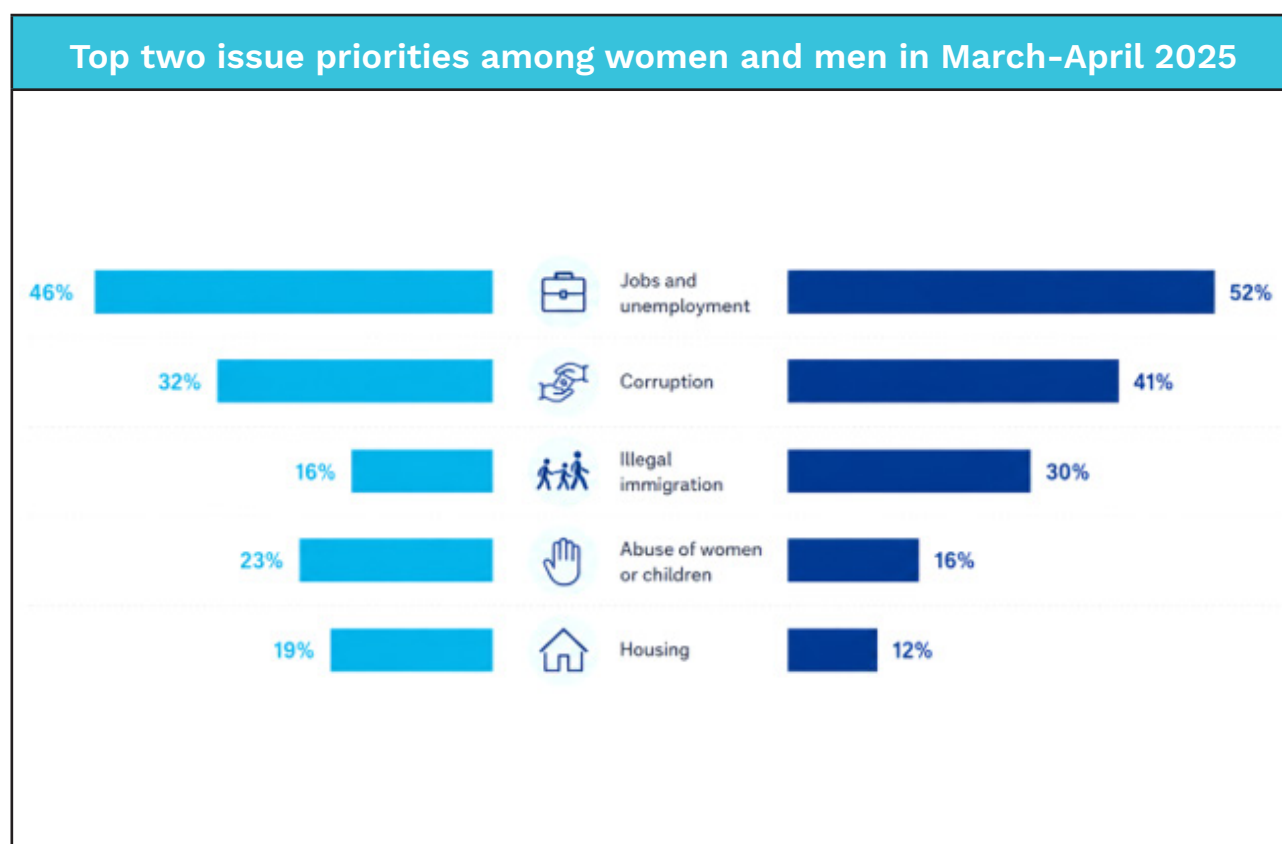
As the IRR noted at the time, the parity between the DA and the ANC under the unique circumstances of the VAT debate was, and proved to be, no new settled reality of the political landscape. Yet, the timing of capturing that moment in a scientific polling survey makes the ANC-to-DA swing from late 2024 to early 2025 particularly valuable in terms of understanding how issue priorities might differ for men and women.

The IRR's 2025 fieldwork ran from 27 March to 3 April, at the height of the national dispute over the Budget and the proposed increase in VAT. The revised Budget tabled on 12 March proposed raising VAT by half a percentage point in 2025/26 and by another half point the following year. The Finance Minister, Enoch Godongwana of the ANC, and the overall National Treasury justified the measure in part by the need to fund obligations in health, education, transport, and security, and to protect the wider social wage.

The DA made opposition to the VAT increase one of the defining disputes inside the first year of the Government of National Unity (GNU), while the EFF and MK also rejected the increase. The National Assembly approved the fiscal framework on 2 April, during the final days of the IRR's survey fieldwork. It merits noting that the VAT increase was later withdrawn and the 2 April framework resolutions were set aside.

The national party movement of support at this time was striking. The parties most publicly arguing in favour of the VAT increase, the ANC, IFP, and PA, saw their support decline. At the same time, the parties most publicly opposing the VAT increase, the DA, MK, and EFF, saw their support rise. The reason it is credible to associate the changes in party support in early 2025 from late 2024 almost exclusively with the VAT debate is that the parties opposing the increase are so distinct in terms of socio-economic and demographic makeup. Incredibly few issues unite DA, MK, and EFF voters, so the analytically reasonable inference to draw is that the most notable point of agreement or convergence between these voters is likely the explanatory factor. In this context, the VAT issue and where the DA, MK, and EFF found themselves in the public debate is that factor.

What makes the likely VAT-linked DA-ANC convergence more revealing in terms of understanding how it was differently received by women and men, is the issue-priority profile recorded in the same 2025 poll. Men were much more likely than women to name corruption among their two leading priorities, at 21% against 9%, and were somewhat more likely to prioritise unemployment and jobs, at 61% against 55%, and illegal immigration, at 20% against 16%. Women, by contrast, were more than three times as likely to name abuse of women or children, at 25% against 8%, and roughly five times as likely to name housing, at 15% against 3%.



Now, this cannot establish that men reacted to the politics of the VAT debate while women did not. VAT itself, after all, affects household budgets, and women were plainly not indifferent to economic questions. The stronger conclusion is that the same highly salient national confrontation occurred inside two electorates placing markedly different weight on different political issues, and that their electoral movement was correspondingly different. The claim cannot be that women do not care about VAT as much as men. For such a brazen finding, there is simply lacking evidence. A range of factors could explain why the two genders reacted differently within the same political context. It could be a matter of style, that the aggression with which the DA sought to prosecute its case publicly appealed more to men than women. It could be a matter of political consideration, that men reach political conclusions more rapidly and perhaps uncritically than women do.

Yet, what is clear is that the 2025 ANC-DA parity demonstrates how a national topline can conceal different political processes underneath it. It also provides a warning against treating the gender gap as a static demographic fact. The gap can change sharply when the issue environment changes, but men and women do not necessarily move at the same speed or towards the same party for the same reason. Whatever the case may be, it is from the data difficult to avoid the conclusion that the decisions and priorities of female voters are central to understanding the current and future balance of political power between the ANC and DA.

In 2026 the DA is not comparatively weaker among women than men, yet the ANC is substantially stronger among women than the party is among men. What arises in terms of electoral strategy is therefore not simplistically that women reject the DA – more than a quarter of women do not. What arises is rather that the ANC retains the support of more women while men political disperse more obviously across the major parties. At the same time, the near-disappearance of the ANC gender gap in 2024 and the different movements in 2025 show that the female advantage is politically elastic. And as almost two-thirds of women do not or no longer support the ANC, the relevant question is not whether women can leave the ANC – they already have in large numbers. The question is more about why the ANC retains a larger residual share among women than among men, and why that residual advantage survives some political shocks more strongly than others.

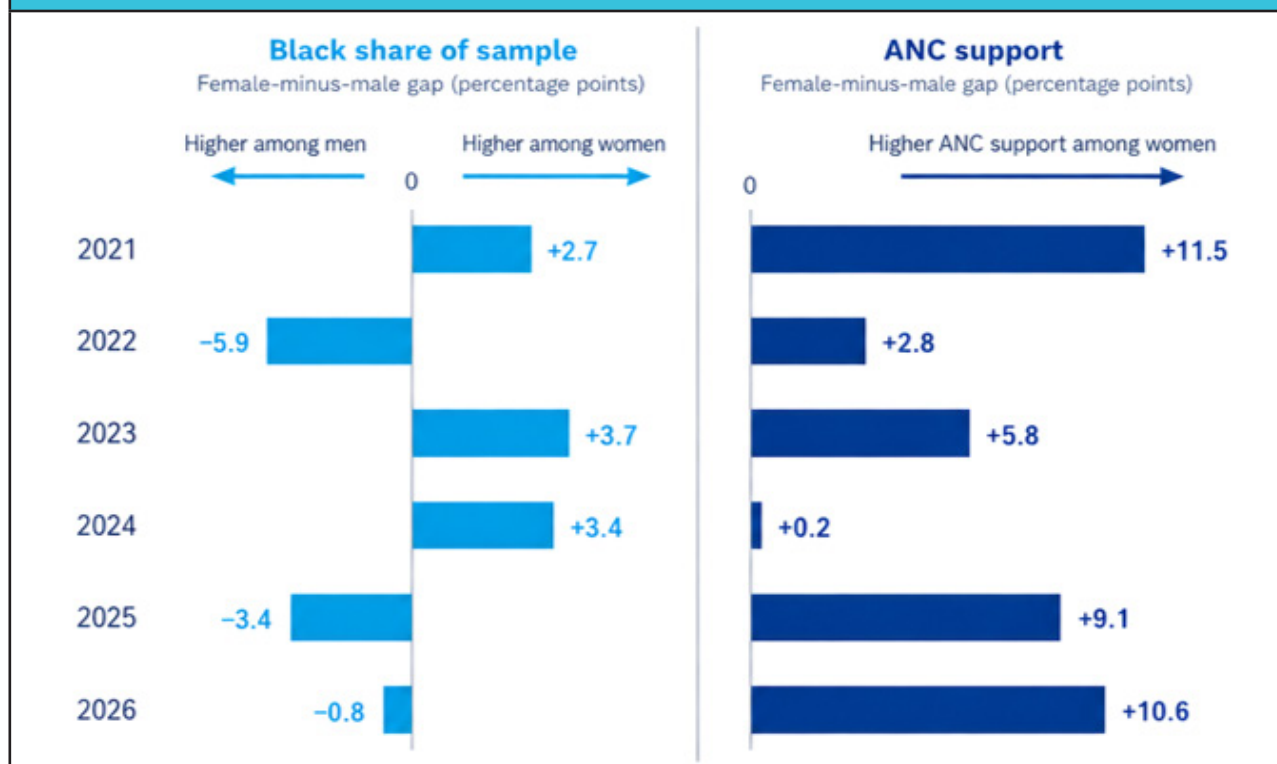
Testing the obvious explanations

A persistent gender gap like this invites several simple explanations. Women might be judged more ANC-supporting because the female electorate is skewed racially, more township-based, more likely to vote, more satisfied with present conditions, or simply more favourable to welfare and state intervention. The six-year compilation of IRR polling data makes it possible to test some of these explanations against changes over time. Notably, none of them adequately accounts for the pattern on its own.

Race, residence, and survey composition

Race is an obvious place to test because party support in South Africa remains strongly associated with racial identity. Here, the racial composition of the IRR's polling surveys from 2021 to 2026 becomes necessary to consider. But the racial composition of the male and female survey samples does not explain why the ANC consistently performs better among women.

Racial survey composition and the ANC gender gap



As shown above, the racial composition of female and male participants in IRR polling changes from year to year – and not in line with a persistent ANC female advantage. In 2021, prior to weighting for representativity, black respondents made up 77% of women and 75% of men in the sample. In 2022, the position reversed when 74% of women were black compared with 80% of men. In 2023 and 2024, the black survey sample was again somewhat higher among women. In 2025 and 2026, it was somewhat higher among men. Yet through all of these changes, ANC support remained higher among women than among men. This is a strong indication that the ANC's female advantage is not some sort of sample or survey bias, pollution of artefact.

The period from 2024 to 2026 makes the point especially clearly. In 2024, the black share of the female sample was more than 3 percentage points higher than that of the male sample, but the ANC's advantage among women was almost zero. In 2025, the black share was instead more than 3 points lower among women, yet the ANC's female advantage widened to 9 points. In 2026, the black shares of the male and female samples were almost identical, but the ANC still performed more than 10 points better among women. If differences in racial composition of samples were driving the gender gap in ANC support, these two patterns should move together reasonably consistently. They do not.

Township residence tells much the same story. In 2025, 27% of women in the survey sample lived in townships compared with 33% of men, even though ANC support was 9 points higher among women. In 2026, township residence was virtually identical among women and men, at 35%, while the ANC's female advantage remained above 10 points. The gender gap in ANC support therefore cannot be explained simply by women being more concentrated than men in racial or residential groups that tend to favour the ANC.

Race and place remain important to South African voting, but the evidence does not support the simplistic proposition that the ANC's female advantage is merely a demographic artefact in terms of race or residence. So too does age fail to provide a stable alternative explanation. Women were markedly older than men in the 2021 sample, slightly younger on the comparable 45-plus measure in 2022, older again in 2025, and only modestly older in 2026. Yet, the ANC female advantage persisted through those changes.

Welfare preference

A second possible explanation is ideological: perhaps women support the ANC because they are more favourable than men to grants, welfare and a larger role for the state. If that were true, we would expect the ANC's advantage among women to move broadly with a gender gap on those questions. The polling does not show that.

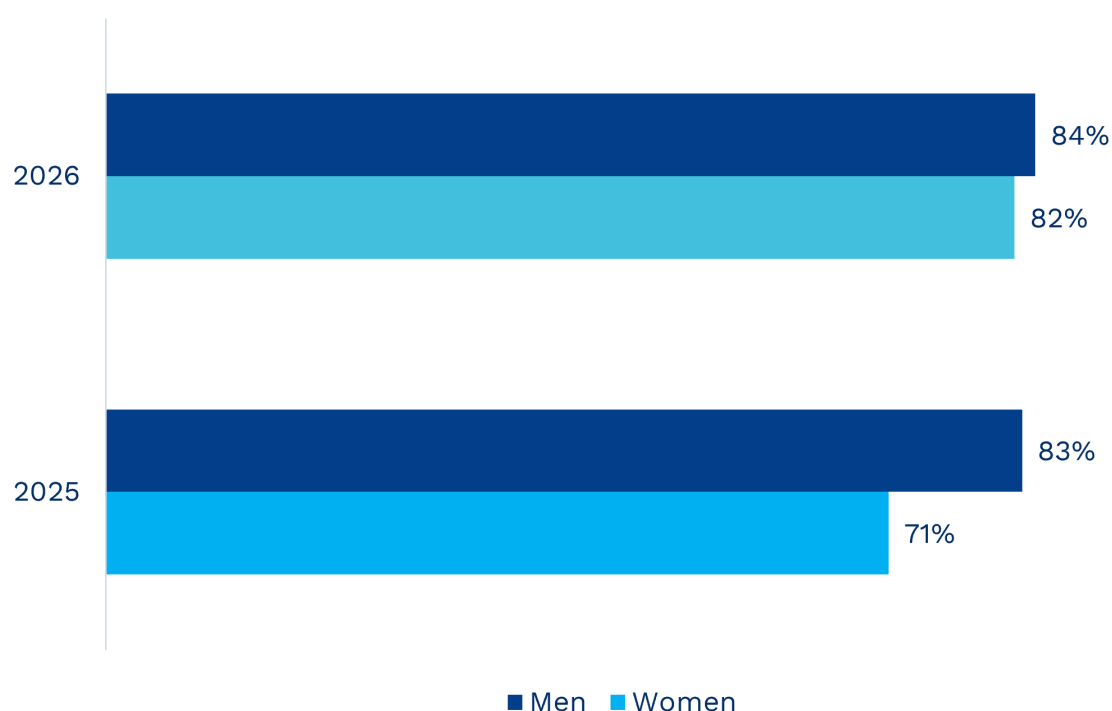
The clearest test is the choice between jobs and grants. In 2025, 71% of women preferred the job-creation option, compared with 83% of men. By 2026, support for jobs among women had risen to 82%, almost identical to the 84% figure among men. The gender gap on this question therefore collapsed from about 12 points to about 2 points. Yet over the same period the ANC's advantage among women did not shrink. It grew, from about 9 points to more than 10 points. If women's greater support for the ANC were mainly the result of a stronger preference for welfare, the two gaps should have moved together. Instead, the welfare-attitude gap almost disappeared while the ANC gender gap widened.

Earlier polling points in the same direction. In 2021, when respondents were asked what government should do to improve people's lives, 59% of women chose more jobs and better education, compared with 44% of men. Only 0.8% of women chose more BEE or affirmative action, while 5% chose more land reform. In 2022 women again placed more emphasis than men on jobs and education, and less on BEE and land reform. These are difficult results to square with the idea that female voters are simply more attracted to redistribution or state intervention.

The 2026 policy findings make the point even more clearly. Some 67% of women said government should stop using race categories for job and business opportunities, 85% wanted the added cost of BEE procurement measured and reported, 63% rated the value they received for their taxes as bad or very bad, and 57% favoured lowering the overall tax burden. Greater female support for the ANC therefore cannot simply be treated as an endorsement of the ANC's broader economic-policy programme.

Nor can the gender gap be explained simply by women making greater use of state services. In 2025, 70% of women said they or their family normally used a government clinic or hospital when sick, slightly below the 73% recorded among men. There was, however, a large difference by party: 83% of ANC voters used government health facilities compared with 54% of DA voters. Reliance on public provision is clearly more common among ANC voters, but women themselves were not more likely than men to report this particular form of reliance. That is important because it separates the household-security argument developed below from a much cruder claim that women support the ANC simply because they depend more heavily on the state.

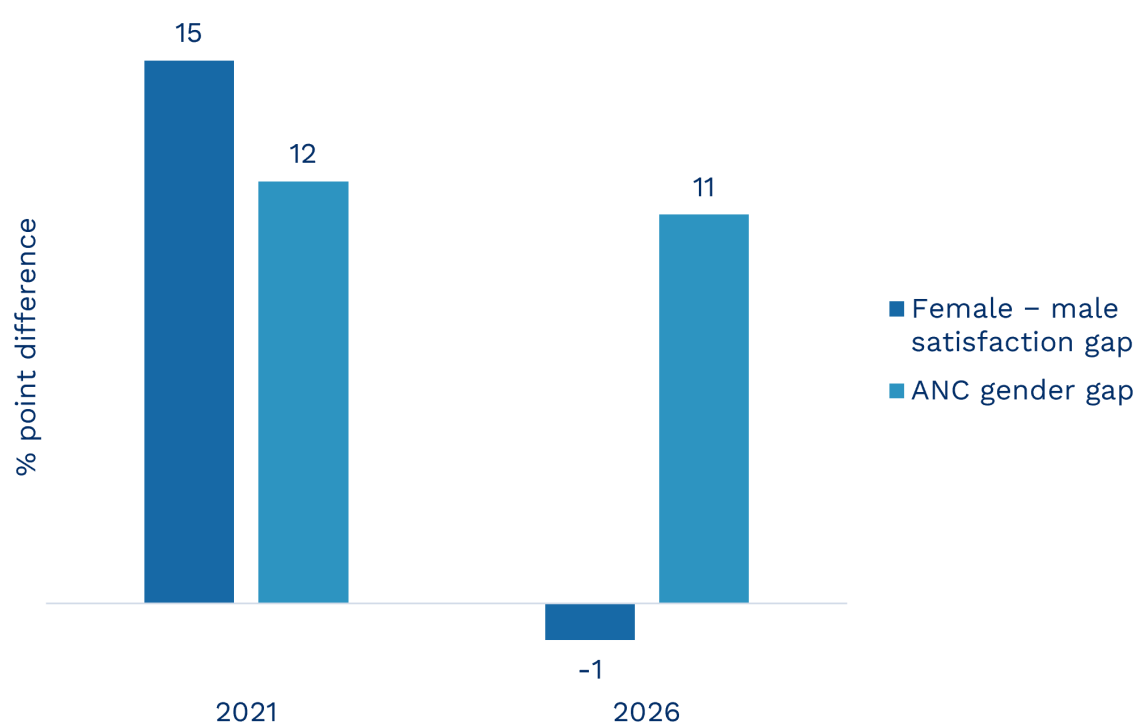
Women and economic policy, selected measures



Life satisfaction

Nor does present life satisfaction explain the persistence of the gender gap. In 2021, 25% of women said their lives were better than five years earlier, compared with only 11% of men. In 2022 the figures were 31% and 19%. At that stage, greater female ANC support coexisted with a more positive female assessment of recent life improvement.

Retrospective satisfaction and the ANC gender gap, 2021 and 2026



But, by 2025 that relationship had reversed. Only 17% of women said their lives were better than five years earlier, compared with 24% of men, yet the ANC still enjoyed a 9-point female advantage. In 2026 retrospective assessments of life presently compared to five years prior were almost identical, at 35% among women and 36% among men, while the ANC's female advantage widened to more than 10 points. The satisfaction gap changed direction, and yet the ANC gender gap did not.

Future optimism produces the same negative test. Women were less likely than men to say life would be better in five years in every comparable wave from 2022 onward. In 2025 only 30% of women expected life to improve, compared with 43% of men. Greater female ANC support therefore persists even when women are no more satisfied with the recent past and are less optimistic about the future.

What remains after the simple explanations fail

The value of these negative tests is that they narrow the explanatory field.

If race composition were sufficient, its movement should track the ANC gender gap. It does not. If welfare ideology were sufficient, a substantial female preference for grants should persist alongside the ANC gap. It does not. If current life satisfaction were sufficient, the ANC premium should weaken when female satisfaction falls below male satisfaction. It does not.

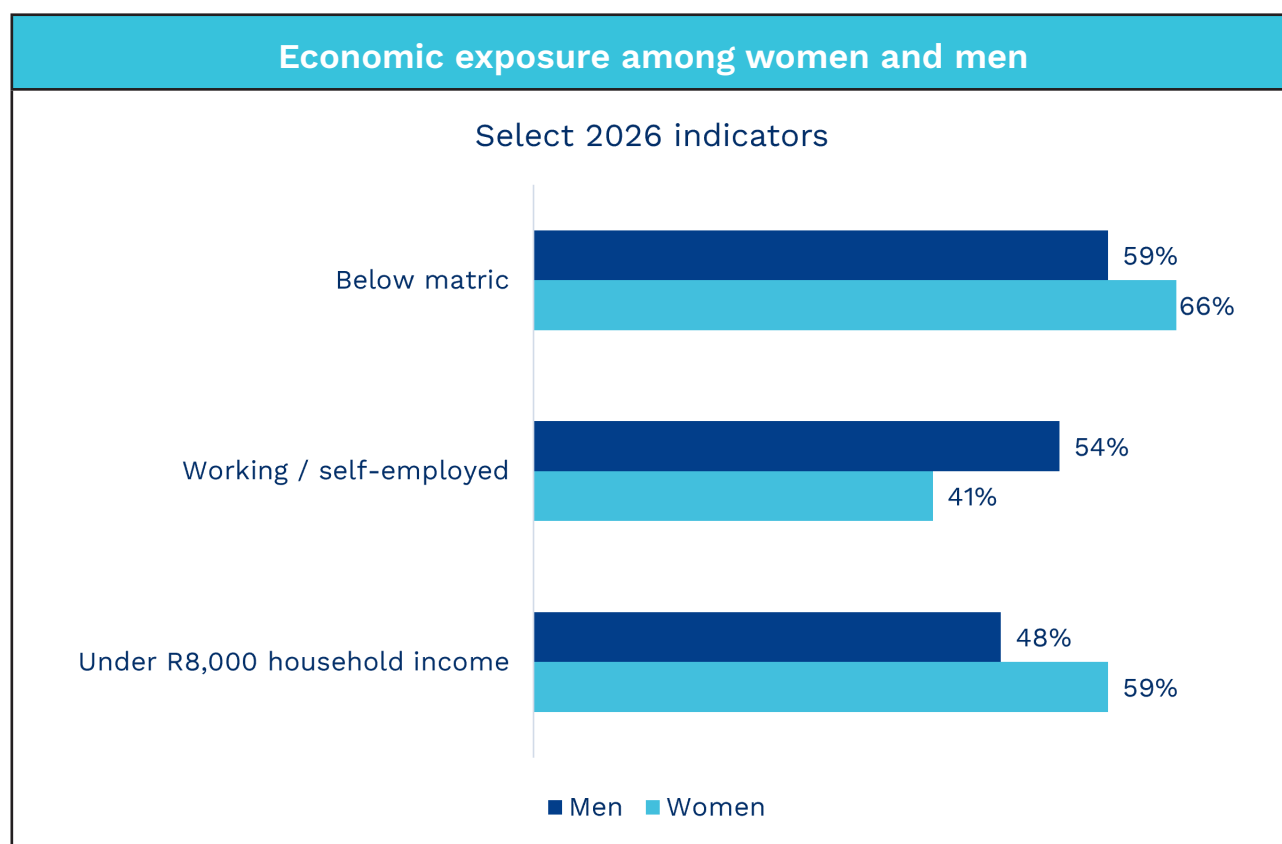
From the data, the most persistent difference that remains is economic exposure. In every directly comparable income wave considered in the data on which this report is based, women are more concentrated in lower-income households. Women are also generally less likely to be working or self-employed, and in recent years more likely to be looking for work. Education also tends to leave a larger female share below matric. These differences do not mechanically reproduce the size of the ANC gender gap, but unlike race and township composition, they repeatedly run in the same direction as the ANC's female advantage. As such, they provide the material setting in which household security becomes politically important to women voters more than men.

Economic exposure and household risk

The IRR's polling shows a consistent economic gap between women and men. In every directly comparable year, women were more likely to live in lower-income households. Among respondents who reported household income, 78% of women lived on less than R8,000 a month in 2021, compared with 59% of men. The gap remained in 2022, at 84% against 74%; in 2025, at 79% against 72%; and in 2026, at 80% against 70%. Women are therefore consistently more exposed to low household incomes.

The same broad pattern appears in employment. In 2021, 28% of women were working or self-employed, compared with 36% of men. In 2022 the figures were 27% and 35%, and in 2026 they were 28% and 36%. The gap narrowed sharply in 2025, when 36% of women and 37% of men were working or self-employed, but women were still more likely than men to report that they were looking for work in both 2025 and 2026.

Education points in the same direction. In every directly comparable wave, women were more likely than men to have less than a matric qualification: 62% against 45% in 2021, 57% against 54% in 2022, 57% against 46% in 2025, and 56% against 51% in 2026. Taken together, the income, employment and education data show a recurring pattern: women enter political and economic life with fewer private economic resources and weaker labour-market attachment than men.



National data describe much the same social setting. Statistics South Africa reported that in the second quarter of 2024 the labour-force participation rate was 56% among women and 66% among men, and specifically linked part of that gap to household duties, child-rearing and other responsibilities that limit women's labour-market opportunities. The 2022/23 Income and Expenditure Survey also found a large income gap between households headed by women and those headed by men: average annual household income was R158,481 in female-headed households, compared with R239,590 in male-headed households. Census 2022 found that household headship was close to evenly divided nationally, with women already heading the majority of households in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. The 2024 General Household Survey further found that 46% of children lived with only their mothers, far more than the share living only with fathers.

These figures are not part of the IRR polling and should not be combined statistically with it. Their value is that they describe the wider social environment in which the polling results sit. They support the same broad picture: women are more likely to make political choices with weaker private economic buffers and greater responsibility for the day-to-day security of households and dependants.

That does not mean economic vulnerability determines how women vote. It means that failure can carry a higher cost. When a household has fewer private resources, problems with housing, health care, electricity, water, municipal services or child protection are harder to absorb. Where women also carry greater responsibility for children and other dependants, these failures affect more than their own comfort. They threaten the functioning of the household itself. The important question is therefore not whether women value jobs and growth; the polling shows clearly that they do. It is whether reliable household security carries greater political weight when private alternatives are limited.

Housing is a particularly clear example because it is both a service and an asset. A home provides shelter and physical security, but also stability for children, protection from rent and, potentially, a family asset that can be passed on. The Department of Human Settlements reported in March 2024 that women made up 68% of approved First Home Finance subsidy recipients in the 2023/24 financial year, while government household data have also tended to show female-headed households somewhat more likely than male-headed households to receive housing subsidies. This does not establish any voting effect, but it does show why housing policy can have unusually direct importance in the material lives of women.

Implications

Economic exposure is not evidence that women prefer dependency. It is better understood as one reason why continuity and security, as conceivably offered by a long-incumbent party like the ANC, might carry greater political value while opportunity is pursued. A voter can strongly favour jobs, lower taxes, better education, and faster economic growth, while also attaching a high cost to the risk of losing a house, a clinic, a grant or a municipal service on which dependants rely.

This distinction is crucial to the rest of the report. The female electorate does not present a simple ideological choice between markets and welfare. The more useful issue is whether economic opportunity and household security are being evaluated together, and whether one party has accumulated greater credibility on the latter.

Household security: the clearest issue-level explanation

The issue data provide the clearest bridge between women's greater economic exposure and the ANC's remaining female advantage. The relevant pattern is narrower than a general claim that women are more fearful or more concerned about crime. Women repeatedly give greater weight to issues attached directly to the home, children, care, and basic household functioning.

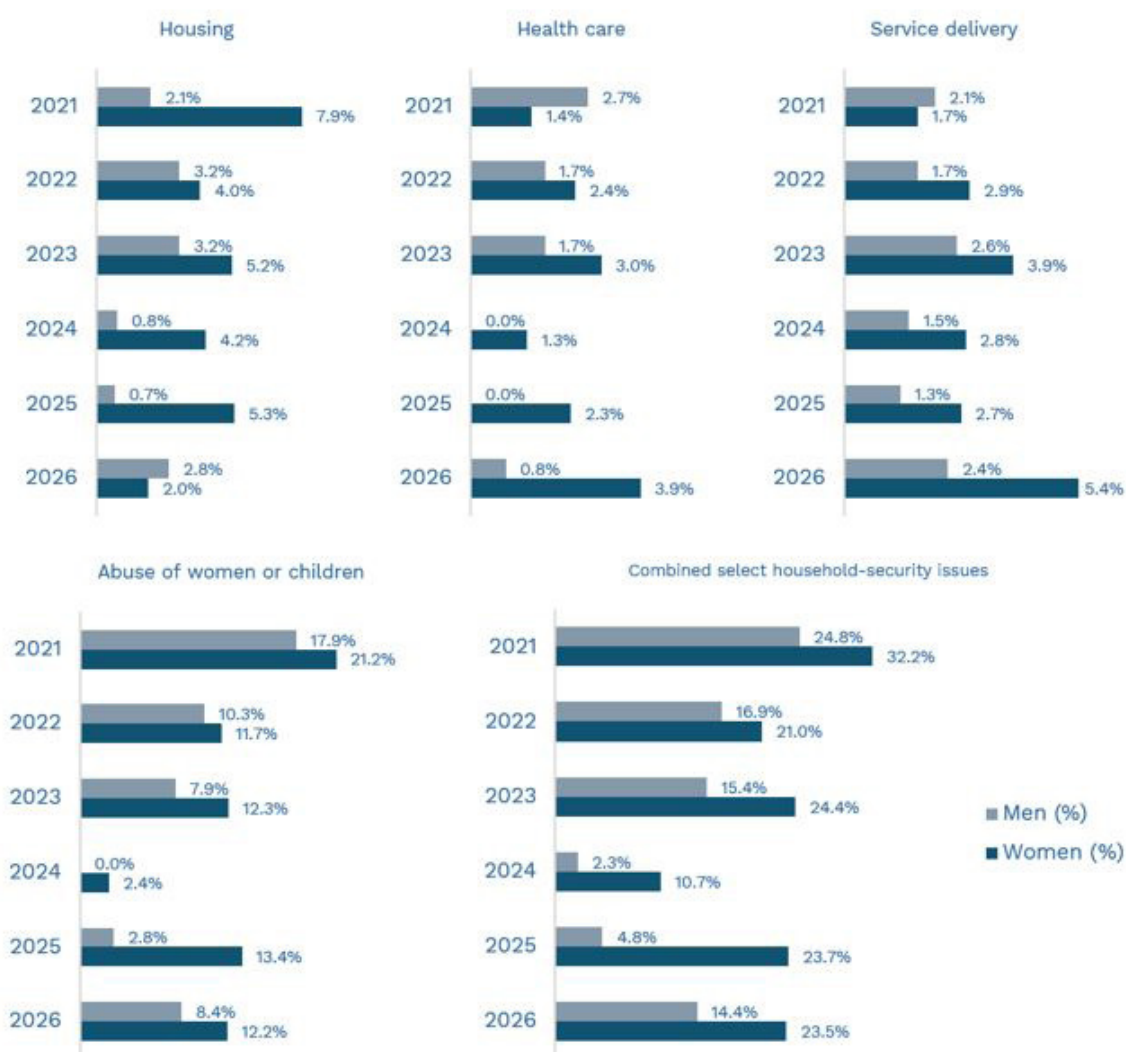
For analytical purposes, this report uses a narrow household-security grouping: housing, abuse of women or children, health care, and service delivery. It is not an original survey scale, and the priority questions are not perfectly identical across all six data sets. We look therefore not at a single reconstructed six-year index. Instead, we look first at the directly observed gender findings in each year, and asks whether the same directional pattern recurs.

In 2021, on the combined top-two priority measure, 49% of women mentioned abuse of women or children compared with 35% of men, 11% of women mentioned housing compared with 2% of men, and service delivery was also more prominent among women, at 8% against 3%.

Health care was roughly even. In 2022 the differences were smaller but the same directional pattern persisted across the four core items: women were more likely than men to opt as issue priorities for abuse of women or children, housing, health care, and service delivery.

The difference becomes striking in the 2025 data. Abuse of women or children was a top-two priority for 25% of women but only 8% of men. Housing was named by 15% of women and only 3% of men. By contrast, men were more likely to name corruption, illegal immigration and crime. In 2026, when the survey recorded a first priority rather than the same top-two format, women were again more likely to prioritise abuse of women or children, at 12% against 8, health care, at 4% against 1%, and service delivery, at 5% against 2%. Housing itself was no longer more female in that wave, at 2% among women against 3% among men.

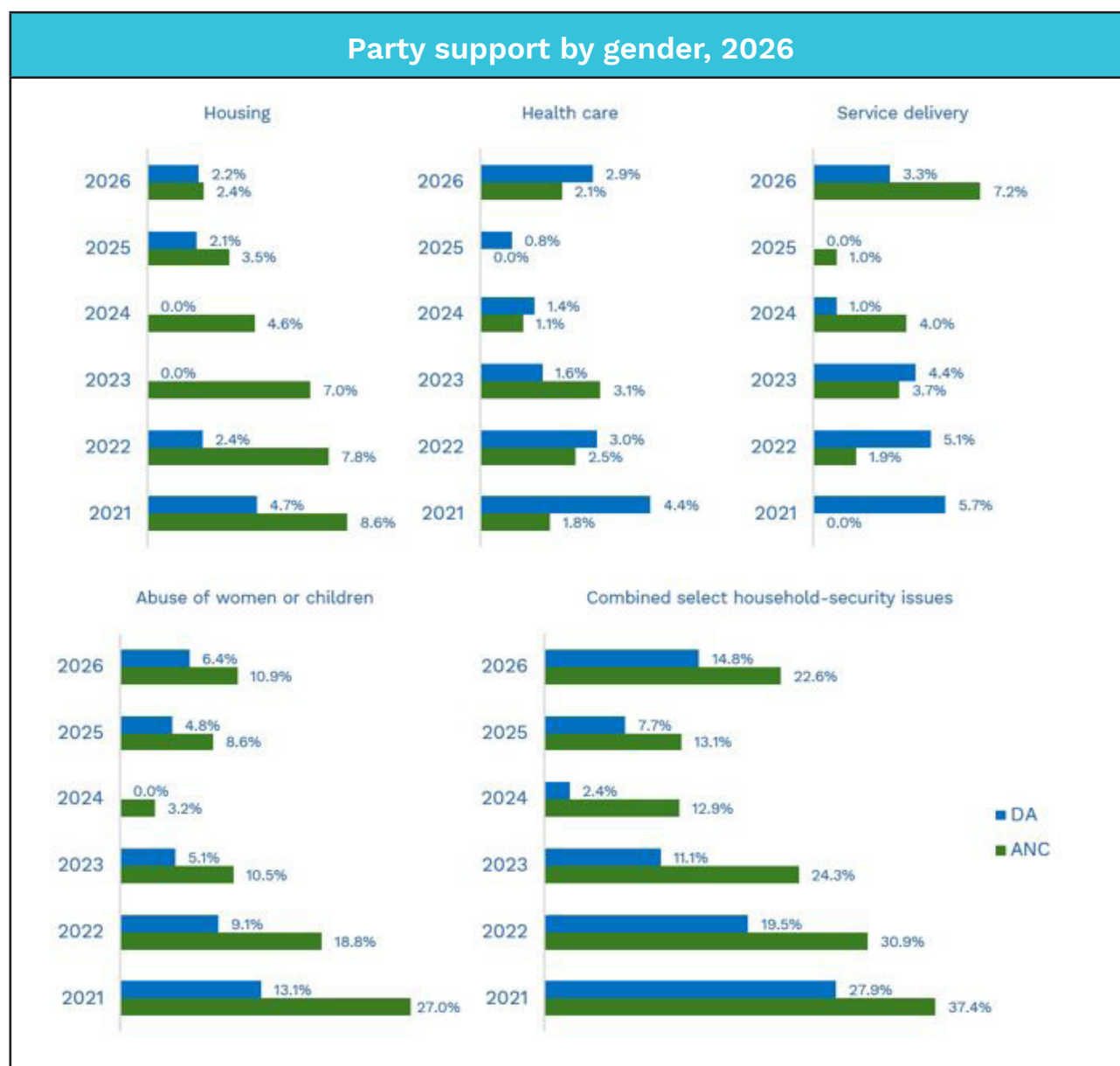
Issues identified as top priority by gender, 2021-2026



The variation in housing is useful because it shows why no single issue should be expected to explain the gender gap on its own. The more consistent pattern lies across a broader group of household-security concerns, especially the protection of women and children, health care and service delivery.

Crime provides a useful comparison. If women's greater concern were simply about feeling unsafe in general, crime should consistently rank higher among women than men. It does not. In 2025, 15% of women named crime or safety among their top two priorities, compared with 18% of men. In 2026 the figures were 9% and 10%. The difference therefore appears to be more specific than a general concern about crime. Women place greater weight on risks tied directly to the household, children, care and essential services.

The party data strengthen that interpretation. From 2023 onward, abuse of women or children was consistently more important to ANC voters than to DA voters: 11% against 5% in 2023, 3% against 0% in 2024, 9% against 5% in 2025, and 11% against 6% in 2026. Housing was also generally at least as important, and often more important, among ANC voters, while in 2026 service delivery was a first priority for 7% of ANC voters compared with 3% of DA voters. The significance is the overlap: the issues on which women tend to differ most clearly from men are also issues that tend to carry more weight among ANC voters than among DA voters.



The point here is not that women and ANC voters are identical constituencies. Nor does the data establish that an individual woman votes ANC because she prioritises housing or abuse of women and children.

The stronger and more defensible analytical claim is that the issues on which women most consistently differ from men, overlap with issues on which ANC voters repeatedly differ from, say, DA voters. This overlap remains after race composition, turnout, welfare preference, and current satisfaction have failed as sufficient explanations.

It is worthwhile here, perhaps to refer back to the earlier discussion of the 2025 VAT episode as means of practical illustration. In the same IRR polling data in which the male electorate shifted dramatically towards the DA during a national confrontation over tax, spending, and government performance, men placed considerably more weight on corruption and somewhat more on jobs and illegal immigration, while women placed far more weight on abuse of women and children and housing. The same national event therefore entered two different priority environments, producing two comparable but distinct results.

Implications

Household security therefore provides the clearest issue-level explanation in the polling for why the ANC continues to perform better among women than men. The data cannot prove that these concerns directly cause an individual woman to vote ANC, nor can they show exactly how much of the gender gap they explain. But this explanation fits the pattern more consistently than the simpler alternatives tested in the report.

The evidence also helps clarify what is driving the pattern. Women are not simply more fearful, more supportive of state intervention or more satisfied with government. They appear to place greater political weight on the security of the household and dependants, while still strongly wanting jobs and economic opportunity. The next question is why those priorities continue to benefit the ANC more than its political competitors.

The ANC and the political memory of the social floor

Economic exposure and household priorities can, therefore, explain why some issues carry greater weight, but they do not by themselves explain why the ANC should benefit from that difference.

The missing link remains political attribution: which party voters have been encouraged, over time, to associate with the provision of the basic household floor. On this point the historical evidence is crucial to our consideration. For three decades the ANC has repeatedly claimed political ownership of the expansion of housing, electricity, water, and other basic services, placing those gains inside its own account of what ANC government delivered and repeatedly presenting their continuation as a reason to vote for the party.

This claim reaches back to the ANC's first democratic-election programme. Its 1994 manifesto treated housing and basic services as central measures of what democracy should mean materially, declaring that decent housing was a "basic right for every human being" and promising that within five years a new government could "build one million homes", extend running water and sanitation to more than a million families, and electrify 2.5 million rural and urban homes.

The manifesto also placed water, electricity, schools, clinics and housing at the centre of its proposed public-works and rural-development programmes. At this stage the claim was prospective: the ANC was asking voters to entrust it with the construction of a post-apartheid household floor.

By the 2000 local-government election, the language had shifted decisively from promise to ownership of a record. The ANC told voters that “since 1994 we have delivered electricity and clean water to millions, built clinics, classrooms and houses”, while claiming one million new houses, electricity for 2.5 million houses and clean water for six million people. The electoral attribution was direct: having listed what had been achieved since 1994, the manifesto asked voters for a renewed ANC mandate so that this work could continue. It also promised free basic amounts of water and electricity for poor households and explicitly noted that improved access would reduce household labour that “usually falls on women and children”.

The same structure of argument survives into later party marketing and campaign literature.

The ANC’s 2009 national manifesto opened by telling voters that the “ANC led government has made much progress” in providing housing, water and electricity to millions of homes. Its accompanying review attributed to ANC policies the expansion of electricity access from 58% of the population in 1996 to 80%, running water from 62% to 88%, and the construction of more than three million subsidised houses. Whether every one of those figures should be accepted at face value is a separate empirical question. What matters for the purposes of this report is in terms of political attribution and that the party itself bundled these achievements together and explicitly labelled them products of ANC government.

The 2011 local-government manifesto reinforced the association in similarly concrete terms. Under the claim that “the face of communities has changed”, it credited ANC policies with more than 2.5 million houses for the poor, clean-water access for six million households since 1994, and electricity connections to nearly five million homes. The manifesto also presented free basic water and electricity as part of this record and described water, electricity and housing collectively as “basic needs”. By the time of the 2011 Local Government Elections, housing and household services had become part of the ANC’s recurring account of what democratic government under the party had physically changed in ordinary people’s lives.

This political vocabulary continued even after the first post-apartheid expansion of services. In 2019 the ANC manifesto prominently advertised more than three million free houses, electrification reaching 84% of South Africans, and clean-water access reaching 88.6%, while arguing that the lives of the majority had “vastly improved”. In 2021 the party again made the attribution explicit under the heading “We have come a long way since the dawn of democracy”, claiming that the ANC has made free basic water and electricity available to poor households, expanded housing to four million households, and widened what it called the “social wage” through electricity, water, sanitation, refuse removal, housing, and other services.

At the ANC’s 2023 manifesto-review rally, Cyril Ramaphosa told supporters that “millions more people have houses, electricity, and access to water and sanitation services”, and immediately situated these alongside grants, health care, education, free basic services, and subsidised housing as elements of social protection provided by “the ANC government”.

The 2024 manifesto then gave the historical claim its own heading, “30 years of meeting basic needs”, recalling the RDP-era provision of free housing and the mass roll-out of water, sanitation, and electricity before promising to continue the progressive realisation of universal basic services and the social wage.

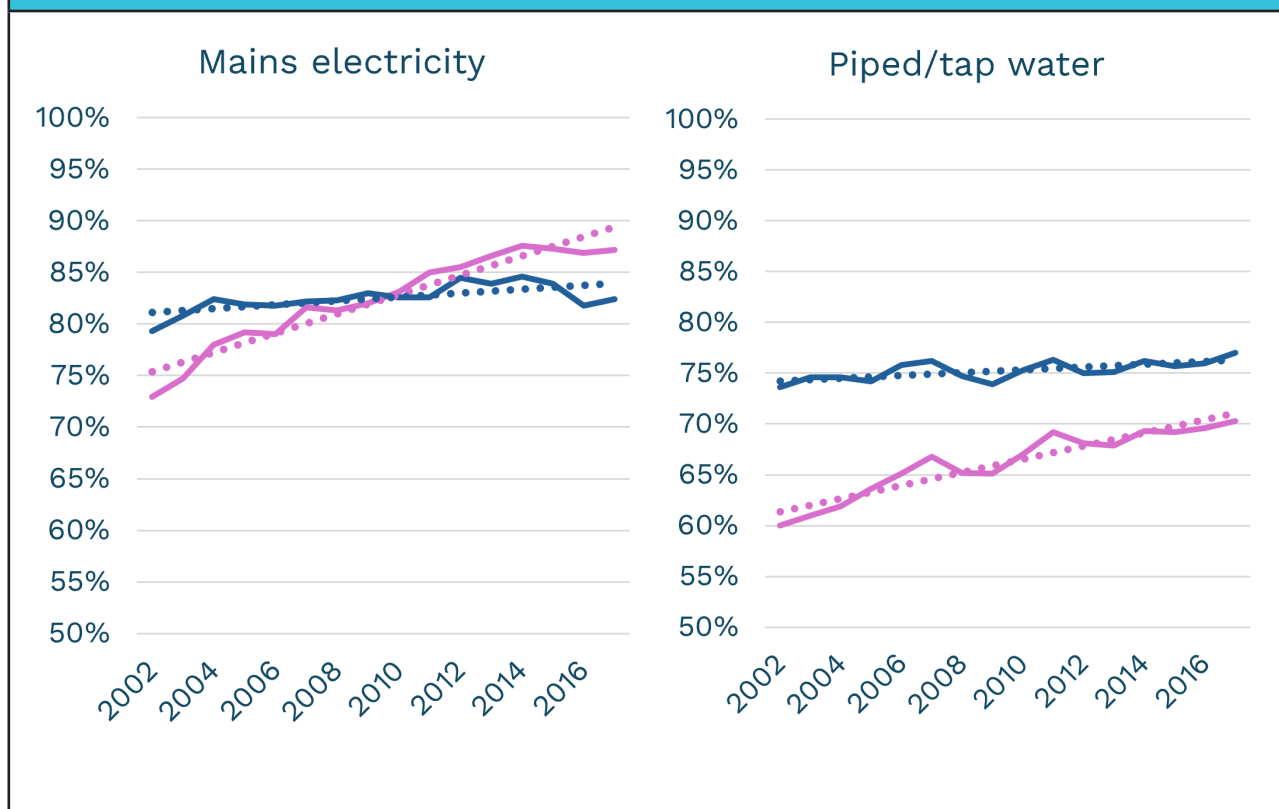
Now, the party campaign literature considered here should be read as evidence of political credit-claiming, rather than as independent verification of every delivery figure claimed by the ANC – marketing not reality. The relevant electoral question, as South Africans are once again on the verge of choosing local government representatives, is not whether the ANC alone financed, built or administered every house, electricity connection or water scheme, nor whether every historical statistic in its manifestos withstands independent scrutiny. Rather, it is whether voters have repeatedly been presented with a political story in which the expansion of the post-apartheid household floor was an achievement of the ANC. From the promise of housing and services in 1994, through the explicit “since 1994 we have delivered” appeal of 2000, to the language of the “social wage” in 2021 and “30 years of meeting basic needs” in 2024, the answer is clearly ‘yes’.

This political attribution also has had a material foundation substantial enough to be experienced within households. Critically, here the question of a gendered experience of a political reality must be considered.

Stats SA found that between 2002 and 2017 access to mains electricity among female-headed households rose from 73% to 83%, an increase of more than 14 percentage points, compared with only around 3 points among male-headed households. Over the same period, water access among female-headed households increased by over 10 points, compared with below 4 points among male-headed households. Housing shows a similar gendered exposure: the share of female-headed households receiving some form of government housing subsidy rose from 6% in 2002 to 17% in 2017, compared with an increase from 5% to 11% among male-headed households. Stats SA itself noted that the higher female share was consistent with policies giving preference to vulnerable groups, including women.

Improvement in household services by sex of household head, 2002-2017				
Household head	Service	2002 access	2017 access	Change, 2002–2017
Female-headed	Mains electricity	72.9%	87.2%	+14.3 pp
Male-headed	Mains electricity	79.3%	82.4%	+3.1 pp
Female-headed	Piped/tap water	60.0%	70.3%	+10.3 pp
Male-headed	Piped/tap water	73.6%	77.0%	+3.4 pp

Improvement in household services by sex of household head, 2002-2017



This does not prove that an individual woman remembers a particular ANC housing promise and votes for the party because of it. The polling cannot establish that causal chain. It does, however, show the conditions in which such a political inheritance could develop. Women remain more economically exposed, household-security issues take up more of their political agenda, female-headed households experienced substantial improvements in housing and basic services, and the ANC has spent three decades claiming those improvements as part of its governing record. The fact that the ANC continues to perform better among women even after a large decline in its overall support is therefore consistent with some residual association between the party and protection of the household floor.

That association would not have been created by political messaging alone. The ANC repeatedly told voters that it had expanded housing, electricity, water and other basic services, but many households also experienced those improvements directly. Female-headed households in particular saw substantial gains in some of the services the ANC claimed as achievements of its government. For some voters, the connection between the ANC and the social floor may therefore have been reinforced by experience as well as by political rhetoric.

The current polling adds another important part of the picture. Women continue to place greater weight on household-security concerns even though they are now no more satisfied with their lives than men, and are often less optimistic about the future. This suggests a distinction between views of the government's present performance and political credit built up over time. A voter can be disappointed with the ANC today while still associating it more strongly than another party with the existence of housing, services or other forms of household security. That remains an inference rather than a directly measured attitude, but it provides a plausible link between past experience, ANC credit-claiming, present household priorities and the party's continuing advantage among women.

Implications

The ANC's residual female advantage may therefore depend less on enthusiasm for current performance and the ideological focus of the ANC than on actual accumulated political credibility around certain matters of household security. It is important to note, though, that that credibility is capable of eroding – as the decline in female support for the ANC in the current six-year data collection shows. But political credit built over a decade or more need not disappear at the same speed as satisfaction with any present government.

For competing parties, this is an implication rather than a direct survey finding, but it is an important one. Economic reform may be more persuasive to women where political change also feels safe for the household. The polling shows clearly that women want jobs and opportunity. What it cannot tell us is which policy, reassurance or political messenger would be enough to persuade women who still support the ANC to switch to another party.

Women want opportunity as well as security

The household-security argument should not be mistaken for a claim that women are simply more supportive of welfare or state intervention. The polling shows something more complicated. Women place greater weight on household security, but they also show strong support for jobs, education, markets and economic reform.

The jobs-versus-grants question makes this especially clear. In 2025, 71% of women chose job creation over grants, compared with 83% of men. By 2026 the female figure had risen to 82%, almost the same as the 84% recorded among men. The gender gap on this question had therefore almost disappeared. Yet the ANC's advantage among women did not disappear with it. Instead, it widened from about 9 points to about 11 points. That makes it difficult to argue that women support the ANC simply because they are more favourable to welfare.

Earlier polling points in the same direction. In 2021 women were more likely than men to say government should focus on jobs and better education, and much less likely to choose BEE, affirmative action or land reform. In 2026, large shares of women also supported lower taxes, opposed the continued use of race categories in job and business opportunities, and wanted the additional cost of BEE procurement to be measured and reported.

The female electorate therefore does not fit neatly into a simple left-right divide. Greater concern about housing, services and the security of dependants does not mean greater support for state intervention in every area. The polling suggests that many women want two things at the same time: greater economic opportunity and greater security for the household.

This is also important when interpreting the 2025 VAT dispute. Women were exposed to the cost of VAT just as men were, and by 2026 they were highly critical of the value they received for their taxes. The much larger movement towards the DA among men in 2025 should therefore not be read as evidence that women were more comfortable with higher taxes. A more plausible interpretation is that tax and economic issues competed with a different set of priorities among women, especially those, as argued in this report, connected to household and dependant security.

Implications

A party seeking to win women voters away from the ANC does not appear to face an electorate that must first be persuaded to value jobs or economic reform. Many women already do. The more difficult political task may be to make economic change credible on the same terrain on which women place greater weight: housing, safety of dependants, health care and basic services.

That is an implication from the pattern, not a tested persuasion message. The survey does not tell us whether a guarantee on grants, a housing policy, a service-delivery record, a stronger response to abuse of women and children, or some other offer would change an individual vote. It does show that an economic offer which ignores household security would leave unaddressed one of the clearest differences between the female and male political agendas.

The female vote and party competition

The ANC's female advantage is politically important precisely because it is no longer a majority female vote. In 2026, 63% of women supported a party or option other than the ANC. The DA attracted 26% of women, virtually identical to its 26% among men. Women are therefore plainly willing to vote against the ANC, and the DA does not have a general female-support deficit in the current support.

Women nevertheless remain more concentrated in the ANC-DA axis, and beyond, than men. In 2026 the largest two parties together accounted for 63% of female support, compared with 53% among men. Men were more evenly distributed across the EFF, MK, IFP, and smaller parties. The male electorate has moved further into multiparty fragmentation, while the female electorate remains more strongly anchored to the two largest parties.

The 2024 and 2025 waves show, however, that female dissatisfaction does not necessarily flow to the DA. In 2024, the only year in which the ANC's female advantage almost vanished, the DA was actually around 8 points stronger among men than women. MK, by contrast, was about 5 points stronger among women. The compression of the ANC gender gap therefore occurred without women becoming disproportionately DA-supporting.

This contrast sharpened in 2025. The DA had an 11-point male advantage, at 35% among men against 24% among women. At the same time, MK displayed an equal and opposite 11-point female advantage, at 22% among women against 11% among men. By 2026 MK's gender tilt had reversed, with support of 9% among women and 13% among men. Because MK support is heavily shaped by KwaZulu-Natal and isiZulu-speaking composition, these movements should not be read as evidence that MK is inherently a female or male party. They show something more instructive in terms of where parties might take electoral strategy into the future: women leaving the ANC do not necessarily enter the same opposition market as men do.

This also changes how the 2024 near-zero ANC gender gap should be understood. It is evidence that the ANC's female premium can be neutralised, but not evidence that one particular opposition party has found a durable formula for doing so. The 2025 VAT period then shows the opposite pattern: a political environment in which the DA surged strongly among men while the ANC remained much more resilient among women.

The female electorate is therefore both open and differentiated. The central contest is not simply whether women will vote against the ANC. As noted, most women voters, almost two thirds, already do not support the ANC. The contest is instead whether a durable political alternative can consolidate enough of the non-ANC female vote while also breaking the ANC's remaining advantage among women who still associate the party with household security or other forms of political trust.

Implications

The six-year record of IRR polling, spanning from 2021 to 2026, neatly covering a political cycle of local government elections, gives two reasons to resist a simplistic conclusion that the ANC's advantage among women voters is impregnable. Over these years, female ANC support has fallen almost as quickly as male ANC support, and the gender premium itself has varied from almost zero to more than eleven points. There is no evidence of an immutable female ANC bloc.

But the same record also warns against assuming that the issues which move male voters will move women by the same amount – or towards the same party. The 2024-2025 sequence is the clearest demonstration. Party competition for women voters therefore requires understanding not only what women dislike about the ANC, but which risks and benefits they weigh most heavily when considering an alternative.

What the polling cannot tell us

The analysis above narrows the explanation for the ANC's female advantage, but it does not convert association into individual causation. Several questions remain beyond what the published data can establish.

First, the IRR's surveys do not ask an ANC-supporting woman to identify the decisive reason for her vote. The data therefore cannot show that housing, caregiving, grants, health care or political memory caused a particular woman to choose the ANC. Explanations in this report must be clearly understood as reasonable inferences from available information.

Second, the polling does not identify the specific offer that would persuade an ANC-supporting woman to switch. The proposition that an alternative party, seeking to lessen the ANC's female advantage must combine economic opportunity with credible household security is an implication from the evidence, not the result of a direct persuasion experiment.

And third, historical political memory is not directly measured in the data. The report can show that the ANC repeatedly claimed credit for the social floor over several election cycles, that female-headed households experienced substantial gains in some of those services, that women continue to place greater weight on household-security issues, and that the ANC gender premium survives present disappointment. Yet, it cannot directly show how consciously those historical experiences enter the vote of any individual respondent today. Therefore, analysis on this issue in this report must be understood as attempts to make reasonable inferences and draw credible conclusions from the rich source of six years of IRR polling data.

These limits do not leave us or this report without an explanation, though, for the unique position it is now clear that women voters hold in the ANC's persistent polling lead and the broader political landscape of South Africa. These limits, as is required for this sort of research, establish the proper level of confidence. The polling is strong enough to reject several simple accounts of the gender gap and to identify economic exposure and household security as the most consistent remaining pattern. It is also strong enough to show that the ANC's female advantage is neither fixed nor synonymous with female satisfaction or welfare ideology. What remains to be tested is the individual-level causal mechanism and the specific persuasion route by which the residual advantage could be broken.

Conclusion

South Africa's increasingly competitive contest for political primacy has a clear gender dimension.

In the IRR's 2026 polling, the ANC led the DA by around 11 points among women but by less than one point among men. On the weighted shares, almost the entire national ANC-DA advantage therefore came from the ANC's stronger position among female voters. Yet this should not be mistaken for secure female loyalty. Women have left the ANC almost as rapidly as men since 2021, most women no longer support it, and the party's female advantage almost disappeared in 2024. The female vote is therefore both highly important and clearly contestable.

The six-year evidence also makes several simple explanations difficult to sustain. The ANC's stronger performance among women does not consistently follow differences in race, township residence, turnout, present satisfaction or welfare preference. Women overwhelmingly favour jobs over grants, support education and economic opportunity, and in recent polling show substantial support for lower taxes, better value from government and greater policy accountability. The clearest remaining pattern is instead the combination of greater female economic exposure and the greater weight women place on household security, including housing, the protection of women and children, health care and basic services. These are also concerns that tend to carry more weight among ANC voters than among DA voters.

The ANC enters this contest with an advantage built up over time. For three decades it has linked its political identity to the expansion of housing, electricity, water and other parts of the social floor, while female-headed households were among those that experienced significant gains in several of these areas. The polling cannot prove that these memories directly cause an individual woman to vote ANC today, but the pattern is consistent with a form of political credit that survives disappointment with the government's current performance. That helps explain why the ANC can continue to perform better among women even as its overall support falls.

The implication for competing parties is therefore more demanding than simply winning an argument about growth, taxes or government competence. Women already show considerable support for jobs, education and economic reform. The harder task is to convince them that political change will also strengthen the security of the household, children and dependants, health care and basic services. The party that can make economic opportunity and household security part of the same credible offer will have found a route into one of the ANC's most important remaining electoral advantages.

Addendum A

Survey series

This report uses six IRR national polling waves. The total sample sizes were 633 in 2021, 607 in 2022, 604 in 2023, 604 in 2024, 807 in 2025, and 1,038 in 2026. All samples covered registered voters. The surveys are repeated cross-sections and should not be interpreted as a panel following the same respondents over time.

Sampling method

The 2026 survey employed random digit-dialling to mobile phones and computer-assisted telephonic interviewing. Earlier surveys used comparable national registered-voter sampling approaches, although design effects and question batteries differ by wave. Each poll should therefore be interpreted on its own sampling design while the longitudinal analysis places greatest weight on repeated directional patterns and large differences.

Sample size and screening

Year	All respondents	Women N	Men N
2021	633	324	309
2022	607	311	296
2023	604	296	308
2024	604	310	294
2025	807	377	430
2026	1,038	500	538

The IRR’s surveys are limited to registered voters and no turnout scenario is applied to the headline party-support figures used in this report.

Data collection

Data was collected using Computer-Assisted Telephonic Interviews (CATI). The earlier waves were likewise structured national opinion surveys with registered-voter screening. Exact fieldwork dates and design effects are contained in the individual bannerbooks.

Margin of error and confidence level

The individual surveys of the various years have their own design effects and margins of error. The 2026 poll has a design effect of 2.4018 and a conventional simple-random-sample margin of error of approximately plus or minus 3 percentage points before design-effect adjustment. Subgroup estimates carry wider uncertainty. The report therefore places greatest weight on large differences, repeated direction across waves, and patterns that survive alternative explanations rather than on isolated small movements.



Questionnaire design and comparability

The polling batteries change between years. A cross-year comparison is made only where the underlying question is sufficiently similar.

Survey questionnaires were carefully structured to ensure clarity, relevance, and balance. Key design features included:

1. Structure: Questions were grouped thematically, covering governance, economic priorities, race relations, and quality of life.
2. Neutral language: Wording was neutral to avoid influencing respondents' answers.
3. Follow-up questions: Where necessary, follow-ups addressed uncertainty (e.g., "If you had to choose, which party would you support?" for undecided voters).

Data weighting

The survey data are weighted to improve representativeness of the national registered-voter population. Weighting dimensions include key demographic and geographic variables. Because the weighted female share varies across waves, calculations that decompose a national party gap by gender are treated as wave-specific rather than population constants.

Respondent demographics

The survey sample of registered voters represents a diverse cross-section of South African society, ensuring the findings reflect the nation's socio-economic, geographic, and cultural diversity. Below is a detailed overview of the demographic distribution. To the extent that racial categories are used, these have been done purely on the basis of respondents' own racial self-classification.

Geographic distribution (2026)

Respondents were drawn from all nine provinces, with the highest representation from Gauteng (23.8%) and KwaZulu-Natal (21.2%). Smaller contributions came from the Northern Cape (2.1%) and Free State (4.2%).

Province	% of Respondents
Gauteng	23.8%
KwaZulu-Natal	21.2%
Eastern Cape	12.3%
Western Cape	11.7%
Limpopo	9.6%
North West	7.8%
Mpumalanga	7.2%
Free State	4.2%
Northern Cape	2.1%

Respondents were drawn from the full range of residential area types, with the highest coming from township and tribal areas, 34.7% and 33% respectively.

Residential area type	% of Respondents
Township	34.7%
Tribal land	33%
Suburb	16.8%
Central Business District (CBD)	6.7%
Informal	6.2%
Smallholding	1.7%
Commercial farm	0.9%

Age and gender (2026)

The survey skewed toward older respondents, with 33.4% aged between 45 and 64, and 17.7% aged 65 or older. This focus reflects the predominance of older and therefore registered voters.

Age Group	% of Respondents
18-24	8.6%
25-34	19.6%
35-44	20.7%
45-64	33.4%
65+	17.7%

Language (2026)

isiZulu speakers formed the largest language group (24.8%), followed by isiXhosa (18.8%) and Afrikaans (11.3%).

Home Language	% of Respondents
isiZulu	24.8%
isiXhosa	18.8%
English	11.4%
Afrikaans	11.3%
Sesotho	6.4%
Other languages	27.3%

Employment and income (2026)

Employment data revealed that 40% of respondents were seeking work, while 18.3% were retired and 16.9% were employed in the formal sector. Income levels varied, with the largest group earning between R2,000 and R8,000 per month (53.6%).

Income Level	% of Respondents
<R2 000	15.1%
R2 000<R8 000	53.6%
R8 000<R20 000	10.2%
R20 000+	12%
Did not disclose	9.1%

The socio-economically diverse respondent pool set out above ensures a robust and representative dataset, allowing for nuanced analysis of South Africans' perceptions across regions, age groups, and socio-economic statuses.



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