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POLITICAL PARTY BUILDING IN A POPULIST STYLE

Evidence from South Africa's Economic Freedom Fighters, 2014-2019

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the local organisation of the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in its first participation in South Africa's local government elections in 2016. Drawing on original interviews with local party activists, it explains how the EFF's brand of populism mobilised at the grassroots level during its formative years. The study argues that the party's populist style was effective because it helped appropriate existing diverse networks of political activists by positioning itself as the voice of 'ordinary black people' against business and government 'elites'. This orientation of the EFF appealed to youth, activists, and mineworkers who felt excluded from the African National Congress (ANC); while the protests and regalia of its populist style nurtured feelings of collective identity and efficacy among local party organisers. The article indicates how a populist style can be effective in exploiting generational cleavages to build a viable opposition party within the constraints of a dominant party system.

Keywords: South Africa, political parties, elections, Economic Freedom Fighters, party activism

INTRODUCTION

The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was launched in South Africa in 2013 after its founder and leader Julius Malema was expelled from the African National Congress (ANC). It sought support from the disadvantaged black majority in contemporary South Africa and has been widely labelled as left-wing populist, part of the global resurgence of populism across the political spectrum (Mouffe 2018). While there has been significant research on African populism and populist

leaders (Cheeseman & Larmer 2015; Resnick 2014; Melchiorre 2023) and the EFF in particular (Mbete 2015; Nyenhuis 2020; Fölscher, de Jager & Nyenhuis 2021), there has been minimal work on the ground forces that mobilise votes for African populist parties to succeed at the local level. To remedy this lacuna, this study examines the critical period between the 2014 and 2019 national elections in South Africa when the EFF solidified their position as a competitive opposition party, increasing their vote share from 6.4% to 10.8%.

To assess the role of 'populism' in fomenting grassroots mobilisation, the article analyses the ways in which different components of a populist political style motivated individual activists to contribute their time and resources to the EFF's electoral campaigns. The notion of a populist style focuses analysis on the performance of leaders and followers which include (1) appeals to 'the people' against 'elites'; (2) references to impending crisis, breakdown or threat; and (3) disregard for the normal rules of political engagement, termed 'bad manners' (Moffitt 2016). The EFF clearly adopted a populist style by framing the party as representative of the black majority, as opposed to government 'elites'. They appealed to a sense of crisis over President Zuma's Nkandla corruption scandal and the 2012 Marikana massacre, and disrupted Parliament with their revolutionary garb and 'rowdy and disruptive' protest (Mbete 2016, p. 598; Moffitt 2016). However, this says little about how these aspects of populist style affected their ability to recruit grassroots activists, which is the aim of this article.

Firstly, the article details the local resources mobilised by the EFF to establish the importance of individual activists in growing the membership and voting base of the party. Secondly, it examines the reasons activists expressed for joining the party in terms of Ware's (1999) exhaustive framework of purposive, material, and solidary incentives. Further, the study argues that the populist style of the EFF helped it appropriate existing networks of activists in three ways:

(1) Framing their struggle as one of black people against the so-called elites of White Monopoly Capital (WMC) gave them a broad appeal to activists from diverse ideological orientations;
(2) Invoking a sense of crisis in ANC leadership appealed to activists who believed that something had to be done about issues such as mining wages, university fees, housing, and land reform;
(3) Julius Malema's outspoken behaviour, the EFF uniform, and their contentious actions inculcated a party identity which gave local activists the impression it was an effective vehicle to fight for the issues that mattered to them.

Consistent with a notion of 'generational populism' (Melchiorre 2023), the nascent EFF was able to recruit activists from younger generations of black South Africans who had weak ties to ANC and no longer saw it as a viable platform for their concerns or their political careers (Braun 2024a).

METHODOLOGY

The 2016 local election campaigns were an opportune time to meet local EFF activists who were running as councillor candidates at ward level. To build rapport and better understand their activities and motivations, I attended events such as election postering, door-to-door campaigning, social events, court hearings, and rallies. Between 2016 and 2019, I conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with current and former EFF activists and engaged with many others during the election campaign and in subsequent visits. Interviews were conducted for approximately one hour with the aid of a guide in the wards where the activists were based. I recorded and personally transcribed every interview to familiarise myself with the responses of research participants before using an inductive approach to identify the common themes in their explanations for joining the party. After initially organising these themes in terms of purposive, material, and solidary incentives, I used thematic analysis to develop sub-categories of these incentives, each of which encompassed the motivations expressed by at least four of the EFF activists interviewed.

Multiple strategies were used to build a diverse pool of EFF contacts from different entry points into local party networks. In Durban and Johannesburg, I interviewed EFF activists through pre-existing contacts, as well as EFF student activists I had met at campus events. Using a snowballing technique, these initial contacts introduced me to other activists to interview in other locations. Attending EFF campaign events also made it possible to tap into alternative networks of activists. At the 2016 EFF manifesto launch at Orlando Stadium in Soweto I made contacts from Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni who introduced me to additional activists. The relationships I developed with these activists led to visits to Tzaneen, Rustenburg, and Pietermaritzburg where I met local party members who added further geographical breadth to the research. In eThekwini I attended a regional postering event where I met EFF councillor candidates from wards in Inanda and Ntuzuma townships. After the elections I noted that the EFF had a particularly strong result in a specific ward in Umlazi, so I arranged with a regional leader for a group interview with activists in that location.

Ethekwini, Ekurhuleni, and Johannesburg municipalities were chosen as primary research sites because they host the largest black African populations in the country, while the wards in Rustenburg were chosen because they had become

nationally recognised as bastions of EFF support following the 2012 Marikana massacre. These municipalities vary in terms of their ethnolinguistic composition, which is primary isiZulu in eThekweni, with Setswana residents and isiXhosa migrant workers in the mining regions of Rustenburg, and a blend of South Africa's 13 official languages in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni. The ward where I attended campaign events in Ekurhuleni is also notable because of the high population of Sepedi and Xitsonga speakers who had moved there from Limpopo.

RESOURCE MOBILISATION IN THE EFF

Building branch structures and accumulating party members had been a consistent part of the EFF's organisational strategy since its formation. According to a former EFF provincial secretary (Interview, 15 June 2016) for KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) 'in terms of organisational growth, we just wanted to see numbers – numbers and nothing else. We had free room to run around and do whatever we wanted to do as long as we would produce numbers'. A reliance on branch structures and other social networks rather than expensive advertising campaigns was evident in the 2016 elections, when Malema said that they spent less than R10 million on the campaign, relying on word of mouth and rallies across the country (Mbete 2016, p. 602). In addition to regional and national rallies, door-to-door visits were the primary local campaigning method in all wards where my interviews and observations were conducted.

This labour-intensive strategy meant that branches required a committed councillor candidate and pool of volunteers to speak to residents across their entire electoral ward. However, EFF councillor candidates said they received very few resources beyond election placards and used their personal funds to provide food and transportation for volunteers. This was evident as I accompanied EFF branch members during their campaign activities in 2016. For example, during a mass-postering campaign organised by regional and provincial EFF structures in eThekwini, there was no food provided for local volunteers. Instead, it was the ward councillor candidates who paid to feed their volunteers. Branches relied on local activists who were responsible for door-to-door campaigning, postering, and using local newspapers and community radio stations to promote the party. None of the branches I visited had party T-shirts to distribute, and in a Tembisa informal settlement the councillor candidate sought donations of plain red T-shirts to emblazon with the party logo for their volunteers. In the Marikana ward which the EFF targeted – and won – the future councillor explained how their branch members pooled together to organise weekend braais for the community. This was typical of the constraints that EFF activists faced:

> There were no finances. Even to call a mere meeting with your people it's tough. You need airtime, there's no money, EFF does not have money so you can't call someone from the head office and say you want money for campaigning. You need to invest your money, personal money to make sure the ward continues.
>
> (interview, EFF branch founder Tzaneen, 10 July 2017)

> I was putting up posters, and you must remember it was only an eight-month-old party when they campaigned their first national elections so resources were very scarce. Even if they give you posters they don't give you additional material so how are you going to go about putting up those posters? So we had to use our money for the love of it.
>
> (interview, EFF Ward Councillor candidate Hammarsdale, 17 May 2016)

Party branches also helped to maintain a community presence by advocating for piecemeal improvement of infrastructure and community services. For instance, a regional EFF organiser in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) explained why they negotiated with local businesses for building materials to fix local dirt roads: 'It's an opportunity – where we find a gap, we close that gap. So that the people can see the EFF, unlike the other party [ANC], is working even though they are limited, they have nothing [public funds] to use'. In another ward of Tzaneen the branch founder (interview, 10 July 2017) said that they would arrange community clean-ups, and approach the relevant municipal departments in order to bring services such as HIV tests, ID renewals, and emergency water to their semi-rural township where access was lacking. He believed this was necessary 'because you need to make people understand that this organisation is the organisation for the people, especially the oppressed black people of South Africa'.

Functioning local branches were essential to fulfill the call by the EFF leadership for candidates to engage with local problems as part of their electoral strategy. A councillor candidate in Hammarsdale (interview, 17 May 2016) recalled a meeting EFF Deputy President Floyd Shivambu held with councillor candidates in eThekwini before the 2016 elections:

> He spoke about attending to community issues if there are any, perhaps there's a house [with] old people living there, maybe they're having a problem with accessing social grants. You need to go there, avail yourself, be of assistance there…He even went as far as to say *you don't even need to have money to start acting as a ward councillor*.

One of the local grievances EFF branches frequently sought to address was the electricity faults that plague residential areas across South Africa. For example, an EFF member in Diepsloot (interview, 26 May 2016) described how his branch wore their party regalia and went to the Eskom offices to demand the repair of a broken transformer that had left some residents without electricity for two months, claiming they succeeded in having it fixed. This was a common issue raised as I accompanied EFF councillor candidates during door-to-door campaigns in 2016, with residents asking for assistance in repairing broken transformers that interrupted their electricity supply. In Cosmo City, the EFF candidate organised an impromptu community meeting and a petition after being told of power outages in two sections of his ward. In Inanda, a councillor candidate arranged to collect funds from the community to fix a non-functioning transformer. These attempts at local problem solving were frequently spoken about by local EFF and reflected their attempts to follow the party's national directive for its councillor candidates to 'behave as if they were councillors' to ingratiate themselves with voters.

EFF student commands were active in campus protests and appeals for students who had been denied funding or student accommodation. The secretary-general of the EFF Student Command of the University of Johannesburg Soweto Campus (interview, 27 May 2016) explained how they had taken up these causes with management and raised donations to put free sanitary products inside the female toilets. The mobilisation strategy adopted on university campuses mirrored that of the wards described above, rooted in having a presence where their potential supporters were living.

> It's simple, we just go to their respective residence, campaign there, inform there, door-to-door campaigns, those are the most effective ones. Because what you need to do is you must go to the people on the ground, you must find out their lived experiences.
>
> (interview, EFFSC Branch Secretary, UKZN Pietermaritzburg 3 April 2018)

> There are other members that live in residences so they will mobilise there. The students in those residences will state their grievances to that person, then that person will come with those grievances then we see how we can manage them.
>
> (interview, EFFSC secretary-general, UJ Soweto campus, 27 May 2016)

Replicating the tactics of the ANC-affiliated SASCO student organisation, EFF branches on campus organised razzmatazz events for students in the residences with speeches, singing, and dancing. EFF student organisations also provided a

reservoir of volunteers to campaign at ward level. A former EFF student leader at the University of Limpopo (interview, 10 July 2017) explained that 'the EFF they will give us probably five buses and go and deploy us in the surrounding communities of the university. So they say to this bus of comrades, *students you are going that side, you are going to do door-to-door there'*. This was particularly important in KZN, where the party did not absorb existing networks of activists from unions, social movements, or the ANCYL. The EFF mayoral candidate for Msunduzi municipality (interview, 12 June 2016) asserted that students from the nearby Pietermaritzburg campus of UKZN were key ground forces for door-to-door campaigns. This electoral strategy relied on branch structures possessing the membership and skills necessary to carry out campaigning activities.

APPROPRIATION OF MOBILISATION NETWORKS

The EFF built local structures in wards and on campuses by attracting individuals who had prior experience as activists with different organisations. The EFF began as a movement of ex-ANCYL members allied with Julius Malema in 2013, and that year they held a meeting in Soweto with social movements, unions, and community organisations to discuss whether to form a political party. Members of the Pan Africanist Congress and Black Consciousness Party and movements such as the Landless People's Movement (LPM), Anti-privatisation Forum (APF), and September National Imbizo (SNI), mingled with trade unionists from the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) (Robinson 2014, p. 76).

My research found that many EFF student activists had come from the ANC-aligned SASCO student movement that had controlled university student representative councils (SRCs). The human resources of these existing networks were crucial to recruitment, campaigning, and organising local direct actions such as protests, marches, and land occupations. There is also evidence that this translated into electoral gains for the EFF. Exit polls conducted during the 2016 local elections showed significant EFF support among targeted constituencies receiving nearly 30% of votes from those aged 25 to 39, 19% among students, 38% among worker protestors (mainly in the mining sector) and 34% of those living in informal housing (Paret 2016).

In the wards where I conducted research in Soweto, the local EFF organisers came primarily from social movement organisations. The area had been a hotbed of social movement activism since the early 2000s, when various movements fighting to improve service delivery and prevent evictions from informal settlements established the APF as an umbrella organisation to coordinate their activities (Sinwell 2015, p. 83). While the APF and some of its organisations were

no longer active, their former activists helped to establish the EFF's regional and branch structures, including the councillor candidate and cluster head in Protea South who had both been members of the LPM. This gave them some local credibility, organising skills, and networks of fellow activists to recruit to the organisation. In the nearby informal settlement of Thembalihle one of the EFF organisers from the APF and the Thembalihle Crisis Committee explained how he used his existing relationships to facilitate co-operation with other wards in door-to-door campaigning.

In other areas, the EFF was dominated by former ANCYL league members who had been followers of Malema when he was the president of that organisation. One such activist who founded a branch in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) explained their strategy to build the organisation:

> I target public figures of the community, people who are big, who are well known… Like a certain guy I went to him because he once contested. He was expelled from the ANC and he was well loved by members of the community so I recruited him. So there are people who will come, his followers will come to the EFF.

Malema's activism in the ANCYL and previous involvement in his community's politics gave him the local knowledge and experience that informed his strategy to build the EFF branch in his ward. In the same way that the national EFF was borne of a factional struggle within the ANC, local branches such as this emerged from factional divisions at the local level which alienated ANCYL members. This dynamic was replicated in SASCO, which saw some of its members leave to establish or join EFF branches on university campuses. At the Durban University of Technology (DUT) activists left SASCO en masse after being 'defeated' by another faction, ultimately launching the EFF's campus structures (interview, EFF Student Leader, 12 May 2016).

The leadership I interviewed from two EFF branches in Marikana was based around workplace networks, consisting of shop stewards or members of the AMCU trade union in competition with the NUM. In the nearby mining village of Wonderkop, the branch was started by members of Sikhala Sonke, an organisation of women formed after the massacre of mineworkers to organise protest marches and carry out community support initiatives (Essop 2015). The EFF won that ward in 2016, and the councillor explained that she and other members of Sikhala Sonke had started the branch and were all active door-to-door campaigners before the election. These examples show the diversity of networks the EFF branches mobilised to bolster the numbers and effectiveness of newly-established EFF branch structures.

WHY DID LOCAL ACTIVISTS JOIN THE EFF?

Motivations for political activism can be broken down into *purposive* incentives such as belief in the goals, policies, or ideology of a party; *material* incentives such as money, jobs, or favours; and *solidary* benefits such as enjoyment and sociality (Ware 1999, p. 81). Solidary benefits can also include the psychological benefits of participation, including a sense of group identity and satisfaction in contributing to the provision of collective goods (Scarrow 2015, p. 157). This means that retention of cadres is enhanced when they feel as if their party's activities are 'making a difference' in progressing towards the purposive goals that led them to join in the first place (Pettitt 2020, pp. 13-16).

Purposive Incentives and Framing

Ideologically, the EFF was able to resonate with local activists by drawing on elements of Black Consciousness (BC), Pan-Africanism, socialism, and the belief that the ANC had not implemented the Freedom Charter but had sold out in the negotiations that led to the end of apartheid. The populist style of the EFF collapsed these different ideological traditions by narrating a struggle of black people against elites in government and business whom they labelled as defenders of White Monopoly Capitalism (WMC) (Beresford et al. 2023, pp. 7-8). Several local activists I interviewed had previously been members of the PAC or its related student organisation.

Frustrated by in-fighting within the PAC, the leader of the EFF branch at the UKZN campus in Pietermaritzburg (interview, 3 April 2018) was attracted to the EFF because of its Black Consciousness block that spoke to his pre-existing ideological affinities. Other activists in Umlazi (interview, 9 April 2018) and Soweto (interview, 28 June 2016) were attracted by aspects of socialism they saw within the EFF, which made them believe it would be more biased towards the poor. Although the EFF cadres from the Pan-Africanist tradition rejected some of the precepts of the Freedom Charter, the document maintained widespread credibility among many who joined the EFF from the ANC. There was widespread feeling among former ANCYL members who had left to join the EFF that the ruling party had become corrupt and supported WMC, and the new party would prioritise the implementation of the Freedom Charter.

While the Africanist, Charterist,[1] and socialist orientations represent different and sometimes conflicting strands of ideology, their adherents found common ground in the policy orientations the EFF expressed in its founding documents

1 Charterist refers to those from the ANC tradition who believe in the principles of the Freedom Charter, while the Africanist position of the PAC rejected the document.

and subsequent election manifestos. A September National Imbizo activist from Durban (interview, 28 August 2014) who attended the founding meeting in 2013 explained the adoption of the EFF's seven non-negotiable cardinal pillars:

> What happened was that we had a meeting in Joburg with the EFF last year in a very interesting place called The African Freedom Station. It was to discuss the document the EFF had sent to everyone, to all the political movements, PAC, even the ANC, everybody. To say *what is to be done? These are our points, our 14 points, you can add or subtract, lets discuss it*. So they had a call, some accepted the call, some didn't. We were one of those that did. As much as we do see some problems within the EFF, we can sort them out as we move along.

These cardinal pillars take clear positions in favour of socialist policies such as nationalisation and building state capacity to provide free services and stimulate the creation of 'quality' jobs, while the reference to the land expropriation is a nod to Africanist orientations. By targeting issues that appealed to young people from these different intellectual traditions, the EFF was able to recruit activists for the party at local level.

The seven cardinal pillars also attracted some of the young black activists who felt they would benefit from EFF policies:

> So when EFF came up and I saw its seven cardinal pillars and its policies and then I joined the EFF…I see there's many more things to come, especially for us as youth of SA because we need jobs, we need to go to school, we need so many things we need in SA.
>
> (interview, EFF Activist Umlazi, 19 April 2018)

Two regional command team members in Tzaneen (interview, 10 July 2017) agreed that EFF policy orientations, above other considerations, led them to join the party:

> [Activist 1:] 'As youth we realised there is something that is lacking in our community, as youth, unemployment and some issues that were not addressed well by the ruling party. So the policies then were called the seven cardinal pillars, we saw that if they were implemented they were going to work for us, we're going to get employment. [Activist 2:] In fact the policies accommodate us as youth, that's how we keep the ball rolling. So we bought their policies, that's why we joined them.

EFF activists who had been members of the ANCYL saw the EFF as a continuation of the liberation struggle from outside the confines of the ANC. They believed the EFF had greater credibility in delivering on these purposive incentives, making it a better conduit for their political voice which they felt had been ignored by the ruling party. For those sympathetic to BC, socialist, and Pan-Africanist orientations, the decision to become involved in the EFF was guided by Malema's promotion of radical politics while he was in the ANCYL, and afterwards in his new political party.

One of the key policies that appealed to those who had come from both inside and outside the ANC was land expropriation without compensation, of which Julius Malema had been a vociferous proponent when ANCYL president. Land reform was a touchstone issue among EFF activists living in informal settlements because it spoke to material needs as well as feelings of relative deprivation:

> I expect that if EFF take power maybe EFF will make a plan for providing jobs because they said we need the land back. When you came here you can see they have land with nobody that side, but they have 1,2,3, 8 families in one yard [here]. Because I stay with my wife, my boy in a one room shack and they have a lot of space over there…. Since I came here they [the government] don't do anything about that land. We tried to put our shacks there but they [police] came and took our materials.
>
> (interview, EFF activist Diepsloot, 26 May 2016)

In addition to those who had previously been involved in anti-eviction activism (LPM) or came from ideological backgrounds that prioritised the land question (PAC, BC), the EFF's position on expropriation resonated with the feelings of black youth about universities. Maringira and Gukurume's (2021, p. 492) analysis of the 2015-2016 Fees Must Fall movement argues that those seminal protests were not only about fees, but also the economic and political exclusion of black youth:

> By raising the land question in the student protest movement, students bemoaned their lack of access to and ownership of the means of production as the main source of their poverty. For them, whites continue to monopolise ownership of land and other productive resources as they did under apartheid.

The EFF's framing of its policies such as land expropriation, nationalisation, and free education as the solution to inequality and the poverty of black people resonated with ideas that were already present among a segment of young people in the country.

The EFF also developed programmatic linkages to activists living in the mining communities of Wonderkop and Marikana, which helped draw in members from AMCU and Sikhala Sonke. The national leadership had been active there since Malema had been one of the first politicians to support the mineworkers after the 2012 Marikana massacre and endorse their 12 500 ZAR wage demand during the months-long 2014 strike (Essop 2015, p. 226). The EFF councillor elected in Wonderkop (interview, 17 July 2017) explained why she decided to join the party: 'Julius Malema was the first person to come to hear the problems of the community and the workers. So that was where I said *this is the right leader* and I joined EFF'. The populist style of the EFF identified 'elites' from the ANC and WMC as the common enemy of black workers, movement activists, and students, allowing them to build an activist base from these different locations in society.

Material Incentives – A Party for the Youth?

As described above, local EFF activists contributed their own money during political campaigns and there was no evidence that the EFF had the capacity to deliver clientelist benefits to the lower structures of the party. At the ward level it was ANC incumbents who had the power to act as gatekeepers in the distribution of benefits such as jobs and housing, which has led to sometimes violent factional battles within the ANC (Beresford 2015, pp. 239-40). This would suggest there were more apparent material incentives for activists *not* to join an opposition party like the EFF because it would limit their ability to access these goods from local ANC councillors. For example, a former deputy secretary of an ANC branch in Soweto (interview, 24 May 2016) explained why he did not join the EFF officially until 2015: 'I was just staying because sometimes when you go look for a job and then they are the people that are running the government. You stay, hoping they will give you something'. Despite the moral failures he attributed to the ANC after Zuma's corruption scandals and the Marikana massacre, he was still reluctant to leave the party publicly because of the possibility of material benefits.

Many EFF activists were motivated by the potential for them to further their political careers within the organisation or secure a lucrative position as councillor. In Tembisa and Marikana it was realistic for the EFF councillor candidates to win positions as ward councillors, but even in eThekwini where the party had minimal support in the 2014 national elections the councillor candidates believed that they could win their wards in the 2016 elections. Candidates justified putting their own money into the campaign with the hope that they would be rewarded with a councillor's salary after the election, and expressed significant disappointment afterwards if they did not receive a paid position. For example, a councillor

candidate from Inanda (interview, 23 June 2017) felt that his contributions as a cluster head of multiple wards should have landed him a higher place on the PR councillor list, while a candidate in Cosmo City (interview, 10 August 2016) thought that he would be recognised for the impressive vote tally the EFF received in his ward.

Although the EFF's PR list was set before the election, these activists thought the party would do well enough to earn them a position or were led to believe the list would be altered based upon the electoral performance of their ward. In eThekwini this discontent boiled over with the formation of a dissident party, the short-lived Effective Economic Emancipation Party, which criticised many of the party's decisions, including claims that the party 'never supported the structures to mount an effective campaign', as well concerns about how PR seats were distributed: 'We've got proof here [that] others were promised proportional representation [PR] seats. They paid extra cash buying PR seats that never happened. They paid the money [but] they never got PR seats' (Oliphant 2016; eNCA 2016). These disputes over positions suggest employment was a major incentive among party activists, with some of those interviewed for this study deciding to leave the party when they were still jobless after the election, including two who accepted PR councillor positions with rival opposition parties.

Career aspirations are commonly understood to be a motivation for participating in politics, but this is not sufficient to understand why activists would join an opposition party with less chance to distribute these material rewards. Weber's (2020, p. 507) examination of youth political activism in Germany found that even those with strong career aspirations were equally driven by 'moral-ideological' incentives such as the ideological linkages described above, combined with a sense of duty to participate politically in order to change society in a desired direction. Conceptualising political activists as moral beings who are *also* interested in the potential for material benefits helps to understand how potential activists choose political parties. EFF activists expressed this confluence of factors when explaining why they joined the party – it represented a viable path for their career advancements within an organisation that aligned with their moral and ideological convictions.

The factional politics within ANC branches led some young activists to question both their place within the organisation and the commitment of the party to address the needs of their communities, ultimately leading them to join the EFF. Factional battles within local branches for local councillor candidate selection are part of the gatekeeper politics of the ANC which control resources, and the delegates which elect party leaders at its national elective conferences (Beresford 2015, p. 239). In KZN violence was particularly fierce, with most of 157 political assassinations from 2000-2017 targeting local ANC political figures (Mbanyele 2022). This state of affairs in the ruling party dissuaded young activists who instead

chose to align themselves with the EFF. For example, one young EFF activist in Inanda (interview, 15 July 2016) explained how she became interested in the EFF after witnessing the intra-party disputes in the ANC that led to the murder of an ANC candidate in the neighbouring ward. An EFF leader at UKZN Edgewood (interview, 13 May 2016) who was also active in her local branch explained why she saw the factionalism in the ANC as a reason not to be involved:

> You need to go to the right people because if you support the ANC and you're in the wrong side then things won't work out for you as well. And with the ANC it always changes. One day this faction is doing well, the next you must leave this faction for another faction.

Those who reached adulthood after 1994 assessed the ANC by their recent experiences rather than by the liberation struggle. For them, the ruling party did not represent a safe and attractive political home, so they looked elsewhere for that. There was a sense that a new organisation was needed to challenge the older generation that had monopolised positions within the ANC.

In terms of Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (1970) framework, the expulsion of Malema from the ANC was seen by activists as a decisive failure of 'voice', helping to override their loyalty to the ANC and making the exit option more attractive. An EFF activist in Mamelodi West (interview, 27 May 2016) explained:

> I felt embarrassed because me I always liked ANC too much, and too much because of Julius Malema. Because I am a youth and he was a youth of ANC leader so when they expelled that guy then I see that okay, those elder people they don't want the *facts*. They said *you are young, you cannot say something*.

Similarly, an EFF provincial organiser in KZN (interview, 15 July 2016) said he did not join the breakaway COPE party in 2008 because 'we need to fix ANC problems from within the ANC, but as time went on and we realised we are not heard and it's not possible to fix ANC, it's beyond repairs'. After attempts to be heard in the ANC had failed, he saw the creation of the EFF as a viable way to continue his political trajectory within a new organisation. An EFF eThekwini regional organiser (interview, 23 April 2018) explained this thought process in determining his political future at that time:

> ANC leaders were not listening, then they chased Malema out who said *Why are you excluding us?* He was only challenging this leadership saying that this is what we're supposed to do. So that is how we saw

> the injustice that was happening there, and we decided we had to refocus and see who is going to best serve our interest.

While this activist also referred to the policy orientations of Malema and the EFF, his statement reveals the need of such politically-inclined citizens to feel included within an organisation. For an individual activist to have a viable career in politics there must be clear upward path for mobility in a party that caters to one's prior political preferences. In this way the purposive incentives of activists were intertwined with career objectives, especially amongst those who were already part of ANC youth structures.

The exile of Malema from the ANC presented an opportunity for these activists to leave the ruling party, but that decision required them to consider which organisation offered a brighter future. The EFF branch founder at UKZN Edgewood (interview, 13 May 2016) explained how deeply the ANC's rejection of Malema and his allies by the ANC affected him: 'Immediately when they were expelled, I felt that I was expelled too, as such I burnt my T-shirt and membership card'. For them, this represented the failure of the ANC mother body to listen to demands being made by its youth organisations. This was explained by a young EFF activist from Limpopo (interview, 10 July 2017):

> We need to go back to the book and start our own things where we can be fully represented. That's when we joined EFF in large numbers. When we left ANC we didn't regret. We loved the ANC but it does not want to be with us.

Despite a deep loyalty to the ANC, such activists felt that there was no place for them and their ideological outlook within the party, thus paving the way for a generational exit from the ruling party to the nascent EFF structures. For young people who aspired to careers in politics, the EFF opened a new avenue where they felt they would taken seriously and move forward as political activists. In contrast to the more exclusive nature of an entrenched and multigenerational party like the ANC, young activists felt the EFF had space for them to become leaders in the pursuit of the purposive goals they hoped to achieve. Indeed, the EFF has emerged as a political home for young black political activists who have helped to reshape the demographics in Parliament in 2019, with 47% of their MPs under the age of 45 compared to 25% for the ANC (People's Assembly 2021).

Solidary Incentives – Building a Partisan Identity and Projecting Efficacy

Local EFF activists expressed a desire to be part of a political movement capable of producing the societal changes promised in its ideological and programmatic

platform. Comparative research has shown that party activists are often driven by such expressive desires, making them more likely to join parties that are able to fulfill this emotional need to have their voices heard in the political arena (Whiteley 2011; Huddy, Mason & Aarøe 2015). For activists motivated by this sense of civic duty, they must feel they are part of an organisation that represents their purposive interests *and* has the power to implement them. The notion of collective identity is pertinent here because it highlights the cognitive, moral, and emotional connections that bind people together to participate in collective action that are distinct from the rational self-interest of material incentives (Poletta & Jasper 2001, p. 285). Political parties may be formed around individuals with common interests, but the creation of a strong collective identity helps to sustain voluntary activity by building solidarity around beliefs in organisational efficacy and its contribution to the moral good.

In this discussion of career prospects for young activists within the EFF, there was a clear feeling among grassroots EFF activists that they had been excluded from meaningful political participation by the ANC. They did not feel that the ANC was able to make political improvements and did not feel personal efficacy in voicing their concerns in the party. In contrast, members of an EFF branch in an Umlazi ward (interview, 19 April 2018) explained why they felt empowered within the EFF:

> I joined EFF because I want to be heard. ANC they're only having their own meeting there and making decision for us. They never hear our voices so that's why I joined EFF.
>
> We do not have a voice, our voices are not heard. I wanted to work, join EFF, the Fighters, I wanted to be just like them just to make *izwe lethu* [our country] a better place.

These young activists believed their opinions were valued by the new political party, helping to satisfy a desire while augmenting a sense that their participation was fulfilling a civic duty to contribute to the betterment of their communities. The EFF tried to develop these affective linkages by consciously building a partisan identity, as explained in *The Coming Revolution* (2014, p. 5) by EFF deputy president Floyd Shivambu:

> We understood economic freedom fighters to be the informal settlement dwellers, workers, communities and activists who would challenge the system every day with the aim of benefiting from the country's natural and economic resources.

EFF activists refer to each other as 'fighters', a collective identity formed around the party's dress, contentious tactics, and leadership, which inculcated a belief that the organisation was a viable instrument for contributing to what they viewed as the public good.

From its inception EFF members became known for wearing red berets, hard hats, and domestic worker uniforms while attending protests, rallies, and sitting in Parliament. The berets were meant to signify their revolutionary character in the tradition of Che Guevara and Thomas Sankara, while the uniforms suggested solidarity with the interests of the black working classes (Mbete 2015, p.41). Wearing EFF regalia in communities and campuses was identified as a crucial component of increasing visibility during consciousness raising efforts. The national leadership encouraged the weekly display of party regalia through social media under the hashtag #EFFRedFriday:

> Anyone who belongs to the EFF, if you are not wearing RED today, you are a sellout. If you are not a sellout, show your colours and tell them through your colours that you are not ashamed of being part of the Red Battalion.
>
> (EFF Instagram 2022)

Local branches also took initiatives to encourage their members to wear party colours, such as UJ Soweto Campus where members were fined R40 if they did not wear their EFF T-shirt to campus on Wednesdays and Thursdays (interview, EFF Branch Secretary, 27 May 2016).

When EFF members engaged in local protests they believed that wearing the EFF regalia gave them more power to accomplish their goals, as explained by an EFF activist in Diepsloot (interview, 26 May 2016):

> We were two months without electricity, and then the lady [councillor] for ANC went there by Eskom offices [to complain]. They cried many times, but they didn't come here to fix it. But we just called other members of EFF, one had a *bakkie* [truck], we took his *bakkie* and go to Eskom offices. He also stays in this area. We were wearing our berets and T-shirts.

This activist explained how he believed that because they went to the Eskom offices as 'fighters' their concerns were addressed more promptly than they would have been otherwise. The benefit of this EFF brand was also highlighted by an EFF cluster head in Protea South (interview, 2 May 2016), who had previously tried to organise a non-profit in his community:

> As a NPO [non-profit organisation] your voice is very low, as opposed to you being in politics or a member of the opposition. Look what the EFF does at the Parliament. If I were to wear maybe an EFF regalia or a cap, even if I do nothing, by just walking people assume that this man, maybe he's one of the 'mad guys'… it's a privilege to be in the EFF, because whether you make sense or not, people are willing to listen.

The national leadership wore EFF regalia in Parliament and during rallies, helping to construct a strong partisan identity in the minds of supporters, opponents, and the public audience. In the party's early days in ANC-dominant KZN, wearing EFF regalia was a bold political statement for local activists:

> People looked at us very brave because they were not used to the EFF and they knew very well that the EFF was showing to be against the ANC. And everywhere there's ANC so why would three people have courage to wear the EFF beret in an ANC-led ward? So they saw us as these people that were being very brave. So that's how we broke the ice and then students started to change.
>
> (EFF organiser, UKZN Howard College, interview, 8 May 2016)

These early local leaders for the EFF explained how they would have membership forms on hand because they were inevitably approached by interested students whenever they wore their berets on campus. Other activists in the province explained how they became members of their local branch after speaking to people they observed wearing EFF regalia in their communities. This aspect of the EFF's populist style played a key role in projecting the image of solidarity and efficacy within the organisation, as well as increasing their visibility to show the party had local members on campuses and in communities.

Protest Tactics and Perceived Efficacy

In addition to uniforms, scholars have found that tactics constitute collective identity, forming an important part of how activists see themselves (Poletta & Jasper, 2001, p. 292). Since its formation, the EFF has consistently organised protests and rallies to attract public attention to their political stances. In 2015 they organised the 'March for Economic Freedom' which led 40 000 supporters to the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to advocate for 'economic inclusion', while their MPs were removed from Parliament for disrupting President Zuma's State of the Nation Address each year from 2015 to 2017 in protest against alleged corruption within the government.

The national leadership of the EFF also mandated its regional bodies to organise local protests around specific issues so as to maintain the visibility of the party between election periods. In 2018 there were at least 25 marches to hospitals organised by regional EFF structures[2] to protest about government health care services as part of a co-ordinated campaign by the national EFF leadership. In 2018 they led protests at H&M stores across the country after deeming the company's advertising racist. This was repeated at Clicks pharmacies across the country in 2020 over its marketing of hair-care products which appeared to denigrate black hair texture. The party leadership took stances against these and other issues which had gone viral on social media, such as an allegedly whites-only matriculation party at a Western Cape high school, which led them to quickly mobilise protests at that location (Cape Argus 2021). In this way, the EFF combined social media activism with real-world protests to garner further attention for the issue – and the party – through social media networks and mainstream media exposure.

The EFF used the disruptive element of a populist style to attract individuals and networks which saw the value of protest in pursuing their political goals:

> If you can look at the ideology of the EFF it's a protest movement. Where there are protests we support those protests. Where there are none, we still make them.
>
> (interview, EFF organiser UKZN Howard College, 8 May 2016)

> Even though it is sometimes violent or chaotic but it makes the voice of the EFF heard, they are the loudest voice. Whatever they say it is taken to notice because of the way they say it.
>
> (interview, EFF Branch Secretary Hammarsdale, 5 April 2018)

These EFF activists saw protesting as a key part of the party's identity, and it helped build solidarity and feelings of empowerment among those who participated. Protests tactics are widely used in South African communities and campuses, so the EFF's tactics aligned with existing practices used by local activists and grassroots organisations.

The leadership of the EFF forged these tactics and sartorial choices into a populist style which engendered a collective identity as 'economic freedom fighters'. Julius Malema was seen as a vocal proponent of the issues that they cared about, and as someone who was not afraid to 'speak truth to power'. Although he was less popular among the general population than leaders in the ANC, DA, and

2 Tabulated by author from various news sources.

EFF, he had the greatest support among members of his own party (BusinessTech 2017). They believed Malema's notoriety was an effective way to draw attention to the positions he expressed. An EFF organiser in Lenasia (interview, 27 April 2016) told me: 'there must be a brand...Malema is there as a president to bring more mass to the organisation'.

The activists I spoke to believed that Malema's leadership was important because of the attention it brought to the purposive incentives that motivated their own activism. An EFF activist at the University of the Witwatersrand (interview, 5 April 2016) explained how Malema was necessary to grow the party and get it noticed, but it was his ideas around land reform, nationalising resources, and decolonisation that led her to join the party: 'For me I don't believe in Julius Malema but I believe *with* Julius Malema. So that idea that he has, I have that idea with him'. While many activists expressed affective attachment towards Julius Malema, these feelings were grounded in the political ideas he represented, and the perceived efficacy his leadership had because of the media attention he attracted compared to other opposition parties:

> The party is not for Julius Malema alone, it belongs to everyone. Julius is just a great leader who must lead this party until such point until we say we don't want him….so far I don't see that happening because we still believe in him, he's a great leader.
>
> (interview, EFF leader Tzaneen, 10 July 2017)

The national leadership of the EFF helped to create an identity as 'economic freedom fighters' through their dress, protest tactics, and support for issues which resonated with many young people in South Africa. This consistently attracted media attention and, for EFF activists, projected a sense of efficacy about the organisation's potential to win elections and contribute to political change. The 'bad manners' and sartorial displays of the EFF's populist style – led by Malema himself – helped give them an identity which differentiated them from other opposition parties and gave activists a sense of solidarity and efficacy.

CONCLUSION

This examination of how a populist style incentivises local party activism reveals a key component of populism's mobilising potential, looking beyond the direct connections between national leaders and voters that dominate much of the existing literature. The EFF attracted activists from diverse organisational backgrounds who possessed civic skills that enabled them to be active grassroots campaigners for the party. Informal settlements in Soweto and Lenasia had rich

histories of protest movements that provided civic education to young people, while mineworkers in Marikana were increasingly politicised by union activities after the Marikana massacre (Sinwell 2015; 2016; 2023; Ngwane 2003).

The EFF was able to mobilise these people primed for political activism, along with the former ANCYL members and university students from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This established bridgeheads in prestigious middle-class institutions like the universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand and within more working-class student bodies like the Durban and Mangosuthu universities of technology. It was the EFF's use of a populist political style that helped it attract these different groups of activists by collapsing their world views within a simplistic frame of black 'people' vs. WMC 'elites'.

This local party infrastructure was not forged with the ethnic ties and neo-patrimonialism that have been dominant explanations of African political party growth (Elischer 2013, pp. 2-4). Instead, the EFF recruited from a generation of activists looking for an effective way to exercise their political voice and pursue their objectives for personal and collective advancement. The party appealed to purposive incentives with their invocation of common issues faced by the black majority, while also providing the material incentives of political careers among contemporary youth and the older 'youth' who had been part of Malema's ANCYL.

The disruptive element of the EFF's populist style also provided solidary incentives to participants, with the party's combative leadership, protest tactics and uniforms giving them a sense of political efficacy as 'economic freedom fighters'. In short, activists were strategic about selecting an organisation that offered them the best vehicle to *perform* their activism in ways which corresponded with their purposive motivations. The establishment of a locally-rooted partisan identity by the EFF has proven to be an important ingredient in the emergence of the first sustained black opposition party which has bridged linguistic and regional divisions in the country. While many young people in Africa's dominant party systems may reject the divisiveness and 'bad manners' of a populist political style, this study indicates its potential effectiveness in building grassroots support for competitive opposition parties.

POSTSCRIPT

The EFF has continued to persevere as a political party, belying initial expectations. However, the 2024 national and provincial elections revealed that its generationally based populist style limits further expansion. The party's growth trajectory continued in Mpumalanga, Western Cape Northern Cape, and Eastern Cape, while it held steady in its stronghold in Northwest, Limpopo and Gauteng provinces (IEC). This indicates a continued nationwide campaigning presence but suggests

an electoral ceiling for a party that appeals primarily to young people in a country where that demographic is underrepresented among registered voters (Bekker, Runciman & Roberts 2022, p. 305).

In KZN the EFF's support fell from 10.0% in 2019 to 2.5% in 2024 and the ANC dropped from 55.5% to 17.4% as the newly formed uMkhonto we Sizwe Party (MK) captured 45.4% of national votes in the province. MK combined elements of a populist style with the trust that its leader and former President Jacob Zuma still enjoyed in that province. With both the EFF and MK evincing aspects of an elite-led vanguardist populism to gain political power (Beresford et al. 2023, p. 4), the latter positioned itself as the voice of black Africans against WMC and the domination of Roman-Dutch law. MK used this populist framing to build local structures comprising disgruntled ANC activists, uMkhonto we Sizwe veterans, and other community members seeking change from the incumbent government (Braun 2024b). Through social media it also mobilised the online RET community – which had previously promoted the EFF – to manipulate public discourse around the elections in MK's favour (CABC 2024). The MK effectively displaced rival parties in KZN only six months after its launch, outperforming the EFF in convincing local activists and voters that it was the most viable challenger to the ruling party.

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