

The 2024 Elections in Botswana: Introduction to the Special Issue

Jeremy Seekings,*  Christian John Makgala[§]  and Batlang Seabo* 

Keywords: Botswana Democratic Party, Umbrella for Democratic Change, election campaign, competitiveness, party system

On 30 October 2024, Botswana voted in the country's thirteenth parliamentary and district council elections since Independence in 1966. The result was the unprecedented defeat of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which had governed Botswana since before Independence, and the formation of a new government by the hitherto opposition Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC). The BDP was not merely defeated but was also crushed, with its share of the vote dropping by more than twenty percentage points in comparison to the previous elections, in 2019. The BDP won only four (out of 61) parliamentary seats and 130 (out of 609) district council seats. It was relegated from being the ruling party to being the smallest of the opposition parties in Parliament. It also lost its control over local government. Before the elections, it controlled almost all of the 31 local councils. After the elections, it controlled only one (very small) council (Chobe).

The elections were a spectacular success for both the UDC and the smaller Botswana Congress Party (BCP). The UDC won 36 parliamentary seats, giving it an outright majority in Parliament. It won 300 district council seats, giving it outright control of 21 local councils and dominance (in coalitions with the Botswana Patriotic Front, BPF) in three others.¹ The BCP also performed strongly by winning 15 parliamentary seats (many more than the BDP) and 121 district council wards (almost as many as the

* Jeremy Seekings, University of Cape Town and Botswana Election Research Network (BERN). Email: jeremy.seekings@gmail.com

[§] Christian John Makgala, University of Botswana and BERN. Email: makgalac@ub.ac.bw

* Batlang Seabo, University of Botswana and BERN. Email: seabob@ub.ac.bw

¹ The UDC also took control of the tiny Sowa Council through nominated councillors.

BDP), mostly across the north of the country. It controlled five district councils (one in coalition with the BDP). The smaller BPF, formed by former president and BDP leader Ian Khama just prior to the 2019 elections, made modest progress by winning an additional two parliamentary seats (taking its total to five) and a total of 42 district council wards (and control of one council). The four big parties (i.e. the UDC, BCP, BDP, and BPF) dominated the elections. One independent candidate was elected to Parliament, making him only the second independent member of Parliament (MP) since Independence. Only eleven independent candidates and three candidates from fringe parties were elected to local councils.

The scale of the BDP's defeat went far beyond what most observers had expected. Prior to the elections, it had been widely anticipated that the BDP would lose many of its parliamentary seats and there would be a 'hung' parliament, with no party achieving an absolute majority. The UDC's outright victory took most observers by surprise.

The articles in this special issue of *Botswana Notes and Records* analyse these unprecedented and unexpected results of the 2024 elections. This special issue is the product of the Botswana Election Research Network, which was established in early 2024 to coordinate research into the elections. The ambition behind the Network was to bring scholars together into a coordinated study of the elections, which draws on analyses of the data on registration and voting from the IEC, data on surveys of public opinion, and constituency-level studies. Whilst the Network hoped to collect more data than proved possible, the articles in this Special Issue constitute the fullest analysis of any election in Botswana to date. The articles examine the background to the elections, campaigns, and results at the local level in several parts of the country, voters' perceptions and motivations, voter turnout, and the results of the elections. There are, inevitably, important topics that have not been analysed in detail, including dynamics within both the hitherto ruling BDP and the hitherto opposition UDC. The analysis of local political dynamics is limited to a few parts of the country.

One of the core members of the Network, Dr Sethunya Tshepo Mosime, died tragically in December 2024. Her enthusiasm, knowledge, and judgement were sorely missed in the workshops where this special issue and this introductory article were prepared.

This introduction to the Special Issue provides an overview and context for the more focused papers that follow. The following section briefly compares the 2024 elections with the previous 2019 elections. This is followed by a discussion of changes in the political context between 2019 and 2024. The article then considers both the evidence from by-

elections and surveys of public opinion on trends in voter perceptions and intentions. The article then examines the overall election results and the geography of electoral change. Finally, the paper considers the implications for the party system and elections in Botswana in the future.

Continuity and Change

The 2024 elections resulted in the first turnover in the country's history. They were, however, not the first elections marked by dramatic change. The previous, 2019, elections also entailed massive change, even though it resulted in the re-election of the ruling BDP. In 2019, 31 out of the 57 parliamentary constituencies returned an MP from a different party than in the previous (2014) elections (Brown 2020). The BDP lost 15 of the parliamentary seats that it had won in 2014, but it won 16 of the 20 seats that the opposition parties had won in 2014. The turnover in 2024 was very similar (although the comparison of 2019 and 2024 is complicated by the addition of four new constituencies in 2024). In 2024, 23 constituencies returned an MP from the same party (although in 10 of these cases, there was a notional change in that the party either joined or left the UDC). At least 34 of the former constituencies returned an MP from a different party (and this figure rises to 38 if you include the 4 new constituencies).

Figure 1 compares the BDP's shares of the vote in each constituency in the 2014 and 2019 elections. Any constituency where the BDP won the same share of the vote in both elections would be a data point on the 45° 'no change' diagonal line. If the data point lies above and to the left of the diagonal, it indicates that the BDP won a larger share of the vote in that constituency in 2019 than it had in 2014. Conversely, if the data point lies below and to the right of the diagonal, then the BDP won a smaller share of the vote in 2019 than it had in 2014. Figure 1 shows that there were many constituencies where the BDP significantly increased its vote share in 2019 and many constituencies where its vote share fell significantly. Most of the former were urban constituencies in and around Gaborone, where the BDP won many seats from opposition parties, and unseated (inter alia) both Duma Boko (the UDC leader) and Gaolathe Ndaba (leader of the small Alliance for Progressives, AP, which soon after joined the UDC). Most of the constituencies where the BDP lost votes were in the Central District, which had been the BDP's primary stronghold since Independence.

Figure 2 repeats the analysis, this time for the 2019 and 2024 elections. Every single data point is located below and to the right of the diagonal, showing that the BDP's share of the vote fell in every one of the country's constituencies. Across the now-former Central District (after it

was divided up in 2022, see below), the BDP's share continued to fall. In the urban constituencies in and around Gaborone, the BDP lost the votes (and seats) in 2024 that it had gained in 2019.

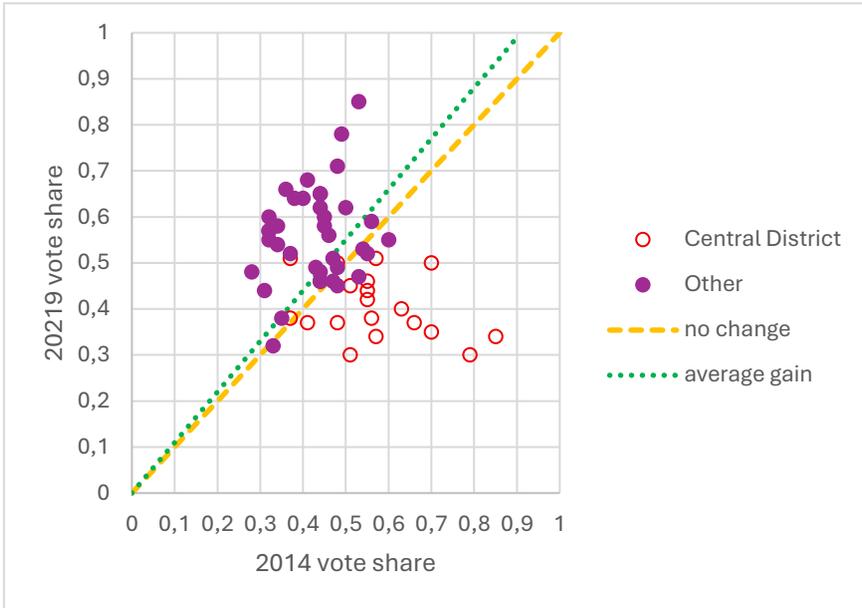


Figure 1: BDP vote share, 2019 v 2014

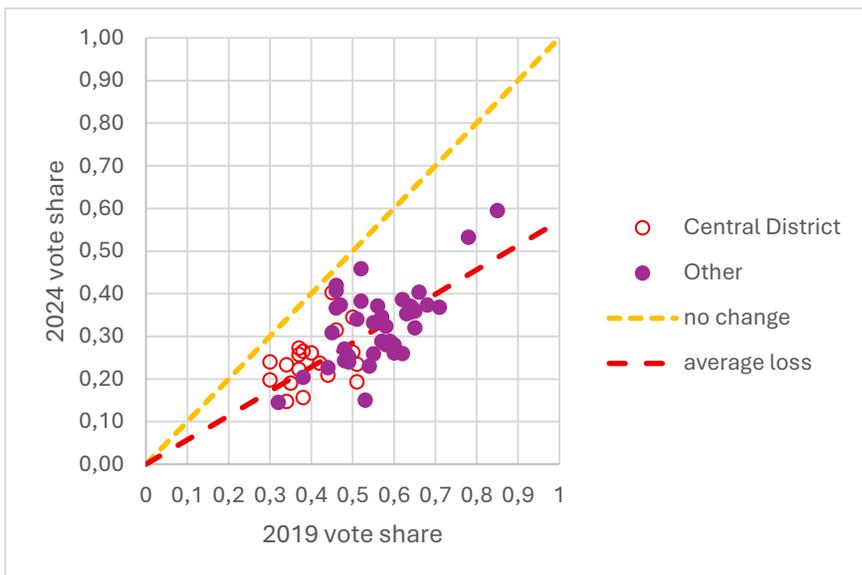


Figure 2: BDP vote share, 2024 v 2019

With hindsight, it appears that it was the 2019 elections that were anomalous, because of the strange circumstances in which President Masisi and the BDP were able to present themselves as the president and party of change when compared to Masisi’s predecessor, Ian Khama, who had formed a rival party and entered into some kind of a relationship with the UDC (Brown, 2020; Seabo and Nyenhuis, 2021). The more appropriate (or longer-term) comparator for the 2024 elections might be the 2014 elections. Table 1 summarises the key results of the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections. Comparing 2014 and 2024, we see that the vote share of the BCP barely changed, the vote share of the UDC increased from 30 per cent to 37 per cent, and the BPF took 8 per cent of the vote. The BDP lost one-third of its vote share. But – and this is the biggest shift over the decade – it lost 90 per cent of its representation in Parliament. In 2024, the BDP won more votes than the BCP and BPF combined but won only four seats compared to their combined 20 seats. As Table 1 shows, the BDP remained the second largest party, ahead of the BCP, in terms of district council seats in 2024, which is a better reflection of the BDP’s share of the vote.

Table 1: Results of elections in 2014, 2019, and 2024

		BDP	UDC	BCP	BPF	Other	Total
2014	Parliamentary vote share	46%	30%	20%		3%	100%
	MPs	37	17	3		0	57
	Councillors	311	116	56		4	487
2019	Parliamentary vote share	52%	36%		4%	7%^	99%
	MPs	38	15		3	1^	57
	Councillors	332+1*	129		17	11^	489+1*
2024	Parliamentary vote share	30%	37%	21%	8%	4%	100%
	MPs	4	36	15	5	1	61
	Councillors	130	300	124	42	13	609
<p>* One ward was not filled in the general election. The IEC (2019) reports that the BDP won 334 seats, but this is inconsistent with the reported totals for the country less the other parties.</p> <p>^ Includes the AP, which contested the 2019 elections separately from the UDC but joined the UDC for the 2024 elections. The AP won six seats, the BMD won one seat, and independent candidates won four seats.</p>							

Sources: IEC (2014, 2019, 2024); data provided by the IEC on the 2024 elections.

The Changing Context

Between 2019 and 2024 the context for elections changed in several important respects. First, reforms were effected to the country's administrative districts, with consequent changes to district councils. Then the boundaries of many parliamentary constituencies and district council wards were revised, with the creation of new constituencies and wards. Opposition parties moved in and out of coalitions, which contributed to delays in most parties' selection of candidates through primary elections.

In 2019, Botswana was divided into 10 district councils and five city or town councils. In 2022, the BDP government created an additional 17 district councils and two town councils. The country's largest district – Central District – was dismantled, with former sub-district authorities elevated to independent districts (Mahalapye, Palapye, Bobirwa, Tonata, Tutume, Boteti, and Serowe). The government said that this was to improve service delivery, but it has been suggested that its objective was to undermine the influence of Ian Khama by breaking up Central District (the former colonial 'Bangwato Reserve' or Gammangwato) and encouraging voters to prioritise local ethnic identities (such as Batswapong and Kalanga, among others).

The restructuring of districts informed the work of the Delimitation Commission chaired by Justice Mokwadi Chris Gabanagae. For 20 years, from 2004 to 2024, Botswana comprised a total of 57 parliamentary constituencies and 490 district council wards. For the 2024 elections, following the report of the Gabanagae Commission (in February 2023), the total was raised to 61. Additional constituencies were created in Kgatleng, Kweneng, Maun, Okavango, and Ghanzi, whilst one constituency in south-eastern Botswana was (in effect) divided and incorporated into other constituencies. The total number of district council wards was also increased, from 490 to 609. The boundaries of many constituencies and wards were adjusted. Some wards were moved from one district to another.

Whilst these changes to the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies and district council wards do not appear to have been politically motivated, they did have political consequences. The creation of additional constituencies created openings for aspirant MPs and councillors, but the redrawn boundaries also resulted in conflict. The case that attracted the most attention was in the south, where one part of the former constituency of Mmathethe-Molapowabojang was combined with the former Goodhope-Mabule constituency to create the new constituency of Goodhope-Mmathethe, with boundaries corresponding to the boundaries of the newly-created Goodhope District Council. When the incumbent BDP MP in Goodhope-Mabule, Eric Molale, announced that he

would not stand for re-election, President Mokgweetsi Masisi sought to parachute into the newly merged constituency his Minister of Finance, Peggy Serame. But the incumbent BDP MP in Mmathethe-Molapowabojang, Edwin Dikoloti, was in no mood to stand aside. Dikoloti overwhelmingly won the BDP primary election, was deselected by the BDP leadership, ran as an independent candidate, and defeated Serame comfortably, thus becoming the second independent MP in the history of Botswana.

Changed ward boundaries also had consequences. These can be illustrated in the case of one of the wards for the Mahalapye District Council. The village of Moralane, to the west of Shoshong, was previously part of a ward with the village of Mosolotshane. For 2024, it was moved into a ward with Kodibeleng, to the south-east. The veteran Botswana National Front (BNF), and sometime AP, activist from Moralane, Mogalakwe Mogalakwe, had contested at least six elections on the basis of campaigning in Mosolotshane as well as Moralane. Now he had to switch his attention to Kodibileng. His campaign was doomed to failure in the face of a strong candidate from Kodibileng.

The political landscape was also changed as a result of the alliances among and disunity in the opposition parties. In the 2019 elections, the UDC coalition had comprised the BNF, the BCP, and several smaller parties (including the Botswana People's Party, BPP, the oldest party in the country). Only the small Botswana Movement for Democracy (BMD) and the AP stood outside of the UDC (the BMD having been expelled from the UDC). The BPF, formed shortly before the 2019 elections, did not join the UDC but it and the UDC chose not to compete against each other in several constituencies. After the 2019 elections, the various opposition parties discussed whether to remain in, to join, or to leave the UDC. Through 2020 and 2021, it was reported that the BCP was likely to leave the UDC. In July 2022, the BCP resolved to remain in the UDC for six more months in the interests of reconciliation. In January 2023, the BCP announced that it would not remain in the UDC. Instead, it was discussing with the AP the formation of a rival coalition. The AP, however, proceeded to join the UDC. The UDC appeared attractive because it excelled in by-elections nationwide, by winning about 80 per cent of those held between 2019 and 2024. The BPF, for its part, appeared to be in the UDC until early 2024, when it announced that it would contest the elections separately. In practice, Khama's concern to ensure the defeat of Masisi and the BDP meant that the BPF mobilised strategically. In some constituencies, the BPF supported UDC candidates. In others, where it recognised that it could not win, the BPF nonetheless stood its own

candidates in order to take votes away from the BDP and thereby help the UDC.

The realignment of the opposition contributed to the quasi-defection of four MPs who had been members of the BCP but had been elected for the UDC in 2019. In July 2022, the BCP suspended five of its MPs after they attended a UDC caucus, contrary to the BCP's instructions. Four of the five chose to remain in the UDC, which prompted the BCP to expel them. Thereafter they were individual members of the UDC without any party affiliation. Five other incumbent elected MPs and one nominated MP defected from their former party before the 2024 elections. Two MPs defected from the UDC to the BDP (in Shoshong and Tonota). Three elected MPs defected from the BDP: one to the BPF (in Jwaneng-Mabutsane), one to the BPP (in Francistown West), and one to stand as an independent candidate (Dikoloti, in the new constituency of Goodhope-Mmathethe). One nominated MP defected to the BCP (to stand in Kgatleng West).

Political Trends, 2019–2024

By-elections and surveys of public opinion provide some evidence on trends in voter attitudes and preferences over this period. The evidence from both by-elections and surveys suggests that voters' enthusiasm for Masisi and the BDP soured in 2020–2021. By the end of 2021, the BDP was losing by-elections. Survey data from mid-2022 confirmed this picture of deepening voter disaffection.

The results of the one parliamentary and nineteen district council ward by-elections held between 2019 and 2024 augured badly for the BDP. The first by-elections were delayed until the end of 2021 because of Covid-19. In the 11 district council ward by-elections held in December 2021, the BDP retained two wards, won one from the UDC, and lost five wards that it had hitherto held (three to the UDC and one each to the AP and BPF). The other three wards were retained by the UDC. In the eight ward by-elections held in 2022 and 2023, the BDP retained only one ward and lost the other seven wards that it had hitherto held (six to the UDC and one to the BCP). In total, therefore, the BDP retained three wards, won one from the opposition, and lost twelve wards that it had won in 2019. On average, the BDP's share of the vote in these 19 wards fell by 12 percentage points from 47 per cent in the 2019 elections to 35 per cent in the by-elections.

The only parliamentary by-election between 2019 and 2024 was in the Serowe West constituency in July 2023. This by-election was occasioned by the absence (in self-imposed exile) of the MP elected for the BPF in 2019, Tshekedi Khama (popularly known as 'TK'), who was the

younger brother of Ian Khama. The other opposition parties lined up in support of the BPF, whose candidate won the by-election with 67 per cent of the vote. The BDP might have taken some comfort in that its share of the vote remained unchanged, which was better than in the district council by-elections.

The ward by-election results proved to be generally good predictors of the results in the 2024 elections. It is impossible to do a precise comparison because the boundaries of some of the wards were changed between the by-elections and the 2024 elections. But, in the wards that appear comparable, the BDP's share of the vote fell by a further 6 percentage points between the by-elections and the 2024 elections. In other words, about two-thirds of the swing away from the BDP in these wards occurred between 2019 and the by-elections, with about one-third of the swing occurring between the by-elections and 2024.

Table 2: Vote shares in the 2019 and 2024 elections compared to Afrobarometer survey data on voting intention

Party	2019 AB survey (%)	2019 elections		2022 AB survey (%)	2024 AB survey (%)	2024 elections	
		Share of vote (%)	Share of eligible electorate (%)			Share of vote (%)	Share of eligible electorate (%)
BDP	43	52	32	22	31	30	18
UDC	27	36	22	34	23	37	22
BCP				7	11	21	13
BPF	2	4	2	3	3	8	5
Other	4	7 [^]	4	4	2	4	2
Don't know / refused / not vote	24		39	30	31		40
Total	100	99	99	100	101	100	100

[^] Includes the AP, which contested the 2019 elections separately from the UDC but joined the UDC for the 2024 elections.
Share of electorate: the estimated eligible population, and not only the registered voters.

Sources: IEC 2019, 2024; Afrobarometer (AB) 2022 and 2024 surveys; our calculations.

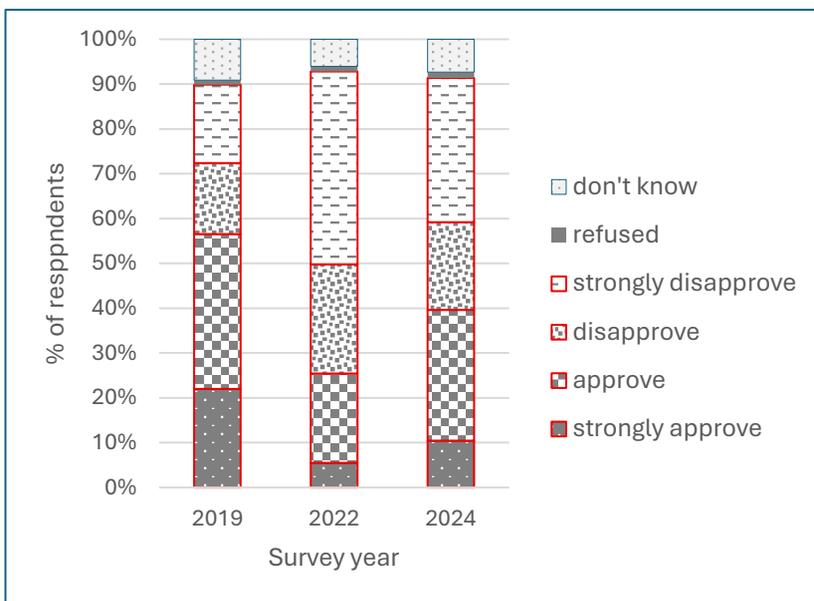


Figure 3a: Assessments of the performance of the president, 2019–2024
 Source: Afrobarometer survey datasets; authors' calculations.

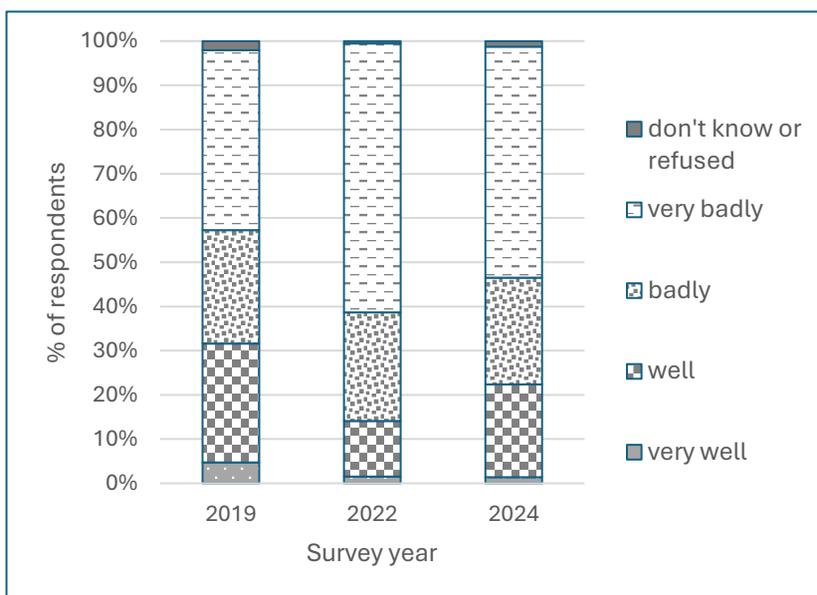


Figure 3b: Assessments of the performance of the government on job creation, 2019–2024
 Source: Afrobarometer survey datasets; authors' calculations.

This picture of deepened disaffection is consistent with the evidence from Afrobarometer's countrywide survey of public opinion in mid-2022. A comparison of the 2022 survey with the previous Afrobarometer survey, conducted just prior to the 2019 elections, suggests that there had already been a large swing away from the BDP (see Table 2). This was driven in large part by criticism of President Masisi and his government's performance on key issues (see Figures 3a and 3b).

The 2024 survey was fielded in July, three months before the general election and just prior to the primary elections of the BDP, UDC, and BPF. The survey suggested that there had been a slight increase in support for the BDP – and in approval of the president's and government's performance – since 2022. This was not reflected in the actual results of the elections held three months later.

There are at least four possible explanations for the difference between the Afrobarometer data on voting intention in July 2024 and the actual election results in October 2024:

1. The Afrobarometer sample was unrepresentative of the electorate.
2. Afrobarometer respondents were less than honest in declaring their voting intentions.
3. Some voters decided, or changed their minds, during the election campaigns.
4. Turnout in the elections was uneven, in that turnout was lower among BDP supporters than among supporters of the opposition parties.

It is likely that all four explanations have some validity. The third and fourth explanations have been suggested to us by candidates from different parties. The UDC's mobilisation appears to have been very effective (including among younger voters) in the final days of the campaign, when a UDC victory became more and more likely. BDP candidates bemoan the difficulties in getting their supporters to vote on election day.

Botswana can only vote in elections if they have registered in advance. According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the total number of Botswana eligible to register and vote in 2024 was 1,715,656 (IEC 2024). The IEC set itself the target of registering 1.3 million voters. It achieved only a total of 1,038,261 voters, i.e. about 80 per cent of its target and only 60 per cent of the eligible voting population. Of this total, 1,036,229 were registered locally and 2,032 were registered in the diaspora. This was despite reported financial challenges experienced by the IEC, which led to the exercise being repeated twice. More women

than men registered to vote in the 2024 elections. Out of the total number of registered voters, 562,802 women registered compared to 473,441 men (IEC 2024). Voter registration by age groups increased save for the 18–25 age group, which shows that apathy is still prevalent among this group of voters.

Candidate Selection

All four major parties selected candidates through primary elections. In a few cases, primary election results were overruled by party leaders (including in Goodhope-Mmathethe). The BCP held the first phase of its primary elections in October 2023 and completed the second phase in December 2023. The UDC, BDP, and BPF primaries were delayed until July 2024. As in previous years, a substantial minority – about 20 per cent – of the electorate voted in the BDP’s primaries. Smaller numbers voted in the opposition parties’ primaries. Overall, it is likely that between one-quarter and one-third of the electorate voted in one or other of the parties’ primaries.

Men vastly outnumbered women among the candidates who won the primaries and proceeded to contest the general election. The BDP selected only seven women (out of 61) as parliamentary candidates. The BPF and BCP each selected six women candidates. The UDC selected only three women candidates.²

The delays in holding primaries appear to have had more negative consequences for the BDP than for any of the opposition parties. In previous elections, parties held primaries well before the elections (as the BCP did in 2023), allowing the parties to regroup behind the candidates who won their primaries. In 2024, the BDP emerged from its belated primaries deeply divided. Some losing candidates defected to other parties or stood as independents. Others actively ‘decampaigned’ their party’s candidate in the general election by encouraging their supporters to vote for candidates for the opposition parties. Others simply remained aloof, neither supporting nor opposing their party’s candidate. The BDP held ‘reconciliation’ events in some constituencies. As the article on Shoshong discusses, it is likely that decampaigned and indifference cost BDP candidates many votes, in some cases enough to lose the elections. In most cases, however, BDP candidates lost by more votes than can be accounted for by decampaigned and indifference.

An important factor in the 2024 elections was the long-running war of attrition between Masisi and Khama, which began soon after Masisi

² The IEC (2024) undercounts the number of women parliamentary candidates.

replaced Khama as president in April 2018. Masisi believed Khama's unpopular leadership nearly cost the BDP the 2014 elections, when the party retained power despite winning only 47 per cent of the popular vote while the combined opposition garnered 53 per cent (but not a majority because of their disunity and the first-past-the-post electoral system). Masisi soon discarded several unpopular policies that had been initiated by Khama. Masisi's changes resonated with the electorate. Khama was displeased, which led to a fallout with Masisi that became so severe that Khama backed the formation of the BPF just before the 2019 elections and became its patron (Brown 2020). The UDC aligned with Khama, who was seen as unduly interfering with Masisi's governance, and was punished by the voters with significant losses in the 2019 elections (*ibid*; Seabo and Nyenhuis 2021). Nevertheless, Masisi's relentless pursuit of Khama through fabricated court cases, which led to Khama fleeing to South Africa in November 2021, claiming his life was in danger, distracted Masisi from governance and garnered public sympathy for Khama. A Masisi-manipulated constitutional review process and failure to fulfil 2019 election promises, such as job creation and combatting pervasive elite corruption, significantly affected Masisi's popularity. Even some BDP loyalists and activists claimed that they could not support Masisi and that they voted for the opposition instead.

The Competitiveness of the Elections

The electoral dominance of the BDP prior to 2024 masked the rising competitiveness in parliamentary elections into the 2000s, as shown by Poteete (2012) and Burchard (2013), using slightly different criteria to measure competitiveness. By most measures, the competitiveness of elections peaked in 2014, diminished somewhat in 2019, and rose again in 2024, to almost the same level as in 2014.

Poteete (2012) measured the competitiveness of constituencies using three variables: Was the margin of victory in a constituency less than 5 per cent? Did the incumbent party lose? Did the victorious candidate win less than 50 per cent of the vote? She showed that the proportion of constituencies that were competitive surpassed the proportion that were uncompetitive, for the first time in 2009. Poteete (2015: 446) later suggested that the 2014 elections were 'the most competitive [elections] to date', with the average margin of victory 'plummeting' from 31 per cent (in 2009) to 15 per cent (in 2014).

Burchard (2013) measured competitiveness in terms of, firstly, the average margin of victory in parliamentary constituencies and, secondly, the proportion of parliamentary constituencies where the margin of victory

was 10 per cent or less. This latter proportion rose from 18 per cent in 1989 to 42 per cent in 2009 (Burchard 2013: 116).

Brown (2020) reproduced Poteete's analysis for the 2019 elections. He showed that the 2019 elections appeared to have reversed the trend of rising competitiveness. The average margin of victory rose, and the number of highly competitive constituencies fell.

We reproduce these analyses for elections from 2004 to 2024 (see Table 3). Measuring one of Poteete's variables – whether the incumbent party lost – is not straightforward. For example, if a constituency was won by the UDC in 2019 (when the UDC coalition included the BCP) and retained by the same MP, now standing for the BCP against the UDC, has the incumbent party won or lost? We chose to count this scenario as an incumbent victory. We also chose to ignore defections between 2019 and 2024. The constituencies of Shoshong and Tonota were therefore not counted as lost by the incumbent party because both were won by the UDC in 2019 and 2024. In addition, there were four more constituencies in 2024 than in the preceding elections.

The different measures of competitiveness are not consistent when comparing 2024 with previous elections. The average margin of victory in 2024 (20%) was the same as in 2019, higher than in 2014, but lower than in 2004. The number of very close constituency elections (<5% margin of victory) in 2024 was similar to 2019 (and 2009), but the number of constituencies where the victorious candidate won less than 50 per cent of the vote rose sharply from 2019 to 2024 – to almost the same proportion as in 2014. The number of constituencies where the incumbent party lost was higher than ever before (but only by the number of additional constituencies). By Poteete's aggregate measure, elections were more competitive in 2024 than in 2019, although this is driven by the large number of seats that changed hands instead of the narrow margins of victory. By Burchard's measure, the 2024 elections were similar to the 2019 elections. By most measures, the 2024 elections were less competitive than the 2014 elections. The 2019 elections again appears to be the anomaly (in this case because the BPC was then part of the UDC, which reduced a number of otherwise three-way races to two-way races).

Table 3: Competitiveness of parliamentary elections

Election	Average margin of victory (%)	Number of parliamentary constituencies	Constituencies where ...				Competitiveness of constituency				
			margin of victory <10%	margin of victory <5%	incumbent party lost	winning candidate won <50% of vote	Poteete criteria			Burchard criteria	
							Not competitive	Competitive	Highly competitive	Not competitive	Competitive
2004	22%	57	20	9	10	17	35	9	13	37	20
2009	20%*	57	22	12	14**	13	34	9	14	35	22
2014	15%	57	28	22	18	29	19	14	24	39	28
2019	20%	57	19	10	32	17	17	26	14	38	19
2024	20%	61	16	11	36	30	15	22	24	42	19

* This figure is provided by Burchard (2013) and Brown (2020), and is consistent with my calculations using IEC data. Poteete (2015: 446) reports that the average margin in 2009 was 31.4%. This appears to be an error.

** This includes Lobatse, where the incumbent MP stood successfully as an independent candidate.

Sources: Calculated using criteria from Burchard (2013) and Poteete (2012) and data on election results as reported by IEC. Note that incumbent party losing is understood as the party that won the preceding general election lost, i.e. not taking into account defections or by-elections. In cases where a party joined or left the UDC, these are not counted as a change of party. This application of the criteria means that some of these data differ from the data reported in Burchard (2013) and Brown (2020).

Whether or not the 2024 elections were more competitive than preceding elections, they were certainly highly competitive in some parliamentary constituencies. In almost half of the 61 constituencies, the winning candidate won less than half of the total valid vote (see Figure 4a). The UDC’s Ketlhalefile Motshegwa won Mmadinare with only 30 per cent of the valid votes cast. The largest vote share was in Mahalapye West, where the UDC’s David Tshere won 73 per cent of the vote. Winning margins were often narrow. In eleven constituencies, the winner won by less than 5 percentage points (see Figure 4b) and in another five constituencies the winning margin was less than 10 per cent. The BDP’s Mabuse Pule won Kgatleng East by only 30 votes (out of more than 11,000) whilst the BCP’s Ruben Kaizer defeated the incumbent MP (and former BCP member) Dithapelo Keorapetse in Selebi Phikwe West by only 36 votes (out of more than 8,000). The largest margin (58%) was Tshere’s in Mahalapye West.

Figures 4a and 4b point to the fragile basis of the UDC’s and BCP’s gain. Five UDC MPs and three BCP MPs (together with two of the four BDP MPs and one independent candidate) won by less than 5 per cent of the vote.

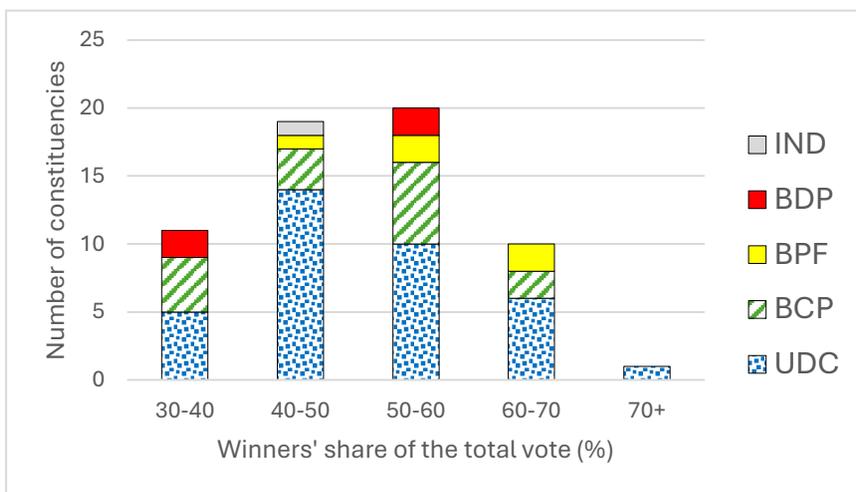


Figure 4a: Constituencies won by winner’s vote share and party in the 2024 elections

Note: IND denotes an independent candidate.

Source: Calculated using data from IEC.

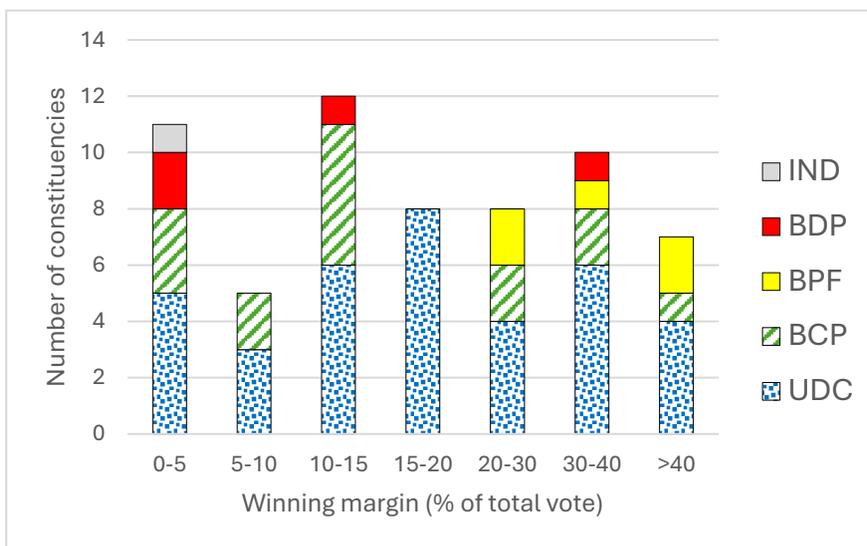


Figure 4b: Constituencies won by winning margin and party in the 2024 elections

Note: IND denotes an independent candidate.

Source: Calculated using data from IEC.

Parliamentary Elections Results

A total of 262 candidates contested the parliamentary elections in 2024 (IEC 2024). This was an increase from the 210 parliamentary candidates in 2019 (IEC 2019), again largely because the BPC competed against the UDC in many parts of the country.

Table 4: Fate of incumbent MPs in 2024

Outcome	BDP	Opposition	Total
Did not stand	4	1	5
Lost in primary elections	9	-	9
Stood in general election; lost	20	2	22
Stood in general election; won	4	16	20
Stood in general election as an independent candidate	1	-	1
Total	38	19	57

In 2024, only 21 out of 57 incumbent MPs were re-elected. This meant that 40 of the incoming 61 MPs had not been elected in the previous

elections (although some were returning to Parliament after an interval away). Table 4 summarises the fate of the 57 incumbent MPs, by party (as of early 2024). Only 21 of the incumbent MPs (almost all from opposition parties) were re-elected. Five MPs (mostly opponents of Masisi in the BDP) did not stand. Nine MPs (all in the BDP) were defeated in their party’s primary elections. Twenty-two (mostly from the BDP) were defeated in the general election.

Because the winning margin in many constituencies was small, a smaller swing away from the BDP to the opposition parties would have had a large effect on the UDC’s majority. Figure 5 and Table 5 show the hypothetical consequences of a smaller swing, i.e. of the BDP winning a larger share of the vote in each parliamentary constituency. The effects are calculated for each constituency by reallocating hypothetical votes to the BDP candidates from the opposition party candidates in proportion to each of the opposition parties’ share of the vote.

The overall swing against the BDP was 22 percentage points. If the swing away from the BDP candidate was reduced by 1 per cent – i.e. if the BDP candidate had been won an additional 1 per cent of the vote – then the BDP would have not lost the Mmopane-Metsimotlhabe constituency to the UDC. If the swing away from BDP candidates had been reduced by 2 per cent, i.e. if BDP candidates had won an additional 2 per cent of their constituencies, then the BDP would have held on to two more seats (Kgatleng West and Kgalagadi North).

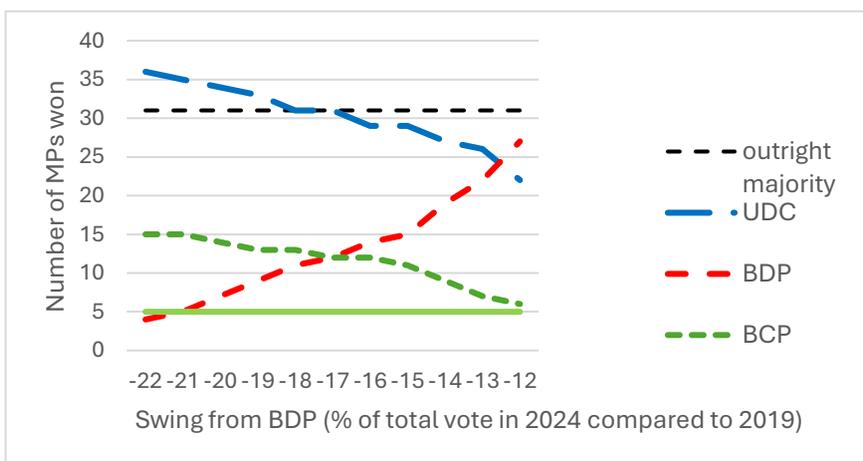


Figure 5: Hypothetical number of MPs elected by party if the swing away from the BDP had been smaller

Source: Calculated using data from IEC.

Table 5: Constituencies that the BDP would not have lost, given a smaller swing against it

If swing away from BDP was only ...	Constituencies that the BDP would not have lost to UDC	Constituencies that the BDP would not have lost to BCP
21%	Mmopane-Metsimotlhabe	-
20%	Kgalagadi North	Kgatleng West
19%	Charleshill	Tati East
18%	Mmadinare Francistown East	-
17%	-	Gamalete
16%	Lentsweletau-Lephepe Jwaneng-Mabutsane	-
15%	-	Okavango East
14%	Gaborone North Mogoditshane East	Selebi Phikwe West Okavango West
13%	Kgatleng Central	Tswapong South Bobirwa
12%	Mogoditshane West Boteti West Kanye West Molepolole South	Selebi Phikwe East

This exercise shows how sensitive the BDP's defeat was to the scale of the swing away from it to the opposition parties. If this swing had been reduced by only 1 percentage point, then the BDP would have won one additional seat, giving it five MPs rather than four. If the BDP had reduced the swing by 5 percentage points, then it would have won eight additional seats, giving it twelve MPs, and reducing the UDC to 31 MPs, i.e. to the minimum required for an outright majority. If the BDP had reduced the swing by 6 percentage points, then it would have won an additional 14 seats, thereby not only denying the UDC an outright majority but also overtaking the BCP to become the official opposition. If the BDP had reduced the swing away from it to only 12 per cent of the vote, then it would have been the largest party in Parliament (although still short of a parliamentary majority).

This serves to underscore a key point about the elections: The result was catastrophic for the BDP because of the scale of the swing against it. If the swing away from the BDP had been 'only' 12 per cent of the vote (compared to 2019), then it would have lost its outright majority

but would have remained the largest party in Parliament. A swing of more than 12 per cent resulted in the annihilation of the BDP and the UDC winning an unlikely outright majority. This has implications for future elections. Even a small swing back to the BDP would result in a very different political landscape.

Local Government Elections

Elections were held for 609 seats in the thirty-one local councils. Both the number of councils and the total number of seats were increased compared to 2019. A total of 2,457 candidates contested the local government elections (of whom 379 were women). This was an increase from the 1,546 candidates in 2019 (IEC 2019, 2024).

The BDP lost most of its council seats to the UDC, BCP, and BPF. The UDC won 300 seats, the BDP won 130, the BCP won 124, the BPF 42, and the tiny Botswana Republican Party won one seat. Twelve independent candidates won seats. Compared to 2019, the BDP lost more than 200 council seats while the UDC gained almost as many.

The UDC's shock electoral triumph was mirrored in the number of district councils it controlled after the elections. The party won outright control of 21 administrative districts, and won another three in coalition with the BPF. The BCP won control of five district councils, including one in coalition with the BDP. The BDP and BPF each won control of one district council. Table 6 shows the district councils controlled by each party after the 2024 general election in comparison with the 2019 elections.¹

The Geography of the Elections and the Changing Party System

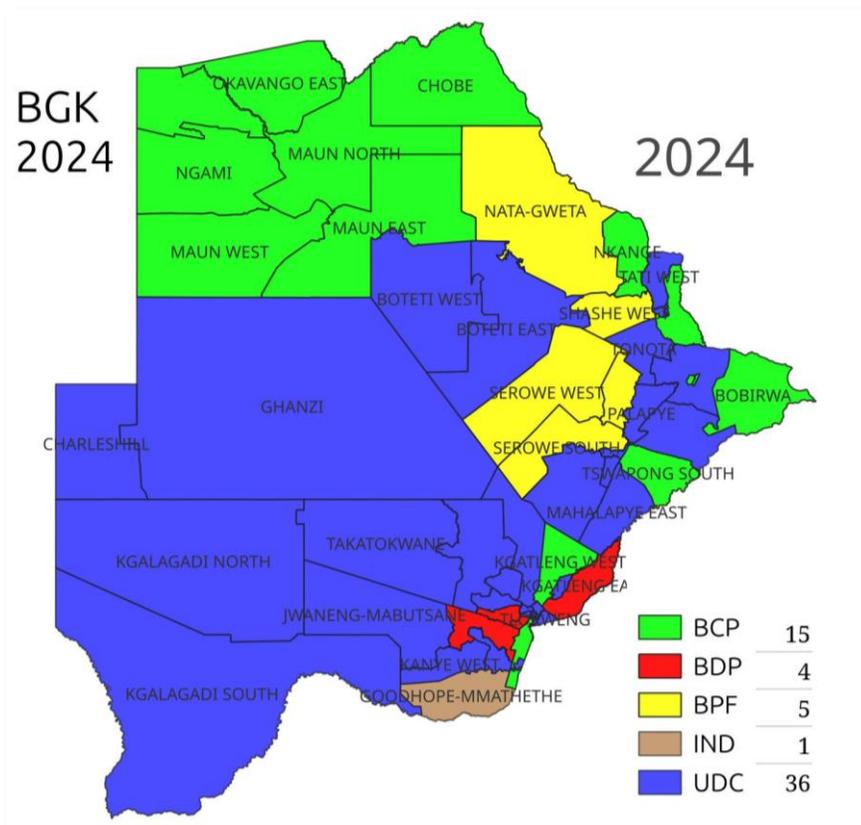
The composition of the new parliament was disproportionate to the aggregate vote shares because the opposition parties tended to have regionally concentrated support whilst the BDP had diffuse support across the whole country. This was clearest in the cases of the BCP and BPF. Twelve of the BCP's 15 parliamentary seats were spread across the north of the country. The BPF's five seats stretched north from Serowe. The UDC's wins included all eight seats in and around Gaborone, another 11 seats along the A1 Highway north to Francistown (through Mahalapye, Palapye, and Tonota), and a further 10 seats stretching west of Gaborone

¹ Statistics on the local councils are inconsistent. The IEC (2024: 37) appears to misreport the outcomes. Table 6 was compiled on the basis of the detailed ward results reported by the IEC (2024) supplemented by research using the councils' Facebook pages.

through Molepolole and across the Kgalagadi to the western border with Namibia (see Map 1).

Table 6: Local councils after the 2019 elections and after the 2024 elections

After the 2019 elections		After the 2024 elections		
Council	Elected councillors	Council	Mayor	Coalition partner
Central	BDP	Palapye	UDC	BPF
		Mahalapye	UDC	
		Tonota	UDC	BPF
		Sowa	UDC	?
		Boteti	UDC	
		Tutume	UDC	BPF
		Bobirwa	BCP	BDP
		Serowe	BPF	
North-East	BDP	North-East	UDC	
North-West	UDC	North-West	BCP	
		Okavango	BCP	
Chobe	BDP	Chobe	BDP	
Gaborone	BDP	Gaborone	UDC	
Kgalagadi	BDP	Tsabong	UDC	
		Hukuntsi	UDC	
Kweneng	BDP	Kweneng	UDC	
		Mogoditshane	UDC	
		Lethakeng	UDC	
Kgatleng	BDP	Kgatleng	UDC	
Lobatse	BDP	Lobatse	UDC	
Jwaneng	BDP	Jwaneng	UDC	
Francistown	BDP	Francistown	UDC	
Selebi Phikwe	divided	Selebi Phikwe	BCP	
Southern	BDP	Moshupa	UDC	
		Kanye	UDC	
		Mabutsane	UDC	
		Goodhope	UDC	
South-East	BDP	Tlokweneng	UDC	
		Ramotswa	BCP	
Ghanzi	divided	Charleshill	UDC	
		Ghanzi	UDC	



Map 1: The spread of election results according to party colours

Note: IND denotes an independent candidate.

Source:

<https://web.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=888617413252166&set=a.427321419381770>

The election results suggest that Botswana comprises four broad regions in terms of electoral support. Table 7 shows parliamentary vote share and parliamentary representation by party in these four different parts of the country.

The BCP won 42 per cent of the vote across the north of the country, from the North-West, across the North and North-East and Francistown, to Selebi Phikwe. The UDC dominated across the southern part of the country, from Ghanzi and Kgalagadi through to Gaborone and the South-East. It faced opposition from the BCP and BDP in the heavily urban south-east of Botswana, i.e. in Gaborone, Kgatleng, and South-East. However, in Kweneng, the former Southern District, Ghanzi and Kgalagadi, the BCP had little support, with the BDP posing the only

competition to the UDC. The BDP is the only party with countrywide support but with less than half of the vote everywhere. The spread of its support meant that its votes were not matched by parliamentary representation. In each of the four regions shown in Table 7, the BDP was in second place in terms of the number of votes, but nowhere did it have the most votes.

Table 7: Party strength by region

Party	North-West, North-East, Francistown, Selebi-Phikwe		Central		Gaborone, Kgatleng, South-East		Kweneng, Southern, Ghanzi, Kgalagadi		Botswana total	
	MPs	Vote share (%)	MPs	Vote share (%)	MPs	Vote share (%)	MPs	Vote share (%)	MPs	Vote share (%)
UDC	4	24	9	32	7	43	16	46	36	37
BCP	10	42	3	21	2	25	0	8	15	21
BPF	0	3	5	20	0	2	0	4	5	8
BDP	0	28	0	24	1	29	3	37	4	31
Other	0	3	0	3	0	1	1	5	1	3
Total	14	100	17	100	10	100	20	100	61	100

The 2024 electoral outcomes raise several implications for Botswana’s party system as well as for our understanding of Botswana’s political parties. The fall of the BDP from state power also marked an end of the dominant party system that had endured since Independence, and it possibly ushered in a multiparty system. Like other dominant parties in the region, the BDP’s stranglehold on power was maintained by a combination of ethnic voting, party loyalty, and its image as the party that had delivered Independence. Considered a conservative right-wing party, the BDP was also popular among farmers and private business. The BDP’s association with Seretse Khama, the founding president of Botswana and paramount chief of the largest district (Central District, until 2022), made the BDP more appealing to Botswana.

Botswana always maintained an apparent multiparty system after Independence, in contrast to some other countries in the region where opposition parties were banned and one-party systems were institutionalised. By the time of the advent of the third wave of democracy in the region in the early 1990s, and the late independence of Namibia and South Africa, the BDP had already established itself as a dominant party. The BDP continued to win every election, although not by the same landslide as in the previous decades. The BDP faced a potent challenge for the first time in the 1994 general election. Its dominance was curtailed

when the BNF, which was considered a left-wing party (see Molomo 2000), won 13 parliamentary seats. Wiseman (1998) analysed Botswana's party system in terms of a slow evolution from a dominant-party system to a semi-dominant-party system. He based this on the evident decline in the popular vote for the BDP and a steady rise in the combined popular vote for opposition parties.

At this point, scholars concluded that a two-party system was emerging (e.g. Wiseman 1998; Poteete 2012). The BDP was able to hang on to power in 1999, in part due to the first-past-the-post electoral system and the implosion of the BNF (Poteete 2012). However, the real threat to the dominance of the BDP came with its historic split in 2010 and the formation of the BMD, which was a moderate party led by young, vibrant politicians who were staunch critics of Ian Khama (Lotshwao and Suping 2013). The BMD's cooperation with the BNF resulted in the formation of the UDC coalition in 2012 to challenge the BDP in the 2014 elections. In 2014, the BDP won less than half of the popular vote. Whilst it won a majority in Parliament, it faced stronger opposition in Parliament. The poor performance of the BCP in the 2014 elections meant that Botswana appeared to confirm that the country had shifted from a dominant-party system to a two-party system (comprising the BDP and BNF-led UDC). In 2019, the BCP joined the UDC, which reinforced the appearance of a two-party system. But two small parties remained outside of the UDC: The AP, which had been formed after a split in the BMD, and a new party, the BPF, which was formed by ex-President Ian Khama due to a fallout with his successor Masisi. Botswana thus appeared to have a two-party system with some additional small opposition parties.

Against this backdrop, the 2024 electoral outcomes cause us to pause and reflect again on the party system. The newly reshaped UDC – comprising the BNF, the leftist BPP, and the social liberal AP – faced off not only against the BDP but also against the BPF and the BCP, both of which chose to contest the elections outside of the UDC. The BDP, UDC, and BCP all enjoyed substantial support, which caused three-way races in some constituencies. In one part of the former Central District, the BPF also mounted a strong challenge. It is clear that Botswana no longer has a two-party system. Many observers anticipated that the 2024 elections would result in a 'hung' parliament with no party winning an absolute majority. In Botswana's new multiparty system, the UDC was able to win an absolute majority despite winning only 37 per cent of the vote. Its coalition with the BPF and the one independent MP raises the government's share of the vote, but only to 47 per cent, i.e. less than one half of the total.

The 2024 elections thus suggest that Botswana's party system has evolved into a truly competitive multiparty system. Within the UDC, BNF candidates only accounted for 23 per cent of the total vote (as shown by Ramsay in his article in this issue). The BNF was therefore only slightly ahead of the BCP, which won 21 per cent of the vote. This meant that, of all of the individual parties, it was the BDP that won the most votes.

The UDC not only faces opposition from both the BCP and the BDP, but it also faces the challenge of maintaining unity between its three constituent parties (the BNF, the AP, and the BPP) and ally (the BPF). As we saw above, any loss of votes would deprive the UDC of a parliamentary majority in the next elections. Not only did the BCP and BDP retain substantial support but the smaller BPF – which is currently (in 2025) collaborating with the UDC in national government and in several district councils – is also well positioned to act as a 'kingmaker' in the next, 2029, polls.

This Special Issue

The first three articles in this special issue examine aspects of the background to the elections. In the first article, Ramsay details the Botswana National Front's uneasy path to 'Unity in Action'. Almost from its formation in 1965, the BNF sought to build some kind of united front with other opposition parties. It repeatedly failed. The BNF not only failed to unite with other opposition parties, but in 1998 it also split, with the defectors forming the BCP. The formation of the UDC in 2012 was a partial success – but only partial in that the BCP remained outside of the coalition until 2019. Disunity cost opposition parties dearly – at least until 2024, when the UDC achieved a parliamentary majority on less than 40 per cent of the popular vote, thanks to the first-past-the-post electoral system and the multiplicity of parties.

Referring to voters who identified with the BDP and provided the bedrock of its support base for decades, Batlang Seabo and Jeremy Seekings then examine the decline over the long term of 'BDP partisanship'. Using Afrobarometer survey data, they show that about one-half of surveyed Botswana said that they felt close to the BDP as recently as the early 2000s. This share had dropped to about one-fifth by the 2020s. They suggest that social and economic change – including urbanisation and the declining significance of agriculture – may have contributed to this decline in identification with the BDP. However, most of the decline was due to worsening assessments of the performance of the party and its leaders. Seabo and Seekings then consider the implications of the decline of BDP partisanship. By the 2020s, election outcomes had come to be

determined by the votes of non-partisan or independent voters, i.e. voters who do not feel close to the BDP or any of the (then) opposition parties. Few of these non-partisans are swayed by regional, ethnic, or other sociological factors. Voting intentions among the rising number of non-partisans correlate with these voters' assessments of the performance of the president and government and with how much they trust the BDP and opposition parties. Seabo and Seekings finally model the 2024 election results, taking turnout into account.

In their article, John Makgala and Monageng Mogalakwe examine the debacle over the 2021–2024 constitutional review and some of the immediate factors that cost the BDP votes. The BDP had pledged in 2019 to conduct a comprehensive constitutional review in response to long-standing public grievances. After winning the 2019 elections, the BDP seemed unwilling to fulfil this promise. Under pressure, President Masisi appointed a Presidential Commission on the Review of the Constitution, defined its terms of reference, and selected the commissioners. The Commission's findings were rejected by civil society and opposition parties. Makgala and Mogalakwe argue that Masisi's approach supports the late Professor Kenneth Good's view of Botswana as an authoritarian or minimalist version of 'liberal' democracy, where the ruling elites are generally accountable only to themselves. Perversely, whilst perpetuating a 'strong man' syndrome and weak institutions, the episode contributed to the BDP's loss of power in the 2024 elections.

The articles by Mogopodi Lekorwe and Wilford Molefe and Bontle Tumedisio Masilo and Sonia Gaobolae examine aspects of election integrity. Lekorwe and Molefe use data from the pre-election 2024 Afrobarometer survey to analyse citizens' perceptions on several controversial issues concerning elections in Botswana. First, they show that most Batswana report that they feel free to vote for their preferred candidate. Very few report that they are subject to pressure. There is, however, some concern over the secrecy of the vote. Lekorwe and Molefe focus on the issues of electoral transparency, changes in suffrage, and oversight of voter registration. They find that there is overwhelming popular support for votes to be counted at the polling stations (rather than being transported to some other, more central location). A minority of Batswana are cautious about the role of the parties' election observers in voter registration. A larger minority of Batswana are sceptical about extending the vote to prisoners. They conclude that democratic integrity in Botswana might be strengthened through reinforcing transparency mechanisms, promoting civic education, and fostering inclusive dialogue on electoral reform.

In their article, Tumediso and Gaobolae also examine trust in the IEC. As they note, Botswana long had an enviable reputation for holding free and (relatively) fair elections. Across much of Africa, a lack of confidence in election management bodies has fuelled popular distrust in elections and hence scepticism about democracy. Using Afrobarometer data, Tumediso and Gaobolae show that between one-third and one-half of Batswana reported that they trusted the IEC ‘a lot’ in surveys conducted between 2005 and 2019. In the 2022 survey, this fell to 20 per cent. In the 2024 survey, it fell further to only 11 per cent. At the same time the proportion of Batswana who reported that they did not trust the IEC ‘at all’ rose sharply. The proportion of Batswana who assess that the most recent elections were free and fair also declined sharply. Batswana blame the IEC as well as the Directorate of Intelligence and Security. Tumediso and Gaobolae also discuss the concern among opposition parties that the BDP would rig the elections. This gave rise to disputes over technologies, the observation of voter registration, and the observation of the transport of ballot boxes and counting of votes. The UDC formed and trained the *Madibelathopho*, ostensibly to ensure fuller transparency in the elections. Whilst the relationships between politicians’ distrust and popular distrust remains unclear and (as Tumediso and Gaobolae conclude) the reform of the IEC is necessary, opposition parties might be fanning the flames of distrust with their incendiary rhetoric.

The following two articles examine generational aspects to the elections. Carla Grahl and Jeremy Seekings use Afrobarometer data to examine generational changes in political attitudes over the period from 1999 to 2024. They show that the preferences and attitudes of successive generations of voters have changed in very similar ways in some respects, with more and more negative assessments of the performance of the BDP and its leadership. In other respects, however, there are clear generational differences rooted in their formative socialisation in different periods: The generation of Batswana born before Independence were (and remain) significantly more attached to the BDP and have a stronger commitment to political participation than the following generations. These are differences between generations, not simply by age or stage in the life cycle. Grahl and Seekings also discuss evidence from focus groups in urban and rural areas that suggest that generational differences are in part due to urbanisation: Voters who migrated to towns or who grew up in towns were exposed to different influences than voters who remained in the villages of rural Botswana were. Historical loyalties rooted in early political socialisation are important, but, for many urban and some rural voters, loyalties have been transformed by more contemporary experiences and assessments.

In their article, Batlang Seabo and Bame Gaonyadiwe examine the high turnout of younger voters ('Gen Z') in the 2024 general election. Voter apathy and low turnout during elections, especially among younger citizens, have been pointed out as some of the weaknesses of Botswana's electoral democracy. This has both reflected and contributed to the domination by the BDP, which enjoyed stronger support among older generations. Using data from the IEC and from Afrobarometer surveys, Seabo and Gaonyadiwe compare voter registration and turnout among the different age cohorts to assess the relevance of three theories of voting (party identification, rational choice, and sociological theories). They argue that young and first-time voters who voted for the UDC were a major factor in the 2024 general election.

The following article by Dorothy Mpabanga, Godisang Mookodi, Angela Joubert, and the late Sethunya Mosime assesses some of the challenges to the participation of women in elections in Botswana. Only three women were elected in the 61 parliamentary constituencies. Mpabanga *et al.* examine the gender stereotypes that are widespread in digital media during elections. They show that men are widely viewed as leaders and that women should stay at home to look after the household. Social media posts doubted women's capabilities, including their performance once they are elected to office. Some political party supporters post positive messages about their own party's female candidates, portraying them as intelligent, hardworking, accountable, and capable of running government. Mpabanga *et al.* conclude that patriarchal stereotypes and unsupportive structures and policies impede women's political participation.

The final three articles examine the elections at a more local level. Jeremy Seekings examines the rise of the BPF in (what was, until 2022) Central District. The constituencies of Central District had long been the BDP's heartland. The formation of the BPF just prior to the 2019 elections posed a fundamental challenge to the BDP. In his article, Seekings reviews the performance of the BPF from its formation in 2019 through to the 2024 elections. In the 2019 elections, the newly-formed BPF had performed strongly in Serowe. In some constituencies elsewhere in the district, the BPF and its 'patron' – former President Ian Khama – had supported candidates from other opposition parties against the BDP. In the 2024 elections, the BPF ran more and generally stronger candidates than the BDP did, but made only limited progress by winning only two more parliamentary seats. Seekings argues that the BPF relied heavily on Khama's aggressive campaigning and legitimacy, but lacked strong organisation on the ground. In many constituencies, voters who were

unhappy with the BDP supported other opposition parties rather than the BPF.

John Makgala then examines the ‘outlier’ constituency of Kgatleng West (formerly Mochudi West). The Kgatleng District is notable for its record of turnovers of parliamentary representatives, with multiple parties having represented it since the 1960s. The BCP’s victory in Kgatleng West in 2024 made it the fifth party to represent the constituency. Makgala argues that, while tribal royalty has influenced voter choice, Bakgatla are traditionally independent-minded. Makgala discusses party politics and elections in Kgatleng over the long term, before focusing on candidate selection, campaign strategies, and the election outcome in 2024.

In the final article, Jeremy Seekings examines the constituency of Shoshong, in the southern part of Central District. The 2024 elections in Shoshong offer an opportunity to examine how the defection of an elected MP (from the then opposition UDC to the then ruling BDP) affects the local political landscape. When the MP defected, he was not followed by any of the senior UDC office-holders or elected councillors in the constituency. He then had to contest a divisive primary election in his new party, the BDP. In the 2024 elections, the UDC maintained its domination of the constituency, thereby ousting the defector. Whilst the poor performance of the BDP was in large part due to factors exogenous to the constituency, particularly the countrywide resurgence of the UDC and expansion of the BPF, it seems unlikely that the defector took many supporters with him. In this constituency, in these elections, party proved more important than the individual candidate.

Political Party Factionalism, Alliances, and Botswana Politics after 2024

How politics in Botswana evolves after the 2024 elections will depend on divisions and alliances within and between the country’s political parties. History shows that very little can be taken for granted. Botswana’s political parties have long histories of disruptive, and even violent, factionalism that is driven by personal ambition, ideological differences, and organisational weaknesses. The UDC has its origins in the BNF, which suffered repeated splits (as Ramsay shows in this volume). The BDP used its incumbency to preserve some unity but nonetheless also faced repeated splits, including in 2010, when much of the popular *Barataphathi* (i.e. those love the party) faction left to form the BMD. The BMD itself subsequently split, with many of its leaders forming the AP in 2017. The fallout between Khama and Masisi led to the creation of the BPF – which in turn experienced factional strife (as discussed by Seekings in this volume).

Disunity among opposition parties impeded their efforts to dislodge the BDP prior to 2024 (as discussed by Ramsay in this volume). Ironically, recent history also shows that alliances can have negative consequences. In 2019, in the face of the feud between Khama and Masisi, the UDC aligned with Khama, hoping to gain influence in his tribal Central District. The trade union BOFEPUSU (Botswana Federation of Public, Private and Parastatal Sector Unions) opposed this alliance, as Khama's leadership was unpopular. The BDP's victory in the 2019 elections was in significant part the result of voters' rejecting the UDC-Khama alliance (Brown 2020; Seabo and Nyenhuis 2021). After the 2019 elections, the BCP withdrew from the UDC, citing governance concerns including particularly Boko's leadership style. At the time, the UDC blamed the BCP for enabling the BDP to remain in power.

The 2024 elections showed that this criticism was unnecessary. Despite disunity within the opposition as a whole, the UDC achieved an unlikely parliamentary majority whilst the BCP also performed strongly. Together with the BPF – which had also left the UDC – the UDC and BCP inflicted a massive defeat on the BDP. In some constituencies, especially in the former Central District, the BDP was defeated in three- or even four-way contests.

The future of political parties in Botswana may hinge on strategic alliances, as shown by the UDC's success. The BPF has already been incorporated into the UDC government through cabinet appointments. The BPF could officially join the UDC or could remain independent as a potential kingmaker. Some activists from the BCP and BDP opened a debate on a possible alliance for the 2029 elections, although the BCP hierarchy dismissed such thinking. However, changing dynamics may compel a relationship between the BCP and BDP against their common enemy – the ruling UDC. The BDP appears to have survived its election defeat but, without access to state resources through incumbency, factional strife might arise during its 2027 elective congress. Any split could lead to factions aligning with the UDC or the BCP for the 2029 elections.

The Afrobarometer survey in 2024 suggested that, for the first time in the history of Botswana, fewer than half of eligible voters felt close to any political party. This means (as Seabo and Seekings discuss in this volume) that elections are decided by 'independent' voters, i.e. voters who do not identify with any of the parties. The importance of independent voters is the result of both disaffection (as discussed by Seabo and Seekings and Grahl and Seekings in this volume) and generational change (as discussed by Seabo and Gaonyadiwe in this volume). The rising proportion of independent voters is likely to lead to continued volatility in elections. At the same time, the established political parties – including even the BDP

– have retained some loyal supporters. Given that one in five eligible voters still identifies with the BDP and the party won close to one-third of the vote in 2024, the party remains a potentially important player and ally.

The big change demonstrated in this volume, which was not so apparent before, has been the decline of voters' loyalties to parties, i.e. of loyalties that politicians have for a long time appeared to take for granted. This shift was revealed in the 2019 elections, when the UDC leadership's decisions alienated many of the party's supporters, which caused a backlash that favoured Masisi and the BDP. Conversely, in 2024, the BDP leadership appear to have over-estimated the loyalty of BDP supporters, many of whom voted for other parties, often for the first time, or simply stayed away on election day (as Seabo and Seekings suggest in this volume). Whether and how Botswana choose to vote is shaped by the parties' candidates, organisation, and campaigns at the local level (as shown in the three local-level studies in this volume). Success in the next elections in 2029 will depend on the structures that parties put in place at the local level between now and then, as well as on the performance of the national government in delivering (or not delivering) on its promises.

Acknowledgements

This project was conceived of and executed by the Botswana Election Research Network (BERN) with financial assistance from the University of Cape Town. BERN is a non-partisan network of interested researchers inside and outside the country, and was formed in early 2024. It operates along the lines of the successful Zambia Election Research Network (ZERN) that is co-hosted by the Southern African Institute for Policy and Research in Lusaka and the University of Cape Town. ZERN has organised a series of workshops since 2016, which generated a series of publications including an edited volume on *Democracy and Electoral Politics in Zambia* (2020) and a special issue of the *Journal of East African Studies* (in 2022/23). The partners in the BERN initiative are the University of Botswana (through the Democracy Research Project), the Botswana Centre for Public Integrity, Afrobarometer's National Partner in Botswana (Star Awards), the University of Cape Town (through its Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy) and the Botswana Society.

Researchers monitored and analysed the 2024 elections and built capacity for research on future elections. In addition to analysing the national picture, BERN researchers examined campaigns and dynamics at the constituency level in several parts of the country. BERN had hoped – but sadly failed – to raise the funds required for a dedicated pre-election telephone survey and a more systematic collection of data at the constituency level. With limited funding, we were only able to conduct research in a limited number of constituencies. Gabriel Tshekiso and Karabo Matonkomane assisted with research in Gaborone. Angela Joubert assisted with research in Goodhope. Mosetsanagape Lebotse assisted with

research in Kgatleng West, and Leaname Busang assisted with research in Shoshong and Mahalapye. A BERN workshop was held on 9 April 2025 at the tranquil Crocodile Pools outside Gaborone, where various contributors presented and discussed their papers for revision. The revised papers were presented at a second workshop on 17 September 2025, again at Crocodile Pools. Revised papers were sent out to reviewers for further assessment and then revised again for publication.

References

Official Documents and Reports

- Gabanagae Commission 2023. *2022 Delimitation Commission Report*. Gaborone: Government Printer.
- Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) 2014. *General Elections Report*. Gaborone: IEC.
- Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) 2019. *Report to the Minister for Presidential Affairs, Governance and Public Administration on the 2019 General Elections*. Gaborone: IEC.
- Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) 2024. *Report to the Minister for State President on the 2024 General Elections*. Gaborone: IEC.

Secondary Sources

- Brown, C 2020. 'Botswana votes 2019: Two-party Competition and the Khama Factor', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 703–722.
- Burchard, S 2013. 'You Have to Know Where to Look in Order to Find It: Competitiveness in Botswana's Dominant Party System', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 101–126.
- Lotshwao, K and Suping, K 2013. 'The 2010 Split of the Botswana Democratic Party', *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 343–360.
- Molomo, MG 2000. 'Understanding Government and Opposition Parties in Botswana', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 65–92.
- Poteete, AR 2012. 'Electoral Competition, Factionalism, and Persistent Party Dominance in Botswana', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1, pp. 75–102.
- Poteete, AR 2015. 'Election note: Botswana's 2014 Parliamentary Elections', *Electoral Studies*, vol. 40, pp. 444–447.
- Seabo, B and Nyenhuis, R 2021. 'Botswana's 2019 General Elections: A Referendum on General Ian Khama', *African Studies Review*, vol. 64, no. 4, pp. 854–883.
- Wiseman, JA 1998. 'The Slow Evolution of the Party System in Botswana', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 241–264.