Project Name: Democracy

ANC Elective Conference - Presidential Candidates on Social Media

21 September - 21 November 2022
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Introduction

Following the CABC's *Working for Democracy Project*, this brief report investigates the scope of online conversation surrounding the four candidates who feature prominently as candidates for the ANC presidency, namely Cyril Ramaphosa, Zweli Mkhize, Lindiwe Sisulu, and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma. The report assesses data that was collected for a two-month time period between 21 September 2022 and 21 November 2022. The CABC has previously investigated [potential inauthentic activity](#) online around [#PhalaPhalaFarmGate](#) as well as analysed public debate on [Lindiwe Sisulu and the Constitution](#).

In anticipation of the upcoming elective conference, where the ANC will elect members to the National Executive Committee, delegates from different regions and factions have been put forward. This has undoubtedly raised heated debates that span internal ANC politics right through to broader South African political and socio-economic conversations. Twitter has seen varied conversation on the processes and potential outcomes of the conference over the entire year. This sustained interest, comprising 153,270 mentions from the 1st of January, may relate to the possibility that the person elected as the leader of the ANC would have a strong opportunity to become the president of the country, whether through an ANC majority or a potential governmental coalition, after the 2024 general election.

Finally, it would be an omission not to acknowledge the current developments within our democracy. This document is intended solely to analyse what the online presence of ANC presidential candidates looked like, what policy or character differences they motivated in support of their candidacy as well as what talking points were mobilised against the incumbent.

Overview

This section will briefly speak to the overall volume of the ANC Elective Conference conversation as well as elements of conversation surrounding Cyril Ramaphosa on social media – specifically Twitter. The CABC made use of social media analytic tools to collate the information presented in this report. Our dataset was gathered through utilising candidates names as keywords to capture as much of the relevant conversation as possible.

The year-long conversation around the four candidates held over 150,000 mentions with 43,560 unique authors present based on the mentions returned in our dataset.
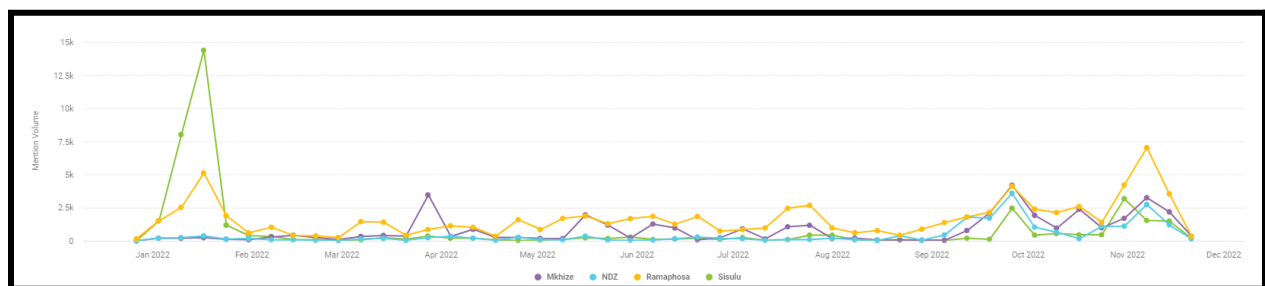

Figure 1: Mention Volume for all four candidates from the 1st January - 21st November

As seen in Figure 2, in the two-month time period between 21 September and 21 November 2022, mentions that contained either the names of one the four candidates or the ANC Elective Conference were found in just over 53 000 mentions. This represents slightly more than a third of the overall conversation within our dataset, since the beginning of the year. These mentions were driven by more than 18 000 unique authors. This means that each unique author accounts for approximately 9 mentions. It is important to note that our data set did not bring in mentions from candidate accounts themselves e.g. Sisulu is not likely to post something containing Lindiwe Sisulu in the text unless it is shared from a media house or a video title etc. Another limitation came about in the way our categories were set-up. Content within candidates data-sets were not mutually exclusive and as such total mention counts do not represent conversation solely focused on individual candidates.
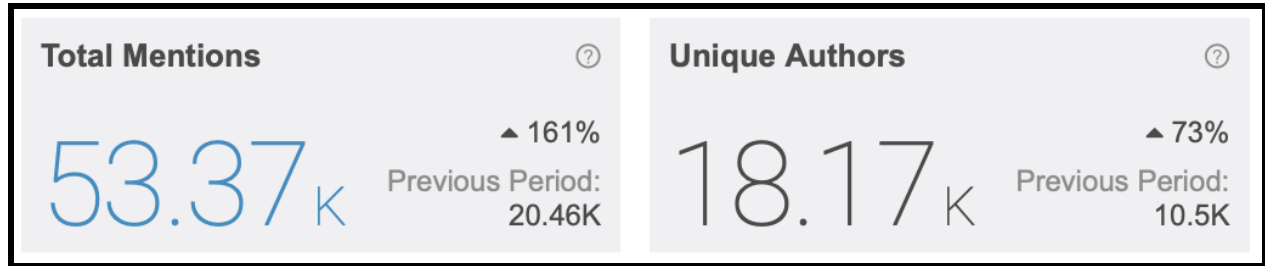
Figure 2: Total mentions and unique authors of all four candidates

The graph below (x-axis in weeks) shows the total volume over time and the fluctuations in the ANC Elective Conference conversation. This graph is quite useful because it juxtaposes the mentions related to each candidate. This also allows us to visualise the extent to which mentions that include Ramaphosa appeared more than mentions of the other candidates. This is expected as Ramaphosa is the current sitting president and all eyes are on him to see if he is able to continue as leader of the ANC for a second term. This has implications not only for the party, but also for the country.
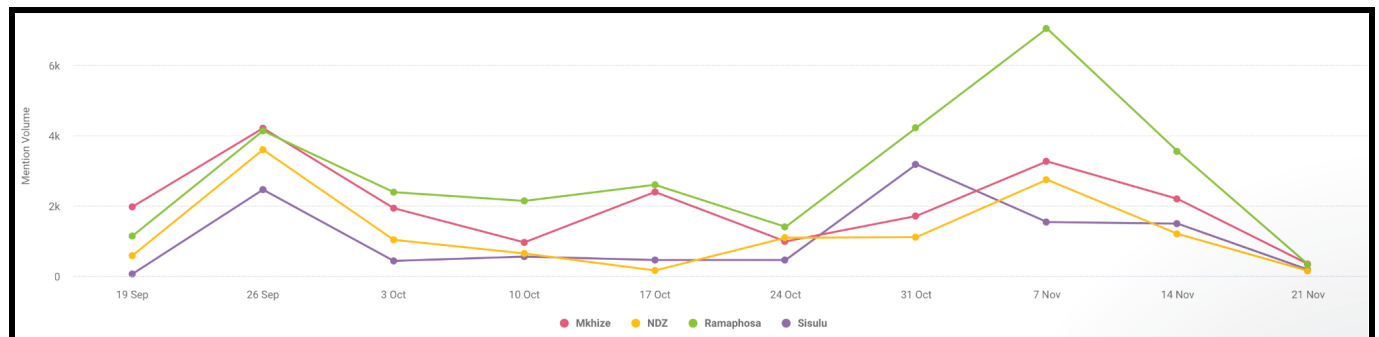

Figure 3: Volume over time with all four candidates

Taking a closer look at the conversation about Ramaphosa there were nearly 29 000 mentions from approximately 12 000 unique authors (See Figure 4 below). This means that mentions that include Ramaphosa account for more than half of the conversation measured between September and November.
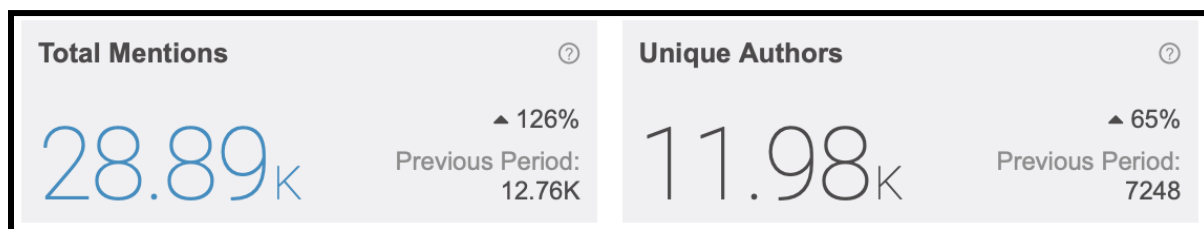

Figure 4: Total mentions and unique authors of Ramaphosa

These metrics, read together with other factors that will be discussed below suggest that in the Twitter space, Ramaphosa has been the primary candidate to contend with.

The topic wheel in Figure 5 below shows the topics and subtopics that were primarily discussed within the context of the Elective Conference. The innermost circle, which shows the main topics, don't reflect Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who as we will see below did have a campaign for the presidency running, with hashtags like #womandla and #backtothevision. Within the subtopics, the wheel shows scandals (Phala Phala), legal woes (AdvDali_Mpofu), conflicting views by prominent ANC members, and campaigns; this suggests that there was widespread discussion concerning who might become ANC president. Additionally, our analysts noticed that Paul Matshatile – current ANC Treasurer-General and potential opposing candidate who will not be discussed in this report – was a subtopic for both Zweli Mkhize especially with regards to conversations around potential political arrangements.
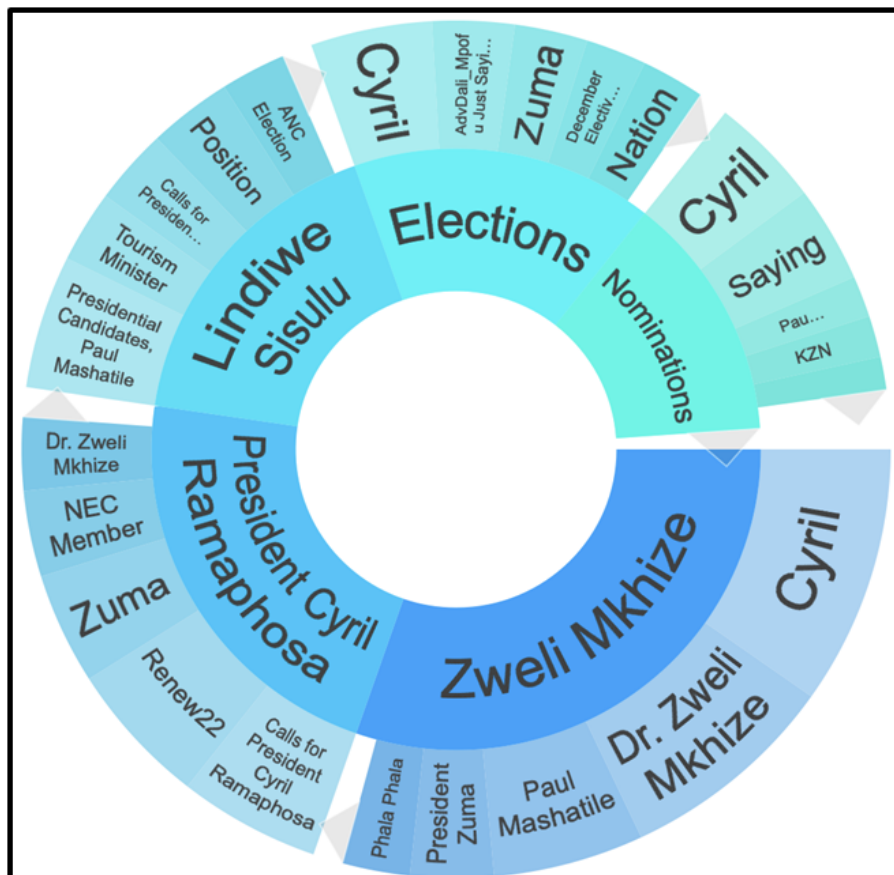
Figure 5: topics wheel of all topics related to the four candidates

Before we delve into the other three candidates, let us isolate the Ramaphosa volume over time graph (x-axis in weeks) in order to understand some of the peaks' drivers within this narrative
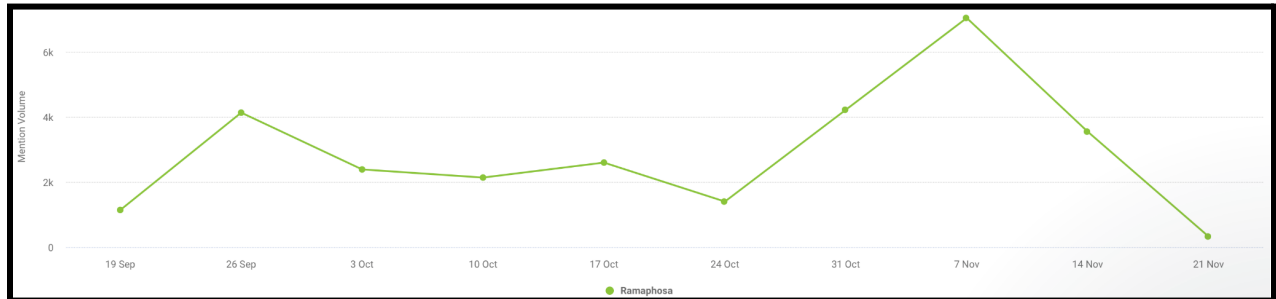

Figure 6: candidate Ramaphosa volume over time

This section will briefly touch on two major peaks surrounding the Ramaphosa conversation:

On Saturday 27 September, the majority of KZN branches endorsed Zweli Mkize for ANC president according to IOL journalist Sihle Mavuso. Within this trending topic a Twitter user commented on the language that media houses use to refer to President Ramaphosa and Dr Zweli Mkhize. These posts are shown in Figure 7 below. The type of language used to refer to public figures on any text based media is important because it can be used to introduce and reinforce ideas, biases and fears into the minds of social media consumers, especially when the reference is used repetitively. This was the case ahead of the US elections for example where former president Donald Trump would continually use the term "crooked Hillary" to refer to his opponent Hillary Clinton so that his supporters and people on the fence of deciding whether or not to vote would consider the democratic opponent as corrupt and a bad choice to vote for.

Figure 7: tweets about KZN's endorsement of Mkhize and media coverage of candidate

Furthermore, our analysts found that the online social media conversation favouring Ramaphosa was quite prominent. Ramaphosa's online campaigns for re-election were clear as evidenced by the use of the hashtag #renew22 which returned 2168 mentions in our dataset during the aforementioned two-month time period.

Figure 8: tweets containing #renew22 hashtags in support of Rampahosa

Interestingly, researchers found two accounts created in the second half of 2022 that are used solely for tweeting commentary about Ramaphosa's #renew22 campaign and Fikile Mbalula's campaign for secretary general ahead of the ANC elective conference. For example:

The @Renew22 Twitter account is dedicated to promoting the re-election of Ramaphosa. This account explains in its bio that it is the official account for Ramaphosa's re-election campaign, #renew22. Figure 9 below displays the profile.
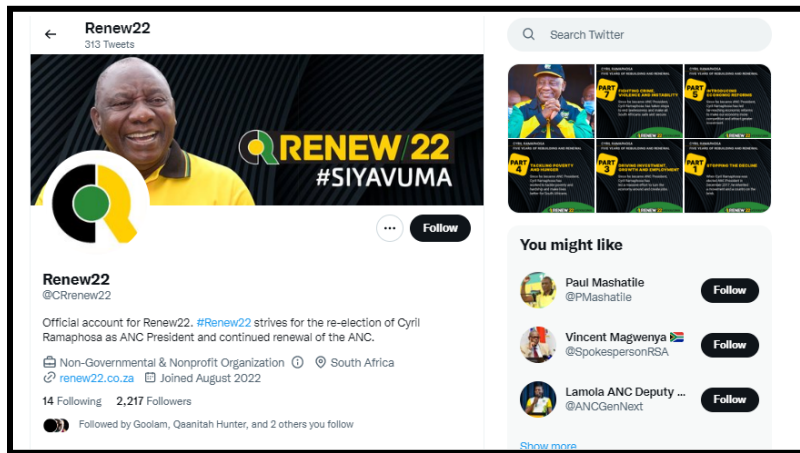

Figure 9: Profile created to drive #renew22 content

The @MbalulaSG22 Twitter account promotes both the re-election of Ramaphosa as president of the ANC and Fikile Mbalula as the secretary general. The bio of this account is not as clear as @CRrenew22 as it is presented more as the personal account of a twitter user rather than the official account created to drive a campaign. The bio of the @MbalulaSG22 account is shown in Figure 10 below to contrast the difference in how these two accounts appear.

Figure 10: Profile created to drive the election of Ramaphosa and Fikile Mbalula

Criticisms levelled against Ramaphosa in comparison to the three other prominent candidates were also returned in our dataset. They were largely driven by the hashtag #phalaphalafarm. Figure 11 below highlights the use of the hashtag in tweets that compare two opposing presidential candidates with Ramaphosa.
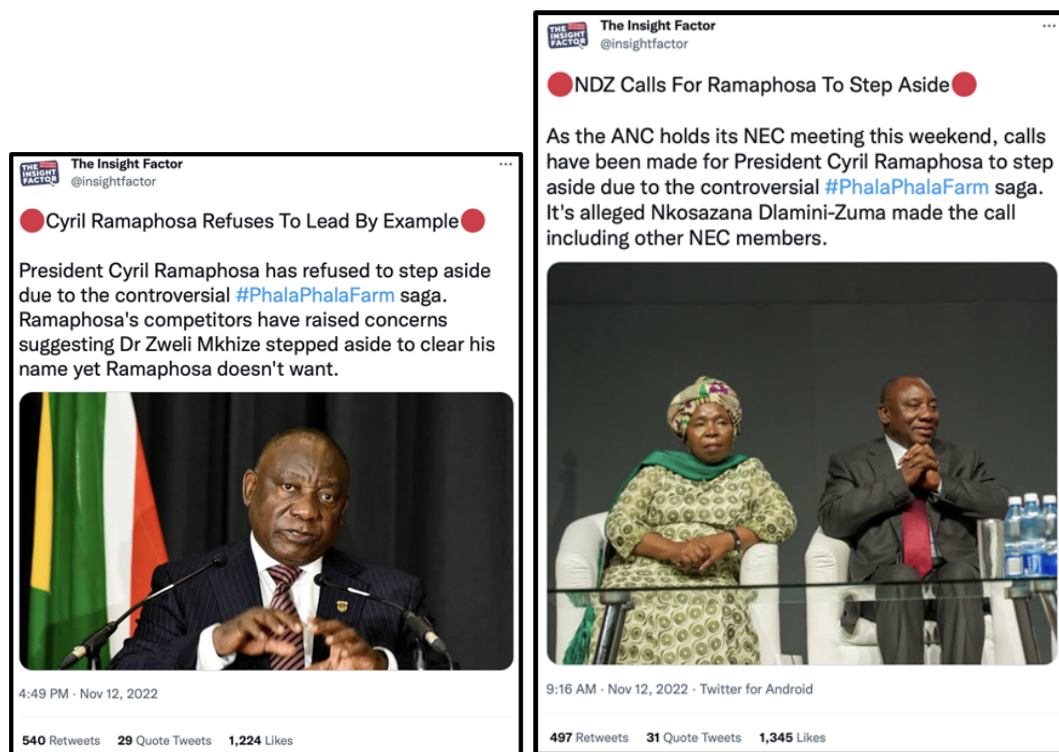

Figure 11: criticism and calls for Ramaphosa to step down

Overall it was noted that the mentions about Sisulu, NDZ and Mkhize rarely occurred alone. Instead, these candidates were often pitted against Ramaphosa. The fact that all three were mainly pitted against Ramaphosa suggests that he was the primary candidate to beat. As such, the next three sections in this report will take a closer look at how the other three candidates were covered, based on differing motivations on why they should be made ANC president. These sections will identify any attacks levelled against the primary contender and instances of potential narrative manipulation.

Mkhize

In comparison to Ramaphosa, Zweli Mkhize was the second largest conversation within our dataset. There were 20 200 mentions returned in our dataset for candidate Mkhize from 9 519 unique authors or an average of approximately 2 mentions per author. Furthermore, the conversation was highly-retweet driven with 18 070 retweets recorded, a retweet percentage of 89.45%. Our social listening tool estimated a potential 69 300 000 accounts reached, representing just over a third of all accounts reached in the broader elective conference conversation. This suggests that there is considerable online interest in Mkhize's candidacy for ANC president.

The most active days were 22 and 27 September, 8 and 18 October, and 7 and 13th November in our reporting period. See Figure x below with Mkhize's total volume over time (x-axis in weeks):
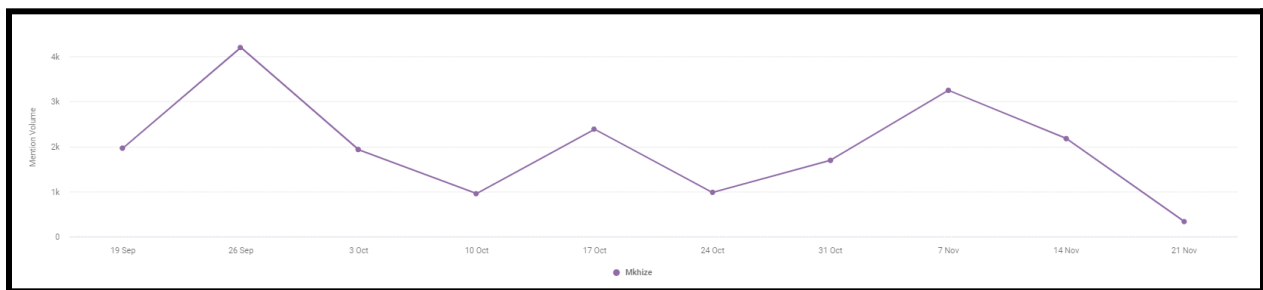

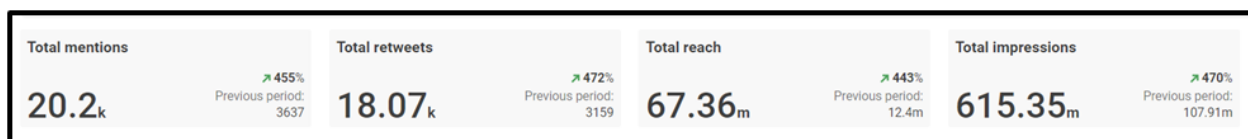*Figure 12: Mention Volume for Mkhize*

Figure 13: Metrics for Mkhize snapshot

Mkhize's campaign for the ANC presidency seemed to rest on three pillars:

- *Reformation*, which may be understood as an ode to the renewal of the ANC where Mkhize is envisioned as the great reformer, dedicated to the principles of Radical Economic Transformation (RET). Throughout this theme the party was presented as factionalised and devoid of adherence to organisational values and traditions.

- *Strategy* which concerned itself with presenting Mkhize as a strategist, possessing plans and solutions for the various ills affecting South Africa, among other issues, major talking points such as loadshedding and the high crime rate made up the foreground of this theme.

- *Alternative,* which concerned itself with presenting Mkhize as a moral, law-abiding politician in contrast to the scandal driven conceptualisation of Cyril Ramaphosa. Within the final theme, contrast was made to the consequences of the Digital Vibes scandal for Mkhize's position within the party, while the Phala Phala scandal has seen lesser consequences for the incumbent.

Within the reformation pillar, concepts such as sanity and respect as well as unity and the healing of division within the ANC are used. Furthermore, a Twitter user made reference to appointing Arthur Fraser (see Figure 14 below) as the National Director of Public Prosecutions (NDPP), the result of which would see people jailed. However, this is not indicative of a conclusive trend.

Figure 14: Mkhize and Arthur Fraser are envisioned as crusaders against corruption

While reformation within the ANC was part and parcel of Mkhize's desire for nomination, his promises for strategic intervention seems to point toward building confidence in his competency at the national level. Mkhize can be seen in a nomination acceptance video, which garnered 153 retweets, 675 quote tweets and 513 likes, presenting his priorities as a presidential candidate. These include interventions to end loadshedding, promote job creation as well as stemming violent crime and drug abuse.

Mkhize as an alternative to Ramaphosa saw mention of adherence to consequences, with one account indicating that Mkhize stepped-aside after an allegation of theft while Ramaphosa, who is facing various counts of unconstitutional conduct remains in office[1].

Support for Mkhize came from varied sources, including promotional individual accounts, a media house and RET aligned accounts with large followings (1) (2). Top hashtags within the conversation included #zwelimkhize (1170 mentions), #sabcnews (707 mentions), #phalaphalafarm (510 mentions) and #renew22 (304 mentions). Mkhize furthermore had two unique hashtags, #khabazela (169 mentions) and #zm22 (120 mentions).

Mentions of Zweli Mkhize constituted the second most active conversation in our data set after Ramaphosa. Mkhize furthermore had an active social media campaign. This campaign was composed of promotional material (see Figure 15 below) as well as the use of monikers and hashtags such as "The Butterfly (Uvemvane)", #khabazela and #ZM22, which sought to make the case for Mkhize as a strong candidate heading into the ANC elective conference.

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[1] It is worthwhile to note that in the case of Mkhize's resignation, the ANC Integrity Committee had convened to recommend actioning of the step-aside rule. At the time of the tweet noted above, 18 October 2022, the Integrity Committee had yet to convene and recommend a similar course of action for Ramaphosa.

Figure 15: A [promotional poster](#) shared in support of Mkhize's campaign

Sisulu

In our snapshot for Lindiwe Sisulu's support online, the conversation comprised 11,070 mentions by 5,995 authors or an average of approximately 2 mentions per author. The total retweet count stood at 10 520 retweets or a retweet percentage of 95%. This percentage represents a highly retweet-driven conversation over the selected time-period. This suggests that Twitter users engaging in Sisulu's candidacy are opting to share the views of others instead of their own.

Posts within this snapshot held an estimated reach of 34,200,000 accounts with 262,170,000 opportunities to see. The conversation around Sisulu was most active on the 28th September, 31st October, 2nd and 5th of November & the 13th of November. The peaks on 28 September and 13 November held the same mention count at 1,259 mentions on the day.
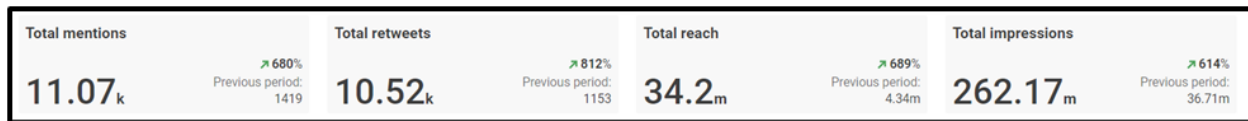
Figure 16: Mention volume for Sisulu

Figure 17: Metrics for Sisulu snapshot

Digging deeper into the identical peaks, we noted that the peak on the 28th held a partially anti-Sisulu sentiment. An influential account based on followers and post engagement, @AdvoBarryRoux, commented on the relatively old average age of NEC members, Sisulu included. Within other mentions that referenced Sisulu on that day Sisulu's lack of nominations as well as the perceived snubbing of her candidacy (see Figure 18 below) for ANC president by Jacob Zuma, in favour of NDZ were found.

Figure 18: An individual post with high engagement states that Sisulu and Magashule have sold out only to miss out on an endorsement from Jacob Zuma

On 13 November, one driver of conversation was an op-ed written by Lindiwe Sisulu and published in City Press on the need for Ramaphosa to resign. Other conversation starters included a post by Kim Heller which seemed to be in response to a statement made by former president Thabo Mbeki. Mbeki had referenced candidates who did not have strong policy platforms by stating "Why must I vote for you? Because you are pretty?" in what may be construed as an affront to Sisulu.

Content which sought to make a case for Sisulu and against Ramaphosa further referenced gender markers, with one post stating that Sisulu had proven that Ramaphosa lacked "testicular fortitude." Other jabs at the incumbent included an interview where Sisulu made reference to money playing a role in the 2017 elective conference. This post received 375 retweets, 32 quote tweets and 691 likes.

A post shared in support of Sisulu's candidacy included a video which saw her explain her motivation for running. This video garnered 101 retweets, 12 quote tweets and 322 likes. Akin to

Mkhize, Sisulu's online support sought to position her as a strong alternative to Ramaphosa; this also positioned Sisulu as a challenge to patriarchy within the ANC. Top hashtags within the conversation included #renew22 (594 mentions), #ancnec (514 mentions), #anewanc (349 mentions) and #patriarchy (213 mentions).

Online conversation around Lindiwe Sisulu seemed to be driven mainly by self-published articles, op-eds and other forms of media, including interviews. Sisulu furthermore occupied the least active conversation in terms of mention count. Content within the mentions that contained her name were intrinsically linked with broader questions around ANC policy and leadership, rather than appearing to be a political campaign with posters and hashtags like the other candidates.

NDZ

With over 12 000 mentions during the reporting period (see Figure 19 below), mentions that included Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma (hereafter NDZ) in our dataset represent around a quarter of the total number of mentions in the broader ANC Elective Conference dataset (over 53 000 mentions). Unique authors in this conversation on the other hand represent about a third of the conversation. This suggests that there is a considerable appetite for the debates that are related to the current role, perception and NDZ's future within the ANC.
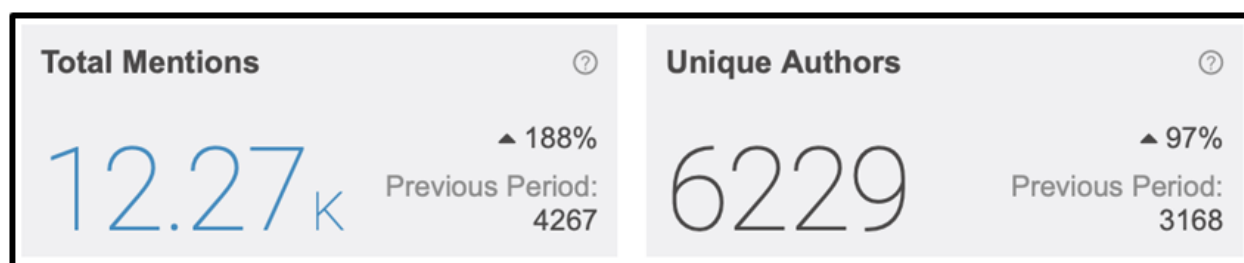
Total Mentions	⑦	Unique Authors	⑦
12.27k	▲ 188% Previous Period: 4267	**6229**	▲ 97% Previous Period: 3168

Figure 19: Total mentions and unique authors about NDZ

The graph in Figure 20 (x-axis in weeks) shows the total volume over time and the fluctuations in the NDZ conversation. This graph is quite useful because it allows us to pinpoint certain peaks and drivers of the conversation.
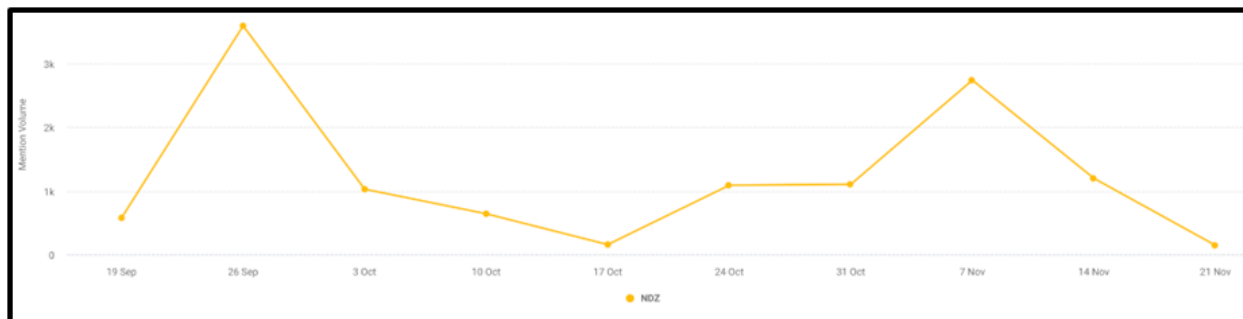
Figure 20: Total volume over time about NDZ

On the evening of Monday 26 September 2022, former president Jacob Zuma endorsed NDZ for president while simultaneously putting himself forward for ANC chairman. This trended across social media with many users expressing similar opinions seen in the tweet below:

Figure 21: tweet expressing an opinion about Jacob Zuma endorsing NDZ

In the period between the Friday 4 November to Saturday 12 November, several narratives drove the conversation and these trends can be noticed in the volume over time graph in Figure 20 above. The first is NDZ's formal announcement/explanation for why she intends to put herself forward as a candidate for ANC president, this post received 140 retweets, 121 quote tweets and 395 likes.

The second is a more discriminatory narrative that presents a gendered lens to the candidacy of NDZ (and Sisulu). Our analysts picked up on some tweets that reduced the two prominent female candidates to their gender. Some accounts addressed this issue:

Figure 21: tweets addressing the gender bias against NDZ

The third is associated with the scandals linked to NDZ. These scandals range from the [source of funding](#) for her last run for ANC president to the [criminal allegations against Jacob Zuma](#). Numerous conversations on this narratives trended as seen below:
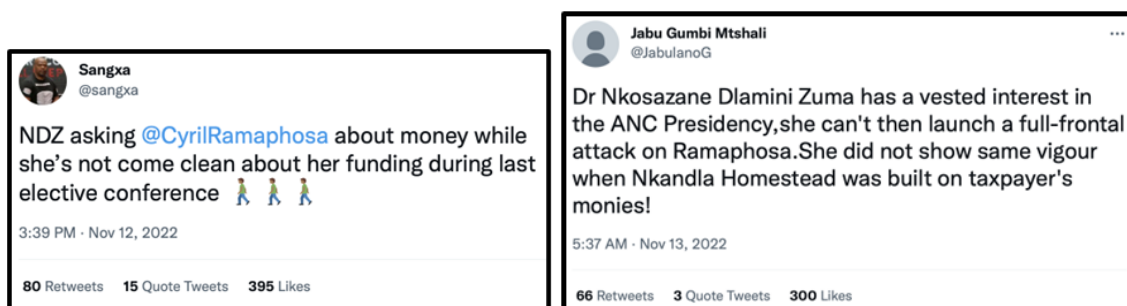

Figure 22: tweet about the scandals associated with NDZ

NDZ's campaign online was supported through promotional content such as posters and illustrations ([1](#)) ([2](#)) ([3](#)), as well as the use of personalised hashtags such as #NDZ22,

#backtothevision and #Womandla. #NDZ22, with 1076 total mentions, including retweets, was the most popular campaign specific hashtag in our data set.

Figure 23: A poster shared in support of NDZ's campaign

Conclusion

The online narratives regarding the ANC Elective Conference presented a robust conversation on who would be the most suitable candidate – not only for the ANC party, but potentially for the country as well.

Several points emerged from this paper. First, both Sisulu and Mkhize's metric analysis in our dataset had references to a disunified ANC. Second, Sisulu mainly drove her own campaign through op-eds and media content and/or news features. Third, Ramaphosa, Mkhize and NDZ had clear online campaigns which sought to see them elected, these campaigns made use of unique hashtags such as #renew22, #khabazela and others alike. Fourth, all of the candidates referenced corruption as a slight to compromise Ramaphosa's campaign; for example, Sisulu in the context of the 2017 electoral conference and both Mkhize & NDZ with regards to the

Phala-Phala scandal. Fifth, each candidate had promotional video material explaining their running platform.

Overall, our analysis points to the fact that the three candidacy campaigns each contained slights against the incumbent, while simultaneously attempting to justify why they should be elected.