

# Local Government Elections: A Beacon of 'Service Delivery Hope' in South Africa

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**Abstract:** This paper assesses the impact of local government elections in addressing service delivery matters. Service delivery protests have become a common phenomenon in South African communities. The reasons attributed to these protests have often been corruption, maladministration, financial challenges and slow rollout of services by authorities in local municipalities. As a result, the frustrated masses are forced to make informed choices through the ballot paper. Local government elections are one of the most popular platforms where South Africans choose candidates of their choice to serve as councillors and mayors in local governments. By voting for a particular candidate, citizens will be empowering politicians with a mandate to make important decisions on their behalf. However, in most cases elected officials are corrupt and frequently feed their communities with empty promises. The study employed an exploratory design and a qualitative method. Snowball sampling was employed in selecting relevant sources which would lead the researchers to other research work on the same field through key words and reference lists. Discourse analysis was employed to analyse data. The study discovered that local government elections are important in ensuring the quality of service delivery the electorate receives.

**Keywords:** Corruption, Local government Elections, Maladministration, Municipality, Protest, Service Delivery

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## 1. Introduction

Local government elections are one of the most popular platforms where South Africans choose candidates of their choice to serve as councillors and subsequently some will be mayors in local municipalities. It is the mandate of these individuals to provide best services to their communities. If the electorate is not pleased by the kind of services rendered by elected officials in their communities, they employ various ways of getting rid of them and one of these ways is local government elections. The promising candidate is most likely to be voted for and political parties that have a good record of service delivery are also most likely to be the choice of the electorate. Elections are designed to suit the needs of a society based upon historical events as well as desired outcomes (Lindberg, 2005). In a previously divided society, there is a strong need for representation and accountability. At the local level, elections should allow citizens to feel that they are represented and are holding leaders and parties accountable.

In 1994, a huge responsibility faced the democratic government to reverse the apartheid policy legacies of inequality, poverty and racial segregation. As a result of slow roll out of service by the

government, protest action escalated, especially from 2004 (Managa, 2012). In the past, protest was the only recourse that the public had to air their displeasure with government. The main reason was because majority of the people were unable to vote or engage in any public political participation before 1994 (Lindberg, 2005).

Politicians have always made short-term promises to satisfy voters' interests during every election campaign. As a result, politicians elevated the public expectations by creating false perceptions that after the election communities would receive the services promised (Managa, 2012). Since 1994, election manifestos and campaigns of political parties participating in the elections have shared a sequence of repeated themes such as *addressing underperforming municipalities to defeat poor service delivery; improving service delivery; developing infrastructure and creating employment* (Managa, 2012). The themes are eye-catching and they directly address the most pressing issues that societies face on a daily basis. Hence, communities could be lured to vote for parties that could not fulfil their promises in the end. Once these promises are not delivered, communities could resort to protest. Protests have always been a result of frustration due to failure by the authorities to fulfil promises made during

election time. Due to this frustration, many South Africans go the protest way hoping that their voices will be heard. Between 2009 and 2010 protests were at massive and they were associated with high levels of violence (Managa, 2012). A significant number of these protests took place in informal settlements. This suggests that people living in informal settlements where there are high rates of poverty and unemployment would likely demand better service delivery (Managa, 2012). The phase of massive service delivery protests was overtaken by the new era of local government elections where citizens take control of pressing issues in their communities by voting out authorities who cannot deliver to their expectation. This paper aims to assess the impact of local government elections in ensuring superlative service delivery to communities.

## **2. Local Governments**

Local government is defined as a political unit established by law which have considerable control over local affairs and have the power to tax (Nyalunga, 2006). Since 1994, the South African government has taken great strides in ensuring development and the promotion of economic growth through legislation and specific regulations targeted at improving the general wellbeing of its citizens, especially the poor (Madumo, 2015). In that regard, it is increasingly challenging for the government to accelerate development because of the difficulties associated with corruption, mismanagement and maladministration amongst others. The system of local government in South Africa is relatively new and it aims at addressing the developmental dilemmas created by former Apartheid rule (Managa, 2012; Madumo, 2015). Municipalities have their own limited autonomy as per the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996. The Constitution serves as a supreme law of the country and any other legislation, policies or conduct that is not consistent with it become null and void. Local government in South Africa is flooded with a variety of challenges including the incapability to facilitate and improve development in the communities under which the municipalities serve (Madumo, 2015). Hence, this serves as a huge challenge to the provision of services that are aimed at initiating developmental projects by municipalities.

On the same note, municipalities in South Africa play a crucial role in propelling the agenda of development of the national government and ensuring

the deepening of the democratic culture within municipalities (Madumo, 2015). The purpose of the existence of the local government is to warrant easy delivery of services and promote the general well-being of the people living in different communities. Hence, it is the obligation of people in any community to hold their leaders accountable in any way and to recall them via the electoral process when they so wish.

## **3. Governance in Municipalities**

Municipalities are of paramount importance in the governance of local communities. Good governance is an important facet that the leadership must provide. In a way, it is the mandate of every local municipality to provide good governance to the community. Local government is the only institution of government that is mandated to bring together a variety of sectoral issues within one developmental policy and it is close to the people. Municipal offices are geographically closer to residents than other government institution. Most importantly for the poor the offices are easier to reach. Furthermore, local councillors have smaller constituency to report to than public representatives at provincial and national level. Therefore, they can concentrate on local matters that are highly community-specific (Arkinson, 2002).

Councillors are required to attend to the needs and interests of specific neighbourhoods. Since councillors are voted for by the people, it means that a councillor who consistently fails to deliver can be removed at the end or during the course of his term. Before the attainment of democracy in South Africa, municipalities prioritised regular maintenance of infrastructural services and social facilities. They maintained streets, water pipes; storm water drainage, electricity networks and cemeteries just to mention a few. They also planned new housing estates and infrastructure works. Sometimes they adopted innovative economic or tourism strategies, nonetheless, these tended to be the exception particularly in the poor rural communities (Arkinson, 2002; Managa, 2012; Madumo, 2015).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Design**

The current secondary study employed an exploratory design and a qualitative method. Exploratory

design is an appropriate research design for projects that address a subject which has high levels of uncertainty and ignorance and when the problem is not clearly understood (Bryman, 2012).

## 4.2 Sampling

Snowball sampling is a non-probability sampling method that involves data sources identifying other potential data sources to be used in the research. Hence, it is a method based on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects (Bryman, 2012). For the current study, the researchers employed snowball sampling in selecting relevant sources which would lead them to other research work on the same field through key words and reference lists.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

The researcher employed discourse analysis. It refers to the practises of talking and writing (Woodilla, 1998) which brings text into being through the production, distribution and consumption of text. Therefore, the goal of discourse analysis is to explore the relationship between discourse and reality as well as interpretation of hidden meaning (Bondarouk & Ruel, 2004). The researcher analysed data collected from the internet, databases, newspapers, journal articles and books. In so doing the relationship between discourses that is other authors' findings on service delivery in South Africa and how they influence voters' decision during local government elections was established.

# 5. Findings and Discussion

## 5.1 Corruption

One of the most important reasons why the electorate subsequently decides to remove a sitting official through the electoral process is corruptions. Most politicians who engage in corrupt activities during their term of office often risks recall. Notwithstanding the political crisis brought about by the end of National Party apartheid rule in 1994, corruption persisted into the democratic period on mismanagement and a lack of transparency and public parliamentary accountability (Jackson, Muzondidya, Naidoo, Ndletyana & Sithole, 2009). The Mandela Presidency introduced measures intended to counter corruption. A government

White Paper on Reconstruction and Development, which essentially represented the post-apartheid blueprint for policy and administrative transformation, explicitly noted in Section 3.12.4 that the government would act '...decisively against corruption in the welfare system through a system of audit trails' (RSA 1994). The Reconstruction and Development White Paper also mentioned in Section 3.15 that legislation was being prepared to introduce a Public Protector, '...to give the public recourse to deal with corruption and maladministration' (Jackson *et al.* 2009).

The 1996 constitution provided for the protection of human rights and equality for all. In contrast to upholding these rights, corruption became widespread in the face of violation of human rights (Jackson *et al.* 2009; Managa, 2012)

## 5.2 Financial Challenges

Most of the local municipalities in South Africa are either bankrupt or on the brink of bankruptcy. As a result, their ability to provide quality service delivery to the people is greatly affected (Mdlongwa, 2016). Many municipalities are unable to supplement the budgetary allocation with rate payments to assist in rendering the services required because of the lack of quality service provision. Communities often refuse to pay any services that they receive, citing low efficiency levels and a lack of affordability. The Auditor-General's 2010/2011 financial report revealed that only 7 out of the 283 municipalities audited around the country had received clean audits for the year. In spite of this, unauthorised expenditure of R5 billion was incurred by 112 municipalities and their business entities compared with R2,7 billion by 101 municipalities in the previous year. The report further paints a bleak picture of financial mismanagement in almost all municipalities. The 2010/2011 National Audit Report states that clean audits are delayed by a lack of satisfactory internal controls and financial management skills which exacerbates unauthorised spending (Mdlongwa, 2016).

Municipal managers receive bonuses and they are deployed to government positions regardless of proven incompetence. There are reports of a municipal manager who earned a salary of R2 015 024 per annum, which included a bonus of R335 837, the highest in the country. Reports disclosed similar situations in the other 56

municipalities where municipal managers were paid performance bonuses in the last financial year despite presiding over poor municipal performance. Despite government promises of capping the salary package for municipal managers, salaries are still not regulated and managers of poorly performing municipalities are still earning significant salaries and bonuses (Managa, 2012).

### 5.3 Elections and Councillor Performance

One of the drivers of competitive local elections should be how well councillors do their jobs. In a study by Chingwete (2015) on public opinion on the execution of duties by councillors across South Africa, 61% of respondents "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of the way their elected local councillors performed over the previous 12 months. Nearly five in 10 respondents say local government performed "fairly well" or "very well" in maintaining roads (48%) and markets (49%), an improvement on both ratings from previous years. When asked who should be responsible for ensuring that, once elected, local government councillors execute, respondents are split. Three in 10 (31%) say the local council should hold councillors accountable, 28% say the voters, 22% say their political party, and 16% say the national government (executive).

The findings of this study suggest that few people believe that the people can have the capacity to hold their council accountable. This is because the majority of the respondents concurred that the local council should hold its councillors accountable. Arkinson (2002); Managa (2012); Madumo (2015) are of the view that the ward system of representation requires councillors to attend to the needs and interests of their communities. A councillor who consistently fails to execute his or her duties can be removed at the end or during the course of the tenure of office.

### 5.4 Political Parties' Role in Municipal Elections

The results of the 2016 local government elections in which the ANC suffered a massive blow from opposition parties indicate the loopholes in the ANC led municipalities. Comments from different stakeholders indicate that the loss of a political party in an election is a result of its failure to leave up to the promises they make to the electorate.

COSATU president Sdumo Dlamini indicated that:

*This was a final warning shot to the movement. We must listen, the people they are saying the movement must rid itself of factionalism and start addressing socio-economic challenges (News24, 2016).*

South African Bishops pointed out that:

*People of South Africa can take credit for the recent local elections who all agree were free and fair. Democracy itself was the victor. The election result may herald in a new phase in the history of our democracy involving coalition government, realistic opposition politics and greater responsibility in the exercise of power. In this election our people have spoken, they demand change; they expect service and are tired of corruption, maladministration and being ignored. God will be with us if we create a future based on respect for human dignity (Gaudium Press, 2016).*

### 5.5 Ensuring Quality Service Delivery Through Elections

The purpose of elections is to ensure that people's views are represented. By voting, people will be giving power to make important decisions on their behalf to certain individuals. A survey by Nkomo and Felton (2016) on local elections and people's perceptions found that:

*Less than half of South Africans believe that elections ensure that their views are represented (44%) or enable them to remove non-performing leaders from office (36%). Both measures have decreased from previous surveys.*

*Two-thirds say that elections guarantee they have genuine choices (68%) and that votes are "often" or "always" counted fairly (66%).*

*Six of 10 South Africans (61%) disapprove of the way their local government councillors did their jobs over the previous 12 months.*

*Support for the idea that it is voters' responsibility to make sure that councillors do their job is still a minority view (28%) but has doubled since 2008 (Nkomo & Felton, 2016).*

The results of the study discovered that very few people believe that their views are represented



through the voting system. Nyalunga (2006) asserts that local governments are units constituted by law and they have substantial control over local affairs. This implies that with the power local governments have they can represent fairly the wishes of the people who vote them into office. In that regard, elections guarantee communities genuine choices and ensure that their votes are counted fairly. On the same note, it is increasingly challenging for local governments to accelerate development because of the difficulties associated with corruption, mismanagement and maladministration amongst others (Managa, 2012; Madumo, 2015).

A Marikana resident indicated that:

*"We hear the promises they make but we don't know whether they will or won't do as they promise. But we will vote and only then will we be able to see if those promises will actually come true. The promises never end. They are quick to come and ask for our votes and make us promises but they aren't quick to sort out our problems. But it's not a problem because we will still cast our votes, we have to exercise our right to vote" (News24, 2016).*

In line with the findings of this study, Managa (2012) asserts that politicians have a tendency of making temporary promises that often go unfulfilled. This is done to fulfill voters' interests during election campaigns. As a result, politicians elevate

the public's hopes and create false perceptions that after the election, communities will receive the services promised. Since 1994, most election manifestos and campaigns of political parties have shared a series of regular themes such as addressing underperforming municipalities to defeat poor service delivery, improve basic service delivery and develop infrastructure (Managa, 2012; Madumo, 2015).

## 5.6 Voting Trends

Since the year 2000 the voting trends in local government elections has never been stable. The fluctuation of the number of votes among political parties is a cause for concern in as much as service delivery is concerned. As indicated in Table 1, in the year 2000 the ANC received 59.4% of votes followed by the DA with 22.1%. However, in the local government elections that followed that is 2006 the ANC received 66.3% and the DA 14.8%. Apparently, the ANC gained and the DA dropped. A better explanation to this would be the quality services offered by ANC led municipalities would have led most of the people to vote for the party. This assumption is best supported by the 2016 Local government elections results in which the ANC lost the previously stronghold Metros to the DA. Even if one is to compare the 2016 and 2011 election results it is apparent that the ANC received a massive blow. Reasons to this would be the increase in

**Table 1: Voting Trends Municipal Elections**

YEAR	POLITICAL PARTY	VOTES GAINED %
<b>2000</b>	ANC	<b>59.4</b>
	DA	<b>22.1</b>
	IFP	<b>9.1</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>9.4</b>
<b>2006</b>	ANC	<b>66.3</b>
	DA	<b>14.8</b>
	IFP	<b>8.1</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>10.8</b>
<b>2011</b>	ANC	<b>69.4</b>
	DA	<b>15.3</b>
	IFP	<b>5.2</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>10.1</b>
<b>2016</b>	ANC	<b>55.6</b>
	DA	<b>24.5</b>
	EFF	<b>8.3</b>
	<b>Other</b>	<b>11.6</b>

Source: IEC election reports 2000-2016

the incidence of service delivery protest in ANC led municipalities. Mugambiwa, Tirivangasi and Yingi (2015) assert that in South Africa, service delivery has become a serious challenge. There are a plethora of causes which include dissatisfaction with the delivery of basic municipal services such as running water, electricity and toilets, especially in informal settlements and rampant corruption and nepotism within local government structures. Such aspects are key to the demise of the ANC in the 2016 local government elections.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, local government elections are to a significant extent a popular platform where South Africans choose candidates of their choice to serve as councillors and mayors in local governments. Municipalities are mandated to provide best services to their communities. Hence, the quality of service they provide to the electorate determines the electorate's choice during local government elections. If the electorate is not pleased by the kind of services rendered by elected officials in their communities, voting will be one of the ways in which they chose councillors and mayors who satisfy community needs. The most promising candidate is most likely to be voted for and political parties that have a good record of service delivery are also most likely to be the choice of the electorate.

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