

Local government elections as a form of public participation: some critical perspectives

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Abstract

This paper argues that local government elections constitute an important form of community participation, especially in a democratising society such as South Africa, even though they are a formal and regulated form of participation. While regulated participation through elections might be constrained by time, locale and infrastructural resources, their overall significance to 'bring government closer to the people' should not be underestimated. It would seem that it is in this regard that local government elections have, since the inception of the democratic order in South Africa in 1994, played an important role. The importance of such elections lies not merely in terms of the specific votes cast for particular parties, but also to the extent to which specific communities, albeit through regulated participatory spaces, are allowed to debate and consider issues germane to their everyday, lived experiences in their particular communities. Based on a number of opinion and statistical surveys of the 2006 local government elections in the Western Cape, this article suggests that participatory spaces are important only when they are readily accessible to voters at the grassroots level; and the extent to which their specific needs are aired, accommodated and influence the existing, or subsequent, planning priorities of local government. It is thus precisely at the inception and formulation phase of specific local government policies – often mooted during election campaigns – where people at the grassroots level can ensure that their voices are heard, and do indeed count, in local government planning frameworks.

Local government elections: a symbol of community inclusion

It would seem that local government elections, since the birth of democratic South Africa, do not merely signal the right of people to vote for a political party but are both symbolically and ideally an expression of the "voice of the people" [*vox populi*] (Norris, 1999, 2002a, b; 2004). This means the electoral voice, or vote, drives specific political party campaigns and either contributes to and or detracts from their legitimacy, reputation and credibility (MacIntyre, 2003). It is in this regard that ordinary people at grassroots level can link evidence-based advocacy programmes (e.g. in relation to specific service delivery programmes) to party political campaigning (Lijphart, 1977, 1985). In short, the past track record of specific parties would serve as a barometer of their actual commitment to specific communities. Mere electoral promises can be measured in terms of the actual outcomes of previous election promises and outcomes (Klug, 2000). In this manner, a type of grassroots audit of party political

performance is therefore possible and, in this sense, ordinary people are in a position to ensure that their collective voices are not merely informed but are respected by parties (Hadenius, 2001).

It would seem that since the birth of democracy in South Africa in 1994, it is precisely such informed voices that are able to make an impact on the nature, substance and overall dimensions of especially local government elections, as borne out by the March 2006 local government elections (Sisk, 1995). The 2006 local government elections in the Western Cape suggest that they act as a tool to influence development strategies both in urban and rural areas, especially by giving a voice to those communities, such as farm workers who, in many ways, are still to benefit from the new socio-economic order. By expressing their opinions on specific development issues, such communities highlight areas that should be prioritised by the party political incumbents once the elections are over. Yet, as election strategies of both different parties and communities

illustrate, relationships to the electoral vote are often not without conflict. However, conflict frequently serves to give rise to particular interpretations and understandings of electoral issues where pressure, lobbying, co-operation and bargaining co-exist as mobilising / strategising tools to influence the overall voting patterns. This means communities mobilised by specific parties or by themselves must choose the right ‘battles’, e.g. the constitutional right to housing. Furthermore they must understand the relevance, profile and political sensitivity of the issue. It is in this regard that understanding and occupying existing political spaces is a skill, not an event, and to be successful as a community, people need to have both long-term and short-term visions of their goals and an overall socio-economic development framework (Sunstein, 2001). This gives rise to the need for organisational capacity, resources and clear decision-making structures within organisations to be systematically linked to the grassroots at large to ensure legitimacy for socio-political campaigns *vis-à-vis* elections and subsequent development planning programmes at the local level. Major issues raised and debated during election campaigns would not merely influence the overall voting results. They would also serve to provide a fair indication of the socio-economic priorities for particular communities and the resultant development planning tasks that await the incumbent local councillors within specific local authorities – hence the import of local government elections as a form of community participation.

The structure of this article

This paper is divided into the following inter-related sections:

1. Research Methodology
2. Local government elections in practice: the connection to communities
3. Local government elections and their significance for specific communities
4. Community participation through local government elections: the challenges for local governance

Research Methodology

This article is based on interviews conducted with Mr Courtney Sampson, Electoral Officer of the Province [EOP] of the Western Cape, as well as the following Municipal Electoral Officers (MEOs) and electoral project co-ordinators (EPCs) in the six Electoral Regions of the Western Cape (as indicated below). While a personal interview of about 60 minutes was conducted with the EOP, the other interviewees had to respond to telephonic questions based on issues

that relate to:

- polling stations
- secrecy of the ballot
- the voting process
- citizen participation
- voting behaviour
- vote counting.

The average time spent telephonically with each interviewee was approximately 10 minutes.

A sample size of 50% (of the voting areas) was drawn from the six Electoral Regions of the Province of the Western Cape.¹ Though every effort was made to conduct interviewees with both the Municipal Electoral Officers (MEOs) and electoral project co-ordinators (EPCs), in the cases of the Boland Wine District and the Eden Electoral Region, this was not possible. Even so, in both instances two EPCs were selected for interviewees to ensure accuracy of the sample size.

Local government elections in practice: the connection to communities

The practical significance of local government elections to communities is often determined by very basic issues such as access to polling stations, the secrecy of ballots, the voting process itself, the resolution of post-election disputes and the acceptance by both the electorate and the elected by all competing political parties of voting results and or patterns. In this regard, the March 2006 voting patterns were as follows: In the electoral region of Metropolitan Cape Town, of the 1.4 million registered voters approximately 50% cast their vote while in the electoral region of the West Coast District 58% of registered voters cast their votes. In the electoral region of the Boland Wine District the votes were fewer than 50%. For example, in the Stellenbosch area voters were rather indifferent to voting with only 48% of the electorate casting their vote. In contradistinction with this apparent apathy in Stellenbosch, in the Overberg District a distinguishing feature of the voting trends, according to the MEO, was that “adults were eager to vote, whereas the youth were rather indifferent”. In his view, this was perhaps due to the fact that “youth believe that their concerns, like recreational facilities and employment, are not taken seriously [once councils resume their work]”. This means that the youth are quite critically inclined with regard to their social conditions. It also suggests that they judge election manifestos in terms

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of their material impact on their lives. This critical consciousness thus influences the rate at which citizens participate in local government elections, both as individuals and as a community-at-large.

According to the EPC in some areas, such as Bredasdorp, farm workers were assertive about their right to vote. Here critical consciousness acts not as a reason to withhold the vote, but as an awareness to vote. In the words of the EPC, “this boldness to express an opinion on political rights contrasts sharply with a situation in the 1990s when farm-workers did not have the courage to express their views publicly and often were subject to the wishes of their employers. This means that in the past, farmers often decided for whom their workers had to vote. This is clearly no longer the case!” In the case of Bredasdorp 64% of the citizens voted, among the highest voting polls in the Western Cape. This enthusiasm to vote in the local government elections – especially in farming communities – suggests that community participation through local elections is essentially about constructing and exercising a specific ‘voice’ in relation to specific electoral issues and political parties. In this sense, ‘voice’ is both dialogic and discursive. By referring to past experiences when communities were afraid to express their voices, communities are signalling that the construct of voice is often loaded with highly charged, and often unexamined, assumptions about a particular person or persons or the circumstances that influence a particular voice or voices.

This also means that the community ‘voice’ is often not one of plurality but is, quite often, the outcome of a range of influences from people such as farmers who, seemingly in the past, discouraged farm workers from voting or [encouraged them] to vote for a specific party or parties. Thus empowering the community with their own ‘voice’ often, especially in semi-literate areas, requires that they be provided with the necessary verbal and linguistic competencies to express their ‘authentic voice’ directly and not, as would often appear to be the case, via assumptions or duress by a specific person(s) such as a farmer(s). Among other interpretations, this assessment suggests that the authentic experiences of citizens give rise to specific voting patterns that are not reducible to a single issue. Instead, these are frequently related to a range of community concerns such as unemployment, homelessness, drug trafficking and domestic violence – issues which, increasingly, affect both urban and rural communities.

Yet another interesting electoral trend was in the Eden District where, in the case of Knysna, a young election candidate attracted up to 60% of the registered voters to the ballot box. This ‘fashioning’ of voices (Bakhtin 1981) calls the forces of heteroglossia: consisting of centripetal forces which are normative and homogenising; and centrifugal forces which are disruptive and dispersing. These are also discursive struggles for existential meaning, based on the experiences of, and tendencies among, voters. Quite often, though, some ‘voices’ expressing the significance of voting for a specific community are more privileged than others (Bakhtin, 1986). Social relations are inscribed in all language use and hierarchies of power, thus frequently this determines *who* can say *what* to *whom*, in what ways, and with what response (Bourdieu, 1991). It is in this regard that Pierre Bourdieu (1991, p5) reminds us that there is a difference between being able to produce an utterance and being able to produce an utterance that is “likely to be *listened* to, likely to be recognised as acceptable” (original emphasis). In this instance reference to “be part of your country” not merely serves as an affective signifier but also as a mobilising force by literally getting people to the voting booth! This therefore normalises social interactions as people recognise, respond, and ‘act together’ in given situations, hence the import of the inter-subjective construction of a shared social understanding and the collective identity; and need for people to vote for the sake of the future of their country.

In the case of the electoral region of the Central Karoo, the EPC of Prince Albert mentioned that people were very excited to vote. In his view, citizens were quite informed about their choices and the voting process as a whole, thanks to the educative work of the South African Council of Churches, who carry out voter education on behalf of the IEC. The EPC indicated that their consciousness-raising motto was “To be part of your country, you must vote! To vote, you must first register!” In his view this message was understood. It translated into a voting poll for Prince Albert in 2006 of 72%, compared with a rate of 67% in 2000. It is important to note that the sense of commitment to participate as a community is graphically illustrated here, where people have to travel long distances to voting booths. For example, the EPC of Beaufort West pointed out that farming communities are widely dispersed, with some farms being as far away as 92 kilometres from Beaufort West. In the case of Ward 6, more than 500 people had to be accommodated after 19:00 as they were within the boundary of the ballot station. In his view “despite these problems, people were clearly

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excited to vote – 57% of the citizens of Beaufort West voted”. It is in this regard that authors such as Spivak (1993) and Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980) suggest that the capacity to do what one knows or understands to do often acts as a catalyst to vote, as in the case of Beaufort West, despite the long distances that had to be travelled. In a very real sense, community participation in local government elections also indicates the possibilities for alternative voicing, alternative listening and alternative acting (Butler, 1997).

Other voting trends indicate that in George more than 54% of registered voters cast their vote while, according to the EPC for Mossel Bay, the citizens were “quite happy to vote as borne out by the number of people who voted – 56%”. Often, enthusiasm to vote means very close voting results and post-election disputes. How these disputes are resolved can influence, if not determine, the extent to which communities either endorse such results. In March 2006 local government post-election disputes were registered in Khayelitsha and Delft. According to Courtney Sampson, the Provincial Electoral Officer (PEO), the allegations of irregularities were refuted by independent monitors, comprised of local NGOs. Independent reports from independent monitors “made it clear that the electoral code of conduct was indeed observed in Khayelitsha and Delft”. In the view of the PEO, “there were few disputes because we did not allow tensions to build up”.

Local government elections and their significance for specific communities

Political implications of voting trends are often significant, especially when there are hung councils, as happened during the March 2006 election in the City of Cape Town, when no single party had an outright majority of votes. To be specific, in the Western Cape there had been a slight shift in the voting patterns of the citizens since 2000. In 2006, the ANC obtained 37.9% of the vote, the DA 41.85%, the ID 10.75% and other parties received 9.49% of the vote. In 2000 these parties obtained the following proportions: the ANC 37.7%, the DA 52.3%, the ID 1.4% and other parties obtained 8.52%.

In 2006 in Cape Town, the DA won 90 seats in the 210-member council, the ANC 81 and the ID 2. Following the elections of March 2006 there was a precarious coalition government, under the executive leadership of Mayor Helen Zille. The position of the former CEO of Cape Town, Wallace Mgoqi, was declared unconstitutional by the Cape High Court on 9 May 2006. In the meanwhile, tensions between

the ID and DA continued, with the MEC for Local Government and Housing of the Province of the Western Cape apparently threatening to dissolve the current City Council in terms of Section 139 of the Constitution and to appoint an Administrator to run the City until the next elections (cf *Mail & Guardian*, 21 April to 27 April 2006, p 2). Eventually a comprise resolution was reached, on 31 October 2006, in the presence of the National Minister of Provincial and Local Government.² The agreement between the province and the city was that the seven-party city administration led by the Democratic Alliance – but excluding the African National Congress (ANC) – would remain in place. However, the ANC would be given two more sub-council chairmanships, taking the number of sub-councils it chairs from five to seven. The two spheres of government – city and provincial – were at loggerheads over the provincial minister’s proposal to change the executive mayoral system to a proportional executive committee system, which would have drawn the ANC into the city’s top management. This agreement, according to the national Minister, Mr Sydney Mufamadi, “would deepen democracy in the city”³.

The voting patterns were not merely influenced by inter-party rivalry but, according to the PEO, MEOs and EPCs, were also influenced by the location of polling stations, the secrecy of the ballot, the voting process itself, citizen participation during voter education, the general voting behaviour of citizens and the actual counting of votes. However, the voting patterns were not merely affected by these infrastructural factors directly related to voting, but were also influenced by the dominant relations of power concentrated in the hands of farmers in rural areas. For example in some areas, such as the Koue Bokkeveld, voters are totally dependent on farmers for at least two reasons. First, farmers have to grant politicians the right to visit their farms to campaign for the votes of farm workers (and farmers). Second, being harvesting time, they have to give their workers time to cast their vote. And in the words of the PEO, “unfortunately there are instances where farmers do not co-operate in this regard. In these instances, since we have a good working relationship with Agri-Weskaap [the farmers’ Union] we often depend on them to resolve such tension”. The PEO pointed out that through the past few years, a healthy relationship of trust had developed between Agri-Weskaap, the SAPS and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC).

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Though it would appear that there is generally a co-operative relationship between the IEC and the farmers, it is extremely important that the IEC ensure that the democratic rights of ordinary farm workers are not subject to the whims and caprice of farmers. The fear of intimidation and being expelled from farms can very easily prevent farm workers from registering their concerns with the IEC and its officials. Vigilance in this regard is thus of utmost importance!

Other factors that influenced voting patterns in specific communities appear to be directly related to the general confusion among voters with regard to the nature of the ballot papers. For example, the MEO for Theewaterskloof made it quite clear that the three ballots “were quite confusing” to voters. In his words: “Voters did not understand them. Most voters were under the impression that once they [had] voted for one candidate it was sufficient. They simply did not see the need to cast [an] additional two votes. I think this voting process must be simplified”. In this regard

it is suggested that democracy/voter/ ballot education should be continuous and not limited to a few weeks before an election. Perhaps democracy education should be introduced at school level and the assistance of NGOs should be elicited to reach the larger, non-literate sections of a specific community.

Yet another factor impacting on voting patterns seems to be apathy among certain sections of the youth in some areas. For example in Stellenbosch, the EPC commented: “It would appear that people can’t actually see the fact that they are moving forward. The youth appear to be totally caught up in their own daily priorities. They simply can’t see the bigger picture; [or] why voting is so important for the country and its future.” It is rather disquieting that such an apathetic state of affairs exists *vis-à-vis* local government elections in Stellenbosch town, a university town. It is thus important to gauge overall attitudes towards national government elections as well as to establish whether the levels of apathy extend to the entire democratic and democratisation process in South Africa. Should such levels of apathy indeed obtain, it would be incumbent upon local and national leaders, within and across different sectors, to address this political problem. Educating the youth across ethnic divides is important to safeguard and strengthen the democratising project in South Africa.

In George the EPC was concerned that citizen apathy regarding voting could perhaps be attributed

to a lack of voter education. In her words, “Eden District is simply too big for one NGO to cover. The IEC only contracted one NGO to do voter education within a very limited period.” As stated earlier, to ensure informed citizen participation in elections it is important that voter education enjoys attention beyond an election period. It is perhaps important that the suggestions from specific communities in this regard be considered.

In contradistinction to the apathy experienced, certain sections of youth and adult citizenry in George and environs, for example in the case of Bitou, i.e. the Plettenberg Bay district, the EPC commented: “[T]he youth were very excited to vote as a youth stood as a candidate. This excitement caused some tension. We were called to defuse the situation. Even so, what this tells me is: let the youth stand for election, and you get them involved! Here in Bitou the youth were clearly not apathetic!” This excitement of youth participating in elections should be encouraged and sustained. This particular experience should perhaps be tested elsewhere by ensuring that youth run for a designated political office, such as Director of Youth Affairs. Incorporating the specifics of the Youth into an election campaign might very well counter the apparent apathy of youth *vis-à-vis* elections!

Yet another factor influencing voting patterns was the apparent neglect of the special needs of handicapped people and senior citizens. For example, in Oudtshoorn the MEO expressed concern over the secrecy of the ballot, especially in relation to the blind and illiterate. In his words: “How secret can your ballot be when the names must be read out in public and others can hear your choice? Surely this comprises, if not defeats, the notion of secrecy. And then there are three ballots! This is quite confusing to the elderly, illiterate and blind.” It is important that voter education and voting assistance occur with specific reference to the particular context/circumstances of the citizens.

Distances to the polls were also problematic for some voters. For example, according to the EPC for Knysna, people were not happy to travel up to 5km to the voting station. This a problem of demarcation of the voting district. Transport to and from polling stations should be addressed by all stakeholders with a view to minimising the problems in this regard.

A lack of voter education apparently also affected voting rates and patterns. According to the PEO, MEOs and EPCs, the prevailing adverse economic circumstances of unemployment and poverty resulted in few people volunteering their services to the IEC; on the contrary, they wanted to be paid for such services. While in circumstances of high

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levels of unemployment such a scenario seems to make sense, it is nonetheless important to encourage voluntary work where the intrinsic value of collective mobilisation and support for the democratic process should be emphasised. Even so, the aforementioned electoral officials stressed that a range of both positive and negative circumstances clearly exist, which need to be taken into account to ensure that elections really become, and remain, a genuine expression of community participation in local governance, such as:

- The co-operative and strategic role of the SAPS
- Population density in urban areas and small geographical space
- Tension-ridden nature of political campaigning
- Lack of public debate in media
- Lack of morality of decency
- The role of the 'bridging generation', i.e. the generation that participated directly in the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s and 1980s
- The role of municipal field co-ordinators (MFCs)
- From symbolic voting to substantive/voting
- The economics of electoral position.

Though these preceding factors are not discussed in this paper they nonetheless constitute an important part of those challenges facing communities as they seek to use local government elections to improve the materiality of their actual lived experiences at grassroots level; the focus of the ensuing section.

Community participation through local government elections: the challenges for local governance

The validity of community participation through local government elections is usually tested through election observation and monitoring by a range of interest groups either connected to the specific political parties or 'independent' of such parties. During the March 2006 elections, monitoring and observer missions interacted with all the actors in the electoral process and organised briefing and debriefing meetings with key stakeholders or role-players including the IEC, media, political parties, civil society organisations and security forces. In the case of Cape Town, for example, the Archbishop of Cape Town, together with representatives from various embassies and other 'noted people', were taken in a bus to various polling stations to see the voting process for themselves. More importantly, perhaps, at all polling stations in the Western Cape each political party had two representatives to monitor the voting process. These representatives are known as party agents. They were present during the casting of a

vote by a voter. They were also present during the counting of the votes and, in the case where a particular ballot paper was considered to be spoilt, they had to verify/agree that such a ballot paper was indeed spoilt. This ensured that the voting and counting processes were quite transparent. Levels of citizen apathy, *vis-à-vis* local government elections, suggest that there is a need for continuous voter and democracy education, especially at elementary and high school levels from where the next generation of leadership would come. The potential for community conflict *vis-à-vis* service delivery – the bread-and-butter issues that inform election campaigns – should be carefully considered before specific sectoral delivery programmes such as housing are implemented. Ethnophobia and xenophobia in this regard should be discouraged and where necessary be prosecutable to the full extent of the law. While municipalities the world over face the challenge of managing viable and environmentally sustainable urban and rural systems, based on a scan of internet sites of the major political parties in South Africa such as the ANC, DA and others⁴, it is quite clear that they understand that municipalities face a range of additional challenges. These include

- Skewed settlement patterns, which are functionally inefficient and costly, extreme concentrations of taxable economic resources in formerly white areas, demanding redistribution between and within local areas;
- Huge backlogs exist in service infrastructure in historically underdeveloped areas, requiring municipal expenditure far in excess of the revenue currently available within the local government system;
- Creating viable municipal institutions for dense rural settlements close to the borders of former homeland areas which have large populations with minimal access to services, and little or no economic base;
- Great spatial separations and disparities between towns and townships and urban sprawl, which increase service provision and transport costs enormously. Most urban areas are racially fragmented, with discontinuous land use and settlement patterns. Municipalities in urban areas will need to develop strategies for spatial integration, while managing the continuing consequences of rapid urbanisation and service backlogs;
- Creating municipal institutions that recognise the linkages between urban and rural settlements. There is a wide variety of urban settlements,

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ranging from those which play the roles of local or regional service centres (supplying services to rural areas and other towns), to functionally specialised towns (such as mining towns) and administrative centres (common in former homeland areas). Importantly, almost all towns are functionally linked to rural areas, relying on their hinterlands for productive economic activity and providing critical centres for the delivery of social services;

- Entrenched modes of decision-making, administration and delivery inherited from municipalities geared for the implementation of urban and rural apartheid, inability to leverage private sector resources for development due to a breakdown in the relationship between capital markets and municipalities, the lack of a municipal bond market and poor creditworthiness of many municipalities;
- Substantial variations in capacity, with some municipalities having little or no pre-existing institutional foundations to build on and the need to rebuild relations between municipalities and the local communities they serve. Municipalities should be particularly sensitive to the needs of groups within the community that tend to be marginalised, and responsive and accessible to people with disabilities.

The preceding contextual factors facing municipalities would, increasingly, impact differentially on community participation through local government elections or other modes of regulated participation or in other forms of organisation and mobilisation geared towards the improvement of their actual lived experiences at grassroots level.

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Some preliminary conclusions and recommendations

The extent to which communities are able to participate in local government elections will ensure that to that extent democracy becomes entrenched in material practice in both urban and rural living environments of ordinary people. However, as evidenced by the wave of popular protests across South Africa in 2005⁵, such formal, regulated forms of community participation would have very little purchase if councillors and officials do not follow-up their election manifestos of concrete, sustained actions to translate Mr Mbeki's notion of 'a better life for all' an experiential reality for the majority of South Africans. The very nature of community participation and its impact on subsequent generations would thus profoundly depend on how seriously councillors take local government elections as a form of community participation. This paper suggested that there are voting trends that are clearly promising while at the same time there are signs of infrastructural neglect, neglect that could so easily translate into either voter apathy or a radicalisation of dissent among certain sections of the citizenry in relation to local government elections as an authentic voice of ordinary people at grassroots level. Should the latter reality materialise, the very future of every town and hamlet in South Africa would be affected by the prevailing circumstances that impact on local government elections, as suggested in this article. For the sake of future generations, every councillor chosen to be their community representative and advocate during the 2006 local government elections dare not forget the continued existential reality of material marginalisation, exclusion and overall poverty at grassroots level – from the still largely intact apartheid circumstances on the sand dunes of the Cape Flats to the smog-filled ghettos of Soweto.

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- 5 Cf eg <http://www.southafrica.indymedia.org/>; <http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?2,64>
- 6 <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/manifestos.html>