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VOICES COUNT

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability: Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

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MIT
POLITICAL SCIENCE

RESEARCH REPORT

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Contents

Summary

A growing body of research exists on democratic accountability. Much of this research focuses on citizen strategies for expressing their views, and on efforts to hold politicians and government service providers accountable. Despite this research, we in fact know little about how *politicians* in young democracies view these aspects of democratic governance.

Given that accountability can be understood as a feedback 'loop' between citizens and elected representatives, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the norms and values of politicians themselves, the pressures they face and the ways that they communicate with their constituents.

This report details findings from an original survey of approximately 1,000 South African councillors in 2016 and 2017 to explore what representation and accountability looks like from their perspective. How do they understand the various links in the accountability chain, including citizen input and deliberation, norms of good government and pressures from political parties, friends and family? The quality of democratic accountability, and the success of interventions to improve citizen representation, may depend on the norms and beliefs held by elected representatives.

Our findings are that even in a political context defined by strong parties, the *descriptive representation* of South African politicians has important substantive implications. Individual-level characteristics such as the race, gender, wealth and age of councillors meaningfully predict attitudes and perceptions on a range of important questions about voice and accountability.

Practically, this suggests that citizens and civil society actors ought to recognise that individual politicians are likely to process information and take action in a manner that is strongly mediated by their own characteristics, social networks and life experiences. Just as sophisticated politicians will target their messages to different groups of voters, our findings suggest that citizens and civil society actors should target their messages to politicians in ways that are most likely to resonate.

We conclude that greater sensitivity to politicians' perspectives may serve to enhance efforts to improve social accountability more generally. Theories and practice of social accountability should also pay greater attention to elected and non-elected actors as human individuals, shaped by life histories and the same types of cognitive and social biases that seem to constrain just about all of us.

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability:
Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

Despite a great deal of scholarly and policy-oriented research in recent years around how citizens can improve accountability among government officials, we know surprisingly little about how elected representatives themselves actually perceive their jobs and pressures, and what representation and accountability looks like from their vantage point.

Introduction and context

In democratic contexts, the concept of *accountability* generally connotes a set of expectations held by citizens about the proper behaviour of elected government officials. Politicians are expected to be willing to inform the public about their actions and responsibilities, to listen to the demands and views of constituents, and to accept blame or punishment when they have not performed well – especially if they have violated existing norms and laws. Perhaps more than ever before, non-governmental organisations, anti-corruption watchdogs and grass-roots civil society activists around the globe are launching campaigns aimed at enhancing accountability by pressuring government officials to live up to these standards.

Despite a great deal of scholarly and policy-oriented research in recent years around how citizens can improve accountability among government officials, we know surprisingly little about how elected representatives themselves actually perceive their jobs and pressures, and what representation and accountability looks like from their vantage point. How do politicians understand the various links in the accountability chain, including citizen input and deliberation, norms of good government and pressures from other actors such as parties, friends and family? Under what conditions do these perceptions align with (or diverge from) the model of accountability promoted by citizens, activists and civil society organisations? These questions are important because the quality of democratic accountability, as well as the success of interventions to improve the representation of citizen voices, may well depend on the norms and beliefs held by elected representatives.

In this report, we study these questions using an original survey of local politicians in contemporary South Africa. We seek to 'open the black box' around elected representatives by exploring the views and experiences of individual politicians in South Africa's local governments. We follow the insight of Grandvoinnet, Aslam and Raha (2015: 6), who highlight that, "within the state, elected and nonelected officials respond to different sets of incentives and might have divergent attitudes toward fostering or responding to social accountability". We pursue this

hypothesis, and specifically seek to theorise about and empirically examine why some politicians are more inclined to listen to citizens, and to represent and act on their interests. What are the pressures they face? How do they communicate? Why do some embrace norms of accountability while others do not?

Learning about politicians' perspectives should contribute to broader understandings of which strategies might be effective for holding politicians accountable and to improve the quality of democratic governance. Like the citizens they are supposed to represent, South African politicians are diverse across many dimensions, including race, class, gender and age. In this report, we show that even within the 'black box' of government, these traits are meaningful predictors of individual views. In other words, our findings suggest that descriptive representation has important substantive implications. More practically, this implies that when interacting with local elected officials, citizens and organised actors from civil society ought to recognise that individual politicians are likely to process information and to take actions in a manner that is strongly mediated by their own characteristics, social networks and life experiences. Just as sophisticated politicians will target their messages to different groups of voters, our findings suggest that citizens and civil society actors should target their messages in ways that are most likely to resonate.

More generally, our research seeks to contribute to the burgeoning literature on 'social accountability' (e.g. Grandvoinnet *et al.* 2015; as reviewed by Joshi 2013; Fox 2015; World Bank 2016; and summarised in McGee, Edwards, Minkley, Pegus and Brock 2015). To date, this literature offers few clear success stories, but rather warns that researchers should not take for granted how actors will respond to and coalesce around particular campaigns. Grandvoinnet *et al.* (2015: 37–8) highlight that "Social accountability [SA] results from the interplay of state action and citizen action" and go on to argue that, "the drivers of state action have not been an adequate focus of SA mechanisms, even though the role of the state is

pivotal to the concept of SA".[1] We attempt to take these lessons and concerns seriously, and our work may eventually help to identify the conditions under which social accountability mechanisms can operate in normatively desirable ways. Within the social accountability literature, we see a large gap in terms of illuminating the opinions, attitudes, mechanisms of information processing and behaviours of *politicians themselves*, particularly in the African context.[2] We proceed with the understanding that the views of elected leaders about what issues are important, what actions are right or wrong, and what role citizen participation ought to play, are central in ultimately shaping policy outcomes and levels of engagement. In order to understand how and why citizens are more or less effective in their efforts to benefit from democratic government, we need a better understanding of the motivations and perspectives of elected politicians.

South Africa is a country in which questions of accountability, politician performance and service delivery have become particularly salient. Indeed, virtually each day, the news media reports on corruption scandals at all levels of South Africa's government, complaints about the quality of governance and sometimes violent protests against inadequate service delivery – a term that connotes myriad frustrations. While one could lament this as evidence of the failures of democratic accountability, the high volume of citizen mobilisation aimed at sanctioning poor government performance also reveals strong accountability processes in action.

Since its first multi-racial election in 1994, South Africa has been heralded as one of the world's more robust democracies, hosting a series of free and fair elections at the national, provincial and local levels. The country's constitution is one of the most progressive in the world, as demonstrated at least in part by the enumeration of a series of social and economic rights. A vibrant media landscape transmits the news in multiple languages and modalities, and a strong network of civil society organisations operates throughout the country.

South Africa's local government sphere in particular was intended to be a site of participatory governance. With this goal in mind, the government mandated the creation of 'ward committees' (Piper and Deacon 2009) to be convened by ward councillors in the 4,000-plus wards (currently) within the country's eight metropolitan municipalities and 226 local municipalities, and a set of procedures for community participation in budgeting and priority-setting through the development of Integrated Development Plans

(IDPs). Given a long history of grass-roots activism and engagement, and deliberate constitutional planning for accountable government, South Africa is therefore arguably a 'most likely' case for finding engaged citizens and responsive politicians. Indeed, millions of South Africans have gained access to better services since the end of apartheid.

However, for many observers, democratic hopes, including for local government, have turned to disappointment (Alexander 2010; Siddle and Koelble 2012). A legacy of apartheid has left the country burdened with profound inequalities of income, wealth and opportunity particularly along racial lines, but also along other dimensions, including gender and space (urban–rural).

In fact, the reality of democratic governance is quite varied across the country, and demands more nuanced analysis. To date, the vast majority of studies of South African local governance have been focused on the macro level, often making general conclusions rather than seeking to explain variation across contexts. For example, Piper and Deacon (2009) draw conclusions about the failings of local governance based on a study of Msunduzi municipality. Alexander (2010) and Booysen (2007) highlight broad trends in protests and service delivery across municipalities, noting key changes in state–society relations. But such studies either draw on selective accounts of a few politicians, or simply discuss politicians in aggregate, sometimes as 'government' or 'the state'. While understandable as the entry-point for raising some of the key issues in local democratic governance, such approaches do not explore heterogeneous preferences and motivations among government actors.

In the long term, we seek to develop a fuller understanding of local government accountability through a panel study of municipal councillors, beginning with the councils elected in the August 3, 2016 elections. This election proved to be the most competitive in South Africa's modern democratic history and led to important transfers of power away from the dominant African National Congress (ANC), in favour of the main challenger, the Democratic Alliance (DA) party, and to a lesser degree, an emergent Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party. Whereas the DA was once viewed as an almost exclusively 'white' and 'coloured' party – to use the unavoidable race categories employed in the South African context – the political landscape has shifted with many black South Africans now voting for and serving in leadership positions in the DA. Meanwhile, the ANC's support among an already small share of non-black voters has diminished substantially. South Africa's particular history of institutionalised

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1   We adopt this definition of social accountability, which is slightly different from Joshi's (2013), as the latter makes a distinction between social accountability and political accountability, which we do not. Irrespective of the term used, our focus is on accountability with respect to elected politicians.

2   One exception is the African Legislators' Project, which has surveyed several dozen high-level legislators in various African countries – but this is simply a cross-sectional attitudinal survey, and is not designed to assess particular causal theories of accountability.

white supremacy and racial apartheid polarised voters and parties along racial lines – but the overlap between party and race is not complete and we seek to identify the areas in which one trumps the other.

This report details the findings from a baseline survey, which forms just one component of a larger research project[3] that will be ongoing at least until the next set of local government elections. The survey, carried out between November 2016 and August 2017, included approximately 1,000 South African local councillors in 21 municipalities. While this study covers just a single country case, and at the moment a snapshot in time, such research begins to tease out the accountability chain and provides new insights about the *individual* perspectives of local politicians.

We detail two sets of findings in this paper:

1. We describe the background characteristics of the local councillors surveyed, including the breakdown in terms of race, gender, level of education and wealth, and the communications tools they use.

Such information is surprisingly unavailable – certainly to the public and to multiple municipalities. We begin to fill this gap by providing a basic portrait of the demographics of this critical group of elected representatives and, where possible, we compare this portrait to that of the demographics of the municipalities they were elected to represent.

2. We detail the responses of councillors to a range of survey questions concerning their views about their jobs, responsibilities and the role of citizen input versus party pressures. In certain cases, we demonstrate high levels of consensus around particular views and values. Where there is greater variation, we explore which councillor characteristics consistently predict various answers, holding other factors constant. We find that even once we control for party affiliation, councillors' race, gender, wealth, education level and age are all important predictors of their responses, highlighting that even in a strong party system, councillors bring their own life histories to their jobs.

Methods (plans and the realities of data collection)

Our population of interest is elected South African local municipal councillors in urban and near-urban areas. This includes councillors elected through both proportional representation (PR) and single-member district (ward) rules in all eight major metropolitan municipalities, and in 13 adjacent 'local municipalities' (see Appendix, p. 22).

Our initial plan was to field a baseline survey approximately two months after the 2016 local elections. We hired a survey firm, Ipsos, to conduct this part of the study. The protocol was to make appointments with municipal managers and arrange to have an enumeration team attend a full council meeting. We expected that most councillors would complete the 15-minute survey via self-administration using either their own smartphones or tablets that would be made available to them. Councillors would also have the option to complete the survey with pen and paper, or through face-to-face enumeration. We had planned for enumeration to last for approximately two to three months.

South Africa's 2016 local elections proved to be exciting, competitive and, in many cases, violent; and these dynamics carried over into the start of the council terms. In such an

environment, even a professionally implemented, confidential survey was not likely to be received as a 'neutral' endeavour. First, it took several weeks for some councils to be seated, owing to the need for the formation of coalition governments. Moreover, violence within councils – that is, literal physical fighting between elected councillors – further delayed our research. Tensions within councils also made it difficult to secure appointments.

After several months of attempting data collection with only limited success, we set out to approach councillors with a different format – computer-assisted face-to-face interviews – that proved more successful. We engaged the survey firm Plus94 to conduct this work. While falling short of our original goal of obtaining a near-census of councillors in our subject municipalities, our final sample of 1,032 councillors contains a diverse group from the eight urban municipalities and 13 near-urban local municipalities from which it was drawn, and is sufficient to meaningfully explore variation across councillors and localities.

The main implication for our study is that our respondents are those who were *willing* to talk to a survey enumerator, to share their views with some

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degree of trust that they would not be used as part of a political smear campaign or in some other detrimental manner. We cannot say very much about the (approximate) 50 per cent of councillors in our targeted municipalities who did not participate in our survey, except for the fact that local government, like other spheres of government in contemporary South Africa, is characterised by large portions of representatives who are difficult to contact, and who sometimes resist communication and transparency. Of course, we cannot over-interpret non-responses to a survey: busy and productive councillors may refuse to participate simply due to time constraints, and they may not see much value to themselves or their constituents in participating. But in a great many cases, our non-responses reflect difficulties in simply contacting councillors and broken promises to complete the survey.

Despite these limitations, we believe that our sample is an important one substantively, and reflects the lived reality that many councillors are not likely to respond to external queries.

Findings

In our analyses, we consider the distribution of councillor responses to questions related to citizen voice and accountability. Are there areas in which there is a strong consensus among councillors? Where there is variation, what are the best predictors of that variation?

First, we identify the salient individual characteristics of councillors, and their distribution within the study. This helps to understand the extent to which our sample is representative of councillors in the councils from which we sampled; and representative of the broader population they represent.

Subsequently, we examine whether these characteristics are themselves good predictors of councillors' attitudes concerning key accountability processes and mechanisms. These analyses help us to distinguish the extent to which individual circumstance, party identification or (in future analyses) constituency characteristics are associated with certain responses.
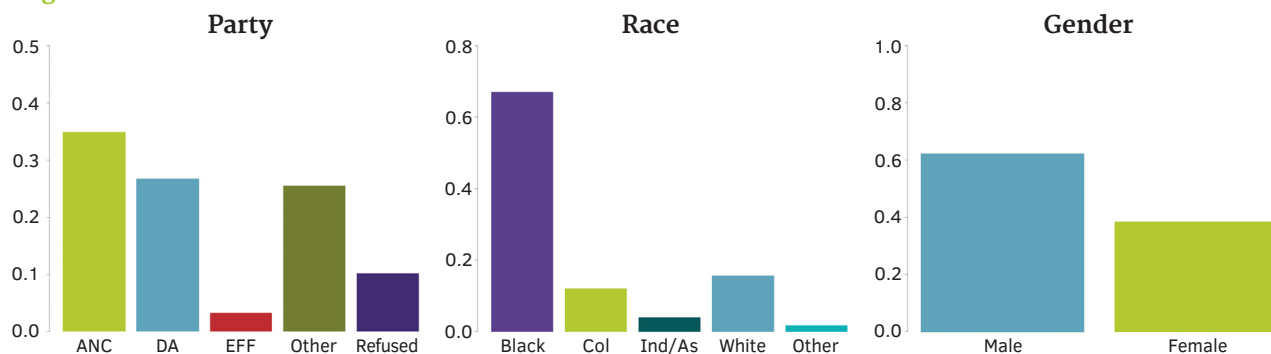
A descriptive portrait of local councillors

Questions of representation have long been understood in terms of 'descriptive' and 'substantive' components (Pitkin 1967). The former references the degree of similarity between elected representatives and their constituents in terms of descriptive characteristics such as gender, race and socio-economic status. The latter refers to the extent to which elected representatives advocate for particular policies that their constituents (or groups among their constituents) prefer. While these are distinct concepts, they are related when citizens' preferences and interests are shaped by or correlated with descriptive characteristics. When this is the case, *inequalities* in descriptive representation – differences in terms of "lack of representation in political office on the basis of race, gender, class, ethnicity, disability" – may cause or perpetuate other forms of inequalities along these lines (Gaventa and Runciman 2016: 71).[4] In other words, the extent to which elected leaders in South African local government *appear* similar to their constituents, in terms of important demographic and socio-economic characteristics, may be important in explaining policy outcomes.

The following are key demographic characteristics of our sample, compared (in some cases) to demographic characteristics of the study municipalities (also shown in Figures 1 to 3).

Figure 1

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4 Regretfully, we did not ask any questions about disability on our survey.

Passed Matric

Graduated University

Age

Figure 2

Own a car

Computer at home

Have satellite TV

Own refrigerator

Ever lived in an informal settlement

Figure 3

Councillor type

Municipal leader (mayor, speaker, maycom, whip)
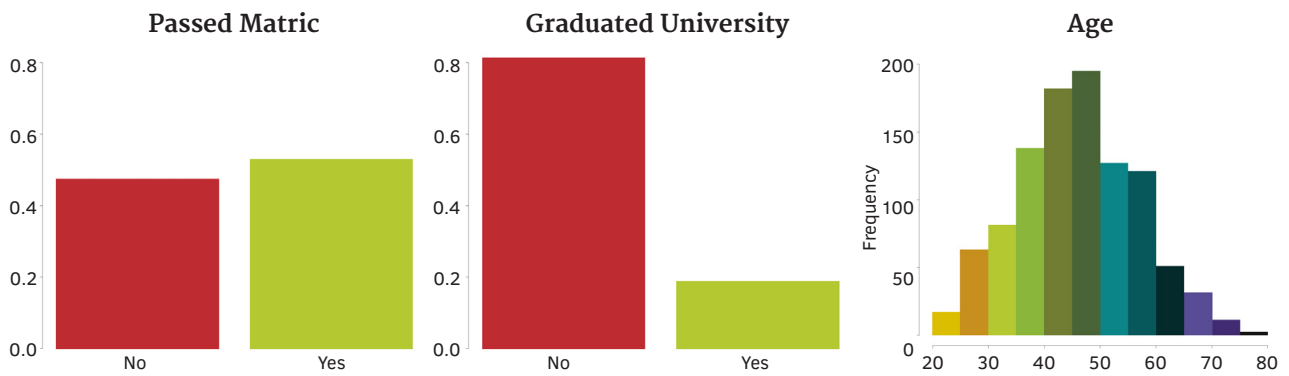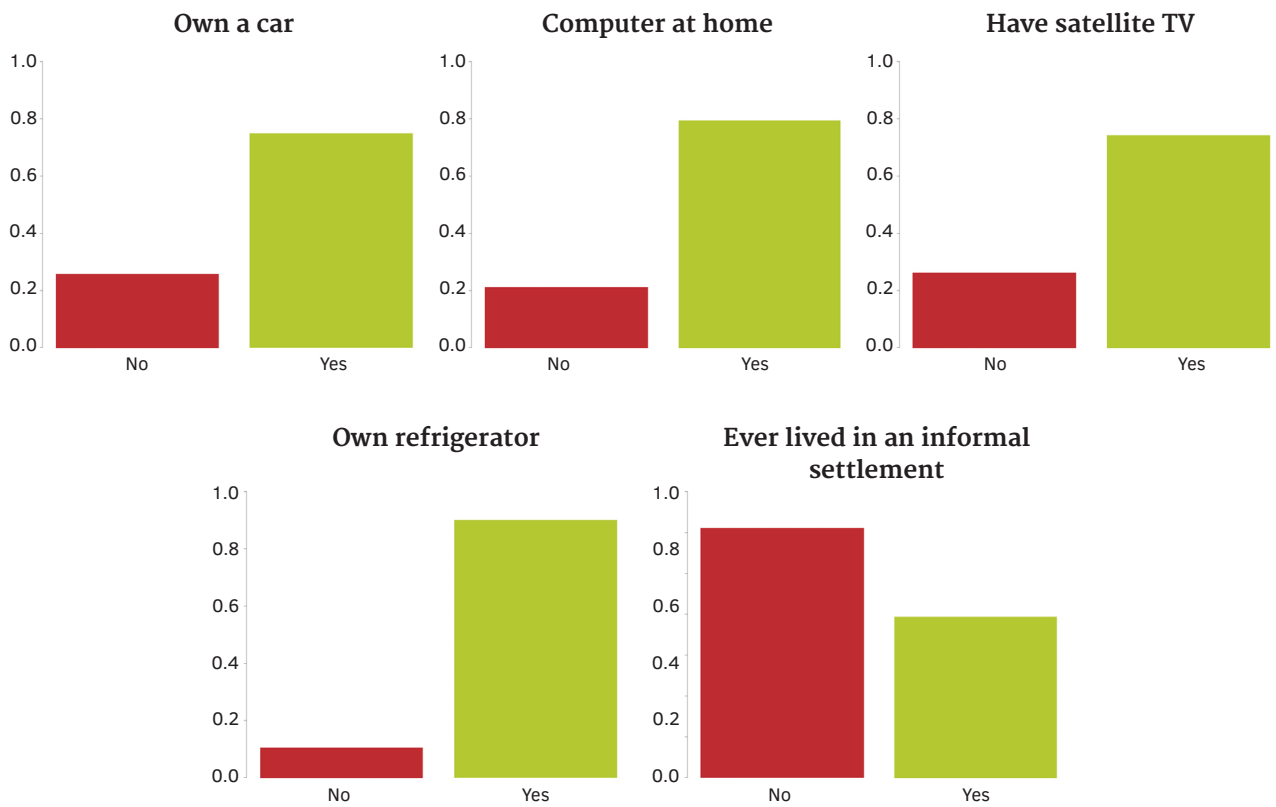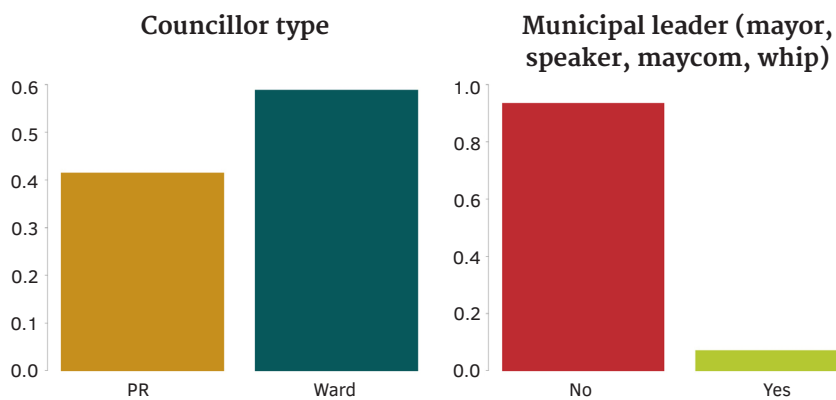
- Approximately 72% of the respondents reported their party affiliation on the survey. Of that group, 48% of the responding councillors are from the dominant ANC party (which controlled 16 of the 21 study municipalities, and received 45% of the PR vote share in our study municipalities); 37% are from the DA party (which received 40% of the PR vote share); 5% from the EFF party (which received 8% of the vote share); and the remainder of approximately 10% are from smaller parties or are independents (small parties received 6.8% of the PR vote share).

- In terms of self-identified racial categories, 67% identified as Black or African (as compared with 72% as estimated for the citizenry in the study municipalities); 16% identified as white (compared with 16% among citizens); and 12% as coloured (11% of citizens).

- Within our sample, 38% of the councillors are female – which is clearly not representative of the overall population (in fact, 51% of South Africans are female).[5]

- In terms of education, 53% of the councillors passed 'matric', South Africa's standard exam for completing secondary school; and 19% of councillors have a university degree. Councillors are thus more educated than the general population, among whom less than 10% of those aged 20 and over reported having a Bachelor's degree on the 2016 nationwide community survey.

- The average age of councillors in our sample is 46 years.

- In terms of wealth, we create a simple five-point index that sums the number of durable goods that the councillor reported owning (component parts are displayed in Figure 2): a car, a computer, a refrigerator and a satellite TV. While 53% of councillors report owning all four items, 5% report owning none; 5% report owning just one; 10% report owning two items; and 25% report owning three of the four items.

- Moreover, 39% of councillors report that they had previously lived in an informal settlement, suggesting that a substantial portion of South Africa's elected representatives have direct life experience with poverty. (Indeed, having lived in an informal settlement is a very strong negative predictor of current reported wealth.)

- The distribution of councillors is fairly evenly balanced between major metropolitan areas (54%) and non-metro / local municipalities (46%).

- Figure 3 also displays the proportion of ward compared to PR councillors; and the share of councillors in the sample who hold leadership positions (mayor, speaker, member of mayoral committee (maycom), or party whip).

In the analyses that follow, we consider the extent to which these characteristics account for other aspects of councillors' reported behaviours and attitudes. To be certain, many of these characteristics are frequently correlated with one another – for instance, there are few white ANC councillors; and wealth and education are correlated. However, none of these factors are so strongly correlated that we cannot explore their associations independently.[6] Throughout the report, we give estimates followed by the upper and lower bounds of 95% confidence intervals.

Modes of communication

Central to voice and accountability is communication and the flow of information. If citizens want to be heard, it is important to understand the channels that councillors use most frequently. Urban-based civil society organisations are increasingly using new forms of information and communications technology (ICT) to advance their agendas, but how likely is it that these will be heard by local councillors? In our survey, we asked councillors about their use of eight different modes. As displayed in Figure 4, they could report that they 'read, use or access' each of those on a seven-point scale ranging from 'never' to 'multiple times per day'. For most channels, the modal response was 'multiple times per day', but clearly some channels are consulted more frequently than others. The vast majority of councillors report consulting the newspaper or radio at least once a week – though a small minority report that they rarely or never read the newspaper.

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5 Owing to the lack of availability of demographic information about councillors, we cannot yet determine whether this is because of actual imbalance in the gender representation of councils and / or because of a bias in who was willing to respond to our survey.

6 We use the variance inflation factors (VIF) from our models to check for potential multicollinearity. While certain variables such as party affiliation have VIFs greater than two – indicating some degree of correlation with other predictor variances – we find that none of the regressors has VIFs greater than three, indicating that multicollinearity is not a serious concern.

Figure 4
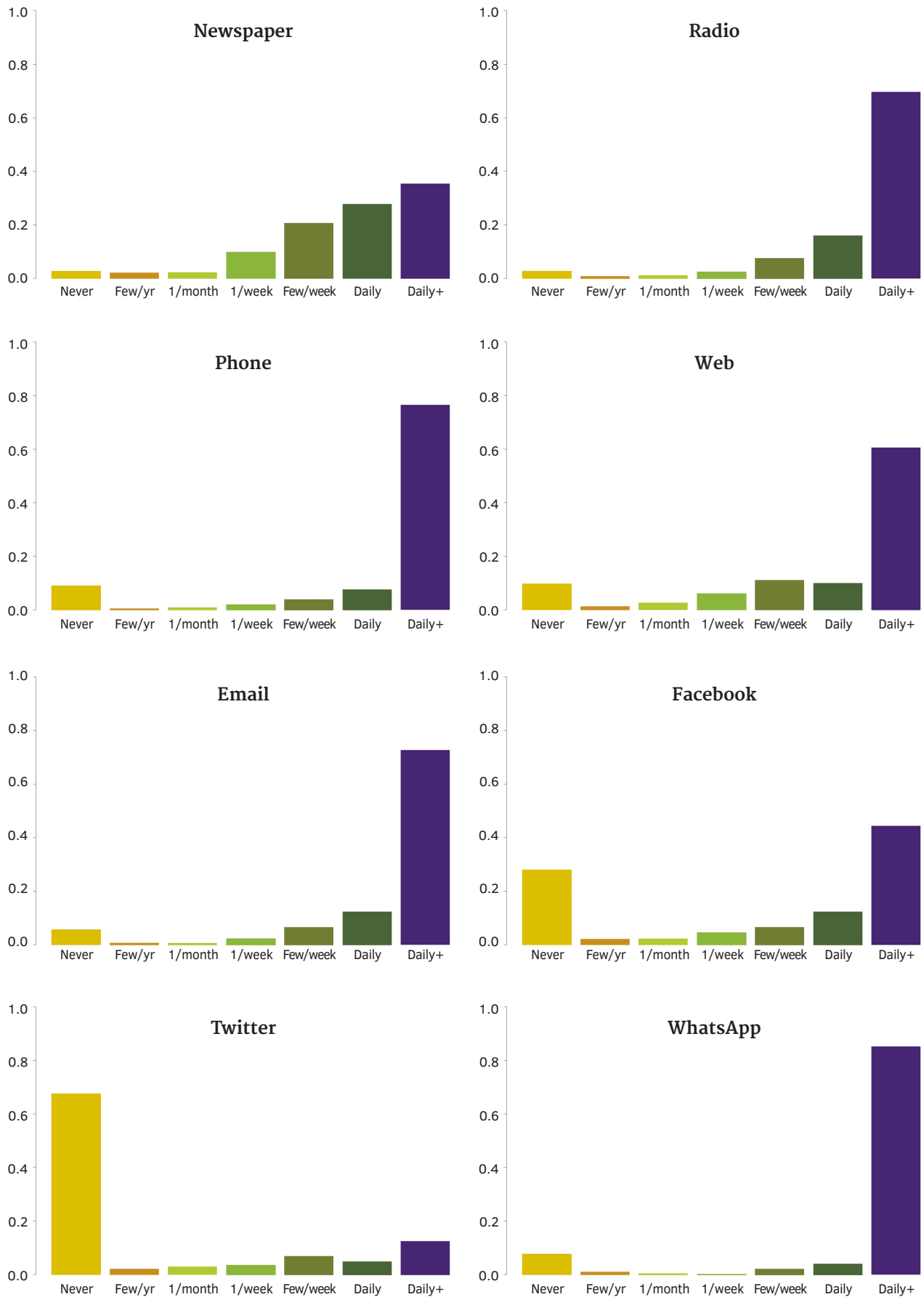
Our findings are clear: local councillors do not universally or consistently access digital communications. For example, we find, in line with conventional wisdom in South Africa, that ANC councillors use digital communications to a lesser extent than other parties.

Among digital channels, councillors use WhatsApp with the greatest frequency, with just 8% indicating that they never use that channel. At the opposite extreme, the majority of councillors 'never' consult Twitter. Separately, we create an indicator for frequency of use of digital communications across channels, summing the indicators for accessing the web, email, short messaging service (SMS), Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp.

Our findings are clear: local councillors do not universally or consistently access digital communications. For example, we find, in line with conventional wisdom in South Africa, that ANC councillors use digital communications to a lesser extent than other parties, such as the DA. Holding other factors constant, ANC councillors are on average nearly 14 percentage points (–5%, –25%) less likely to be a 'heavy digital user' (defined as being in the top third of the digital communications index), and nearly 11 percentage points (–2%, –23%) less likely to use Twitter, compared to members of other parties.[7] Meanwhile, wealth and university education are positive predictors of digital technology use: a one standard deviation increase in the wealth index is associated with a 3 percentage point increase (–1%, 8%) in the likelihood of being a heavy digital user, while having a university education is associated with a 10 percentage point increase. By contrast, a one standard deviation increase in age (approximately 10 years) is associated with an 8 percentage point *decrease* (–5%, –12%) in the likelihood of being a heavy digital user. Black racial identity is also a negative – though insignificant – predictor of digital communications use.[8] Finally, we see that councillors in major metropolitan municipalities are 9 percentage points (2%, 17%) more likely to be heavy digital users. These patterns generally hold even when looking only at sub-sets of ANC

and DA councillors, highlighting the important ways in which personal characteristics shape how individual elected officials access information. To be clear, the point is *not* that black councillors or older councillors are *not* using digital technologies at all, but simply that, on average, they utilise fewer of these communications modalities and generally less frequently than white councillors and younger councillors. While one might expect that digital access will continue to increase, such findings do suggest that campaigns targeting councillors with ICTs may be more effective at reaching certain types of councillors than others.

Citizen voice and accountability

From the perspective of representation and accountability, a key concern is the extent to which councillors seek out and respect community participation and feedback. Williams (2006) for example, in a discussion of community participation in local governance in South Africa, argues that meaningful participation is quite limited, owing to the nature of strong party control of the political agenda, and careful management of how and on what issues citizens can actually participate.

What are councillors' views about the role citizens ought to play in decision-making? To be sure, asking questions about this topic may generate responses that do not accurately reflect what councillors actually do in practice. In particular, such questions may be affected by social desirability bias. However, we developed questions that forced councillors to make trade-offs among priorities, and we believe that their answers can, at the very least, help shed light on how councillors *perceive* the role of citizen input in local government.

Specifically, we asked councillors to choose between sets of statements, asking whether they agree 'more' or 'much more' with either statement.

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[7] By contrast, ANC councillors are just as likely to be Facebook users as the members of other parties.

[8] However, having a black racial identity is strongly and negatively associated with being a Facebook user, leading to a nearly 27 percentage point decreased likelihood.
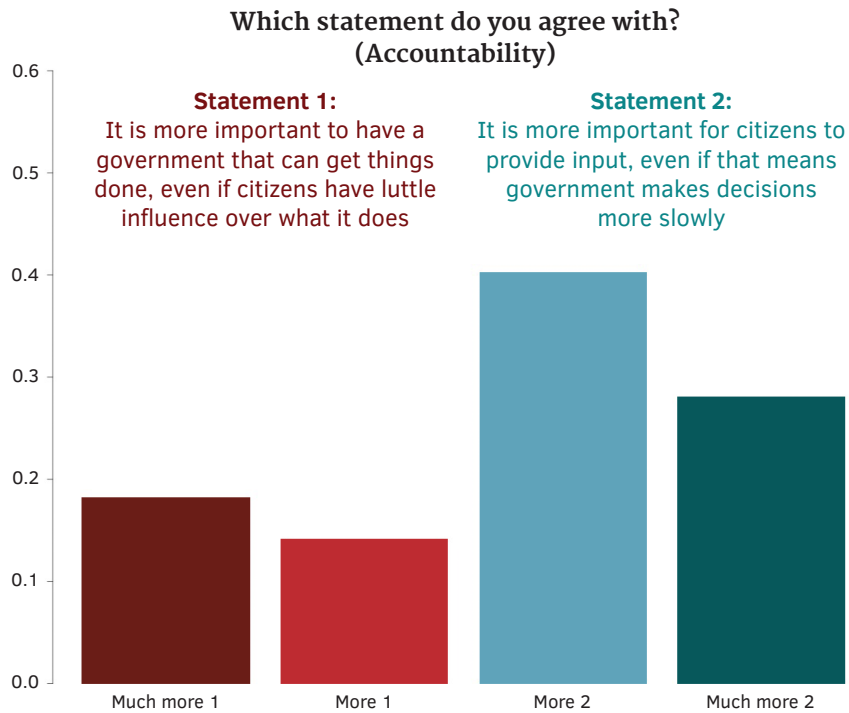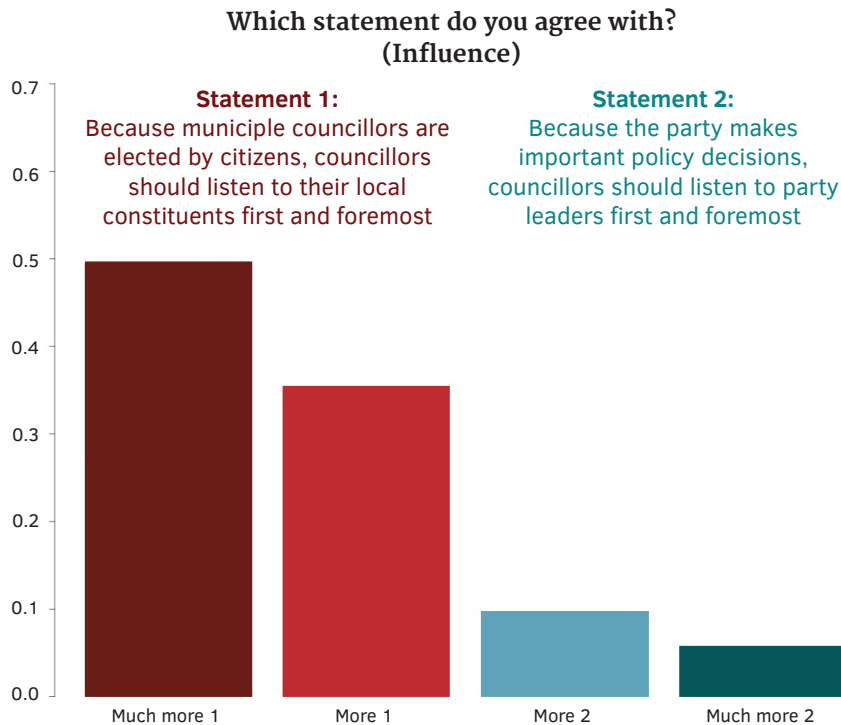
Figure 5

Which statement do you agree with?
(Accountability)

Statement 1:
It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if citizens have luttle influence over what it does

Statement 2:
It is more important for citizens to provide input, even if that means government makes decisions more slowly

Figure 6

Which statement do you agree with?
(Influence)

Statement 1:
Because municiple councillors are elected by citizens, councillors should listen to their local constituents first and foremost

Statement 2:
Because the party makes important policy decisions, councillors should listen to party leaders first and foremost

As shown in Figure 5, the first set of statements asks them to identify their location on a perceived 'efficiency–participation' continuum. The point is not to imply that these are a zero-sum game, i.e. that participation always imparts an efficiency loss, but to identify the extent to which politicians prioritise citizen input relative to other factors:

- Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if citizens have little influence over what it does.

- Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to provide input, even if that means government makes decisions more slowly.

Second, as shown in Figure 6, we ask the councillors to recognise the trade-offs between listening to local constituents (voters) and party leaders. The point of this question is to recognise that councillors must balance between these two sets of 'principals':
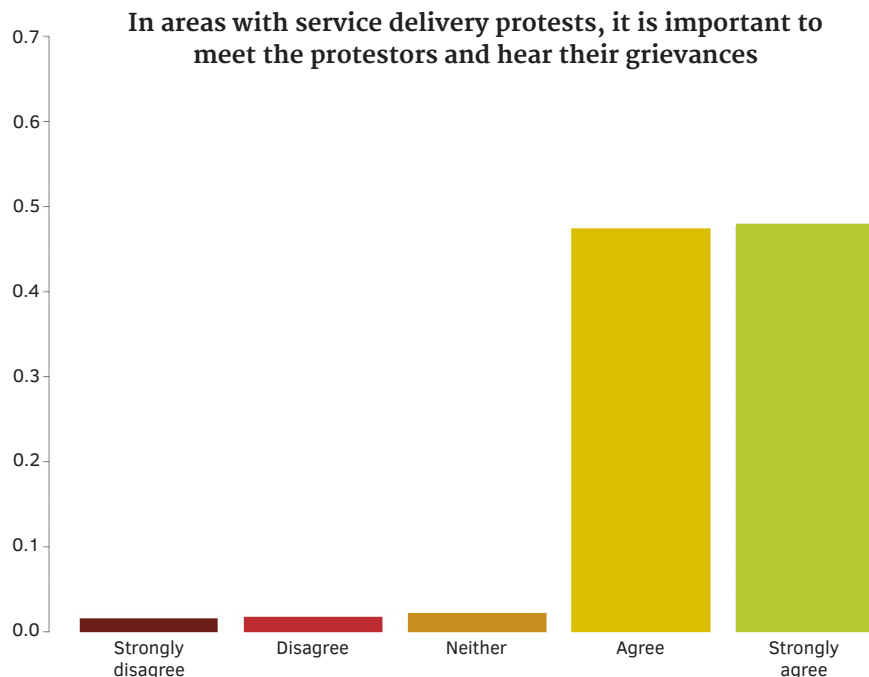
- Statement 1: Because municipal councillors are elected by citizens, councillors should listen to their local constituents first and foremost

- Statement 2: Because the party makes important policy decisions, councillors should listen to party leaders first and foremost.

Thus, both questions provide councillors with an opportunity to choose a 'listen to citizens' response. In both cases, a majority of councillors selected that option. However, a full 32% of respondents opted for the 'efficiency' or 'get things done' value over citizen input; and 15% indicated, contrary to social expectations, that they need to listen to party leaders first and foremost.

Wealthier councillors are significantly more likely to say that they prioritise citizen input over efficiency:

a one standard deviation increase in the wealth index is associated with a 4 percentage point increase (1%, 7%) in the likelihood of agreeing either 'more' or 'much more' with Statement 2. ANC councillors are also more likely to respond in favour of citizen input, while EFF councillors are significantly more likely to favour 'getting things done' – a response that seems consistent with that party's rhetoric, which emphasises the role of strong leadership. Moreover, ward councillors are significantly less likely to favour citizen input over 'getting things done' (–7%; –1%, –14%), compared to PR councillors. These patterns may be unsurprising, since ward councillors are more on the 'frontline' of service delivery and may perceive that they will get more favourable feedback from citizens if they can deliver. Moreover, in many instances, they may feel overloaded by citizen input. Finally, while few variables significantly predict whether councillors will prioritise listening to constituents over listening to the party, older councillors are significantly more likely (3%; 0%, 6%) to agree 'more' or 'much more' that constituents' opinions should be prioritised.

Figure 7

In areas with service delivery protests, it is important to meet the protestors and hear their grievances

As Figure 7 shows, councillors also overwhelmingly (more than 95%) agree or strongly agree with the statement,

- In areas with service delivery protests, it is important to meet with the protesters and hear their grievances.

This further reflects a perception – perhaps surprisingly widespread – among South African councillors that citizen input should play a central

role in local governance. On the other hand, we had expected that more councillors would choose not to meet with protesters as a strategy to reduce their bargaining power.

Efficacy / perceptions of influence

Do individual councillors believe that they can effect change? Do they view themselves as influential? Just as perceptions of efficacy have long been recognised

as important for political participation on the part of citizens (e.g. Finkel 1985), so too should we inquire about whether individual elected leaders perceive themselves to be efficacious. This should be of particular concern in a sample such as the one studied here: local government leaders may perceive themselves to be at the bottom of a governance pyramid and, among councillors, those who are not in leadership positions within the council may not see themselves as being able to contribute. In turn, it stands to reason that those who do not perceive themselves as influential may be substantially less likely to take action, which would be an important source of agency loss for citizens engaging with and making demands on such councillors.
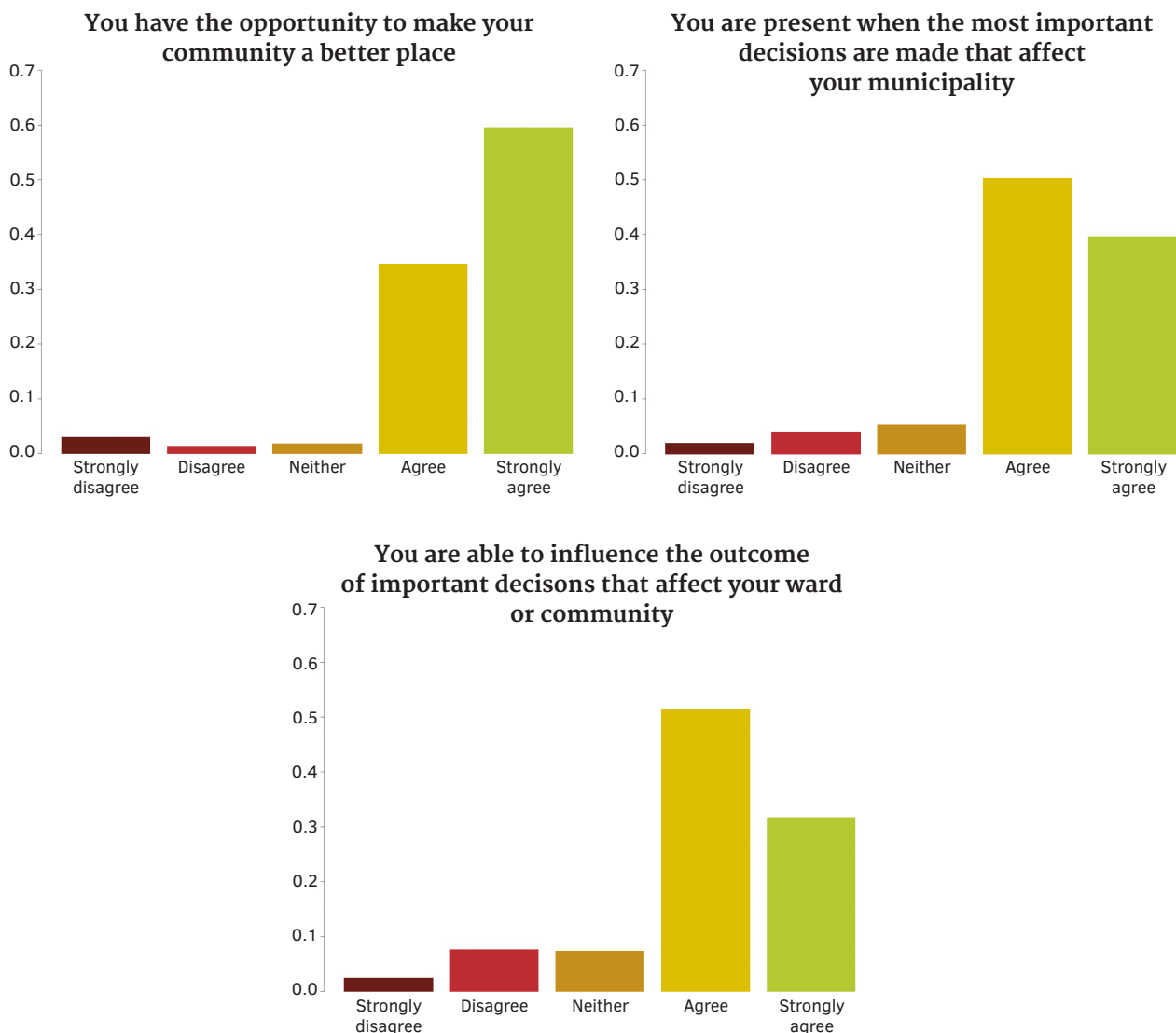
We consider responses to three statements:

- You have the opportunity to make your community a better place

- You are present when the most important decisions are made that affect your municipality

- You are able to influence the outcome of important decisions that affect your ward or community.

Councillors had five options in reaction to each statement – strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree. (This is the case for all statements considered in the remainder of this report.)

We find a high level of perceived efficacy in our sample. For the first statement, a full 94% agree with the statement, but, as shown in Figure 8, there was some variation in strength of sentiment. Responses to the second and third statements are highly correlated, and when compared with the first statement we find more variation in responses. Still, there is a strong consensus among councillors that they are both present for important decisions and can influence important decisions.

Figure 8

You have the opportunity to make your community a better place

You are present when the most important decisions are made that affect your municipality

You are able to influence the outcome of important decisons that affect your ward or community

RESEARCH REPORT

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability:
Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

Councillors from parties in power and those in leadership positions were somewhat more likely to agree that they can influence outcomes.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences between councillors of different parties. On the other hand, a councillor's wealth is a consistent predictor of all three questions, a finding that is consistent with studies of citizens, which show higher efficacy among the wealthy (Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995). For instance, a one standard deviation increase in wealth is associated with a 2 percentage point increase (1%, 4%) in the likelihood that councillors either 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that they are able to influence the outcomes of important decisions. Moreover, black councillors are significantly more likely to perceive themselves as being influential, and were 11% (5%, 19%) more likely to agree that they are able to influence important outcomes compared with councillors of other racial identities. These effects hold within both the ANC and the DA. While whites hold a disproportionate share of South Africa's wealth relative to their numbers, within the political realm their minority status may lead them to perceive themselves as less influential in decision-making.

Councillors from parties in power and those in leadership positions are somewhat more likely to agree that they can influence outcomes. By contrast, university-educated councillors are less likely to agree with this statement (–8%; –2%, –16%). This is a surprising result that demands some greater examination, as we generally expect more educated individuals to feel more efficacious. However, in South Africa's political context university-educated individuals may perceive themselves to be more distant from the centre of political power and the majority of the population.

Finally, while female councillors are somewhat more optimistic about being able to make their community a 'better place', there appears to be no significant

difference in their likelihood of feeling that they can influence important decisions.

Overall, these are important findings if one wants to understand how and why some councillors are more likely to take action, given their awareness of citizen wants and needs. Future research will need to examine the extent to which such feelings actually predict councillor behaviours and impact.

## Job satisfaction / sense of respect

In a related manner, we might expect that those who feel that they are being treated poorly – either in terms of their compensation and professional development, or by the communities they serve – would be less likely to do their jobs well. They might feel a lesser obligation to respond to the demands of constituents or of party leaders, perhaps due to a sense of apathy or even antipathy. Conversely, councillors in this position might try harder to earn the respect of one or both of these 'principals'.

We report the distribution of responses to related questions in Figure 9. Councillors overwhelmingly responded that they agree with the statement, "You are learning new skills", and there are no important differences in terms of councillor characteristics. However, there was somewhat less consensus among councillors that people in their communities respected their work. While 39% strongly agree, 51% merely agree with this statement, and 7% are neutral. In general, wealthier councillors perceived slightly more respect (a one standard deviation increase in the wealth index is associated with a 2 percentage points greater likelihood (1%, 4%) of agreeing or strongly agreeing that one's work is respected) and women slightly (though not significantly) less.
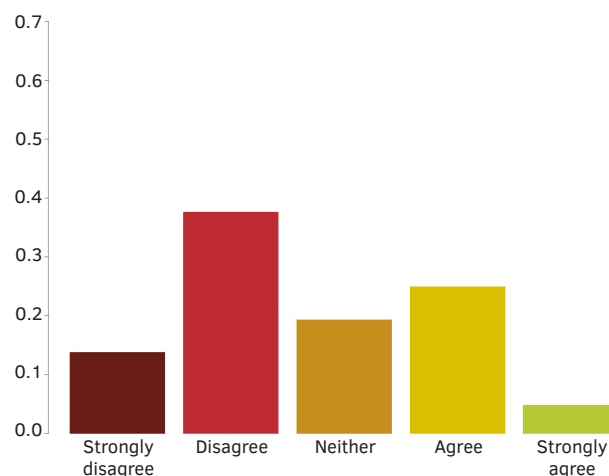
Figure 9
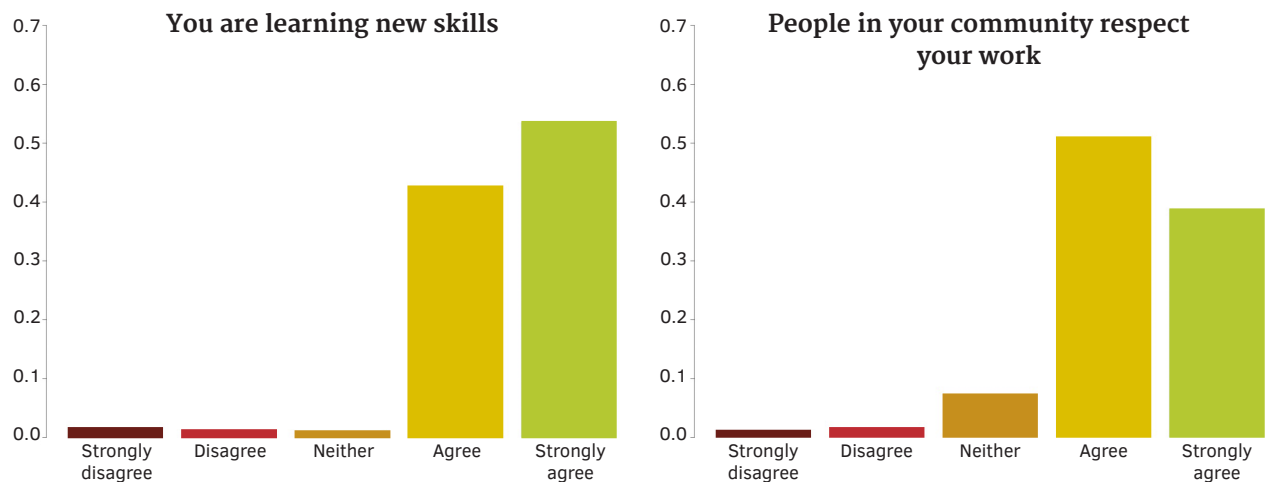
The pay/compensation is fair
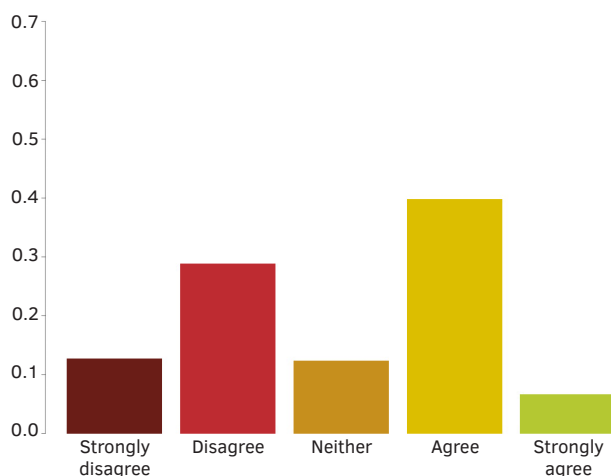
The news media provides a fair portrait of local councillors in South Africa

Interestingly, ruling party councillors and those in metropolitan municipalities perceive less respect (a decrease of approximately 2 percentage points in the likelihood of agreeing or strongly agreeing for both predictors), though the differences are not statistically significant. This may reflect a sense that ruling party politicians are 'owed' a degree of respect for their work that is not always reflected in reality, or that more is demanded of ruling party politicians. Indeed, public expressions of dissatisfaction are generally lobbied at those in power, rather than at opposition leaders.

In contrast to the previous two measures of job satisfaction, councillors vary widely in their assessment of the extent to which they said their pay was fair for their work. While 46% agree or strongly agree that the pay was fair, 42% disagree. The major sources of variation were whether the councillor was from a party in power (in which case they had a 13 percentage point (5%, 21%) greater likelihood of responding 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their pay was fair), and councillor type (ward v. PR). Ward councillors are 7 percentage points less likely (–0%, –14%) to report that their pay was fair, which is understandable given that the job of ward councillor, by all accounts, appears far more onerous than that of a PR councillor. Councillors with university degrees are somewhat less likely to agree that their pay is fair, while women are somewhat more likely (though not at significant levels) – both of which may reflect differing opportunity costs of a career in local government.

Finally, most councillors perceive that the media treated them poorly, with 38% disagreeing and 14% strongly disagreeing with the statement, "The news media provides a fair portrait of local councillors in South Africa". Councillors in leadership positions are substantively and significantly less likely (–12%; –3%, –21%) to agree or strongly agree that the

media treated them fairly. Older councillors, by contrast, are more likely to agree that the media was fair (3%; 0%, 7%).

What sorts of pressures do councillors face?

Councillors face a range of pressures in their daily work and lives. In poorer South African communities, citizens may come to their ward councillor for a wide range of personal problems and concerns, often well beyond the scope of councillors' job descriptions. While councillors' willingness to help address constituents' needs may be laudable in some cases, the integrity of a democratic government depends on those exchanges being made in a relatively transparent manner, without threat or intimidation, and without demands to grant special favours in a *quid pro quo* relationship.

Of course, it is difficult to ask directly about the prevalence of corrupt practices and we would not expect honest answers if we did. Instead, on the survey, we asked whether family members, friends and companies, "… pressure you for favours they expect given your work as a councillor". We also asked whether councillors fear violence "against you personally because of your position as a councillor". Such questions provide an opportunity for councillors to describe the environment in which they work without fear of recrimination.

As shown in Figure 10, while a majority of councillors disagree with these statements, only about one third strongly disagree. Almost 25% of councillors say that friends pressure them. A full 45% of councillors say that they fear violence – a quite reasonable fear given the extent of violence targeted at councillors, with several homicides and home-burnings each year.

Figure 10

**Family members pressure you for favours
they expect given your work as a councillor**

**Friends pressure you for favours they
expect given your work as a councillor**

Local companies pressure you for tenders

**Your fear violence against you personally
because of your position as councillor**
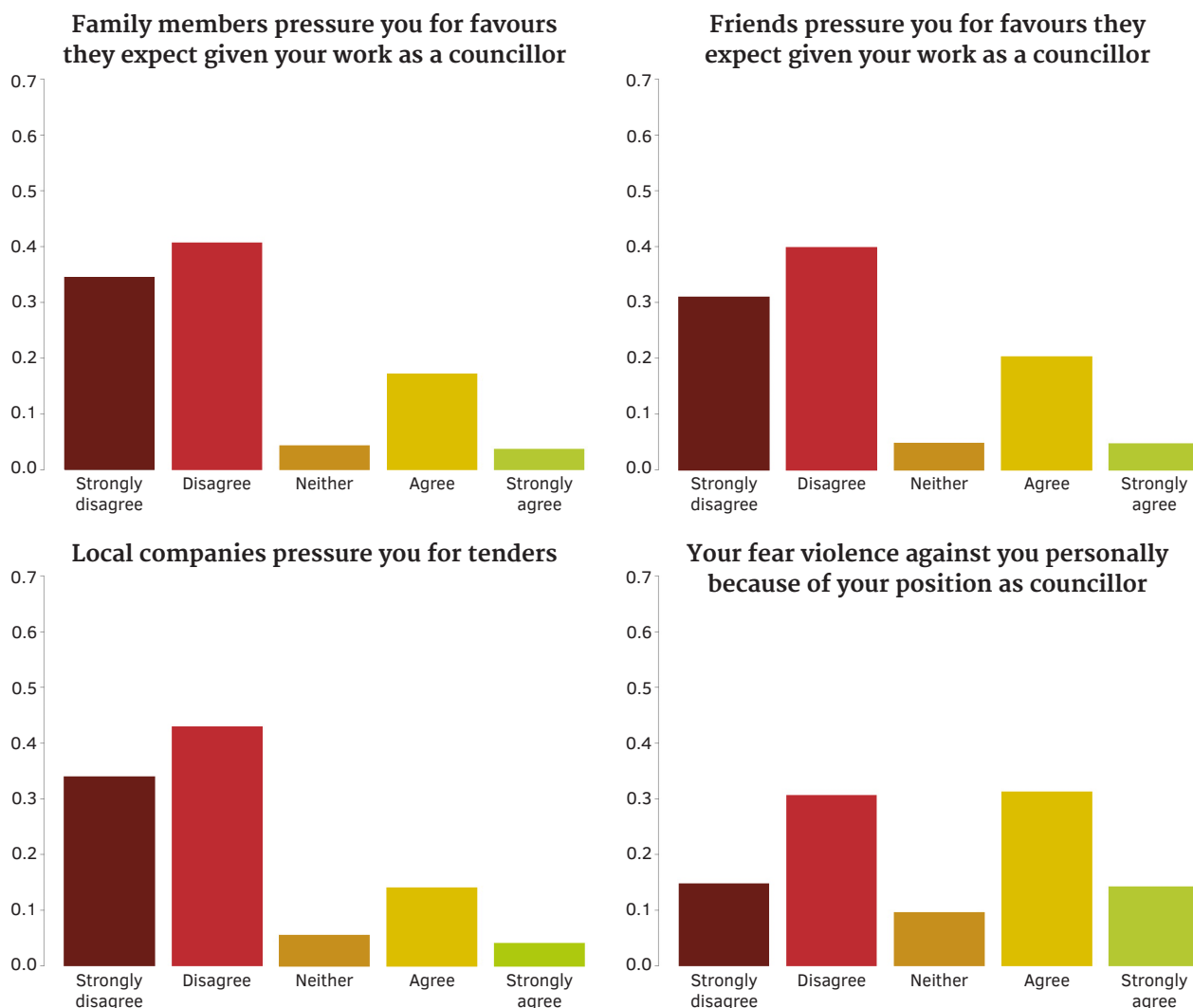
Across parties, more black councillors say that they face pressures than white councillors do. For example, holding other factors constant, councillors who identify as black are 15 percentage points (8%, 25%) more likely to agree or strongly agree that family members pressure them for favours, and 18 percentage points (10%, 27%) more likely to agree that friends apply pressure, compared with councillors of other race groups. By contrast, university-educated councillors are less likely to agree that family members applied pressure (–10%; –2%, –18%).

Meanwhile, ANC councillors, ward councillors and those in the major urban centres are all more likely to agree that companies applied pressure to them, while ward and metropolitan councillors are also more likely to agree that they feared violence. Meanwhile, older councillors generally report facing fewer pressures than their younger counterparts (a one

standard deviation upward shift in age is associated with a 4 percentage point (–1%, –8%) decrease in the likelihood of agreeing that companies apply pressure, and a 5 percentage point (–1%, –8%) decrease in the likelihood of fearing violence). Finally, women are more likely than men to report fear of violence – being female is associated with a 7 percentage point (0%, 14%) increase in the predicted probability of agreeing that they fear violence.

In sum, those with the most challenging life histories are the ones who seem to carry the biggest burdens within their local constituencies. This may be largely explained by the fact that they live in areas where needs are greatest. Owing to South Africa's history, the structure of dependency is profoundly different along racial lines. For example, black councillors report having 8.2 dependents on average, while white councillors report having just 2.3 dependents.[9]

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[9] Respondents were asked: "How many people rely on you personally to provide the money they need for food, shelter and basic necessities?"

Do councillors recognise norms of honest government? Are they inclined to punish violators?
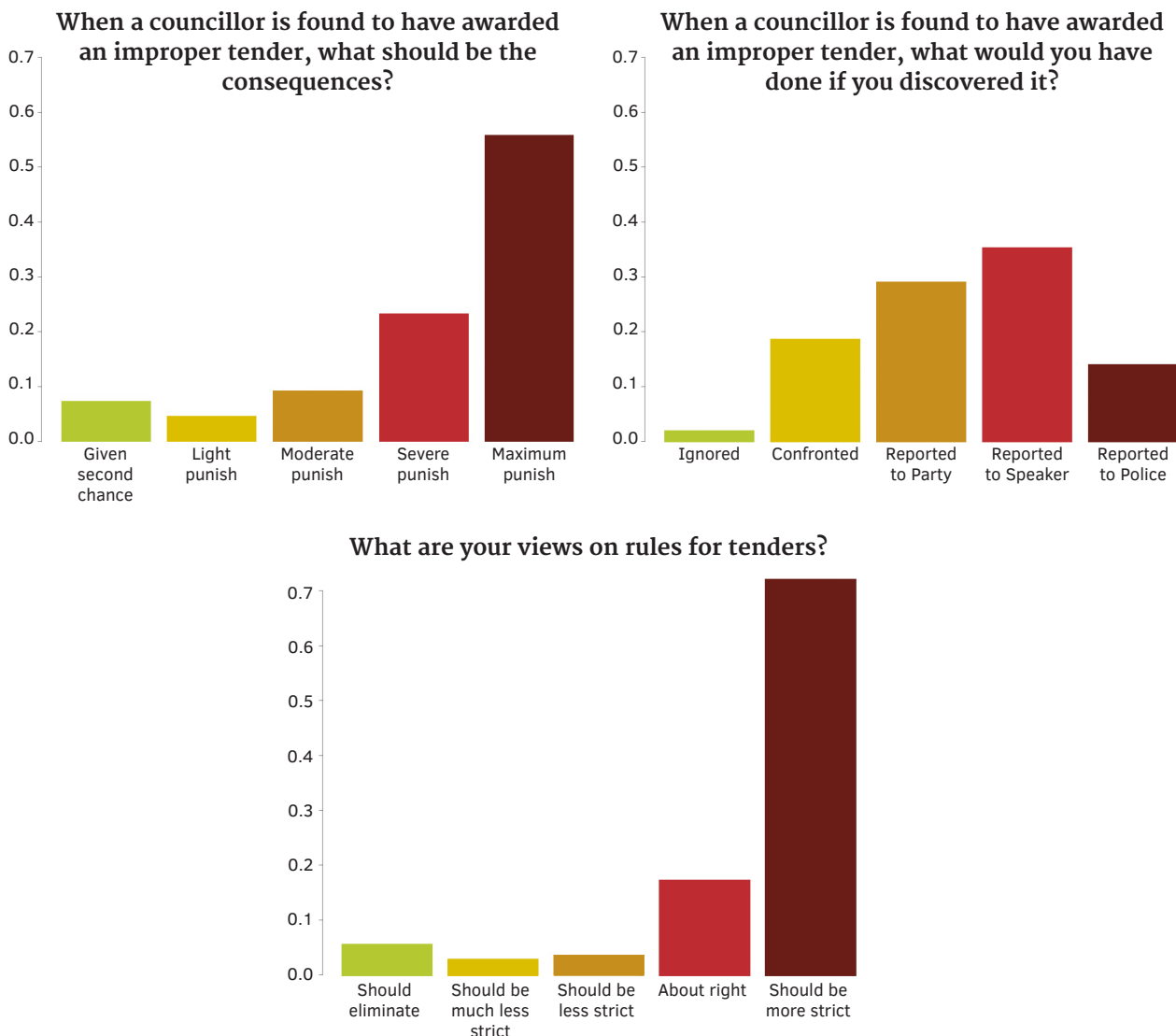
Finally, we consider norms of honest government set in a context where councillors and municipal governments have been routinely accused and sometimes convicted of corrupt practices. Again, we were concerned about the possibility that councillors would not be fully truthful when responding to a potentially sensitive question, so we created a hypothetical scenario of a case of 'tender fraud', and asked each councillor their views about the most appropriate punishment. Specifically, we asked three questions:

- What do you think the consequences should be for L.W.C. [the initials of a hypothetical local ward councillor]? (Respondents are provided five response options ranging from no punishment to maximum punishment.)

- If you had been the one to discover this violation, what is the action you most likely would have taken? (They are offered several response options, as shown in Figure 11.)

- Which of the following best describes your views about the current rules for awarding tenders? (They are offered five options from the elimination of rules to rules should be more strict.)

As shown in Figure 11, a majority of councillors respond to the first and third questions with the 'maximum punishment / most strict' option, reflecting the desirability of seeming 'tough' on corruption. Nonetheless, a substantial share of councillors do not select this option, perhaps reflecting beliefs that some aspects of what is understood to be 'fraud' ought to be treated with a lighter touch and that they are not reprehensible in the extreme.

Figure 11

When a councillor is found to have awarded an improper tender, what should be the consequences?

When a councillor is found to have awarded an improper tender, what would you have done if you discovered it?

What are your views on rules for tenders?

Rather than simply waiting for 'accountability champions' within governments to emerge, citizens ought to be more precisely targeting their messages and efforts to increase the likelihood of responsiveness at the individual politician level. If the goal is action and not simply confrontation, theories of social accountability require more understanding of the people in power.

Views about punishment divide somewhat predictably along party lines, with DA councillors more likely to opt for the strictest approach. But individual circumstances continue to structure attitudes: among sub-sets of ANC and DA councillors (and for the entire sample), race and gender are strong predictors of attitudes, with black councillors opting for less strict approaches than councillors from other race groups; female councillors opting for less strict than male; and wealthier councillors opting for stricter approaches than less wealthy.

While further research is necessary to better understand and interpret such findings, one possible valid explanation is that views about punishment are shaped by the degree to which a councillor may feel some empathy with the circumstances that prompt individuals to favour friends and family even when it means violating the rules and procedures of their job. For black councillors, and for those in more difficult socio-economic circumstances, they observe (and are much more likely to experience) the pressures that councillors sometimes face to grant special favours, and so may be more inclined to moderate their views about punishment. Our point here is not to say that any position is right or wrong, but simply to clarify that within the ranks of elected officialdom, views about important issues of appropriate conduct vary in important ways that can be documented systematically.

Discussion: Implications for social accountability

The specific survey findings presented above provide a snapshot of a set of politicians' views on relevant concerns about accountability processes. But what is the relevance for a broader understanding of social accountability *in practice*?

To date, most theories and practices of social accountability have focused on the articulation of what citizens want and need towards some undifferentiated corporate or government body. Our findings suggest that such approaches should take into account the strategic environment in which citizen–politician interactions occur, and the characteristics of elected representatives. Rather than simply waiting for 'accountability champions' within governments to emerge, citizens ought to be more precisely targeting their messages and efforts to increase the likelihood of responsiveness at the individual politician level. If the goal is action and not simply confrontation, theories of social accountability require more understanding of the people in power.

A useful analogy may be the practice of successful marketing both by politicians and companies alike. In such cases, the marketing of messages involves the deliberate segmentation and customisation of target markets: getting into the heads of potential voters and consumers to convince them to vote for a particular party or candidate, or to buy a particular product. The same candy bar, detergent or car, is 'sold' to different sets of potential consumers in different ways because successful companies have come to observe that the life experiences of consumers affect how they will respond to messages, symbols and prompts to buy products.

Can citizens and civil society organisations engage in similar practices? That is, can they recognise that there may be different 'markets' for their needs, and

RESEARCH REPORT

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability:
Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

that being successful (getting what they want) may demand a tailoring of messages? For starters, as shown clearly in our research, the media channels for communication differ along the lines of key councillor characteristics. Those same characteristics also predict a set of councillor views about how government can and should work, let alone specific views about particular policy priorities (which we have not discussed in this report, but also vary systematically in similar ways to those detailed above for questions about voice and accountability).

Our findings also suggest that future campaigns to enhance social accountability might benefit from greater appreciation of other psychological and behavioural insights, including with respect to risk aversion (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and other-regarding perspectives (e.g. the importance of social expectations and recognition; see, for example, World Bank 2015). Can politicians be successfully 'nudged' in the same way that citizens are (Thaler

and Sunstein 2009)? Undoubtedly, the most sophisticated of individual and collective actors from within society are likely already to practise socially attuned strategies. But more general theories and practice of social accountability would benefit from explicit detailing, systematic theorising and empirical testing of such practices. Democratic citizens should have the same tools at their disposal as politicians and corporate actors.

We leave it to future research and to others to develop specific citizen-based strategies that take advantage of specific and general insights about politician attitudes and behaviours with the goal of attaining greater responsiveness and integrity in their work. Our larger point is that treating all elected and non-elected government employees with 'one size fits all' strategies is likely to be far less effective than one that tailors messages in ways that are empathic to a diversity of perspectives.

Conclusions

Our analyses of a survey of South African local councillors provides some important insights on how elected representatives vary in their views and attitudes towards accountability processes, including the role of citizen input, norms of good government and the types of pressures that politicians face. Our findings illustrate that, even within a polity characterised by strong parties, and for which councillors are largely dependent on party elites to maintain their jobs (see Lieberman, Martin and McMurray 2017), councillors express a range of views on important questions about voice and accountability in democratic government.

With respect to certain questions, councillor responses do vary systematically along party lines; but for many others there is no apparent difference in responses by party. Rather, we find significant variation *within* parties, particularly across councillors of different socio-economic and demographic backgrounds. In particular, gender, age, education and wealth explain variation in councillor responses. Not surprisingly, race continues to play a particularly important role in South African politics and governance. While much of the racial variation is picked up at the party level (more than 90% of ANC

and EFF councillors in our sample are black, while just 30% of DA councillors are black), even within parties, for many questions, race is still a reliable predictor of attitudes and behaviours. Importantly, in a system in which citizens largely vote for *parties* (even for ward candidates, parties make the choices about who will stand for office), representation is delivered via individuals, and those individuals' views are a product of their own life experiences.

As stated at the outset, these analyses provide a snapshot of elected local councillors in the first year of their term. Future research will investigate how councillor characteristics and responses in turn predict their future behaviours and career paths, both at the individual and municipal levels. Whether or not citizens' voices will really 'count' in local government will surely depend, at least in part, on how needs and demands are heard, interpreted and processed by such elected representatives and leaders. In the meantime, theories and practice of social accountability need to pay greater attention to elected and non-elected actors as human individuals, who are shaped by life histories and the same types of cognitive and social biases that seem to constrain just about all of us.

RESEARCH REPORT

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability:
Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

Appendix: South African councillor panel study municipalities surveyed 2017–2018

Key

■ Metropolitan municipalities

■ Local municipalities

☐ Not surveyed
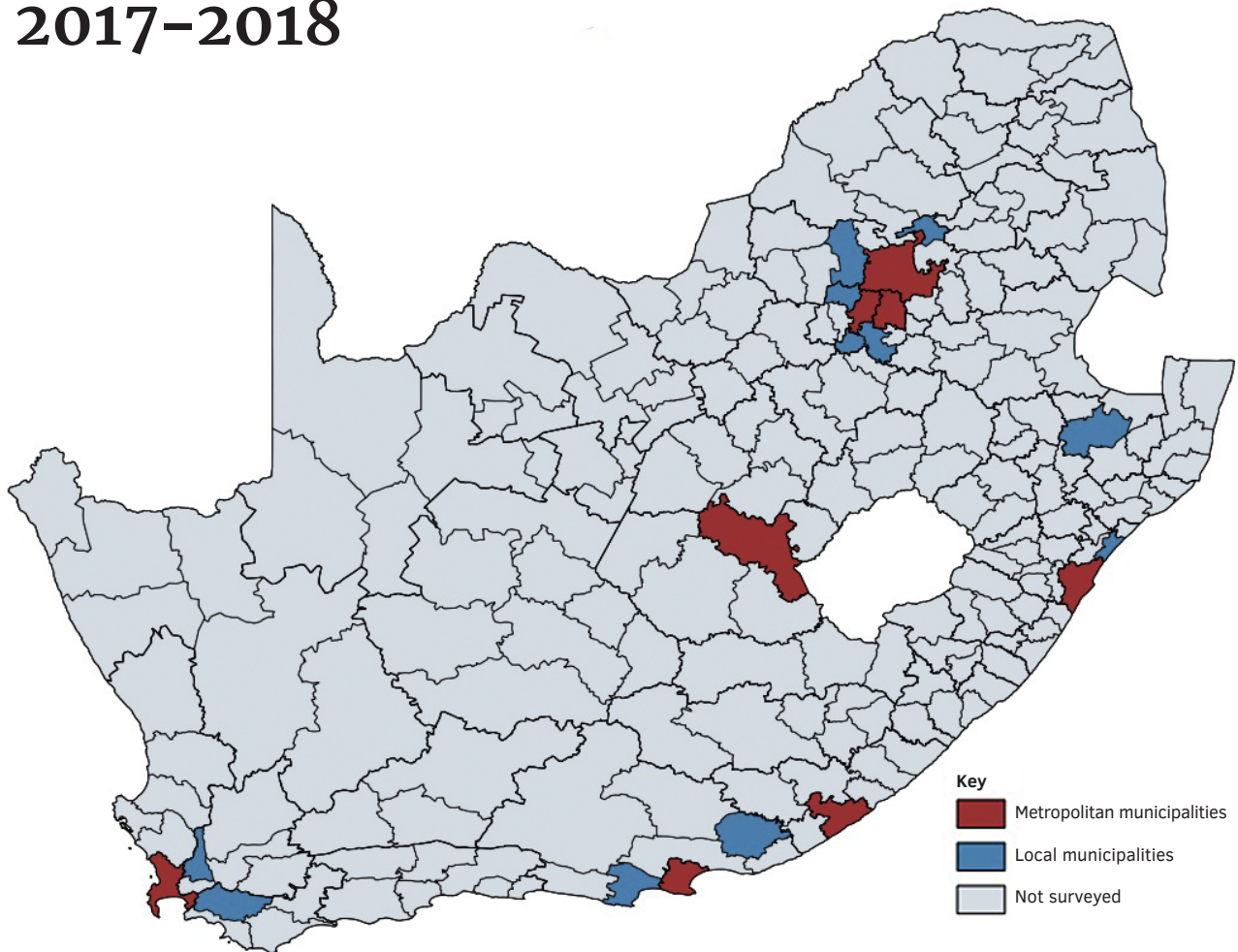
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RESEARCH REPORT

Politicians' perspectives on voice and accountability:
Evidence from a survey of South African local councillors

About Making All Voices Count

Making All Voices Count is a programme working towards a world in which open, effective and participatory governance is the norm and not the exception. It focuses global attention on creative and cutting-edge solutions to transform the relationship between citizens and their governments. The programme is inspired by and supports the goals of the Open Government Partnership.

Making All Voices Count is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and the Omidyar Network, and is implemented by a consortium consisting of Hivos, IDS and Ushahidi.

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