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Can trust in SA's municipalities ever be restored?

For most South Africans, the state is experienced through the mechanics of a fight-or-flight response, a rational adaptation to an environment of constant unpredictability.



By Wits University

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Photo: Chante Schatz, Wits University



DIVE DEEPER



Experiencing state mechanisms, for most South Africans, means confronting constant unpredictability, resulting in a 'fight or flight' response.

The "fight" is a daily battle for basic rights, physical survival in the face of collapsed infrastructure and the mental fortitude required when nothing ever

elsewhere. Those left behind stay out of necessity rather than choice. While some might stay out of a sense of defiant civic loyalty, others simply have no option, forced to survive by whatever means they can.

The upcoming municipal elections highlight the rift between administrative performance and citizen expectations. Professor Emeritus Susan Booysen from the Wits School of Governance observes that asking people to cast a ballot in this climate is fundamentally an exercise in cognitive dissonance: "We're really asking them to suspend their trust and disbelief that things can actually be better," she says. Professor Daryl Glaser, from the Department of Political Studies, points out that explicit discourse around trust is virtually non-existent in the public sphere, as no party wants to be heard pleading - "just trust us". Instead, they rely on what Glaser calls "trust reservoirs" tied to historical, cultural or regional identity, rather than performance.

Glaser maps these distinct identity markers across the political spectrum, showing how the ANC draws on its liberation legacy and social welfare expansion. The DA highlights its regional delivery track record, the EFF mobilises youth by challenging white power structures, while the MK party leverages its leadership's ethno-regional appeal. This reliance on identity over performance sees political actors encouraging voters to overlook profound structural shortcomings, from economic stagnation to systemic corruption. This dynamic presents a fundamental puzzle for local democracy.

"Perhaps the real question is why narrowly transactional considerations have played such a limited role in shaping voter preferences until now," says Glaser.





Photo: Chante Schatz, Wits University

Hiding behind the poor

In the City of Johannesburg, urban specialist Dr Tanya Zack from the Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning within the School of Architecture and Planning, documents a localised state that routinely "hides its service delivery failures behind the poor". Ahead of the elections, rather than deploying spatial or developmental solutions to fix hazardous, flooded roads and pavements or broken traffic lights, the state defaults to what Zack calls "performative violence". This involves sensationalised policing blitzes to project an illusion of order. "It's like the government stopped governing and then blames the people for its failure," says Zack.

Dr Tracy Ledger, from the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI), traces this administrative failure back to a betrayal of the post-apartheid social contract. Universal access to basic services was a foundational promise meant to guarantee a dignified standard of living, even in the face of widespread poverty. Instead, Ledger argues, the state has fundamentally reversed its role, transforming into an entity that actively pursues poor people who can't afford to pay for services. Authorities rant about a "culture of non-payment" to hide a crushing economic reality - 40% of South African households cannot afford to spend a cent on water or electricity without directly sacrificing basic food expenditure.

This failure highlights the core tension of civil society interventions, which despite doing vital work, exposes state absence and deepens historical divides. Professor Philip Harrison, also from the Research Chair in Spatial Analysis and City Planning, warns that overstating the efficacy of short-term private initiatives is dangerous as there are distinct limits to what communities can achieve outside the state. Crucially, these interventions can introduce long-term risks for the poorest of the poor: "The electricity grid and the water grid depend on the middle class paying their service charges. If they've gone completely off grid, then the

Ledger targets this structural dysfunction with even less patience: “The municipality cannot expect the public sector or businesses to solve the problems that the municipality has caused and continues to cause.” Civil society stepping in to pick up the slack provides a “get out of jail free card” to paid officials who choose to redirect infrastructure budgets towards general expenditure or vanity projects. The human cost of this misallocation is devastating - child grant beneficiaries borrow money primarily to pay for electricity, sacrificing essential protein items from their food baskets which results in childhood stunting. Women-led township food businesses are also decimated because they cannot preserve stock, cook or trade safely in unlit environments. Widespread municipal diversion leaves people without the basic benefits explicitly funded by the national budget. For Ledger, the solution is not a creative private-sector partnership - it is a legal imperative: “The state must go back and read the freaking Constitution.”

Dismantling political fiefdoms

Can new structural interventions, such as the Public Service Amendment Act, build a scaffold of trust between municipalities and the people that they serve? The legislation seeks to professionalise local government by drawing a legislative firewall between political office and administrative appointments. Harrison points out that under coalition arrangements, the historical practice of allowing politicians to appoint boards created problematic “political fiefdoms” designed to route tenders to associates and cronies. While breaking these appointment loops marks a vital shift, the public expects much more. As Booysen says, unless the legislation actively enforces individual responsibility and deep project engagement, the law will remain an empty gesture.

Glaser says that maladministration is only one symptom of a much larger structural issue and adds that patronage networks, while inherently toxic to clean governance, have historically acted as a flawed stabiliser in low-trust environments by offering rapid upward mobility for a few. Dismantling them legislatively without fixing the broader economy may simply trigger intense frustration.

Moving past historical failures requires defining clear metrics for a functional local democracy. Harrison notes that the real “seeds of hope” lie in a broader



electricity. By ensuring that this income goes directly back into utility infrastructure rather than the general pot of municipal spending, we can get the basics back on track.

Furthermore, Ledger introduces an essential conceptual balance to the grim state of affairs: "Being in a community with people who are trying to make a plan will cheer you up every time." This is matched by Zack's insistence that civic trust is built not through abstract political statements but through a tangible "demonstration of delivery" such as the Social Employment Fund's localised food gardens and waste-reclaiming initiatives. Zack rejects the idea that trust requires a romanticised community consensus, stating instead that "trust equals really robust battling to get some of these big issues solved".

For Glaser, success is a reduction of exposed corruption, while Ledger looks for municipal spending aligned with the needs of residents, prioritising a continuous water supply over prestige vanity projects. Ultimately, Booysen believes that salvaging trust depends entirely on "whether services are working, whether there is evidence of a return on the rates and taxes that people pay." This demands transitioning municipal spaces away from being experienced as "places of possible threat" and restoring them to safe environments where human dignity is protected and citizens can enjoy a basic quality of life. **DM**

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Author: Leanne Rencken



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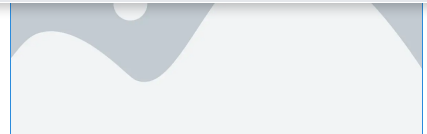
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