

# The Broken Relationship Between the Government Machinery and its People: A Reality or a Myth?

**PW Mabitsela**

Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

**PS Raseala**

University of South Africa, South Africa

---

**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to clarify the breakdown of relationship between government machinery and its people as far as service delivery is concern. Service delivery is a complex and difficult task in South Africa. When politicians during local and national elections engage in elections campaign, quite often the politicians are bombarded by service delivery demands from the citizens. In turn, the politicians make elections promises to satisfy the service delivery demand of the citizens should they be elected to office. After, the election season has, the politicians elected to office rarely interact with the citizens to deliver the election promises. This can be attributed to many factors, such as breakdown of relationship between government machinery and the citizens, lack of capacity by the government machinery to deliver services to citizens amid the growing population in South Africa, break of trust between government and its citizens, poor service delivery, corruption and maladministration. The paper is conceptual and descriptive in nature, which means document and review literature on government has been used to collect data. The paper argues that the relationship between government machinery and its people is broken. The empirical results indicate that the relationship between the government and its citizens has broken.

**Keywords:** Public administration, Government machinery, Service delivery protests, Public trust

---

## 1. Introduction

The lack of public trust between government and its citizens is a thorny issue in South Africa and this has led to service delivery protests and violent protests. For example, when elections promises are made by politicians during elections campaign and after the politicians are elected in office, often the politicians do not fulfil the elections promises. As a result, the citizens take to the streets in an attempt to get the attention of the government. South Africa is burdened by 63,9 per cent of unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2022), with over 55 per cent of the country's population living in poverty, as well as growing inequality (Statistics South Africa, 2017). As a result of the development challenges, the government machinery has experienced breakdown in relationship with the citizens and growing number of service delivery protests due to inadequate provision of basic services and failure to deal decisively with corruption and maladministration.

There is evidence that the breakdown of public trust between the government machinery has resulted in violent service delivery protests. For instances,

#feesMustfall at universities in across the country, Vuwani demarcation protests, the burning of buses and trains throughout the country and the #Seshego shutdown because of lack of constant supply of water. It needs to be stated that in order to resolve public trust in government machinery there should be a proper oversight and that corrupt officials in government institutions have to be brought to justice. This paper begins by providing conceptual analysis on the meaning of public trust and government machinery, followed by a theoretical perspective of public trust and government machinery. This is then followed by discussion of election promises, corruption and maladministration, service delivery challenges as enablers to broken trust between the government machinery and its citizens. Discussion of results and recommendations are provided in the last section of this paper.

## 2. Conceptual Analysis of Terms: Government Machinery and Public Trust

Citizens' trust in government is one of the elements of good governance. The word public trust is not

found in many literature, instead many authors use trust in government. The question remain is what is trust in government? Mansoor (2010) define trust in government as the confidence that citizens have in authorities to do the right things. The citizens (people) experts the government entities to be upright, provide them with justice, and safeguard their fundamental rights of food, health, shelter and safety. Therefore, trust in government refers to the public's expectations regarding their political leaders and government agency's performance regarding how they commit, behave, and fulfil their responsibility (Cheema, 2011). On the other side, OECD (2013) view trust in government as the confidence of citizens and business in the actions of government to do what is right and perceived as fair. It is one of the most important foundations upon which the legitimacy and sustainability of political systems are built. Hitlin and Shutava (2022) define trust in government as the public's perception of government based on expectations of how it should operate. In a nutshell trust in government is the same as public trust. It depends on the author's compatibility to use those terms.

The concept of the public trust relates back to the origins of democratic government and its seminal idea that within the public lies the true power and future of a society; therefore, whatever *trust* the public places in its officials must be respected. Public Trust is a term of art referring to any public property which belongs to the whole of the people. Initially it was used within the formation of the government to refer to politicians who achieve power by election (Hitlin & Shutava, 2022). Therefore it is a responsibility of politician to build trust to the public by coming back to the public after the election and provide feedback instead of appearing to the public during the election.

The machinery of government is a key tool to the elected politicians who want to exercise control, formulate and implement their preferred policy programmes. According to Heath (2020) the machinery of government means the interconnected structures and processes of government, such as the functions and accountability of departments in the executive branch of government. The term is used particular in the context of changes to established systems of public administration where different elements of machinery are created. The phrase "machinery of government" is thought to have originated with John Stuart Mill in considerations on Representative Government (1861). It was notably

used to a public audience by President Franklin D Roosevelt in a radio broadcast in 1934, commenting on the role of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in delivering the New Deal. A number of national governments, including those of Australia, Canada, South Africa and the United Kingdom, have adopted the term in official usage.

The Office of the Premier (Limpopo) and cabinet (2019) define machinery of government as the allocation of functions and responsibilities between departments and ministers. These allocations reflect a government's strategy and priorities and changes may often be made following an election or to support new policy directions. The Public Service Commission (2016) state that the term "machinery of government" refers to: the allocation of functions to and between departments and other government agencies; the creation of a new departments or other government agency, and the amalgamation or abolition of existing departments and other government agencies; the co-ordination of the activities of departments and other government agencies.

It is the responsibility of State Service Commission to review the machinery of government across all areas of government according to Section 6(a) of State Sector Act 1988 which state that "Department dealing with policy issues that have potential implications for the machinery of government are required to consult SSC". Based on the abovementioned definition, machinery of government is just a structure and functions government in order to deliver service to the public. The government structure of South Africa consists of three spheres of government. The first is national government for the country as a whole. The second sphere consists of the nine provincial governments, each responsible for the delivery of certain services to their communities. The third sphere is local governments which are responsible for delivery services to their local communities (Du toit, Knipe, Van Niekerk, Van der Waldt & Dovle, 2002).

### 3. The Theoretical Framework Underpinning Public Trust

Trust in democratic institutions and its functions are usually explained from two different theoretical perspectives. On one hand, there are cultural theories arguing that trust in political institutions like government does not necessarily depend on the quality of the political affairs on the part of the government,

rather it depends on the deeply rooted norms and values that people attain as a member of the society and as a social being. Institutional theories, on the other hand, argue that political trust depends on the way citizens evaluate the performance of the democratic institutions. Both cultural and institutional theories have two streams: micro and macro. Macro theories in both types focus on the shared belief and understanding of the socio-political phenomena, whereas the micro theories emphasize on the individual experience and evaluation of the social norms, values, and institutions. Empirical research shows that trust or distrust in political institutions is determined by the political and economic performance of the regime rather than cultural context (Mishler & Rose, 2001, 2005).

Political trust has become a dominant approach that argues that political trust is determined by public assessments of government actions. According to the approach, whether or not a regime is supported by the greater populace depends on the outcomes of the government actions (de Blok *et al.*, 2022). Again, the evaluation can be based on both micro and macro performance of the government. The macro-performance theory argues that political trust and its variation across regions can be understood by the macro level indicators such as unemployment, inflation, economic growth, and government stability. Studies related to macro-performance theory are usually comparative. On the contrary, micro-performance theory states that underperforming government agencies will determine public trust in government institutions and vice versa (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003). The micro-performance theory further states that change in the trust in government depends on the changes in public perception of the quality of the public services rendered by the government (Yang & Holzer, 2006). The choice of citizen to act during a national crisis depends on how the leaders are dealing the crisis. Sztompka (1999) argued that citizen's perception follows rational-choice theory which can be defined as the "consistent evaluations of politics" by the citizens "given any level of political knowledge" (Elsas, 2015). Apart from the theoretical underpinnings, empirical evidence suggests that political trust is a rational phenomenon (Elsas, 2015). Individual choices are determined by an array of variables including their sociodemographic factors dictated by available information or person's knowledge on the crisis, and potential costs and benefits in determining preferences.

#### **4. Research Methodology**

In this paper qualitative research design is followed and it uses a naturalistic approach that seeks understanding phenomenon in context-specific setting (Golafshani, 2003:600). According to Hancock (2002:1), qualitative research attempts to increase the understanding of the author regarding why things are the way they are in our social world and why people act the way they do. According to Business Dictionary (2013:1), research methodology refers to the process which can be used to collect information and data for the purposes of making decision. Muaz Jalil (2013:6) asserts that research methodology refers to the mode of data collection, this include whether qualitative or quantitative data required, or a mix of the two. The paper uses secondary research (also called desk research) and it consists of research about what has already been written or found at the library, that is information found in books, databases and journals (Driscoll, 2011:153).

#### **5. The Role Election Campaigns Promises in Creating a Hype of Expectations for Services**

Naurin (2011) defines "election promise as a promise or guarantee made to the public by a candidate or political party that is trying to win an election". In other word election promises is about political manifesto (election campaign) of a political party. "Elections are at the core of democratic politics. At least in principle if not always in fact, they provide citizens with a chance to express their policy views and priorities, to participate directly in the political process, and to hold elected leaders accountable for their actions" (Craig, Martinez, Gainous & Kane, 2006:579). As mentioned earlier in the abstract that: "when politicians during local and national elections engage in elections campaign, quite often the politicians are bombarded by service delivery demands from the citizens. In turn, the politicians make elections promises in an effort to satisfy the service delivery demand of the citizens should they be elected to office. After, the election season has ended, usually the politicians once elected to office rarely interact with the citizens to deliver the elections promises."

Naurin and Markwat (2019:2210) stated that election pledges hold a prominent place in classic accounts of representative democracy – accounts in which political parties make clear pledges before election, voters use these pledges to make decision at the ballot box,

and voters then either reward government for living up to their commitments, or "vote the rascals out" if pledges are broken. Mellon and Feldman (2021:1) argue that "parties make hundreds of campaign promises but not all are seen by voters as central to a party's offering. Studies of government promises fulfilment accept that not all promises equivalent but in practice treat all promises equally because they lack an appropriate means of measuring promise centrally". Palfrey and Postlewaite (2007) stated that the difficulty with the argument that campaign statement are a mere act of promising or pledging, to carry out a particular policy is that they are cheap talk. The challenge with political parties is that they are concern with the implementation of their policy rather than service delivery. Their relationship with the voter is based on election only, especially during the election campaign. Therefore, this breaks the trust between the government and its people.

## 6. The Broken Public Trust as a Result of Poor Service Delivery

A wide range of literature (Twala, 2014) on broken public trust because of poor service delivery, such as Allan and Heese (2011) and Hough (2008) has examined the reasons behind lack of public trust in government machinery and service delivery related protests in South Africa; citing issues such as lack of services, housing, jobs, water, and sanitation, as well as political problems linked to ward councillors (South African Local Government Association, 2015).

When the ruling African National Congress (ANC) grabbed power in 1994 after the collapse of the apartheid regime, it undertook to provide wide range of basic services such as free housing, free water and sanitation, jobs, and most importantly, free education. By implications the ANC's goal of improving the majority of lives of the citizens of South Africa was unattainable in just 28 years in government. The slow pace of delivery of such services and failures in governance processes has diminished the public trust that the citizens have on the ability of the government machinery to turn the tide on service delivery. Consequently, such failures have led to raising anger from those citizens who remain trapped in abject poverty, unemployment and landlessness, as evident by the sporadic ongoing service delivery protests across the country.

The Presidency (2015) found that the key reason for the dwindling level of public trust in government

machinery is as a result that approximately 80 percent of municipalities in the country had failed to perform their mandatory duties, with more than 50 percent of municipalities having had failed to perform half of their duties. As such, it is unsurprisingly, that the root cause of lack of public trust in government machinery in South Africa is associated with the inability of the government to deliver services to the citizens. This inability is compounded in part by a shortage of competent staff at the higher echelons of local government. Sikhakhane and Reddy (2011) identified the lack of public accountability as another reason for the lack of public trust in government machinery. This is so particularly in municipalities, with growing unhappiness among citizens. This lack of accountability is also evident at national level, where there has been widespread looting of public funds of state-owned enterprises such as Eskom, Transnet, Denel, South African Airways and Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa. As a result, only 33 percent of the population had trust in local government. While most of the literature (Presidency, 2015; Sikhakhane & Reddy, 2011) cite different views on the leading views on the decline of public trust and protests. However, the municipalities have their own perceptions.

## 7. The Complexity of Challenges Associated with Service Delivery

Service delivery is a complex and difficult task in South Africa as mentioned previously in the abstract. According to DBSA (2022) "service delivery in South Africa remains a big challenge for municipalities. By lacking in infrastructure, resource and maintenance, they are unable to provide communities with quality service delivery in fast turnaround time. In the end, the lack of municipal infrastructure halts progress in other areas".

IDASA (2010) stated the major concern of service delivery challenges known as: the degree of corruption, institutional capacity constraints relating to appropriate skills and staff, lack transparency, dysfunctional of ward committees, lack of accountability by councillors and municipal officials, lack of public participation in issue of governance, failure to comply with municipal legislation and other by-laws, failure to prioritize community needs and IDP and budgeting process not aligned, tension between the political and administrative section of the municipalities and weak financial viability tremendously.



As a result this has led to the breakdown of relationship between government machinery and its people. This breakdown of relationship government machinery and its people is manifested by recent service delivery protests. The protesters explain that they took to the streets in order to get government to listen to them.

## **8. Corruption and Maladministration**

Corruption and maladministration are amongst the major challenges that confront South Africa. This assertion is supported by the evidence cited in Corruption Watch 2016 Annual Report which revealed that for the past five years, most of the prevalent types of corruption reported in 2016 were one way or another centered around the abuse of power (Corruption Watch, 2016). The breakdown of relationship government machinery and its people could be because of abuse of power by the government officials who engage in corrupt activities and maladministration.

Another type of corruption which was identified in the Corruption Watch 2016 report was bribery and procurement corruption. In an article penned by Safara and Odeku (2021), the revelation is that a tension exists between corruption and the rule of law in South Africa (SA). Further to that, Safara and Odeku's (2021) study revealed that corruption and maladministration were found to be inconsistent with the rule of law. The findings of Safara and Odeku's (2021) study re-emphasizes the argument of this paper that there is breakdown of relationship between government machinery and the people because evidently corruption and maladministration diminish the trust in the rule of law.

The catastrophic nature and the dent which corruption and maladministration has done to the functioning of the government machinery is evident. This proposition is confirmed by Maropo (2018) who undoubtedly asserts that corruption and maladministration distort government priorities and weaken the local government machinery. Corruption and maladministration weaken the ability of the state to provide services such as adequate housing to the poor, indigents, and vulnerable communities. This proposition is supported by the study conducted by Mashiane and Odeku (2021) which re-affirm the argument that corruption and maladministration contributes to the breakdown of relationship between government machinery and

its people for instance. On the other hand, Igwe, Egbo and Nwakpu (2021) argue that corruption lays a foundation for the violation of citizens' rights and underdevelopment. Furthermore, Igwe, Egbo and Nwakpu (2021) posit that there is a strong correlation between corruption, the absence of ethics of governance and maladministration. Lekubu and Sibanda (2021) argue that the reason why there is a lack of trust between the government and its citizens could be attributed to low levels of ethics and morality in public service in South Africa (SA). For instance, the Zondo Commission on State Capture reports, Advocate Terry Motau report on VBS. These corruption events of the past have demonstrated how machinery of government has broken down.

## **9. Results and Discussion**

Service delivery protest, riots and looting was a sign of broken relationship between government machinery and its people. The issue of trust has declined in the level of trust in government. According to the results of the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Edelman Trust Barometer, which surveyed more than 31 000 respondents in 26 country around the world, 16 of the countries surveyed in 2013 have trust score lower than 50 percent in government compared to only 9 of the countries surveyed that have trust scores below 50 percent in business. Afro barometer (2021) previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018. The findings were as follow: Trust in nearly all institutions is low – and declining. Only media broadcasters, both independent (63%) and government (61%), and the Department of Health (56%) enjoy the trust of a majority of citizens. Only a minority of South Africans say they trust the president (38%) and Parliament (27%) "somewhat" or "a lot." For the first time in Afro barometer surveys, only a minority (43%) express trust in courts of law. Only about one in three citizens (36%) trust the Electoral Commission of South Africa, with trust levels particularly low among younger respondents. Slightly more (42%) trust the Public Protector. Trust in both the ruling African National Congress (ANC) (27%) and opposition parties (24%) continues to decline. Trust in the ANC is especially low among younger and more educated respondents. Two-thirds (67%) of South Africans would be willing to give up elections if a non-elected government could provide security, housing, and jobs. Nearly half (46%) say they would be "very willing" to do so, with higher levels of support among younger and more educated respondents.

## 10. Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings from the most recent Afro barometer survey show a worsening deficit of public trust in South Africa's key democratic institutions. Low levels of trust in elected representatives point to a democratic malaise matched by decreasing voter turnout at elections and decreasing trust in the Electoral Commission. President Cyril Ramaphosa aimed to bring back trust in government when he replaces former president Jacob Zuma but riots in July may have been a warning. What the government need to do, is to improve its service delivery by providing social protection and demonstrate a determination to punish corruption to have any chance of rebuilding trust between citizens and their state. The ongoing inadequate service delivery, corruption, and political challenges, amongst others, have led to the rapid emergence of violent and destructive protests in South Africa, which are quickly becoming a concern for the government and many citizens. The predicament that remains is whether getting the attention of local authorities improves the quality of service, as evident in the shortage of railway services that leads to delays. These delays are frequently met with the torching of trains, thereby worsening the backlog in railway services. This only undermines the already weakened capacity of railway services creating a vicious cycle of service delivery protests.

## References

Afro Barometer. 2021. South Africans' trust in institutions and representatives researches new low. *Dispatch* no.474. 24 August 2021.

Allan, K. & Heese, K. 2011. Understanding why service delivery protests take place and who is to blame. Available at: [https://www.municipaliq.co.za/publications/articles/sunday\\_indep.pdf](https://www.municipaliq.co.za/publications/articles/sunday_indep.pdf). Accessed 20 August 2022.

Aragones, E., Palfrey, T. & Postlewaite A. 2007. Political reputations and campaign promises. *Journal of the European Economic Association*.

Business Dictionary. 2013. Research Methodology. Available at: <http://www.businessdictionary.com>. Accessed 22 July 2022.

Cheema, G.S. 2011. Engaging civil society to promote democratic local governance: Emerging trends and policy implications in Asia. *Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy*. Available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download>.

Corruption Watch. 2016. Report showing increasing intolerance for corruption. Available at: <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/cw-2016-report-shows-increasing-intolerance-corruption/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwteOaBhDuARIsADBqRehY5hTClZutwf>

AF9sr5G9o\_2Eyz2t\_jHRkZBe3vxsJyV8LmE1DtucaAphcEALw\_wcB. Accessed 27 October 2022.

Craig, S.S., Martinez, M.D., Gainous, J. & Kane, J.G. 2006. Winners, losers, and Election Context: Voters Responses to the 2000 Presidential Election. *SAGE Journals*.

Department of Government Communication and Information System. 2022. The importance of public trust in government and why we should care. Pretoria: Government Printers.

Department of Premier and Cabinet. 2019. Machinery of Government Handbook. Pretoria: Government Printers.

DBSA. 2022. Impact of municipality infrastructure in service delivery. Pretoria: DBSA.

De Blok, L., van der Meer, T. & Van der Brug, W. 2022. Policy area satisfaction, perceptions of responsibility, and political trust: A novel application of the REWB model to testing evaluation-based political trust. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 32(1):129-150. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2020.1780433>.

Driscoll, D. 2011. *Introduction to Primary Research: Observations, Surveys and Interviews*. Available at: <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/writingspaces2/driscoll-introduction-to-primary-research.pdf>. Accessed 23 July 2022.

Du toit, D., Knipe, A., Van Niekerk, D., Van der Waldt, G. & Doyle M. 2002. Service excellence in governance. Sandton: Heineman Publishers (Pty) Ltd.

Elsas, V.E. 2015. Political trust as a rational attitude: A comparison of the nature of political trust across different levels of education. *Political Studies*, 63(5):1158-1178. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12148>.

Golafshani, N. 2003. Understanding reliability and validity in Qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 8(4):597-606.

Hancock, B. 2002. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*. Trent Focus Group. Available at: <http://classes.uleth.ca/200502/mgt2700a/Articles/Qualitative%20Research.pdf>. Accessed 24 July 2022.

Heath, J. 2020. *The Machinery of Government: Public Administration and the Liberal State*. Oxford University Press: Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197509616.001.0001>.

Hitlin, P. & Shutava, N. 2022. Trust in government: A close look at public perception of the Federal Government and its employees.

Hough, M. 2008. Violent Protest at Local Government Level in South Africa: Revolutionary Potential? *South African Journal of Military Studies*, 36(1):41.

IDASA. 2010. The statement of local government and service delivery in South Africa: Issue, challenges, and solution. Pretoria: Local Government Unit (LGU).

Igwe, P.A., Egbo, O.P. & Nwakpu, E.S. 2021. Content analysis of ethics of governance, maladministration, and political corruption. *International Journal of Public Sociology and Socioterapy*, 1(2).

Lekubu, B.K. & Sibanda, S. 2021. Moral values and ethics as antidotes for corruption in the South African Public Service and Administration.

- Mansoor, M. 2021. Citizens' trust in government as a function of good governance and government agency's provision of quality information on social media during COVID-19. *Elsevier Inc.*
- Mashiane, K. & Odeku, K.O. 2021. Analysis of the impediments to the realisation of the right to access to adequate housing in South Africa. *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 36(1): 149-176.
- Mellon, J., Prosser, C., Urban, J. & Feldman, A. 2021. Which Promise Actually matter? Election Pledge Centrality and Promissory. *SAGE Journal*.
- Mishler, W. & Rose, R. 2005. What are the political consequences of trust? A test of cultural and institutional theories in Russia. *Comparative Political Studies*, 38(9):1050-1078. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414005278419>.
- Muaz-jalil, M. 2013. Practical guidelines for conducting research: Summarising good research practice in line with the DCED Standard. London: United Nations, Donor Committee for Enterprise Development. Available at: <http://www.enterprise-development.org/page/download?id=2133>. Accessed 22 July 2022.
- Naurin, E. 2011. Definitions of Election Promises in Empirical Research. *Election promises, party behaviour and voter perceptions*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.
- Naurin, E., Soroka, S. & Markwat, N. 2019. Asymmetric Accountability: An Experimental Investigation of Biases in Evaluation of Government Election. *SAGE Journal*.
- OECD. 2013. Government at a glance. Geneva: OECD Publishing.
- Sefara, L. & Odeku, K. 2021. Critical Legal Perspective of International Anti-Corruption Laws for Tackling Corruption in South Africa. Available at: <https://heinonline.org/HOL/LandingPage?handle=hein.journals/perbularna10&div=27&id=&page=>.
- Sikhakane, B. & Reddy, P. 2011. Public Accountability at the Local Government Sphere in South Africa. *African Journal of Public Affairs*, 4(1):85-102.
- South African Local Government Research Centre. 2014. *The SA Local Government Briefing*. Cape Town: SA Local Government Research Centre.
- South African Local Government Association (SALGA). 2015. *Community Protest. Perception Study 2010 and Community Protests: A Snapshot of Local Government Perceptions*. SALGA Report.
- Statistics South Africa. 2017. *Poverty trends in South Africa: An examination of obsolete poverty between 2006 and 2015*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. 2022. Quarterly Labour Force Survey: 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2022. Pretoria. Available at: [https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page\\_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=73289](https://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=1854&PPN=P0211&SCH=73289).
- The Presidency. 2015. *Twenty Year Review: Background Paper on Local Government*. Pretoria: The Presidency.
- Twala, T. 2014. The Causes and Socio-Political Impact of the Service Delivery Protests to the South African Citizenry: A Real Public Discourse. *Journal of Social Science*, 39(2):159-167.
- Van de Walle, S. & Bouckaert, G. 2003 Public service performance and trust in government: The problem of causality. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 26(8-9):891-913. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1081/PAD120019352>.