

Local government elections – what to watch for 7 October 2021

Pity the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). They have about 30 days to prepare, print and distribute ballot papers for more than 60 000 candidates vying to capture one of the more than 9 000 councillors posts up for election. Those ballots must get to more than 20 000 voting districts in 257 municipalities across the country. The local government elections on 1 November is no small logistical endeavour.

The more than 60 000 candidates are linked to 1 482 political parties and ratepayers' organisations. Imagine if each organisation had a distinct logo that must go onto the ballot paper too!

Wards and party lists

An easy explanation for the high number of organisations participating in the election is that each municipality consists of 50% ward councillors and 50% councillors elected from party lists – the so-called PR or proportional representatives. Each voter has two votes, one for an individual as ward councillor and one for a party to determine proportional representation. Even if you run as an independent you should link to an organisation to collect proportional votes too.

Many proponents of a constituency system argue that it brings a more direct link between a voter and a representative and would result in more accountable democracy. This is not necessarily the case. The local government system provides for direct voting for an individual representative but, overall, it hasn't contributed to better outcomes for voters. The dire state of local governments testifies to that.

The main advantage of the PR system is that it grants representation to smaller and minority parties who would otherwise not have been able to gain a seat. This ensures better inclusion and more participation. The DA, EFF, IFP and a few others have gained from this.

The Big Five numbers

On election night we can watch out for the following five numbers:

- **58%: The poll percentage.** At the previous local government elections in 2016, 58% of registered voters took the trouble to cast a vote. Judging by registration numbers, turnout would be lower this year. Only 65% of eligible voters have registered, against 75% in 2016. The total number of voters has declined by about half a million since the 2019 elections – be it because of Covid-19, general disenchantment, poverty ... it indicates less interest. That could change by polling day of course, as parties' campaigns pick up. Lower turnout will favour the parties that are better at getting their supporters to the polls, something the DA traditionally did well.
- **54%: The ANC's share of the vote.** The ANC achieved 54% of votes in 2016. However, in the 2021 election, this percentage could be lower. Opinion polls show support for the ANC at 49% to 50%. The 2016 vote resulted in the party losing control of three metros, a bitter pill to swallow. Even if the ANC cannot improve their total vote, presumably they would like to regain ground in the metros and hold the councils they currently run.
- **24%: The DA's share share of the vote.** In 2016, the DA garnered 27% of the vote and in 2019 they collected 21% in the general election. Given the travails in the party, 27% is probably out of reach. Noticeably, leader John Steenhuisen is targeting 24%. Currently, the DA controls, or is in the ruling coalition, in three metros and 24 councils. For them the issue is also whether they can hold on to the 27 and become part of ruling coalitions in more councils.
- **11%: The EFF's share of the vote.** In 2016, the EFF garnered 8% of local government votes and 11% three years later, in the 2019 election. Opinion polls show support for the EFF at 12% to 15%. With the EFF's target voters being young voters, a major concern for them must be the fact that there are now only 4,6 million young people (those under the age of 30) who are registered to vote, compared to 6,3 million in 2016.
- **1,14%: Independents' share of vote.** Some have huge expectations that independent candidates can make a breakthrough in this election. In the past, independent candidates have struggled. In 2016, they received 27 seats countrywide and 1,14% of the PR vote. We will see if a trend break occurs this year. Mmusi Maimane's One SA Movement and Herman Mashaba's Action SA are new kids on the block and no doubt keen to make a breakthrough. One SA Movement is supporting candidates under the banner of local ratepayer organisations. Action SA is registered as a political party and fielding candidates in its own name. Two different strategies. It will be interesting to watch their respective performances.

The ten municipalities

- **Johannesburg:** This is where Herman Mashaba's Action SA wants to make a breakthrough. Will it? Or can the ANC-led coalition retain control? The ANC lost Johannesburg in 2016 and that was quite a shock for the party. Since then, it has recaptured Joburg from the DA. The city is in bad shape and urgently needs renewal.

- **Tshwane:** The control of this municipality has been severely challenged since 2016, when the ANC lost it to a DA-led coalition. While the DA coalition is still in charge, it is uncertain whether they can hold the capital city of South Africa, given what other coalitions can be formed. Action SA has also put candidates up in this municipality in their attempt to be part of a ruling coalition.
- **Nelson Mandela Bay:** This municipality is currently led by a DA coalition. However, since 2016 it has swung between DA- and ANC-led coalitions. Residents are hoping for a new start as political instability left the city with corruption and poor management.
- **Ekhuruleni:** This East Rand metro is currently led by what must be one of the last Zuma acolytes in the ANC, Mzwandile Masina. (He wanted the South African Reserve Bank to print money to finance the metro...!) In 2016, the ANC lost the majority in this metro and now rules in coalition with smaller parties. One SA Movement has nominated independent candidates in each of the 112 wards and stand under the banner of the Independent Citizens Movement This will enable them to also gather PR votes in addition to wards they may capture.
- **Emfuleni:** This municipality includes Evaton, Sebokeng, Vaal Oewer, Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging, and is notorious for its poor management. Here too, One SA Movement has put up 35 independent candidates as part of a community organisation.
- **Ethekwini:** The EFF has made inroads in Durban and claim that they can capture the majority. It will be a hard push as the ANC has more than 57% of the councillors. The July unrest may have an impact as could the fact that more than half of the ANC's candidates are new and have not served before. Nevertheless, it will be a massive swing if Ethekwini is put into a position where it has to form a coalition.
- **Maluti-a-Phofung:** This municipality, consisting of the picturesque Harrismith in the Eastern Free State, is notorious for its poor management and its failure to pay Eskom. There are 16 ANC councillors who voted against the ANC mayor and, as a result, found themselves expelled from the party. They have now formed a civic organisation and are contesting all 16 wards. Can they unseat the ANC?
- **Bitou:** The council for the greater Plettenberg Bay area has six DA and six ANC councillors each, with the 13th position captured by a small party who first sided with the ANC and then the DA. The small party councillor became mayor but has since been suspended pending corruption enquiries. As a result, the council is now deadlocked.
- **Lekwa:** Standerton is suffering from severe mismanagement and the town is in serious disrepair. The municipality was placed under administration and the minister of finance was appointed as the administrator by order of the High Court. Will the election bring change?
- **Kannaland:** Comprising the Little Karoo towns of Ladismith, Calitzdorp and Zoar, this municipality is one of 64 officially labelled 'dysfunctional' municipalities in South Africa and the only municipality in the Western Cape with this label. Based on size, it is probably the most dysfunctional municipality in the country. Kannaland has 3 ICOSA (Independent Civic Organisation of SA) members and two each from the DA and ANC. The seven members struggle to work together. Since 2000, the council has continuously swung between ANC-, DA- and ICOSA-led coalitions, ended up under administration, and is now fighting in the courts on who is in charge. (But the council did produce an Integrated Development Plan of 212 pages!)

So what?

- Currently, polls put the main parties' support at 49% to 50% for the ANC, 18% to 21% for the DA, and 13% to 15% for the EFF. This may very well change by polling day – polls are a reflection at a particular point in time, not a prediction of what will happen in the future.
 - Even if these wide differences in votes indeed materialise on polling day, in individual metros and towns the results can be much closer, necessitating coalitions to form a ruling majority.
 - It looks like coalitions will be the name of the game – the trick will be who exactly will pair with whom.
- Happy voting!