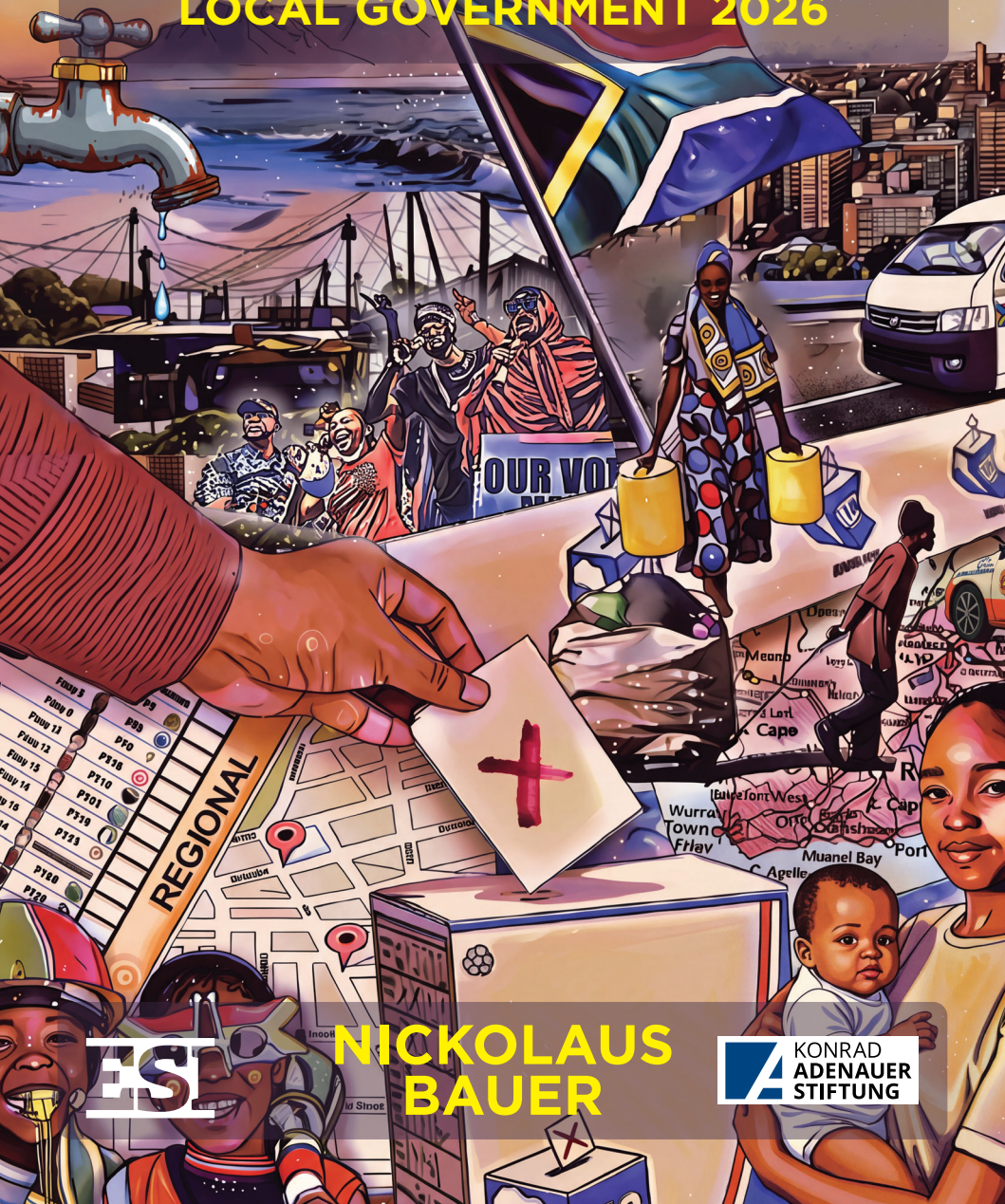


SOUTH AFRICA'S EASY ELECTION GUIDE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT 2026



**NICKOLAUS
BAUER**



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**by
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Introduction:

Why your vote matters in local government elections

Another crucial year has arrived, and with it, another hotly contested election that is likely to change South Africa for years to come. On 4 November 2026, South Africa will yet again have an opportunity to elect the officials who will lead the country, only this time at a local level. The 2026 local government elections are upon us and political parties; their candidates and independent wannabe councillors are out to convince you to queue up and choose them on election day. It should be a proud day for all of us as we get to exercise our power as the people to hire and fire those meant to serve us in our local councils. This will be our 7th municipal election and 14th election overall since democracy arrived in 1994.

However, the sad reality is that South Africans are losing faith in the democratic process. This is not simply a hunch: the facts and figures back this up. The 2024 national election produced the worst turnout of any national election in South Africa's history. Just under 59% of the electorate turned out on election day, a mere 16.3 million of 27.8 million registered voters (IFES 2026). This is virtually the same number that turned out 25 years earlier, in 1999, when 16 228 462 votes were cast, which does not sound like a problem until you realise that the overall population increased by almost twenty million people. Furthermore, that is not even taking into account the people that have not registered to vote, those South Africans older than eighteen who have decided not to take part in elections.

Unfortunately, this picture is substantially worse for local government elections. Historically speaking, local polls have always been significantly lower than national elections. In 2021, it was no different, with voter

turnout being just over 45% (EISA 2021) a clear reminder that many voices were left unheard in shaping our communities.

This is a horrible paradox because it is at the local level that you are most likely to feel the experience of ineffective government, regardless of whether a municipality has collapsed due to corruption, ineptitude or political stalemate. When the institution that is responsible for providing your electricity, water and/or refuse removal fails to deliver, you are bound to be affected personally, while at a national level the rot of useless governance takes a while to arrive at your doorstep. In other words, when your household has overflowing garbage bags on the pavement, unflushed toilets and you're sitting in the dark, the failure of local government becomes all too real.

It is therefore clearly local government that directly impacts service delivery, grassroots development and the future of your community, but with fewer people voting, fewer voices are represented. The good news is that local government is also the best opportunity you as an individual in your community has to do something about it. As we move closer to election day, it is important to realise that the power to shape your community starts with you.

This guide will not only help you understand the lie of the land in each of the country's metros and a selection of the most significant municipalities, but also what you and your community can do to ensure that good local governance is not an impossible ideal. Poor governance is not simply something to get angry about when you have reached the point of no return, have cursed and given up on your elected representatives, but rather a right that you are entitled to as a citizen of South Africa and a member of your suburb, town and city.

However, what this guide will not do is to do the work required to realise this right. That responsibility comes hand in hand with the right of every South African to expect decent services, safe neighbourhoods and a better tomorrow for their families. Furthermore, that responsibility means more than pitching up to a voting booth every few years.

Governance only works if you work for it.

I consistently argue that the democratic process is like a muscle all citizens must exercise. While the majority of us marvel at a well-defined, fit body, how many of us are actually willing to put in the work to build it? If you are not willing to roll up your sleeves and become an active citizen in your corner of the country, you can never expect the country's democratic muscle to be anything but flab on an unhealthy body.

This might be the point where many of you put down the guide and decide this is not for you: you have a full-time job as it is, a family to raise and a household to run. You might be shrieking inwardly to yourself: "Am I now expected to do the work of the politicians I voted for? Why bother!"

Of course, you can decide to do that if you like. However, the only guarantee you will have is that by doing so, you will have absolutely no impact on what happens in your community.

Politicians have unfortunately proved time and again that, unless they are consistently made to face the consequences of their actions from either the constituency they serve or the party they represent, the majority will do very little. That is unfortunately the case worldwide, and South Africa is no exception. So, if you choose to ignore this election, the likely outcome is that governance will at best stay exactly the same in your community or get worse. So why not read on to see how you can ensure at least a little accountability and force some action in your community, not only during the upcoming election cycle but long after it too?

The point of this guide is therefore to empower you, the reader, with the knowledge and insight needed not only to choose the local government that is right for you, but also to keep public representatives at the local level engaged and accountable. If you think that is impossible, I encourage you to read further and find out more.

Understanding Local Government

To have an impact on governance in your community, you need to

understand how things function at this level. Indeed, if you want to truly understand South African politics, you need to understand local government. This is not because municipal politics is particularly exciting when compared to politics at the national or even the provincial level. It usually isn't. There are few dramatic votes in council chamber votes of national importance, no presidential addresses or midnight cabinet reshuffles. Furthermore, you'll be forgiven for thinking very few local politicians are capable of making a municipal budget sound remotely interesting.

Yet this is exactly where governance becomes real for every single South African. Local government is the area of the South African state that is supposed to make sure your water arrives, your rubbish disappears, your electricity is connected, your roads are maintained and your neighbourhood is planned in a way that makes sense. It is also where decisions are made about local development, land use, municipal infrastructure and many of the everyday services you rely on. To many of us, local government does not seem like something worth caring about and this is clearly apparent from the proportion of the electorate that turns out to vote in each local election.

However, when local politics fail, you will definitely notice and much sooner than you would any dysfunction at the national or provincial level. If a tap runs dry you may choose to curse the president or complain about your premier. In reality, that anger is misguided, as basic services are a local government responsibility, as obligated by the South African constitution (South African Government 2026b).

In brief, South Africa has three spheres of government: national, provincial and local. The constitution proclaims (South African Government 2026d) them as being distinctive, interdependent and interrelated. Local government is therefore not simply an extension of the national government, seen as being at the bottom of the pile, even if national departments sometimes treat it like a poor cousin that needs to be tolerated and schooled.

local government operates, have constitutional powers in their own right and specific responsibilities that empower them to govern local affairs within the law. Unfortunately, this is where things become slightly complicated, especially when you unpack the levels and structure of municipal governance (South African Government 2026d). There are currently 257 municipalities in South Africa: eight metropolitan municipalities, 44 district municipalities and 205 local municipalities. In its simplest form, a municipality consists of a municipal council made up of elected councillors who are responsible for the governance of a demarcated area.

The easiest way to understand the difference between the three is to think about where you live in your corner of South Africa. If you live in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni, eThekweni, Nelson Mandela Bay, Buffalo City, or Mangaung, you live in a metropolitan municipality. These are the country's largest and most urbanised areas and, unlike the rest of the country, they are governed through a single municipality responsible for the full range of local government functions in that metropolitan area, encompassing basic services like water, electricity and refuse removal, as well as broader functions like public safety, health and even tourism.

If you live outside a metropolitan area, the scope of what you expect from a municipality is far narrower and its responsibilities are more basic. This is because the rest of the country is divided into district municipalities, which are then in turn made up of local municipalities. District municipalities are generally responsible for matters that need to be dealt with across a wider area, including district-wide planning and supporting the capacity of local municipalities.

On the other hand, local municipalities deal more directly with communities and share certain responsibilities with the district. If this structure seems clunky and does not make immediate sense, that assessment is largely correct. There is no clear distinction between responsibilities in the division of governance between local and district municipalities (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung 2008). For example, a South

African living in a small town may be governed by a local municipality which sits within a district municipality. That means there can be more than one municipal authority involved in the services and development of the area. That means there is often a serious overlap in responsibilities, which, paradoxically, does not result in twice the level of service delivery. Rather, this opens up cracks into which accountability for municipal functioning and tasks at local and district levels falls.

This brings us to the critical question: who are the people you are actually voting for and expecting to run your local government? As described earlier, whatever form a municipality may take, it is in essence a municipal council made up of elected councillors who represent the specific wards for which they were elected by local residents. To clarify, a ward is a specific physical area of a municipality, demarcated by the Municipal Demarcation Board (2026). Ultimately, the municipal council is a political decision-making body: the decisions made by ward councillors, each holding a single vote tied to a specific geographical area of the municipality. A ward councillor represents a specific geographic area, while a PR councillor represents a political party across a broader municipal area. How they are each elected will be unpacked in the next chapter. This is the distinction between a ward councillor and a proportional representation (PR) councillor.

In theory, councillors are supposed to be proactive public servants, rather than simply employees who attend council meetings, appear at community events and collect a salary. Unfortunately, this perception is in many cases the status quo.

In fact, councillors have an array of responsibilities. They must approve the municipal budget, deliberate on policies and pass by-laws. They also make decisions about how municipal money is to be raised and spent. They approve the municipality's Integrated Development Plan (IDP), which is essentially the municipality's broad blueprint for what it wants to achieve, where it intends to raise money and how it plans to use these funds to deliver services and develop infrastructure.

These decisions matter because budgets are political documents.

Every Rand a municipality spends somewhere is a Rand that cannot be spent elsewhere. Whether to fix water infrastructure, upgrade roads, build public facilities, support local economic development, or maintain parks and public spaces is ultimately about determining priorities. Councillors therefore have a much more important role than simply ensuring that a pothole gets fixed on their street or choosing who gets to use the local municipal hall for an event. They ultimately decide what the municipality prioritises.

Unfortunately, not all councillors are equal in their performance and priorities. One of the uncomfortable realities of South African local government is that councillors can sometimes feel more accountable to the political party that put them on the ballot than to the people who voted for them. This is especially true if they are PR councillors who are elected through party lists, and whose political futures depend heavily on the party structures that selected them. A conflict arises when a councillor knows who they are meant to serve but also knows that their position ultimately depends on keeping the party happy.

This is not unique to local government, but municipal elections uniquely offer voters more opportunities to choose candidates from outside the traditional party system. Independent candidates have long been part of local government elections, giving communities the option of voting for an individual rather than simply a party. In the 2016 local elections, 27 of the 855 independent candidates who contested seats were successful (COGTA 2021). Five years later, at the 2021 polls, 51 independent candidates secured seats out of the 944 contested (Mail & Guardian 2021).

This makes local politics potentially more personal and more accountable than national politics, where Members of Parliament (MPs) have historically been elected through party lists, and voters have had little say over which individual representatives ultimately enter the National Assembly. However, this is began to change with the 2024 national and provincial elections (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2024c), independent candidates were allowed to stand for the National Assembly

for the first time). At the local level, therefore, the person knocking on your door, attending the ward meeting for your area, and answering your WhatsApp message can actually be the person you helped put into office.

There is, however, another important distinction to be made here. Councillors are not municipal employees. They do not personally run the water department, repair electricity infrastructure or collect your rubbish. Instead, the administration is headed by a municipal manager and officials who are responsible for implementing the decisions of the council. The political leadership provides oversight, makes policy and holds the administration accountable.

This distinction matters enormously when you are angry about something. Your ward councillor may be the person you phone and complain to on WhatsApp when the refuse outside your home has not been collected for three weeks, or when there is yet another power outage; however, they are not the person who personally dispatches a truck or electrician to your street. Their job is to represent you, raise the issue, push the local administration to act and hold the municipality accountable.

That is where your vote becomes important, because you are deciding who will represent you on the council and fight for the type of community in which you want to live. I have seen this first-hand in my work (Bauer 2024) as both a journalist of eighteen years and a civil servant during a short stint in the City of Johannesburg.

The communities that appeared to function best were not necessarily the ones blessed with councillors who are endowed with impeccable governance skills and able to dispense exceptional service delivery. In fact, some were operating in spite of weak governance and a municipality that was often slow to respond. What made the difference was that residents knew who their councillor was. They understood what that councillor was responsible for and, just as importantly, what they were not responsible for.

They knew how to raise an issue, how to demand an answer and how to keep pressure on their elected representative. However, they

also understood that accountability was not a one-way street. The most effective communities did not simply sit back and wait for the municipality to fix everything. Residents worked with their councillor, organised themselves, identified problems and found ways to improve their neighbourhoods together. They took ownership of their streets, their public spaces and their communities. They understood that having an elected representative does not absolve citizens of responsibility. In many cases, the strongest communities were those where residents and their councillor saw each other not as opponents, but as partners with different responsibilities and the same ultimate objective: making their corner of South Africa somewhere they could all be proud to call home.

One may wonder where all the municipal funds come from. A municipality is not simply handed a pot of cash by the national government every year. In theory, municipalities must raise a significant portion of their own revenue through the services they provide and the taxes and charges they levy on the people living within their boundaries. Property rates are one of the biggest sources, while residents and businesses also pay for things such as water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal and other municipal services. There are also licences, fines, fees and other charges. However, municipalities do not stand entirely on their own. The national or provincial government provides municipalities with various forms of funding, including the Local Government Equitable Share (LGES) and conditional grants, while provincial and national departments can fund particular programmes and infrastructure. For many of the country's poorest regions, the bulk of municipal funding comes from national or provincial governments. This means that the money flowing through a municipality can come from several different places and understanding where it comes from is important because it also helps explain who is responsible when things go wrong.

Municipalities are not left entirely to their own devices as the Constitution gives national and provincial governments a responsibility to monitor municipalities and support them in carrying out their

functions (South African Constitution 1996a). At the national level, the Department of Co-operative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA), together with provincial COGTA departments, therefore, has an important oversight and support role. Where a municipality struggles to fulfil its constitutional or legal obligations, the provincial government can intervene under certain circumstances, using the constitutional intervention mechanisms in Section 139 (COGTA 2023). In serious cases, this can involve a provincial government taking steps to ensure that a municipality fulfils its obligations. Some of the municipalities we examine later in this book have undergone exactly this process.

So, while your municipality has significant responsibility for what happens in your community, there is an entire system of oversight above it. Knowing who is responsible for what is essential when you want to hold the government accountable. This is why understanding how your local government functions is so important, as it reveals how you can have a real impact in your local area, rather than assuming politics is something that only happens in Parliament, on television, or on social media.

However, politics is also the tap that runs dry, the electricity infrastructure that fails and the rubbish that piles up outside your home. It is the pot-holed road with dysfunctional traffic lights you drive down every morning. On a larger scale, it is also whether your neighbourhood can accommodate new housing and businesses, whether your public spaces are maintained, and whether your municipality has the money and capacity to deliver the services it is supposed to provide instead of losing those resources to corruption or waste. When these things fail, the answer is not always as simple as blaming the councillor standing in front of you. Sometimes the problem is political, administrative, or financial. At other times, it is simply a lack of capacity. Often, it is a sad and frustrating combination of all of these factors.

Understanding who is responsible for what is one of the most important things you can do before you decide who deserves your vote. Without knowing what your municipality is responsible for, how

its council works and what your councillor can actually control, you are effectively voting in the dark. After everything I have already said about your duty to keep South Africa's democratic muscle flexed, voting blindly is the last thing we can afford to do, unless we want a South Africa that ends up being paralysed at a local government level.

How Local Elections Differ from National Elections

If you have ever stood in a voting station on a local government election day and wondered why you have so many ballot papers, you are not alone. South African elections are not all the same and electing local representatives is not as simple as electing representatives for Parliament and the provinces.

In fact, one of the biggest mistakes you can make when approaching a local government election is to assume that it works like a national election. It doesn't. The people you are voting for are different, the ballots are different, the way votes translate into seats is different and, perhaps most importantly, what happens after the votes are counted is different.

This matters as the 2026 local government elections are not simply another opportunity to tell the African National Congress (ANC), the Democratic Alliance (DA), the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), uMkhonto weSizwe (MK), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), or whichever political party you support what you think of them. This is because you are choosing the people who will sit on the council responsible for your municipality, and you are doing so through a localised electoral system that gives you more than one way of expressing your political preference across multiple ballot papers. This leads us to a question that causes the most confusion in a local government election: How many votes do you actually get and what do they represent?

If you live in one of South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities, you will receive two ballot papers. One is for your ward councillor, with the names of individual candidates for your ward. The other is for the

PR vote, which indicates your choice for the political party to lead the metro council.

If you live in a local municipality outside a metro, you will generally receive three ballot papers: one for your ward, one for the party you want represented in your local municipal council through the PR system, and a third for the party you want represented in the district council your local municipality belongs to.

The easiest way to understand this is to forget the political jargon for a moment. Your ward vote is about a person, and your PR vote is about a party. That is the fundamental difference, although both will decide how many warm bodies will be representing you and your interests in the municipal council. Ward councillors and PR councillors make up the number of members in a specific municipal council who will vote to approve budgets, enact policies or approve municipal laws. The number of elected council members corresponds to the number of wards and PR councillors that have been assigned to a municipality.

Take, for example, three very different municipalities. Johannesburg, South Africa's largest metropolitan municipality, has a council of 270 councillors: 135 are directly elected ward councillors and 135 are PR councillors. So, if you live in Johannesburg, your two ballots ultimately determine the composition of those 270 seats.

Now take the Sol Plaatje Local Municipality in the Northern Cape. Its council has 65 councillors: 33 are elected directly from wards and 32 are PR councillors. Again, voters have two ballots - one for their ward candidate and one for a political party.

The Bojanala Platinum District Municipality in North West works differently. Its council has 70 councillors. Only 29 are directly elected through the district's PR system; the remaining 41 are appointed by the five local municipalities within the district. This is because at a district level, voters directly elect nearly 40% of the council through the PR ballot; the remaining roughly 60% is allocated to the local municipalities within the district, which then appoint councillors from their own councils in proportion to the parties represented there. In other words,

there are no directly elected ward councillors on the district council itself. Your third ballot helps determine the political representation on the district council, while the councillors representing particular wards are elected to the local municipalities that make up Bojanala.

So, in simple terms, a metropolitan municipality like Johannesburg has 270 seats, split 50/50 between 135 ward seats and 135 PR seats. Similarly, a local municipality like Sol Plaatje has 65 seats, made up of 33 ward seats and 32 PR seats, which is also a 50/50 split. However, a district municipality like Bojanala Platinum has 70 seats, made up of 29 district PR seats and 41 representatives delegated by its five local municipalities, which is roughly a 40/60 split.

That is why the number of ballots you receive—and what each ballot actually does—depends on the type of municipality in which you reside (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021a). As mentioned in the previous chapter, your ward is a defined geographical area within your municipality. You will vote for a ward candidate who wants to represent that specific area on the municipal council (Republic of South Africa 1998). This system is deliberately local; you are not voting for a representative for South Africa or your province. You are voting for someone to represent your bit of Johannesburg, your bit of Tshwane, your bit of Polokwane, or your bit of wherever you live.

The candidate who receives the most votes in that ward wins the ward seat and could be standing on behalf of a political party or as an independent candidate. That means your ward ballot is probably the closest thing South Africa has to the kind of constituency based politics many people imagine when they think about elections. These are the individuals we have described as being at the coalface of local government service delivery. They are the ones you ask what they intend to do about the potholes, water problems, crime concerns or collapsing public spaces in your area. Moreover, based on their performance, you get another opportunity to hire or fire them five years later at the next election.

The PR ballot works differently as you are not voting for a person but

for a political party. The votes cast for parties are used to allocate seats in the council broadly in proportion to the support each party has received. The candidates who fill those PR seats come from lists submitted by political parties (South African Constitution 1996b).

Ultimately, the ward councillor acts as the primary contact for residents and handles direct service delivery complaints, while the PR councillor focuses on broader municipal oversight and policy by being assigned to support specific areas or monitor municipal projects as directed by their party. In essence, it is an attempt to provide local representation and ensure all political parties have a voice in the council too.

This is where, as a voter, you may find the system particularly interesting and often complicated. You might vote for an independent candidate in your ward while voting for a political party on your PR ballot. This is because you might feel that a particular independent candidate is the best person to represent your neighbourhood, while believing that a political party not associated with that candidate is better equipped to run your municipality. There is absolutely nothing contradictory about doing this and the choice is ultimately yours.

It is important to understand that this is how local elections work fundamentally differently from national elections. South Africa's national and provincial electoral systems do not divide the country into wards in the same way municipal elections do. The 2024 national and provincial elections used a more complicated system following changes to the electoral law that allowed independent candidates to contest seats in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2024c).

However, the crucial point for the ordinary voter is this: there is no municipal style ward councillor waiting at the end of your national ballot. Your national vote helps determine the composition of the National Assembly and, ultimately, who forms the national government. Yet the MP that eventually represents your area of the country is primarily determined by Parliament and their presence in the National Assembly is essentially the result of making it onto a party or candidate list.

On the other hand, your local votes determine who sits on the council that governs your municipality, either as your ward councillor or a PR councillor. That distinction is easily lost and is the reason why people end up blaming President Ramaphosa or his ministers for what are essentially local government responsibilities.

Nevertheless, as I have explained before, if your municipal rubbish is not collected, your streetlights do not work, or your local planning department takes six months to process an application, shouting at the President on television during his next address is probably not going to solve the problem. You need to know which level of government is responsible, which is why understanding the local electoral system is so important.

There is also the problem of coalitions. If you think election night is when the winner is announced and everyone goes home, local government is going to surprise you, if not frustrate you. Increasingly, South Africa's political system yields no clear winner in electoral contests, meaning no single party wins enough seats to govern alone.

South Africa's proportional electoral system makes this entirely possible because seats are distributed according to the support received by different parties. If no party wins more than half of the seats on a council, that council is hung: two or more parties must then work together to elect the mayor and executive, pass budgets and implement municipal policies.

Although we have just experienced the very first national governing coalition after the inconclusive provincial and national elections of 2024, coalition politics is not new to South Africa - especially at the municipal level. There have been municipal coalitions since the first local government elections under the current wall-to-wall demarcation in 2000. However, they have become increasingly important as the political landscape has fragmented. After the 2021 elections, 66 municipalities had no party with an outright majority, a trend not confined to small municipalities (Mbanyele and Moffat 2021). In fact, five of the country's eight metropolitan municipalities—Ekurhuleni, eThekweni,

Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela Bay and Tshwane—emerged from the 2021 elections without a single party winning an outright majority.

In theory, coalitions should be a good thing, as they ideally force political parties to compromise, negotiate and find common ground, bringing different ideas into government and preventing one party from simply doing whatever it wants by virtue of its majority.

Yet as recent history has taught us, this form of governance can also be incredibly unstable, futile and ineffective. If political parties spend more time fighting over who gets the mayor's chair than worrying about whether the municipality can pass its budget and deliver services, the real consequences are felt by local residents.

A hung council can therefore be either an opportunity for better democracy, or a recipe for political paralysis. There are more than enough examples where we examine individual municipalities in later chapters to support this idea. So, when you walk into a voting station on 4 November 2026, do not simply ask yourself which political party you like.

You need to ask yourself a few more questions.

- Who do I want representing my ward?
- Which party do I want represented in my municipal council?
- What happens if nobody wins outright?
- And what kind of government do I want to see formed afterwards?

Increasingly South African elections are not simply about choosing a winner but about choosing who has to work with whom to govern.

The Big Picture: South Africa's Political Landscape in 2026

South Africa is entering the 2026 local government elections as a very different country politically from the one that went to the polls in 2021.

The ANC is no longer the dominant political force it once was, after

being humbled at the 2024 national and provincial elections to win just over 40% of the vote, a result that forced President Cyril Ramaphosa into a ten-party Government of National Unity (GNU) (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2024b). This is the first true GNU in our democratic history, as the 1994 GNU formed by Nelson Mandela was mandated by the interim constitution (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2026).

Arguably the biggest outcome of the 2024 GNU is that the Democratic Alliance no longer serves as the official opposition, having joined the government as members of the cabinet along with smaller opposition parties like the IFP, Patriotic Alliance (PA), Freedom Front Plus (FF+), Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC), GOOD Party, United Democratic Movement (UDM), Rise Mzansi and Al Jama-ah.

The EEF seems to be slipping from its position as a significant national player. At the same time, a new force in the form of the MK party has arrived almost out of nowhere. Former president Jacob Zuma's fledgling party has become one of the country's biggest political players, and while its internal disarray suggests that it may be a political flash in the pan, its presence continues to be felt in all parts of the country, as it will be during the upcoming local government elections.

Most critically, it is clear from the 2021 local government election and the 2024 national and provincial elections that South Africa has entered the era of coalition politics. The elections on 4 November 2026 will likely follow the same pattern, and coalitions could increase the number of political parties sharing power across the country's 257 municipalities. To understand why, you first need to understand how South Africa got here.

For most of the first three decades of democracy, the ANC's dominance meant that coalition politics was largely something other democracies had to worry about. The ANC won a majority nationally at every election from 1994 to 2019 and easily controlled most municipalities across the country (Everatt 2024). Other parties had particular municipalities, with the most obvious example being

the DA in Cape Town and other municipalities in the Western Cape, along with the IFP in municipalities across Kwazulu-Natal. Yet, the basic political equation since 1994 has been straightforward: the ANC won enough seats to govern, and opposition parties opposed it. For most of the first three decades of democracy, the ANC's dominance meant that coalition politics were largely something other democracies had to worry about. The ANC won a majority nationally at every election from 1994 to 2019 and easily controlled most municipalities across the country (Everatt 2024). Other parties had particular municipalities, with the most obvious example being the Democratic Alliance in Cape Town and other municipalities in the Western Cape, along with the IFP in municipalities across KwaZulu-Natal. However, the basic political equation since 1994 has been straightforward: the ANC won enough seats to govern, and opposition parties opposed it.

That all changed dramatically in 2016. While the ANC remained the biggest party nationally in the local elections, it failed to win an outright majority in Johannesburg, Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). So, for the first time, four of South Africa's eight metropolitan municipalities were hung councils.

Parties that had spent years attacking each other in councils around the country suddenly had to sit at the same table and work out how to elect mayors, speakers and members of executive committees. They had to agree on budgets, policies and programmes. Moreover, they had to decide whether their political differences were more important than their shared desire to keep another party out of power. It was messy; it worked in some ways, but mostly it did not, as the dysfunction that has been creeping into many of our metros since 2016 shows.

Then came the 2021 local government elections, when the number of hung councils increased dramatically to 66, proving that coalitions were no longer just a temporary political necessity. In fact, they were fast becoming the way South Africa was governed (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). The national and provincial elections of May 2024

cemented this narrative once and for all, with the political earthquake that finally ended the ANC's three-decade parliamentary majority (Electoral Commission 2024b).

There is an important historical distinction to be made regarding the GNU that was formed as a result. South Africa has had governments involving more than one political party before —especially before the 1994 democratic breakthrough. In 1933, during the economic crisis of the Great Depression, J.B.M. Hertzog's National Party entered into a coalition with Jan Smuts' South African Party (South African History Online 2019). That coalition eventually became the United Party. The arrangement was driven by the economic crisis of the time and lasted until political differences, most dramatically over South Africa's involvement in the Second World War, eventually broke it apart. There were also coalition arrangements involving the National Party and Labour Party in the 1920s and various forms of political cooperation and opposition alliances during the increasingly turbulent decades before 1994 (South African History Online 2026a).

However, none of these should be confused with the 1994 GNU, which was part of the constitutional settlement that took South Africa from apartheid to democracy (South African History Online 2026c). The transitional constitutional arrangements provided for parties winning twenty or more seats in the National Assembly to participate in government, with Cabinet and provincial executive positions allocated according to their representation. The ANC, National Party and IFP participated in the national GNU under this transitional arrangement. Once the 1996 Constitution was adopted, the National Party left the GNU and went to the opposition benches.

The 2024 GNU is completely different from that of 1994, as it was not constitutionally mandated but a political necessity. No provision in the Constitution told the ANC that because it had fallen below 50% it had to form a GNU and share power to stay in government. Instead, the election result forced political parties to negotiate their way towards a government because no single party had enough support to govern alone.

This distinction matters. In 1994, the GNU was part of the machinery of political transition into a democracy. In 2024, the GNU is the consequence of voters taking power away from a dominant party. That makes the current GNU arguably one of the most important developments in South African politics since 1994.

This was not a marriage of political convenience without rules or structure. The GNU parties all agreed to a statement of intent, broadly committing them to constitutionalism, the rule of law, accountability, transparency, integrity and good governance (South African Government 2024b). They also agreed on a minimum programme focused on inclusive economic growth and job creation, reducing poverty and the cost of living and building a capable and ethical state.

This sounds good on paper, but in practice, the process was not as smooth as the agreement laid out and the political honeymoon did not last long. The GNU has had to deal with disagreements over policy, appointments, cabinet responsibilities and the basic question of how parties with fundamentally different political philosophies can govern together. A GNU Clearing House mechanism was eventually created specifically to help resolve disagreements between the parties.

This is the core lesson that the GNU brings to the country as we approach the local elections: coalition politics is not about everyone agreeing, but about finding enough things to agree on to govern constructively. That sounds obvious but in the South African political context it is proving to be elusive. By now you might be wondering what this all has to do with the local government elections. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that the national political terrain will affect the local.

The 2026 municipal election will likely be dominated by four major political players. The ANC remains the largest political organisation in the country, with an enormous historical footprint, extensive organisational structures and a presence in virtually every part of South Africa. Yet the oldest political party in Africa enters these elections after its national vote fell below 50% for the first time in 2024. Therefore, its challenge is

not simply to win votes, but to convince voters that it can still govern municipalities effectively after years of criticism over corruption, poor administration, financial mismanagement and service delivery failures. Its own internal turbulence is also weighing it down after the party failed to meet its own deadline to announce mayoral candidates and instead paraded several potential nominees in each municipality it is contesting with just weeks to go until election day. Some would argue the ANC is as divided as its ever been in its 113 year old history with their inner disarray leading to the party making an absolute mess of its candidate list submission with the IEC. Large swathes of candidates in key Eastern Cape Municipalities and the Mangaung metro were excluded as list discrepancies were recorded within the party countrywide.

The DA enters the election as the country's second-largest political party and the governing party in the Western Cape, and the successful custodian of a functional yet grindingly unequal Cape Town. It has spent years positioning itself as the alternative to the ANC government and has increasingly sought to present itself as a party capable of governing beyond the Western Cape. Its challenge is that local government performance outside that province has been patchy at best, meaning it has not translated its successes in Cape Town to other metros.

The MK Party is a new political giant after being formed shortly before the 2024 national election by former president Jacob Zuma. Disgruntled and unpredictable, Zuma led MK to secure almost 15% nationally; the party performed particularly strongly in KwaZulu-Natal, becoming the biggest party in the province. It has already demonstrated that its support can translate into local electoral victories. In March 2025, for example, the MK party won a Richmond Municipality ward that had previously been held by the ANC, taking more than 54% of the vote.

The EFF has established itself as a major opposition force since its formation in 2013, but its growth and impact seem to be plateauing, as is evident from its vote share dropping to 9% in 2024 from almost 11% in 2019. Nevertheless, the Red Berets' importance in municipal politics goes beyond the number of seats they win. In a hung council, a party

with a substantial minority can become the difference between one coalition governing and another collapsing; the EFF has proved to be a kingmaker in many municipalities since 2016 and has joined coalition governments in the past five years.

Then there are the smaller parties. The IFP remains a major regional force in KwaZulu-Natal and has demonstrated its ability to win wards and municipalities, while joining coalitions around the country. The PA has proven its local influence time and again by entering coalitions and even leading municipal governments like the Beaufort West Local Municipality and its connected Central Karoo District Municipality.

ActionSA has also become an important player in Gauteng metropolitan politics, particularly because of its role in coalition negotiations, even securing the mayoral chain in Tshwane. The FF+ remains an important player, particularly in parts of the Western Cape, Gauteng, Free State and North West, while the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) has a relatively small national footprint but has repeatedly punched above its weight in coalition negotiations. The UDM, which has experience in coalition politics since it was formed in 1997, remains influential in parts of the Eastern Cape. The GOOD Party, African Transformation Movement (ATM) and Al Jama-ah also wield some influence across the country, with Thapelo Amad and Kabelo Gwamanda both serving as the Al Jama-ah mayors in Johannesburg, in spite of the party securing just 1% of the vote in the city in 2021.

There are also regional and community-based parties, civic associations and a growing number of community movements along with independent ward candidates, which all demonstrate the same thing: South African politics is becoming more fragmented. The newest kid on the proverbial block is Floyd Shivambu's Afrika Mayibuye Movement, which was formed after his exit from the EFF and subsequent expulsion from MK. Other relative newcomers, Rise Mzansi and Build One South Africa (BOSA), will also be contesting their first local elections.

Political fragmentation is not necessarily a bad thing as it means voters have more choices. However, it means that the mathematics of

governing becomes much more complicated, and a party with a relatively small number of votes can wield a lot of power in determining who governs at a local level. This gives rise to the phenomenon of kingmaker in the truest sense of the word, where those that do not necessarily have the most votes, the most councillors, or even a particularly large electoral following still have something potentially more valuable: the votes needed to get another party over the line.

Coalition governance is formally quite simple: two or more parties combine their seats to elect an executive and support its decisions. At the municipal level, that normally means agreeing on the choice of mayor, executive structures, budgets and policies. Nevertheless, the real politics plays out in the negotiations.

Let us look at this fictional example, imagine a municipality with 100 council seats.

- Party A wins 42 seats
- Party B wins 35 seats
- Party C wins 15 seats
- Party D wins 8 seats

Party A has won the election. Yet Party A cannot govern alone. It needs another eight seats.

Suddenly Party C and Party D, though receiving only 15% and 8% of the seats respectively, become enormously important. Either can negotiate with Party A or Party B and give the two parties with the most seats in the election a shot at governing.

Both parties can demand political positions, policy commitments, changes to the budget or even a change to the name of a road in exchange for their co-operation. On the other hand, they can simply refuse to support either side, based on principle. This is the crude mathematics of coalition politics and it is why the smallest parties can sometimes have the biggest political leverage.

It is these discussions that decide who gets the mayoral chain, who

secures Member of the Mayoral Committee (MMC) positions and which policies become part of the governing programme in a municipality. However, even if these discussions get formalised and agreements are entered into to form a government, South Africa's recent history offers some painful lessons in how coalitions can be dysfunctional and fail.

It is not the concept of coalition government itself that has been the problem with many South African municipal coalitions but rather the absence of a shared programme and stable political agreements. The Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay municipalities have all experienced periods in which mayors were removed, coalitions fractured and governing arrangements changed repeatedly. In Tshwane, for example, mayor Randall Williams resigned in February 2023 ahead of a planned no-confidence motion after internal coalition tensions. What followed was a series of disputes over the election of his successor and the functioning of the Tshwane council.

These political battles have consequences far beyond the personalities involved. A municipality still needs to pass budgets, appoint senior officials, maintain infrastructure, pay suppliers and collect revenue, while at the same time delivering basic services like water, electricity, road maintenance and refuse removal. However, when political instability prevents a council from making decisions, municipal administration is no longer prioritised and residents suffer.

The national government has acknowledged that unstable coalitions compromise a municipality's ability to function (SANews 2026). Too often, local coalitions prioritise distributing political power, such as securing the mayor's seat, over effective governance. Furthermore, coalitions built merely as 'anti-party' alignments lack common ground once in office.

Coalition governments are not inherently unstable, as they can foster accountability by compelling parties to negotiate and compromise. However, successful coalitions require clear plans, including written agreements, defined policy priorities, dispute-resolution processes, position allocations and enforcement mechanisms for non-compliant

councillors. Crucially, coalition partners must prioritise the interests of the municipality over coalition self-interest.

The Local Government: Municipal Structures Amendment Bill of 2026, commonly referred to as the Municipal Coalitions Bill, was tabled with great fanfare this year. However, it is unlikely to be implemented before November's elections, meaning that moving local politics away from informal deal-making and greed looks set to be delayed. Unfortunately, no law can force politicians to behave sensibly, but clear rules can make it harder to treat municipalities as mere bargaining chips in a game of political poker.

All of this means that winning the election and governing the municipality are no longer necessarily guaranteed, or even the same thing. A party can come first and end up in opposition. A party can come third, or close to last and get the mayor's position. A party can win 45% of the vote and lose power because smaller parties combine against it, or an independent ward candidate can win a single ward and become the decisive vote.

This is not necessarily undemocratic. It is how representative democracy works when no party has a majority. But for you the voter it means looking beyond the party logo and examining what a party actually stands for, who its local candidates are, whether those candidates can solve problems and which parties they will work with. If there is going to be a coalition, you need to know what their agreement will actually contain.

At the end of the day, winning votes and winning power are two different things in 2026. Moreover, winning power and actually governing meaningfully are different again. That may be the most important thing to understand before you vote in November's elections.

City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality

There is no prize more sought after in South African local government elections than the mayorship of Johannesburg. With an almost R100 billion annual budget, a 40 000 strong civil service and 15% of the entire national economy, the seat of government in the country's financial heartland is a massive opportunity but also a poisoned chalice. This is because, while Johannesburg has the makings of a city state in scale and possibility, it has unfortunately also become a horrific symbol of governance failure, political partisanship, grand corruption and general collapse. Analysts quite rightly point out that if Johannesburg cannot be saved then the national South African project of reform, growth and rebirth will surely be lost as well.

The situation is dire. A report in August this year by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (CDE) shows Johannesburg is caught in a financial doom cycle where expenditure is aggressively outstripping actual revenue collection (CDE 2026). The city has also accumulated a staggering R72 billion in unpaid debt and incurred over R22 billion in unauthorised, irregular and wasteful expenditure (Polity.org 2025). This is coupled with an imminent collapse of Johannesburg's decaying water and electricity supply due to theft, vandalism and lack of maintenance. Presently, over 226 megalitres of the city's water supply is wasted before reaching consumers due to burst and broken infrastructure and piping, while, in the past six months alone, the city suffered 54 132 local power outages (CDE 2026).

It was not always this way: all it took was ten years of political instability. Since 2016, Johannesburg has had eight different mayors across ten separate terms, and a succession of highly fragile coalition governments. Not a single mayor has managed to complete a full five-year term in office. This political instability has destroyed long-term infrastructure planning and data-driven decision-making. Coalition shifts lead to constant leadership purges, paralysing the city's administration and allowing public finance management to disintegrate. It is little wonder

that in many parts of the city there seems to be no attempt to govern at all. Whoever does end up winning enough votes to form a government after 4 November 2026 will inherit a city-state-sized municipality that is running out of time.

The political dynamics in Johannesburg are unusually complicated because the city is no longer a place where one party can simply win power and govern. The ANC lost its outright majority in 2016 and has never recovered it. Since then, Johannesburg has become a laboratory for coalition politics, with parties that campaign against one another one month finding themselves sharing a mayoral committee the next. The result has been a politics of permanent negotiation, where the survival of a government can depend on a handful of councillors and where ideological consistency often takes a back seat to the arithmetic of getting 136 votes.

This makes the November elections less about who wins Johannesburg outright—because that is increasingly unlikely—and more about who finishes first, who holds the balance of power and who can put together a coalition capable of surviving beyond its first few months. The likely battleground is therefore between the ANC, DA, ActionSA and EFF, with smaller parties and potentially MK, playing an outsized role in determining who eventually occupies the mayoral office.

The issues themselves are remarkably straightforward. Water, electricity, roads, rubbish, billing, policing and financial management will determine the election far more than grand ideological promises. Johannesburg needs to get its revenue collection working, reduce wasteful expenditure, rebuild its electricity and water infrastructure and restore basic administrative competence. It also needs to deal with the informal economy, crime, derelict buildings and the growing problem of hijacked and abandoned properties. These are not glamorous issues, but they are the things residents experience every day.

There are, however, reasons for optimism. Johannesburg remains an extraordinarily powerful economic engine. Its enormous tax base, sophisticated private sector, financial institutions, universities,

property market and concentration of skills give it advantages that few African cities can match. The city has also recently tabled a R97.1 billion budget focused on rebuilding infrastructure, improving service delivery and driving inclusive growth. In addition, in a significant recent development, Johannesburg settled its R5.25 billion Eskom debt, removing the immediate threat of the electricity supply being throttled.

The question is whether the political system is capable of exploiting those advantages.

The mayoral race itself is an unusually star-studded, crowded field. The DA has chosen Helen Zille, a former Johannesburg opposition leader, Cape Town mayor and Western Cape premier, whose campaign has deliberately turned the city's failures into a personal political crusade. She has placed infrastructure collapse, corruption and basic service delivery at the centre of her campaign.

ActionSA is fielding Herman Mashaba, the businessman who served as Johannesburg mayor from 2016 to 2019 and is attempting a remarkable political comeback in the city where he first became mayor. The EFF has selected Dr Tlaleng Mofokeng, bringing a younger and more policy-oriented voice into a race dominated by political veterans. The IFP's Youth Brigade leader Mlungisi Mabaso is their candidate, and the PA has chosen Kenny Kunene; both currently serve as MMCs in the metro. The current speaker Margaret Arnolds is the candidate for the African Independent Congress (AIC). while Bishop Dulton Adams will represent the ACDP. The UDM is running Yongama Zigebe and the FF+ has fielded former MMC Franco de Lange.

The MK party has a political success story in its candidate Bongani Baloyi the former mayor of Midvaal, one of the DA's top-performing municipalities nationally. The ANC, meanwhile, has created problems for itself by taking months to settle on its candidates. Its final Johannesburg shortlist contains incumbent mayor Dada Morero, deputy mayor and finance MMC Loyiso Masuku. Party veteran and former director-general in the presidency Frank Chikane was also in the running but seems to have been a profile casualty of the ANC's electoral lists fiasco.

Newcomer Rise Mzansi has unveiled former political analyst and academic Lukhona Mnguni as its candidate and BOSA is fielding its deputy leader Nobuntu Hlazo-Webster. A celebrity dynamic has been added to the race with the inclusion of media personality and activist Ntsiki Mazwai as the Land Party's mayoral candidate.

The outcome is therefore truly difficult to call. Zille currently has the momentum, having succeeded in making 'save Johannesburg' the central political proposition of the election. On the other hand, a DA victory does not guarantee a Zille mayoralty. Unless one party performs spectacularly well, the winner will still need coalition partners, and Zille's ability to compromise with the very parties she has spent months attacking may prove just as important as her ability to win votes.

The most likely outcome is therefore not a clean political takeover but another coalition government. The real question is whether, this time, the parties can find a way to make coalition government work—or whether Johannesburg will simply enter another five years of political musical chairs.

City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality

There is perhaps no municipality in South Africa where the argument over what constitutes good local government is more fiercely contested than Cape Town. For more than two decades the city has been the DA's great showcase—a functioning counterpoint to the failures of many other South African metros and the most powerful evidence for the party's argument that competent local governments can still work. Home to almost 4.8 million residents, the city boasts a vast tourism and property economy, one of the country's most important ports and its prestigious status as the legislative capital, with the National Assembly under the watchful eye of Table Mountain.

Cape Town is thus an extraordinary political and economic prize. Yet beneath the familiar image of tourists at the V&A Waterfront, clean streets and functioning infrastructure lies a city of extraordinary inequality, housing shortages, gang violence, spatial apartheid and increasingly bitter arguments over who benefits from its success. The situation is therefore not nearly as simple as the familiar 'Cape Town works' narrative that the DA trumpets so readily.

However, Cape Town does have something increasingly rare in South African local government: institutional continuity. The DA has governed the city since 2006 and, following the 2021 election, retained an outright majority (Electoral Commission 2021b). It won 58.22% of the vote and 136 of the 231 council seats, although a subsequent recount reduced this to 135. The ANC was a distant second on 18.63%, with 43 seats, while the EFF secured just over 4%.

That political stability has produced real advantages as the city has maintained relatively strong financial management, continued investing heavily in infrastructure and developed a reputation for delivering basic services more reliably than most of the country's other large municipalities. Its 2026/27 budget retains approximately R40 billion in basic infrastructure investment over three years, including major

spending on water and sewer networks, electricity, transport, informal settlements and public amenities.

Cape Town's greatest political challenge is therefore not that the local government does not work. It is that it works very differently for different Capetonians. The city has some of South Africa's wealthiest suburbs and some of its most impoverished communities, often separated by little more than a highway, forest or a railway line. Residents of Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain, Delft and parts of the Cape Flats experience a fundamentally different reality from those in Camps Bay, Constantia or the Atlantic Seaboard. In July, the Public Protector found deep-rooted problems affecting basic services in Khayelitsha and Langa, citing budget constraints, ageing infrastructure, illegal connections, vandalism and violent protests (Business Day 2026). The investigation exposed failures around the delivery around water, electricity and other municipal services in vulnerable communities.

This is the central political challenge for Cape Town: can a city that is already comparatively well governed become substantially more equal without destroying the very financial and administrative discipline that made it successful? Housing sits at the centre of that question as Cape Town is attracting people, investment and increasingly wealthy residents as well as the indigent in search of a better life, at a rate that is placing enormous pressure on service delivery and land and housing affordability. The result is a city where economic opportunity exists next to a brutal spatial geography inherited from apartheid. The next administration will have to build more housing closer to jobs, improve public transport, accelerate informal-settlement upgrades and somehow begin dismantling a spatial system that still forces thousands of poorer residents into long and expensive daily commutes.

Then there is the critical question of safety. Cape Town recorded the second highest number of murders of any city in the world in 2025/26, at 3 441 (BusinessTech 2026). Cape Town's gang and drug crisis has become one of the defining political issues of the city, particularly on the Cape Flats. In response, the DA has increasingly

argued for greater municipal policing powers rather than leaving the fight against organised crime exclusively to the South African Police Service. Besides jobs, housing and reliable services, the DA has made stronger policing one of the central pillars of its re-election campaign, proposing a detective unit be launched as part of the municipal police force. This proposal has, however, been challenged by the national government (Daily Maverick 2026c).

Water presents another challenge. Cape Town famously came within days of running out of water during the 2018 drought, an event that permanently changed the city's approach to water security (National Geographic Society 2023). The immediate crisis was averted but the underlying challenge remains. The city's latest water outlook states that the supply remains stable, but the risk of restrictions has increased as rainfall becomes less predictable and demand rises. Cape Town is now investing in additional sources of water in an effort to build a system capable of surviving a future drought.

In spite of these challenges, the opportunities within the Mother City are enormous. Cape Town has a functioning administrative base, a sophisticated private sector, a globally recognised tourism industry, world-class universities, a major port and an extraordinary natural environment. It has also positioned itself to become increasingly energy independent, with billions being invested in electricity-grid upgrades, renewable energy and the Steenbras pumped-storage scheme.

The political dynamics, however, are beginning to change. For years, the DA could campaign in Cape Town from a position of overwhelming strength, but that dominance is no longer quite as comfortable. While the party remains the clear favourite, its traditional support base is increasingly contested by smaller parties, particularly among coloured voters on the Cape Flats. ActionSA has selected Dereleen James as its mayoral candidate, while GOOD is fielding Brett Herron, a former City of Cape Town councillor and MMC. The PA has put forward Cheslyn Daniels as their candidate and other smaller parties will also be competing for voters who once regarded the DA as their default option.

The ANC has always struggled in Cape Town. The party has not governed the city since Nomaindia Mfeketo's ANC-led administration ended in 2006, having come to power then through floor-crossing rather than by winning an election. It received only 18.63% of the vote in 2021. Yet even though the party says it is treating the metro as a strategic target, it has still not formally announced its final mayoral candidate at the time of writing. Eight names are in the mix: Jeremiah Thuynsma, Fiona Abrahams, Mareldia Chowglay, Lwazi Pakade, Zelda Tarntaal, Ernest Theron, Ndithini Tyhido and Luvuyo Zondani.

The DA, meanwhile, has put its incumbent mayor and current party leader, Geordin Hill-Lewis, forward for another term. His pitch is straightforward: Cape Town works, the DA has delivered, and changing the political leadership would risk throwing away what has taken two decades to build. His opponents have a very different argument: that a city cannot claim success while thousands of its residents remain trapped in poverty, unsafe communities and an apartheid-era spatial economy. The outcome is therefore one of the easier calls in the country's major metros, but the consequences may be more complicated. The DA is overwhelmingly likely to retain control of Cape Town. The real contest is whether it can maintain the scale of its majority, whether Action-SA and PA can further break into its traditional support base and whether the ANC can begin rebuilding itself in a city where it has been politically marginal for two decades.

For Hill-Lewis, another majority would provide something Johannesburg's mayor can only dream of: five years of political continuity and the freedom to govern without coalition partners holding a gun to the administration's head. Yet, that would also remove the easiest excuse. If Cape Town is South Africa's best-run metro, then its next test is no longer simply keeping the lights on and the books balanced. But transforming competence into inclusion—ensuring the prosperity visible from the slopes of Table Mountain finally reaches the communities living in its shadow.

City of Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality

If Johannesburg is South Africa's financial capital and Cape Town its showcase city, Ekurhuleni is something rather different: the country's industrial engine room. Stretching from the eastern edge of Johannesburg to the borders of Mpumalanga, Ekurhuleni is home to more than four million people and hosts OR Tambo International Airport. It contains some of South Africa's most important manufacturing and logistics infrastructure and a vast concentration of factories, warehouses, mines and industrial businesses. Its 2026/27 municipal budget is R70.9 billion, meaning that, despite the lack of a glamorous title, it is not a peripheral municipality (City of Ekurhuleni 2026). Ekurhuleni is a critical arena where South Africa's ability to manufacture, distribute and generate industrial employment will either be revitalised or continue to deteriorate.

Despite this immense potential, Ekurhuleni has become one of the country's most politically unstable metropolitan municipalities. The problem is not simply that services are failing, but that the political machinery responsible for fixing them has itself broken down.

In the 2021 elections, the ANC remained the largest party, but its support slipped to 38.19%. The DA secured 28.72%, the EFF 13.57% and ActionSA 6.6% (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). With no party coming close to an outright majority in the 224-seat council, the result was another hung metro and another turbulent experiment in coalition government.

Since then, Ekurhuleni has endured precisely the kind of political instability that has plagued Johannesburg. Nkosindiphile Xhakaza became mayor in April 2024, the fourth mayor in four years and the third person to hold the office. Coalitions have repeatedly shifted; parties have fallen in and out of government; and political disputes have increasingly become inseparable from the functioning of the administration. As in Johannesburg, the consequences are visible on the ground.

Electricity reliability, water infrastructure, potholes, waste collection

and illegal connections remain among the most persistent complaints. The city's own 2026/27 budget acknowledges the need to strengthen infrastructure maintenance and financial sustainability amid a wave of infrastructure vandalism, illegal water connections and electricity theft.

However, the most serious problem may be beyond institutional and bureaucratic boundaries. Ekurhuleni has increasingly found itself caught between political parties fighting for control and an administration that is supposed to be delivering services regardless of who holds the mayoral chain. Corruption and maladministration allegations surrounding senior municipal officials have further poisoned the environment (Mail & Guardian 2026b). The arrest of senior Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Police Department official Julius Mkhwanazi in connection with a 2022 murder, and alleged impropriety by the former city manager Dr Imogen Mashazi have turned municipal administration into a legal battleground in its own right (SABC News 2026b).

The result is familiar: political parties need control of the municipality to distribute power and influence and will do almost any deal to make that happen. Ultimately, these concessions make an administration harder to manage, while the resulting instability weakens oversight and long-term planning. Service delivery suffers and residents become increasingly angry. Instead of seeking overall consensus, political parties then exploit that anger to attack one another, producing still more instability. Ekurhuleni has been trapped in this loop, cycling through three mayors in the five years since the last election.

The irony is that the city possesses enormous assets on which to build, along with an extraordinary geographical position. Ekurhuleni sits at the heart of Gauteng's transport and logistics network, with OR Tambo providing the country's principal international aviation gateway, while major road, rail and freight corridors connect the industrial east of Gauteng to the rest of the country. Furthermore, its manufacturing base, abundant industrial land and high concentration of businesses offer an economic proposition that few South African municipalities can match.

If Johannesburg is the place where South Africa makes business

deals, Ekurhuleni is where much of the country manufactures things. This creates an enormous opportunity for the next administration to rebuild industrial infrastructure, make it easier to do business, attract investment, improve logistics and use the municipality's enormous economic base to create jobs for its millions of residents. However, none of this is achievable while electricity remains unreliable, roads collapse, water systems fail and businesses cannot trust the municipality to provide those basic services. The politics of Ekurhuleni therefore comes down to a remarkably simple question: can the city convert its economic advantages into a functioning government?

The 2026 election is likely to be one of the most fiercely contested metro races in the country. The DA has selected Khathutshelo Rasilingwane as its mayoral candidate. Her personal story is particularly useful to the party that often struggles with a grassroots narrative. She grew up in an informal settlement in Tembisa after moving to Gauteng as a child and has framed the campaign around the basic failures she experienced herself: unreliable electricity, inadequate water, poor sanitation and the absence of opportunity. The DA's pitch is that Ekurhuleni does not need another political arrangement but a competent administration capable of restoring basic services and attracting investment.

ActionSA has selected Xolani Khumalo, the television personality and anti-crime campaigner, whose political proposition focuses heavily on tackling corruption, fighting crime and restoring accountability. His emergence is significant because ActionSA has already demonstrated its ability to erode ANC support in parts of Ekurhuleni. Indeed, in a December 2025 ward by-election, the party claimed its share of the vote grew from 4% to 25%, while the ANC's support plunged from 69% to 37%. One by-election does not constitute a metro-wide trend, but it demonstrates the vulnerability of traditional party loyalties. Looking to the broader contest, Thulani Shongwe will represent the MK party and Themba Lukhele is the candidate put forward by the Afrika Mayibuye Movement.

The ANC has a much bigger problem: it is fighting itself before it can

fight everyone else, as is evident from its failure to finalise its municipal candidates. The party's shortlist for Ekurhuleni contains four names: incumbent mayor Nkosindiphile Xhakaza, regional secretary and finance MMC Jongizizwe Dlabathi, former mayor and former Gauteng Legislature Speaker Ntombi Mekgwe and council whip Pelisa Nkunjani. The contest between Xhakaza and Dlabathi has become particularly ugly. Dlabathi was recently removed from the mayoral committee by Xhakaza amid the contest over who should become the ANC's mayoral candidate, prompting intervention by the Gauteng ANC. The dispute has exposed precisely the kind of internal political instability that the ANC will need to convince voters it can overcome with just weeks to go until election day.

The EFF, meanwhile, remains an important force because its 13.57% showing in 2021 gives it enough weight to influence coalition arithmetic without being large enough to govern alone. Like elsewhere in the country, smaller parties will have an outsized role. The outcome is therefore genuinely difficult to predict.

The more likely outcome is another hung council. The city does not lack money, industry, infrastructure or economic potential. The winners on 4 November 2026 will inherit something more valuable than a R70.9 billion budget: the industrial heart of Gauteng, sitting on the doorstep of the country's biggest economy, with millions of people waiting for it to start working properly.

City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality

If Johannesburg is the economic prize and Cape Town the country's showcase of municipal competence, Tshwane is something else entirely: the political capital of South Africa. It is here that the Union Buildings sit, the Presidency and much of the national administration are based and the country's political machinery is concentrated, as well as foreign missions from around the world. Tshwane is also a sprawling metropolitan municipality of more than four million people, stretching across an enormous geographical area from the dense urban core to townships, informal settlements and vast rural tracts. With a budget of more than R55 billion, it is a city of enormous consequence (City of Tshwane 2026).

Politically, Tshwane has become one of South Africa's great battlegrounds. The ANC lost its outright majority in the city in 2016 and has not regained it. In the 2021 local elections, the DA emerged as the largest party with 34.44% of the vote, followed by the ANC at 30.31%, the EFF at 10.63% and ActionSA at 8.7% (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). No party came close to controlling the 214-seat council outright. Tshwane consequently became another laboratory for coalition government—and another municipality where the fight to assemble a majority has often proved almost as inconclusive as the election itself.

The consequences have been profound. Tshwane has had a revolving door of political leadership, with mayors repeatedly coming and going as coalitions collapse and new political arrangements are stitched together. Solly Msimanga, Stevens Mokgalapa, Randall Williams, Murunwa Makwarela, Cilliers Brink and the incumbent Dr Nasiphi Moya have all occupied the mayoral office since 2016. The city has lurched between DA-led administrations, ANC attempts to regain control and increasingly complicated multi-party arrangements. Moya, a member of ActionSA, was elected in 2024 with the help of the EFF, ANC and smaller parties in Tshwane. This instability has had a predictably negative effect.

Yet Tshwane's problems are not simply political. The municipality has faced severe financial and administrative pressures, with concerns around revenue collection, debt, infrastructure maintenance and the reliability of basic services. While these issues are not as severe as those in Johannesburg or even Ekurhuleni, disruptions to water and electricity supply, potholes, unreliable refuse collection and poor maintenance of roads and public spaces are recurring political grievances. Tshwane is vast and has also struggled with the enormous cost of maintaining infrastructure across one of the largest municipal territories in the country—geographically much larger than Johannesburg.

Like Cape Town, it also contains some of South Africa's most affluent suburbs next to deeply impoverished townships and informal settlements. Mamelodi, Soshanguve, Atteridgeville and Hammanskraal sit within the same municipality as Waterkloof, Menlyn and Centurion. The challenge is therefore not simply to deliver services, but to deliver them across a vast metropolitan area where communities have radically different needs and distance makes infrastructure extraordinarily expensive to maintain.

Hammanskraal has become a particularly powerful symbol of the city's failures. Years of water-quality problems, infrastructure deficiencies and service-delivery frustration have made the township a political flashpoint. The 2023 cholera outbreak, which killed at least 23 people in the Hammanskraal area, brought national attention to the consequences of failing water and sanitation systems (ReliefWeb 2023). The crisis exposed not only the condition of local infrastructure but also the terrible consequences when basic municipal services fail. Water is therefore likely to be one of the defining issues of the election in Tshwane.

On the other hand, there is also opportunity in Tshwane as it has something few South African cities can match: a concentration of political, scientific, educational, industrial and technological institutions that could make it the country's most important knowledge economies. The University of Pretoria, the world class Council of Scientific

and Industrial Research (CSIR), government departments, research institutions, automotive manufacturing in Rosslyn and a vast public-sector economy give the city a remarkable economic base.

The automotive industry also is particularly important. Tshwane is home to major vehicle manufacturing operations and a sophisticated supplier network, giving the municipality the opportunity to build on advanced manufacturing, logistics, technology and research. The challenge is transforming these assets into broader employment and economic opportunity, rather than allowing Tshwane to remain primarily an administrative government hub with a secondary industrial sector.

Politically, that is where the contest becomes interesting. The DA is defending its position as the largest party and has put forward Cilliers Brink, the former mayor, as its mayoral candidate. Brink's removal from office in September 2024 after the DA's coalition collapsed remains an important part of his political story. His campaign is effectively an argument that the city was beginning to recover under DA leadership before political instability brought it down.

ActionSA, meanwhile, is defending its position in the capital with Dr Nasiphi Moya, the current City of Tshwane mayor, as its mayoral candidate. Moya's position is particularly significant because Tshwane is the only metropolitan municipality in which ActionSA holds the mayoralty. Her campaign is therefore about more than retaining the city's top job: it is an opportunity for ActionSA to demonstrate that it can govern a major South African city and convert its political influence into an electoral mandate.

As in the rest of the country, the ANC has not selected its final candidate yet, putting forward six possible candidates: Aaron Maluleka, the MMC for Human Settlements; Kgoši Maepa, a former ANC Tshwane regional chairperson and former chief of staff to Premier Panyaza Lesufi; Chana Pilane-Majake, a former MP and deputy minister of public service and administration; Tlangi Mogale, the MMC for Roads and Transport and ANC Tshwane deputy chairperson; and two

lesser-known candidates Patience Moropa and Phumeza Mangcu.

The EFF has selected Omphile Maotwe to run for mayor; the ATM has announced Mncedi Ndzwanana, who is currently speaker of council, as their choice; and former MP Willie Spies is the FF+ candidate. Rise Mzansi and GOOD are fielding a joint candidate in Sarah Mabotsa and the Afrika Mayibuye Movement's candidate is Prince Mokotedi.

As in the case of many other metros, voters in Tshwane have now experienced years of political instability. The question is whether they will punish the parties responsible for it or simply learn to accept a coalition government as the new normal. The most likely outcome is another hung council. A DA-led administration remains possible, but only if it can assemble a coalition that is considerably more disciplined than the fragile arrangement that ultimately brought Brink down in 2024.

Tshwane has the institutions, industries, universities, government machinery and human capital to become one of Africa's great knowledge and administrative capitals. It has the political importance, economic assets and geographical position to thrive.

eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality

If Johannesburg is South Africa's economic capital, Cape Town its showcase and Tshwane its political capital, eThekweni is the gateway to the Indian Ocean and the eastern hemisphere. Durban is South Africa's busiest port city, a major tourism destination, the commercial centre of KwaZulu-Natal and home to one of the largest concentrations of manufacturing and logistics activity on the African continent. Its beaches, hotels and convention centres make it one of the country's most recognisable cities, while its port connects South Africa's economy to the rest of the world.

With a municipal budget of R75.3 billion and a population of more than four million, eThekweni is a city of enormous economic and political consequence (eThekweni Municipality 2026c). However, it is also a city caught in a particularly difficult transition: from being one of the ANC's safest metropolitan strongholds to becoming a genuinely contested political battleground.

For decades, the ANC could treat Durban almost as a political entitlement. That ended in 2021 when the party slipped to 42.02% of the vote, its majority disappearing for the first time (Electoral Commission 2021b). The DA took 26.62%, the EFF 10.48% and the IFP remained a significant force at 7%. The ANC nevertheless retained control by forming a coalition with smaller parties. The city is currently governed by a coalition led by the ANC, together with the EFF and the National Freedom Party (NFP), with the ANC's Cyril Xaba serving as mayor.

That political shift matters enormously because eThekweni is now sitting at the intersection of three major political forces: the ANC's declining but still formidable support base, the DA's attempt to break the ANC's grip on Durban and the extraordinary rise of the MK Party in KwaZulu-Natal. Unlike Johannesburg, where coalition politics is largely a consequence of the ANC's national decline, eThekweni faces an additional complication: the politics of Zuma-era KwaZulu-Natal.

The MK Party has fractured the ANC's traditional electoral base in

the province, taking advantage of the deep personal and political loyalty that former president Jacob Zuma continues to command. The defection of former eThekweni mayor Zandile Gumede to MK in July has made that threat particularly potent (Mail & Guardian 2026a). Gumede is not simply another politician. She has twice chaired the ANC's eThekweni region and served as mayor, giving the MK party access to someone with deep organisational knowledge and an established political network inside the metro.

On election day, the question is likely to be how large MK's majority share of the vote is, rather than whether it is the largest party. It will be the first time that MK's governance capabilities are seen in action, should the party either secure a majority or manage to cobble together a coalition.

These immediate politics cannot obscure the city's very real governance problems. Water has perhaps become the defining service-delivery issue. Thousands of leaks, ageing pipelines, water loss and infrastructure failures have produced repeated interruptions across the metro. The DA claims there are currently around 13 000 active water leaks and that the city's debtor book is heading towards R50 billion (Democratic Alliance 2026). Those figures are contested political claims, but the underlying problem is undeniable: eThekweni is struggling to maintain the infrastructure required to supply a rapidly growing metropolitan population.

Sanitation is an even bigger concern, with the deterioration of the city's wastewater infrastructure repeatedly threatening rivers, beaches and, therefore, the city's tourism economy. Years of sewage spills and treatment-plant failures have damaged Durban's reputation and forced authorities to spend billions on running repairs to systems that should have been maintained in the first place. The municipality's 2026/27 budget consequently puts more than R3 billion towards wastewater treatment upgrades and another R1.7 billion towards water-loss reduction and pipe replacement (eThekweni Municipality 2026b).

Electricity is another pressure point. Illegal connections, ageing

networks, cable theft and inadequate maintenance have all contributed to unreliable supply in parts of the municipality. The city has allocated R2.4 billion towards electricity infrastructure in the new capital programme, while simultaneously trying to recover billions in arrears from residents and businesses (eThekweni Municipality 2026a).

This is where eThekweni's financial problem becomes particularly interesting. The municipality is not simply out of funds like the many municipalities that are unable to charge for the services they provide or be paid for the rates they levy. In fact, it reported a 94% revenue collection rate for the 2025/26 financial year and collected R48.58 billion from its own revenue sources. However, that headline figure masks a much bigger problem: the accumulated debtor book (eThekweni Municipality 2026d). In June 2026 alone, the city disconnected thousands of water and electricity accounts linked to billions of rands in arrears.

No city can simultaneously promise world-class services and tolerate a culture in which vast numbers of consumers do not pay for what they use. However, aggressive disconnections carry their own political costs, particularly in poor communities where unemployment and household poverty are already high. Expect this to be a political issue upon which many parties will campaign ahead of November and not only in eThekweni.

It is not all doom and gloom, though. The city offers enormous economic opportunities. Durban has a port, beaches and a well established tourism infrastructure, combined with a major events and convention sector and an established international brand. It also has a manufacturing base and logistics networks that can be expanded on. The Durban port expansion and surrounding logistics economy could position eThekweni as one of Africa's most important trade gateways.

However, infrastructure failure threatens that advantage. A container ship does not care about political history and neither does an international investor. If roads are unreliable, water supplies are disrupted, sewage spills into rivers and businesses cannot depend on electricity, economic geography becomes a liability rather than an advantage.

The opportunity available to the next administration is therefore enormous: to turn Durban back into a city that works for both the people who live there and the businesses that depend on it. The political contest will determine whether that is possible.

The DA has selected Haniff Hoosen, a former Durban councillor and longtime national politician, as its candidate. The candidate for the IFP is its national spokesperson and current Deputy Minister of Transport Mkhuleko Hlengwa. ActionSA has selected Zwakele Mncwango, the party's KwaZulu-Natal provincial chair and a former member of the provincial legislature. The EFF has put forward Hlengiwe Mkhali, a former public representative and community activist from Inanda, giving the party a candidate with deep roots in working-class communities.

However, the most consequential contest is undoubtedly the ANC versus MK. The ANC has shortlisted a collection of candidates in Durban, reflecting its inability to choose just one. Possible candidates are incumbent Mayor Cyril Xaba, Council Speaker Thabani Nyawose, former KwaZulu-Natal premier Nomusa Dube-Ncube, veteran politician Maggie Govender and Mina Soma-Lesoma.

MK, meanwhile, initially named the fairly unknown Zandile Hlophe-Mkhwanazi as its mayoral candidate. But the technology entrepreneur and academic was abruptly replaced at the beginning of September with Mxolisi Phakathi. Phakathi is linked to the Twelve Apostles Church in Christ. He was member of the KwaZulu-Natal legislature and KwaZulu-Natal chairperson of the African Transformation Movement before joining the MK party.

Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality

Nelson Mandela Bay metropolitan municipality represents a fragile opportunity wrapped in a political tinderbox. This city, with its enormous industrial potential, has continually struggled to make the basic machinery of local government work.

Centred on Gqeberha and incorporating Kariega, Despatch and a string of surrounding communities, the metro is home to roughly 1.2 million people and hosts one of the country's most important automotive manufacturing clusters. It has a deep-water port, major vehicle plants, a substantial industrial base and a coastline that gives it obvious tourism potential. Yet Nelson Mandela Bay has become one of the clearest examples of the gap between what a South African city could be and what poor governance reduces it to.

The political stakes are therefore unusually high. For much of the democratic era, the ANC has treated Nelson Mandela Bay as one of its Eastern Cape strongholds, assured that it would not face any challenge to its governance. That grip began to slip spectacularly in 2016, when the ANC lost its outright majority and the DA took control through a coalition led by mayor Athol Trollip (Electoral Commission 2021b). In 2021, the DA remained the largest party with 39.92% of the vote, followed by the ANC at 39.31%, the EFF at 7.87% and smaller parties holding the balance. The difference between the two largest parties was barely 5 000 votes. Nelson Mandela Bay had effectively become the definition of a political knife-edge.

That makes the 2026 election particularly important as Nelson Mandela Bay is truly up for grabs. A few percentage points could determine who governs the metro—and who has to spend the next five years negotiating with everyone else. The city's governance problems are equally severe. Much like elsewhere in South Africa, water has become one of the defining issues. Nelson Mandela Bay has endured repeated water shortages and severe supply interruptions. The metro's water problems are not simply the result of a drought, such as the one

experienced in Cape Town (The Herald 2026). Ageing infrastructure, leaks, illegal connections, inadequate maintenance and years of underinvestment have combined to create a system in which enormous quantities of water are lost before they reach consumers.

The electricity system faces similar pressures. Illegal connections, cable theft, ageing infrastructure and municipal debt have made reliable supply increasingly difficult in poorer communities. Waste management, roads and sanitation add to the list of everyday grievances.

However, Nelson Mandela Bay's most damaging problem may be the one residents cannot see: the collapse of confidence in the municipality itself. Having had eight mayors since 2016, the metro has been repeatedly battered by political instability, corruption allegations and administrative dysfunction. Municipal officials have been suspended, councils have been fractured and coalition arrangements have repeatedly threatened to collapse. The consequence is an administration that struggles to plan beyond the immediate political crisis.

Such continual failure matters because Nelson Mandela Bay cannot afford to lose any more time. Its finances are in complete disarray, and the metro is on the brink of structural insolvency, kept afloat only through grants from the national government (Daily Maverick 2026a).

The city's greatest asset is its industrial base. It is home to major automotive manufacturing operations, including Volkswagen's Kariega plant and a substantial network of automotive component and spares manufacturers. The automotive sector is also deeply integrated into the Eastern Cape provincial economy and provides thousands of direct and indirect jobs. The metro sits on a strategic piece of South Africa's coastline and its ports, industrial land, road and rail connections, as well as proximity to major manufacturing operations give it the ingredients to become a major logistics and export hub. The potential of the Coega Special Economic Zone is particularly significant, attracting billions of rands in investment and offering the city the opportunity to build an industrial economy around manufacturing, logistics, energy and exports.

Yet again, the opportunity comes with a giant 'if' as investors do not

simply look at tax incentives and available land, but at the basics. They want a guarantee of water, electricity, roads and security. Without this basic service delivery, investment will simply migrate elsewhere. The central political question in Nelson Mandela Bay is therefore whether the metro can get its house in order quickly enough to capitalise on the industrial opportunity sitting on its doorstep. The political contest in November will be fascinating.

The DA has selected Retief Odendaal as its mayoral candidate. Odendaal previously served as mayor between 2022 and 2023 and is attempting to position himself as the candidate who can restore stability and professionalise the administration. The party's message is familiar but particularly relevant here: competent administration, financial discipline, infrastructure maintenance and an environment in which businesses can invest and create jobs.

The ANC, meanwhile, is desperate to retain control of the city. Its current mayor, Babalwa Lobishe, is among four candidates on the party's mayoral shortlist, alongside ANC NEC member and former councillor Andile Lungisa, Xolani Vela and Ntombi Nama. Lungisa, a former ANC regional chairperson and MMC, has emerged as a particularly prominent figure in the contest, while Lobishe enters the race with the advantage—and burden—of having been mayor since 2024.

The EFF, with mayoral candidate Sinawo Thambo, remains a significant factor in a city where the ANC and DA have historically been closely matched. Even a relatively small shift in the EFF vote could have significant consequences in coalition arithmetic. Another party of possible significance, the MK party has chosen Mvuleni Mapu as its mayoral candidate in the metro.

There are also smaller parties that could play a role. Nelson Mandela Bay has become something of a graveyard for simplistic coalition politics. The metro's experience demonstrates how quickly a party with only a handful of councillors can become disproportionately powerful when no larger party has a majority. Parties such as the UDM, AIC and PA have all played roles in the city's shifting political arrangements.

That makes the election about much more than first place. The ANC and DA could again finish within striking distance of one another, but if neither moves decisively beyond the 40% mark, the post-election negotiations could be just as important as the campaign itself. As seen so often before, the party that wins the most votes will not necessarily secure the position of mayor.

There is a further complication: voter fatigue. After years of political instability and service-delivery failures, Nelson Mandela Bay residents have every reason to be cynical about yet another election promise to fix the city.

Whoever wins on 4 November 2026 will inherit a municipality with fewer people and fewer resources than Johannesburg or Cape Town, but with something those cities would envy: a genuine opportunity to rebuild an industrial city around manufacturing, logistics, energy and exports. The question is whether its politicians can finally provide the one thing investors and residents need most: a government that stays in place long enough to get the job done.

Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality

If Nelson Mandela Bay is the Eastern Cape's industrial heavyweight, Buffalo City is its political and administrative counterweight. Centred on East London—officially renamed KuGompo City in January 2026—and stretching through Mdantsane, King William's Town, Bhisho and a vast surrounding area, Buffalo City is the seat of the Eastern Cape provincial government and home to roughly 900 000 people. This makes it one of only two metros in South Africa with fewer than 1 million residents (Daily Dispatch 2026). Like Nelson Mandela Bay, it has a deep-water port, an established automotive industry, a major agricultural hinterland and a coastline with considerable tourism potential.

This makes Buffalo City an important political prize but one that also comes with a problem much like its Eastern Cape neighbour: a metro that has never quite managed to turn its considerable assets into a convincing economic story.

The ANC has governed Buffalo City since its creation as a metropolitan municipality in 2011 and, unlike Nelson Mandela Bay, the party has never lost its outright majority (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). In the 2021 election, the party won around 58% of the vote, with the DA at roughly 24% and the EFF at about 10%. The political contest is therefore fundamentally different from that of Johannesburg, Tshwane or Nelson Mandela Bay. In Buffalo City the battle is not really over whether the ANC will govern, but rather whether its majority will be eroded, and whether the opposition can finally turn discontent into a credible alternative.

That does not mean the city's political dynamics are uncomplicated. The ANC's dominance has created a governance challenge distinct from the coalition instability elsewhere. While political control has been continuous, this stability has not necessarily translated into institutional strength. Buffalo City has faced recurring problems around financial management, infrastructure maintenance, service delivery and municipal capacity.

Water insecurity is one of the metro's most persistent problems. It is a familiar story: the municipality has experienced repeated supply interruptions, ageing infrastructure, leaks and inadequate maintenance. Communities in Mdantsane and surrounding areas have endured prolonged outages, while the city's water losses remain a major financial and operational burden. Although the municipality has invested in upgrades to its water network, the underlying challenge remains unchanged: a growing city trying to maintain infrastructure that has not kept pace with either population growth or economic needs.

Electricity and sanitation create similar headaches. Illegal connections, non-payment, ageing infrastructure and vandalism put pressure on the electricity network. Non-technical losses from illegal electricity connections and meter tampering have cost Buffalo City Metro between R228 million and R340 million per year in lost revenue (Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality 2021). Furthermore, failing wastewater systems threaten rivers, communities and the city's environmental assets. Roads and refuse collection add to the everyday frustrations.

However, Buffalo City's most fundamental challenge is arguably its economic stagnation, given that the East London region once had a much stronger industrial identity. While the automotive sector remains important, particularly through the Mercedes Benz manufacturing plant and its component suppliers, the broader industrial economy has struggled. Deindustrialisation, logistics constraints, weak rail infrastructure and the general difficulty of doing business in South Africa have all constrained growth.

On the other hand, this is also where Buffalo City's greatest opportunity lies. The East London Industrial Development Zone (2026) offers the city a ready-made platform for manufacturing, export-oriented industry and logistics. Mercedes-Benz has invested heavily in its East London operations, while the wider automotive ecosystem provides a strong foundation on which to build. Furthermore, the port, although smaller than Durban's or Cape Town's, provides another strategic asset. The problem is that these advantages have not

yet translated into the large-scale economic activity and job creation that Buffalo City needs.

Buffalo city also has something else: Bhisho. As the provincial capital is located within its borders, Buffalo City hosts the Eastern Cape legislature and provincial government. This gives the metro an unusually large public-sector economy and a concentration of political institutions. However, it also creates the danger that Buffalo City will become a city whose economy is disproportionately dependent on government rather than one that uses government as a platform for wider economic development. The political challenge for the next administration is therefore not simply to keep services running, but to rebuild Buffalo City's economic purpose.

The political contest begins from a position of considerable ANC strength. The party has not yet formally selected its mayoral candidate in Buffalo City, in keeping with its indecisiveness at a national level. Its shortlist includes incumbent mayor Princess Faku, Deputy Minister of Sport, Arts and Culture Ncawu Mafu, Simphiwe Dzingwa and Ncedo Kumbaca. The DA, meanwhile, has taken an unusual approach. It has decided not to field a mayoral candidate in Buffalo City, arguing that its focus should instead be on building its council representation. On the one hand, this reflects the difficult arithmetic facing the opposition: the ANC won 43 of the metro's 50 wards in 2021, leaving the DA with only seven. On the other hand, the DA might be criticised for a lack of commitment to fight for the mayoral chain and settling for merely expanding its presence

The EFF also has a significant role to play in this area, having selected Mkhululi Dlepu as its mayoral candidate. Its support base gives it the ability to challenge the ANC in poorer communities, particularly where frustration over unemployment, land reform and service delivery is greatest.

However, the most interesting opposition challenge may come from the UDM which has selected its deputy president, Nqabayomzi Kwankwa, as its mayoral candidate. Kwankwa, a prominent Eastern

Cape politician with local roots, is the UDM's attempt to turn dissatisfaction with the ANC into a broader challenge to its dominance. The MK party will also be contesting the election, fielding Mzwandile Vaaiboom as its candidate.

Still, the most likely outcome is an ANC victory and another ANC-controlled council. The real question is the size of the majority. A substantial decline would be politically significant even if the party retains power, because it would demonstrate that the Eastern Cape's traditional political loyalties are weakening.

That makes the 2026 election in Buffalo City an important test of something different from the coalition question dominating the other metros. The contest raises the question of whether political stability without effective administration is enough. Buffalo City has all the ingredients for a prosperous economy, including an industrial base, a deep-water port, the Mercedes-Benz manufacturing plant, a special economic zone, a provincial capital, an agricultural hinterland, a large urban population and an established university sector. What it needs is a coherent economic strategy and a municipality capable of executing it.

Mangaung Metropolitan Municipality

Mangaung is a provincial capital that has never quite found its economic purpose. Centred on Bloemfontein and incorporating Botshabelo, Thaba Nchu and a vast surrounding area, Mangaung is the administrative heart of the Free State. It is home to the provincial legislature, the Supreme Court of Appeal and the University of the Free State, and sits at an important crossroads between Gauteng, the Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape. Mangaung is also a warning about what happens when political dominance becomes detached from economic performance.

The ANC has governed the municipality since the dawn of democracy and, unlike Johannesburg, Tshwane or Nelson Mandela Bay, has never had to surrender political control (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). In 2021, it won 56.65% of the vote, comfortably ahead of the DA at 23.76% and the EFF at 10.72%. Mangaung therefore remains one of the ANC's safer metropolitan strongholds. The question in 2026 is not really whether the party will govern; rather, it is whether its once-formidable majority is beginning to crack.

This is not hard to imagine because the city's problems are becoming increasingly difficult to disguise. Like the situations detailed in so many local government stories, Mangaung has struggled with deteriorating infrastructure, unreliable water and electricity supplies, insufficient road maintenance, inconsistent refuse collection and poor municipal financial management. The municipality has repeatedly appeared in the national Auditor-General's reports as an example of weak governance, with concerns around irregular expenditure, inadequate controls and the failure to implement recommendations (Parliamentary Monitoring Group 2025).

The water crisis in Mangaung has become particularly acute (GroundUp 2026a). Bloemfontein's ageing water infrastructure has suffered from leaks, burst pipes and inadequate maintenance, while communities in Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu have experienced repeated supply interruptions for weeks on end. Water loss puts further pressure

on municipal finances because every litre that disappears before reaching a paying consumer represents both wasted infrastructure and lost revenue.

Electricity presents much the same problem, with the metro having to deal with ageing infrastructure, illegal connections, electricity theft and significant levels of non-payment. Eskom debt and municipal arrears have periodically placed additional pressure on the city's ability to maintain reliable supply.

The municipality's balance sheet is also of concern (The Citizen 2026). Mangaung has spent years battling to collect what residents and businesses owe it while simultaneously trying to maintain a sprawling network of roads, pipes and electrical infrastructure. This dilemma creates a familiar municipal trap: poor services encourage non-payment; non-payment reduces revenue; reduced revenue means less maintenance; declining infrastructure produces even worse services. It is a cycle that is particularly difficult to break in a city with high unemployment and widespread poverty.

Mangaung's geography makes matters worse. The municipality is enormous, stretching across communities with radically different economic circumstances. Bloemfontein contains relatively prosperous suburbs and commercial districts, while Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu have much higher levels of unemployment and poverty. The municipality is consequently trying to deliver metropolitan-scale services across a population that is economically fragmented and geographically dispersed.

Yet there is also opportunity in Mangaung. Bloemfontein's position in the centre of South Africa gives it a natural logistics advantage. It sits on major road and rail routes connecting Johannesburg, Cape Town and the Eastern Cape. Its role as the Free State's administrative capital provides a large public-sector economy, while the University of the Free State, the Central University of Technology and a concentration of medical, legal and professional institutions provide a substantial skills base.

The challenge is to turn those advantages into something more than an economy dominated by the government. Mangaung furthermore has an opportunity to position itself as a regional logistics, education, healthcare and services hub, while using Botshabelo and Thaba Nchu to build a stronger manufacturing and agro-processing base. The city has enormous potential in agriculture and renewable energy, particularly given the Free State's land and solar resources.

Again, none of this works without a functioning local government competently providing basic services. Potential investors considering setting up factories in Botshabelo likely do not care which political party controls the provincial legislature. They care whether the municipality can guarantee electricity, water, roads, waste removal and predictable administration.

That makes the political question in Mangaung deceptively simple: can the ANC's political stability finally be converted into administrative competence and economic growth? The party has not yet selected its final mayoral candidate. Its shortlist includes incumbent mayor Gregory Nthatsi, former mayor and MP Thabo Manyoni, Bongani Lawrence Mathae, Theodorah Mosala-Leeuw, Lulaman Oditi-Titi, Sekhophi Malebo, Vusimuzi Simon Soqaga and Motshewa Martha Tladi.

The DA has selected Werner Pretorius as its mayoral candidate, the MK party has chosen former ANC Speaker and acting mayor Mapaseka Mothibi and the EFF has lined up Sam Matlase. However, unlike the other metros, the balance of power remains firmly in the ANC's favour. The most likely outcome is therefore another ANC victory and another ANC-controlled council. A complete loss of its majority would be a major political earthquake, but that is unlikely. The more interesting question is how much support the ANC loses at this election, given the issues listed above.

If the party falls substantially below 50%, Mangaung could suddenly find itself facing the type of coalition politics that have transformed Johannesburg, Tshwane and Ekurhuleni.

It would have been impossible to include every single municipality in

this book. However, this selection focuses on municipalities that matter beyond their borders—because of their economic importance, political influence, governance challenges, population size or strategic location. Some are major regional centres; others are places where political shifts could have national consequences. For instance, because the Northern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West have no metropolitan municipalities, municipalities encompassing the largest cities in those provinces have been included. Together, they provide a useful snapshot of the choices voters face, the pressures municipalities confront, and the very different political and economic realities shaping local government across South Africa.

Polokwane Local Municipality

There are few smaller municipalities that matter more to the politics of their province than Polokwane. This is not simply Limpopo's capital, it is the province's economic hub, administrative centre and political nerve centre, and the municipality the ANC will be most determined to defend in the 2026 election. With more than 10% of Limpopo's population living within its boundaries, Polokwane combines a growing urban core with a huge rural grouping of villages and traditional communities. Politically, Polokwane remains an ANC fortress, but it is no longer an unquestioned one.

In 2021, the ANC won 56 of the municipality's 90 council seats, securing 62% of the party list vote (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). The EFF emerged as the official opposition with 21 seats, while the DA secured seven. While that is still a commanding ANC majority, the EFF's influence is significant because Polokwane encompasses Seshego, the hometown of the Red Berets' leader Julius Malema. The EFF will therefore look to make further inroads into a municipality with a large, young and economically marginalised population.

Polokwane is able to trumpet genuine signs of institutional improvement as the municipality secured its fourth consecutive unqualified audit opinion for the 2023/2024 financial year (Auditor-General of South Africa 2024a). However, the political opposition argues that this neat audit story bears little resemblance to the experience of many residents.

As in so many places across the country, water has become the defining issue of the election. Large parts of Seshego and other communities have endured prolonged shortages, sometimes lasting for weeks. In 2025, residents of Seshego went without water for almost three weeks. The municipality blamed these supply failures on the bulk supply system, power interruptions and vandalism (The Citizen 2025). The DA has taken the matter to the Public Protector, accusing the municipality of failing to provide a sustainable water service (Democratic Alliance Limpopo 2026).

This is where Polokwane's local power struggle becomes interesting. Mayor John Mpe is both the face of the municipality and a major figure in the Limpopo ANC. He was elected deputy chairperson of the ANC's provincial executive in March, along with Premier Phophi Ramathuba and his political ambitions have increasingly extended beyond the municipal level. The ANC has now shortlisted Mpe, Speaker Wilhelmina Modiba, regional executive member Matlala Pheedi and MP Soviet Lekganyane for the mayoralty, with a final candidate only expected in September.

The EFF has lined up Seshego local Lawrence Mapoulo, the party's Limpopo chairperson and former mayor of Polokwane's transitional council when the municipality was formed in the 1990s, as its mayoral candidate. The DA's Polokwane campaign is led locally by caucus leader Johan Retters, who has made water, crime and accountability central to the party's attack on the ANC. ActionSA's mayoral campaign initially put forward Moses Molepo, a former ANC member and whistleblower, but the party recently changed its candidate to its provincial chairperson in Limpopo, Victor Mothemela.

The electoral arithmetic in Limpopo heavily favours the ANC, so the most likely outcome is another ANC victory and another ANC-controlled council. The real contest is over the size of that majority. That makes Polokwane one of the more revealing smaller municipality contests of 2026. If the ANC falls significantly below its 2021 level of support, particularly as the EFF and newer parties eat into its support, Polokwane could begin moving towards the kind of fragmented politics already visible elsewhere in South Africa.

However, Polokwane's ambitions to become a 'smart city' and grow into a metropolitan municipality, using its strategic location, substantial agricultural economy, a growing urban population and the institutional weight of being Limpopo's capital, will fail if its residents cannot reliably turn on a tap and see water flowing.

Ehlanzeni District Municipality

Ehlanzeni District Municipality is Mpumalanga's great eastern prize: a district where politics, tourism, agriculture and the province's strategic relationship with Mozambique and Eswatini all merge. Stretching across more than a third of Mpumalanga, Ehlanzeni comprises four local municipalities: the City of Mbombela, Bushbuckridge, Nkomazi and Thaba Chweu. It encompasses the province's capital, serves as the gateway to the Kruger National Park and has some of South Africa's most important tourism and agricultural economies. Therefore, what happens here matters far beyond the borders of these rural municipalities.

It is also a useful illustration of the peculiar politics of district government. The district itself does not run the taps or collect the rubbish in Mbombela or Bushbuckridge. Rather, these responsibilities fall under the local municipalities, as explained in Chapter 2.

On paper, Ehlanzeni has a stronger governance story than many of the municipalities around it, consistently receiving clean audits with no material findings (Auditor-General of South Africa 2025b). On the other hand, the clean books conceal a more complicated political reality. The ANC dominates the district council with 42 of its 64 seats, comfortably ahead of the EFF on nine and the DA on seven (Electoral Commission 2021b). Executive Mayor Enoch Shabangu remains the ANC's face at district level, but the real political battle is increasingly taking place inside the constituent municipalities, particularly Mbombela and Bushbuckridge.

Mbombela is arguably the biggest prize in Mpumalanga at a local municipal level. It is the provincial capital, the tourism gateway to the Kruger National Park and the economic centre of the Lowveld. The ANC won 59 of its 90 council seats in 2021, a sharp decline from the 69 seats it secured in 2016. Meanwhile, the EFF increased its share to 14 seats and the DA to 12. The ANC's faltering performance over two elections suggests that Mbombela could become a hung municipality after 4 November 2026.

Bushbuckridge presents a different challenge. The ANC remains overwhelmingly dominant, holding 53 of the 76 council seats after the 2021 election (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). However, the EFF emerged as the principal challenger during the last ballot after years of competitive opposition by the Bushbuckridge Residents Association. It will take a lot to eat into the ANC's support base, even though service-delivery problems are substantial.

Water is the defining issue in Bushbuckridge, more so than in other areas of the country. The municipality has long struggled with water shortages, despite sitting in a region that has seen massive water infrastructure development in the past decade (SABC News 2026a). It is an enormous contradiction that people who live next to three substantial dams still struggle to have running water in their homes.

Still, the economic opportunity in these two district municipalities, and the region as a whole, is enormous, particularly when it comes to tourism. The Kruger National Park and a range of smaller game reserves are located within the municipality. Furthermore, forestry cross border trade and agricultural sectors like citrus and macadamias all offer potential for growth. Mbombela's position between Gauteng, Mozambique and Eswatini also gives it a natural logistics advantage.

As always, the challenge is converting these opportunities into local jobs and functioning communities, rather than allowing them to exist next to deep rural poverty. The 2026 election is therefore likely to produce two very different stories inside one district. In Bushbuckridge, the ANC is still the overwhelming favourite, but in Mbombela, the political situation is far more volatile. A significant ANC decline could produce a hung council, giving the DA, EFF and smaller parties like the FF+ and the ACDP substantial influence over who governs.

At the district level, however, an ANC victory remains the most likely outcome. The bigger question is whether that political dominance can survive the growing disconnect between Mpumalanga's extraordinary economic potential and the everyday experience of its residents. The district needs those advantages to translate into water that flows,

infrastructure that works and an economy that gives the residents living next to South Africa's greatest tourism assets a greater share of the wealth these assets generate.

Bojanala Platinum District Municipality

There are few places in South Africa where the contradiction between mineral wealth and community poverty is starker than in the Bojanala Platinum District Municipality. Incorporating Rustenburg, Madibeng, Moses Kotane, Moretele and Kgetlengrivier, the district sits on the richest platinum belt on Earth (Africa Mining IQ 2026). Rustenburg alone derives the overwhelming majority of its economic output from mining, which accounted for 76.6% of its gross value added in 2020. The district also contains Marikana, one of the most politically and historically charged places in democratic South Africa following the 2012 massacre, where striking miners were gunned down by police during a labour dispute (South African History Online 2026b).

Bojanala is therefore not simply another rural district, but a test of whether South Africa can turn mineral wealth into functioning local government and broad-based economic opportunity. The governance record is decidedly mixed. The district itself has performed better financially than some of its constituent municipalities, but the wider picture is troubling. The Auditor-General's latest district assessment shows that two municipalities have needed intervention: Madibeng is under national intervention and Kgetlengrivier is under national provincial intervention (South African Government 2024a). Across the district and its five local municipalities, the audit record has historically been dominated by qualified opinions, with the 2022/23 cycle producing four qualified outcomes and one adverse opinion (North West Provincial Treasury 2024).

Madibeng is perhaps the starkest example of municipal failure. The municipality has endured years of financial and administrative dysfunction, including enormous irregular expenditure. In 2021, Parliament warned about a pattern of consecutive disclaimer opinions (five by that stage) and a lack of consequence management, directly translating into reduced funding for infrastructure maintenance and the provision of basic services (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2021).

This dysfunction has led to the politics of the area being highly combustible, as voter discontent has already resulted in a hung council. Following the 2021 elections in Rustenburg, no single party held a majority. Although the ANC secured 43 of the 90 council seats, far more than its closest rivals, the EFF with 17 and the DA with 13, it fell short of an outright majority. The party consequently assembled a narrow coalition with smaller parties, such as AIC, Arona and an independent councillor (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). However, this coalition agreement collapsed in 2025 and the ANC has since governed with the EFF.

Rustenburg's position between Johannesburg and Botswana, its existing industrial base and its concentration of mining expertise give it the potential to become a major regional services, manufacturing and logistics centre. Tourism around the Magaliesberg and Pilanesberg areas adds another economic layer, but diversification will remain difficult if municipal infrastructure and basic services continue to deteriorate.

Madibeng Local Municipality presents an attractive electoral proposition with rich agriculture surrounding the Magaliesberg mountains, industrial growth in Brits and thriving tourism around the Hartbeespoort Dam. This unique mix provides potential as a critical economic hub, but unlocking this industrial and eco-tourism potential relies on stabilising municipal infrastructure, improving service delivery and expanding local manufacturing and mineral processing. However, the service delivery problems are depressingly familiar: water and electricity shortages, poor sanitation and road maintenance, intermittent waste collection and a lack of affordable formal housing.

These problems are compounded by the municipality's financial weakness. Severe cash-flow shortages mean Madibeng cannot consistently pay bulk utility providers like Eskom (which is owed over R1.4 billion) and Magalies Water, or neighbouring suppliers like the City of Tshwane. This triggers rolling electricity and water cutoffs that leave townships like Maboloka, Madidi and Jericho without running water or power for weeks at a time. Chronic non-compliance with

the Municipal Finance Management Act (MFMA) has also forced the temporary withholding of equitable share funding allocations by the National Treasury (Hartbeespoort News 2026).

The ANC retained a majority in 2021 with 44 of 82 seats, while the EFF won 14 seats and the DA 12 (Electoral Commission 2021b). Since then, the municipality's governance failures during the current term have created another obvious opening for opposition parties. The electoral scenarios are therefore quite different across the district.

The ANC faces the very real possibility of losing its majority in Madibeng after the Sunday Times leaked an audio recording in April 2026, in which Mayor Douglas Maimane allegedly offered opposition councillors R200,000 to run a campaign against his own party. He did not respond to the publication's questions and was removed as mayor later that month (TimesLIVE 2026).

However, Rustenburg is the real battleground as a hung council is entirely plausible in that municipality. The ANC's ability to reproduce its existing coalition arrangement may depend on whether the EFF, DA, ActionSA and smaller parties gain or lose ground. At the district level, an ANC victory remains the most likely outcome, but the more significant political story will be what happens in the key local municipalities of Rustenburg and Madibeng.

The ANC's inability to choose a single mayoral candidate sees another crowded field of contenders in Rustenburg. These include former mayor Matthew Wolmarans, incumbent mayor Sheila Mabale-Huma, former North West MEC Wendy Matsemela and former MEC Paul Sebegoe. The EFF has selected Juju Monaise to lead its campaign. Mirroring its strategy in Buffalo City, the DA has opted not to centre its campaign on a single mayoral figure, focusing instead on ward-by-ward candidate deployment. ActionSA has also set its sights on the municipality, choosing Ofentse Kombe as its candidate.

In Madibeng, the ANC has five would-be mayors, with Freda Makgwathe, James Mashigo, Raymond Motsepe, Ditshego Mbeze and Joseph Moyo among those in contention. The EFF has selected Stan

Komape as its candidate, while the DA has yet to announce a candidate for the municipality.

Msunduzi Local Municipality

There are few municipalities in South Africa where the gap between political importance and municipal performance is more consequential than Msunduzi. Centred on Pietermaritzburg, the provincial capital of KwaZulu Natal, Msunduzi is the administrative and economic centre of the uMgungundlovu district municipality. Its position on the N3 corridor, combined with manufacturing, agriculture, tertiary education, government and tourism, gives it an economic base many municipalities would envy. It should be one of KwaZulu-Natal's great secondary cities. Instead, it has become another example of what happens when economic potential is not backed up by municipal delivery.

The governance record is deeply troubled, with Msunduzi enduring years of financial and administrative dysfunction and repeated provincial interventions. A 2024 parliamentary oversight visit found persistent weaknesses in municipal management affecting service delivery, with the usual impact on water, waste management, roads and electricity (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2024).

Although the Msunduzi municipality improved to the point of obtaining an unqualified audit opinion with findings in 2024/25, Parliament also reported R114 million in fruitless and wasteful expenditure during the year, taking its accumulated balance to R248 million (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2025b). This makes Msunduzi one of the more important electoral contests in KwaZulu-Natal. This is not simply a fight for control of a municipality but a contest over the future of the provincial capital.

The ANC enters the 2026 election already weakened, having won only 40 of the 80 council seats in 2021, against 16 for the DA, 10 for the EFF and eight for the IFP (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). The party therefore lost its outright majority and has had to rely on smaller parties and shifting alliances to retain control.

The IFP has subsequently demonstrated that the ANC's dominance can be challenged. In a 2023 by-election in Ward 2, the IFP took 58%

of the vote against 39% for the ANC, capturing a ward previously held by the governing party. However, the biggest wildcard is the MK Party. Its breakthrough in KwaZulu-Natal during the 2024 national election was particularly dramatic in Msunduzi, where it won 52.6% of the provincial ballot, compared with 18.2% for the DA and 17.2% for the ANC (Electoral Commission 2024a).

The question for 2026 is whether that support can be converted into a local-government machine. The economic stakes are substantial. Pietermaritzburg's position on the Durban–Johannesburg corridor gives it genuine potential as a logistics and manufacturing centre, while its proximity to a major agricultural economy creates opportunities in agro-processing. Its universities, provincial government functions and established commercial sector provide another layer of economic potential.

However, unlocking that potential requires precisely what Msunduzi has struggled to provide: competent municipal government. The ANC will likely fail to lure voters back after years of provincial intervention and financial mismanagement: the municipality is therefore likely to be MK's for the taking. On the other hand, it is yet to name a mayoral candidate, but then, neither have the DA and the IFP. Unsurprisingly, the ANC's indecision over its mayoral has resulted in seven names being put forward, including the incumbent mayor Mzimkhulu Thebolla, former mayor Chris Ndlela, along with Sibongile Dlamini-Mabaso, Bishop Vusi Dube, Zenzele Msomi, Najmah Ahmed and Ningi Mbanjwa. ActionSA has chosen Fanele Mthembu and the EFF's candidate is Nthuthuko Mncwabe.

Garden Route District Municipality

There are few parts of South Africa where the promise of local government is more visible—and the consequences of getting it wrong more immediate—than the Garden Route. Stretching along one of the country's most valuable tourism corridors, the district encompasses George, Knysna, Mossel Bay, Oudtshoorn, Bitou, Hessequa and Kannaland. It has beaches, forests, agriculture, tourism, property development and some of the country's fastest-growing towns. It is a place people increasingly want to live, visit and invest in.

That growth, however, is putting enormous pressure on the infrastructure that made the Garden Route attractive in the first place. Service delivery challenges due to population growth have been compounded by environmental and climate pressures. Severe weather events in 2026 caused more than R500 million in preliminary infrastructure and facility damage across the district, with George and Knysna among the hardest hit (George Municipality 2026).

The district itself has a remarkably strong governance record. In the 2024/2025 financial year, the Garden Route District Municipality received its fifth consecutive clean audit, while George, Hessequa and Mossel Bay also achieved clean audits. The district has consequently become something of a Western Cape counterpoint to the municipal dysfunction seen elsewhere in the country. Yet, this is where the Garden Route becomes a poster child for potential institutional discord at the lower levels of municipal governance, proving that a well-run district does not necessarily mean all the municipalities within it are equally well run.

The sharpest contrast is between George and Knysna. George is the economic centre of the district and one of the Western Cape's most important secondary cities. The DA won 46.4% of the vote in 2021, securing 26 of the 55 council seats, but falling short of a majority. It has subsequently governed through a coalition with the FF+ and the ACDP (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b).

The situation has since become considerably more fragile. The PA has made a remarkable assault on the DA's support in George. Former DA councillors have defected to the PA, and the party won three DA-held wards in 2026 by-elections, including a February victory in which it took 65% of the vote. It now has six council seats and has openly declared that George is there for the taking. This makes George one of the more intriguing smaller municipality contests in the Western Cape.

The DA has selected incumbent mayor Bronwen Johnson as its mayoral candidate, while the PA's growing support gives it a credible route into the mayor's office if it can convert by-election momentum into a broader municipal vote. The ANC remains a distant second force, while the FF+, GOOD, the PBI and smaller parties could hold the balance of power in a tightly contested council.

Knysna is an altogether more serious governance story, with the municipality having been caught in a prolonged political and administrative crisis. In September 2025, the Western Cape government sought to dissolve the council and place Knysna under administration, citing repeated governance and service-delivery failures (South African Government 2025). The National Council of Provinces ultimately rejected the intervention and the council remained in place.

The underlying problems are immense. Water security, sewage, roads, financial stability and ageing infrastructure remain major challenges. Knysna's 2026/27 budget explicitly states that the municipality requires a major infrastructure restoration, allocating roughly 80% of its R249 million capital budget to infrastructure, including electricity, roads, stormwater, water and sewerage (Knysna Municipality 2026).

The politics of the municipality are equally fractured and has morphed into lethal violence, following the murder of two serving councillors in August (Daily Maverick 2026b). The 21-seat council is split between the DA, ANC, PA and EFF, along with local parties such as the Knysna Independent Movement (KIM) and Plaaslike Besorgde Inwoners (PBI). The ANC currently leads a shaky coalition with the EFF, PA and PBI, led by Mayor Thando Matika. So far only the DA has

selected a mayoral candidate, putting forward Levaël Davis.

The district itself is likely to remain firmly DA-controlled. George, however, is a genuine battleground, with the DA fighting to hold a municipality where the PA has demonstrated that it can convert support into actual council seats. Knysna is even more unpredictable. Another fragmented council is highly plausible, and the ability to assemble a governing coalition will matter more than which party finishes first.

Sol Plaatje Local Municipality

There are few smaller municipalities that carry quite as much historical and political weight as the Sol Plaatje Local Municipality. Centred on Kimberley, the capital of the Northern Cape, this is the city where South Africa's diamond story began and where the province's political, administrative and economic institutions remain concentrated. Kimberley has a university, serves as the seat of provincial government, and acts as a major centre for mining, agriculture and tourism due to its strategic position between the country's interior and the Northern Cape. It should be one of the province's great regional cities. Instead, it has become another example of how economic potential and municipal performance can move in completely opposite directions.

Sol Plaatje has struggled with negative audit outcomes and financial pressure, with its latest available financial-health assessment rating it as under strain. The municipality reported an operating deficit of roughly R183 million for the 2024/2025 financial year (Municipalities of South Africa 2026). The situation is compounded by ageing infrastructure and poor revenue collection.

Again, water is the most obvious manifestation. Kimberley has grown dramatically since upgrades to the original Riverton water system were undertaken to increase capacity and replace ageing asbestos pipes (Kimberley Prospector 2024). The frequency of major water shutdowns has declined, and the bulk-water programme is intended to address some of the structural problems. Yet, the fact that Kimberley still has to explain why water cannot reliably reach a growing population echoes a familiar story.

In spite of this, economic opportunity is substantial. Mining remains important, but the city's future lies in diversification: education, renewable energy, tourism, agriculture, logistics and services. Turning those assets into an economic advantage will be a challenge, as the result of another politically fractured council.

The ANC won 33 of the 65 council seats in 2021, just enough for a

majority (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). The DA won 14, the EFF six, the PA three, with several smaller parties making up the remainder. That majority subsequently disappeared after a 2023 by-election was won by the Patriotic Alliance, forcing the ANC into a coalition with GOOD. The ANC regained the ward in July 2025, restoring its majority.

The party has also experienced internal political turbulence. Former Northern Cape MEC Barbara Bartlett previously served as executive mayor and former national minister of Transport Dipuo Peters as speaker. Bartlett and Peters are now mayoral candidates for the ANC, along with Dorothy Morudi, Pantsi Obusitse and Thandi Mfulo, as the party is once again undecided on its final picks. The DA has selected Heinrich Pieterse as its mayoral candidate, and the EFF has chosen Lorato Florence Tito.

ZF Mgcawu District Municipality

ZF Mgcawu District Municipality is another Northern Cape powerhouse. It is centred on Upington and stretches along the Orange River towards the Namibian border. Geographically, this district is one of the most unusual parts of South Africa: an intensely productive agricultural economy surrounded by some of the country's harshest desert landscapes. It comprises five local municipalities: Dawid Kruiper, Kai !Garib, Kgatelopele, !Kheis and Tsantsabane. Grapes, raisins, wine, livestock, tourism, logistics and increasingly renewable energy are the municipality's key economic drivers.

However, these economic drivers depend on that most basic municipal competency: water. ZF Mgcawu's record in water delivery has been mixed. Kai !Garib has required the direct intervention of the district municipality on several occasions during the past municipal term (Kai !Garib Municipality 2025). Meanwhile, Dawid Kruiper loses almost half of its water annually due to poor maintenance and sewage spills before the water even reaches a tap (GroundUp 2026b). Furthermore, Upington residents have faced water restrictions and reported extraordinary water bills from the municipality (Democratic Alliance Northern Cape 2026).

Nonetheless, the district is a relatively strong governance performer as ZF Mgcawu received an unqualified audit opinion with no findings in 2021/22 and 2022/23, before receiving an unqualified opinion with a matter of emphasis in 2023/24 (Auditor-General of South Africa 2024d).

There is also a potentially transformative opportunity emerging around energy. In June 2026, the national Department of Electricity and Energy launched South Africa's first District Energy Council in Upington, bringing together government, Eskom, municipalities, agriculture, business and other stakeholders (South African Government 2026a). The initiative is intended to improve coordination around electricity and energy investment and is being piloted in the ZF Mgcawu District Municipality before being extended elsewhere. This makes the municipality's story a very different political proposition from that

of municipalities such as Madibeng or Knysna. There is no obvious indication of municipal collapse, so the immediate challenge is whether the district's relatively competent administration can maintain stability while keeping pace with the economic and environmental pressures building around it.

The most likely outcome is therefore continued ANC control of the district, but local council politics are becoming more competitive. The PA is beginning to make inroads in Upington following a May 2026 by-election in Ward 15 of Dawid Kruiper Local Municipality. The party won 37% to the ANC's 32% and the DA's 29%, taking a ward previously held by the DA (Daily Maverick 2026d).

The ANC's candidates for Dawid Kruiper are David Kazi and Elise Mnyaka, while the DA has announced Igshaan Sulliman as its candidate. Although ward-winner Christi-Ann Ntlanganiso is currently the PA's most prominent public figure, she has not been designated as its mayoral candidate.

Matjhabeng Local Municipality

If Mangaung is the Free State's political capital, Matjhabeng is its industrial ghost story. Centred in Welkom and incorporating Virginia, Odendaalsrus, Hennenman, Allanridge and Ventersburg, the municipality was built around the Goldfields, one of the great mining regions of the twentieth century. Welkom was once synonymous with South African gold, planned mining towns and industrial prosperity. However, today, Matjhabeng is one of the clearest examples of what happens when a municipality inherits the infrastructure of a wealthy industrial economy gone dormant and fails to adapt.

Matjhabeng has more than 500 000 residents and a municipal budget of around R4.6 billion, but the scale of its challenges is enormous. Its finances remain deeply distressed: the Auditor-General recorded a qualified audit opinion for 2022/23 and 2021/22, while cumulative unauthorised expenditure stood at R2.47 billion, irregular expenditure at R1.95 billion and fruitless and wasteful expenditure at R239 million by January 2025 (Auditor-General of South Africa 2024b). The municipality also faces a grave debt problem with its broader debt to major utilities standing at roughly R14 billion, including R9 billion owed to the Vaal Central Water Board alone (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa 2025a).

Furthermore, the sewage infrastructure crisis has become so severe that the Free State High Court declared it in breach of its constitutional obligations to provide services in a sustainable manner, and to promote a safe and healthy environment (SAFLII 2024). A 2024 High Court judgment also noted that Matjhabeng was losing 56% of its procured water, that only three of thirteen wastewater treatment plants were operational and that 1,543km of sewer pipes were blocked. Consequently, sewage has flowed through streets, affected schools and businesses and contaminated the environment (South African Government 2026c). In 2026, the national Department of Water and Sanitation intervened directly, handing over 22 refurbished wastewater facilities.

In spite of this dire situation, the ANC remains in control politically, yet its dominance is weakening. In 2021, the ANC won 39 of the 71 council seats, taking 53.9% of the proportional vote (Electoral Commission 2021b). The DA won sixteen seats and the EFF nine.

The ANC's inability to settle on a single mayoral candidate in municipalities across South Africa has reached farcical proportions in Matjhabeng. It has presented a field of seven contenders: incumbent mayor Thanduxolo Khalipha, Dikeledi Rosemary Direko, Sipho David Manase, Daniel Themba Marothodi, Nyameko Erick Mtebeko, Mpolaile Lydia Radebe and Victoria van Rooyen.

The contest sees the return of one of the Free State's most recognisable political figures. The former Free State premier and ANC secretary-general Ace Magashule is contesting the mayoral race as the candidate for the African Congress for Transformation (ACT), seeking a return to frontline politics after his expulsion from the ANC (News24 2026). The DA has selected Piet Botha, a long-serving local councillor, as its mayoral candidate. The EFF has put up Thomas Macingwane.

Matjhabeng looks set to produce a hung council, meaning the strong governing hand required to address the municipality's problems will likely be elusive.

Sedibeng District Municipality

There are few parts of Gauteng where the consequences of South Africa's industrial decline are more visible than in the Sedibeng District Municipality. Centred on the Vaal, the district sits at the southern edge of the economic heartland, incorporating the former industrial powerhouses of Vereeniging and Vanderbijlpark, along with Sebokeng, Sharpeville, Midvaal and Lesedi (including Heidelberg). It has steel, manufacturing, energy, agriculture, major transport routes and a history deeply woven into South Africa's industrial and political story. If the Vaal region can be rebuilt, it can become an important second economic engine for Gauteng. However, if this region continues its current decline, the consequences will be felt far beyond its municipal boundaries.

Sedibeng's overall governance is in relatively good shape. The municipality received an unqualified audit opinion with findings in 2024/25, although the Auditor-General noted that its internal control environment had not improved and that repeat findings remained (Sedibeng District Municipality 2025). The problem is that the district contains two very different local government stories. On the one hand, there is Midvaal, where the DA has maintained a strong governing majority and a reputation for relatively competent administration. It is even regarded as one of the most financially sustainable municipalities in South Africa by Ratings Afrika (Midvaal Local Municipality 2026). On the other hand, there is Emfuleni, comprising Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark, Sebokeng and Sharpeville, which has become one of Gauteng's most troubled municipalities and is seen as the poster child for local government dysfunction.

The district itself is in better shape than Emfuleni, but Sedibeng's political importance hinges overwhelmingly on the battle for Emfuleni. In 2021, the ANC lost its outright majority there for the first time, winning only 38 of 90 seats (Electoral Commission 2021b). The DA won 24 seats, the EFF fourteen and the FF+ six. This presents the common tale of fragmented politics that is currently spreading across South African

local government. Since then, Emfuleni has become a case study in how political instability and municipal dysfunction reinforce one another.

Emfuleni's financial numbers are shocking on all levels (Auditor-General of South Africa 2025a). In 2023/24, the municipality adopted an unfunded budget and recorded a R987 million deficit, while Eskom debt sits between R2.2 billion and R8.227 billion, according to the Auditor-General and Eskom's own figures. The consequences are gravely visible on the ground. Water is intermittent, sewage runs in the streets, waste collection is non-existent in large parts of the municipality and ageing electrical infrastructure that is vandalised and unmaintained means outages last for weeks on end.

Amid this decay there is also an opportunity for a deep economic turnaround. The Vaal was built around heavy industry, particularly steel and manufacturing, and while those industries are flailing due to South Africa's de-industrialisation, Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging retain industrial land, transport connections, engineering skills and a substantial base of existing infrastructure. At the same time, the municipal dysfunction makes any new investment nearly impossible. This means that Sedibeng is critical to the national narrative on local government and the efforts to turn around the country's industrial slide.

The electoral outcome is thus critical but genuinely difficult to call. Sedibeng District itself could remain under ANC control, while Midvaal is likely to remain DA-controlled. However, Emfuleni is the real prize. The ANC remains the largest party, but its majority has disappeared and its internal divisions are now public. The DA has demonstrated that it can win in what was historically ANC territory, most dramatically taking Ward 28 in Evaton by just eight votes in May 2026, although the ANC is challenging that result. A DA breakthrough in Emfuleni is therefore possible, but another hung council is probably the safer prediction.

Current Emfuleni mayor Hassan Mako is now one of the ANC's four shortlisted mayoral candidates for November, along with Disebo Tlebere, speaker Sibongi Soxuza and Meshack Manqa. The DA will attempt to turn Emfuleni's financial and service-delivery collapse into its strongest

argument yet, using its governance success in Midvaal to promote its candidate, Kingsol Chabalala. The EFF has presented Jeannette Maloka as its candidate in this troubled local municipality.

OR Tambo District Municipality

The OR Tambo District Municipality is centred on Mthatha and comprises the local municipalities of King Sabata Dalindyebo, Nyandeni, Ingquza Hill, Port St Johns and Mhlontlo. This Eastern Cape district forms the heart of the former Transkei and remains one of the most politically significant rural regions in the country. It is named after one of the ANC's most revered leaders, contains Nelson Mandela's birthplace at Mvezo and remains overwhelmingly ANC territory.

It is also desperately poor and municipal governance is largely dysfunctional. The district has a population of more than 1.3 million and a moribund economy that has never come close to matching its political importance, in spite of tourism, agriculture and maritime opportunities. The Auditor-General's 2023/24 assessment found that none of the six municipalities in the district achieved a clean audit: two were unqualified with findings and four were qualified (Auditor-General of South Africa 2024c). Infrastructure grant management has also been a serious problem. National Treasury withheld R188.23 million in infrastructure grants from the district after underspending, while the municipality achieved only 67% of its reported service-delivery targets and met only half of its sanitation targets.

The service-delivery challenge is enormous in the predominantly rural municipality, with hundreds of villages scattered across difficult terrain. The most basic need of water supply depends on a combination of dams, treatment works, boreholes, springs and river abstractions, making the system expensive and difficult to maintain.

Mthatha adds an urban version of the same problem but at an urban level with water interruptions, electricity problems, roads, sanitation, waste and deteriorating infrastructure being a persistent challenge. The result is a municipality where residents can live within sight of major government institutions and pristine landscapes, while still struggling to access the most basic services.

Politically, in spite of this disorder, the OR Tambo District

Municipality remains one of the ANC's strongest fortresses (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2021b). The district council has 40 ANC councillors out of the 59 seats, compared with six for the EFF, five for the UDM, three for the ATM, two for the DA, one for the AIC and two independents. At the local level, the King Sabata Dalindyebo Local Municipality, which contains Mthatha, is similarly dominated by the ANC, which won 48 of the 73 seats in 2021. This makes the 2026 election less about whether the ANC will lose power and more about whether its dominance is becoming politically expensive.

The UDM also remains a particularly important local force. Unlike many opposition parties, it has genuine historical roots in the Eastern Cape and has retained a meaningful presence in KSD. The EFF is also attempting to turn widespread youth unemployment, poverty and service-delivery frustration into electoral gains. Furthermore, the emergence of new parties means the ANC can no longer assume that every dissatisfied voter will simply stay home.

However, there is significant economic opportunity in the region, especially for tourism development around Mvezo, Coffee Bay and Mthatha Mouth. The N2 Wild Coast Road and the R61 corridor, along with the Mthatha Airport, could bolster logistics opportunities, while the proposed Wild Coast Special Economic Zone is a potential catalytic project (COEGA 2026). If even some of this comes together, the district could begin shifting from a predominantly consumption-based rural economy towards one built around tourism, agriculture, logistics, agro-processing and small business. All of this requires first that infrastructure is maintained and services are regularly delivered.

Otherwise, OR Tambo's political importance, cultural heritage, natural beauty, agricultural and logistical potential and a population large enough to support a significant regional economy could remain dormant. The district's development story will remain trapped in plans, promises and infrastructure projects that take years to materialise, negatively affected by a lack of functional governance.

82 Mandla Mandela, Nelson Mandela's grandson, has emerged as the

ANC's preferred mayoral candidate for the King Sabata Dalindyebo (KSD) local municipality ahead of the November election. However, for now he is just another candidate, along with the current MMC for KSD Nomtandazo Ursula Thandi Mdledle and PR councillor Zoliswa Madyibi. Meanwhile, Ncedo Kolanisi has been unveiled as the EFF candidate for KSD, while the UDM will only announce their KSD candidate in September.

The ANC remains overwhelmingly favoured to win the elections. However, while a 2025 KSD by-election showed the party retaining its ward with 43.66% of the vote, voter turnout was only 19.15% (Electoral Commission of South Africa 2025). The opposition's challenge is therefore not simply to defeat the ANC but to convince voters that changing political leadership will actually produce better government.

The most likely outcome on 4 November 2026 is therefore continued ANC dominance, both at district level and in KSD. A dramatic political takeover is unlikely. On the other hand, an erosion of the ANC vote would be significant, particularly if the UDM, EFF and other smaller parties can consolidate local frustration.

By now, one thing should be clear: local government is where politics stops being abstract.

The national government can argue about economic policy, foreign affairs, constitutional reform and the state of the nation. The local government has to collect your rubbish, keep the lights on, maintain the roads and get the water to your tap, while keeping sewage off your neighbourhood's pavements. At the same time, it needs to process your building plans, manage municipal finances and keep your community safe. Furthermore, it must attempt to make cities and towns attractive places in which to live, work and invest.

That makes choosing who to vote for a little more complicated than choosing the party with the best slogan. The 2026 local government elections will produce thousands of campaign posters, promises and political arguments. Every party will tell you it can turn your municipality around. Some will have credible plans, while others will

make unrealistic promises. Some will have a decent record but a weak candidate, while others will have attractive ideas but no evidence that they can actually implement them. Your job as a voter is to separate the nonsense from the reality.

The best way to do this is by examining your municipality and not the party vying for your vote. The first question should not be: 'Which party do I like?', but rather, 'What does my municipality actually need?' That may sound obvious, but it is surprisingly easy to forget. A voter who is resident in a municipality struggling with water shortages cannot afford to judge parties primarily on their national positions or the campaign message espoused before election day. A community battling electricity theft and infrastructure collapse needs to know what candidates intend to do about those specific problems. A town with relatively good services but few jobs may need a completely different political conversation from a party positioning itself as merely a better alternative.

Make a list of the particular issues that most affect your life locally, then ask every party the same question: What exactly will you do about these things? That immediately makes political campaigning much easier to judge than falling for a silver-tongued politician.

Political parties are very good at slogans: 'Fix the city!', 'Jobs for all!', 'Clean government!', 'Service delivery now!' and 'Take back our municipality!' These may sound promising, but slogans are not plans. Voting for a slogan will not fix your water, electricity, roads, crime, housing, waste, public transport, billing, corruption or community development problems.

If a party says it will fix the water crisis, ask how. Where will the money come from? What infrastructure needs to be repaired? How long will it take? Who is responsible for delivering the solution? Most critically, does the municipality actually have the legal power to do what the party is promising?

That last question matters.

Municipalities do not control everything that happens in their communities. Electricity generation, policing, mining rights, health

services and many other functions involve the national or provincial government. A party promising to solve something outside municipal control is likely just latching onto a popular topic rather than offering a practical solution.

Any politician telling you they alone will rid your community of undocumented migrants, increase your social grant or end gangsterism and drug dealing on your streets is lying. These are completely or in part national competencies, and the local government can at best work with the national or provincial government to solve such issues, or at worst has absolutely no power to do anything about them.

A good local government promise should therefore answer three questions: What will you do? How will you pay for it? Is it in fact your job to do it? If there is no clear answer to these three questions, treat the promise with scepticism and caution. If your ward candidate refers you to their party's manifesto for detailed answers, by all means read the manifesto, but read between the lines thoroughly and look for specifics. Manifestos are worth reading; however, they should be read like a reasonable contract, not a love letter promising the earth without any plans on how to make that happen.

Does the party identify the municipality's biggest problems? Does it acknowledge financial constraints? Does it explain how its promises will be funded? Does it set measurable targets? Does it distinguish between what can be done immediately and what will take five years to do?

Municipal budgets are also finite: every rand spent on one item is a rand that cannot be spent elsewhere. Therefore, if a party promises lower rates, free services, new roads, more housing, more jobs, better water, better electricity and cleaner streets—all without explaining from the source of funding—the missing detail is the most important part of the manifesto.

The best manifesto may not be the one with the most promises and the most flowery language, but the one that tells you what the party will not do because it cannot afford to. A track record also beats promises any day of the week, and one question is arguably more important than

specifics on plans: what did you do when you were last in power? If a party has governed your municipality for five years, you have something extremely valuable: evidence.

Look at the condition of the municipality today. As far as governance is concerned, did the audit outcome improve or deteriorate? Did debt increase? Did the municipality collect the money owed to it? Were officials held accountable for wrongdoing? Moreover, as far as the basics are concerned, did water come out the tap the majority of the time? How many times did the community have municipal power cuts? Was rubbish collected on time? Were infrastructure projects completed? Did service delivery improve?

No administration gets everything right and the point here is not to demand perfection but to look for a direct indication of performance. In other words, is the municipality getting better or worse?

The voter needs to be firm but fair: a party cannot be blamed for every problem in a municipality it has never controlled. Equally, a governing party cannot endlessly blame its predecessors after years in office. At some point, the record becomes its own.

Furthermore, local elections have a special feature that national elections do not: a dedicated ward councillor. This matters enormously, as this is the politician you will actually deal with when a streetlight is broken, sewage is overflowing or your community needs municipal attention.

Therefore, the voter should look beyond the party and find out who is standing in their ward. Does the prospective councillor live in the community and have they been involved locally? Do they understand municipal government? Have they attended council meetings? Do they communicate with residents? Do they know how the municipality works? Perhaps most importantly, are they easily reachable when something goes wrong, and will they actually step up to help?

That councillor will not personally repair your water pipe, but a good councillor will know how to raise the issue, follow up on it and hold the administration accountable. Your ward councillor is not your

personal handyman or fix-it-all when something goes wrong; they are your representative in the council. Treat that choice accordingly.

If all the manifestos and speeches have left you more confused than informed, use a simple scoring system. Write down your five biggest local concerns and give each one a score from 1 to 5, according to how important it is to you. Then score each party from 1 to 5 on each issue.

Some of these issues could be:

- Track record: What have they actually delivered?
- Plan: Is their proposed solution credible?
- Money: Have they explained how projects will be funded?
- Competence: Do they appear capable of implementing it?
- Candidate: Do you trust the people they are putting forward?
- Accountability: Have they acknowledged their failures as well as their successes?

The point is not to turn democracy into a spreadsheet, but to prevent yourself from voting purely on emotion. Of course, emotion is not necessarily a bad thing: politics is personal and your experience of your community matters. The trick is to combine what you feel with what you know.

To sum up, here are five questions before you decide who you will vote for:

- What has this party actually done where it governs? Do not look at what it says, but what it does.
- Can it afford what it is promising? If there is no credible answer, be sceptical.
- Does it understand local government? A party can be brilliant at national politics and terrible at municipal government.
- Who is its candidate in my ward? The person on the poster may matter more to your daily life than the party leader.
- What happens if nobody wins a majority? Parties and candidates

need to be able to tell you who they are prepared to work with and on what conditions.

This last question is particularly important as a coalition government is likely in more and more municipalities around the country after November. Campaigning brilliantly does not mean you can sustain a government. Even if you win the election, you may still fail to govern. Then, when it comes to voting day, do the boring things really well.

Check that you are registered in the correct voting district and know where your voting station is. Take your identification document with you and allow enough time to vote. Understand your ballots before you enter the voting booth and make sure you have received them all. Remember that, depending on where you live, you may receive up to three ballots: one for the municipality, one for the ward and possibly one for the district council. The precise ballot structure depends on the type of municipality and whether independent candidates are contesting the election. Refer to Chapter 3 if you are unsure and read the explanations carefully.

Lastly, do not let someone else tell you which box to mark and remember: your vote is secret. Nobody at the voting station, outside it or in your community is entitled to know how you voted. Importantly, do not let WhatsApp, Facebook, X or Instagram decide your election. Local elections are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and fake news because rumours can spread through tightly connected communities at extraordinary speed. A photograph of an empty water reservoir can be real but five years old, or a video of a protest can be genuine but from another municipality. A message claiming that a particular party has already won can be completely fabricated, and a screenshot claiming that voting has been postponed may have been created by someone sitting in their bedroom.

Before believing and forwarding something, stop and ask: who published it? When was it published? Where did the information come from? Is there an original source? Has another credible source reported

it? Be particularly careful of dramatic claims containing phrases such as 'URGENT', 'BREAKING', 'SHARE THIS EVERYWHERE' and 'THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW'. The more outrageous the claim, the more important it is to check it.

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is the primary source of official election information, results, voting arrangements and electoral notices. Use it as the sole source of reliable information about the election process. Therefore, it is a good idea to make use of its website: www.elections.org.za.

There is no perfect party. There is no perfect councillor. There is certainly no perfect municipality. This is because local government is messy: budgets are constrained, infrastructure is expensive, councils are political, officials make mistakes and communities disagree. Sometimes, a municipality genuinely does not have the power or money to deliver the solutions demanded of it. However, this does not mean you as the voter are powerless.

The local election gives you a remarkably simple democratic instrument: reward what works, punish what does not and demand evidence before believing either. Do not fixate on which party makes you angriest or happiest. Instead, ask which party has the best chance of making your municipality work better.

Furthermore, never assume your vote does not count because your municipality is small. In local government, a few hundred votes can change a ward; a few thousand can change a council; and a handful of councillors can determine who becomes mayor. Your mark on the ballot paper may seem small, but the consequences are not.

South Africans still tend to think that meaningful politics happens in Pretoria, at the Union Buildings, and in the National Assembly at Parliament in Cape Town. This book has hopefully shown you that it does not. Rather, politics happens when the taps run dry, and when the power goes off. It happens when the pothole outside your house becomes big enough to qualify as a swimming pool. It happens when your municipal bill makes no sense, when your rubbish is not collected,

when sewage runs into a river, when a business cannot get a building plan approved, or when a young person cannot find a job in the town where they grew up.

That is local government. That is why the 2026 Local Government Elections matter.

Your job does not end at the ballot box—perhaps the most important point this book has tried to make.

Democracy does not end when you leave the voting station. If you vote and then cede responsibility for the next five years, you have outsourced your municipality to somebody else and have no right to complain when things go wrong. Remember that residents always have a role to play. Be proactive in your community committees and follow what your councillor is doing. Always report service failures or anything else going wrong in your corner of the municipality. You do not need to be on the clock seven days a week to chase accountability. You simply need to care about where you live.

A municipality ultimately belongs to its residents. Treat it that way.

The 2026 elections should not be seen as an isolated event. There is another reason these elections matter. The 2026 local government elections are the first major national political test after the 2024 general election and the formation of the GNU. These elections will show us what has happened to the political map since then.

The questions we should be interested in are the following. Where has the ANC recovered? Where has it continued to decline? Has the DA expanded beyond its traditional strongholds? Can the EFF turn its national support into local power? Can parties such as ActionSA and the PA establish themselves as durable political forces? What has happened to smaller parties, old and new? Perhaps most importantly: can a coalition government actually work?

The answers to these questions will matter more than you think, because South Africa will hold its next national and provincial elections in 2029. By then, the political parties will have another set of statistics to work from. The 2026 elections will show them where voters are moving,

which coalitions are viable, which promises resonate and which parties are losing their grip.

They may also reveal something even more important: whether South Africans are becoming more willing to punish poor governance, regardless of which party is responsible. If voters begin choosing municipalities on performance rather than historical loyalty, the implications for national politics could be enormous. The future is thus profoundly local.

South Africa has spent decades having very big arguments about very big things: our Constitution, our history, our national economy, race, transformation, foreign policy and political ideology. All of those things matter. However, underneath those arguments lies a much more subtle question: can the state actually make people's everyday lives better?

That question gets answered locally, in Johannesburg and Cape Town, Mthatha and Kimberley, Welkom and Upington, and even in a small town that most South Africans have never heard of. The municipality is where the promise of the government meets reality. That is what makes local government so important, and why the 2026 election is not simply about choosing councillors and mayors for the next five years, but about deciding what kind of municipalities South Africans are prepared to accept.

The future of South Africa will not be built only in the Union Buildings, in the National Assembly or in provincial legislatures. It will be built, street by street, ward by ward, town by town, and above all, community by community and resident by resident.

The future is local.

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT 2026

NICKOLAUS BAUER

Award-winning political journalist Nickolaus Bauer presents a clear, accessible guide to South Africa's 2026 local government elections. Explaining how local government elections differ from national and provincial contests and why they matter. Providing a practical overview of the political landscape shaping South Africa's major metros, as well as key district and local municipalities. Empowering voters with the information necessary to not only make an informed choice on voting day but to keep their elected officials accountable and become active citizens in their communities.



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