

AFRO BAROMETER

Working Paper No. 62

**DELIVERY OR RESPONSIVENESS?
A POPULAR SCORECARD OF LOCAL
GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE
IN SOUTH AFRICA**

by Michael Bratton and Mxolisi Sibanyoni

**A comparative series of national public
attitude surveys on democracy, markets
and civil society in Africa.**



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**Delivery or Responsiveness?
A Popular Scorecard of Local Government Performance
in South Africa**

Abstract

Just under half of South Africa's adult citizens think that the country's new system of local government is working well. Moreover, the level of popular approval varies sharply across provinces and may be declining over time. With reference to overall local government performance, rural residents are less likely to be satisfied than urban dwellers; and Blacks tend to be less satisfied than people of other races. Importantly, however, all South Africans seem to judge local government performance in personalized terms, that is, according to whether they think their own elected councilor is doing a good job. In addition, they base their judgments about local government performance (and about democracy too) in good part on whether their elected councilor actually *listens to their needs*.

Among Africans, democratization is often seen through the lens of socioeconomic **delivery**. Many people view the attainment of political freedom in instrumental terms, that is, as a means to the end of improving material standards of living. This outlook is especially prevalent in South Africa, where democratic reforms are seen as key to ending the exclusions – from economic opportunity and social services – of apartheid. Yet, as Steven Friedman comments, “democratic government is meant to offer more than (delivery). It is meant to listen to us and to speak for us, not simply ‘roll’ things out to us.”¹ Indeed, local government policy of the South Africa explicitly calls for consultative and participatory forms of municipal structures (like ward committees) and processes (like integrated development planning). Policy makers and commentators alike envisage a local government system in which citizens are involved in their own governance and development and in which elected representatives (like local government councilors) are held democratically **responsive**.²

This paper examines popular views about local government performance in South Africa. We explore whether public opinion reflects a mentality of material delivery or whether people also see local government performance as a function of their right to demand political representation. At the end of the paper, we comment on the implications of the popular “scorecard” on local government for the health of the larger regime of democracy.

To anticipate results, we find that **just under half** of South Africa’s adult citizens think that the country’s new system of **local government is working well**. Moreover, the level of popular approval varies sharply across provinces and may be declining over time. With reference to overall local government performance, rural residents are less likely to be satisfied than urban dwellers; and Blacks tend to be less satisfied than people of other races.

Importantly, however, South Africans also judge local government according to whether they think their own elected councilor is doing an acceptable job. They base these judgments about local government performance in good part on whether the councilor actually *listens to their needs*. And they use the same pattern of reasoning for judging *both* local government affairs *and* their satisfaction with the performance of democracy in general. Thus, local proceedings have national ramifications.

Approach and Method

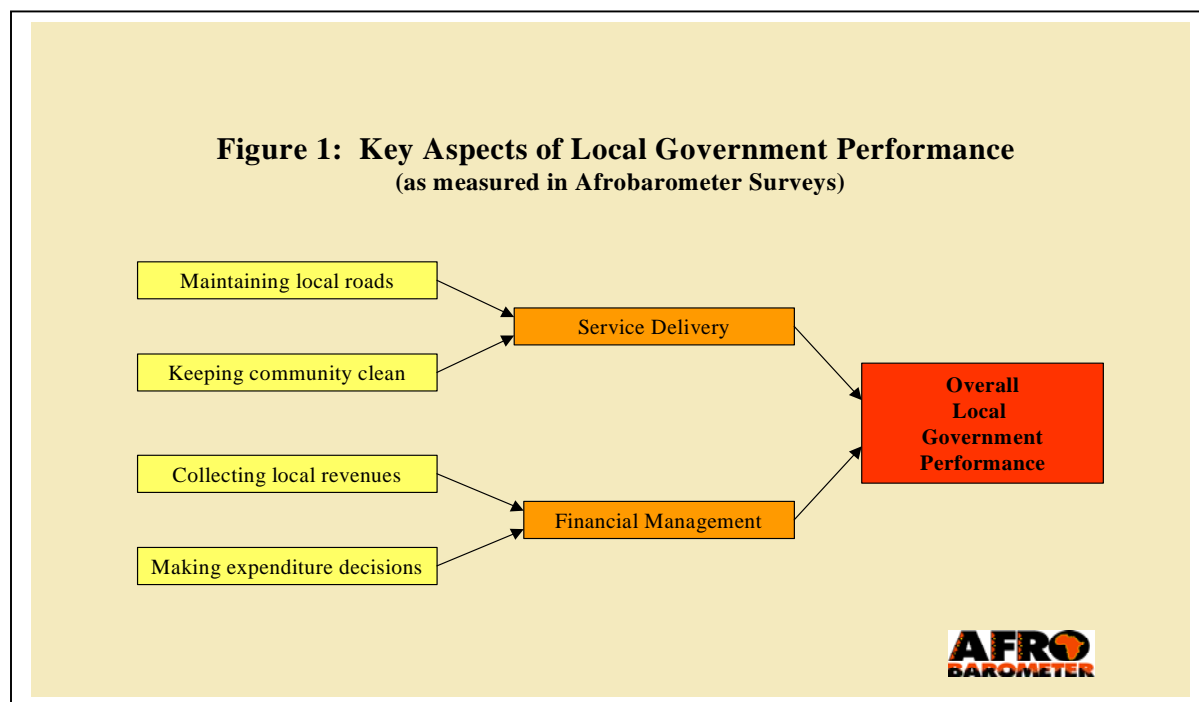
The data for this paper are drawn from the latest **Afrobarometer survey** conducted in South Africa in January and February 2006.³ Face to face interviews were conducted in the eleven official languages. A representative cross-section of 2400 citizens from all provinces was scientifically selected. In the first stage of sampling, 600 Census Enumerator Areas (EAs) were randomly selected from a frame of all EAs, stratified by province and race, with the probability of selection proportionate to population size. The realized sample was weighted by age, gender, race and province to ensure it matched official 2005 population estimates. In the second stage of sampling, four households were randomly selected within each EA. In the third and final stage, one South African citizen over the age of 18 was randomly from a list of all household members to be interviewed. The final sample supports estimates to the national population of all adults that is accurate to within a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points at a confidence level of 95 percent.

By allowing ordinary citizens to express their views, this paper provides **a public opinion perspective** on local government performance. As with all Afrobarometer publications, it is based on subjective popular perceptions, which – right or wrong – guide mass action in a democratic society, whether in voting booth, at community meetings, or in the streets. The paper provides a summary scorecard of what ordinary citizens are thinking about institutional and leadership performance at the grassroots some five years after the elections of December 2000 that inaugurated a “transformed” local government system.

To measure **overall performance**, we construct an indicator composed of selected local government functions (see Figure 1). As discussed in the next section, municipal councils are responsible for delivering a wide range of public services (which we summarize as “**service delivery**”) and for raising and spending revenues (which we summarize as “**financial management**”). Our measure of “overall local government performance” combines *both* of these key aspects.

Since this study could not ask about citizen satisfaction with the delivery of *every* local government service, we chose to focus on two of the most visible services: **maintaining local roads** (which is part of council’s responsibility for municipal public works) and **keeping the community clean** (which includes street cleansing and the collection and disposal of refuse). And to capture councils’ perceived capacity at financial management, we simply asked about local government capacity at **collecting local revenues** (such as taxes, rates and fees) and **making expenditure decisions** (which includes allocating budgetary resources).

The form of the questions was always the same: “How well or badly would you say that your local government is handling the following matters, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say?” Respondents could choose one of five possible responses: “very badly,” “badly,” “fairly well,” “very well,” or “don’t know/haven’t heard enough.” Most people (at least 97 percent) could offer a substantive response about service delivery. But many people had no opinion about financial management (up to 27 percent). To maximize sample size, therefore, the last response (“Don’t know/haven’t heard enough”) was recoded as the middle value on the five point scale.



Background: Legislative Framework and Administrative Functions

The legal framework for local government in South Africa is contained in **Chapter 7 of the Constitution (1996)**, which outlines the structure, composition, duties, and objects of the local sphere of government. Further supporting documents – such as the **Local Government Municipal Structures Act, 1998** and the **Local Government Municipal Systems Act, 2000** – elaborate on the structure and mechanisms of local government. The underlying principle is *co-operative governance*, which pulls together three autonomous spheres of government (i.e. National, Provincial and Local governments) into an

interdependent governing machine, with the local sphere as the final conduit for the delivery of public services because of its proximity to the people.

The legislation makes provision for three different categories of municipality. **Category A** (metropolitan) **municipalities** are referred to as “Metros” for short. Metros tend to be highly populated, cover business districts and industrial areas, and have considerable financial and administrative capacity. Category A municipalities contain only one municipal council. Then there are **Category C** (district) **municipalities**, which have municipal executive and legislative authority in areas that include more than one municipality. Within each Category C municipality, there will be a number of smaller **Category B** (local) **municipalities**. Category B municipalities share municipal and executive authority in their area with the Category C municipality within which they fall. A Category B municipality must have a viable centre of economic activity. If it does not, and is not able to fulfill the functions of a municipality, then it is called a District Management Area (DMA), and the District municipality performs all the municipal functions.

The **White Paper on Local Government (1998)** is the national policy framework that defines the transformation of local government in South Africa. In recognition of the new role of local government in serving local communities (i.e. compared to the pre-1994 apartheid era), the White Paper came up with the concept of *developmental local government*, defined as “local government committed to working with citizens and groups within the community to find sustainable ways to meet their social, economic and material needs and improve the quality of their lives.”

The White Paper also discusses institutional structures of the municipality. These include the various categories of municipality (as discussed above) as well as the role of traditional leadership. After extensive consultation, the institution of traditional leadership was further reviewed and entrenched in the **Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Amendment Act no. 41 of 2003**. Accordingly, a traditional council recognized within a defined area of jurisdiction will thus work in partnership with a local council. Some of the main functions of traditional council include, supporting municipalities in the identification of community needs as well as fostering service delivery partnerships with the local municipality.

The inclusion of local communities in the work of local government is imperative to the overall vision of developmental local government. As expressed in Chapter 7 (Section 152) of the constitution, one of the objectives of local government is to “encourage the involvement of communities and community organizations in the matters of local government.” The structure provided for this broad participation is the Ward Committee (WC) system. Chapter 2 (Section 19) of the Municipal Structures Act outlines the framework for the establishment of ward committees, delineating their structure, powers and functions. Key roles of WCs include monitoring council performance and participating in integrated development planning.

Integrated development planning is a process through which municipalities prepare a strategic development plan for a five-year period. An Integrated Development Plan (IDP) is a product of this process. The IDP informs all planning, budgeting, management and decision making in a municipality. The Municipal Systems Act of 2000 requires that all municipalities go through a participatory planning process to produce IDPs. Involvement in the production of IDPs is the chief mechanism of allowing citizens to some degree of involvement and knowledge of municipal finance.

The constitution makes provision for the sharing of various **function and roles** amongst different spheres of government. As regards local government, Section 153 of the Constitution stipulates that a municipality must ‘structure and manage its administration, budget and planning processes to give priority to the basic needs of the community’. Giving further clarity to this is Schedule 4 part B of the Constitution which then catalogues the various functions of local government, even though some of these

functions can be administered concurrently with Provincial government, depending on local competencies. Local government can also perform other functions assigned to it by national and provincial governments. Although the rationale for shared functions is generally a good one as it is concerned with maximising the delivery of services, there is sometimes an ambiguity about who is finally responsible for some services, for example in the delivery of health care. But other functions, like road maintenance and keeping the community clean, which are the services studied here, fall within the jurisdiction of local municipalities.

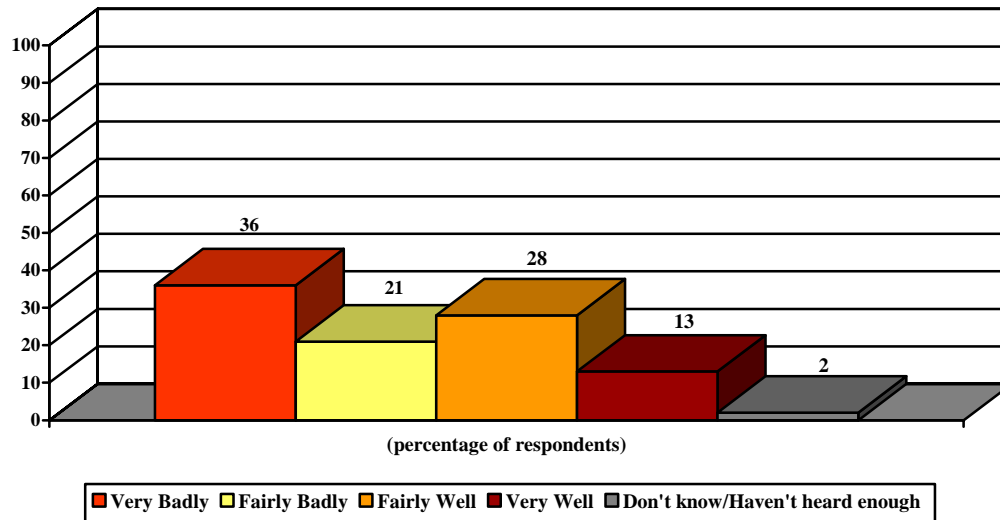
We recognize that, for many services, there is currently much confusion on which elements of service infrastructure – including health clinics, water reticulation systems, and roads – are provincial or local. In fact, the South African public may be unaware of such fine distinctions. Even at the local level, it is not even always clear whether given responsibilities for service delivery rest with local (category B) or district (category C) municipalities. For this reason, we chose to focus on the *maintenance* (not construction) of *local* (not national) roads since these are most frequently a local government responsibility. We concede, however, that the public might sometimes think that the local council is responsible for a task that lies within the purview of another tier of government. Indeed, the interdependent nature of a three-tier government almost guarantees that local government will bear the brunt of popular assessments of government performance. And, as stated earlier, perceptions are powerful: if people *think* that the local government is responsible, then they are likely to form their performance evaluations accordingly.

A National Scorecard

This section of the paper reports the frequency with which South Africans approve or disapprove of key aspects local government performance, as well as the intensity of these assessments. We begin with the delivery of local services as viewed through the examples of road maintenance and refuse collection. We then consider financial management as illustrated by local revenue collection and the allocation of budgets. All statistics are national averages. Together they amount to a “scorecard” of how “well” or “badly” local governments are seen to be doing.

As Figure 2 shows for 2006, fewer than half of South Africans were satisfied with local government performance at **maintaining roads**. By combining those who think that their council is doing “fairly well” (28 percent) or “very well” (13 percent) at this task, only 41 percent report approval overall. A total of 57 percent express disapproval – and 36 percent say “*very badly*.” Compared with neighbouring countries, South Africa enjoys a well-developed and maintained network of roads that service the industrial parts of its economy. But rural areas have been historically underserved with paved roads and regular road maintenance. An Expanded Public Works Programme aims to address deficits in road construction and other basic amenities, but citizens appear to think that the pace of implementation is not meeting expectations.

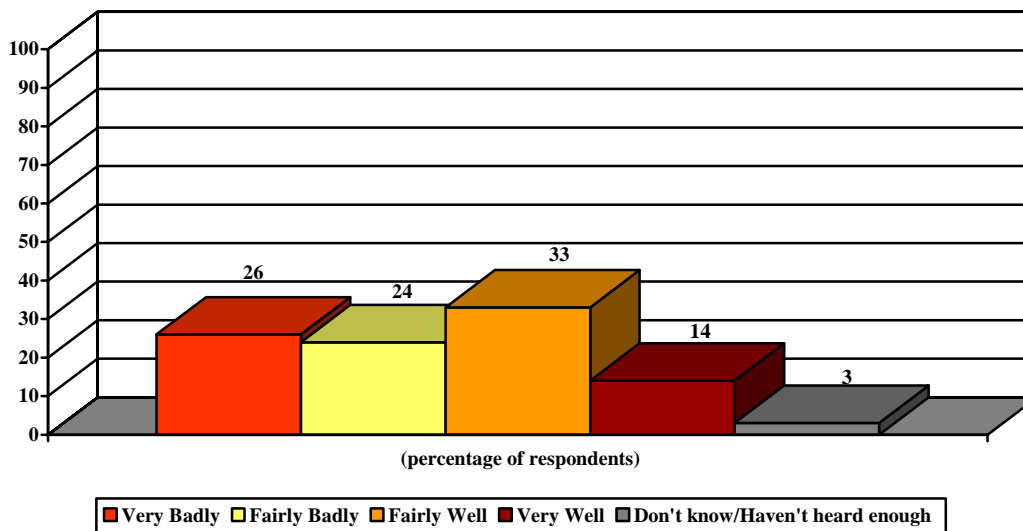
**Figure 2: Popular Assessments of Service Delivery:
Maintaining Roads (2006)**



There's only a marginal difference between reported satisfaction and dissatisfaction with local

People are somewhat more satisfied with local government efforts at **keeping the community clean**. Figure 3 reports a higher overall level of public approval (47 percent) of sanitation services, though, again, this is still a minority opinion a slightly larger proportion *disapproves* (50 percent). Especially in those urban townships that are densely populated, people do not have adequate facilities to dispose of household refuse, which all too easily overflows available dumps and encroaches on public spaces. Some places still even suffer from archaic systems of “bucket” sanitation.⁴ Moreover, refuse collection is also one of the first functions to be disrupted when municipal workers go on strike.

**Figure 3: Popular Assessments of Service Delivery:
Keeping the community clean (2006)**



When it comes to **collecting local revenues**, more South Africans think that local governments are doing “well” (47 percent) than doing badly (26 percent) (see Figure 4). This seemingly positive picture may reflect recent improvements in revenue collection. Over the past few years, most municipal councils – especially Metros – have introduced efficient and user- friendly systems to keep records, trace complaints, and correct errors, for example on property rates and electricity bills. But it is important to note that more than one quarter of respondents (27 percent) are not sure how local governments are performing at revenue collection. They are undecided, don’t know, or have not heard enough to hold opinions about local government financing. Public knowledge in this critical area is probably most limited in the “low capacity municipalities” that do not have a functioning process for integrated development planning, that rely too heavily on external consultants for budget advice, or that are exempted until 2008 from complying with provisions of the Municipal Finance Management Act of 2003.⁵

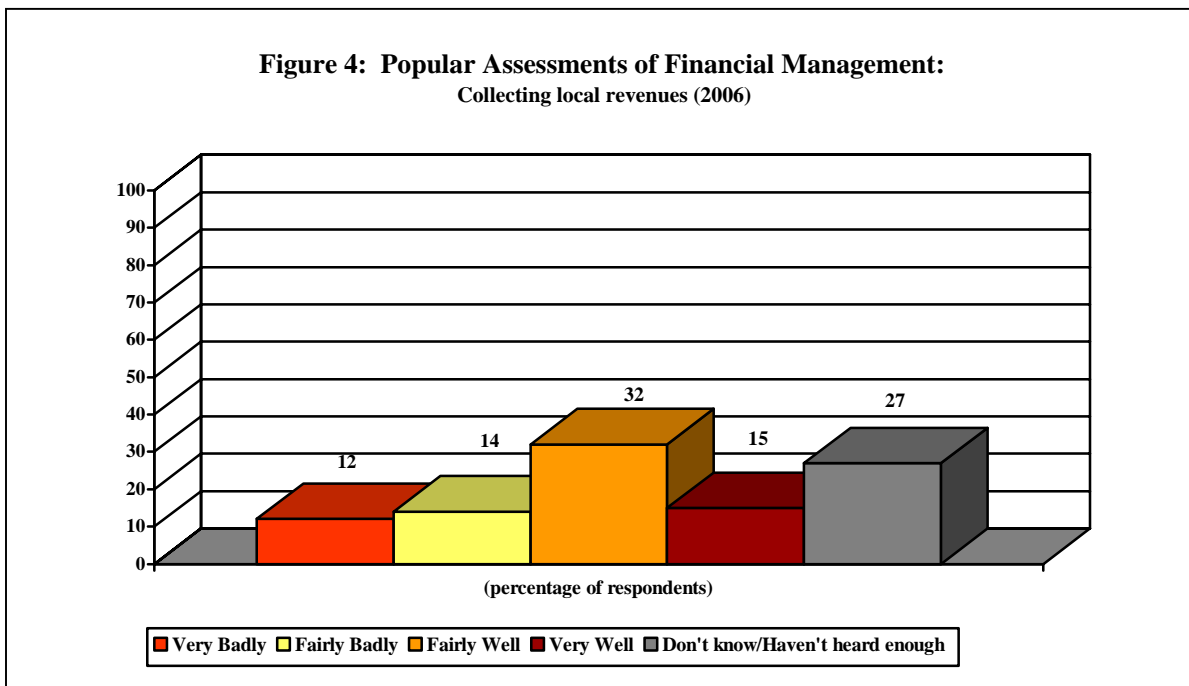
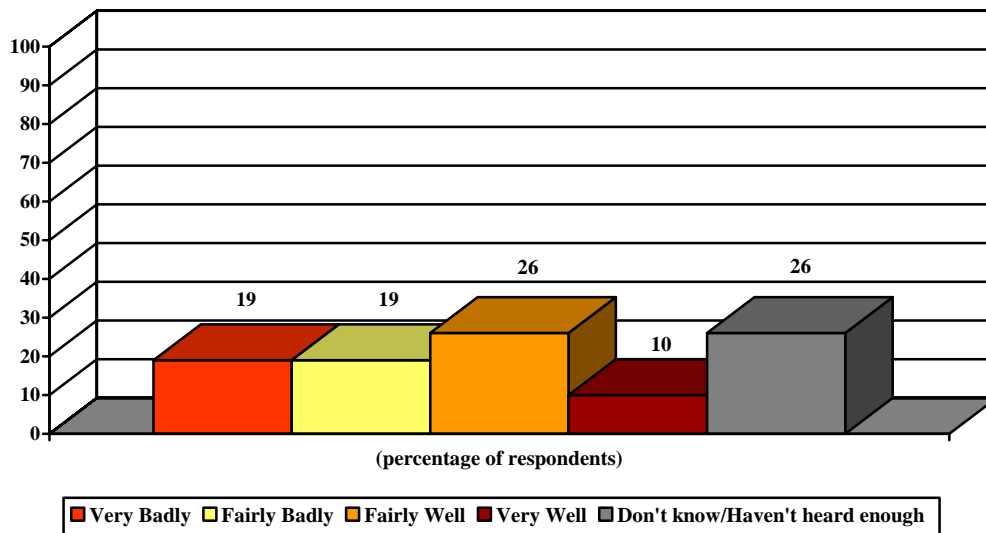


Figure 5 indicates considerable popular uncertainty about how local government **makes expenditure decisions**. We find an almost even split between those who say local government is doing “badly” at this task (38 percent) and those who say it is doing “well” (36 percent). Again, more than one quarter (26 percent) “don’t know.” Citizens come to hear about their local municipalities’ financial decisions through their representation in ward committee structures, at *imbizos* (community meetings called to make announcements), or via local municipal bulletins. Municipalities are legally bound to discuss their integrated development plans and annual budgets with ward committee representatives. As the WC system is only just beginning to function, however, most citizens have yet to gain knowledge about the process of financial decision-making in their municipalities. Even where ward committees function well, the municipal budget is rarely tabled for discussion with WC members, who could then report to the interest groups they represent.

Because people are not well informed about financial management, they tend to base their judgments about local government performance on councils’ effectiveness at delivering services. Indeed, popular opinion about how well the council is providing basic sanitation services (“keeping the community clean”) turns out to be the central element in an index of overall local government performance.⁶

**Figure 5: Popular Assessments of Financial Management:
Making expenditure decisions (2006)**



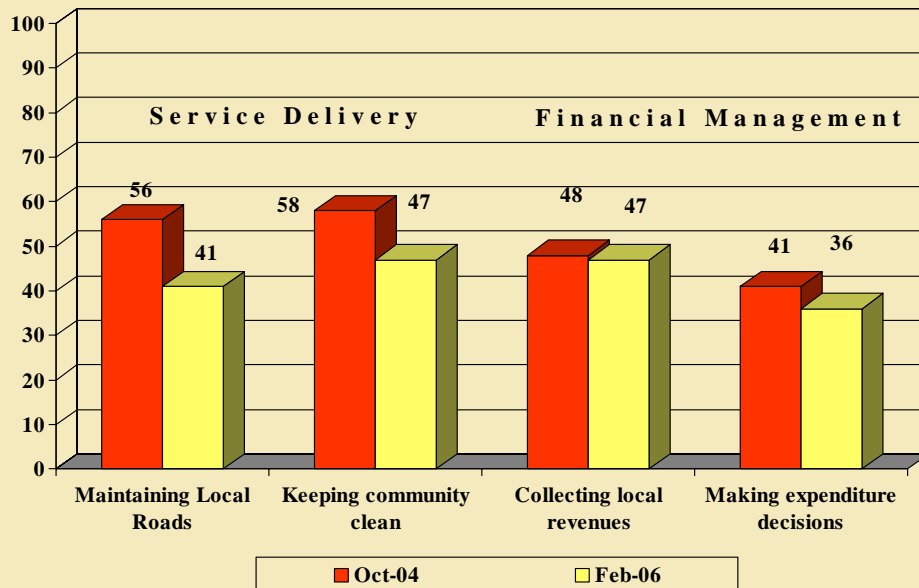
Trends Over Time

How stable are these popular assessments? Do they **rise or fall** as South Africans gain familiarity with their new system of local government? As a means of tracking trends in public opinion, the Afrobarometer repeats identical questions over several surveys. So far, we have made just two observations of mass attitudes to local government performance in South Africa: in October 2004 and February 2006. While reliable trend analysis requires at least three observations and a wide time spread, we nevertheless find it useful to report preliminary results, even if these are only provisional.

Figure 6 suggests that South Africans are more likely to be losing than gaining confidence in local government performance. The proportions of the population who think that local government is handling its affairs “well” (i.e. “fairly well” or “very well”) are in decline for *all* the functions we measured. **The largest declines are registered for service delivery.** Whereas a majority (56 percent) was satisfied with road maintenance in 2004, only a minority (41 percent) felt the same way in 2006, a 15-point drop. A similar pattern applies to the collection of refuse (“keeping the community clean”), which registered an 11-point drop over the same seventeen-month period.

A downward trend is also evident in public assessments of fiscal performance. Fewer people in 2006 than 2004 think that local governments are doing a good job at raising local revenues and making sound budget decisions. These small declines (between 1 and 5 points) could be due to sampling error across surveys. Nevertheless, by 2006, only about one third of South Africans (36 percent) thought that local governments were handling budget allocation decisions in a satisfactory manner.

**Figure 6: Local Government Performance,
Trends in Popular Assessments, 2004 and 2006**
(percent saying "fairly well or "very well")



"How well or badly would you say that your local government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?"

Why has public opinion taken a negative turn by 2006? We offer **four possible interpretations** that focus on events that occurred between the two surveys in late 2004 and early 2006. First, local government elections were postponed by almost a year from early 2005 to March 2006. This delay signaled a measure of disorganization in local government affairs and temporarily deprived South Africans of their newly won right to elect local leaders. Second, political protests at the perceived slow pace of service delivery broke out in the low-income townships of several metropolitan municipalities, including Gauteng, Durban and Cape Town. These protests received nationwide publicity and were taken as a barometer of mass discontent with the performance of incumbent political leaders. Third, in late 2005 and early 2006, the mass media gave wide coverage to prominent cases of corruption in housing and other local government programs, for example in Matjhabeng and Phomolong, Free State.⁷ And, finally, service delivery – or shortfalls thereof – became the central issue in the campaign for the March 2006 local government elections.⁸

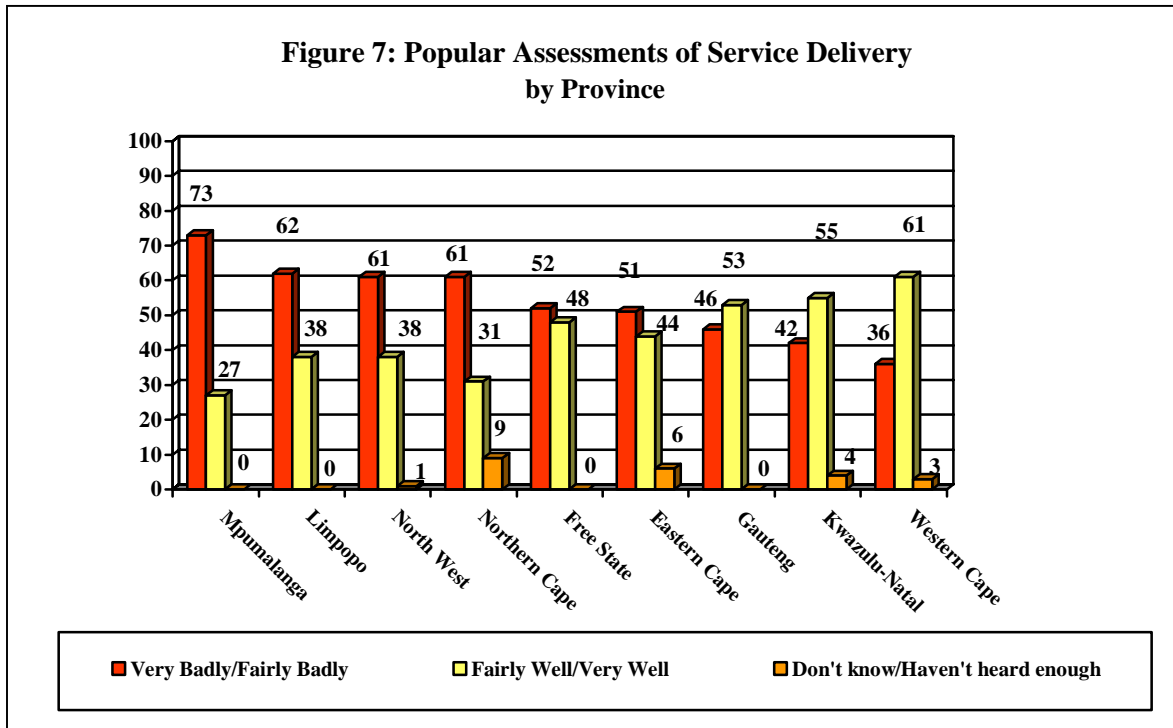
Variations Across Provinces

In South Africa, public opinion varies across space as well as time. People in various provinces offer very different levels of approval or disapproval for local government performance. Their reactions in February 2006 are displayed in Figures 7 (for service delivery) and 8 (for financial management).

Reactions to **service delivery** run the gamut from 73 percent disapproval in Mpumalanga to 61 percent approval in the Western Cape. The four provinces without Metro councils (Mpumalanga, Limpopo, North West, and Northern Cape) reported the highest level of dissatisfaction. In all these places, substantially more residents feel that councils are performing "badly" than are performing "well." In these areas, people find difficulty in accessing services by virtue of their distance from council headquarters and the weak administrative capacity of district councils themselves. By contrast, the residents of provinces with Metro councils (Gauteng, Kwazulu-Natal and the Western Cape) report

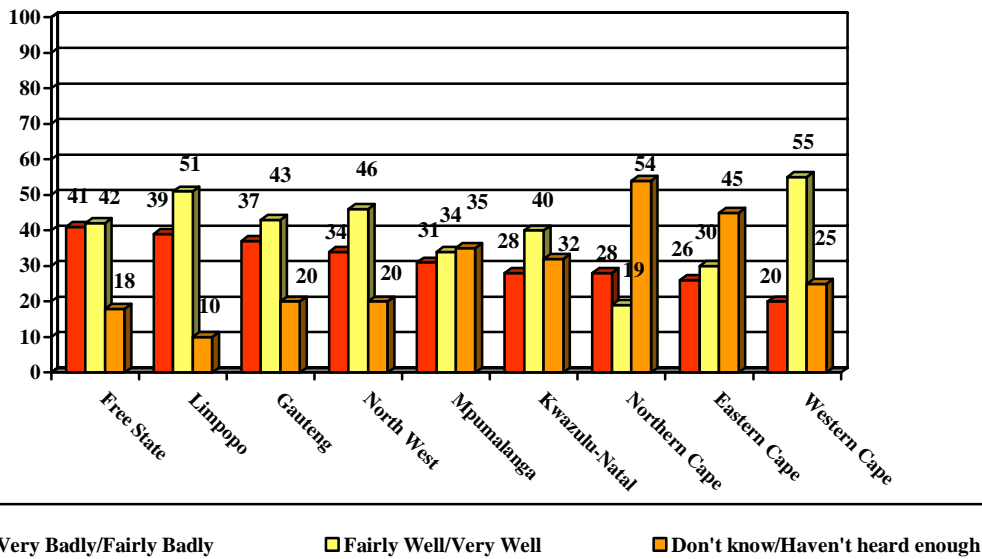
satisfaction with the delivery of public services. Indeed, more people here see councils performing “well” than performing “badly.”

As for the other two remaining provinces (Eastern Cape and Free State), public approval and disapproval are more evenly balanced. In the Free State, which has no Metro, only four percentage points separate those who are satisfied with the delivery of services from those who are not. The gap is wider in the Eastern Cape (7 percentage points), which may be attributed to the large rural or semi-rural population that lives inland, far away from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Area (formerly Port Elizabeth).



With reference to local government’s handling of **financial management** tasks, Western Cape again registers the highest approval (55 percent). Notably, Western Cape and Limpopo are the only provinces in which a majority of citizens think that revenue collection and budget allocations are “well” handled. Citizens express greatest concern about financial management in the Free State, where 41 percent see these tasks as “badly” handled. It is worth noting that a majority of the residents of the Northern Cape report not knowing enough about local government finances to offer an opinion. Three other provinces (Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga, Kwazulu-Natal, Northern Cape) also recorded a fairly high proportion of people (one third or more) who professed to need more information.

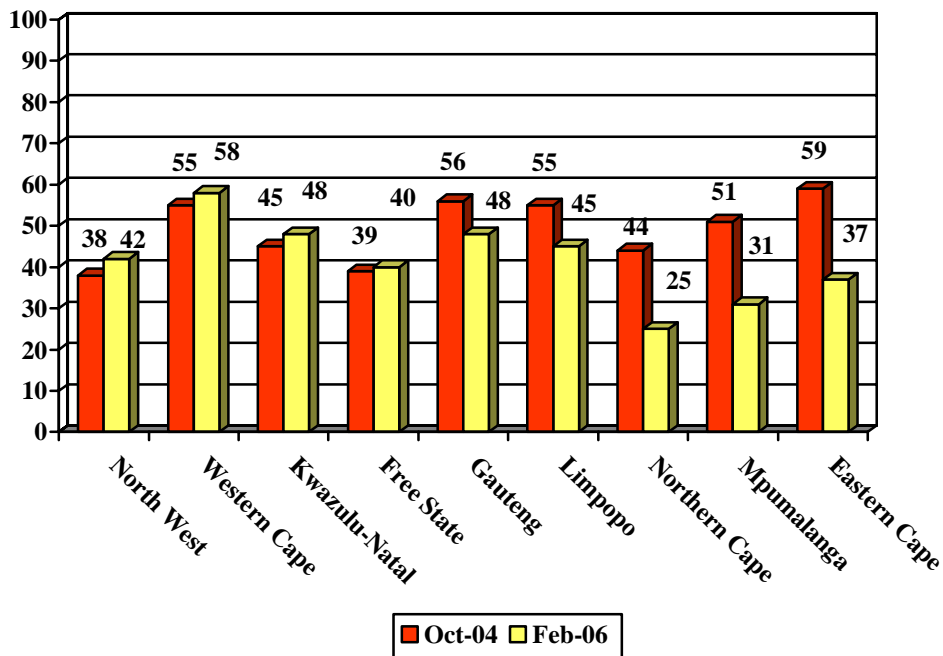
**Figure 8: Popular Assessments of Financial Management,¹
by Province**



The recent decline in popular assessments of local government performance was concentrated in some provinces, but not in others. As Figure 9 shows, four provinces – North West, Western Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, and Free State – actually registered increases in positive ratings between 2004 and 2006. Note, however, that these upward shifts in opinion were small and could possibly be due to sampling error across surveys. A much clearer picture emerges in the **five provinces where popular approval declined**. In each case, the downward shift is substantial, ranging from 8 percentage points in Gauteng to 22 points in the Eastern Cape. And, as noted earlier, these declines were driven by emerging dissatisfaction with service delivery, more so than with financial management.

The diverging trajectories of public opinion in different provinces can be interpreted in both economic and political terms. Economically, some of the largest drop-offs in popular satisfaction occurred in some of the poorest provinces, like Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape. Especially in the extensive outlying rural areas of these provinces, residents apparently began to tire of waiting for the delivery of expected material benefits. Politically, dissent about local government performance was disproportionately concentrated in areas – such as Limpopo and the Eastern Cape – where the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has long been the dominant political party. It seems that the limits of partisan loyalty have been reached in these areas: people now feel free to raise issues of service delivery and to question the ANC's performance on this score. By contrast, in areas like the Western Cape, where the ANC has consistently been held accountable by an active opposition at the local government level, public satisfaction has remained steadily high (and rising) over recent years.

Figure 9: Local Government Performance, Trends in Popular Assessments, 2004 and 2006
(percent saying "fairly well or "very well")



Explaining Popular Assessments

By what route do South Africans arrive at judgments about local government performance? Why do some people think that councils are doing well, whereas others think councils are doing badly? Which do people want more: socioeconomic delivery or political representation?

One sort of explanation would focus on **demographic factors**. It would see people's assessments of local government performance as deriving directly from their social background. In post-apartheid South Africa, and despite progress at addressing social inequalities since 1994, an individual's life style and life chances still depend on the inherited structure of society. As such, one would expect that race, place of residence, and access to information would shape how people think about local government performance. By this logic, those White urbanites who are well informed by the mass media are likely to express more positive evaluations than those marginalized Blacks who happen to live in rural areas.

Rather than social structure, an alternate perspective emphasizes **individual attitudes**. Regardless of background, all South Africans are rational beings who constantly reflect on the world around them and form opinions on political and economic subjects. On the basis of their distinctive personal experiences, for example, they decide for themselves whether their council is a trustworthy institution, whether their elected councilor is doing a good job, and whether he or she is responsive to popular needs. As such, we would expect that people who feel that their councils are trustworthy and that their councilors are hard-working and responsive, would be inclined to hold positive overall assessments of local government performance.

In the real world, it seems likely that *both* demography *and* psychology would have parts to play in explaining popular evaluations of local government performance. This is the essence of the comprehensive model that we present below. In this instance, the object of explanation is the popular

perceptions of **overall local government performance**. To repeat, overall performance is a summary measure of satisfaction with four local government functions: two aspects of service delivery plus two aspects of financial management. For purposes of operational research, we created an index of overall performance by averaging each person's evaluations across all four of these local government functions. As it happens, this index is a valid and reliable representation of how South Africans feel *in general* about local government performance in 2006.⁹

To *explain* overall local government performance, we try to predict it by simultaneously applying an array of demographic and attitudinal indicators. This statistical technique is known as **multiple regression**.¹⁰ It allows the effects of each predictor to be controlled for the effects of all others; thus we can weigh the relative contribution of each variable in a comprehensive model.

The results are presented in Table 1. It shows, as expected, that both social and attitudinal factors help to shape popular assessments of local government performance. Together, these six predictors explain about 16 percent of the variance in popular assessments. Since this is not a large amount, there are obviously other factors – not specified in the model – that are also at work. But, as a start, we can begin to understand the reasons underlying South Africans' assessments of local government by means of these two sets of explanatory factors.

The **most influential factor is whether people think their councilor is doing a good job**. If they are pleased in this respect, people are likely to regard the *whole system* of local government as performing well. In other words, South Africans, like people elsewhere in Africa and the world, tend to *personalize* their evaluations of institutions. Especially in low information environments – say where local government institutions are new or have not established widely known reputations – people take a convenient shortcut: they judge institutional performance in terms of the performance of leaders. This may be an especially rational response in situations where leaders act as political patrons who control institutional resources, which they distribute at their own discretion.

Alternatively, in the context of South Africa, where only 14 percent of citizens know the name of their councilor, people may project a negative assessment of council performance from the perceived anonymity or absence of the councilor. And, in the rural hinterlands of district (Category C) municipalities where citizens are not directly represented by a ward councilor, they may be protesting the remoteness and facelessness of councilors who were elected on a party list in a proportional representation election.

The **second most important consideration is residential location**. As indicated by the negative sign on the regression coefficient (B), South Africans who live in rural areas are significantly *less* likely to approve of overall local government performance. This interesting finding cuts against the grain of the literature on public opinion in African countries, which usually finds that urban populations are generally more critical of government performance. In South Africa, however, where mass populations were consigned to underserved rural areas under apartheid, rural local governments often remain deprived and underdeveloped. Not only do they have low quality roads and lack refuse collection services but they also suffer from limited access to health, education, water, and electricity services. Precisely because rural residents are less well served than their urban counterparts, they are consistently more critical of local government performance.

Other factors also shape popular assessments. Black South Africans, who bore the brunt of apartheid, have systematically more downbeat assessments of local government performance than citizens of other races. This may partly reflect a tense history of confrontation between local residents and township authorities during the apartheid years and partly the current situation where residential areas populated predominantly by Africans continue to receive fewer and inferior services. New opportunities for

participation in local government also offer formal channels through which Black citizens can be critical of government performance. According to a baseline survey conducted by the Department of Provincial and Local Government in 2004-5, Blacks account for a disproportionately high quota of participation in ward committees. By the time of the 2006 local government elections, citizens in rural areas and urban townships were familiar with local government work and could collectively remind councilors of promises made in previous years and their impatience with waiting.

The distinctiveness of Black disaffection should not be overlooked. When asked to evaluate the performance of other political institutions – the presidency, the national parliament, the provincial premierships -- Blacks are consistently more favorable than Coloureds, Asians and Whites. It is only in relation to local government that they see institutional performance in a more negative light than do other racial groups.

Finally, criticisms of local government performance can be offset to a degree if citizens are well informed, for example by being regular consumers of the mass media (especially newspapers). And, to evaluate local government highly, citizens must feel that their local council is a trustworthy institution, especially when it comes to financial management.

Table 1: Popular Assessments of Overall Local Government Performance, Explanatory Model

	B (Regression Coefficient)	S.E. (Standard Error)	Beta (Standardized Coefficient)	Sig. (Statistical Significance)	Explanatory Rank (from Beta)
Constant	2.337	.121		.000	
Demographic Factors					
Rural residence	-.336	.047	-.150	.000	2
Media access	.116	.021	.109	.000	4
Black	-.265	.054	-.099	.000	5
Individual Attitudes					
Job performance of councilor	.227	.027	.176	.000	1
Trust council	.144	.024	.128	.000	3
Councilor listens	.116	.025	.093	.000	6

Adjusted R square = .158, Standard error of the estimate = 1.017

To conclude this analysis, we wish to draw special attention to the responsiveness of local government councilors. This sixth-ranked predictor is listed at the bottom of Table 1. The positive sign on the regression coefficient indicates that **the more that councilors listen to their constituents**, the higher are popular assessments of local government performance. We take this to mean that ordinary people wish to be consulted about their needs, to be involved in problem solving for their communities, and to be able to remove leaders who turn a deaf ear. The fact that popular approval of local government performance is in sharp decline in some parts of South Africa is evidence that, so far, people think that councilors are not listening closely enough to citizen needs. And the fact that all attitudes point toward a popular quest for responsive government suggests that South Africans value responsive government just as much as material delivery.

Three Puzzles

The above list of sources of approval for local government performance in South Africa is interesting also for what it does *not* include. Missing from the above analysis are considerations of political partisanship and perceptions of corruption. Yet, the most complete study to date of public opinion in Africa concludes that satisfaction with democratic governance at the national level is boosted by partisan allegiance to the

ruling party, but undercut by perceptions that governing elites are corrupt.¹¹ Others also commonly assume that poverty is a determinative demographic factor for service access.¹²

Why do these factors fail to appear in our model as significant influences on popular assessments of local government performance in South Africa? The absence of partisanship, corruption and poverty constitute unexplained puzzles requiring further research.

Take **political partisanship** first. At the national level, South Africans are significantly more likely to feel positive about health service delivery if they “feel close” to the ruling African National Congress. Identification with the ruling party apparently imparts a rosy glow to perceptions of a service that remains, in practice, a responsibility of national and provincial governments.¹³ Yet partisan loyalties play *no role* whatever in popular assessments of the *local* government services we have examined, namely road maintenance and refuse collection. Why this difference?

One answer would draw attention to electoral systems. Whereas national elections are based on a system of pure proportional representation (PR) with a single a party list, local government elections are based on a mixed system in which PR is supplemented by a plurality formula in which councilors are elected from single-member wards. Thus, people are able to vote for individual councilors as well as a party’s list. Under these circumstances, voters are likely to reason pragmatically: they will support the candidates who have proven they can deliver services and manage budgets. At the local level, a candidate’s track record seems to matter more than his or her party affiliation.

Turning to **corruption**, we expected to find, as is common in other African countries, that official graft undermines trust in public institutions. In South Africa, many people (45 percent) think that “most” or “all” elected councilors and appointed council administrators are corrupt. And, consistent with expectations, these perceptions significantly undermine popular trust in councils. *But perceptions of corruption do not significantly undermine popular assessments of local government performance.* We interpret this to mean, that as long as service are delivered and expenditures are allocated, South African will tolerate a measure of corruption. Moreover, South Africans who trust local councils (42 percent do so “somewhat” or “a lot”) must base this sentiment on considerations *other than corruption*. If these interpretations are correct, then there are reasons for concern about the development of an effective and transparent system of local government finance in South Africa.

Finally, what about **poverty**? Poor people in other countries are consistently less likely than the “well-to-do” to be satisfied with government performance. This is true of local government in South Africa too. An alternative model, with poverty in place of race, shows that poor people tend to think that local governments are performing badly. But the model with poverty as a predictor does not explain as much variance as the model with race as a predictor.¹⁴ Because Blacks in South Africa are more likely to be poor than any other racial group, a model that includes an indicator for race better captures the dynamics of race-based poverty and its (negative) influence on public opinion about local government. For that reason, we chose to report the latter model here.

Implications for Democracy

South Africans experience political authority directly and intimately through the functions of local government. They acknowledge the power of the state every time they pay annual property rates or monthly household service bills. They feel the performance of government through the cleanliness (or otherwise) of the public spaces in their neighborhoods and the bumpiness (or otherwise) of the local roads around their homes. These existential moments serve as guides to judgments about, not only local governments, but more remote entities like provincial and central governments too.

By way of conclusion, we contend that a common mental template – one that emphasizes political responsiveness as much as material delivery – even extends to the regime of democracy writ large. Table 2 uses exactly the same model as Table 1; only now, we use it to predict satisfaction with democracy. The interviewer asks each respondent, “overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa?” In early 2006, twice as many South Africans were satisfied (63 percent) as not satisfied (30 percent). Interestingly, citizens reach this generally positive conclusion with reference to the same set of considerations that they used for appraising local government performance. Five of the six predictors remain statistically significant and even rural residence has the correct sign even though it is not significant. And the model is actually more efficient for satisfaction with democracy than local government performance, now predicting 17 percent of the variance.

Finally, the democracy model moves considerations of local government to the fore. The *most* important determinant of satisfaction with democracy becomes whether citizens trust their local government council (it formerly ranked third). And the requirement that councilors listen to their constituents moves up one explanatory rank (from sixth to fifth) between the local government model and the democracy model. In both cases, therefore, the characteristics of local government are more important to the evaluation of democratic performance than that of local government itself.

In short, citizens see a trustworthy municipality as a tangible symbol that South Africa’s new democracy is operating well. And citizens value councilors who listen because they personify the calibre of elected representatives that can make democracy work. For people who do not fully appreciate the abstract concept of democracy or who do not seek roles in national politics, a local council with a responsive councilor can serve as a viable arena in which to practice the arts of participatory citizenship. But the council must appear to be trustworthy, a view to which only a minority of South Africans subscribe (42 percent). In addition, councilors must listen to their constituents, which even fewer people believe (20 percent). So, at the same time as revealing what kind of democracy they want, South Africans remind us how far institutions and leaders have to travel before this kind of democracy is attained.

Table 2: Popular Assessments of Satisfaction with Democracy, Explanatory Model

	B (Regression Coefficient)	S.E. (Standard Error)	Beta (Standardized Coefficient)	Sig. (Statistical Significance)	Explanatory Rank (from Beta)
Constant	1.528	.107		.000	
Demographic Factors					
Rural residence	-.062	.042	-.031	.138	6
Media access	.115	.020	.120	.000	3
Black	.337	.048	.142	.000	2
Individual Attitudes					
Job performance of councilor	.133	.025	.116	.000	4
Trust council	.262	.021	.264	.000	1
Councilor listens	.070	.023	.064	.002	5

Adjusted R square = .171, Standard error of the estimate = 0.895

Summary and Policy Lessons

The public opinion “scorecard” in this paper reveals that:

- * Just under half of adult South Africans think that the local government system is working well.
- * Over time, popular approval of local government performance has slipped from being a majority sentiment (in October 2004) to a minority sentiment (by February 2006).

- * Because citizens are poorly informed about how local governments are financed, they base their judgments about council performance mainly on service delivery.
- * Popular approval is consistently highest in Western Cape (for overall local government performance) and lowest in Mpumalanga (for service delivery) and the Northern Cape (for financial management).
- * While approval of performance may be rising in four provinces, it is declining in five, notably the Eastern Cape.
- * People's satisfaction with local government performance depends on both their social background (especially being an urban dweller) and their personal attitudes (especially satisfaction with the job performance of their elected councilor).
- * Unlike at the national level, incumbent leaders cannot rely on party loyalty to ensure satisfaction with government performance at the local level. Instead, voters will support candidates who have a proven track record of being responsive.
- * South Africans consider that many local government personnel are corrupt though, disturbingly, these perceptions do not seem to affect their assessments of local government performance.
- * Since local government is the closest point of contact between citizens and state, South Africans seem to use the same mindset – one that emphasizes political responsiveness as much as material delivery – in evaluating local government and forming opinions about democracy.

The above results hold implications for policy actors, including those in the government's Department of Provincial and Local Government (DPLG), the South African Local Government Association, and NGO's with programs to build local government capacity. Despite the laudable efforts of these entities to build participatory linkages between councils and citizens, much work remains to be done. For example:

- * Citizens urgently require **information about local government financing**, especially the role of municipal councils in raising local revenues and making expenditure decisions. This information would help citizens to activate ward committees, to participate in integrated development planning, and to monitor the budget process in their local councils.
- * Increased **media coverage of local government affairs** will have beneficial effects on popular satisfaction with local government performance. Afrobarometer data indicate that the deepest impact on satisfaction can be obtained by disseminating information via newspapers and the widest impact via radio.
- * Measures are required to **encourage local government councilors to listen to their constituents**. While training of councilors is a useful first step, progress in ensuring the responsiveness of elected leaders is only likely to succeed if supported by incentives. These might include measures to tie salary increments to councilor performance or to allow the electorate to recall non-performing leaders.
- * The existence of a mixed electoral system at the local level appears to encourage voters to detach themselves from partisan loyalties and to base their judgments on the councilor's job performance. This matter should be investigated more systematically and any lessons learned conveyed to the policy actors who are addressing **electoral system reform at the national level**.
- * There is an intimate connection between **taxation and representation**. The more that citizens contribute to the financing of local government programs, the greater the power they will have to hold

elected leaders accountable. Thus policy makers and advocates should take full advantage of service delivery mechanisms that clarify the connection between paying for services and the political right to demand performance.

Endnotes

¹ Steven Friedman, “Put the ‘Service’ Back in ‘Service Delivery’” *Municipal Talk*, 1, 1, June 2006, p.12.

² Steven Friedman, “The Citizen as Subject: The Quality of Democracy in Africa,” paper presented at the 20th World Congress of the International Political Science Association, Fukuoka Japan, July 2006.

³ The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 18 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University. For information: www.afrobarometer.org. Fieldwork in South Africa was conducted by Citizen Surveys.: www.citizensurvey.org.

⁴ Lindow, Megan, “New Money, Old Buckets Anger South Africa’s Poor,” (Pretoria, Idasa,, 2006).

⁵ Department of Provincial and Local Government, *Local Government Laws* (Pretoria, DPLG Research Directorate, no date) p. 20.

⁶ See endnote 9 below. When this item is excluded, the reliability of our index declines from Alpha = .821 to Alpha .799, a larger drop than when any other item is excluded.

⁷ As another example, the central government has sought to “clean up one aspect obstructing delivery: widespread corruption by local government officials in handing out BEE (Black Economic Empowerment) deals.” *SouthScan*, 21, 15, 28 July 2006. www.southscan.gn.apc.org.

⁸ “For citizens, as always, the paramount concern continues to be the ongoing problem of service delivery.” Joe Mavuso, “Looking Back, it was a Good Poll,” *Municipal Talk*, 1, 1, June 2006, p.5.

⁹ A principal components analysis (unrotated) produced a single factor that explained 71 percent of the variance across four aspects of local government performance. This factor, which we *call overall local government performance*, is statistically reliable at Alpha = .821 (n = 2400). The index has the same range as the original indicators (1-5) but captures a finer degree of variation by allowing individuals to occupy positions at decimal points between categorical integers.

¹⁰ Using the common “ordinary least squares” method, we began with an exhaustive model containing 8 demographic predictors (including province and political partisanship) and 9 attitudinal predictors (including knowledge of councilors’ names and perceptions of councilor corruption). All regression coefficients that were not statistically significant at p<.001 were dropped. Table 1 represents a final, trimmed model.

¹¹ Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes and E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy and Market Reform in Africa* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 278.

¹² Philip Keefer and Stuti Khemani, “Why Do the Poor Receive Poor Services?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 28, 2004, pp. 935-943.

¹³ The Local Government and Health Consortium, *Decentralising Health Services in South Africa: Constraints and Opportunities* (Durban, Health Systems Trust, 2004).

¹⁴ The model with poverty explains less than 15 percent of the variance in perceived performance, versus almost 16 percent for the model with race.

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