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Factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery at a municipality in South Africa

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Abstract

In the present-days, political polarisation stands as one of the most challenging and pervasive phenomenon responsible for poor service delivery in South African local municipalities. This paper was aimed at investigating factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa. A qualitative approach was utilised in the form of case study and semi structured interviews were conducted with nine (9) ward councillors from the selected municipality. This paper found that leadership competency, political dynamics and partisanship have surfaced as a key source of political polarisation. This paper also found that political polarisation accounts for poor and prolonged service delivery processes in local municipalities. South African local municipalities should adopt "Big Bang" approach to decentralization of decision-making about service delivery for achieving greater consensus and reforms. This paper has the potential to contribute to theory, policy and practice in terms of framework for stakeholders' engagement strategies to address the impact of political polarization.

Keywords: Political Polarisation; Service Delivery; Municipality; Public Choice Theory

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1. Introduction and background

This paper discusses and argue factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery at a municipality in South Africa. Drawing from Ravselj and Hodzic (2020); Madjozi (2023) it can be argued that in the present-days governance and public administration, political polarisation stands as one of the most challenging and pervasive phenomena responsible for poor service delivery in South Africa local municipalities. This political polarisation is characterised by deep-seated ideological divisions, strident partisanship, and a propensity for adversarial politics, political polarisation has gained prominence in the discourse of many nations (Weismueller et al., 2024). It is a phenomenon that transcends borders, reverberating through legislative chambers, executive offices, and, perhaps most profoundly, at the grassroots level of local governance (Fahy and Bock 2019). As a microcosm of this global phenomenon, South Africa grapples with the multifaceted implications of political polarisation, a country with a rich of history, diversity, and ongoing transformation. The legacy of apartheid, a system that institutionalised racial segregation and discrimination, continues to cast a long shadow over the nation's political landscape (Jenkins et al., 2023; Jethro, 2019). In the wake of the democratic transition in 1994, South Africa emerged as a beacon of hope, with Nelson Mandela's leadership symbolising reconciliation and unity. Yet, over time, the transition brought to the fore complexities, including the proliferation of political parties, the divergence of ideologies, and persistent social and economic disparities (Mallinson, 2021).

The challenges faced by local governments in South Africa, such as Stellenbosch Municipality in the Western Cape Province, are complex and multifaceted. These challenges encompass political interests, resource allocation, and governance issues, including political patronage and the influence of party affiliations (Vedder et al., 2023:64). Stellenbosch Municipality, known for its rich cultural heritage, diverse population, and economic importance, represents a microcosm of the country's complexity (Lastikova, 2023). While specific research on political polarisation in Stellenbosch Municipality may be limited, there is evidence of political divisions that could impact local governance and service delivery. Factors like party politics, ideological differences, and the legacy of apartheid contribute to this landscape (Karreth, 2022). This paper endeavors to fill this research gap by investigating the impact of political polarisation on service delivery at Stellenbosch Municipality, South Africa. Stellenbosch.

To address the aim of this paper, the following research question is also addressed in the present investigation:

- What are the factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa?

The empirical analysis of this paper is based on the data collected from ward councilors from a selected Municipality to uncover the underlaying factors of political polarisation and its impact on service delivery.

2. Literature review

2.1. Origin of political polarisation in South African political landscape

The historical legacy of apartheid in South Africa led to the African National Congress (ANC) becoming the predominant political force representing the black population, especially the African majority, after the end of apartheid in 1994 (Fernandez and Fernandez 2020). According to Southall (2019) the efforts to reform

apartheid faced opposition, to the formation of a cross-racial unity movement known as the United Democratic Front. This movement was comprised of various community-based civic organizations, religious groups, workers, and youth movements, effectively serving as a surrogate for the exiled ANC. The author further reported that by 1985, the consolidation of black trade unions into the Congress of South African Trade Unions set the stage for the revival of the Congress Alliance, akin to the 1950s.

Prior to 1993, South Africa stood as one of the most deeply divided nations on the global stage. Its populace habitually framed political discourse in terms of a stark "Us" versus "Them" dichotomy. However, the landscape underwent a significant transformation in 1994 with the advent of democracy and its inaugural democratic elections. What set South Africa apart in the decades following 1993 was its choice to embrace a sense of unity and "us-ness" rather than perpetuating division through "otherness." The intense political polarisation gradually gave way to an era of national reconciliation. Nonetheless, it eventually reverted to emphasizing division and "otherness" in its political narrative (www.democratic-erosion.com, n.d.).

Formerly, political polarisation primarily hinged on the traditional Left-Right ideological spectrum. In the contemporary world, it is defined by a more complex set of distinctions, including "globalist/cosmopolitan versus nationalist," "religious versus secular," "urban versus rural," "traditional versus modern cultural values," and "participatory versus representative democratic models." Presently, the prevailing polarizing discourse revolves around the conflict between the general populace and the perceived elite, who are accused of impeding the interests of the people. This rhetoric mirrors the post-apartheid period in South Africa, which led the nation back into a state of polarisation. The Zuma government, representing the elite, started obstructing the public's interests, resulting in a renewed polarisation within the country (www.democratic-erosion.com, n.d.).

2.2. Origins of political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa

2.2.1. Origins of political polarisation

Drawing from Chigova and Hofisi (2023) and Marino et al., (2023) coalition between political parties is one of the major underlying factors that is responsible for political polarisation on local government service delivery in South Africa. The authors further reported that service delivery obstacles emanate from the instability of electoral systems and coalitions. Polarisation due to these obstacles impedes the capacity of municipal administrations to provide essential services. However, a qualitative study by Madjozi (2023) found that polarisation is greatly influenced by its historical trajectory and is susceptible to random fluctuations. Furthermore, the degree of polarisation is significantly shaped by the initial distribution of opinions within the population. When there are no extremist viewpoints, polarisation tends to be less pronounced. However, if communication is characterized by noise or uncertainty, it can push a population towards more extreme positions and even lead to acute polarisation. Lastly, the apparent reduction in polarisation in situations of increased cultural complexity is due to a specific aspect of the measurement used for polarisation. It deems a population with a broader spectrum of extreme opinions as less polarized.

Political scientists argued that in the modern context, polarisation is less driven by policy distinctions along a traditional left-right spectrum and is increasingly shaped by other divisions. These divisions include religious

versus secular, nationalist versus globalist, traditional versus modern, and rural versus urban perspectives (McCoy et al., 2018).

Table 1. Factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa

Source	Factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa
Madjozi, 2023	Factors contributing to political polarisation in South Africa include path dependency, initial distribution of opinions, noisy communication, and cultural complexity. Political polarisation impedes service delivery by hindering consensus and reforms.
Yende, 2024	Factors underlying political polarisation in South Africa include frustration with government's handling of socioeconomic issues, leading to violent protests impacting service delivery, as seen in Cato Manor.
Ngumbela, 2022	Political polarisation in South Africa is fueled by poor governance, leading to service delivery failures. Factors include power imbalances, lack of accountability, and broken politics hindering effective service provision.
Van Eeden and Khaba, 2016	Political polarisation in South Africa is fueled by historical context, dissatisfaction with service delivery, and power struggles. This impacts service delivery by hindering progress and perpetuating a cycle of unmet needs.
Gwiriri and Bennett, 2020	Political polarisation in South Africa is motivated by competition for government programmes among cooperatives, leading to skewed benefits distribution. Powerful, less accountable leaders may prioritize personal interests over service delivery.
Twala, 2014	Factors underlying political polarisation in South Africa bring in ANC governance issues, socio-economic disparities, and citizen dissatisfaction, influencing service delivery protests and public discourse significantly.
Tirivangasi and Mugambiwa, 2016	The factors underlying political polarisation in South Africa are associated with citizenship crisis, historical background, and issues of xenophobia, affecting service delivery protests and governance challenges.

A study by Schwalbe et al., (2020) found voters tend to become more polarised in response to controversial statements made by leaders of the opposing party than they do from their own party's leaders. Consequently, this dynamic incentivises political leaders to adopt more polarised positions themselves. According to Klymak and Vlandas (2023) and McCoy et al., (2020) the heightened level of partisan polarisation, stemming from the growing identification with one's own political party, seems to be exacerbating a phenomenon known as democratic hypocrisy. This occurs when citizens are more inclined to question and challenge democratic norms when their own party is in control, as opposed to when the opposing party holds power. Drawing from Leong et al., (2020) voters have a tendency to interpret political information in a way that aligns with their

preexisting beliefs, which represents a cognitive bias. This bias significantly contributes to the increasing levels of political polarisation. Jost et al., (2022) further argued that polarisation often leads to heightened cognitive inflexibility, wherein individuals become less adept at adapting their beliefs in response to new information or transitioning between different modes of thought. This cognitive inflexibility, in turn, fuels further polarisation. Paradoxically, the Beattie and Beattie (2023) noted that "curse of knowledge" is an overlooked potential psychological factor that contributes to political polarisation, operating in conjunction with institutional causes. As opposed to ontological humility, the study by Bolton (2021) highlighted that ontological arrogance is one of the underlying factors that is responsible for political polarisation. Ontological arrogance fosters closed-mindedness, confirmation bias, dehumanisation, echo chambers, and hostile interactions with those who hold different political views. Historical realignment in political alliances has intensified this debate. In essence, today's polarisation arises from contemporary issues and the enduring consequences of past political realignments (The two key factors behind our polarised politics, n.d.). The following table provide a summary of factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa.

As alluded to in the table above, political polarisation is responsible for diverse views and deterrence of effective of service delivery, as seen in service delivery protests across municipalities like Greater Tzaneen and Cato Manor. These underlying factors collectively contribute to political polarisation and its detrimental consequences on service delivery in South Africa.

2.2.2. Political polarisation and service delivery in South Africa

Given the above narrated origins of political polarisation, Masuku and Jili (2019) argue that the politicisation of municipal administrative components is blamed for the low quality of services provided by local governments. The authors further claim that politicisation is responsible for poor governance in municipalities. According to Bateman et al., (2019) it is believed that one of the most crucial approaches to lowering poverty through programs for poverty alleviation is through public service delivery systems. As part of the South African government's cooperative system, major municipalities ought to embrace an integrated approach to public service delivery (Tomazevic 2019). To ensure effective and efficient service delivery, local municipalities and pertinent stakeholders must combine processes and services as part of an integrated approach to public service delivery (Velsberg et al., 2020).

Pertaining to public service delivery, local municipalities are required by the South African government's White Paper to transform public service delivery to generate income opportunities for people, particularly the impoverished, with the exclusive goal of assisting in the reduction of poverty and the realisation of peoples' expectations. According to Masuku and Jili (2019) community development opportunities and the smooth operation of local governments are significantly impacted by the political landscape. The authors further highlighted that in municipal South African governance, political favouritism and meddling are commonplace, and they impede the equitable provision of services.

3. Research methods and design

This paper used qualitative methodology in a form of a case study to investigate factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery in South Africa. As such it was considered as a socially

constructed phenomenon that could adequately be understood in an interpretivist philosophy where a qualitative approach is suitable for use (Malterud, 2016). Based on the research design, this paper utilised the non-probability sampling method in the form of convenience sampling technique to select an information-laden case that was deemed appropriate for studying the phenomenon under study (Rashid et al., 2019; Patton, 2014). More specifically, this study targeted a local municipality within the Cape Winelands in the Western Cape that has a history of community unrest during the delivery of public housing project. Drawing from the cases study, Stellenbosch Municipality was deemed fit for providing data saturation and therefore was selected as the case study. The table below (see table 2) presents the target and sampled population of ward councillors who are currently serving and those who served in Stellenbosch Municipal Council. These ward councillors are affiliated in different political parties.

Table 2. Target and sampled population

Occupation	Target population	Sample selected
Ward councillor	15	15
Total	15	15

The study used census to select the participants of the study. This study considered a sample of 15 ward councillors, as shown in the table above. However, on the preceding table the demographics of participants have been depicted.

Table 3. Participants, gender and number of years serving in municipal council

Participants	Gender	Years of municipal council service	Qualifications
1	Male	4	Diploma
2	Female	9	Honours degree
3	Male	4	No qualification
4	Male	3	Standard 8
5	Female	4	Grade 12
6	Male	4	No qualification
7	Female	8	Grade 5
8	Male	4	Honours degree
9	Female	3	Standard 8

Semi structure interviews we successfully conducted with 9 ward councillors, from the 15 that was selected initially, 4 ward councillor had another meeting and 2 ward councillors withdrew from participating in the

study. An interview per participant took approximately 10 minutes. During the interviews, field notes were used to capture the response and the notes were helpful during the data analysis.

3.1. Data analysis

For the purpose of assuring mutual understanding, analytical accuracy, and the validity of findings to be ensured, cross-validation and group discussions are necessary (MacCallum et al., 1994; Bergmeir et al., 2018). In this paper coding of the transcribed data was done independently to prevent confirmation bias during the analysis stage. A qualified qualitative researcher from the faculty confirmed the created codes for accuracy, consistency, and the removal of any subjectivity. The objective analysis of the data and the revision of the codes at the recommendation of an impartial investigator were made possible by the involvement of an outside party. We debated the initial ideas during the data analysis phase until they came to a consensus. To prevent any possible confirmation bias, the authors double-checked the results, and the impartial investigator verified them.

4. Findings and discussion

The interviews conducted were aimed at prompting specific responses regarding the participants perceptions on factors underlying political polarisation and its impact on service delivery at Stellenbosch Municipality. Three main themes and three (3) sub-themes emerged from the thematic analysis conducted using the ATLAS.ti software. These themes include 1. Service delivery politicisation (partisanship), 2. Education and qualifications (leadership competency) and 3. Racial divides and tactical coalitions (political dynamics).

4.1. Service delivery politicisation

Polarisation in contemporary politics has been attributed to a combination of evolving social conditions and government actions, which have triggered fundamental disagreements about the government's role and responsibilities (Weismueller et al., 2024). Polarisation has been accentuated by a historical realignment of political alliances. Consequently, conservatives have reacted by increasingly advocating the view that government intervention should be limited, reflecting a central aspect of the polarisation in today's political landscape.

4.1.1. Partisanship

According to Malik (2024) power relations and partisanship are the root causes of disagreements over ward development. The author further added that partisanship influences the contribution of political actors on resource allocation, causing the ruling parties to favor co-partisans and disadvantage opponents, even in circumstances where expenditure is purportedly neutral. The view of the participant below captures the sentiments of some participants in this study.

> *"The bases to disagree with other developments are simply because the other party does not want development to happen during the term of their opposition in a certain ward." – [Participant 9; Participant 1; Participant 4; Participant 8] said.*

Given the responses of the participants it can be argued that there is a contentious and political charged environment where decisions about the service delivery are influenced by the political interests of political actors rather than the merits of the services that should be delivered to the public. Bin'Omukama (2022) added that the roles and views of ward councillors from the oppositions are dictated immensely by their political parties rather than the interest of the public. This implies that these councillors are representatives of their political organisations rather than their ward. Their contribution on the decision making about the service delivery is central to the interests of their political parties. Some participants [Participant 2 & Participant 5] pointed out that

> *"The relisation of democracy in South Africa ends at a superficial level, we sit in a council meeting and argue with people who have no clue of our constituency but have guts to oppose the development that should be done in our wards."*

This response by Participant 2 & Participant 5 expressed a dissatisfaction with centrlisation of decision making about service delivery to the council. South African democratic system fails to meet the hopes or expectations of its citizens, in terms of improvement of their living conditions and opportunities for growth (Masuku and Jili 2019).

4.2. Education and qualifications

Studies reveal that ward councillors' competency in South Africa is heavily influenced by their education and certifications (Majola 2022; Mbandlwa and Mishi 2020). Reduced protests and better service delivery are correlated with experienced leadership, education, and background. According to (Mbandlwa and Mishi 2020) ward councillor positions are also influenced by the socioeconomic features of the districts they represent. In order to increase councillor effectiveness and sustainability in politics, education and credentials are crucial, as evidenced by the dearth of initiatives for empowering women councillors, such as gender problems training and political grooming.

4.2.1. Leadership competency

There are no educational prerequisites to become a ward councillor in South Africa. This implies that voters can still vote for candidates who do not have Grade 12 (Mbandlwa 2018). The ability of ward council members to provide services to the general public is somewhat dependent on their qualifications, and education and experience are two essential elements of competent leadership (Majola 2022). The views of the four participants captured the aggregate views of the participants in this study [Participant 3; Participant 4; Participant 6; Participant 7]

> *"……. because some of us do not even have grade 12 but we were the choice of the people."*

This particular response of these ward councilors provides a compelling argument which drives the narrative that the competency of ward councilors is not based on the level of education. The literature also provided a contrasting argument that the members of the ward council often struggle to engage fully in decision-making processes because they are not well-versed in municipal policies (Winsvold, Ødegård and Bergh 2017). The following are some of the participants' opinions concerning leadership competency

> *"There should be a short course offered in Law and community participation to us as ward councilors…." – Said [Participant 3 & Participant 9].*

These ward councilors believe that these courses could improve their skills of engaging in the council. Even though formal education may not be a prerequisite for becoming a ward councillor, leadership characteristics and knowledge of governance processes are necessary for effective service delivery and political engagement.

4.3. Racial divides and tactical coalitions

A combination of historical racism, apartheid legacies, and post-apartheid battles shape South Africa's racial divides and coalitions. Economic instability and racial inequality plague post-apartheid South Africa, sparking demonstrations and calls for community development (Macdonald 2015). Threats to democracy are addressed by the Constitutional Court, especially state capture and entrenchment of political power. Political formations competing for support from the Black majority in the 2009 elections highlighted the continuous fight for social cohesion and racial justice (Levenson and Paret 2023).

4.3.1. Political dynamics

The majority of participants claimed that political dynamics is a key factor that underlie political polarisation within Stellenbosch Municipality. Four ward councillors [Participant 1; Participant 6; Participant 7; Participant 8] said,

> *"It is difficult to commence the project because of political differences".*

According to Chigova and Hofisi (2023) service delivery obstacles stemming from the instability of electoral systems, coalitions, and polarisation hinder the capacity of municipal administrations to provide essential services. Some ward councilors from Stellenbosch Municipality believed that these political dynamics are an outcome of racial differences in municipal council. Other ward councillors [Participant 1; Participant 5; Participant 4] said,

> *"We have the same voice as blacks and colored ward councilors regardless of our political differences."*

This tactical coalition due to racial differences gives credibility to the saying that

> *"There are no permanent enemies, and no permanent friends in politics, only permanent interests" (Tsang 2021).*

Drawing from Mengiste (2020) it can be argued that some ward councillors act rationally in their self-interest, seeking to maximise their utility or benefit in decision-making processes. According to (WikiLivres.org: Questions et réponses sur les livres, Romans, B.D, des auteurs et Culture votre guide littérature #1, 2021) Plato claimed that excessive freedom is a threat to democracy. The author further contended that a system in which everyone has the right to rule allows for the ascent to power of a variety of egotistical individuals who are driven solely by their own goals and have no regard for the needs of the people.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This paper sheds light on the critical issue of political polarization and its detrimental effects on service delivery within South African local municipalities. Through a qualitative approach using case studies and semi-structured interviews with ward councillors, it became evident that leadership competency, political dynamics, and partisanship significantly contribute to the polarization phenomenon. Moreover, this paper revealed that this polarization directly correlates with the poor and protracted processes of service delivery, thereby adversely affecting the communities they serve. Ultimately, the implications of this paper extend beyond academia, offering practical guidance for policymakers and practitioners seeking to confront and mitigate the impacts of political polarization on service delivery.

5.1. Policy implications

South African local government should consider separating policy advice and service delivery to depoliticize certain aspects of service provision. Establishing semi-governing agencies responsible for delivering indispensable services can reduce political interference in the day-to-day delivery of services to the public. Local municipalities should shift from partial decentralization of the decision-making process about service delivery to a greater consensus and reform. Ward members should be given autonomy to make decisions about service delivery in their respective wards. The council should be informed and given the opportunity to review and scrutinize resolutions from specific wards but not the authority to oppose decisions made by those wards. According to Section 47 of the Municipal Systems Act (Act 32 of 2000), municipalities should provide ongoing training and capacity-building programs for ward councillors to ensure effective performance of their duties. Continuous training for councillors is crucial, as effective leadership characteristics, education, and experience positively influence service delivery and reduce protests (Fallon et al., 2023). To ensure the effectiveness of the training provided by institutions like the South African Local Government Association (SALGA), a grade 12 certificate or a higher certificate in public administration should be a prerequisite for ward councillors to contest elections. This study revealed that a substantial percentage of ward council members lack formal education beyond the 12th grade, adversely influencing their ability to participate in decision-making and understand local regulations.

5.2. Practical recommendations

Ward council members should be required to complete mandatory training programs or meet minimal educational requirements. These programs should include specialized short courses on governance, law, and public engagement to improve their knowledge of local government procedures. Municipalities should partner

with local universities or educational institutions to offer accredited courses that councillors can complete to meet educational requirements. This collaboration will ensure that councillors receive high-quality education and training relevant to their roles.

5.3. Limitation of the study

Although qualitative research is highly important in obtaining profound understanding and deciphering complicated phenomena, researchers need to be cognisant of its limitations. The unique context and experiences that were documented in this qualitative study may not be applicable generally, which restricts the capacity to draw generalisations from the findings. Divergent interpretations of the same data by different researchers could result in different findings.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflict of interest or funding to disclose.

Data availability statement

Data will be made available on a reasonable request from the authors.

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