

Expecting the Unexpected? Political Accountability in the ANC

futurefact ... combining a decade of statistical data with critical insight proffered by a team of senior researchers, futurefact tracks the changing sentiments and shifting social identities of ordinary South Africans

Despite the divergent political identities that characterise South Africa today, there appears to be a common expectation for political leaders to be ethical and accountable. Growing impatience with corruption and inefficiency is strongly evident, even amongst supporters of the ANC, whose recent history has been marred by frequent allegations of corruption and cadre deployment.

Among those who identify themselves as being "strong supporters" of the ruling party (9,91 million), a staggering 90% said that they are angered by government officials who use state revenue to finance their luxurious lifestyles. This is marginally below the number of DA (96%) and Cope (94%) supporters who share this sentiment.

Similarly, 9 out of 10 South Africans believe that politicians should not be allowed to accept gifts from people who have been awarded government contracts. This view transcends political party loyalties, with the number of strong ANC supporters who believe this almost equal to that of the DA and Cope. An incredible 98% of ANC supporters reject the lack of accountability in government's ruling elite, noting that politicians are "ordinary people" and should not get special treatment.

What is most surprising about this is that despite the high expectations of the electorate - and the ruling party's failure to fulfil them sufficiently - public support for the party continues to increase. By the end of 2009, more than half of all South Africans were likely to identify themselves as being strong supporters of the ruling party, increasing from a mere 39% the year before. This was the post-Polokwane era and presented a period when the ANC was vulnerable, a window of opportunity which the opposition, notably COPE, was unable to capitalise upon.

Although very similar values and ideals are evident in most people's expectations of the party, supporters are nonetheless divided over whether the party has the capacity and political will to actually enforce accountability. This is best illustrated by comparing the sentiments of strong supporters of the ANC with those of its estimated 2,5 million "wavering supporters"



President Jacob Zuma, whose popularity, as well as that of the ANC, continues to rise.

This is despite allegations of corruption and impropriety that surround the president and some members of his government.

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While 71% of strong supporters are confident that service delivery will improve under the current administration, this is only true of 58% of those whose political support for the party is beginning to wane. Similarly, while almost two-thirds of party loyalists believe that inefficient and corrupt officials will be fired, considerably less naivety is evident amongst wavering supporters. It is therefore the disparate levels of trust in the ruling party that distinguish committed party supporters from those that have indicated a willingness to abandon the organisation.

Continued failure by the ruling party to engender a culture of political accountability and service delivery could alienate these wavering supporters even further. Given that this group of voters accounts for up to 13% of the electorate, opposition parties have the opportunity to capitalise on this lack of confidence. Further consideration of futurefact's survey data suggests that the scepticism of those whose support for the ANC is wavering can be attributed to their personal experience of post-apartheid service delivery.



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Using the LSM measure of class and living standards, it would appear that the strong supporters of the party are more likely to be unemployed or in the working class; wavering supporters on the other hand tend to be from the middle or upper class.

Given the poor living conditions and minimal resources that characterise the lower LSM groups, minor improvements are often disproportionately praised. For example, despite comprising predominantly the poorest people in the country, strong supporters of the ANC responded most positively when asked about service delivery. More than half of strong ANC supporters indicated that their lives had improved due to government's delivery of housing, education and sanitation. Wavering supporters were considerably less impressed by government's efforts in these areas. This could well be explained by the ANC-lead government's inability to fulfil the burgeoning expectations of their upwardly mobile supporters.

In spite of an almost-universal demand for political accountability, there is increasing anxiety over the ANC's failure to fulfil these expectations. As standards of living improve, so too will expectations of service delivery become more demanding. Failure to meet the standards of accountable and service-driven governance that are evidently expected by the electorate could ultimately undermine public confidence in the party. Inevitably, this could impose further distance between the ANC and those supporters whose partisan loyalty is already beginning to wane. Never-the-less we have to acknowledge that at the moment there does not appear to be a viable alternative to the ANC in the eyes of the average South African voter. As long as this continues so will the reign of the ANC.

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