Public trust deficit in democratic state and political institutions: Ominous Signposts for South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses politico-social capital theorisation of the relationship between public trust and democracy in order to demonstrate the interdependence of the African National Congress’ (ANC’s) declining electoral fortunes and the increasing public trust deficits in South Africa’s state, constitutional democracy and political institutions. As desktop-based research, the paper conducts literature survey to distils the relationship between public trust, as social capital, in institutions of society, and electoral performance and formation of societal leadership vacuum, within complexities of the political-economy and political culture and system such as those entrenched in South Africa under the ANC’s 28-year rule. The paper analyses statistical evidence from Afrobarometer’s 2022 survey about South Africans’ public trust in state and political institutions from 2006 to 2021, as well as national, provincial and local government election results from the Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) from 1994 to 2019, to corroborate its theoretical framing. It makes three findings, thus: there is a direct relationship between the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes and the erosion of public trust in institutions of society; the ANC’s 28-years of state governance has created an ominous societal leadership vacuum, setting South Africa’s democracy on the precipice of civil strife; and, the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes will persist into the foreseeable future because public trust is hard to regain and sustain once eroded.

Introduction

This paper explores theorisation of public trust in order to establish analytical tools for understanding the relationship between the incremental erosion of the citizenry’s confidence in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics, on the one hand, and political party electoral decline and creation of societal political vacuum, on the other. The foundational assumption adopted in the paper is that public trust, which involves both subjective and objective drivers, is an indispensable resource for legitimacy, order, legality and stability of institutions of the state, constitutionality and politics that sustain democracy (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). Politico-social capital theorisation of public trust provides that political systems turn on the value of trust by the citizenry and that democratisation evolves in “public spaces” that are fiercely contested (McLean, Schultz & Steger, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Furthermore, theorisation of public trust indicates that political systems require legitimacy in order to ensure that their attendant structures, processes and systems may function through popular citizen support, rather than the use of coercion or violence. Collectively, the cultural, social and institutional dimensions of trust, together with durable personal psychological traits and experiential socialisation processes, give rise to unitary public trust that consists of horizontal interpersonal intra-society and vertical institutional society-state relations (Putnam, 1993; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). Public trust is a construct of planning which is simultaneously hardened as a personal psychological trait that is almost impossible to change or influence, as well as being changeable through experiential socialisation. If eroded, public trust would be extraordinarily hard to regain and uphold sustainably.
Democracy, rather than the expression of its principles on paper, is the totality of lived experiences of the majority of the peoples of the state, which is expressed in terms of public trust in institutions of society (Warren, 1999; Putnam, 2002; Uslaner, 2002; Whitehead, 2003). Hence, social capital theory, read in the contexts of specific political-economy of development, political cultures and political systems provides insights if a society’s democracy is institutionally consolidated, entrenched, transitional, tentative, weak or strong. Unavoidably, the evils of inequality, poverty and unemployment affect public trust and civic engagement in politics (Whitehead, 2003; Khedir, 2020), and South Africa is no exception to the norm. Contrary to popularly accepted view, South Africa’s democracy is neither “established” nor “consolidated,” 30 years since its dawn. Social and political trust in institutions of society, particularly those of state and politics, has remained tentative following the decade-long state capture. It is foreseeable that the ruling ANC will take decades to regain South Africans’ trust, if ever, and, that the societal political leadership vacuum created could in the process be consolidated and abused to stir civil strife and public violence, or worse. This paper does not seek to insinuate an imminent doom for South Africa’s democratisation, but it points to a deleterious societal political leadership vacuum that has formed with the decline of public trust in state institutions of democracy, the ruling ANC and all other political parties. The paper characterises the July 2021 civil unrest as an ominous signpost of public expression of societal political leadership vacuum. By its own admission, the ANC membership increase from 769 000 in 2015 to 1 220 057 in June 2022 lacked quality; instead, it consists of pockets of the so-called “un-ANC” cadre leading to industrial-scale corruption, factional tensions and infighting. The latter conditions have exacerbated the historical societal divisions, causing in the process public disillusionment with the democratic process among an increasing majority of South Africans, especially the ANC’s traditional voting constituencies. For a democratic experiment to hold in a heterogeneous society such as South Africa, therefore, conditions of social cohesion have to prevail (Struwig, Roberts, Gordon, Davids, Sithole, Weir-Smith & Mokhele, 2013), which are predicated on complex and tenuous interactions, experiences and expressions of horizontal interpersonal intra-society and vertical institutional society-state relations. A reading of politico-social capital theorisation confirms that social cohesion and vibrant citizen engagement have a mutually reinforcing relationship with public trust in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Struwig et al., 2013; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). The erosion of public trust in state institutions, governance and democracy has to, therefore, be construed as a function of the conduct of the ruling political party, which is the ANC in South Africa’s 28 years of democratisation.

This paper is organised into seven parts thus: literature survey that traces discussions of the relationship between social capital and democracy is presented after this introduction, followed by the theoretical and conceptual part that examines theorisation and concepts relating to public trust and democracy in the political-economy contexts of political cultures and systems as well as development trajectories akin to that of South Africa under the 28-year ANC rule. The fourth part discusses research methodology, followed by statistical analyses of evidence of public trust deficit in South Africa and its association to the ANC’s electoral decline and the formation of societal leadership vacuum. A discussion of the findings drawn from the analysis is offered in part six, followed by conclusion and recommendations.

Literature Review

Public trust as social capital for democracy

This part conducts a brief literature survey of the politico-social capital theorisation in order to explain the interdependent relationships and functioning of public trust, as social capital, democratisation, democratic transition and democratic consolidation with specific reference to political-economies of prevalent inequalities, severe poverty of the majority and frustrated development such as that in South Africa. Discussions of social capital theory and the functioning of democracies and democratic governance, within specific political cultures and systems and political-economy of development, as well the production and reproduction of public trust in institutions of state and society range across a wide spectrum from Coleman (1990) and Putnam (1993, 2002), through Badescu & Uslaner (2003) and Sønderskov & Dinesen (2016), to Kumagai & Iorio (2019), Thomson & Brandenburg (2019), Festenstein (2020) and Khedir (2020), among others. South Africa’s democratisation is unique and fraud with complexities that have eluded straight-jacket theorisation. This paper draws philosophical inspiration from literature survey of social capital theory within political-economy complexities of political cultures, democracies and governance. These include applications of social capital theory for examining diversities and foundations of democratisation (see Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2002; Whitehead, 2003; Arneil, 2006; Khedir, 2020), the political-economy of transitions to democracy as well as transitional versus consolidated democracies and elite-driven democracies (see Diamond & Plattner, 1996; Lisa, 1999; Putnam, 2002; Badescu & Uslaner, 2003; Diamond & Mortlino, 2005) and political institutions in the creation and recreation of social capital, public (and political) trust, quality governance and government for development and democratisation (see Putnam, 1993; Lin, 2001; Krishna, 2002; Uslaner, 2002; Herreros, 2004; Khedir, 2020). This paper situates social capital theory within the prevalent political culture and system entrenched in South Africa during the past 28 years, rather than the mere existence of a Constitution which is devoid of popular exercise of constitutionalism among institutions of society, inclusive of the state and peoples. The intention is to establish how prevalent political cultures and systems shape and reshape social capital, especially public trust, in state and political institutions as well as transitions and/or frustrations of democracy, democratisation and democratic governance. To this extent, this paper holds that South Africa’s democracy has remained in the transitional phase and largely tentative, rather than consolidated, over the past 28 years, especially given the decade-long state capture which has remained resistant and prevalent.
Theoretical and Conceptual Background

South Africa’s democratisation under the ANC rule continues to be riddled with complexities, contradictions and paradoxes that defy simplistic straight-jacket explanations. This paper frames theorisation from a multiplicity of applications of social capital theory within the contexts of diversities of political-economies, political cultures and systems of democratic transitions and democrtisations in order to examine the trajectories, functions and dysfunctions of South Africa’s democratic governance and public trust deficit in institutions of society under the ANC rule as a function of political disaffection in the politics, the political party and state institutions. The paper contends that the connection between the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes and the erosion of public trust in state institutions, the presidency, government and parliament can be understood through theorisation of the relationship between public trust, inclusive of dimensions, types, drivers and value, and democracy.

Politico-social Capital, Public Trust and Democracy Relationships

As social capital for the political-economy of successful democratic transition, democratisation and governance, public trust is indispensable. But the concept of social capital is not only disputed (McLean, Schultz & Steger, 2002; Putnam, 2002), it has political fuzziness, which is not a determining factor for its utility. As social capital, public trust, has an interdependent relationship with democracy (Warren, 1999; Edward, Foley & Diani, 2001; Putnam, 2002; Uslaner, 2002; Whitehead, 2003). Social capital theory seeks to explain society’s social structure as constituted by institutions and their incessant interactions and dynamism, as well as how they function to produce and reproduce specific political-economies of governance, inclusive of transitional and consolidated democracies or non-democracies (Lisa, 1999; Lin, 2001; Whitehead, 2003; Herreros, 2004; Khedir, 2020). Therefore, public trust is a primate social capital, necessary for the functioning of the political-economy of democratisation anywhere in the world (Herreros, 2004; Khedir, 2020). Theoretically, this paper deduce the principle that democratic transitions and consolidation under political-economies akin to that of South Africa, require specific sets of societal institutions, political cultures and political systems in order that the state’s exercise of power is kept under check through public trust (see, Warren, 1999; Putnam, 2002; Khedir, 2020). Public trust, the paper argues, is an essential necessity for successful democratic transitions and consolidation. Equally, public trust in societal institutions is a function of political cultures and systems entrenched by ruling parties in-charge of state democratic governance for development and democratisation, which is the ANC in South Africa.

Dimensions of Trust

Literature identifies three dimensions of trust, namely: cultural, social and institutional (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). As a construct of planning, trust consists of subjective and objective parts; hence, it has “relational” and “situational” levels of a generalised non-specific interpersonal and specific institutional confidence nature, respectively (Struwig et al., 2013; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). There has to be public support for governing regimes and confidence in societal institutions in order for democracy to endure (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Together, the cultural, social and institutional dimensions of trust give rise to two important perspectives, namely: trust, which constitutes durable psychological trait, is formed at a personal level as an individual is born and raised within particular cultural values; and, trust is created and upheld through experiential socialisation processes (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Khedir, 2020). The latter perspective of trust encapsulates influences that may arise from horizontal interpersonal intra-societal relations as well as the vertical institutional society-state relations (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Khedir, 2020). The difference between the two perspectives is that trust derived as a personal psychological trait is hardened and almost impossible to influence or change, whereas that gained through experiential socialisation processes is changeable. But if eroded, the latter form of trust would be equally difficult to regain. Hence, the second perspective encompass horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust, which are not independent of an individual’s durable personal psychological traits. For these reasons, this paper argues that the ruling ANC will take decades to regains South Africans’ trust, if ever; and, that the societal political leadership vacuum created could be consolidated and abused to stir civil strife.

Closely associated with horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust, literature identifies two variants that are often described as distinct types, namely: social (cultural) trust and political trust (Kumagai & Iorio, 2019). Social (cultural) is itself established through a combination of the two perspectives arising from the three dimensions of trust, as described above, whereas political trust draws from only one aspect of the second perspective. As a result, both constructs of social (cultural) and political trust are, in isolation, deficient in that they exclude the power dynamics that resides in the political relations among citizens and between citizens and societal institutions (Kumagai & Iorio, 2019). Reliance on social (cultural) and political trust alone would provide inadequate tools for the analyses of factors that configure and reconfigure public trust. Also, social and political trust too cannot be constituted outside an individual’s personal psychological traits, which are themselves not immune from horizontal interpersonal intra-societal and vertical institutional society-state relations. Furthermore, institutional trust shapes individual behaviour in ways that influence the vitality of civil society (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Khedir, 2020). The vibrancy of citizenship engagement is, therefore, dependent upon social cohesion, which is itself a function of interpersonal intra-society trust (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Khedir, 2020). Drawing from social cohesion, citizens are positioned to shape institutional decision-making as well as policy implementation, reforms and development outcomes, thereby linking social (cultural), interpersonal and institutional trust to political trust through the vibrancy of citizen engagement. Also, social capital theory holds that stronger citizen engagement, which is a function of social
cohesion and interpersonal trust, creates and upholds institutional trust (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). For this paper, therefore, reference to public trust implies complex and tenuous, but unitary combination of political, social (cultural), interpersonal and institutional trust, as well as their personal psychological traits and experiential socialisation. The paper accepts the unity of trust, in order to encapsulate all variants into the two interrelated categories of interpersonal and institutional trust; and, that the legitimacy and sustainability of a democratic political system, devoid of coercion and violence, derives from and is a resource for institutional trust (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). To ensure that this theorisation of trust adequately establishes the connections between the ruling ANC’s electoral collapse with the erosion of citizens’ trust in public and state institutions as well as political parties, the next two subsections discuss, respectively, the drivers of trust, and unity of trust in public value, governance and state institution bureaucratic services.

**Drivers of Public Trust**

Confirming the inseparability of the two perspectives arising from the three dimensions of trust, politico-social capital theorisation identifies two critical drivers of trust, namely: competence and intention (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; OECD, 2017; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). Competence refers to the ability of institutions to perform their duties, while intention is about the inclination of institutions to do the right things. That is, competence involves “operational efficiency, implementation capacity and responsiveness to … deliver on a given mandate;” and, intentions describe “principles and values that guide action and behaviour” (OECD, 2017: 142; RSA, 2021: 9). Furthermore, competence is driven by responsiveness and reliability attributes whereas intentions derive from values such as integrity, openness and fairness (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Two more drivers of trust, commitment and accountability, respectively connected to moral obligation and responsibility, describe the necessary core intentions for governance and government performance (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Invariably, competence invokes principles of effectiveness, accountability and inclusivity. Together, these three principles give rise to collaborative and sound policy making, integrity, transparency, independent oversight and vibrant citizenship. Literature assumes that commitment and application of these values and principles would ensure that democratisation leaves “no one behind,” is participatory and non-discriminatory, thereby guaranteeing subsidiarity and intergenerational equity (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). Arguably, democracy would instil confidence, create and uphold public trust; hence, there is universal acceptance that these values and principles constitute foundations for good governance (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). Whereas preconditions for citizens’ trust in the state involves morality and reliance on government for effective and efficient service delivery, caution has to be exercised because such reliance can equally place citizens in a position of vulnerability to abuses of state power and undue dependence (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020). This paper holds, therefore, that unresponsive, unreliable, irresponsible, unaccountable, uncommitted, unfair public institutions and political corruption are morally bankrupt and devoid of integrity and openness, thereby eroding public trust and creating distrust.

**Public Value, Governance and State Bureaucratic Services**

The preceding subsection has emphasised the indivisibility of trust, in order to assert its understanding as unitary but variable over a continuum from that based on personal psychological traits to that from experiential socialisation. It has been difficult to aggregate public trust as a construct for planning bureaucratic civil services, because the latter consist of complex variants and their efficacies in ensuring government performance. There is no universal model of “effective” bureaucratic civil service. Even the International Civil Service Effectiveness Index’s (InCiSE) composite metrics does not provide a conclusive universal model of “effective” bureaucratic civil service. However, a dysfunctional bureaucratic civil service would generally disable vibrancy of citizen engagement and undermine government performance, thereby eroding public trust in institutions of state, democracy and politics. Therefore, there is public value in the citizenry’s trust of institutions of state, democracy and politics. Citizen engagement in civic affairs embodies public value for governance, confirming the significance of public trust to legitimacy of institutions. As already stated, public trust, as a construct of planning, consists of subjectivities and objectivities. The former involves individual citizens’ lived experiences, which are also associated with cultural and social relations, whereas the latter relates to systems used to aggregate and measure institutional governance, economic development and levels of living (Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). To circumvent this undue binary of subjectivity and objectivity of the foundations of public trust, this paper relies on the notion of public value of trust which ranges along the continuum of symbolic to instrumental. Whether biased towards symbolic or instrumental value, citizen’s trust accords advantage to governance and performance of institutions; and, government benefit from public trust simultaneously as it is a resource for generating and sustaining trust. Undoubtedly, public trust is crucial to governance; and, the latter has to create opportunities that would influence the former. However, public trust is not just an outcome-based phenomenon; instead, it is a process-based phenomenon, thereby justifying its theorisation as complex and tenuous but unitary, rather than divisible. Repetitive horizontal and vertical social interactions, therefore, are necessary for democracy to endure, whereas institutional dysfunctions create public distrust (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020; Khedir, 2020).
If trust in state institutions and political parties declines due to perceptions of corruption, that in financial institutions may also drop whilst that in media, police and judiciary may increase if they are instrumental in exposing, arresting and successfully prosecuting such acts of malfeasance. In South Africa, though, public trust is declining across all institutions of the democratic society. Where bureaucratic tendencies overtake citizen engagement, stalling government performance and policy implementation, public trust in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics will suffer severely. If the bureaucracy is effective and civil service is efficient, then public trust in public institutions and the state would be boosted, with the implications that trust in the ruling political party too would remain high. But caution has to be exercised because there are variable explanations of what constitutes effective bureaucracies and civil service because of contextual issues such as historical background and politics (Sonderskov & Dinesen, 2016; Kumagai & Iorio, 2019; Thomson & Brandenburg, 2019; Festenstein, 2020). One profound point to make, though, is that whereas it is easy to lose public trust, it is hard to create and sustain it. The erosion of public trust can potentially undermine the democracy and raise the costs of governance. Also, there is a strong inverse relationship between public trust and corruption (Lannegren & Ito, 2017); and, this observation is particularly true for South Africa. Violence and crime too are disincentives to public trust with direct implications to the rule of law and confidence in the police (Lannegren & Ito, 2017; RSA, 2021). In South Africa, public trust is also eroded by the scourge of gender-based violence, undue violence against foreigners and high levels of criminality (Lannegren & Ito, 2017; RSA, 2021). It may be difficult to establish a causal relationship between violence, crime and corruption, on the one hand, and interpersonal and institutional trust, on the other, but the correlation is strong. Increasing distrust in institutions of the state, democracy and politics demonstrates that citizens’ civic engagement is far greater than mere voting activities or public consultations (Putnam, 1993, 2002; Struwig et al., 2013). In the contexts of industrial-scale corruption, dysfunctional civil service and disengaged citizenry, as well as the absence of transparency and accountability, public trust is eroded.

Research and Methodology

The paper reports the results of desktop research that involved literature survey of politico-social capital theorisation of public trust within the complexities of political-economy, political culture and system contexts in order to distil its relationship with democracy. Also, the paper analyses 2006-2021 national survey data and 1994-2019 elections results, respectively, from Afrobarometer and IEC in order to demonstrate that there is a relationship between the worsening public trust deficits in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics, on the one hand, and the ruling ANC’s declining electoral fortunes, consolidating a dreaded societal leadership vacuum. Using statistical evidence, the paper demonstrates that public trust in state and political institutions has been eroded to the extent that a significant proportion of South Africans is now willing to accept an unelected government, if it guarantees them security, service delivery and prosperity. Hence, the paper shows a deleterious process of entrenching societal leadership vacuum is already underway, pointing to ominous signposts for the functionality of South Africa’s democratic transition.

Democratic South Africa: Erosion of Public Trust, ANC Electoral Decline And Societal Political Leadership Vacuum

This section uses statistical evidence to demonstrate that the ANC’s electoral decline is associated with the erosion of public trust in state, political and religious institutions. Muller (2021) characterises the erosion of political and social relations in South Africa as a function of concurrency of reinforcing structural changes, prime among which, are factionalism and tensions within the governing ANC, as an increasing majority of South Africans no longer trusted the former liberation movement in democratic governance. A concerning feature of the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes, the internal factional fragmentation and simmering tensions, is that some in the governing party are readily willing “to use political violence,” attested to by the July 09-18, 2021 civil unrest, “massive violence, the destruction of key infrastructure … pillaging” in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal Province (Muller, 2021: 2). The willingness to use political violence coincides with an increasing majority of South Africans who are willing to forego their right to electoral democracy in favour of an unelected government if security, service delivery and prosperity are guaranteed. This combination of factors, amidst a growing vacuum in societal political leadership owing to the decline of public trust and electoral fortunes of the ANC, spells ominous signposts on the road to deleterious civil strife.

Erosion of Public Trust in State and Political Institutions

Afrobarometer’s May/June 2021 national survey results show that trust in South Africa’s state political and democracy-supporting institutions had declined to their historic lows (figure 1). Public trust in local councils and opposition parties was the lowest among all other institutions, followed by that in police, the ruling ANC, provincial premiers and parliament, all of which fell below 30%. Public trust in traditional leaders, IEC, the presidency and the South African Revenue Service (SARS) ranged from 31% to 40%. For religious leaders, the Public Protector of South Africa (PPSA), courts of law and the army, public trust ranged from 42% to 49%, with that in government broadcasters reaching highs of 61%. These results demonstrate that the majority of South Africans have lost confidence in institutions that support democracy and in those that could potentially energise society for vibrancy of citizen engagement. In essence, the majority of South Africans have lost confidence in the democratic processes; and, this paper argues that this phenomenon cannot be dissociated from the decline in the ruling ANC’s electoral fortunes, which was set in motion since the 2004 national elections (see figure 4). Conversely, public distrust in state and political institutions has been prominent, especially for the police, local councils, opposition parties and the ruling ANC, followed by that in provincial premiers, the presidency, Electoral
Commission, courts of law, SARS, religious leaders, Public Protector, the army and religious leaders (figure 1). The least distrusted institutions were government broadcasters at 37%.

Figure 1: South Africans' Trust (%) in Institutions of the Democratic Society, 2021; Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

The 2021 Afrobarometer results are not an isolated anomaly; instead, they confirm a trend of declining public trust in state and political institutions, reflective of increasing distrust in South Africa’s democracy. This increasing trust deficit in societal institutions was accompanied by a drop in public trust of political parties, with a drastic decline for the ANC (figure 2). Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021: 15) conclude the May/June 2021 Afrobarometer report thus:

“Many of the declines in public trust originated between 2011 and 2015, a period when then-President Zuma was accused in several corruption scandals and Parliament and courts of law appeared unable or unwilling to provide oversight and accountability. A precipitous decline of public trust in the state, elected representatives, and oversight institutions may be one of Zuma’s lasting legacies.”

Indeed, public trust in the ANC dropped drastically between 2011 and 2015; and, it has since never recovered as it reached the lowest point in 2021. It is evident that opposition parties have never fared well in terms of public trust compared to the ANC since 2006. From the 2006 high of 61%, public trust in the ANC dropped to 50% in 2008, recovering to 61% in 2011 (figure 2). This slip in public trust for the ANC in 2008 is associated with the party’s divisive election contestations that preceded the 2009 national elections. The recovery that the ANC achieved in public trust between 2008 and 2011 is indicative of society’s belief that the factional tensions that marked the pre-2008 ANC national elective conference were an isolated epiphenomenal event, rather than an inherent contradiction embedded with the former liberation movement’s transition dynamics under the democratic governance. But as factional tensions became enduring and public post-2011, public trust and distrust in the ANC, respectively, decreased and increased drastically. By 2018 when the new party president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who was elected at the party elective conference of December 2017, ascended to state presidency and power, public trust in the party had reached 38% and could not recover, notwithstanding the so-called “Thuma Mina” and “Ramaphoria” hyperbolic drives that dissipated (Moosa, 2019), reaching the lowest point of 27% in 2021 (figure 2). The constant and steady decline, straddling the ANC’s December 2017 national elective conference, from 2015 to 2021 is the surest indicator that South Africans came to believe that factional tensions and industrial-scale corruption are permanent features of the ruling party. These characteristic features of the ANC have rendered state governance ineffective and paralysed.
Similarly, opposition parties did not gain confidence in increasing numbers of South Africans as public trust in the ANC dropped, suggesting that an ominous societal political leadership vacuum was forming. The optics of leaderless civil unrest, political violence, destruction of infrastructure and rampant looting of July 2021 are ominous signposts of the road to dreaded civil strife that societal political leadership vacuum could create. Given that opposition parties have never gained public trust beyond 40% of 2011, which was an increase from 29% in 2006 (figure 2), consolidation of a deleterious societal political leadership vacuum was guaranteed. Since 2011, public trust in opposition parties dropped to 24% in 2021. Another aspect of this trend is that public trust in the ANC and opposition parties have peaked in the same year, 2011, and reached their historic lows in the same year, 2021 (figure 2). That suggests that South Africans’ loss of confidence in state institutions that are governed by the ANC is generalised to include all other political parties. This phenomenon is a serious sign of societal disillusionment with the democratic process itself, because distrust grew even for democracy-supporting institutions like the IEC, PPSA and courts of law. This trend is ominous given that Afrobarometer survey shows that an increasing majority of South Africans have expressed willingness to forego electoral democracy in favour of an unelected government if security, service delivery and prosperity are guaranteed (figure 3).

Figure 2: South Africans’ Trust in Political Parties (%), 2006-2021; Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

Figure 3: South Africans Willing/Unwilling to Forego Electoral Democracy, 2006-2021; Source: Moosa & Hofmeyr (2021).

From 57% in 2006, the proportion of South Africans who expressed a willingness to forego electoral democracy for unelected government hovered between 62% and 65% during the 2008-2018 period, reaching a historic high of 67% in 2021 (figure 3). During the same period, the proportion of South Africans who expressed an unwillingness to forego electoral democracy dropped from 35% in 2006 to a historic low of 30% in 2021. This character of the South Africa society suggests that the majority do not perceive, if not derive, value from democracy. In this regard, the July 2021 civil unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillaging, amidst state institutions’ paralysis, is not an epiphenomenal occurrence along a merely dissatisfied citizenry. This increasing majority of South Africans would most probably go along if a political faction that has access to state machinery were to instigate a coup. Democracies are generally defended by citizens; and, these results suggest that such defences have been eroded and weakened in South Africa’s democracy.
ANC’s Declining Electoral Fortunes, 1994-2021

As South Africa grapples with the question of whether the country would not exist without the ANC, Kinzinger’s (2022) closing statement at the 8th instalment of the Select Committee hearings of the Congress of the United States of America on January 06, 2021 rings true. Kinzinger (2022: n.p.) said “whatever your politics,” “place country above self” and “honour oath of office,” impressing upon all to understand that “laws are just words on paper,” meaning “nothing without public servants dedicated to the rule of law, who are held accountable by a public that believes that oath matters more than party tribalism where the cheap thrill of scoring political points” is paramount. Kinzinger (2022: n.p.) concluded that if society does not renew its “faith and commitment” to democratic principles, a “great” and “shining beacon” of democratic experimentation as the USA too would not endure. Kinzinger’s (2022) statement elicits public value in defense of democracy in order to demonstrate that even as “party tribalism” may be thrilling for scoring political points, only citizens can provide the unbridgeable defence for the rule of law and sanity. South Africa’s globally-acclaimed Constitution too will degenerate into “words on paper” if the citizenry lose confidence in the democratic processes; hence, it is deeply concerning that 67% of South Africans are willing to forego their right to vote for government. This significant majority of South Africans are not determined to hold public representatives and institutions to account, whilst an ominous societal political leadership vacuum is forming and the ANC exclusively preoccupied with cadre positioning for industrial-scale corruption. Therefore, South Africa’s democracy would not endure if the citizenry does not renew its vibrancy in civic engagement and confidence in institutions that support democracy. The ongoing trend in the ANC’s electoral fortunes suggests that recovery, which is not guaranteed, may take decades to achieve at the polls. The IEC has by law been required to organise free and fair national, provincial and local government elections in South Africa, as well as to report such results (Republic of South Africa, 1996), even as public distrust in it has increased to 57% in 2021. The national elections are revealing of the ANC’s downward spiral in electoral fortunes, especially from 2004 (figure 4), which is not explicable through the incremental strength of opposition parties. As already demonstrated, public trust in all other parties has deteriorated to 24% in 2021 and has always been worse than that for the ANC. Even as a collective, opposition parties have only managed to secure 42.5% of the national vote share in 2019, compared to 57.5% for the ANC.

Figure 4: National Election Results for the ANC versus All Other Parties, 1994-2019; Source: IEC, (2019).

Given the prominence of coalition governments in six of the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities in South Africa (see figure 7), removing the ANC from power is possible, and the party must of necessity be seriously concerned about its future. The coalition governments at local government level, whereas unstable, provide further evidence that South Africa would still endure as the ANC potentially meets its demise. Besides the national electoral decline, the ANC has also experienced concerning election results at the provincial scale (figure 5). Generally, the ANC’s share of provincial votes has been on a downward spiral since 2004, especially in Limpopo, Free State, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Western Cape (figure 5). Decline in the ANC’s share of provincial votes in Mpumalanga and North West started after 2009. The ANC’s share of votes in Northern Cape started declining in 2004, but regaining ground marginally in 2014, to only revert to the downward spiral in 2019. Whereas the ANC made electoral gains in KwaZulu-Natal Province, reaching 64.4% in 2014 provincial polls, a steep decline occurred in 2019 to 50%.
Local government election results (figure 6) demonstrate the primary contexts within which metropolitan municipalities in South Africa have already had coalition governments after the 2016 elections. Opposition parties, individually, would not be able to form governments at both the national and local government scales in the near future. The same cannot be said about the provincial scales because the Western Cape Province has for years been under the Democratic Alliance (DA) government, whereas KwaZulu-Natal Province was once in history governed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). At the national scale, South Africa is capable of forming coalition governments, albeit precarious, without the country collapsing with the demise of the ANC’s electoral fortunes. It is foreseeable that the ANC may be unable to achieve electoral majority enough to form government at the national scale as early as the 2024 national elections. A recent poll has projected a 41% national electoral share for the ANC in 2024.

The ANC’s declining electoral fortunes are adequately demonstrable through the November 01, 2021 local government election results for the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities of Buffalo City, Cape Town City, Ekurhuleni, Ethekwini, City of Johannesburg, Mangaung, Nelson Mandela Bay and City of Tshwane (figure 7). These metropolitan municipalities are a useful indicator of a political party’s command of power in South Africa because they do not just have population numbers, they are economics hubs. Therefore, the 2021 local government elections demonstrate conclusively that the ANC’s command of political power and dominance in South Africa has waned significantly. As already stated, the ANC is not necessarily losing votes to other parties; instead, its declining electoral results have led to coalition governments for the majority of the eight metropolitan councils. From the November 2021 local government elections, the ANC achieved an outright majority of over 50% only in two of the eight (8) metropolitan municipalities (Buffalo City with 59.3% and Mangaung with 50.63%), whereas the DA scored the same only in the City of Cape Town with 58.22% (figure 7). Only three of the eight metropolitan municipalities had governments formed by one party alone. In the five hung metropolitan municipalities, the ANC carried a relative majority in four (Ethekwini with 42.02%, Ekurhuleni with
38.19%, City of Johannesburg with 33.6% and City of Tshwane with 34.31%), whereas the DA had relative majority in Nelson Mandela Bay with 39.92%. Whereas the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) was the third largest party in seven of the eight metropolitan municipalities in terms of the local government election results of November 2021, ActionSA took this spot with 16.05% of the votes following its first participation in elections.

The occurrence described above suggests that none of the opposition political parties was able to consolidate its electoral strength with the ANC’s decline. Given the November 2021 results for the ANC in metropolitan councils of Ethekwini (42.02%), Nelson Mandela Bay (39.92%), Ekurhuleni (38.19%), the City of Tshwane (34.31%) and City of Johannesburg (33.6%), it is inconceivable that the party could secure outright majority anytime in the foreseeable future. Also, there is no evidence that the present balance of electoral forces between the ANC, DA and EFF could be easily broken in the foreseeable future, especially at the national scale. But the likelihood of coalition governments in the five 2021 hung metropolitan councils will continue for the foreseeable future, and Mangaung could be a hung metropolitan municipality in the next elections (figure 7). Political parties lose and gain public trust regularly, but it is of serious concern that in South Africa’s novice democracy all political parties and religious institutions are simultaneously losing public trust.

**Ominous Signposts for Democratic South Africa**

A concerning proportion of South Africans are willing to forfeit their democratic right of voting for government of their choice by staying away from the elections and there is a willingness to be subjected to an unelected government, if it guarantees security, service delivery and prosperity. Under the 28 years of democracy, over two-thirds of South Africans surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2021 are demoralised and in despair. Both horizontal interpersonal and vertical institutional trust have been decreasing since at least 2003, as measured by the Afrobarometer, Plus 94 Research, the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) of the Institute of Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and the South African Social Attitudes Survey of Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This trend is concerning because horizontal interpersonal trust is significant in the South African context where decline in public trust for the ANC is accompanied by a similar trajectory for opposition political parties, which creates a societal political leadership vacuum that could be abused to foment civil strife in case undemocratic forces seek to usurp state power fraudulently or by coercive violent means. The IJR (2019) reports that the weak vertical society-state and horizontal intra-society relations have direct deleterious implications on societal solidarity and public trust (cited in RSA, 2021).

Simultaneously, South Africans have in significant numbers mobilised behind movements that seek to rid the country of criminality, violence and corruption, demonstrating that they have pride in being South African. However, this national pride is also variable across racial divides; and, it was above 80% during 2004-2006, declining to 65% in 2008 and recovering to 81% in 2019/2020 (RSA, 2021). Whereas pride is interconnected with public trust and has the capacity to catalyse vibrancy in civil society, citizen engagement and participatory democracy, both horizontal intra-society and vertical society-state relations are dangerously at their lowest levels. South Africa’s National Development Plan 2030 Vision of establishing active citizenship and enduring democratic experiment has thus far failed to take pragmatic effect. The ANC has been in paralysis as a ruling party, with the result that state governance has been ineffective, defective and deficient. By November 2021, the writing on the wall was vivid that the electoral dominance of the ANC waswaning, without reprieve in sight; and, the ruling party continues to haemorrhage electoral votes, consolidating societal political leadership vacuum. This change in South Africans’ trust in these institutions will have long lasting effects in society’s democracy. The erosion of public trust in institutions of democracy and politics is a function of the ruling party’s history of state governance failures, industrial-scale corruption and state capture. The substantial public mistrust in the ANC, opposition parties and institutions of democracy among South Africans, has been exacerbated in recent years by president Ramaphosa’s evident inaction, indecision, ANC factionalism and paralysis, erosion of state institutions, state capture corruption and the rampant corruption.

**Figure 7: Metropolitan Election Results for ANC, DA and All Other Parties, 2021; Source: IEC (2021b).**

The occurrence described above suggests that none of the opposition political parties was able to consolidate its electoral strength with the ANC’s decline.
associated with state interventions in Covid-19 pandemic. In the final analysis, this paper asserts that the ruling ANC may not regain South Africans’ trust in decades; and, that there is no guarantee that such recovery may happen. Therefore, an ominous societal political leadership vacuum is forming in South Africa.

Public trust in institutions of democracy is crucial for the consolidation and endurance of the democratic experiment. The risk of civil strife is high where society-state and intra-society relations are eroded and public trust in state institutions such as the courts of law, police, Parliament, government, IEC, PPSA and the presidency is at historic lows. Strong public trust in state and oversight institutions and political parties is a necessary resource for the functioning and endurance of democracies, because these institutions form a “democratic ecosystem.” Public trust accords legitimacy and authority to state governance through vibrant citizen engagement. In this context, the state institutions’ collective failure to maintain law, order and stability during the July 2021 civil unrest, destruction of infrastructure and pillaging, in the face of a significant proportion of people who are willing to forego their electoral democracy for an unelected government, must be deeply concerning for South Africa.

A vibrant citizenship activism is necessary for the endurance of political systems and the democratic experiment, yet an increasing proportion of South Africans distrust political parties. The failure of opposition parties to significantly gain electoral votes on the back of the ANC’s decline suggests that there are no credible “checks and balances” on the ruling party’s exercise of state power. Rather than express confidence in opposition parties as a converse of the incremental distrust in the ANC, 67% of South Africans are willing to forego elections and to settle for undemocratically installed but effective government. The majority of black South Africans, the ANC’s primary constituencies, who qualify to vote have increasingly not bothered to register for voting in recent years. Contrary to prevalent aspirations, the democratic experiment has set in motion worsening poverty, inequality, societal despair, crime, violence, rampant elite corruption and state capture, which collectively worked to weaken democratic norms and principles. Public value in South Africa’s democracy has thus waned significantly.

Conclusions

This paper used politico-social capital theorisation to establish the connections between the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes and the increasing public trust deficits in institutions of the state, constitutional democracy and politics in South Africa. It analysed statistical evidence from 2006-2021 Afrobarometer survey data and 1994-2021 national, provincial and local government election results from the IEC in order to demonstrate the relationship between the worsening public trust deficits in state and political institutions, and the ANC’s declining electoral performance. Furthermore, the paper used statistical evidence to show that the ANC’s electoral decline is accompanied by the same trajectory among opposition political parties, signalling the formation of a dreaded societal political leadership vacuum. Drawing from theorisation of the relationship between public trust and democracy, the paper offers three findings, thus: there is a direct relationship between the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes and the erosion of public trust in institutions of society; the ANC’s 28-years of state governance has created an ominous societal leadership vacuum, setting South Africa’s democratisation on the precipice of civil strife; and, the ANC’s declining electoral fortunes will persist into the foreseeable future because it is hard to regain and sustain public trust. Finally, the paper recommends that the South African citizenry has to guard against societal venality of undemocratic forces exploiting the societal political leadership vacuum created by the erosion of public trust and the ANC’s imminent electoral collapse, to install unelected government. Realistically, the potential for civil strife in South Africa cannot be tenably discounted; and, the signposts that South Africa’s democracy is on the precipice are ominous in the absence of vibrant citizen engagement and distrust of political system. The paper further recommends that future studies draw possible escape scenarios because it forecasts that the ANC’s implosion is imminent and that it will cause havoc, but that South Africa will not go down the rabbit hole with the ruling political party.

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References


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