

Trust in political parties is being tested as Covid-19 infection rates surge



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Abstract

With elections coming up next year, political parties are using the crises created by the Covid-19 pandemic to shape public opinion. On the one hand, swift actions were needed to prevent a surge in infections and deaths, while on the other hand, the swift actions that were taken saw a huge decline in the economy, massive job cuts and many people going hungry. Political parties are faced with having to support national efforts to curb the virus while ensuring those who are suffering are heard.

Keywords

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Apparently, trust is a double-edged sword – its quick to earn but it dissipates just as fast.

This seems to be the conundrum facing political parties in South Africa who are also trying to grow their personal connection with voters. With one eye on managing the surge of new and virulent COVID-19 cases, political parties and their leaders are also clearly wary of the virus's effects on next year's elections. And make no mistake, the pandemic serves as an ideological battleground between the main political parties.

The pandemic has already raised necessary questions around the election's integrity and the IEC's preparedness to hold them. But what is also important is how political parties and,

since this is a local government election, independent candidates will use this experience to shape public opinion in their favour.

Initially press coverage of the government's interventions was celebrated both at home and abroad, with the WHO championing President Ramaphosa's decisive and timely measures. And considering the spikes Italy and Spain experienced at the time, South Africans were generally pleased to see that some proactive policy was indeed possible even though their favourite vices of alcohol, tobacco and fast foods were prohibited. But despite an easing of restrictions, economic losses have strained an already fragile economy and the people most severely affected are also those who are the poorest and most vulnerable.

Public opinion of political leaders and their parties is trying to digest these issues and now they literally have more time to do so. From monitoring the health sector's preparedness to save lives, the fiscus' ability to feed the starving and sustain an economy, the questionable deals that seemed to benefit some more than others, and state-owned institutions' ability to manage power supply during winter snaps, are just some issues competing for media coverage and debate.

The fear of poverty and starvation has replaced concern for the virus and the country's stark inequalities have been exposed. While the middle-class mobilised against short exercise windows, few paid attention to those living in overcrowded shacks where physical distancing is impossible and running water for recommended hand washing is scarce. Even the outrage over the military's use of excessive force seems to have waned despite the global campaign to make Black Lives Matter.

Add to this the prohibition of tobacco (that even had some non-smokers up in arms!), the manipulation of food parcel distribution and the infernal disinformation campaigns

spreading across social media platforms, and one can see why political parties struggle to calibrate their responses.

Opposition parties are faced with an important, but delicate decision: while they don't want to be perceived as sabotaging the national effort, their support for the government's action can undermine their position as alternatives to the ruling party.

Parties need to keep their messaging simple, honest and personal showing just the right measure of genuine compassion and firm commitment. And they will need to weave in those terms that are key markers for their voting bases.

From the ANC we have seen a good dose of 'collective responsibility' and many mentions that 'we are all in this together' despite social media posts of senior officials flagrantly breaking the rules. But the president's justification for easing restrictions was perhaps the most compassionate of all responses. Quoted on Al Jazeera, Ramaphosa said: 'Our people need to eat. They need to earn a living.'

While the DA tries to champion the economy emphasising the virus kills, but so does hunger and poverty. Interim party leader John Steenhuisen declared that 'We have to end the national hard lockdown and we have to do it now.' The DA did share the EFF's general concern for holding all 'organs of state ... accountable' and in May filed papers in the Constitutional Court challenging the Disaster Management Act.

Julius Malema and the EFF, loyal to its ideology, flagged 'If this white economy must collapse, let it collapse', and that relaxing lockdown measures would be 'attempted genocide'. EFF MP Naledi Chirwa also asked: 'How many black people have been infected and how many have died?' and 'How many white people have been infected and how many

have died?’ This effort to racialize the issue was curbed by Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, who refused to provide race-based statistics on the pandemic citing, ‘There hadn’t been a need for that’.

And the IFP has not waded into the fray of COVID-19 politics but it seemingly looked to stake out a middle road and support the national effort to fight the surge. Mkhuleko Hlengwa, the party’s national spokesperson, affirmed the party’s support for the government’s plan as long as it considers the infection rate and expert medical advice. Commenting on the gradual economic re-opening he said: ‘...this decision by the National Coronavirus Command Council requires exceptional attention to detail and careful consideration for the lives and livelihoods of South Africans.’

These are all very politically correct epithets that will hopefully calm economic markets. But they do very little to appreciate the daily struggles people are desperate to manage. Actions, dear politicians, speak louder than words.

To rebuild our trust, political parties will need to work hard and show some heart. Perhaps it’s time to offer some tangible, if physically distanced, support to the people of South Africa?

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