



The 2026 LGE Manifestos: Buyer Beware

1. Introduction

South Africa's 2026 Local Government Elections (LGE), scheduled for 4th November, take place in a challenging municipal governance environment. Almost three decades after the adoption of the Constitution, local government still faces significant challenges, including declining municipal performance, weak financial management, deteriorating infrastructure, and growing public dissatisfaction with basic service delivery. The Auditor-General's 2024–25 local government audit¹ outcomes show that only 39 of 257 municipalities achieved clean audits, while 116 received unqualified opinions with findings and 87 received qualified opinions. None of the country's eight metropolitan municipalities achieved a clean audit.

The Constitution² establishes local government as a sphere of government with a distinct developmental mandate. Section 152 requires municipalities to provide democratic and accountable government, sustainable services, social and economic development, safe and healthy environments, and opportunities for community participation. Section 153 requires municipal administration, budgeting and planning to prioritise basic community needs and social and economic development.

It is against this background that political parties have developed their programmes for the 2026 LGE. This briefing paper compares the six party manifestos that had been published at the time of writing:

- African National Congress (ANC);
- Democratic Alliance (DA);
- Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF);
- African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP);
- United Democratic Movement (UDM); and
- South African Communist Party (SACP).

2. Governance, Accountability and Municipal Capacity

Governance is the area in which the six parties demonstrate the greatest convergence. All recognise that service delivery failures cannot be addressed without competent municipal administrations, ethical leadership, financial discipline and effective accountability. The principal difference between the parties is not whether municipal governance must improve, but what type of institutional reform is required.

The **ANC's** approach is centred on rebuilding capable, ethical and developmental local government. Its manifesto follows a review of its 2021 local government commitments and gives attention to governance, institutional capability, financial sustainability, service delivery and consequence management. The **DA** takes the strongest managerial approach. It emphasises professional municipal administrations, merit-based appointments, transparent procurement and accountability. A central theme is the rejection of cadre deployment in favour of competence and performance.

The **EFF** connects governance reform to a broader transformation of municipal power. It argues that municipalities should serve communities rather than political elites, and places strong emphasis on combating corruption, patronage and waste. The **ACDP** places integrity, ethical leadership and service excellence at the centre of its approach. Its model seeks to restore confidence in government through responsible leadership and accountable administration.

The **UDM** emphasises clean governance, competent municipalities, ethical councillors and protection of public resources. It places particular importance on councillors being visible and accountable to their communities.

The **SACP** takes the most explicitly political-economic position. It associates corruption with tenderisation, outsourcing and private profiteering, and advocates greater public control over municipal resources and services.

3. Basic Service and Infrastructure

The provision of basic services is the common foundation of all six manifestos. Water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal, roads and infrastructure maintenance feature prominently across the parties. The fact that the parties agree on this indicates that the political debate is no longer primarily about whether municipalities should deliver basic services. The question is increasingly how municipalities can acquire the institutional capacity and resources necessary to deliver them consistently.

The **DA** places particular emphasis on infrastructure maintenance, reducing water losses and improving wastewater systems. It also supports the use of technical expertise and private investment where these can improve performance. The **EFF** takes a strongly pro-poor approach, linking service delivery to affordability and proposing free basic services for qualifying poor households, while the **ANC** places service delivery within the broader project of rebuilding capable local government.

The **SACP** gives prominence to preventative maintenance, prompt repairs and rebuilding municipal technical capacity, while the **ACDP** and **UDM** emphasise reliable municipal services through improved administration and accountability.

4. Water, Electricity and the Role of the Private Sector

The most significant ideological differences become clearer when the role of private-sector participation is considered. The **DA** is most receptive to private investment and technical partnerships where these can improve infrastructure and service delivery. Its approach combines municipal responsibility with market mechanisms. The **ANC**, on the other hand, adopts a developmental and pragmatic position, retaining public responsibility for municipal services while allowing partnerships where appropriate. The **SACP** takes the strongest anti-privatisation position. It explicitly rejects the proposition that privatisation or outsourcing

should be the automatic response to municipal failure and instead advocates rebuilding public capacity.

The **EFF** emphasises affordable services, free basic services for qualifying poor households and stronger public and community control. Both the **ACDP** and the **UDM** focus more heavily on the outcome – reliable service delivery and accountable government – than on an ideological choice between public and private provision.

5. Land, Housing and Spatial Development

Housing and land represent another significant area of divergence. The underlying political differences concern the status of municipal land. For some parties, land is principally a development and investment resource. For others it is an instrument of redistribution and social justice.

The **ANC** connects local government to spatial transformation and integrated human settlements, reflecting the constitutional and developmental importance of addressing South Africa's spatial inequalities. The **EFF** takes a more explicitly redistributive position. It advocates greater use of municipal land for housing, agriculture and economic opportunities, and views public land as an important instrument of economic transformation. Similarly, the **SACP** treats public land primarily as a social resource. It advocates its use for housing, food production, co-operatives and community facilities rather than private profit. The **ACDP** and **UDM** approach housing primarily through community development and access to basic services.

The **DA** emphasises the availability of well-located land, improved housing delivery and reducing administrative obstacles to development. Land is therefore closely connected to investment, development and functioning municipal planning.

6. Employment, Local Development and Poverty Alleviation

All the parties' manifestos recognise that local government operates within South Africa's broader crisis of unemployment and poverty. However, they differ in the mechanisms of economic development. The **DA** places substantial emphasis on investment, business development, small businesses, informal traders and reducing

unnecessary regulatory barriers. For the **ANC**, the emphasis is on linking local economic development to support for SMEs, employment creation and broader developmental objectives.

The **EFF** approaches local economic development through the concept of economic emancipation, linking municipal land, resources and infrastructure to redistribution and economic participation. The **ACDP** emphasises economic opportunity and enterprise development, while the **UDM** highlights youth opportunities and local economic development.

The **SACP** proposes the most direct municipal role in employment creation. Its manifesto includes public employment, apprenticeships, co-operatives, municipal enterprises and sustainable livelihoods.

7. Municipal Finances

All six parties recognise that the financial crisis in municipalities is closely linked to governance and service delivery. The **ANC** emphasises improved financial management and institutional sustainability, and the **DA** emphasises strong fiscal discipline, transparent procurement, revenue management and preventing waste.

The **EFF** argues that municipal resources should be redirected towards poor communities and essential services and that corruption must be eliminated; the **ACDP** stresses responsible stewardship of public finances; the **UDM** emphasises protection of public money and reducing waste, and the **SACP** argues that municipal resources should be redirected away from tender corruption and private profiteering towards public services, employment and community needs.

8. Community Participation

Community participation is also important across the manifestos because the Constitution expressly requires municipalities to encourage

community involvement. However, there are differences in the proposed depth of participation. The **DA** emphasises resident monitoring and accountability; the **UDM** stresses visible councillors and putting communities before party politics; the **EFF** emphasises people-centred municipalities, and the **ANC** supports responsive government and community engagement.

The **SACP** proposes the most extensive institutionalisation of direct participation through ward assemblies, participatory budgeting and community oversight. The important question here is not simply whether citizens should participate, but whether communities should have direct decision-making power over municipal priorities and budgets.

9. Conclusion

The manifestos of the parties demonstrate that the crisis in local government has become a central political issue. The Auditor-General's evidence provides a compelling institutional backdrop: only a small minority of municipalities achieve clean audits, financial and performance-management weaknesses remain widespread, and infrastructure and service-delivery failures continue to affect communities. However, the manifestos of the six parties do not offer a common model of reform. They share a concern with functioning municipalities, reliable services and accountable government, but differ substantially in their understanding of what effective local government should look like.

The local government election provides voters with competing visions of what local government should be, whom it should serve, and how public resources should be controlled and used. However, while manifestos can be a useful tool in aiding voters in deciding which party to vote for, they should also remember '*caveat emptor*' and interrogate not only what the parties are promising, but whether they offer a persuasive path to the implementation of their promises.

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¹ Auditor-General South Africa (2026): *Consolidated General Report on Local Government Audit Outcomes for 2024 – 25*. Available online at <https://mfma-2025.agsa.co.za/>

² Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/y72khrn5>

Party Manifestos

African National Congress (2026): *ANC 2026 Local Government Manifesto*.

Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/2y54r6u8>

Democratic Alliance (2026): *Local Government Manifesto*.

Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/4u3z2xxt>

Economic Freedom Fighters (2026): *Local Government Elections Manifesto 2026*.

Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/bdhkzu5b>

South African Communist Party (2026): *SACP 2026 LGE Manifesto*.

Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/yexr3bz2>

United Democratic Movement (2026): *2026 Local Government Elections Manifesto*.

Available online at <https://udm.org.za/campaigns>

African Christian Democratic Party (2026): *2026 Local Government Elections Manifesto*.

Available online at <https://acdparty.org.za>

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