



Centre for Policy Studies

**Influential policy actors at provincial level
in South Africa:**
opinions of senior public servants in Gauteng
and Mpumalanga

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
DA	Democratic Alliance
HODs	Heads of Departments
MEC	Members of the Provincial Executive Council
MPL	Members of Provincial Legislatures
NNP	New National Party
PPP	Petitions and Public Participation
SCOPA	Standing Committees On Public Accounts

INTRODUCTION

Public accounts committees, portfolio committees and the ruling party are the most influential key policy actors in provincial policy processes, while opposition parties, members of provincial legislatures (MPLs) and ordinary citizens (ie public participation) are the least influential policy actors. These are the findings of an opinion survey of senior public servants from the nine provinces in South Africa.

This policy brief is based on the responses of senior public servants from the nine provinces, but with specific focus on Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces, to an opinion survey questionnaire containing a range of questions.² The questions were intended to gain an understanding of how senior public service officials at provincial level perceived and therefore rated the level of influence of the provincial legislatures as key role players in provincial policy making processes.

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A total of 92 questionnaires were sent out to heads of departments (HODs) in all the nine provinces and 48 (52.17%) were returned. A note of caution is necessary here though. The sample material on which the analysis for Gauteng and Mpumalanga is based was small. Provinces in South Africa were constitutionally restricted to between five and ten departments. Western Cape was the exception, with twelve departments, until recently. Six HODs from Gauteng and five from Mpumalanga responded to the survey questionnaires. Due to the small size of these two samples, the extent to which any definite conclusions or valid generalisations can be made will be severely restricted. Therefore only tentative conclusions can be drawn for Gauteng and Mpumalanga. However, the larger sample of the nine provinces should yield relatively meaningful findings and therefore enable some valid conclusions to be drawn.

The first part of this paper examines perceptions of influence of selected policy actors. In other words, it looks at how the respondents rated the levels of influence of each policy actor on its own. The second part will then provide a simple comparison table of five most influential positions and the rank ordering of the most influential policy actors at provincial level in general and for Mpumalanga and Gauteng in particular.

PART 1

Legislative chambers as key policy actors

When government policy is formulated at provincial level and legislation is subsequently prepared, a range of key policy actors and institutions exercise

varying degrees of influence to shape the outcomes of these processes. Some of these actors are formal state institutions such as the ruling party, opposition parties, the legislature, portfolio committees and individual members of provincial legislatures. There are also external, non-state policy actors and institutions such as organised interest groups, the media, independent consultants, non-governmental organisations and ordinary citizens.

The object here was to compare legislatures with selected key policy actors and institutions in terms of perceived levels of influence in shaping policy outcomes at provincial level. Respondents were presented with a list comprising different key policy actors³ and asked to rate their levels of influence. To rate level of influence, respondents were provided with the following options: 'Poor', 'Fair', 'Good', and 'Very Good'. A variety of formal state policy actors and extra state actors were being compared in terms of their perceived levels of income. The former included the legislative chambers, committees, political parties represented in the legislature and MPLs, while the latter included the media, organised interest groups and ordinary members of the public.

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Given that the institution of legislature is a compound structure with various internal structures, it was disaggregated into its different parts for purposes of analysis in this study. Here, the legislative chamber is taken as a distinct key policy role player with a potential to influence and shape the outcomes of policy processes at provincial level. As table 1 below indicates, the weight of opinions seems to vary from 'fair' to 'good', particularly in the case of Mpumalanga and for the large sample of all nine provinces.

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	16.7%	0%	10.6%
Fair	50.0%	40.0%	31.9%
Good	16.7%	40.0%	44.7%
Very Good	16.7%	20.0%	12.8%

Significantly, more respondents from Mpumalanga (60.0%) rated the level of influence of the legislative chamber as 'good' to 'very good'. In contrast, Gauteng respondents appear less impressed by their legislative chamber as the majority of 50.0% rated its level of influence as only 'fair'. Based on the large sample of all provinces alone, the perceptions of respondents in general appear to also vary from 'fair' to 'good'.

Crucial role of legislative committees

Table 2 below shows that large majorities of senior public servants from the three samples have rated the level of influence of SCOPA as 'good' to 'very good'. The figures for Gauteng and Mpumalanga are 100% while the larger sample is over 87%. The high rating of perceived level of influence of public accounts committees is not entirely unexpected. After all, parliamentary standing committees on public accounts have become very important and respected instruments of oversight not only at provincial level but also at national level.

Public accounts committees are acutely critical in scrutinising provincial budgets and ensuring accountability by monitoring public expenditure on behalf of citizens.

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	0%	0%	4.3%
Fair	0%	0%	8.5%
Good	66.7%	40.0%	46.8%
Very good	33.3%	60.0%	40.4%

The fact that under the current electoral system the provinces cannot account directly to their voters for the use of public resources implies that public accounts committees are acutely critical in scrutinising provincial budgets and ensuring accountability by monitoring public expenditure on behalf of citizens. The importance of these committees is also signalled by the fact that members of the opposition usually chair them, which adds to their perceived importance in policy processes.

Also given the importance of use and management of public resources in South Africa's multi-tiered system of government that is accountable in the context of prevalent administrative corruption at provincial level, most political parties tend to send their brightest and most competent members to serve in these committees, thus turning them into some of the most competent legislative committees at provincial level.

Respondents were also asked to indicate their perceptions of the level of influence of portfolio committees overseeing their specific departments (eg Housing, Education, Agriculture, and Economic Affairs). Here, an important point to note is that the public servants are regularly in contact with those specific portfolio committees overseeing their departments more than any other committee. Table 3 above therefore clearly indicates that portfolio committees, like Public Accounts committees, are also central policy actors in provincial policy processes.

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	16.7%	0%	4.3%
Fair	16.7%	0%	14.9%
Good	50.0%	40.0%	51.1%
Very good	16.7%	60.0%	29.8%

Portfolio committees constitute the largest proportion of committee systems of all provincial legislatures and the bulk of law-making and oversight work falls within their scope of responsibilities.

For instance, majorities of 80% or more for Mpumalanga and for the large sample rated the level of influence of portfolio committees as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. For Gauteng the figure is slightly lower, at 66.7%. While the responses from the two smaller samples need to be taken with caution, the responses from the larger sample do seem to show that the majority of senior public servants from all the provinces perceive the level of influence of portfolio committees as ‘good’ or ‘very good’. This is a significant finding given the fact that portfolio committees constitute the largest proportion of committee systems of all provincial legislatures and also that the bulk of law-making and oversight work falls within their scope of responsibilities.

Therefore, perceptions about the level of influence of provincial legislative committees in general are comparatively more positive, and the ratings much higher, than those for the legislative chambers – something unsurprising given that much of the work of legislatures takes place at committee level. This suggests that future efforts to strengthen provincial legislatures, especially their institutional capacity, would need to provide more resources and support facilities to the committees.

The ruling party and opposition parties

Political parties are not only critical in the functioning of democratic institutions of government. They are also important role players in public policy making processes as well as the oversight responsibilities of legislatures. Respondents were asked to indicate their perceptions of the levels of influence of the ruling party as well as opposition parties as distinct role players in policy processes at provincial level.

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	0%	0%	0%
Fair	0%	20.0%	10.6%
Good	66.7%	40.0%	55.3%
Very good	33.3%	40.0%	34.0%

Perceptions about the level of influence of opposition parties are not flattering.

Table 4 above shows that the majority of well over 80% from the large sample of all the nine provinces rated the level of influence of the ruling party as 'good' or 'very good'. There are also overwhelming majorities from the two smaller samples (100% for Gauteng and 80% for Mpumalanga) who rated the level of influence of the ruling party as 'good' or 'very good'. A slightly lower figure of 80.0% for Mpumalanga is still relatively high but it does appear to indicate that a certain level of foreboding exists among senior public servants regarding the ruling party in Mpumalanga. It needs to be repeated though that due to the small size of the Mpumalanga sample, no firm conclusions can be drawn in regard to the attitudes of senior civil servants towards the ruling party. Further research work, based on lengthy in depth interviews with some of the public servants in the province might help explore this apparent dissatisfaction with the ruling party in Mpumalanga. Based on the large sample alone though, there is no doubt about the importance of the ruling party as a key role player at provincial level in general.

In comparison, perceptions about the level of influence of opposition parties are not flattering. The majority of respondents (57.4%) in the sample of all nine provinces rated the level of influence of opposition parties as 'fair' while only 36.2% rated it as 'good' or 'very good'. This is far lower, in comparison to the ruling party's perceived level of influence at 89.3% (see table 4 above).

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	16.7%	0%	6.4%
Fair	50.0%	40.0%	57.4%
Good	16.7%	40.0%	31.9%
Very Good	16.7%	20.0%	4.3%

Once again, the figures for Gauteng and Mpumalanga do not reveal any obvious tendencies and not much can be read into them. Nonetheless, taken together, all three samples appear to indicate that the general perception of level of

influence of opposition parties at provincial level is 'fair'. This unflattering perception about the level of influence of opposition parties at provincial level is also not entirely unexpected or surprising. Firstly, opposition parties in many of the nine provincial legislatures are still small, institutionally weak and lacking the necessary resources and support facilities to make a serious impact on the policy processes. Secondly, South Africa's current dominant-party system and the adversarial nature of legislative politics ensure that opposition parties are less influential if not relatively marginalised from policy process compared to the ruling party.

Individual MPLs and Ordinary Citizens

Despite the differential and unequal relationship of the MPLs and ordinary citizens to the levers of power, both these groups of policy actors are regarded with unflattering perceptions in regard to their levels of influence.

Finally, next two tables below show the perceptions regarding the level of influence of individual MPLs and public participation. MPLs and citizens occupy differential positions to the levers of power and therefore exercise unequal authority and power in policy processes at provincial level. This is the case because MPLs are full-time policy actors in formal policy processes while, much of the time, ordinary citizens are on the periphery of formal policy making processes. This is in spite of the fact that numerous formal provisions are contained in the constitution and also in the internal rules and procedures of the different provincial legislatures granting formal opportunities for ordinary members of the public to take part in policy processes and to shape policy outcomes.

Table 6. Perceived level of influence - individual MPLs

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	16.7%	0%	14.9%
Fair	66.7%	40.0%	57.4%
Good	16.7%	60.0%	27.7%
Very good	0%	0%	0%

Despite the differential and unequal relationship of the MPLs and ordinary citizens to the levers of power, both these groups of policy actors are regarded with unflattering perceptions in regard to their levels of influence. As table 6 above illustrates, the majority of 57.4% of respondents from the large sample of nine provinces regarded the level of influence of MPLs as 'fair'. Also, only 27.7% said 'good'. Taken together though, the Gauteng and Mpumalanga samples as well as the large sample of all nine provinces show clearly that the majority of respondents regard the level of influence of MPLs as only 'fair'.

Regarding ordinary citizens or public participation, as table 9 below shows, there are also lukewarm perceptions about the level of influence of this aspect

of our democratic practice. This is not surprising and it is perhaps indicative of the general failure by provinces to promote effective and sustained democratic participation by their citizens in processes of government. While the Gauteng and Mpumalanga legislatures have both established Petitions and Public Participation (PPP) committees to promote public involvement in policy processes, in practice these have achieved minimal results. It seems that ordinary members of the public are still largely absent from involvement in policy processes in both provinces.

The advent of the provincial system of government in South Africa was premised on the view that their closeness to people on the ground would promote greater democratic participation in governance.

Level of Influence	Gauteng	Mpumalanga	All Provinces
Poor	0%	0%	13.0%
Fair	50.0%	60.0%	52.2%
Good	50.0%	20.0%	23.9%
Very good	0%	20.0%	10.9%

Table 7 above also shows that the majority of respondents (52.2%) in the large sample of the nine provinces rated the level of influence of public participation as only 'fair'. Only 34.8% of the respondents said 'good' or 'very good'. For the two smaller samples of Gauteng and Mpumalanga, there appears to be divided opinions among public servants regarding the level of influence of public participation but once again, no firm conclusions can be based on these small samples. Taken together the three samples reveal a clear pattern showing that the majority of respondents rated the level of influence of public participation as only 'fair', signalling thus that ordinary citizens are not seen as critical and influential role players in provincial policy processes. In fact, MPLs and ordinary citizens or public participation were rated as the least influential policy actors in this survey.

Given that the advent of the provincial system of government in South Africa was premised on the view that their closeness to people on the ground would promote greater democratic participation in governance, there appears to be a general failure to bring this ideal to reality. As the role of provinces has come increasingly under scrutiny in public debates over the past few years, policy makers both at national and provincial levels may need to review current processes and capacity within provincial legislatures not only to promote effective and sustained democratic participation, but also to ensure that ordinary citizens exercise a meaningful influence in policy processes.

PART 2

Comparative levels of Influence - top five influential positions

In this section, a number of key policy actors and institutions are ranked in the order of the most influential to the least influential in terms of the perceptions of respondents from the large sample of all nine provinces, and also from the two smaller samples. Once again, the ranking based on the smaller response data from Gauteng and Mpumalanga needs to be taken with caution due to the small size of the samples used.

Legislative chambers in general fared rather poorly compared to the other key policy actors or institutions.

Table 8 below is based on a rank ordering system derived from the 'good' or 'very good' ratings that each policy actor or institution received from the respondents. The rank order system is confined to only five top influential positions and the different policy actors were slotted into the positions based on the number of 'good' or 'very good' ratings that they achieved.

Table 8: Top five positions - influential policy actors/institutions in the province			
Key Policy Actors/Institutions	Gauteng Rank Order: Level of influence	Mpumalanga Rank Order: Level of influence	All Provinces
Legislature's debating chamber	5	5	5
All committees combined	2	2	4
The mass media	4	3	*
Portfolio committee overseeing your dept.	3	1	3
Standing committee on public accounts	1	1	2
The ruling party	1	4	1
Opposition parties	4	*	*
*Not rated in the top five positions			

The table above shows that the legislative chambers in general fared rather poorly compared to the other key policy actors or institutions. Based on the number of 'good' or 'very good' ratings allocated to them by the respondents, the legislative chambers were rated last (ie fifth) in the table above. Significantly, in the two smaller samples from Gauteng and Mpumalanga the legislative chambers were rated below the mass media in terms of perceptions of level of influence. 'Mass media' here includes television, radio and

newspapers. Also significant is that the media is not rated within the top five positions of influential policy actors in the larger sample of all nine provinces. It is difficult to make firm conclusions about the fact that the mass media was ranked within the top five influential positions for Mpumalanga and Gauteng in terms of perceived level of influence, given the small sizes of the two samples. Nonetheless, the mass media has played an important role in policy processes in the provinces, but particularly so in Mpumalanga over the years.

There is a pervasive perception that legislative chambers are under utilised and, on some occasions, marginalised if not ignored by the provincial executive councils.

In fact, concerns have already been expressed in the past in general public policy debates about the dwindling importance of legislative chambers at provincial level in South Africa. There is a pervasive perception that legislative chambers are under utilised and, on some occasions, marginalised if not ignored by the provincial executive councils. They are increasingly being seen as serving only as arenas for mere party political grandstanding, mud slinging or speech making rather than as fora for discussing substantive policy issues.³

In fact, the former speaker of the Gauteng provincial legislature, Firoz Cachalia, expressed concern in the past about the tendency of Members of the Provincial Executive Council (MECs) to approach the media directly to make important policy statements outside the legislature. In a budget speech to the Gauteng legislature in 2002, he requested MECs to bring attention back to the floor of the house "by making important announcements in the house and not directly to the media".⁴ This statement clearly suggests that the mass media is becoming more important than the legislative chamber for important public announcements by the provincial government.

Given the dominant position, status and role of the ruling party in South Africa's system of government, it would be logical to expect it to be ranked in the first position across all three samples in table 8 above. However, only in the Gauteng sample and the larger sample was it ranked in first position. For Mpumalanga, the ruling party was ranked only fourth - just above the legislative chamber and, surprisingly, below the mass media. As indicated in the previous section, there appears to be a certain level of unhappiness about the ruling party among respondents from Mpumalanga. Also, only in the Gauteng sample were opposition parties rated in the top five positions. For Mpumalanga and for the large sample, opposition parties do not appear in the top five influential positions, underscoring the fact that they are largely marginal players in the policy processes compared to the ruling party.

Finally, while the legislative chambers appear to be perceived also as marginal role players in provincial policy processes, the legislatures in general appear to be regarded as key and influential role players by respondents. This conclusion is based on the fact that the other individual components of the legislatures (eg portfolio committees and public accounts committees) received generally high

ratings from respondents in terms of perceived levels of influence (see tables 2 & 3 above). Portfolio committees and public accounts committees therefore appear at the top of the rankings in table 8 above. For instance, the standing committees on public accounts were rated in the top 2 positions, while the portfolio committees were rated in the top three positions across all three samples in table 8 above.

CONCLUSION

The views of senior public servants at provincial level in South Africa are generally positive about the levels of influence of their provincial legislatures and related institutions. At first glance, this would be an unexpected finding given that literature on legislatures in general indicates that these institutions are generally weak and marginal in policy processes compared to executive branches of government. This applies mainly to legislative institutions designed in the British Westminster tradition, as is the case in South Africa. However, the positive ratings of perceived levels of influence of provincial legislatures in South Africa were based on the crucial oversight and monitoring work of specialised internal legislative committees. In particular, the departmental or portfolio committees and the public accounts committees were rated very favourably by respondents in terms of perceptions about their ability to influence policy decisions at provincial level.

However, the less favourable perceptions on the ability of ordinary citizens or public participation to influence provincial policy processes reflects, among others, an underlying inability of our current system of provincial government to promote regular and effective citizen involvement in governance processes. This is something that needs to be viewed with concern, especially after ten years of democratic practice in South Africa.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This Policy Brief is based on the findings of research work partly funded by the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung in Johannesburg, South Africa.
- ² The opinion survey work was conducted between January and July 2003.
- ³ The full list of selected policy actors/institutions included in the survey: organised interest groups (civic organisations, business, trades unions); legislature's debating chambers; all legislative committees; independent consultants and experts; the mass media (radio, television, newspapers); ordinary members of the public; portfolio committees; public accounts committees; the ruling party; opposition parties; and individual MPLs.

The positive ratings of perceived levels of influence of provincial legislatures in South Africa were based on the crucial oversight and monitoring work of specialised internal legislative committees.

- ⁴ Murray C, Nijzink L. *Building Representative Democracy: South Africa's Legislatures And The Constitution* European Union Parliamentary Support Programme, 2002: 60-62.
- ⁵ Cachalia Firoz (Speaker, Gauteng provincial legislature). 'Budget Speech 2002/2003.' 7.