

EPISODE 21

DO WE GET THE GOVERNMENT WE VOTE FOR?

Why Citizens Must Look Beyond Speeches and Elect People Who Can Deliver

Estimated Reading Time: 6–7 minutes

Introduction

Election campaigns are filled with speeches.

Promises.

Slogans.

Songs.

Crowds.

Personalities.

Some candidates are entertaining.

Some are powerful speakers.

Some know how to dominate public attention.

But an important question remains:

Can they actually build, operate and maintain the institutions that society needs?

A country does not run on speeches.

Communities need:

- clean water;
- functioning roads;
- reliable electricity;
- housing;
- jobs;
- public transport;
- safe wastewater systems;
- schools;
- healthcare;

- infrastructure maintenance.

When citizens vote mainly for personalities, performers and career politicians who have never successfully built or managed anything, they should not be surprised when government struggles to deliver.

In a democracy, voters must also accept responsibility for the quality of leadership they choose.

What Should Citizens Look for in a Leader?

Democratic leadership requires more than popularity.

A public representative should demonstrate some combination of:

- competence;
- integrity;
- sound judgement;
- practical experience;
- a record of achievement;
- financial responsibility;
- the ability to build effective teams;
- an understanding of institutions;
- accountability for results.

Being a skilled speaker may help a leader communicate.

But speaking is not the same as delivering.

A person may describe a power station brilliantly without knowing how to build, maintain or operate one.

A candidate may promise thousands of houses without understanding land, planning, finance, construction, bulk infrastructure or project management.

The public should therefore examine evidence of performance rather than relying only on promises.

The Difference Between a Talker and a Doer

A talker tells people what they want to hear.

A doer can show what has already been achieved.

Before voting, citizens should ask:

- What has this person built?
- What organisation has this person successfully managed?
- What measurable improvements followed their leadership?
- Did they complete projects on time and within budget?
- Did they maintain what was built?
- Did the people they served experience better outcomes?
- Did they accept responsibility when things went wrong?

Past performance does not guarantee future success.

But it provides more useful evidence than campaign language alone.

The Infrastructure Test

Imagine a candidate promises to repair a municipality.

The municipality faces:

- failing water infrastructure;
- sewage overflows;
- potholes;
- unreliable electricity;
- housing shortages;
- unemployment;
- poor maintenance;
- weak financial controls.

The candidate is an excellent orator.

Crowds applaud.

But the candidate has never:

- managed a complex organisation;
- delivered an infrastructure project;

- controlled a substantial budget;
- maintained public assets;
- led technical professionals;
- created sustainable employment.

Should voters rely only on the speech?

Or should they ask whether the candidate possesses the competence and experience required to perform the job?

Elections should not be popularity competitions detached from the responsibilities of government.

Why This Matters

Political appointments affect every part of daily life.

The people elected to office influence:

- budgets;
- infrastructure priorities;
- municipal leadership;
- appointments to public institutions;
- maintenance programmes;
- housing delivery;
- economic policy;
- public safety;
- education and healthcare.

When unsuitable people are elected, the consequences may appear years later.

A neglected water system does not collapse immediately.

A power station may deteriorate gradually.

Roads fail after years of inadequate maintenance.

Railways decline when investment, engineering and operational discipline are lost.

Poor voting decisions can therefore impose costs long after the election campaign has ended.

OUBAS Analysis

OUBAS believes that democracy involves more than the right to vote.

It includes the responsibility to vote thoughtfully.

Citizens cannot repeatedly select leaders because they are entertaining, famous, loud or politically connected and then act as though service-delivery failure appeared from nowhere.

Voters should examine:

- competence;
- character;
- experience;
- performance;
- the quality of the proposed team;
- the realism of promises.

This does not mean that only wealthy people, professionals or business owners should hold public office.

It means that anyone seeking responsibility for public resources must demonstrate the capacity to use that responsibility effectively.

A person without an impressive title may be an excellent public leader if they have integrity, practical judgement and a record of delivery.

A highly educated or famous person may still be unsuitable if they cannot implement, manage or account.

The standard must be performance—not theatre.

OUBAS Principle

Public office is a responsibility to deliver, not a platform for performance.

A second principle follows:

The quality of government cannot consistently exceed the quality of leadership that citizens choose and tolerate.

OUBAS Reform Proposal

OUBAS proposes that voters should have access to clear, comparable information on every serious candidate, including:

- qualifications and relevant experience;
- employment and leadership history;
- completed projects;
- measurable achievements;
- past performance in public office;
- financial and ethical disclosures;
- the competence of the proposed leadership team;
- realistic and costed commitments.

Public debates should test implementation capacity, not merely speaking ability.

Candidates should be required to explain:

- what they will deliver;
- how it will be funded;
- who will implement it;
- when it will be completed;
- how performance will be measured;
- what consequences will follow if they fail.

Democracy improves when elections become assessments of competence rather than contests of personality.

Key Lessons

After reading this episode, you should understand that:

- powerful speeches do not guarantee competent government;
- voters should examine evidence of delivery;
- public leadership requires practical ability and accountability;
- infrastructure failure often reflects years of poor leadership and weak decisions;
- citizens share responsibility for the leaders they elect and continue to support.

OUBAS Knowledge Check

1. Which quality is insufficient on its own for effective public leadership?

- ☐ Speaking ability
 - ☐ Integrity
 - ☐ Competence
 - ☐ Accountability
-

2. What should voters examine before supporting a candidate?

- ☐ Past performance
 - ☐ Relevant experience
 - ☐ Capacity to deliver
 - ☐ All of the above
-

3. Does this episode argue that only professionals or businesspeople may hold office?

- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
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4. Why can poor political choices have long-term consequences?

- ☐ Infrastructure often deteriorates over several years
 - ☐ Elections have no consequences
 - ☐ Maintenance is automatic
 - ☐ Speeches repair infrastructure
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5. Which principle best reflects the OUBAS position?

- ☐ Public office is a responsibility to deliver
 - ☐ Popularity is the best measure of competence
 - ☐ Campaign promises are sufficient
 - ☐ Citizens have no responsibility after voting
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OUBAS Public Sentiment Survey

1. What most influences voting decisions in your community?

- ☐ Political party
- ☐ Candidate personality
- ☐ Past performance
- ☐ Policies and plans
- ☐ Community identity
- ☐ Other

2. Should candidates be required to publish measurable records of achievement before elections?

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. Do voters give enough attention to competence and implementation ability?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

4. Which quality should carry the greatest weight when selecting a public leader?

- ☐ Integrity
- ☐ Competence
- ☐ Relevant experience
- ☐ Ability to communicate
- ☐ A combination of all four

5. Have you ever regretted supporting a political candidate because of poor performance after election?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

 OUBAS Innovation Challenge

Design a **Public Leadership Scorecard** that citizens could use before voting.

Choose five compulsory measures.

They might include:

- integrity;

- delivery record;
- leadership experience;
- knowledge of government;
- financial responsibility;
- quality of the proposed team;
- realism of promises;
- public accountability.

Share your scorecard with OUBAS.

Strong proposals may be developed into an **OUBAS Voter Competence Index** and considered by AAP working groups.

Share Your Experience

Have you seen an elected leader who delivered more than they promised?

What made that person effective?

Have you also experienced leadership built mainly around speeches, publicity and excuses?

What did the community lose?

Your contribution will form part of the **OUBAS People's Index on Democratic Leadership and Service Delivery**.

Continue Your Learning

 Visit the **OUBAS Bookstore** for publications on governance, democratic accountability, public leadership, infrastructure, service delivery and institutional reform.

Join AAP

Africa needs citizens who vote thoughtfully and professionals who help public institutions deliver.

Join the **Amalgamated African Professionals (AAP)** to:

- analyse public policy;

- evaluate leadership competency;
- develop practical service-delivery proposals;
- mentor future leaders;
- contribute to evidence-based public discussion.

Join AAP Today.

Follow OUBAS

Follow OUBAS for new episodes, surveys, research findings and reform proposals.

Every response contributes to the **OUBAS People's Index**, helping measure public views on political leadership, voter responsibility and service delivery.

Next Episode

What Should Citizens Demand Before They Vote?

How can voters distinguish realistic plans from campaign theatre?

What information should every candidate disclose?

How should promises be measured after an election?

OUBAS exists to educate, stimulate informed discussion and inspire practical solutions.

Knowledge grows when it is shared.

Institutions improve when people participate.

The only constant in every successful institution should be innovation and continuous improvement.

Join the conversation. Join AAP. Help build a better Africa.