



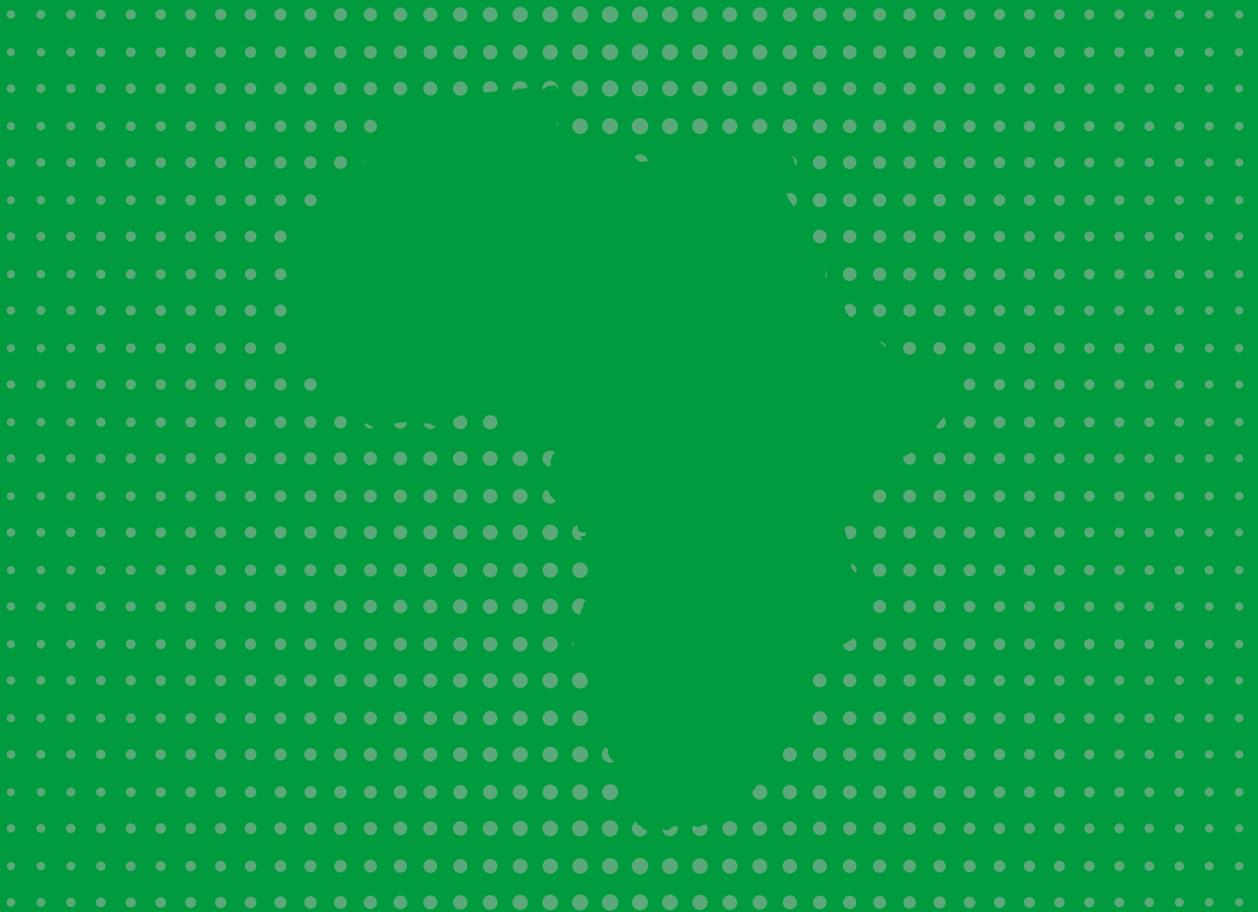
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RECONCILIATION & DEVELOPMENT

OCCASIONAL PAPERS | NUMBER 6

A GENERATION OF DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH AFRICA:

Insights on political participation from the
South African Reconciliation Barometer



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A generation of democracy in South Africa: Insights on political participation from the South African Reconciliation Barometer

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The Reconciliation and Development Series is a multidisciplinary publication focused on the themes of peacebuilding and development. Peacebuilding research includes the study of the causes of armed violence and war, the processes of conflict, the preconditions for peaceful resolution and peacebuilding, and the processes and nature of social cohesion and reconciliation. Development research, in turn, is concerned with poverty, structural inequalities, the reasons for underdevelopment, issues of socio-economic justice, and the nature of inclusive development. This publication serves to build up a knowledge base of research topics in the fields of peacebuilding and development, and the nexus between them, by studying the relationship between conflict and poverty, and exclusion and inequality, as well as between peace and development, in positive terms.

Research in the publication follows a problem-driven methodology in which the scientific research problem decides the methodological approach. Geographically, the publication has a particular focus on post-conflict societies on the African continent.

About this paper

This report was compiled by Mikhail Moosa, Project leader for the South African Reconciliation Barometer in the IJR's Research and Policy Programme.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

ANC	African National Congress
DA	Democratic Alliance
DP	Democratic Party
COPE	Congress of the People
EFF	Economic Freedom Fighters
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IEC	Electoral Commission of South Africa
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
IJR	Institute for Justice and Reconciliation
NP	National Party
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SARB	South African Reconciliation Barometer
StatsSA	Statistics South Africa
VAP	Voting age population

Key findings

- South Africans' faith in their political and voter efficacy has decreased since 2015 and in 2019, three-quarters of respondents (74%) believed politicians do not care about their concerns, while three in five (58%) believed their votes do not make a difference.
- South Africans' confidence in public institutions is relatively low, although there was a marked improvement between 2017 and 2019.
- Public opinion data from the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) explains why voter turnout has steadily decreased over time, highlighting citizens' dissatisfaction with the responsiveness of their democracy.
- The share of the voting age population (VAP) that is not registered to vote has steadily increased and interventions are required to restore citizens' faith in the ballot box.
- The COVID-19 pandemic presents an immense challenge to democracy, but the crisis could present an opportunity for the government to restore public confidence and for decisions to be taken collaboratively and democratically.

Introduction

Nearly a generation has passed since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. At this stage, how healthy is the country's democracy? Since the proliferation of electoral democracy in Africa in the 1990s,¹ some critics have argued that liberal democracy, as it functions in Western Europe, is simply unsuitable for the diverse societies of Africa, especially those with a history of violence and oppression.² More recently, some political scientists have noted the global decline of democratic norms in many countries, while others have warned of the imminent collapse of liberal democracy itself.³ The success of democracy's growth in Africa has proved to be uneven over time and across various countries,⁴ but Africans in several countries have long struggled for greater democratic freedoms.⁵ South Africa, in particular, has a long history of pro-democracy mobilisation.⁶ However, since the establishment of democracy in the 1990s, do citizens still value the freedoms afforded by democracy and do they believe democracy is an effective political system?

To gauge the health of South Africa's democracy, it is first necessary to provide a definition of democracy that might steer a more consistent analysis. South African political scientist Steven Friedman, in a broad overview of the concept and its application in South Africa, suggests that democracy can be defined as 'a system of popular sovereignty in which the political community governs itself through the exercise of the equal decision-making rights and powers of each of its members.'⁷ It is therefore prudent to examine the degree of citizens' participation as political equals. This paper provides novel insights into South Africans' perceptions of democracy, specifically their attitudes towards political participation. The data is from the South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB), a nationally representative public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR). While analysis of SARB data has previously gauged political participation in South Africa,⁸ this paper benefits from using multiple rounds of SARB surveys to track changes in public opinion over time. To supplement the analysis of public opinion data, this paper also draws on data from the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) on national elections and provides an overview of the dominant party theory and how this might affect democratic participation.

Do citizens still value the freedoms afforded by democracy and do they believe democracy is an effective political system?

Outline

This paper is divided into four sections and a conclusion. Section 1 presents a brief overview of the SARB surveys' methodology. Importantly, the data from the SARB is nationally representative, with a confidence level of 95%, and can be disaggregated by several demographic indicators.⁹

Section 2 provides an introduction to the theory of one-party dominance in political science. This section highlights South Africa's relatively unique position as a country where one party, the African National Congress (ANC), has dominated democratic politics in every free and fair national election. It is argued that the ANC's consistent, although declining, national dominance may be one cause behind popular frustration with some procedural aspects of democratic politics, such as voting, and may spur political action by other means.

Section 3 analyses data from South Africa's national elections, from 1994 to 2019, to demonstrate the decline in voter participation over time. An increasing share of the adult population is not engaging in the voting process. While democracy is more substantive than simply holding regular elections, changes in electoral participation over time are a useful guide for citizens' engagement in their democracy.

Section 4 presents public opinion data from the SARB surveys on a range of issues – from confidence in institutions to perceptions of political and voting efficacy. The data is analysed both over successive rounds of the SARB surveys in 2015, 2017 and 2019, and by disaggregating the data according to demographic variables. The SARB surveys reveal that South Africans are increasingly negative toward political participation, particularly voting, as they feel that their actions will not make a difference and that elected representatives are not responsive to their concerns.

In conclusion, South Africans' trust and faith in the efficacy of their democracy is waning. Using findings from the SARB, this paper highlights that citizens do not believe their representatives are responsive to their concerns and that voting is not an effective means of participating in politics. Public opinion data explains why South Africa has seen declining voter turnout over time. To reverse the growing disengagement with democracy, citizens' trust in their government must be restored, elected representatives must listen and respond to citizens' concerns, and barriers to participation, such as voter registration, must be minimised. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown will present significant challenges to many facets of South Africa's democracy, it also presents an opportunity to reinvigorate governance in a more democratic mold, where citizens are engaged and encouraged to participate in their democracy.

Citizens do not believe their representatives are responsive to their concerns and that voting is not an effective means of participating in politics

Section 1: Methodology of the South African Reconciliation Barometer¹⁰

The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) is the world's longest-running public opinion survey on national reconciliation'

The South African Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) survey is a cross-sectional, iterative public opinion survey conducted by the IJR on a regular basis since 2003. It is the world's longest-running public opinion survey on national reconciliation and provides a nationally representative measure of South Africans' attitudes to reconciliation and several other important social and political indicators.

In 2003 and 2004, the SARB survey was carried out twice a year, and then annually until 2013. Since 2013, the survey has been conducted biennially, with the most recent round carried out in July and August 2019. All SARB surveys are conducted using face-to-face interviews and administered in the language of the participants' choice. Participation is always voluntary, based on fully informed consent, and participants are free to withdraw from the survey at any time during the interview. No incentives are offered to respondents for their participation.

A stratified, multistage random sample design was used as the sampling approach. Province, race and geographic area (metro/non-metro) were taken as the explicit stratification variables to ensure that good coverage and the best possible precision per stratum were achieved. The total sample size for the 2019 round was 2 400 respondents. Sample weights are benchmarked to the latest available census data and mid-year population estimates from Statistics South Africa (StatsSA).¹¹ The final dataset was weighted to correct any disproportions that may have occurred. The benchmark variables used in the integrated weighting are as follows: province, race, gender and age group. The survey has a 95% confidence level and the margin of error is 2 percentage points.

Section 2: One party dominance and democracy in South Africa

Since South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, much has changed for the better and much has remained the same for the worse. The country remains starkly marked by several centuries of underdevelopment and racialised inequality,¹² but as a democracy, South Africa possesses many attributes of a successful political transition, albeit with its unique issues.

South Africa's domestic politics have been dominated by the governing ANC, the erstwhile and foremost anti-apartheid liberation movement, which has won the largest share of votes in free and fair elections at every national and municipal election by a comfortable margin. A combination of its anti-apartheid legacy and widespread support across the country, along with the dissolution of opposition political parties, has resulted in the ANC's dominance.¹³ South Africa is therefore a classic example of a dominant party state.¹⁴

In theory, dominant party states can be both democratic or authoritarian, depending on the degree of civic freedom and multi-party competition. Unlike authoritarian regimes, where only one party is allowed to compete freely, dominant party states tolerate electoral competition to varying degrees.¹⁵ Other southern African countries have also been dominated by single parties with liberation legacies in the wake of democratic elections.¹⁶ The dominance of a single party in a relatively free, multi-party democracy produces several unique political features:

- Opposition parties are weak and have almost no chance of replacing the dominant party in government. In India, where the Indian National Congress dominated democratic elections for three uninterrupted decades after independence, opposition parties were merely parties of pressure, with mixed success in extracting concessions from the dominant party.¹⁷
- Due to the relative weakness of other parties, the dominant party – in South Africa, the ANC – is likely to continue to exert its dominance for the foreseeable future. The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the severe economic fallout, might see the decline of the ANC's majority. Nonetheless, it is likely to remain the dominant political party. Provincial and municipal elections are more competitive than national elections. For example, the Western Cape has been governed by three different parties – the National Party (NP), the ANC, and the Democratic Alliance (DA) – since 1994, while the 2016 municipal elections saw the ANC lose majorities in several key councils. Nonetheless, at a national level, no other party comes close to threatening the ANC's dominance.

The dominance of a single party in a relatively free, multi-party democracy produces several unique political features

- As opposition parties cannot realistically expect to become the national governing party, they tend to resort to representing narrower interests and smaller constituencies, becoming ‘parties of pressure’. Many political parties in South Africa are either regional parties, drawing almost all their support and membership from particular provinces, or political vehicles for their leaders, where the party’s reputation and support rely on its leader’s popularity.¹⁸ Although the two main opposition parties, the DA and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), garner support nationally, both parties are perceived to appeal to particular constituencies, rather than representing broad, national interests. The DA has struggled to shake the perception that it remains a party for white English-speakers, particularly after the fallout surrounding the resignations of senior black leaders,¹⁹ and the EFF, with a history of capitalising on racial tensions, draws its support disproportionately from men, with several allegations of sexism within the party emerging over recent years.²⁰

The causes and effects of the ANC’s dominance are features of South Africa’s democracy and influence how citizens interact with their state. One effect of the ANC’s dominance might be that elections are not seen as the most effective means to bring about change in governance. Protests, strikes, and other forms of collective mobilisation are common in South Africa and a legacy of anti-apartheid resistance.²¹ Citizens engaging in collective action are typically using their democratic freedoms to appeal to employers or authorities to improve their conditions. Mobilisation concerned with specific issues – the provision of water, electricity, or housing – are more likely to yield tangible solutions than electoral choice. Election results do not necessarily lead to better services, and the assumption that voters reward better services is more nuanced than initially presumed.²² A study using nationally representative public opinion data from the 2018 Afrobarometer survey suggests that most South Africans would be willing to forego democratic elections if the provision of jobs, security and housing could be improved.²³ Additionally, the relative weakness of opposition parties, despite decreasing support for the ANC, indicates that voters might consider not voting at all to be a better use of their time than voting for an opposition party that will not attain power. To better understand how one-party dominance affects South Africa’s democracy, the following section presents an analysis of national elections since 1994.

One effect of the ANC’s dominance might be that elections are not seen as the most effective means to bring about change in governance

Section 3: Electoral participation

This section presents data from South Africa’s national electoral commission, the IEC, that shows trends in voter participation and electoral results since the first democratic elections in 1994. Importantly, the IEC did not oversee the 1994 elections with a voters’ roll and thus data on levels of registration and turnout is not readily available for that election. As the SARB is nationally representative, the primary focus of this section and further discussion of electoral participation will be on national elections. The following section will explore public opinion data on the political process, institutional confidence and perceptions of voter efficacy, thereby elucidating some of the changes in electoral results and voter participation.

South Africa is a dominant party state and Figure 1 demonstrates the ANC’s consistent electoral majority over time. As the theory of dominant parties suggests, not only is the ANC electorally dominant, but opposition parties are particularly weak. In 2014, the DA obtained the largest share of opposition votes (22%) in the democratic era. While the ANC recorded its worst electoral result in 2019 (58%), the two largest opposition parties, the DA and EFF, had a combined vote share of only 32%. As the ANC’s vote share has consistently declined since its peak in 2004 (70%), no other party appears likely to replace it as the majority party in the next few elections, particularly as the DA’s vote share declined for the first time between 2014 and 2019.

Not only is the ANC electorally dominant, but opposition parties are particularly weak

Figure 1: Change in vote share for the top three parties in national elections²⁴

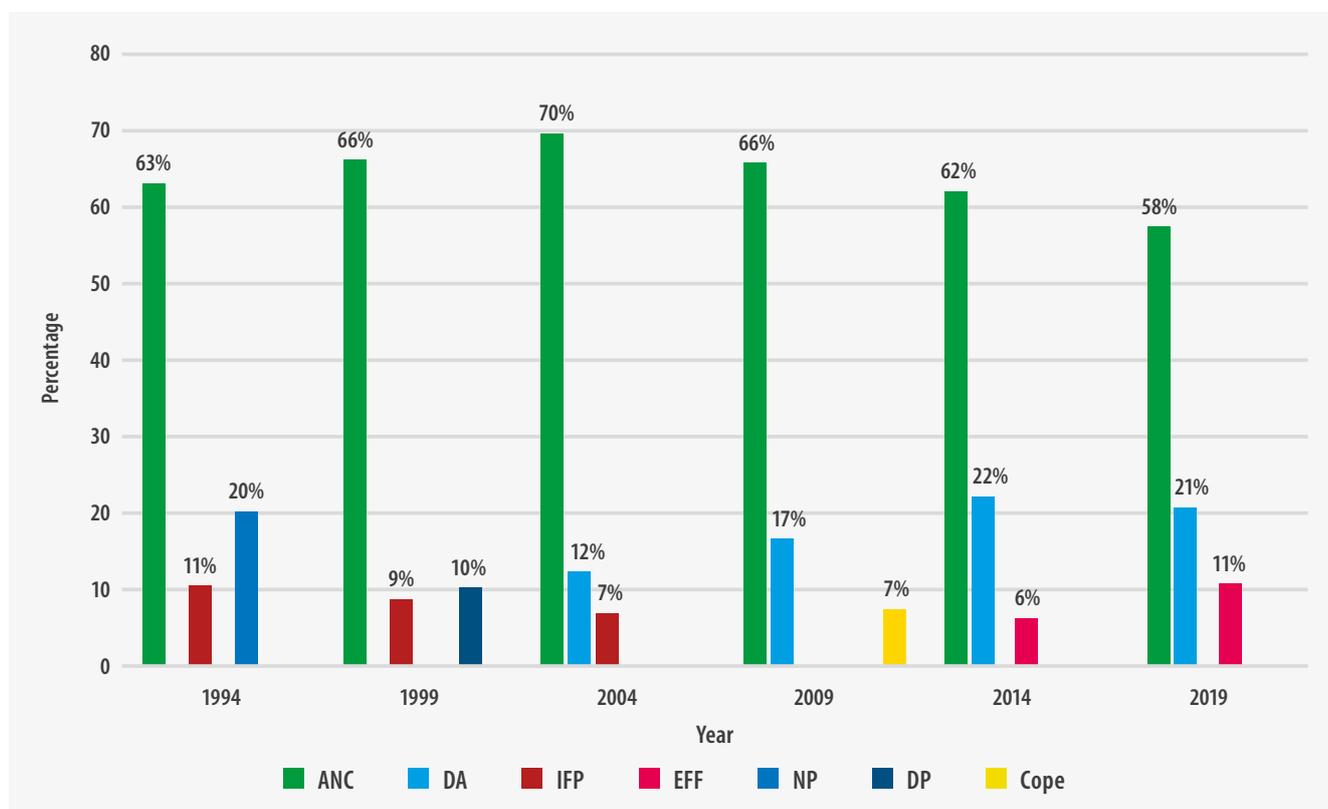
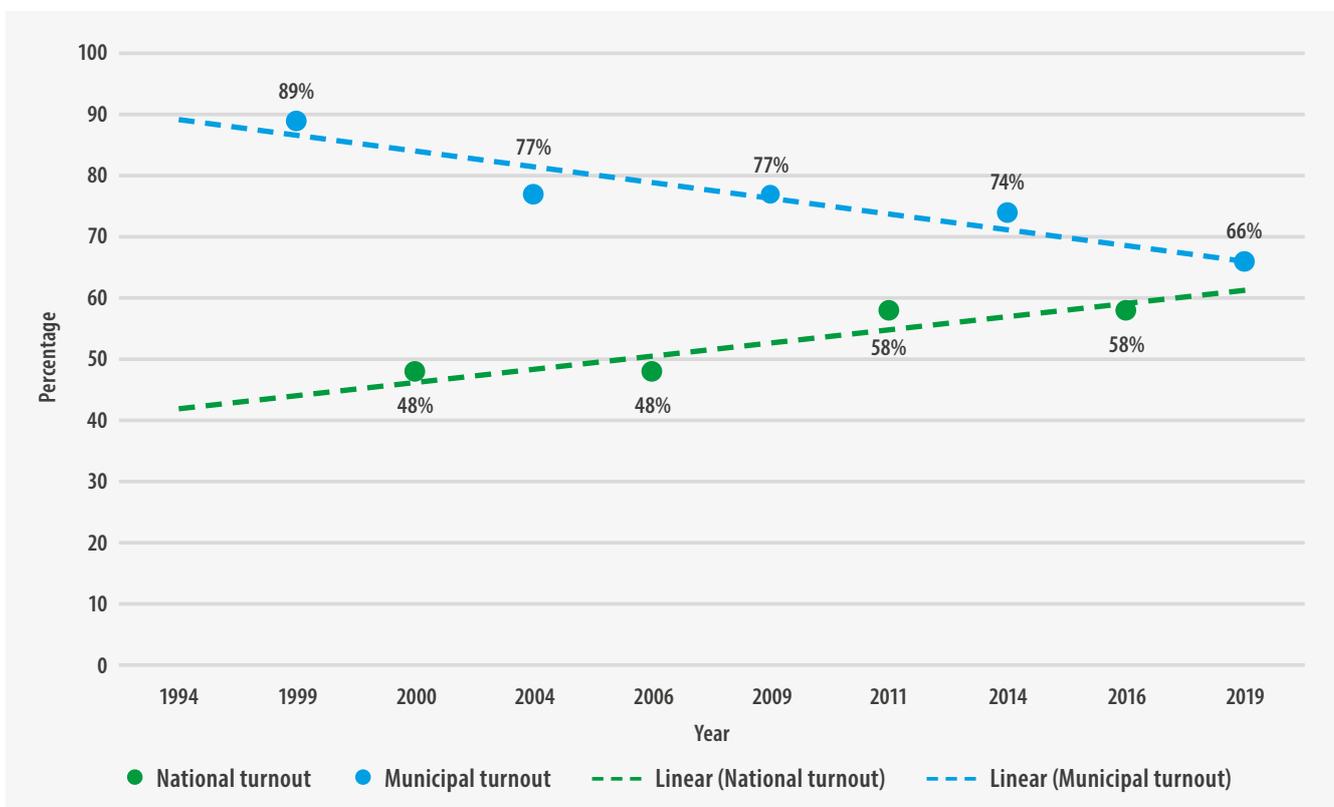


Figure 2 shows the change in voter turnout across both national and municipal elections. Voter turnout refers to the share of the registered voters who vote in particular elections. In 1994, there was no voters' roll and thus no indication of the total registered voting population. However, it is clear that voter turnout in national elections was extremely high in early elections (89% in 1999) and has steadily decreased over time, with a sharp drop in voter turnout between 2014 (75%) and 2019 (66%). In democratising societies it is fairly typical for turnout to be higher in the first few elections and to then decrease slightly. Relatively consistent levels of turnout between 2004 and 2014 are indicative of this stabilisation process, but the drop in turnout in 2019 is anomalous. What are the causes of the decrease in voter turnout? The following section provides some answers using public opinion data from the SARB.

Figure 2: Change in voter turnout in national and municipal elections²⁵



Along with a downward trend in voter turnout at a national level, Figure 2 also highlights steadily increasing levels of turnout for municipal elections.²⁶ Levels of turnout for municipal elections have historically been low, with less than half of registered voters (48%) participating in the 2000 and 2006 elections. In 2011 and 2016, a greater share of registered voters (58%) participated in municipal elections. The increasing turnout of voters to municipal elections, in contrast to the decreasing turnout at a national level, is perhaps indicative of voters prioritising local-level concerns. Municipal elections are also much more competitive than national elections, as smaller, regional parties are more often represented in particular municipalities. The results of the 2016 municipal elections dented the ANC's electoral dominance, as the party lost its majority

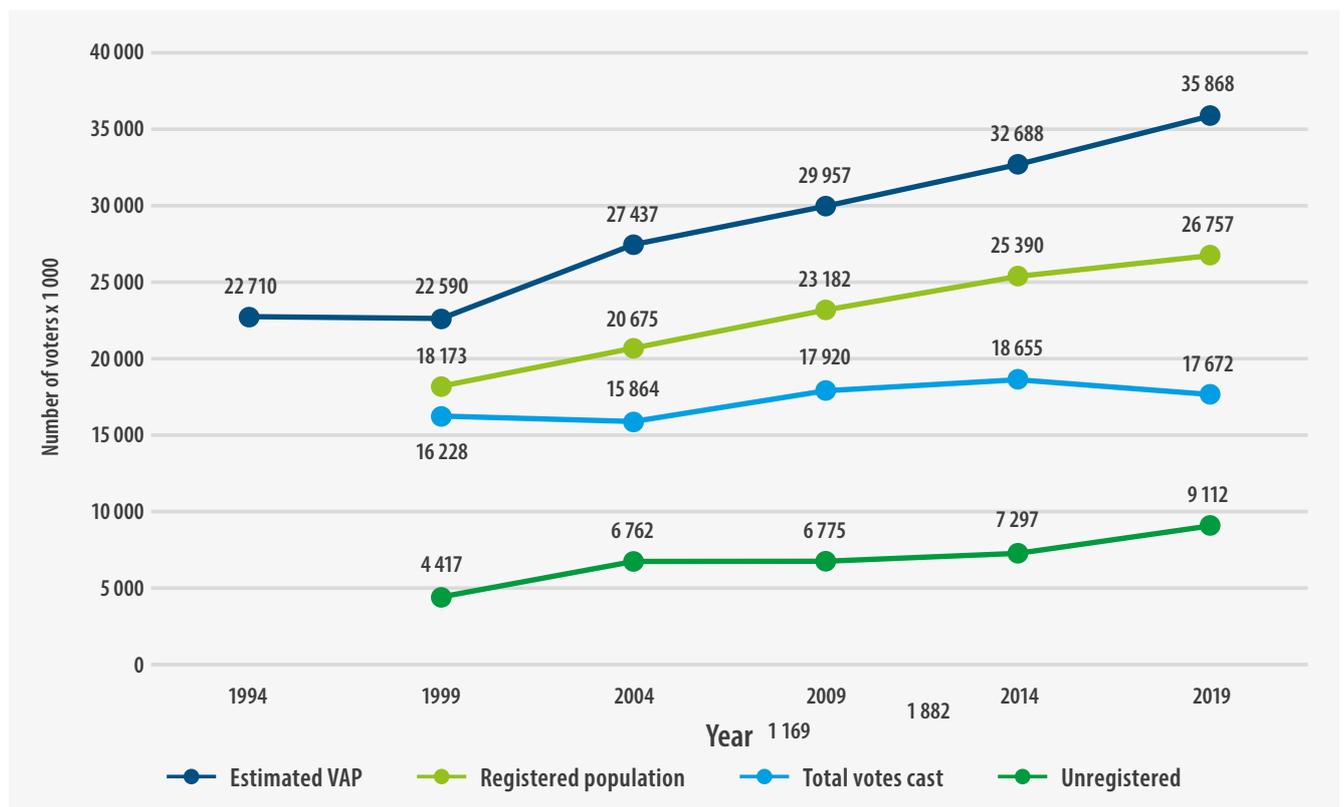
The increasing turnout of voters to municipal elections [...] is perhaps indicative of voters prioritising local-level concerns

support in major metropolitan areas, including Tshwane, Ekurhuleni and Nelson Mandela Bay. The increasing competitiveness of municipal elections, combined with increasing voter turnout, make local-level elections an increasingly important domain of electoral competition.

Why has voter turnout at national elections declined? Figure 3 shows the change in the voting age population (VAP), the total population of registered voters, the total votes cast, and the number of unregistered voters at each national election. Schulz-Herzenberg’s data indicates that as the estimated VAP – the share of individuals over the age of 18 years old – has increased over time, the rate of registration has not kept pace.²⁷ Moreover, the difference between the size of the estimated VAP and the number of registered voters (i.e. unregistered voters) has increased over time. The increasing decline in voter turnout at national elections is demonstrated in the divergence between the population of registered voters and the number of total votes cast. In fact, the number of votes cast in the 2019 national elections was lower than both the 2014 and 2009 elections, despite a steady increase in the VAP.

The number of votes cast in the 2019 national elections was lower than both the 2014 and 2009 elections

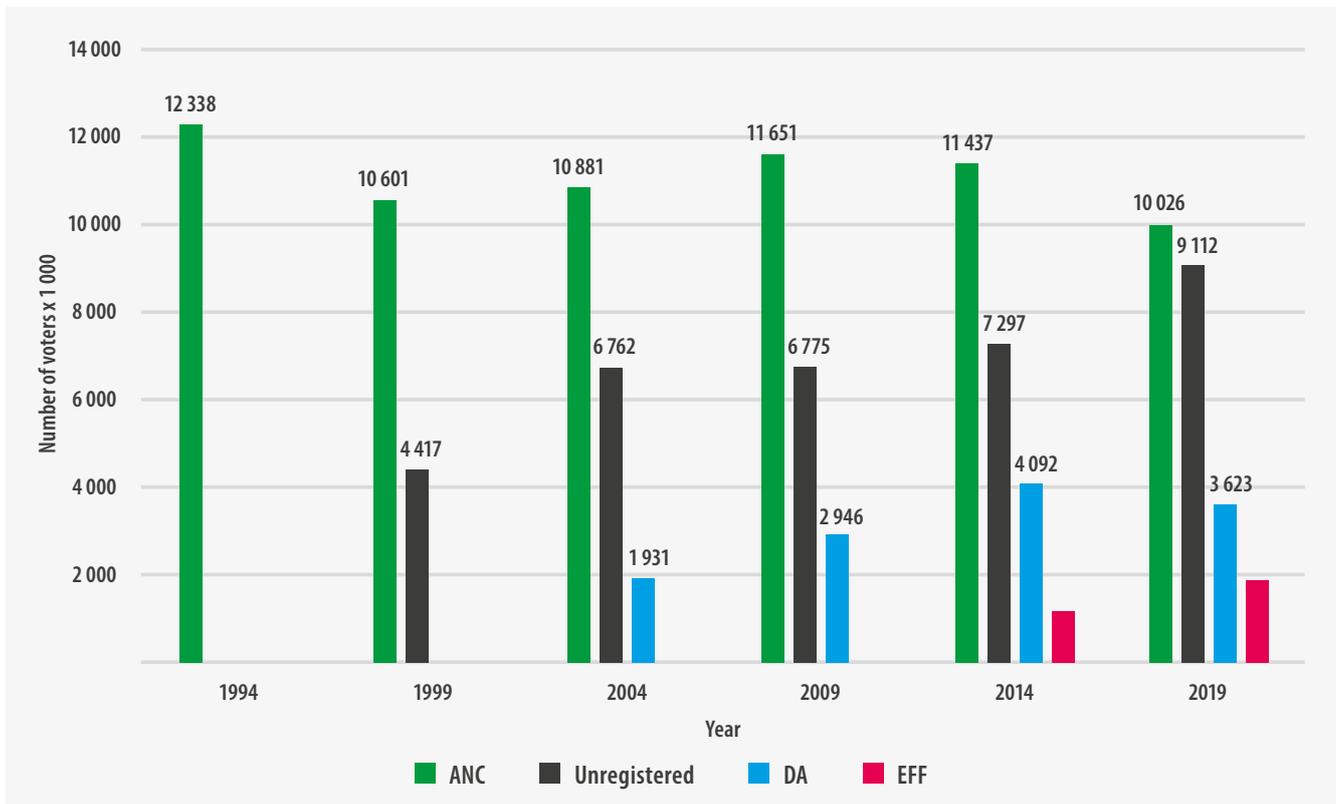
Figure 3: Change in VAP, registered, voting and unregistered populations over time²⁸



To demonstrate the effects of decreasing voter turnout, Figure 4 shows the number of votes received by the ANC in each election, along with the DA and EFF, as well as the increasing number of the VAP that is not registered to vote. In 2019, the ANC received the lowest number of votes in its electoral history, despite significant national population growth since 1994.²⁹ In contrast, the

share of the VAP that is not registered to vote has increased significantly over time. The number of unregistered voters (9 111 541) is almost as high as the number of ANC voters (10 026 475), despite the ANC governing with a national majority, and far exceeds the share of voters for either the DA or the EFF.

Figure 4: Change in number of unregistered voters and number of votes for ANC, DA and EFF³⁰



The data from South Africa's democratic elections reveals several trends:

- The most obvious trend points to the ANC's complete electoral dominance. Based on current trends, this is unlikely to change over the next few years, although the ANC's majority is much less secure.
- Voter turnout at national elections is steadily decreasing, with the 2019 elections registering the lowest turnout in democratic history. Conversely, voter turnout at municipal elections is increasing over time, perhaps indicating that voters are more motivated to engage in local-level politics, which tend to be more competitive than national politics.
- The rate of voter registration is slower than the growth in the VAP, leading to an increasing number of unregistered voters.
- The number of unregistered voters is increasing rapidly and is almost as high as the number of ANC voters. The ANC received its lowest vote total ever and, based on trends of decreasing turnout and an increasing number

of unregistered voters, it is likely that unregistered voters might soon outnumber voters for the governing party. In other words, the ANC is likely to win the next election, but the number of adults who do not participate in that election might be higher than the total number of ANC voters.

These trends pose serious challenges for South Africa's democracy. Figure 3 shows that the VAP in 2019 was more than three times larger than the total number of votes for the ANC (Figure 4). The ANC is governing the country with an electoral majority despite receiving less than one-third of votes from the total VAP. However, South Africa is not alone in facing this democratic conundrum. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has tracked voter turnout around the world for the last two decades and revealed that 'despite the growth in the global voter population and the number of countries that hold elections, the global average voter turnout has decreased significantly since the early 1990s.'³¹ As a new democracy, South Africa's initial high levels of voter turnout in the 1990s was anomalous compared to global rates. The analysis from IDEA suggests that global voter turnout was only 66% (the same turnout for South Africa's 2019 elections) for the period 2011–2015, down from 70% in the 1990s.³² South Africa, however, has had far fewer democratic elections than many other countries. Why is voter turnout decreasing at a national level? Why are potential and registered voters opting out of the voting process? The following section explore South Africans' attitudes toward political institutions and the efficacy of the voting process.

Why are potential and registered voters opting out of the voting process?

Section 4: South Africans' perceptions of political participation

This section relies on public opinion data from the SARB surveys. The SARB asks South Africans questions relating to several themes, but this section focuses on South Africans' relationship with political culture. This section attempts to answer four key questions to understand why voter turnout is decreasing and why people are disengaging from the voting process:

1. How much confidence do South Africans have in public institutions?
2. Why do South Africans have such low levels of confidence in their political institutions?
3. Do South Africans believe that they can participate meaningfully in national politics?
4. Do South Africans believe that voting is an effective way to engage in politics?

Figure 5: Share of respondents with 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of confidence in institutions³³

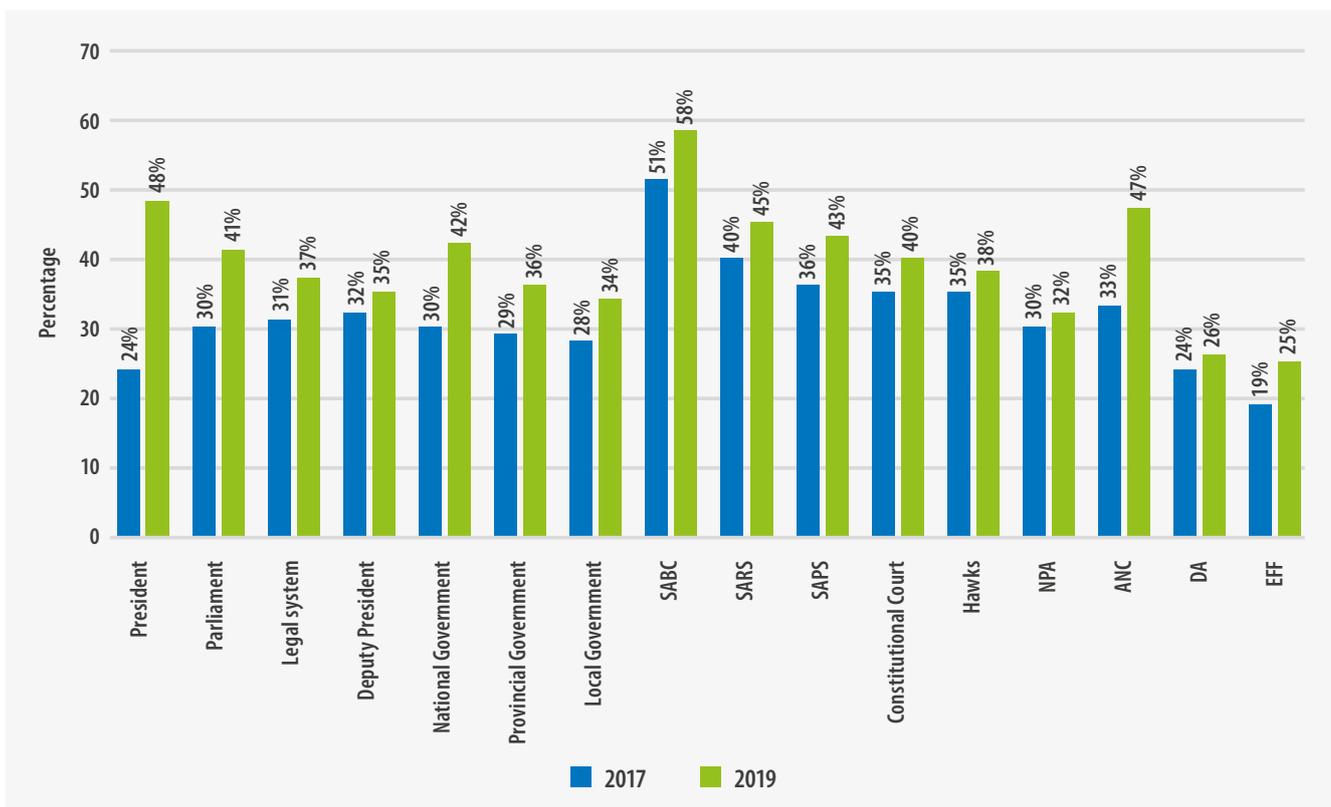


Figure 5 shows the share of South Africans who have 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of confidence in each institution listed. Generally, South Africans do not have a high degree of confidence in institutions, as only the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the national broadcaster, is viewed by a majority of respondents with a high degree of confidence. Despite low levels of

confidence, there was significant growth in confidence across all institutions between 2017 and 2019. Most notably, confidence in the president in 2017, under former president Jacob Zuma, was the lowest of all institutions (24%), but in 2019, under President Cyril Ramaphosa, levels of public confidence doubled (48%). Confidence in the ANC also improved substantially between 2017 (33%) and 2019 (47%). Ramaphosa’s election as state president in 2018, after narrowly winning the ANC presidency in December 2017 and subsequent attempts to convince Zuma to step down early, has probably had a positive knock-on effect for other state institutions.

Despite low levels of confidence, there was significant growth in confidence across all institutions between 2017 and 2019

Why do South Africans have low levels of confidence in their institutions? Several factors likely play a role in South Africans’ negative perceptions of public institutions, namely the slow and uneven delivery of services, lack of capacity in service provision and the widespread belief that institutions are blighted – or ‘captured’ – by corruption.³⁴

Figure 6: Perceptions of corruption in government³⁵

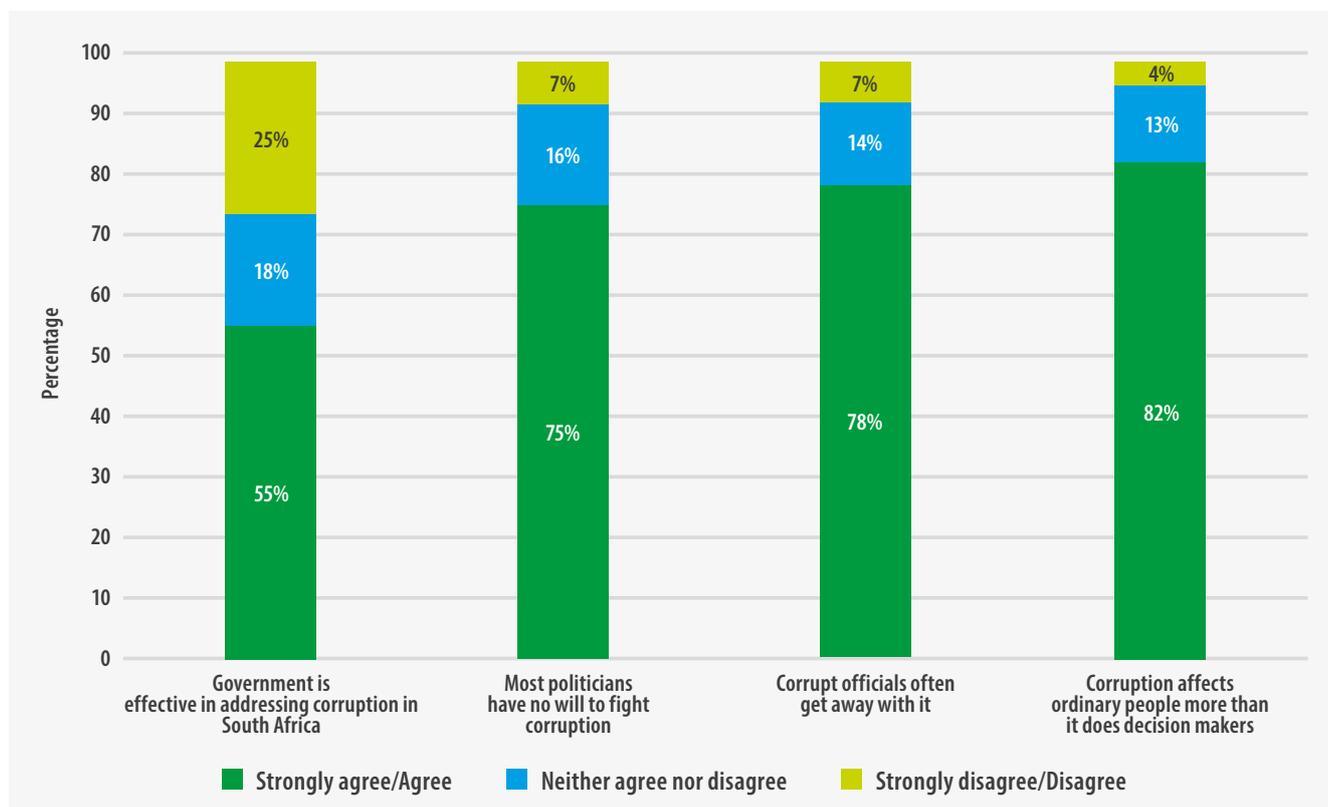


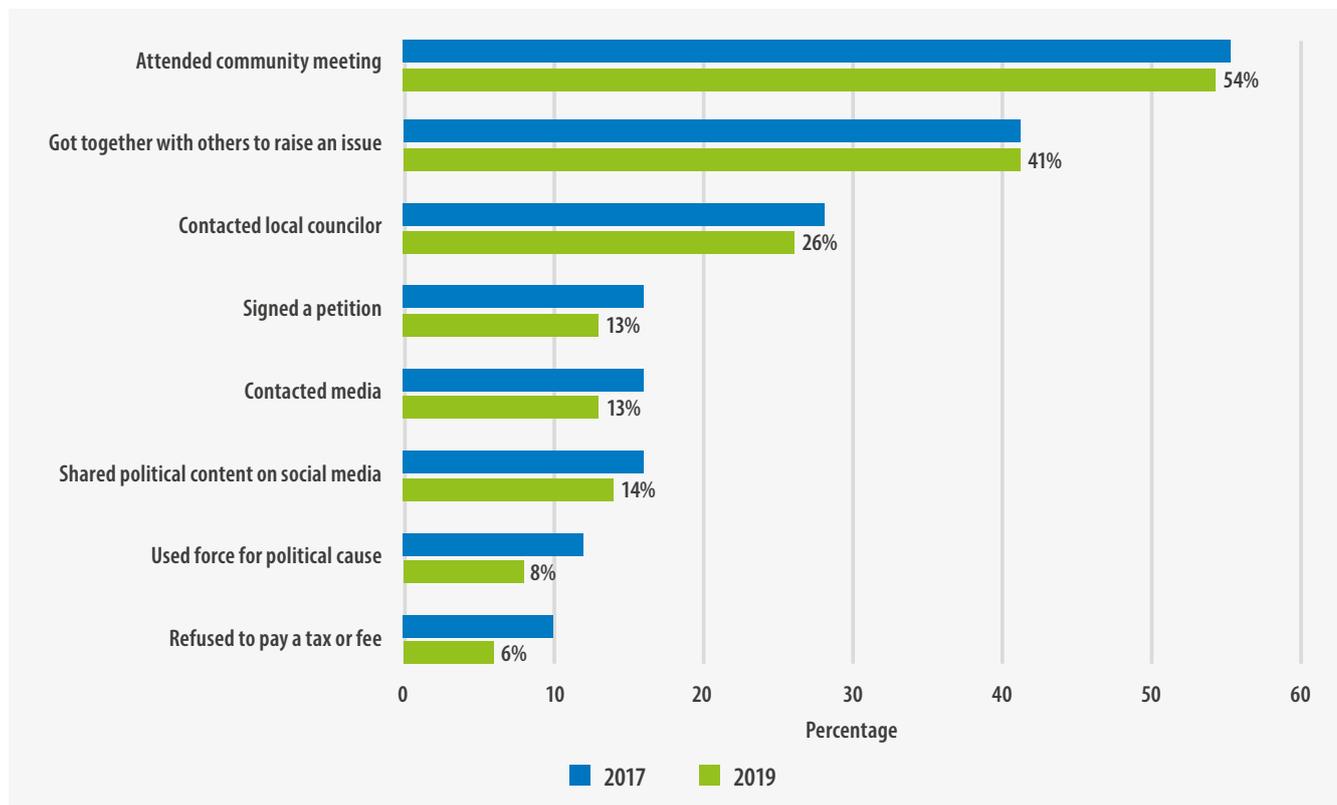
Figure 6 shows that a small majority of South Africans (55%) agree that the government is effective in addressing corruption. This finding is a stark contrast to the 2018 Afrobarometer survey, which found that ‘most South Africans (70%) believe the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” at fighting graft.’³⁶ However, the SARB survey also shows that most South Africans overwhelmingly agree that politicians have no will to fight corruption and that corrupt officials often get away with it. Around four in five South Africans (82%) believe corruption affects ordinary people more than decision-

makers. While a small majority agree that corruption is being addressed, a much larger share of respondents highlights the pernicious culture of impunity around corruption in public institutions.

Outside of electoral politics [...] many South Africans have participated politically in the past year

Outside of electoral politics, Figure 7 shows that many South Africans have participated politically in the previous year. A small majority of respondents (54%) indicated that they had attended a community meeting in the last year, while two-fifths (41%) of South Africans have got together with others to raise an issue. Compared to data from 2017, respondents in 2019 had indicated slightly lower levels of participation, particularly involving more extreme measures, such as using force for a political cause (12% in 2017; 8% in 2019) and refusing to pay tax (10% in 2017; 6% in 2019). While reports of political violence have historically escalated around local and national elections, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal,³⁷ only a small minority of respondents indicate that they have used force for a political cause.³⁸

Figure 7: Share of respondents who participated collectively at least once in past year³⁹



In 2019, almost half of respondents agreed that they do not consider themselves well qualified to participate in issues of national importance

Since 2015, the SARB has asked respondents questions relating to their perceptions of political efficacy (Figure 8). Overall, South Africans express high levels of agreement to negative statements on political efficacy, increasing between 2017 and 2019. In 2019, almost half of respondents agreed that they do not consider themselves well qualified to participate in issues of national importance and they do not have a good understanding of important national issues. A small majority of respondents (55%) believe that they are not as well informed as most people about national issues, while

two-thirds (66%) agree that people like them do not have a say about what political leaders do. Finally, the vast majority of South Africans believe that those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people and that political leaders do not care about what people like them think. Figure 8 shows that South Africans' perceptions of political efficacy were more negative in 2019 than in 2017 and 2015.

Figure 8: Perceptions of political efficacy⁴⁰

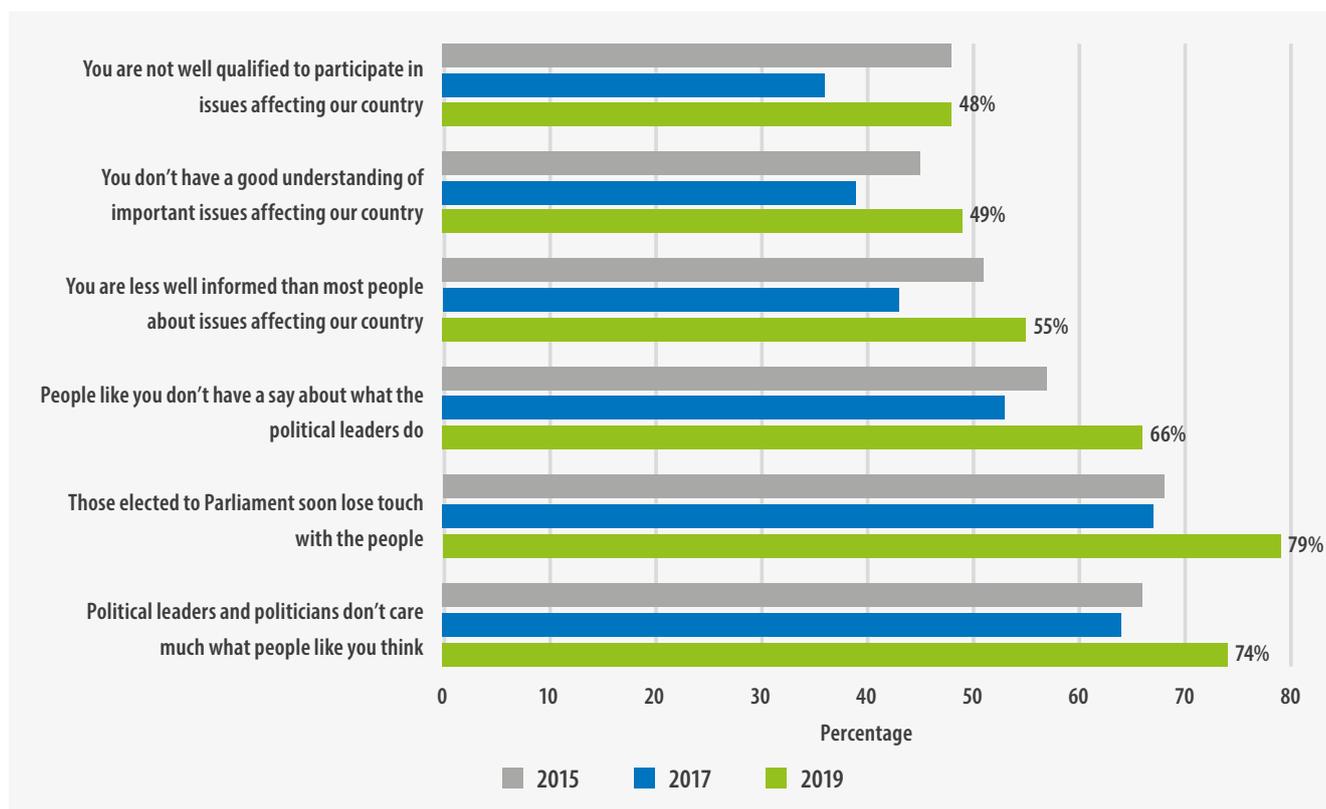


Figure 9 shows that most South Africans also hold negative opinions on the efficacy of voting and that national sentiment was most negative in 2019. Around two-thirds of South Africans (65%) believe that voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted, while a similar share of the public (63%) believe voting is pointless because all parties are the same after elections. Finally, nearly three in five South Africans (58%) believe their vote does not make a difference. These findings suggest that there is a high degree of voter apathy among the South African public. As Figure 9 demonstrates, South Africans' negative perceptions on the efficacy of voting were most acute in 2019 compared to any other year, suggesting that the VAP is becoming increasingly disengaged with the voting process.

Around two-thirds of South Africans (65%) believe that voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted

Are there differences in public opinion on political and voting efficacy among different groups in society? To better answer this question, Figure 10 combines several questions from the survey on political efficacy (Figure 8) to form a scale, ranging from the lowest score of 1 (no belief in political efficacy) to the highest score of 5 (total belief in political efficacy). Moreover, Figure 10

presents the national score on political efficacy and disaggregates the data by gender, age, race, levels of education, and the socio-economic measure (SEM) scale.⁴¹

Figure 9: Perceptions of voting efficacy⁴²

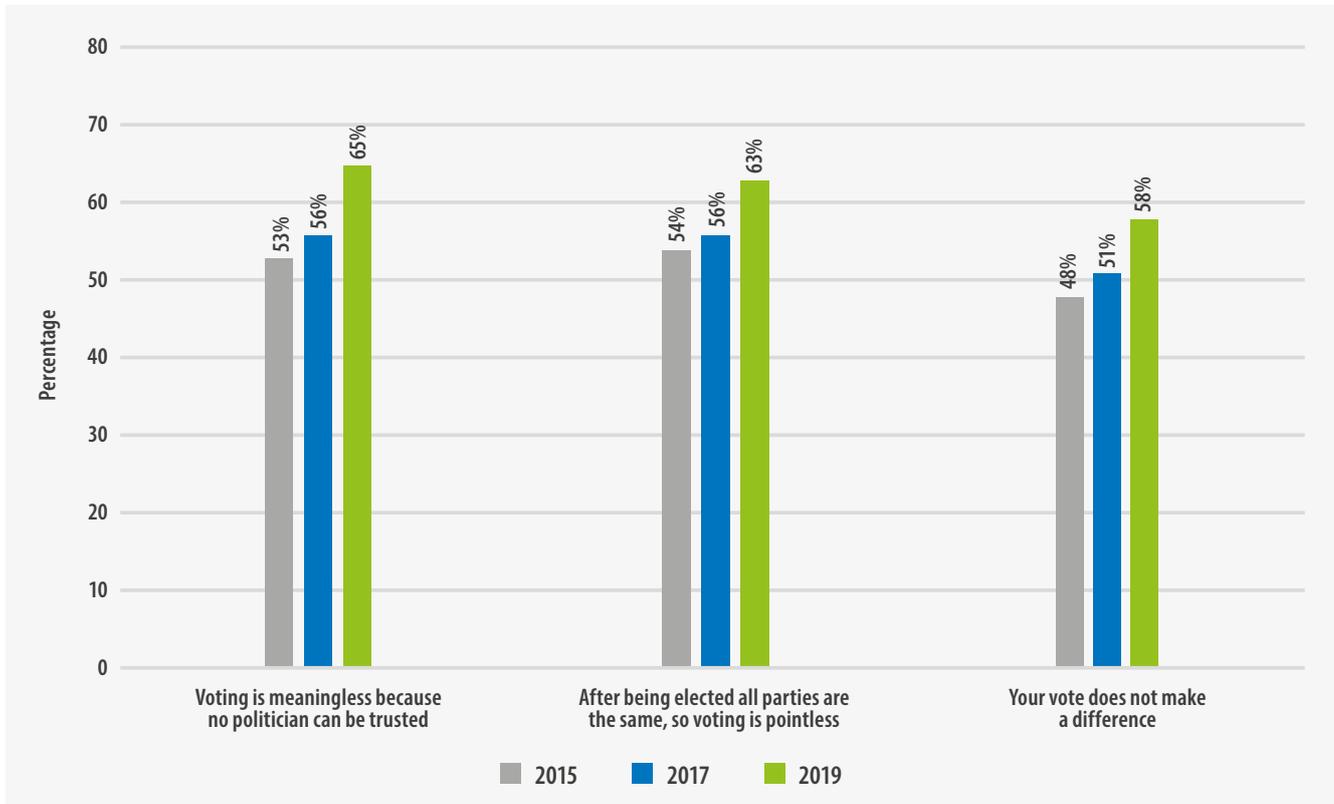


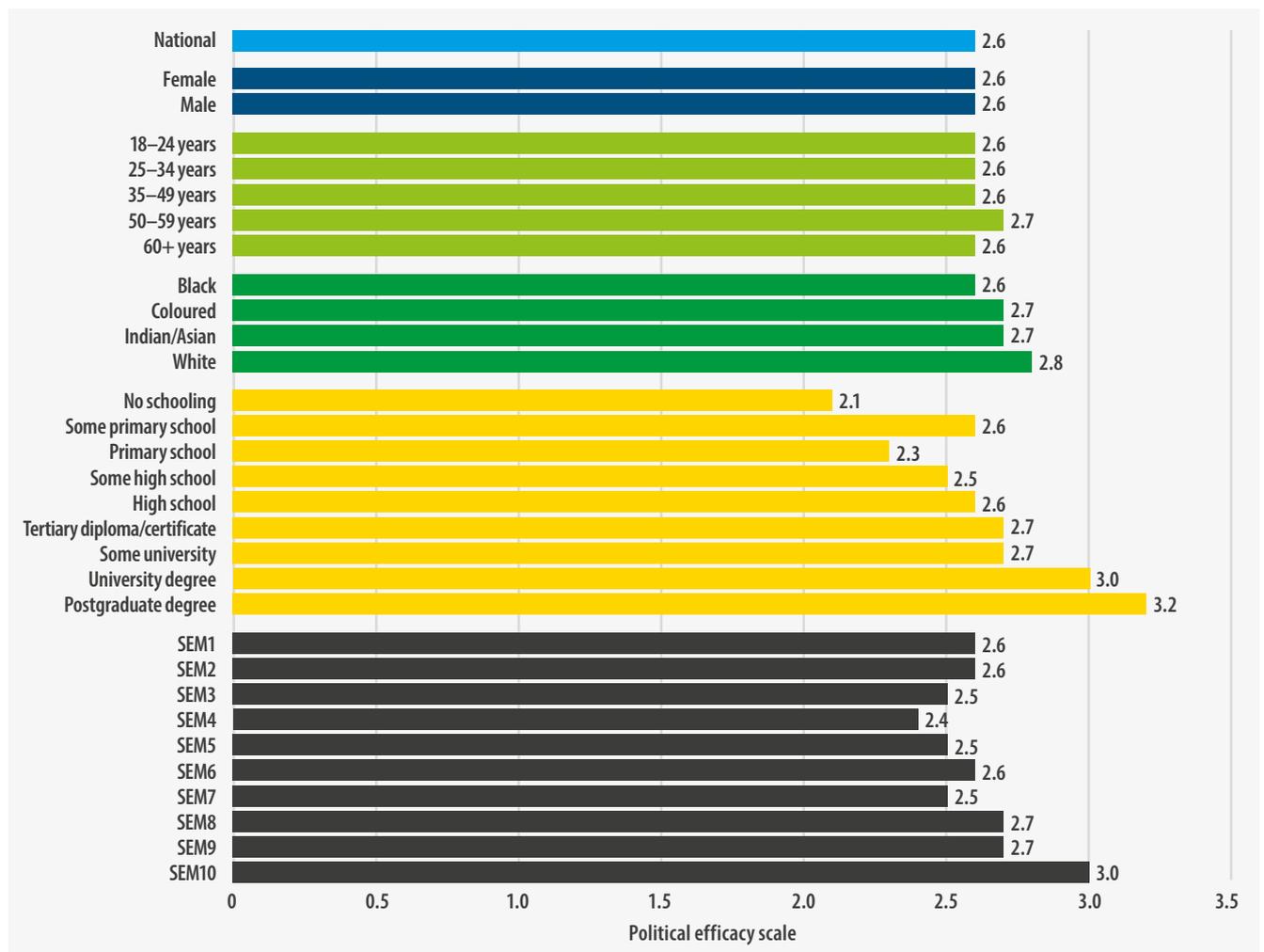
Figure 10 reveals that there not substantial differences in perceptions of political efficacy across gender, age, or race groups. Significantly, respondents with different levels of formal education have varying perceptions of political efficacy. Respondents with no schooling (2.1) are much more negative about their ability to influence politics than any other demographic. By contrast, respondents with undergraduate (3) and postgraduate degrees (3.2) are the most confident in their political efficacy. As levels of education are closely related to levels of current and projected income in South Africa,⁴³ higher SEM groups (8–10), similar to graduate and postgraduate degree holders, express a higher perception of political efficacy than low SEM groups. Wealthier respondents and respondents with higher levels of education are the most confident about the efficacy of political participation, more so than the national average (2.6), while respondents with no schooling and lower SEM status are much less confident about political efficacy.

Wealthier respondents and respondents with higher levels of education are the most confident about the efficacy of political participation

In Figure 11, a scale combining questions on voting efficacy (Figure 9) has been constructed and disaggregated by several variables. There are small differences across age and race groups and larger differences across levels of education among respondents and SEM groups. Young adults (18–24 years old) are more negative (2.2) about the efficacy of voting than the national

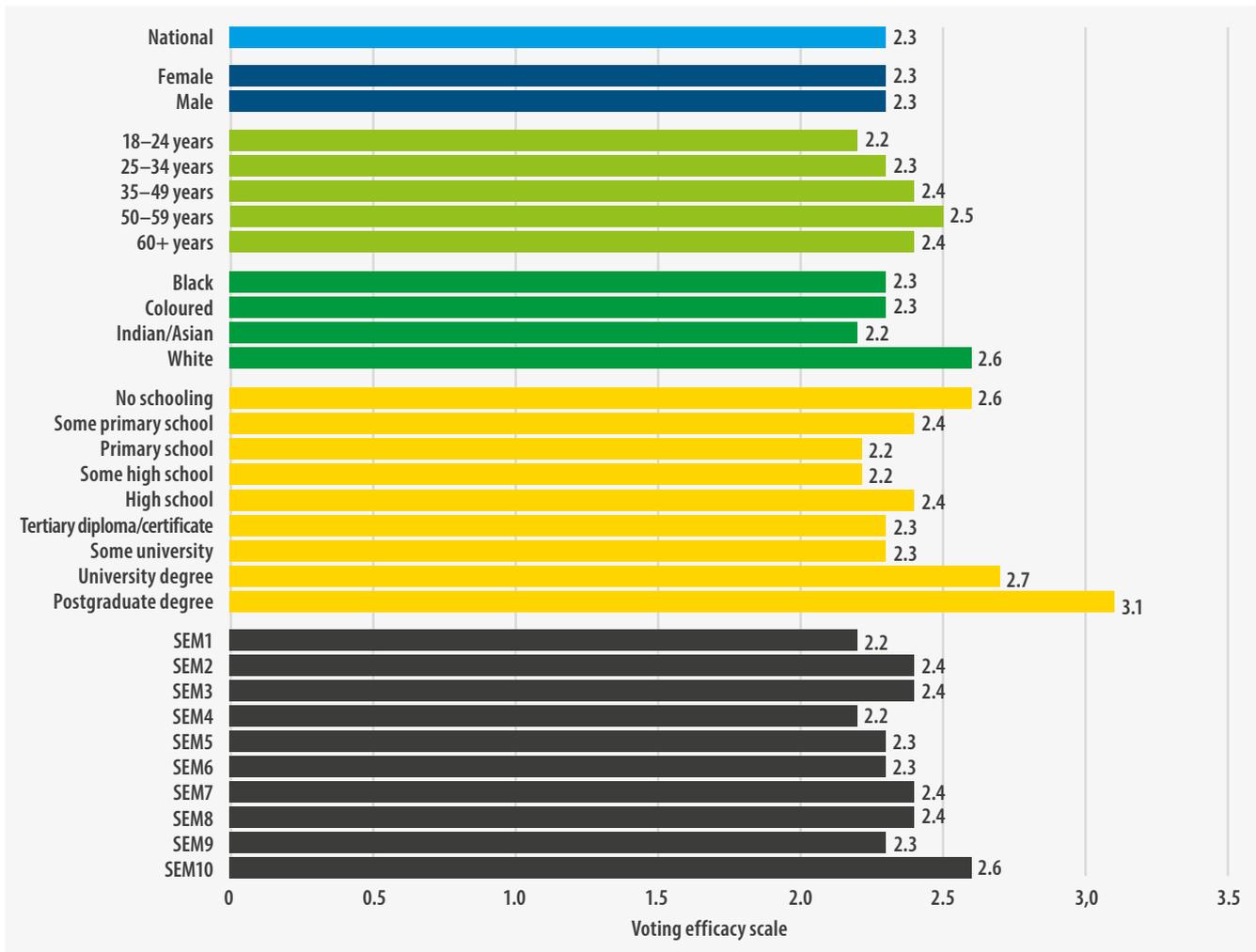
average (2.3), while older South Africans, over the age of 50, are the most positive (2.5). White South Africans are the most confident about the efficacy of voting (2.6), while Indian South Africans are the least confident (2.2). Similar to the scale of political efficacy (Figure 10), respondents with an undergraduate (2.7) or postgraduate (3.1) degree are the demographics with the highest degree of confidence in voting efficacy. Surprisingly, respondents with no schooling (2.6) are more positive about voting than most other respondents with some level of education, including respondents with some university education (2.3). Out of all the SEM groups, respondents in SEM 10, the highest socio-economic measure, were most positive about voting (2.6), while on the opposite end of the spectrum, SEM 1 was the most negative (2.2).

Figure 10: Scale of political efficacy (1–5), by gender, age, race, education, and SEM⁴⁴



In short, socio-economic variables shape respondents' perceptions of the efficacy of political engagement and voting. Respondents with less education and lower socio-economic status are the most negative about political and voting efficacy, while respondents with high levels of education and socio-economic status are the most positive. Demographic variables – gender, age, race – do not reveal significant differences among South Africans on their perceived political and voting efficacy.

Figure 11: Scale of voting efficacy (1-5), by gender, age, race, education, and SEM⁴⁵



Figures 5 to 11 paint a grim picture of the current – and future – status of South Africa’s democratic political culture. First, South Africans have relatively low levels of confidence in public institutions. There are many reasons for this trust deficit, including procedural and institutional inefficiencies, but the perception that these institutions are corrupt is increasingly important. Second, most South Africans believe officials have no interest in combatting corruption and there exists a culture of impunity relating to corrupt practices. Third, the majority of South Africans do not consider themselves sufficiently well-informed to participate in political processes. In addition, three in four South Africans believe political leaders do not care about people like them and those elected to Parliament soon lose touch with the people. Finally, around two-in-three South Africans believe voting is pointless because no politician can be trusted or because all parties are the same. Perceptions of the efficacy of political and voter engagement are also shaped by socio-economic status, with wealthier and more educated respondents being more confident, while less affluent and less educated respondents are less confident. In short, South Africans have low levels of confidence in public institutions, little faith in corrupt officials being held to account, a lack of faith in their ability to participate in the political process, and a scepticism toward the efficacy of voting.

Socio-economic variables shape respondents’ perceptions of the efficacy of political engagement and voting

Conclusion

As a system intended to secure popular sovereignty in decision-making, democracy as it exists in countries around the world is never a finished product. Rather, it is a work in progress. In no country do all people participate as political equals because not everyone has the same access and information needed to participate. The task of democracy is to continually strive towards greater political equality and greater popular sovereignty.⁴⁶

South Africa's democratic task was initiated in the 1990s. While the population was divided across numerous and vast social boundaries at the time, the elections in April 1994 were an opportunity to extend newly established freedoms and rights to all South Africans. Subsequent elections also took place within the context of deep socio-economic divisions, yet South Africans were determined to participate and make their opinions heard through the ballot box. More recently, however, South Africans are increasingly disinclined to participate in national elections, as the inequalities of the 1990s remain, and in some instances are even worsened,⁴⁷ and there is limited competition for votes. What explains the growing apathy towards voting?

Public opinion data from the SARB surveys reveals worrying trends for South Africa's democracy. The last three surveys, conducted in 2015, 2017 and 2019, show that most South Africans do not believe their elected representatives are interested or engaged in citizens' concerns while many believe that their vote would not make a difference. Analysis of the three rounds of SARB surveys reveals that South Africans were more negative about their political and voting efficacy in 2019 than in any other year. Disaggregated data shows that wealthier and more educated South Africans are more positive about political participation, while the least affluent and least educated South Africans are the most negative. South Africans have become increasingly sceptical of the efficacy of democracy and their individual capacity to influence change.

What is to be done? First, for democracy to endure, South Africans' confidence in their elected representatives must be restored. But trust is earned, not given. Over the last two decades, the South African government has often failed to seriously engage with citizens' concerns – from issues of poverty, housing, and employment opportunities to the provision of antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV.⁴⁸ In particular, over the last decade, public trust has been diminished by the prominence of brazen high-level corruption and systematic attempts to use tax-funded state-owned enterprises as vehicles for corruption.⁴⁹ To ensure that citizens might once again feel confident that their voices are respected, the state must endeavor to rebuild public trust by eliminating corruption, prioritising citizens' welfare concerns, and engaging the public on issues of national importance.

The state must endeavour to rebuild public trust by eliminating corruption, prioritising citizens' welfare concerns, and engaging the public on issues of national importance

Second, the state must lower the barriers to democratic participation. One of the most startling trends from the election data in Section 3 is the increasing number of unregistered voters over time. South Africa is a young country and many young people are not allowed to participate in national elections because

they are not registered. By registering more of the VAP, particularly young people, the barriers to participating in elections are lowered. The IEC and the Department of Home Affairs must consider ways of mass registrations as the current policy of creating registration drives is inadequate for the increasing size of the VAP. One possible avenue is to consider automatic registration by synchronising the database of Home Affairs and the IEC; when people apply for a new identity document, driver's license, or passport, their details can be included in the IEC voters' roll. Another potential means of facilitating greater engagement among young South Africans is to encourage greater voter registration at high schools and tertiary education institutions.

Finally, it is integral to consider how the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdown will fundamentally change society and politics in South Africa and around the world. Democracy can survive the pandemic, but only if citizens and states allow it to. Early indications from South Africa's experience under lockdown suggest that civil society groups, the media, and ordinary citizens have been able to exercise some of their democratic freedoms,⁵⁰ but the state's heavy-handed approach to enforcing the lockdown has drawn criticism for denying citizens' basic civic freedoms.⁵¹ South Africa's deep inequalities have been further exposed by the differences in the public response to the national lockdown. While wealthy people rushed to stockpile groceries and can safely order goods online, the poor have lost what little income they had, and physical distancing to curb the spread of the coronavirus is nearly impossible in South Africa's townships. These inequalities have manifested in the form of democratic participation where relatively wealthy and educated individuals can petition and pressurise the state, but most South Africans have no real means for popular mobilisation.

One of the lasting governance legacies of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be the growing influence of the state. The national lockdown was introduced to reduce the transmission of the coronavirus, but it also had the effect of strictly regulating the lives of South Africans and the nature of the economy. The governing party's response to the myriad consequences of the pandemic has indicated its preference for state-led responses to economic recovery, including proposals for the creation of new state-owned enterprises.⁵² In the first few weeks of the lockdown, the state's ability to provide additional social protection has been largely ineffective and occasionally faltered due to corruption,⁵³ while security personnel have often policed violently and with impunity.⁵⁴ Democracy and public accountability will take on even greater importance in response to enlarged state regulation.

Some of the most idealistic commentaries on COVID-19 have emphasised that the pandemic has highlighted much of what is wrong with modern societies – income inequality, lack of access to healthcare, insufficient welfare safety nets – and presents a unique opportunity to form a more caring and equal society.⁵⁵ The economic downturn will have severe repercussions for most South Africans and the lockdown has dampened democratic participation. If there was ever a time to reconsider how and for who South Africa's economy and democracy work, it is now. The socio-political shock of COVID-19 will last for years, but the

If there was ever a time to reconsider how and for who South Africa's economy and democracy work, it is now

processes that emerge in the next few months and years will be pivotal for efforts to rebuild South Africa's economy and restore public trust.

In an ideal scenario, South Africa's economy would become substantially more pro-poor, offering greater welfare support, greater de-commodification of basic goods and services, and providing greater income-generating opportunities. For this to happen, South Africans need to effectively voice their concerns and, most importantly, the state must listen and respond to these concerns. Democracy is not only a political system, it is also a very tangible means by which citizens and the state can engage equitably to reach a common consensus on issues of national importance. The structure of South Africa's future economy and society will be mediated by the strength of its democracy.

Endnotes

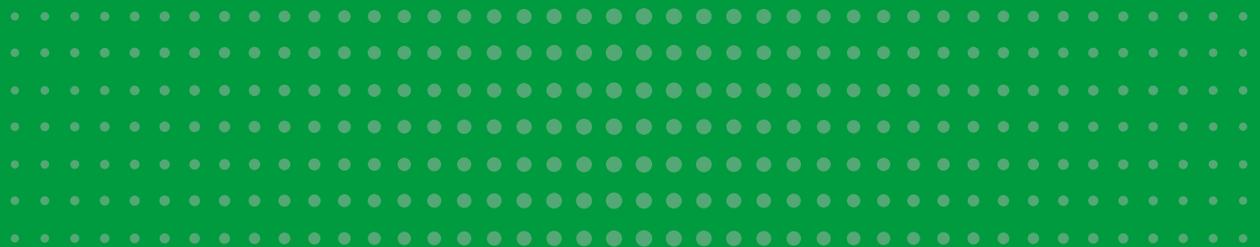
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- 40 Respondents were asked: 'Please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about politics and voting...'. Note: Only responses coded 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree' are included in the chart.
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ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) was launched in 2000 by officials who worked in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, with the aim of ensuring that lessons learnt from South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy are taken into account and utilised in advancing the interests of national reconciliation across Africa. The IJR works with partner organisations across Africa to promote reconciliation and socio-economic justice in countries emerging from conflict or undergoing democratic transition. The IJR is based in Cape Town, South Africa. For more information, visit <http://www.ijr.org.za>, and for comments or enquiries contact info@ijr.org.za.



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