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PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND POPULAR ASSESSMENTS OF MP PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA: A DESIRE FOR ELECTORAL REFORM?

Background

The subject of electoral reforms has been attracting increasing interest in South Africa. Nearly two years ago, a panel of experts was commissioned to investigate how Parliament could improve its work. The panel recently recommended that South Africa's electoral system be reformed into a mixed system that would include a constituency-based electoral system as one of its components. But even before publication of this report, several parliamentary actions had reignited public calls for electoral reform. Parliament's resolution disbanding the highly successful crime-busting unit, the Scorpions, was one such action. Parliament took this step acting upon the instructions of the ruling party, at least initially undermining the required public participation process required by law. This suggests that in the South African Parliament, the interests of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) trump those of the general public. Such indifference to public sentiment highlights the perils of a proportional representation (PR) system that encourages the indebtedness of Members of Parliament (MPs) to their party leadership while undermining accountability to the general public. As a result, electoral reform has become a campaign issue, featuring in the manifestos of nearly all of the opposition parties.

This policy brief examines public attitudes towards MPs, and indirectly towards the present electoral system. The Afrobarometer survey did not ask directly whether people wanted electoral reform, including constituency-based selection of MPs. But it did ask a range of questions about the accessibility of MPs, satisfaction with their performance, and accountability relationships. These help us to get an overall sense of the level of satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – with the current system and how it is functioning.

In sum, the findings reported here do not suggest a high level of popular dissatisfaction with the current system, particularly when they are considered in comparison to other countries, including many that do have single-member constituency systems. Though many South Africans are not fully satisfied with their MPs and their accessibility, they don't appear, on average, to be more dissatisfied than other Africans. This suggests that electoral reform may not be a high priority for many South Africans. But evidence that PR does indeed fail to promote a relationship of accountability between MPs and voters nonetheless raises some cause for concern.

The Survey

Afrobarometer surveys are now conducted in 20 countries in Africa, using a common survey instrument and methodology. The findings reported here draw from a recent survey in South Africa conducted in October and November 2008. This is the fifth Afrobarometer survey conducted in South Africa (others were conducted in 2000, 2002, 2004 and 2006). The survey was based on a nationally representative random sample of 2400 adult South Africans drawn from all nine provinces of the country. The findings reported here have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. Fieldwork was conducted by Citizens

Surveys, Ltd., with technical support from the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa) and the University of Cape Town. Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in 20 countries during 2008 and early 2009. At the time of the writing of this bulletin, results were available from 11 countries in addition to South Africa, including: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania and Uganda. These countries serve as the basis of comparison in this bulletin.

MP Accessibility

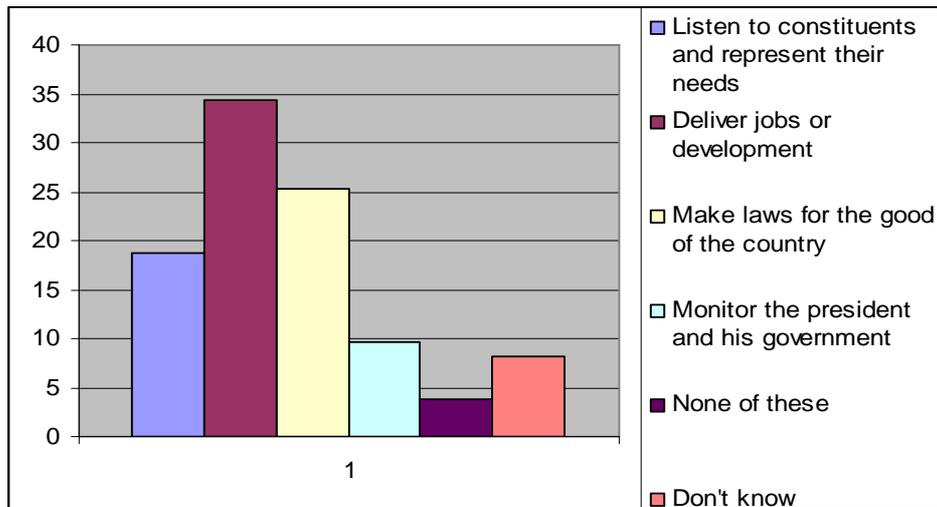
Critics of the PR system are unanimous in their contention that it makes MPs distant from the citizenry. They argue that people are less likely to know who their MP is under a PR system, so MPs are less accessible, responsive and accountable. However, Afrobarometer findings in this regard are somewhat mixed.

Without question, South Africans are less likely to know their MPs than respondents in any of the other 11 countries. A mere 3% of South Africans could correctly name their MP, compared to a 12-country average of 41%. Based on this, the critics would seem to have a strong case.

Yet when we turn to the question of how often people make contact with MPs, the picture changes. Twelve percent of South Africans claim to have made contact with an MP in the past year “about some important problem or to give them your views”. This means MPs are contacted at about the same rate as officials of government agencies (14%) and traditional leaders (13%), but much less than local government councilors (27%) or religious leaders (25%). But this 12% contact rate in South Africa exactly matches the 12-country average. In sum, South Africans may be far less likely to know the name of their MP, but they are just as likely to contact an MP about an issue as citizens in any of the other 11 countries.

Moreover, South Africans appear to place lower priority on MP accessibility than many others. We asked respondents: “Which of the following do you think is the most important responsibility of representatives to the National Assembly?” with options including: a) Listen to constituents and represent their needs; b) Deliver jobs or development to your constituency; c) Make laws for the good of the country; and d) Monitor the president and his government. On average across 12 countries, listening to and representing constituents is the highest popular priority for MPs (45%), followed by delivering jobs or development (29%), and making laws (16%). But in South Africa, the public offers different priorities: 34% identify delivering jobs and development as the top priority, 25% select making laws, and just 19% place the emphasis on listening to constituents (monitoring government is the lowest priority in all countries).

Figure 1: Most Important Responsibilities for MPs in South Africa

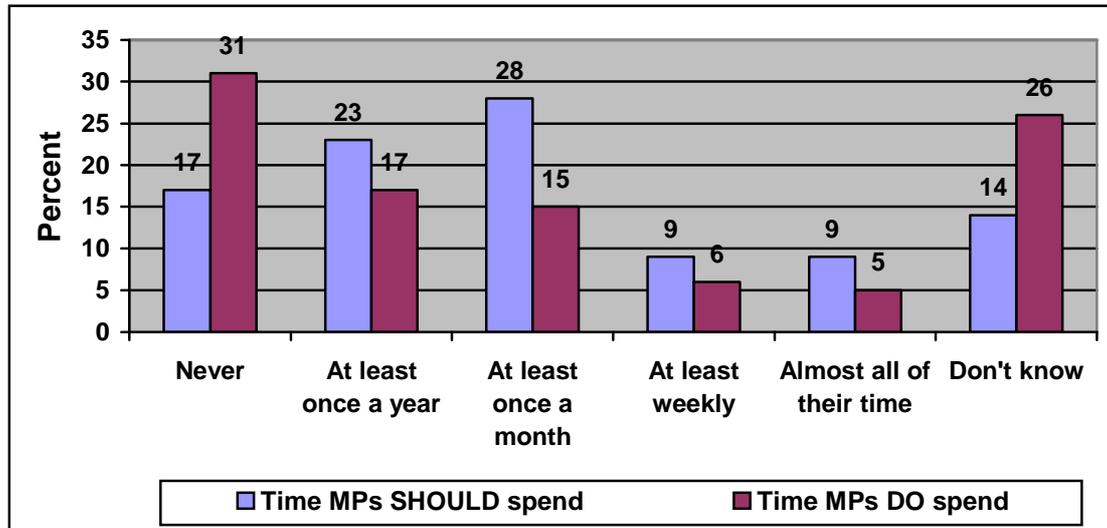


Representatives to the National Assembly have different responsibilities. Which of the following do you think is the most important responsibility of representatives to the National Assembly?

South Africans also have lower – though not insignificant – expectations of how often they should actually see their MPs visiting the community. We asked “How much time *should* your representative to the National Assembly spend in this constituency to visit the community and its citizens?” Nearly half (46%) of South Africans thought that MPs should visit at least once a month or more. Thus, there does seem to be considerable interest in having access to MPs, and ensuring they are familiar with constituent needs. However, South Africans fall well below all other countries in their expectations of MP visits: across all 12 countries, an average of 70% expected visits once a month or more.

When it comes to the time that MPs actually do spend visiting constituencies, though, South African MPs are comparable to their counterparts elsewhere. About one-quarter (26%) of South Africans report visits once a month or more, compared to 30% across 12 countries. So in reality, the different electoral system may not be having significant impacts on South Africans’ access to their MPs. It is important to note that South Africans – like citizens in every country surveyed – are seeing considerably less of their MPs than they would like. There is a significant gap between the desired frequency of visits and the actual frequency. But there doesn’t appear to be any reason to attribute this gap to the nature of the electoral system.

Figure 2: Accessibility of MPs in South Africa



How much time should your representative to the National Assembly spend in this constituency to visit the community and its citizens.

How much time does your representative to the National Assembly spend in this constituency?

It would appear, then, that under the PR system South Africans may have adjusted their expectations of MP roles and responsibilities relative to other countries in ways that accommodate the lower accessibility of representatives in the community.

MP Performance

If MPs in a PR system are accountable to their party more than to voters and constituents, will popular satisfaction with their performance be undermined? We asked whether respondents approved or disapproved of the performance of representatives to the National Assembly in the past year. In South Africa, a plurality of 46% give MPs a positive review, compared to 38% expressing disapproval. This certainly does not reflect an overwhelming level of popular satisfaction. But what dissatisfaction there is may not be related to the electoral system. In fact, the 12-country average for MP performance approval is at almost exactly the same level: 47%. In other words, PR does not, by this measure, appear to have made South African MPs any less satisfied with their MPs than others.

A similar pattern is evident with respect to other indicators as well. For example, we ask respondents “How much of the time do you think that representatives to the National Assembly try their best to listen to what people like you have to say?” The South African response is hardly encouraging. Just 23% say MPs listen “often” or “always,” compared to 64% who say they do so “never” or “only sometimes.” But again, South Africa falls very close to the 12-country mean of 20% (often/always). PR apparently doesn’t make South African MPs any less responsive than the relatively un-responsive MPs elected in constituency-based systems.

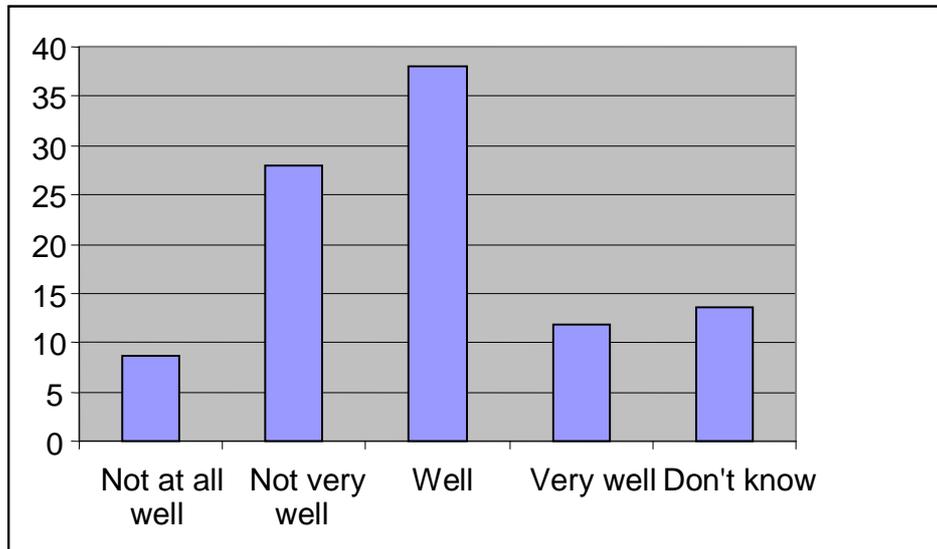
MP Accountability

PR systems also raise critics’ concerns because of their presumed effects on accountability. If MPs’ positions depends more on their selection by party leaders than on the choice of voters, then accountability to the public – a cornerstone of democracy – may be undermined.

But yet again, we find that PR does not seem to undermine accountability as much as the critics would suggest. For example, we asked respondents how well elections “ensure that the

Representatives to the National Assembly reflect the views of voters.” Half of South African respondents (50%) say that elections perform this function either “well” or “very well”, compared to 37% who hold the opposite view. Elections are thus rated as an effective mechanism of accountability in South Africa at a rate slightly *above* the 12-country average of 46%.

Figure 3: How Well MPs Reflect the Views of Voters



Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections ensure that Representatives to the National Assembly reflect the views of voters?

Elections get somewhat lower ratings for their effectiveness in “enabling voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want.” South Africans are evenly split, with 42% saying they perform well in this regard, and 43% saying they perform poorly. But again, the differences with non-PR systems are minimal: across 12 countries, an average of 45% say elections are effective means to remove unpopular leaders, and 42% say they are not.

But critics may nonetheless have some reason to be concerned, as the South African system does stand out for the very low numbers who think that MPs should actually be held accountable *by voters*. We asked respondents: “Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, representatives to the National Assembly do their jobs?” A mere 11% of South Africans attribute this responsibility to voters, compared to 29% who think the president is responsible, 30% who think parliamentarians should monitor themselves, and 19% who attribute responsibility to political parties. South Africans are thus far less likely than others to advocate accountability to voters: across 12-countries, an average of 38% says voters are responsible, and the figure rises to 70% in Malawi and 68% in Madagascar.

Conclusion

We did not ask respondents directly about their support for electoral reform and constituency based MP selection. But the set of questions considered here gives a broad overview of how satisfied the public is with how their MPs and the current electoral system are functioning – including in comparison to other non-PR systems.

The findings reveal that South Africans are not overwhelmingly satisfied with their MPs and the current selection system, but neither are they overwhelmingly dissatisfied. And perhaps most notably, in many respects South Africans’ evaluations do not differ substantially from the mean for 11 other countries surveyed, suggesting that what dissatisfaction there is does not stem

directly from the PR system. The conclusion: electoral reform is probably not a high priority for many South Africans. Moreover, these findings indicate that a move to a constituency-based system is by no means guaranteed to solve some of the problems of accessibility and unresponsiveness that we observe both in South Africa and in other non-PR countries.

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Royal Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (RDMFA/DANIDA), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 4 research, capacity building and outreach activities. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org