

# Youth political engagement in South Africa: Beyond student protests

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 101 | Rorisang Lekalake**

## Summary

South Africa's Youth Day 2016 (16 June) marks the 40th anniversary of the Soweto uprisings, during which thousands of high school students marched to protest the introduction of Afrikaans as a language of instruction in the public education system. The demonstrations proved to be a watershed in the fight against apartheid by bringing South African youth to the forefront of the liberation struggle (South African History Online, 2016). Mattes and Richmond (2015) argue that since then, South Africans have held "contradictory" beliefs about the nature of young people's role in politics: "On one hand ... many people see youth as the primary catalyst of activism and political change. ... On the other hand ... a wide range of commentators routinely experience 'moral panic' about the apparent 'crisis' of youth and its corrosive effect on the country's political culture" (p. 1).

Youth political engagement has again come into focus during ongoing nationwide "fallist" protests led by university students demanding change in South African higher education institutions. In January 2016, the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr. Blade Nzimande, met with student representatives to present progress toward eight demands, including addressing financial barriers to higher education, inadequate housing, and exclusionary language policies (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016a). However, the following month his office released a statement condemning damage to university property amidst renewed protests (Ministry of Higher Education, 2016b).

Despite this renewed activism among university students, findings from the 2015 Afrobarometer survey indicate little change in levels of political participation among South African youth (aged 18-35 years) in general. While half of young survey respondents say they attended a community meeting in the previous year, only minorities report engaging in various other forms of civic and protest action, including protest marches. Youth participation in demonstrations is higher than in 2011 but lower than the levels reported in 2000-2006. These results suggest that student activism is atypical of South African youth's political behaviour in general and that any further youth engagement on issues of transformation in the country is likely to remain concentrated on university campuses.

Although perceptions of political freedoms have increased since 2008, ordinary young South Africans appear to see the country's leadership as relatively inaccessible. However, rising contact levels with local government officials indicate that youth may be increasingly willing to hold their elected leaders accountable at this level of government.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August and September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

While the official definition of “youth” in South Africa is ages 14-35 years (Presidency of South Africa, 2015), Afrobarometer samples include only adult citizens. As a result, this analysis focuses on respondents aged 18-35. Margins of uncertainty surrounding generalizations about population subgroups (e.g. by age or race group or education attainment) are wider than for country-level results, calling for caution in interpreting associated numerical results.

## Key findings

- A majority of South African youth say they are “somewhat” or “very” interested in public affairs (55%) and discuss politics at least “occasionally” (73%). While discussion of politics has increased since 2004 (by 13 percentage points), reported interest has been relatively stable over time.
- At least two-thirds of survey respondents aged 18-35 years believe that citizens should “always” vote in elections (69%), pay taxes (67%), and complain if public services are of poor quality (66%) – all of which are generally associated with good citizenship.
- Three in 10 youth (30%) are active members or official leaders of a religious group, while 15% are actively involved in a voluntary association or community group. Membership in religious groups has declined by 17 percentage points since this question was first asked in 2004.
- Half (51%) of young citizens say they attended a community meeting at least once in the previous year, and one-third (34%) say they joined others to raise an issue. Participation in protest action was less common (15% on average across five types of protest activities).
- Two in 10 youth (19%) say they participated in a demonstration or protest march in 2015, an 8-percentage-point increase since 2011. However, this remains below the levels recorded in 2002-2006.
- A majority (56%) of youth say they did not contact any of six types of political and community leaders in the preceding year. Contact was highest – and increasing – with local government councillors and religious leaders (each 29%) and lowest with members of Parliament (3%).

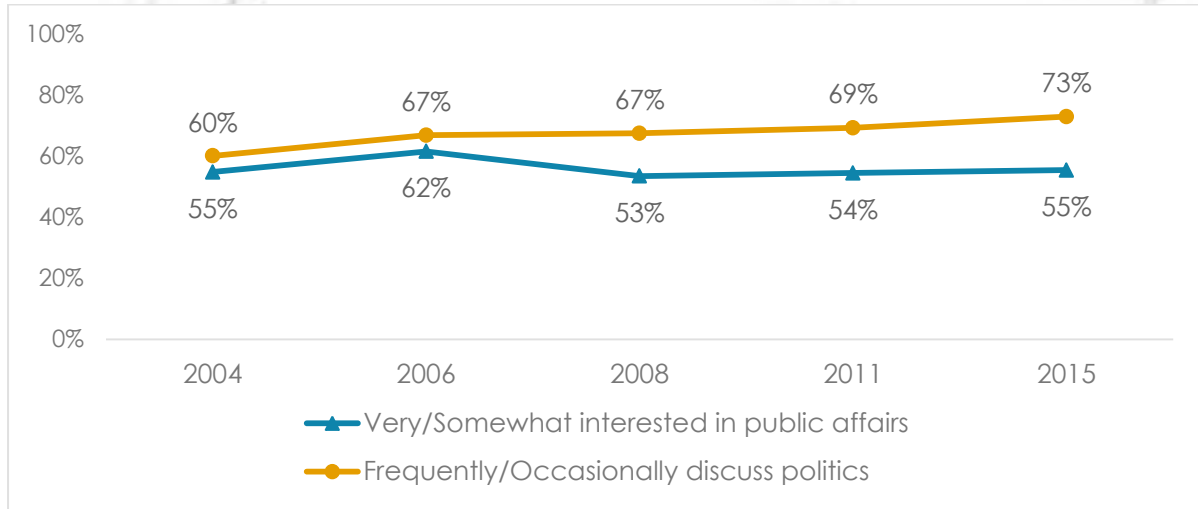
## Interest in and discussion of politics

The proportion of South African youth who report discussing politics at least “occasionally” has increased in the past decade, from 60% in 2004 to 73% in 2015. In contrast, reported interest in public affairs has been stable, at slightly more than half, since declining from 62% in 2008 (Figure 1). (For frequencies by age subgroup, see Appendix Table A.1.)

According to 2015 survey results, rural and male youth are more likely to be “very” or “somewhat” interested in public affairs than urban residents and young women. There is no clear pattern by education level. Analysis by race shows that Indian (59%) and black (58%) youth report the highest interest levels, followed by white (50%) and Coloured (42%) young citizens (Figure 2).

Male youth are also more likely to discuss politics “occasionally” or “frequently” than women (76% vs. 70%), and discussion levels increase with educational attainment. However, there are no significant differences in young people’s behaviour by location (Figure 3). Among race groups, young Indian citizens are most likely to discuss politics (81%), followed by black (74%), white (71%), and Coloured (68%) youth. However, frequent discussion of political issues is significantly more prevalent among black (21%) than among Indian (6%) youth.

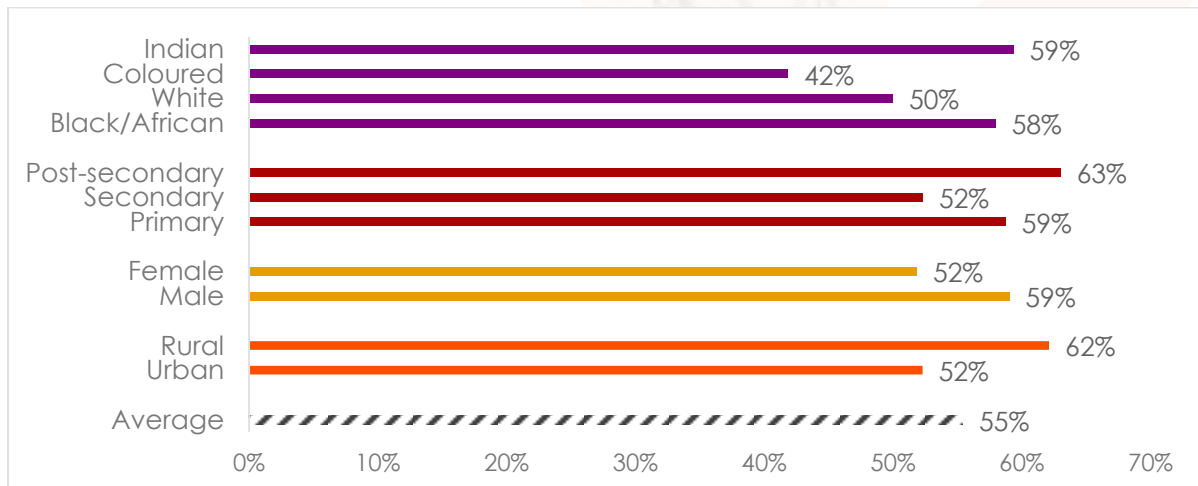
**Figure 1: Interest in and discussion of politics | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2004-2015**



**Respondents were asked:**

- How interested would you say you are in public affairs?
- When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

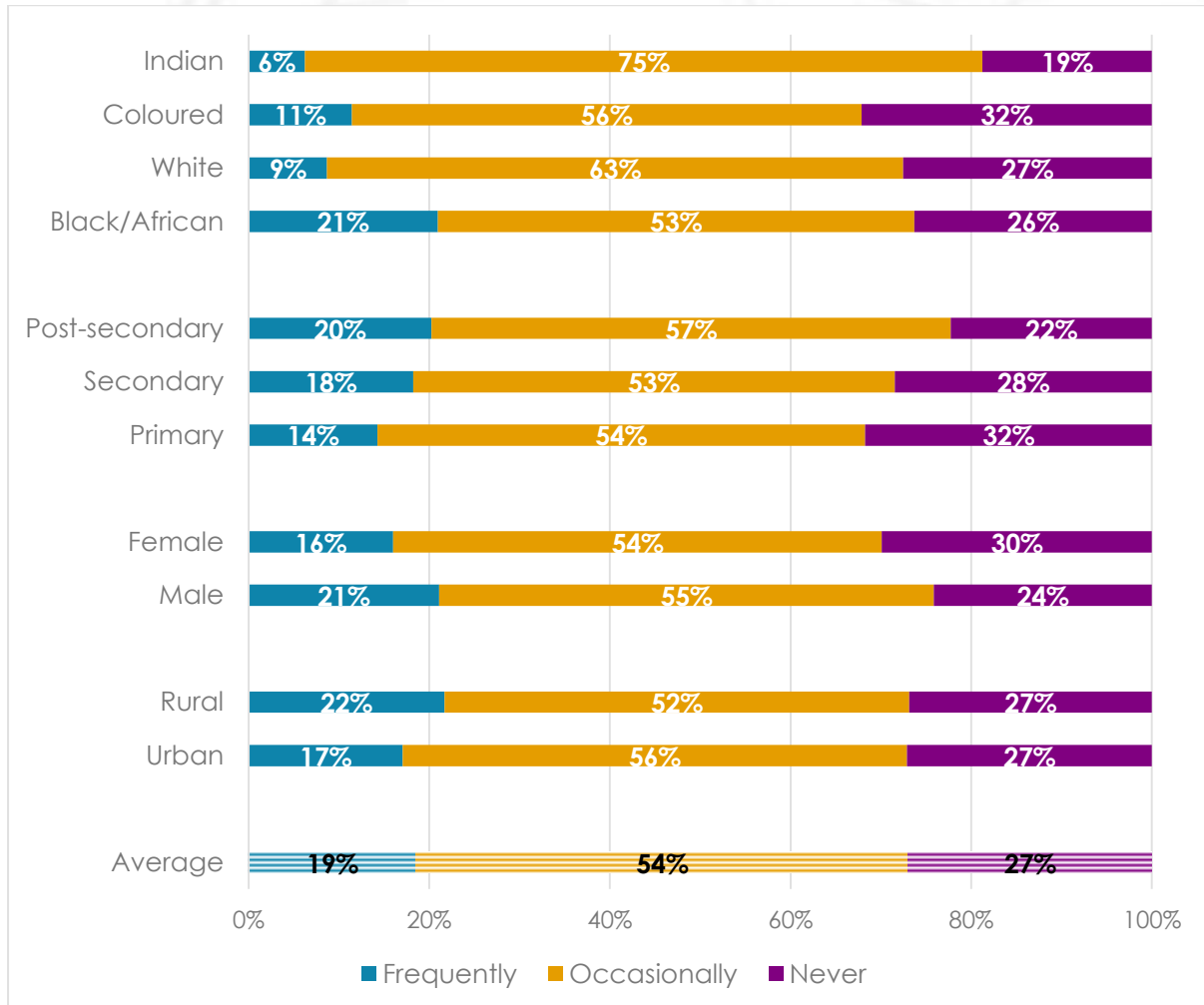
**Figure 2: Interest in public affairs | by race, education,<sup>1</sup> gender, and location | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How interested would you say you are in public affairs? (% “very interested” or “somewhat interested”)

<sup>1</sup> The category “no formal schooling” is excluded from the analysis because of its small sample size: Of 1,140 respondents aged 18-35 years, only six (0.5% of the total) had no formal schooling.

**Figure 3: Discussion of politics** | by race, education, gender, and location  
 | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015



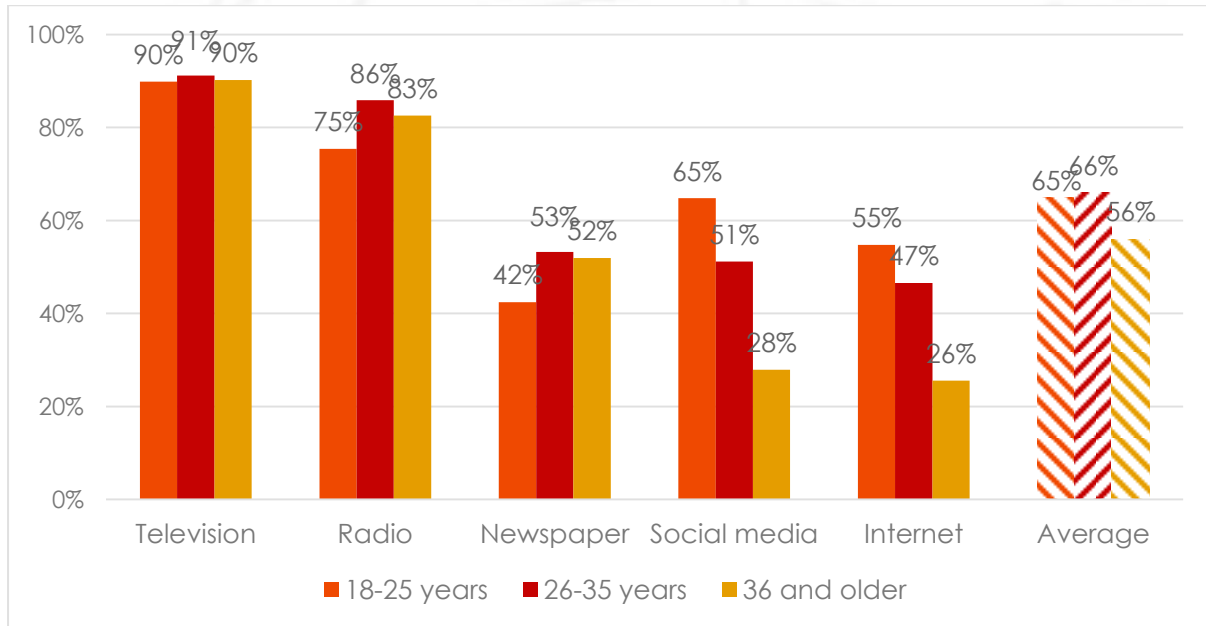
**Respondents were asked:** When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

### Media usage

Six in 10 South Africans (62%) access news from television, radio, social media, the Internet, or newspapers on a daily basis or “a few times a week.” On average, news consumption is highest via television (90%) and radio (81%), while fewer than half of citizens regularly access news via newspapers (49%), social media (48%), and the Internet (42%). These levels are well above the average for 36 countries surveyed by Afrobarometer in 2014/2015 (for more information, see Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 85, available at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)).

Analysis by age shows that, on average, young citizens are significantly more likely to access news across the five media sources on a regular basis than those aged over 35 years (66% vs. 56%) (Figure 4). Radio listenership and newspaper readership increase after the age of 25, while citizens aged 18-25 years are significantly more likely than their elders to access news via social media and the Internet. Watching television news regularly is equally common among citizens of all age groups.

**Figure 4: Regular news consumption | by age | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? TV? Newspapers? The Internet? Social media such as Facebook and Twitter? (% who say “every day” or “a few times a week”)

### Citizenship norms, political freedoms, and partisan identification

More than two-thirds of South Africans believe that good citizens should “always” vote in elections (71%), pay taxes they owe to government (67%), and complain about public services when they are of poor quality (65%). Youth are about as likely as their elders to support these behaviours, which are generally associated with good democratic citizenship, though they place slightly less emphasis on voting (Table 1). Among youth and older citizens alike, only minorities say that requesting personal assistance from leaders (40%), avoiding criticizing the government (35%), and agreeing with their communities on political issues (29%) constitute good citizenship.

**Table 1: Citizenship norms | by age | South Africa | 2015**

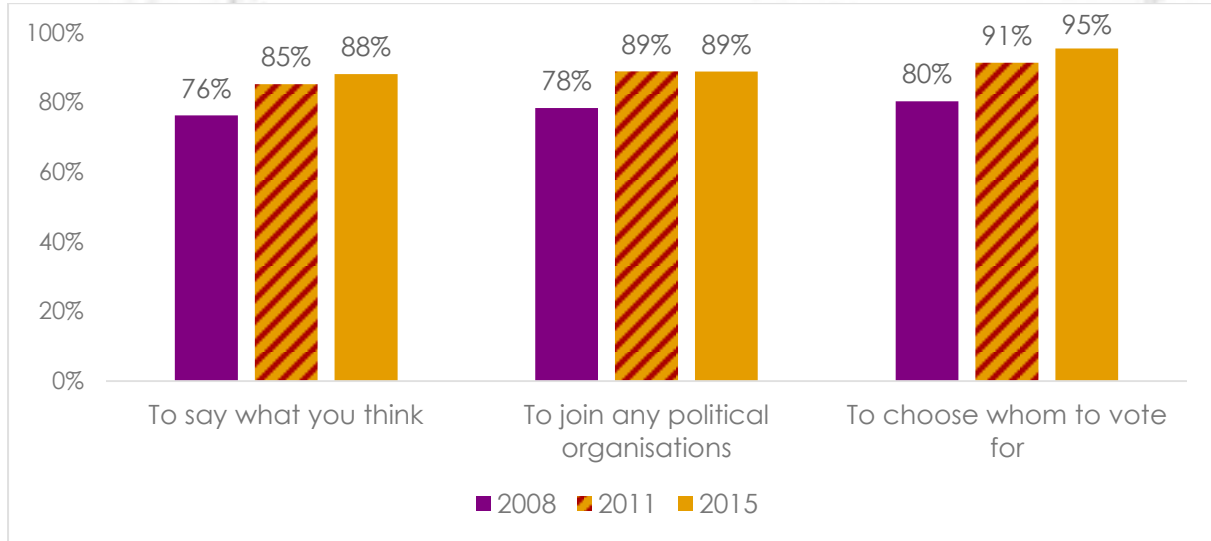
Good citizens should always ...	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older	Average (all ages)
Vote in elections	67%	71%	75%	71%
Pay taxes they owe to government	70%	64%	68%	67%
Complain to government officials when public services are of poor quality	67%	64%	65%	65%
Request personal assistance from elected officials, such as help with school fees or funeral expenses	43%	40%	38%	40%
Avoid criticizing the government	35%	35%	34%	35%
Agree with the majority of people in his or her community on political issues	28%	27%	33%	29%

**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following actions, please tell me whether you think it is something a good citizen in a democracy should always do, never do, or do only if they choose? (% “should always do”)



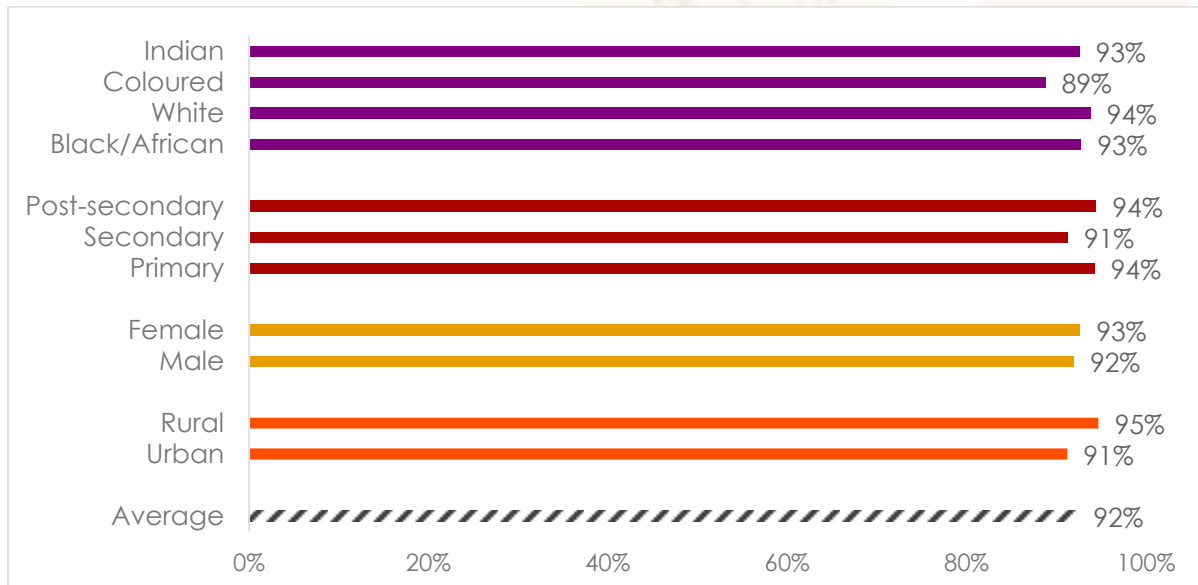
Young people report significantly higher levels of political freedoms than when this question was first asked in 2008. Among 18- to 35-year-olds, 88% say they are “somewhat free” or “completely free” to say what they think, compared to 76% in 2008. Similar gains are evident with regard to freedom of association (89% vs. 78%) and freedom to vote for the candidate of one’s choice (95% vs. 80%) (Figure 5). Further analysis of the 2015 results shows only slight differences in South Africans’ perceptions by age (Appendix Table A.2) or by key social and demographic indicators (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Political freedoms | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2008-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% “completely free” or “somewhat free”)*

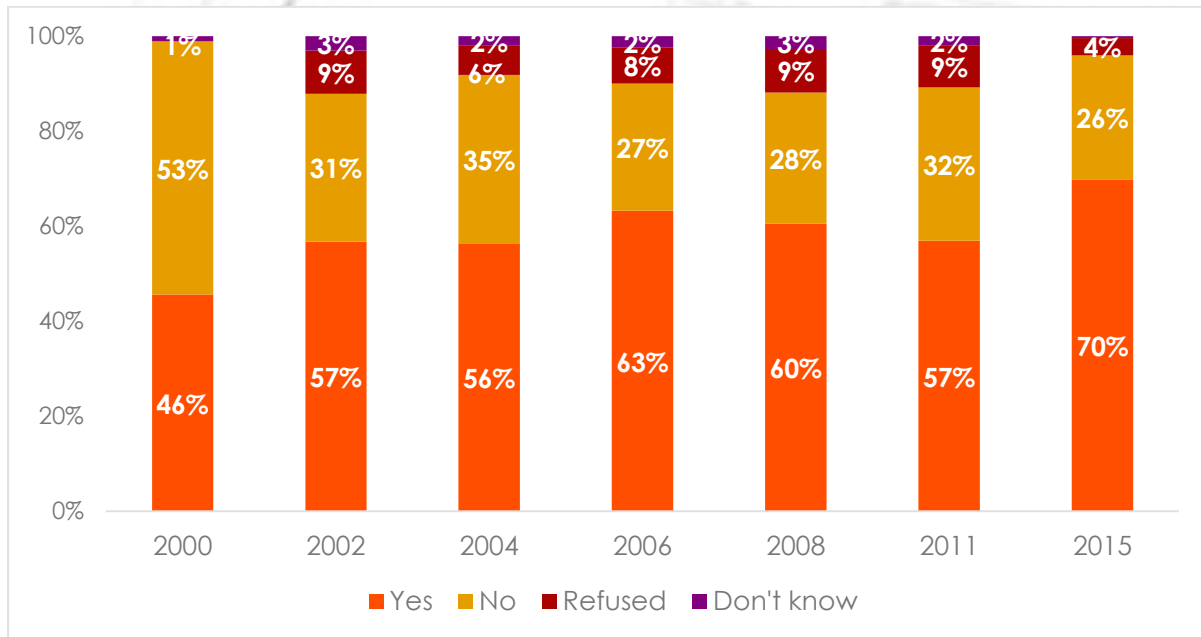
**Figure 6: Political freedoms | by race, education, gender, and location | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% “completely free” or “somewhat free”)*

The proportion of young South Africans who say they feel “close” to a particular political party reached a new high in 2015 at 70%, up from 57% in 2011 (Figure 7). Further analysis of party affiliation by age shows that young citizens are less likely to identify with the African National Congress than those aged over 36 years (40% vs. 48%), while affiliation with opposition parties is consistent across age groups (Appendix Table A.3).

**Figure 7: Partisan identification** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2015



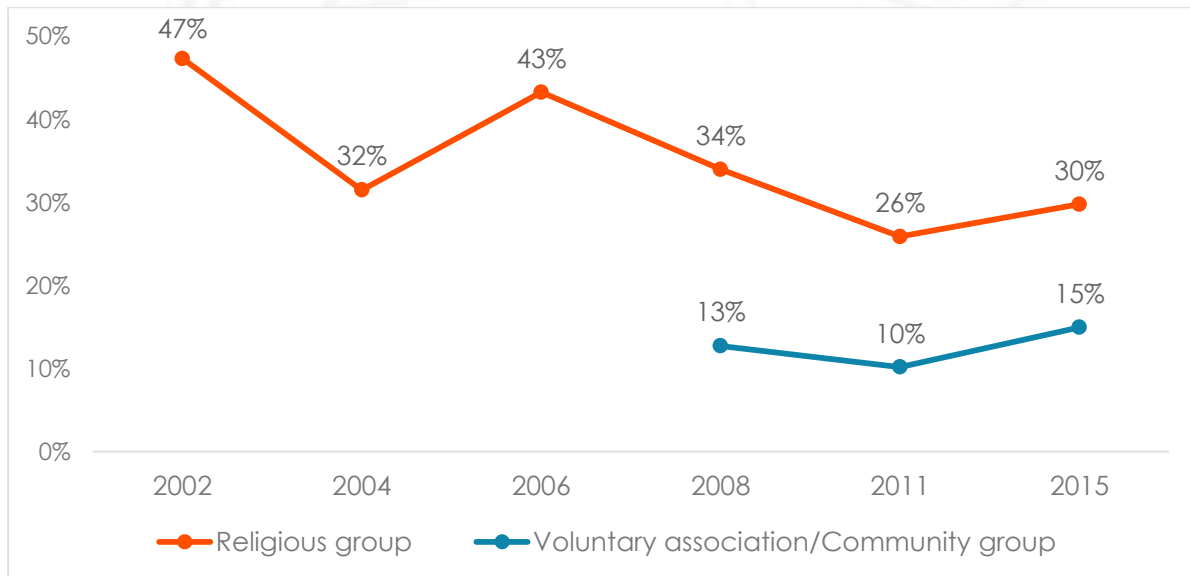
**Respondents were asked:** *Do you feel close to any particular political party?*

### Civic engagement

Mattes and Richmond (2015) found that South Africans aged 18-25 years shared similar views of the role of citizens in a democracy as their elders but were less likely to engage in the political process via conventional forms of non-electoral participation such as involvement in civic organisations and contact with elected leaders. The present analysis updates these findings using the results of the most recent Afrobarometer survey and extends the analysis to 18- to 35-year-olds.

South African youth are more than twice as likely to join religious groups as they are to join voluntary associations or community groups. On average since 2002, 35% of survey respondents have said they are “active members” or “official leaders” of religious groups, while only 13% have said the same about community groups since 2008. Active membership in religious groups has declined over time, from almost half (47%) in 2002 to 30% in 2015, while membership in voluntary associations has been fairly stable (Figure 8). Comparison across age groups shows that youth membership in groups is only slightly lower than membership by citizens older than 36 years (see Appendix Table A.4).

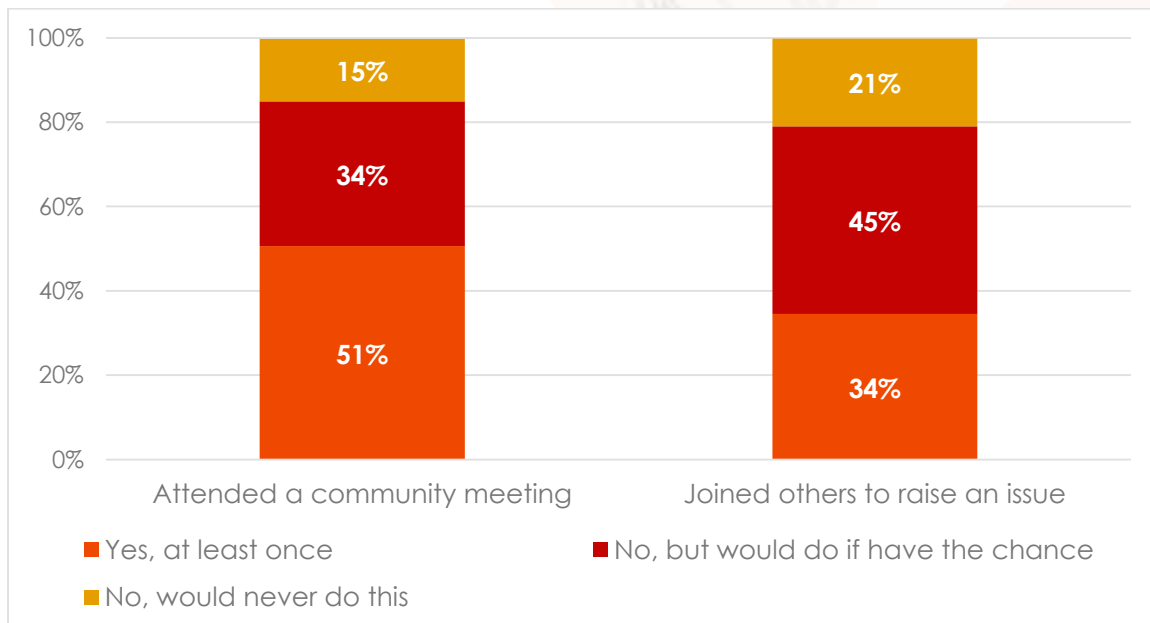
**Figure 8: Active membership in civic organisations** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2002-2015



**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member? (% "active member" or "official leader")

Half (51%) of 2015 survey respondents aged 18-35 years attended a community meeting in the previous year, and one-third (33%) joined together with others to raise an issue (Figure 9). These levels are slightly lower than those for older citizens (54% and 42%, respectively; see Appendix Table A.5).

**Figure 9: Civic participation** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015

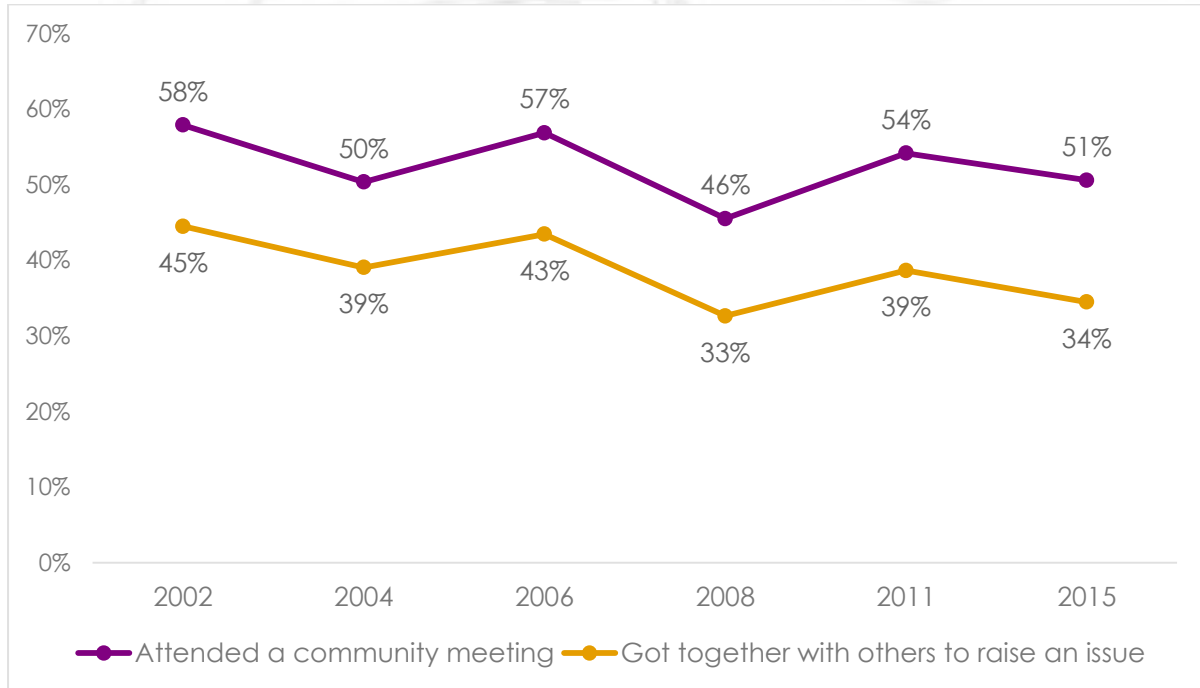


**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue?



Attending community meetings has consistently been more common than joining others to raise an issue (53% vs. 39% on average since 2002). Both measures have declined since these questions were first asked in 2002 (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Civic participation** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2002-2015



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. (% "yes")

### Contact with political and community leaders

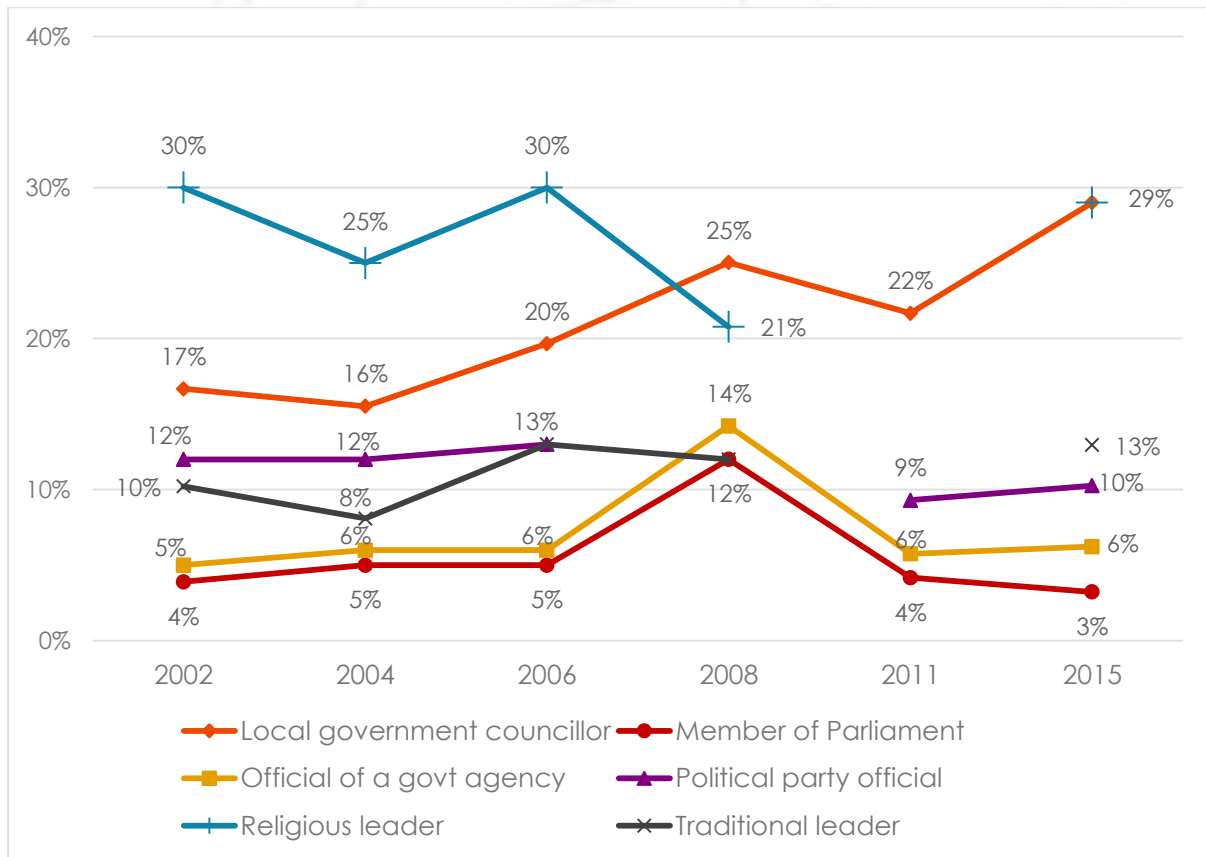
Afrobarometer data show that only minorities of South African youth have had contact with political or community leaders. On average since 2002, contact has been highest with religious leaders (24%) and lowest with members of Parliament (6%). Levels of contact with local government councillors and religious leaders (each 29%) are currently more than double those for any other types of leaders due to significant increases in these measures over time (Figure 11).

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

Comparison by age shows that contact levels increase slightly with age (Appendix Table A.6).

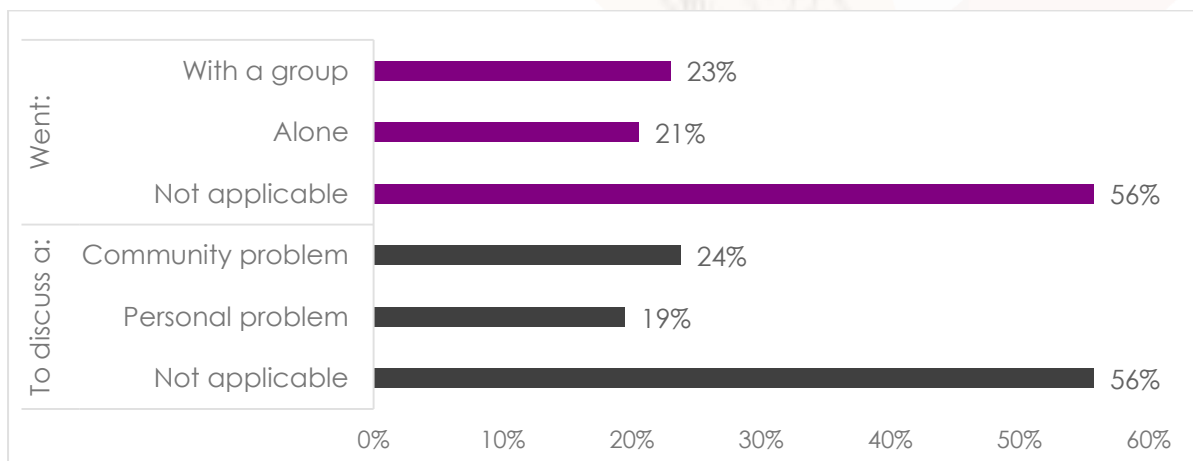
When asked about how and why they contacted these leaders, almost equal proportions of respondents say that they went alone (21%) or with a group (23%) and that they did so to discuss a community problem (24%) or a personal problem (19%) (Figure 12). More than half (56%) had no contact with any of the six types of leaders.

**Figure 11: Contact with leaders** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2002-2015



**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 12: Type of contact with political leaders** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** Thinking of the last time you contacted any of these leaders, did you go: Alone or with a group? To discuss a community problem or a personal problem?

<sup>2</sup> Question text referred to “official in a government ministry” prior to 2008 and to “traditional rulers” prior to 2015.

## Youth participation in protest action

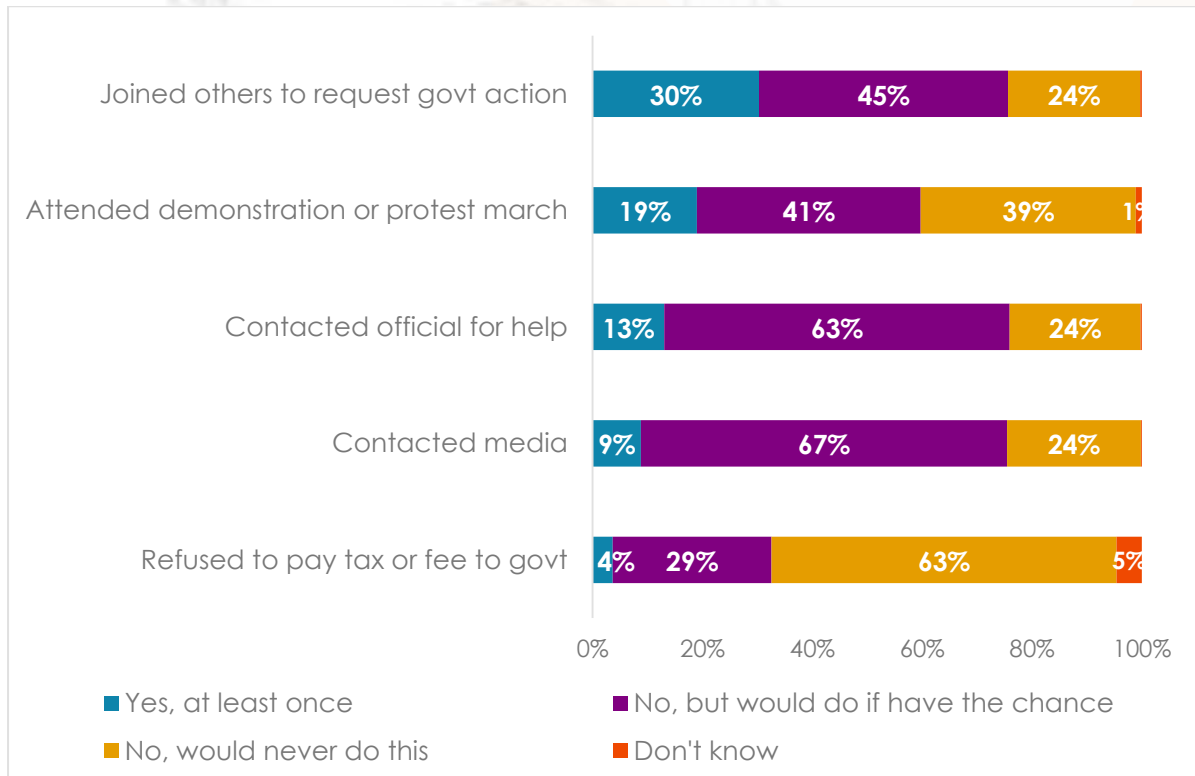
Previous analysis of unconventional political engagement in South Africa shows that citizens aged 18-25 years reported relatively high rates of participation in demonstrations or protest marches, but that these levels had been declining since 2000 and that this age group was no more likely to use force or violence than their elders (Mattes & Richmond, 2015).

Looking at 2015 data for the expanded youth age group of 18-35 years, Afrobarometer survey respondents report lower levels of participation in protest action than in civic activities, despite the large number of student protests throughout the country in 2015. Young respondents are most likely to report joining others in their communities to request government action (30%) and least likely to report refusing to pay a tax or fee to government (4%) in the previous year (Figure 13).

Two in 10 (19%) attended a demonstration or protest, and a further 41% say they would do so if given the opportunity. Four in 10 respondents (39%) say they would “never” participate in a demonstration or protest. (See Appendix Table A.7 for frequencies by age group.)

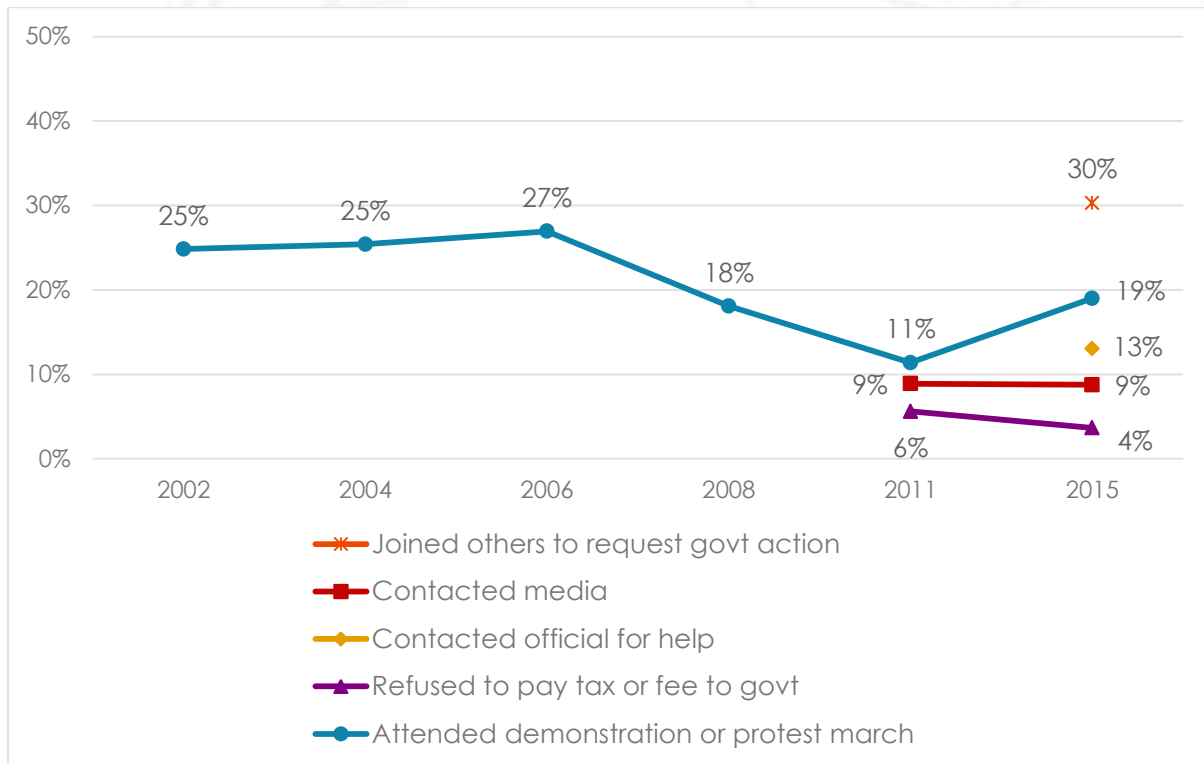
Analysis of youth protest activity over time shows that around one-quarter of survey respondents reported participating in demonstrations or protest marches between 2002 and 2006, after which the proportion declined to just 11% in 2011 before rising again to 19%, perhaps reflecting involvement in the student protests of 2015 (Figure 14). Other measures of protest activity either stayed stable or were asked for the first time in 2015.

**Figure 13: Participation in protest action | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Joined others in your community to request action from government? Contacted the media, like calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper? Contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint? Refused to pay a tax or fee to government? Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

**Figure 14: Participation in protest action | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa**  
 | 2002-2015



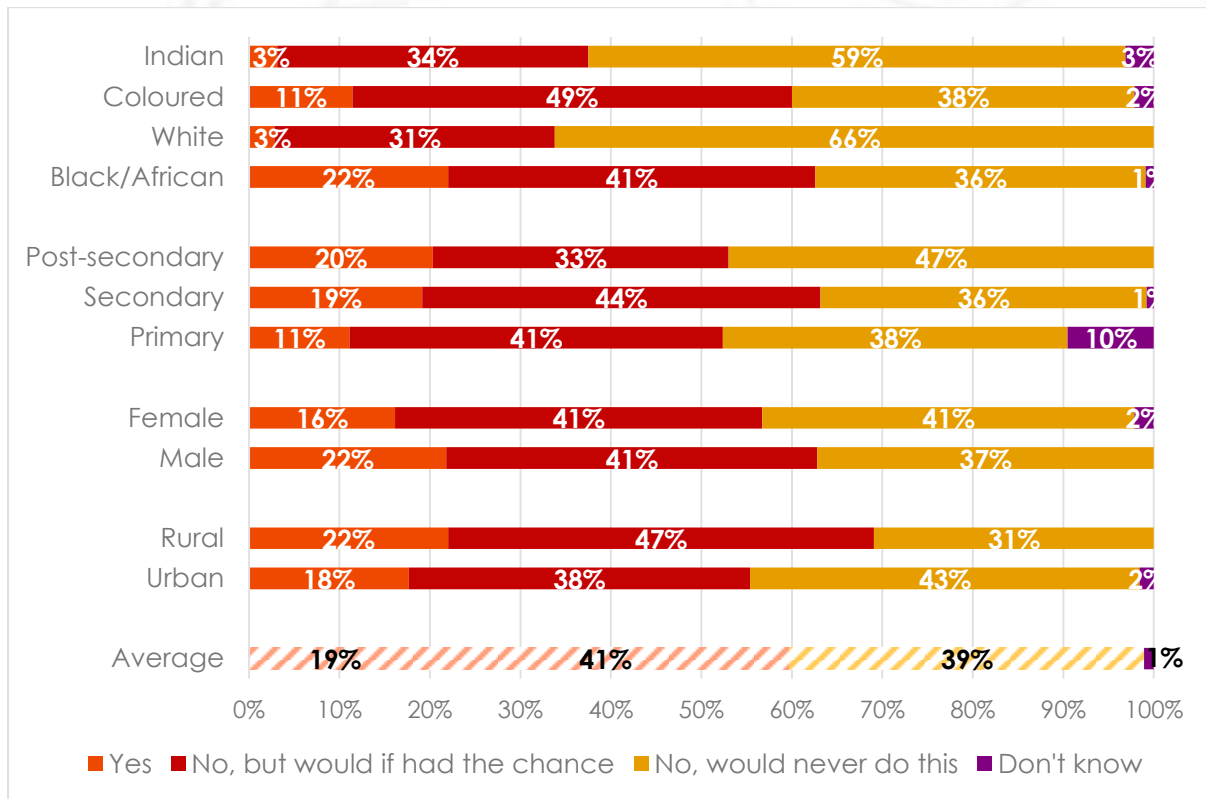
**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Joined others in your community to request action from government? Contacted the media, like calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper? Contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint? Refused to pay a tax or fee to government? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% "yes, at least once")

Among South African youth, participation in demonstrations and protest marches is more likely among men (22%) and rural residents (22%) than among women (16%) and urban residents (18%). Youth with at least a secondary education (20%) are almost twice as likely to say they marched to protest an issue as those with only a primary education (11%) (Figure 15). Results by race group show that young black citizens are far more likely to be involved in a demonstration or protest march (22%) than Coloured (11%), white (3%), and Indian (3%) youth.

Majorities of white (66%) and Indian (59%) youth say they would "never" participate in these actions, compared to fewer than four in 10 Coloured (38%) and black (36%) young citizens. This view is also more prevalent among youth with post-secondary education (47%) than among their peers with lower levels of attainment (37%), despite the many protests at tertiary institutions in 2015.

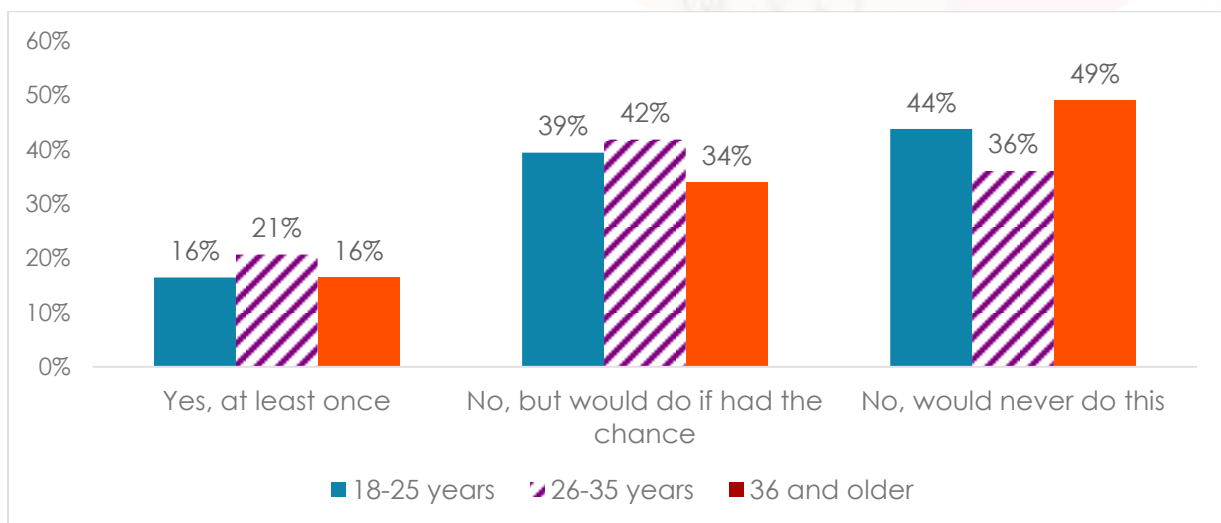
Although youth in general are more likely to engage in protest action than their elders, survey respondents of around university age (18-25 years) are less likely than those aged 26-35 years to have participated in a demonstration or march (16% vs. 21%) and more likely to say that they would never do so (44% vs. 36%) (Figure 16).

**Figure 15: Participation in a demonstration or protest march** | by race, education, gender, and location | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% "yes, at least once")

**Figure 16: Participation in a demonstration or protest march** | by age | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Participated in a demonstration or protest march?



## Conclusion

Ongoing protests on South African university campuses have renewed public debate on the role of the nation's youth in politics and societal transformation. Although the national government has acknowledged the validity of many of the protestors' demands and agreed to work toward the primary goal of eliminating financial barriers to high education in 2016, its response to outbreaks of violent protests illustrates Mattes and Richmond's (2015) argument about "moral panic" regarding certain forms of youth activism.

Analysis of youth political engagement in South Africa suggests that these student demonstrations are not reflective of young citizens' political behaviour in general. Although majorities of youth say they are interested in public affairs and enjoy political freedoms, only two in 10 participated in a demonstration or protest in the preceding year. Furthermore, respondents of roughly university age (18-25 years) are more likely to say that they would "never" do so than those aged 26-35 years.

Levels of civic engagement are generally higher than participation in protest activities, particularly with regard to membership in religious groups and attending community meetings. Although levels of partisan identification among the youth reached a new high in 2015, engagement with members of Parliament remains low. However, young citizens' levels of contact with elected representatives at the local level have increased significantly since 2002.

## References

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## Appendix

**Table A.1: Cognitive engagement** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
<b>Interest in public affairs</b>			
Not at all/Not very interested	49%	41%	41%
Very/Somewhat interested	51%	59%	59%
<b>Discussion of politics</b>			
Never	31%	24%	26%
Occasionally	52%	56%	52%
Frequently	17%	19%	22%

**Respondents were asked:**

- How interested would you say you are in public affairs?
- When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

**Table A.2: Political freedoms** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
Free to say what you think	86%	90%	87%
Free to join any political organisation	93%	94%	92%
Free to choose who to vote for	96%	95%	94%

**Respondents were asked:** In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% "completely free" or "somewhat free")

**Table A.3: Political affiliation** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
No affiliation	33%	29%	24%
ANC	40%	41%	48%
Opposition party	25%	26%	24%
Refused/Don't know	2%	3%	3%

**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that? (Note: "No affiliation" refers to respondents who answered "no," "don't know," or "refused" on the first question.)

**Table A.4: Group membership** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
<b>Religious group</b>			
Not a member	55%	54%	52%
Inactive member	14%	16%	14%
Active member/Official leader	30%	29%	34%
<b>Voluntary association or community group</b>			
Not a member	72%	72%	70%
Inactive member	11%	14%	11%
Active member/Official leader	16%	14%	19%

**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member?

**Table A.5: Civic participation** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
Attended a community meeting	46%	54%	54%
Joined with others to raise an issue	29%	38%	42%

**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue?

**Table A.6: Contact with political leaders** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
Local government councillor	24%	33%	35%
Religious leaders	27%	30%	34%
Traditional leaders	11%	15%	17%
A political party official	11%	10%	14%
An official of a government agency	5%	7%	11%
A member of Parliament	2%	4%	5%

**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

**Table A.7: Participation in protest action** | by age | South Africa | 2015

	18-25 years	26-35 years	36 and older
Joined others to request government action	25%	34%	31%
Attended demonstration or protest march	16%	21%	16%
Contacted official for help	8%	16%	18%
Contacted media	8%	9%	10%
Refused to pay tax or fee to government	3%	4%	4%

**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Joined others in your community to request action from government? Contacted the media, like calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper? Contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint? Refused to pay a tax or fee to government? Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

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