

## South Africans demand government accountability amid perceptions of growing corruption

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 126 | Rorisang Lekalake and Sibusiso Nkomo**

### Summary

A report by South Africa's Public Protector has triggered the latest scandal involving President Jacob Zuma and other state officials, who are accused of improper and unethical conduct in the awarding of state contracts. The report was released as the result of a [High Court ruling](#) (Times Live, 2016) and follows court cases related to the 1999 [Arms Deal](#) (Corruption Watch, 2014) and the misuse of state funds in the security upgrades of Zuma's personal home in [Nkandla](#) (Mail & Guardian, 2016). The latest investigation focuses on allegations of Gupta business family involvement in the removal and appointment of ministers and directors of state companies, resulting in the improper awarding of state contracts and benefits to their businesses totaling billions of rand (Madonsela, 2016). The Public Protector has ordered the president to appoint a commission of inquiry, which will have 180 days to investigate and report its findings (Madonsela, 2016).

The Public Protector's report is popularly known as the "state capture report," referring to corruption enabling powerful individuals, institutions, companies, or groups to influence a nation's policies, legal environment, and economy to benefit their private interests, often with negative consequences for economic development, regulatory quality, and the provision of public services (Martini, 2016).

These allegations are likely to intensify citizens' already-deep concerns about official corruption and inadequate accountability. Findings from Afrobarometer's 2015 survey show widespread perceptions of increasing corruption and impunity for officials who break the law, along with substantial declines in [confidence in the president, satisfaction with his performance](#) (Lekalake, 2015), and [trust in key political institutions](#) (Chingwete, 2016).

While South Africans increasingly support media and citizen oversight over the government, most do not believe that elections are an effective mechanism for holding their leaders accountable, and only a slim majority believe that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption, indicating a need for targeted empowerment efforts.

### 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.

## Key findings

- South Africa ranks first among 36 countries surveyed in 2014/2015 in perceptions of growing corruption, with eight in 10 citizens (83%) saying corruption has increased “somewhat” or “a lot” over the previous year.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of South Africans say officials who commit crimes “always” or “often” go unpunished. This is above the continental average (59%) and represents an increase of 11 percentage points from 2008 (57%).
- Among institutions intended to hold officials accountable, the Public Protector enjoys the greatest public trust (58%), followed by the courts (56%) and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) (55%). Only 41% of citizens trust Parliament “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- An increasing proportion of citizens want Parliament to hold the president accountable (63% in 2015 vs. 47% in 2008) and say the president must obey the courts and laws of the country (77% in 2015 vs. 62% in 2008). But more than half say he regularly ignores Parliament (59%) and the judiciary (56%).
- Strong majorities of South Africans support media investigation and reporting of government mistakes and corruption (70%) and believe the media is effective in this role (82%). However, just half (51%) say citizens' ability to hold government accountable is more important than government efficiency, and only a minority say elections are effective at allowing citizens to remove under-performing officials from office.
- More than half (56%) of survey respondents say ordinary South Africans can make a difference in the fight against corruption, but this view is less common among rural, older, and less educated citizens.

## Corruption and impunity in South Africa

Even before the latest allegations, eight in 10 South Africans (83%) saw corruption as having increased “somewhat” or “a lot” between 2014 and 2015, placing South Africa at the top of 36 countries surveyed (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> When asked about the extent of corruption in various institutions, citizens say government officials, police officers, and local government councillors are the most corrupt, followed by the presidency and members of Parliament (Table 1).

More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens say officials who commit crimes “always” or “often” go unpunished, an increase of more than 10 percentage points since the surveys in 2005 and 2008 (Figure 2). South Africa's perception of official impunity is above the 36-country average (59%) and well above the regional average for Southern Africa (48%) (Figure 3).

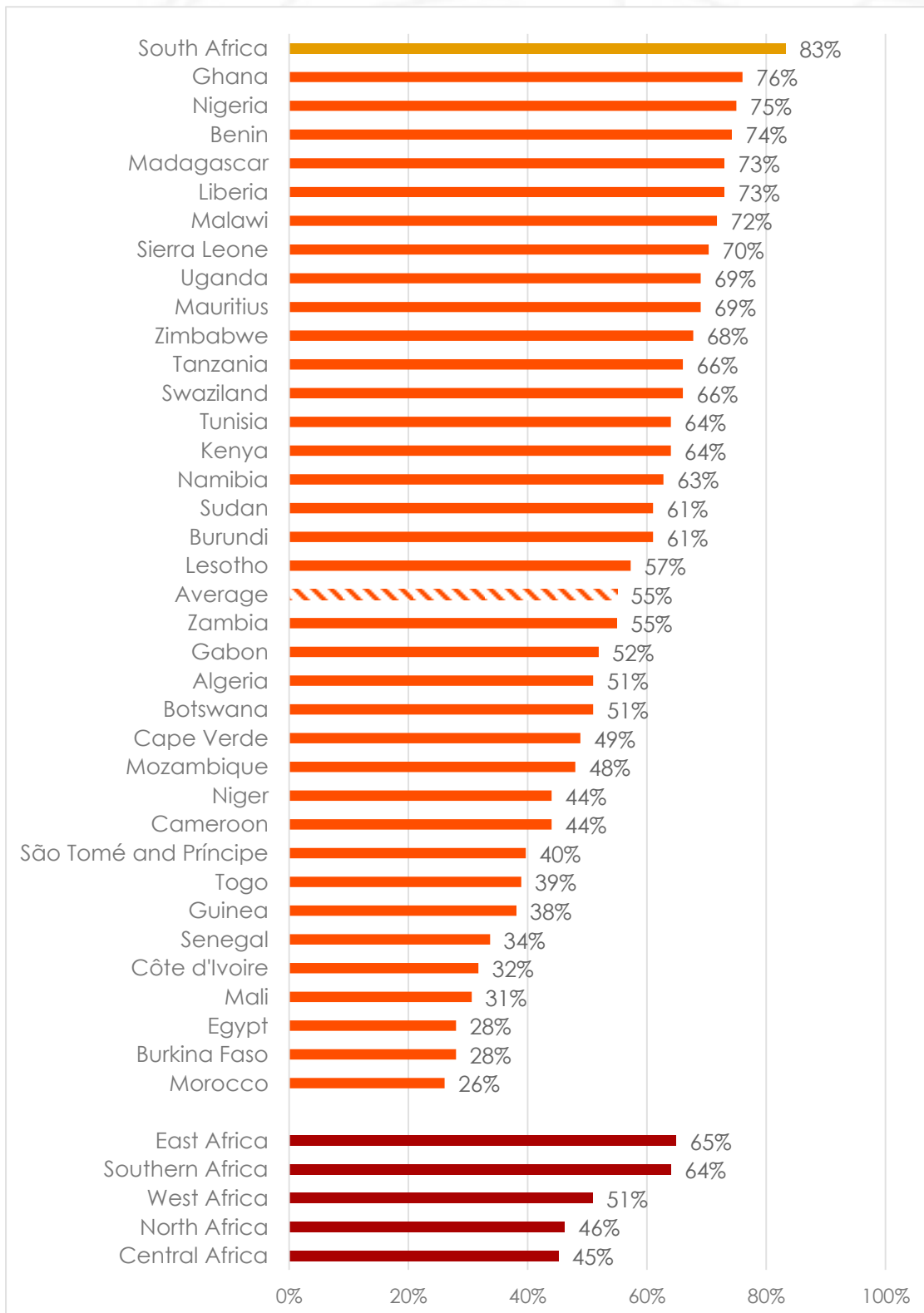
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To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

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<sup>1</sup> For more results on corruption from the 2014/2015 survey, see the joint [Afrobarometer/Transparency International](#) report (Transparency International, 2015).

**Figure 1: Perceived increase in corruption levels | 36 countries | 2014/2015**



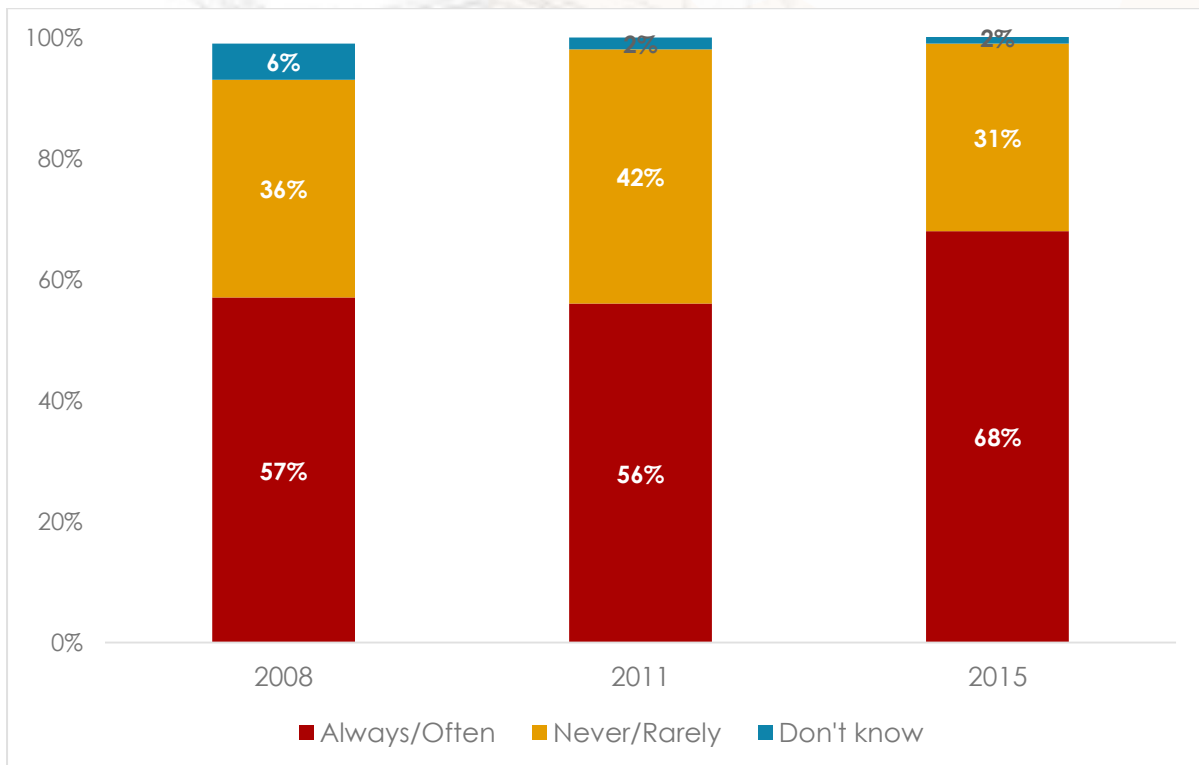
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same? (% who say "increased a lot" or "increased somewhat")*

**Table 1: Perceived corruption levels in institutions | South Africa | 2015**

	All/Most of them	Some of them	None of them	Don't know
Government officials	49%	45%	4%	2%
Police	48%	48%	4%	1%
Local government councillors	48%	47%	4%	2%
Presidency	46%	46%	5%	2%
Members of Parliament	46%	49%	4%	2%
Business executives	38%	47%	9%	6%
Judges and magistrates	23%	56%	16%	5%
Tax officials	23%	51%	17%	10%
Religious leaders	20%	49%	24%	7%
Traditional leaders	19%	43%	19%	19%

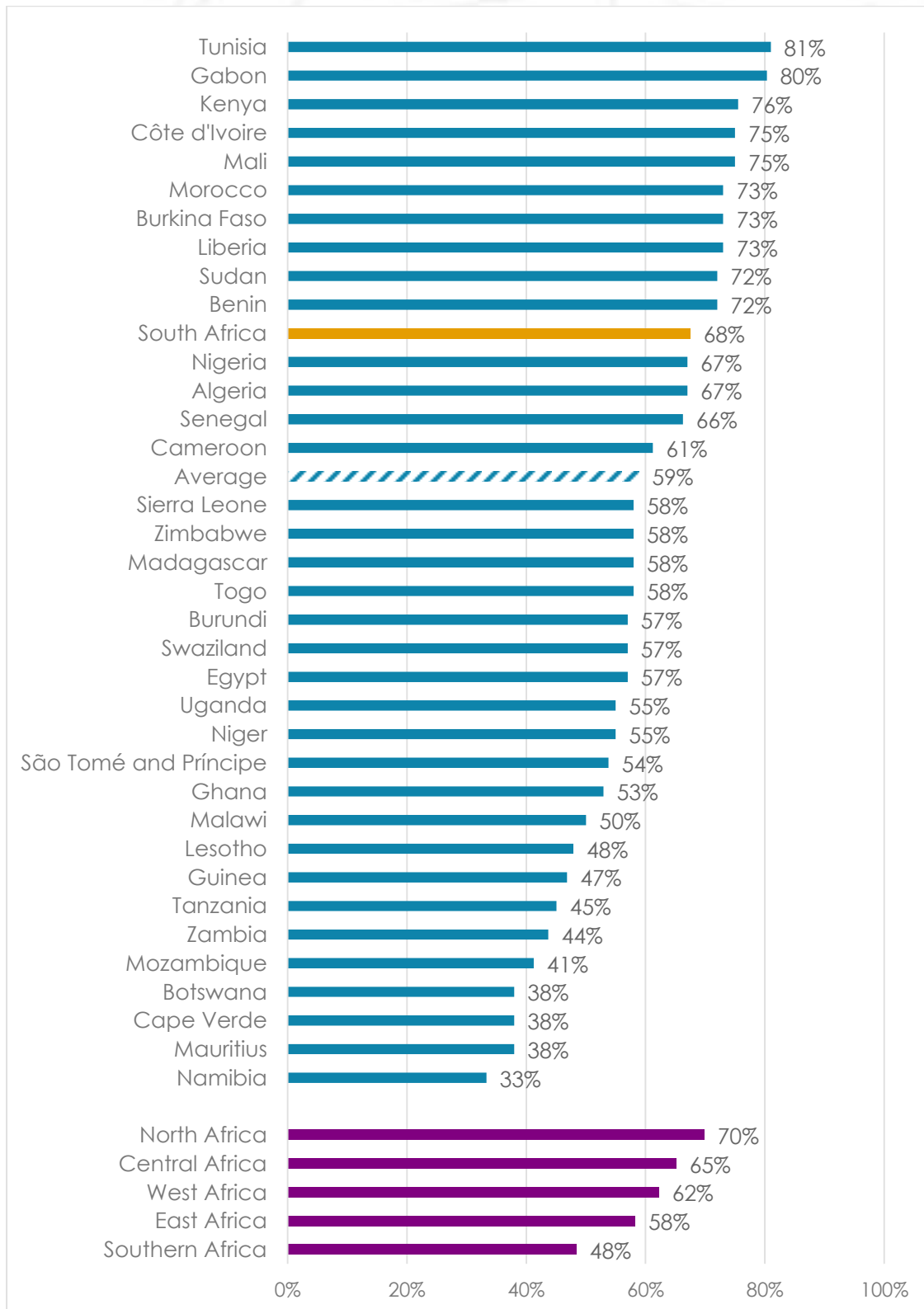
**Respondents were asked:** How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

**Figure 2: Impunity for public officials who commit crimes | South Africa | 2008-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often, in this country do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?  
 (% who said "always" or "often")

**Figure 3: Impunity for public officials who commit crimes | 36 countries | 2014/2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often, in this country do officials who commit crimes go unpunished?*  
 (% who say "always" or "often")

## Accountability

The concept of accountability refers to the obligation of elected political leaders to answer for their political decisions and has three main features: information, justification, and punishment or compensation (Diamond & Morlino, 2004: 25). Democracies depend on two forms of political accountability: horizontal accountability to state institutions charged with maintaining checks and balances on executive power (e.g. Parliament, the judiciary, an ombudsman or public protector), and vertical accountability to the larger society, which may be enforced by news media reporting, civil-society or citizen activism, etc.

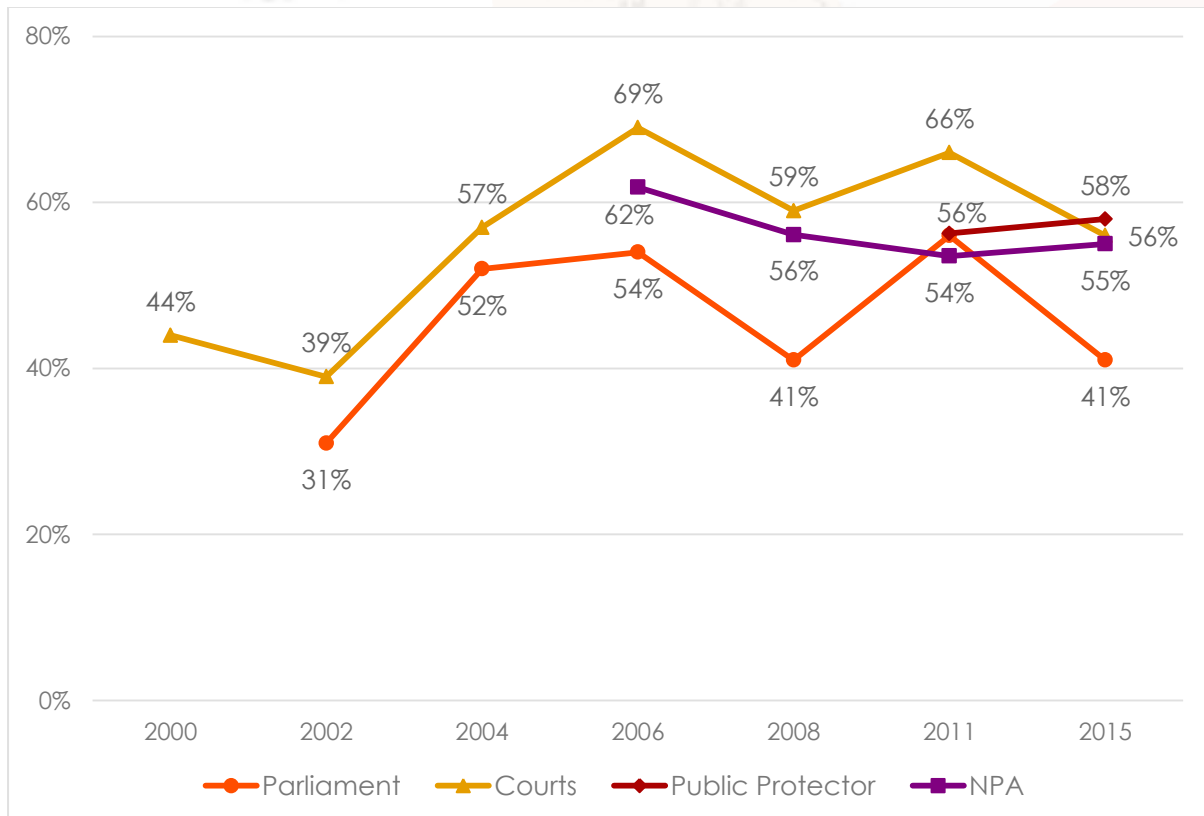
### Horizontal accountability by state institutions

How much do South Africans trust the state institutions charged with maintaining checks and balances on executive power?

Citizen trust is highest (58% “somewhat” or “a lot”) for the Public Protector, an independent institution mandated by the Constitution to strengthen constitutional democracy by investigating and redressing improper and prejudicial conduct, maladministration, and abuse of power in state affairs (Public Protector, 2009). Majorities also say they trust the courts (56%) and the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) (55%) “somewhat” or “a lot,” while only 41% express confidence in Parliament (Figure 4).

Although trust in the courts and Parliament has increased since 2002, both measures declined substantially between 2011 and 2015 (by 10 and 15 percentage points, respectively). In contrast, confidence in the office of the Public Protector and NPA has been stable since 2011.

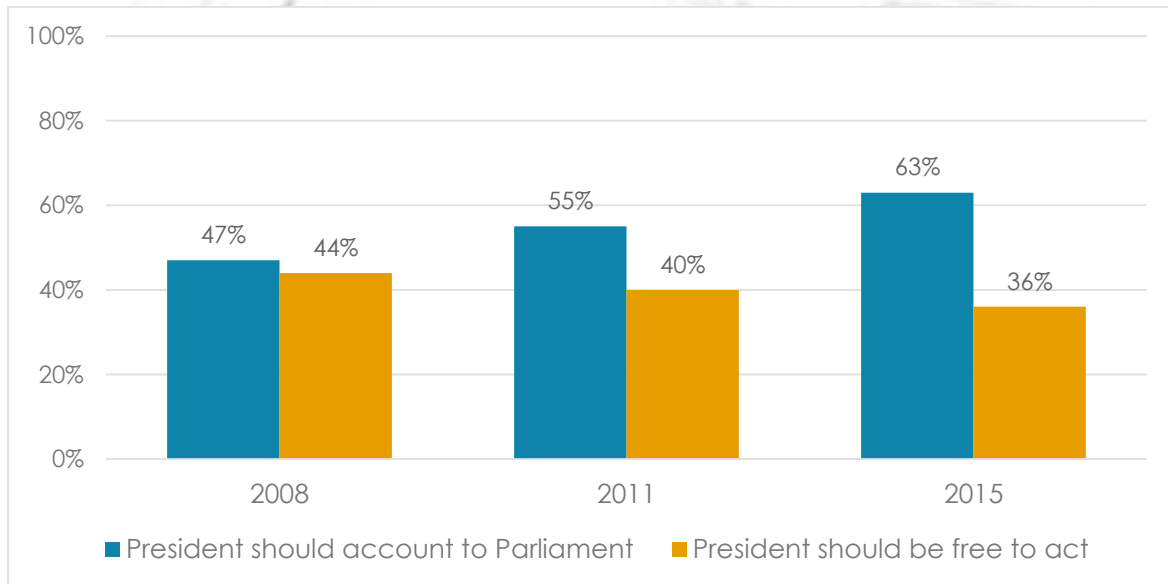
**Figure 4: Trust in horizontal accountability institutions | South Africa | 2000-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

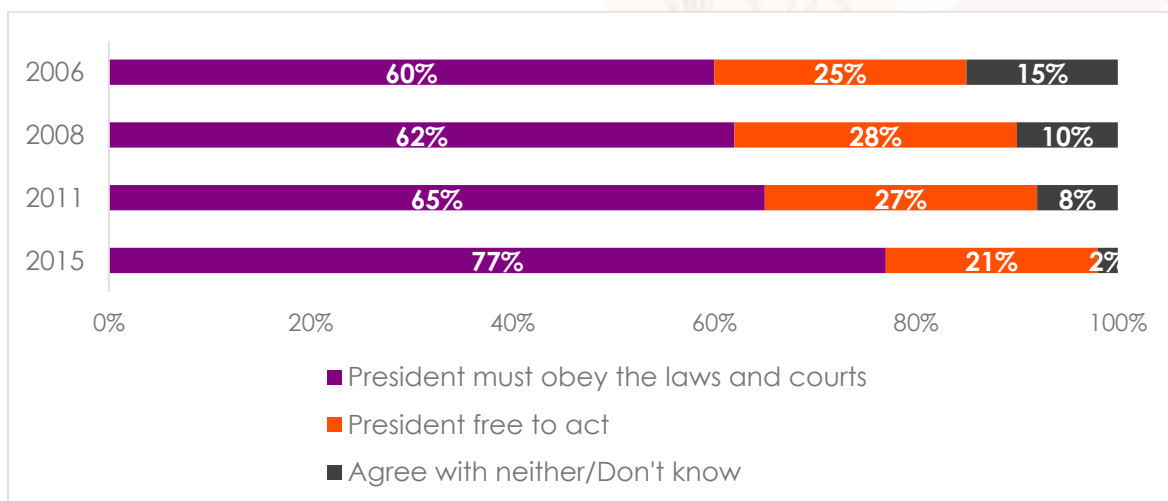
An increasing majority of South Africans say that Parliament should hold the president accountable for how the government spends money: While just 47% of citizens held this view in 2008, that proportion grew to 63% by 2015 (Figure 5). The proportion of citizens who say the president should obey the law and the courts, even if he disagrees with them, also increased during the same period, from 60% to 77% (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: President should account to Parliament | South Africa | 2008-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.  
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

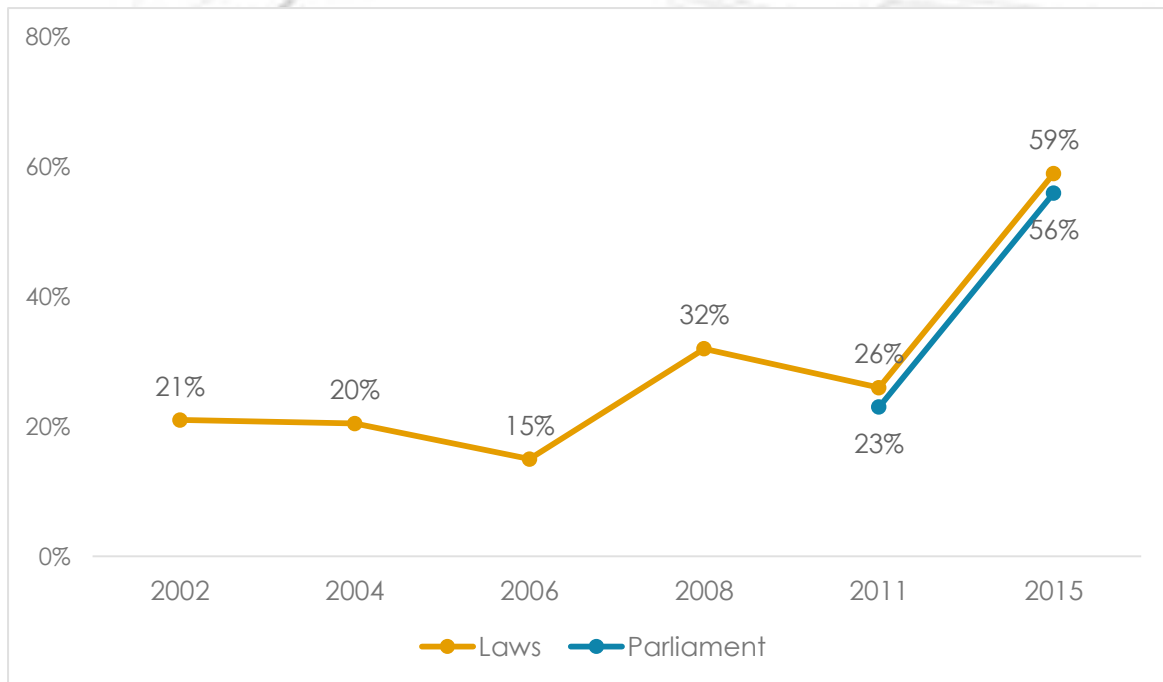
**Figure 6: President should obey laws and courts | South Africa | 2006-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.  
 Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

This support for horizontal accountability does not appear to be matched by perceptions of President Zuma's conduct. A majority of South Africans believe the president "always" or "often" ignores the law and courts (59%) and Parliament (56%) (Figure 7). These levels have more than doubled since 2011.

**Figure 7: Perceptions that president ignores Parliament and the law | South Africa | 2002-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often, in this country:*

1. Does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country?<sup>2</sup>
  2. Does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?
- (% who say "always" or "often")

### Vertical accountability by media and citizens

Vertical accountability is a key component of democracy, which differs from other political regimes in that each citizen "has the same rights and obligations, that is, to be informed (with limited exceptions) about official actions, to hear justifications for them, and to act accordingly – electorally or otherwise" (Schmitter, 2004, p. 48). In South Africa, recent years have seen numerous protests against corruption led by civil society and ordinary citizens, while the news media has kept a strong focus on reporting graft.

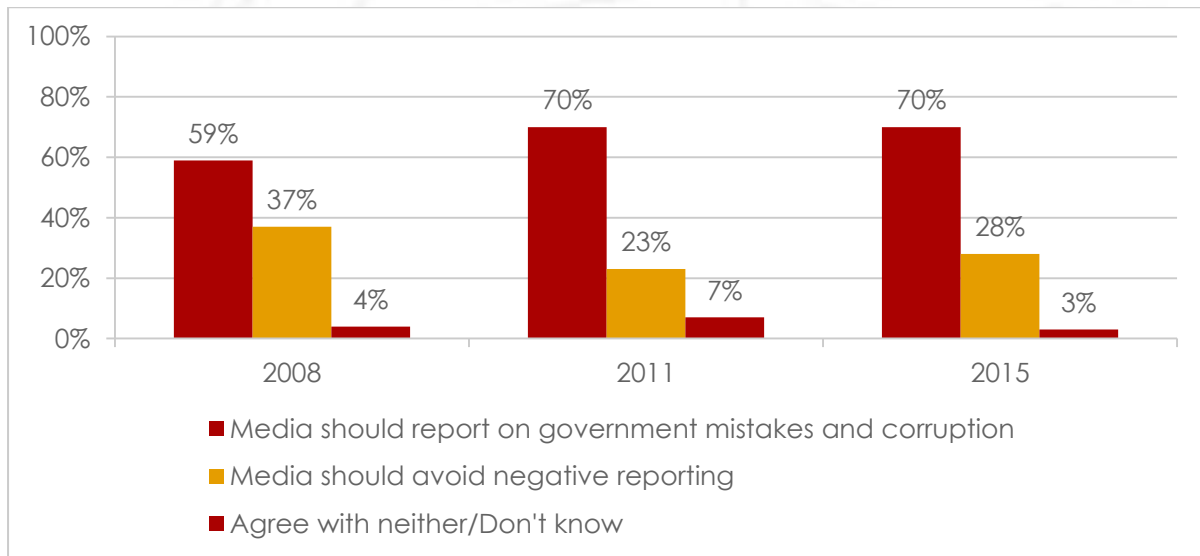
### Media and accountability

A majority of South Africans have consistently supported a "watchdog" role for the news media. The proportion of citizens who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption has increased over time to seven in 10 (70%) (Figure 8), and the media is overwhelmingly perceived as "very" or "somewhat" effective (82%) in that role (Figure 9).

<sup>2</sup> In the 2002, 2004, and 2006 surveys, the question asked about "the Constitution."

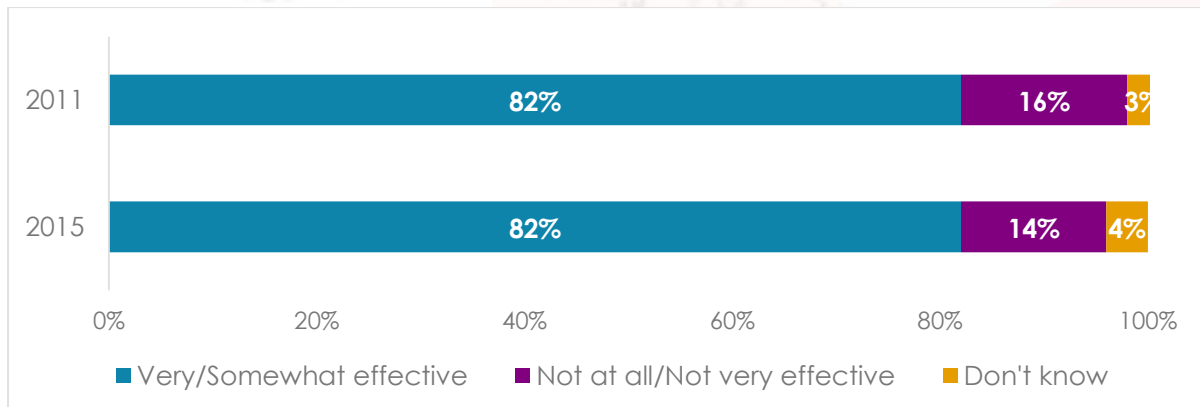


**Figure 8: Media should hold government accountable | South Africa | 2008-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.  
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.  
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

**Figure 9: Media effectiveness | South Africa | 2011-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** In this country, how effective is the news media in revealing government mistakes and corruption?

**Government accountability to citizens**

Since 2011, the view that citizens should be able to hold government accountable – even if it slows down government processes – has gone from a minority view (44%) to one held by 51% of South Africans (Figure 10). At present, however, only minorities of South Africans believe that elections are an effective accountability measure: Just 44% say they are effective in ensuring that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters, while even fewer (36%) say that elections work “very well” or “well” to enable voters to remove leaders who do not do what the people want (Figure 11).

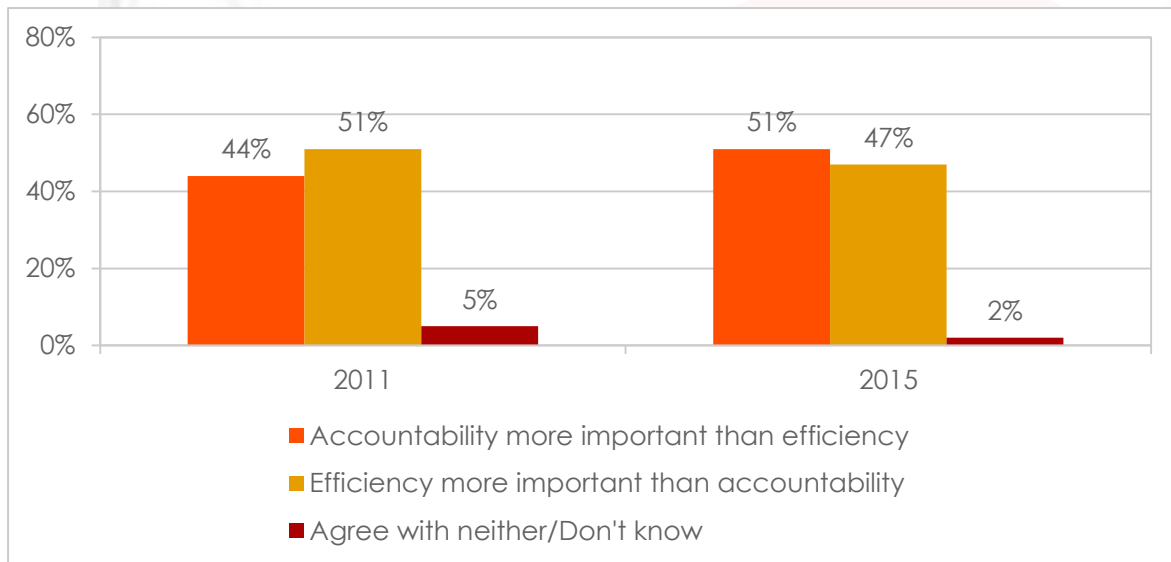
Despite negative perceptions about the effectiveness of elections in holding officials accountable, a majority (56%) of South Africans say ordinary people can make a difference

in the fight against corruption. This is close to the average of the 36 surveyed countries (54%) and of the Southern Africa region (59%) (Figure 12).

The perception that citizens can help fight corruption is slightly more common among urban residents than rural residents (58% vs. 54%) and among citizens aged 18-49 years compared to those over 50 years (57% vs. 52%). Moreover, perceptions of citizen effectiveness increase with education: 58% of respondents with at least a secondary education say ordinary people can make a difference, compared to only 48% of those with a primary education or no formal schooling (Figure 13).

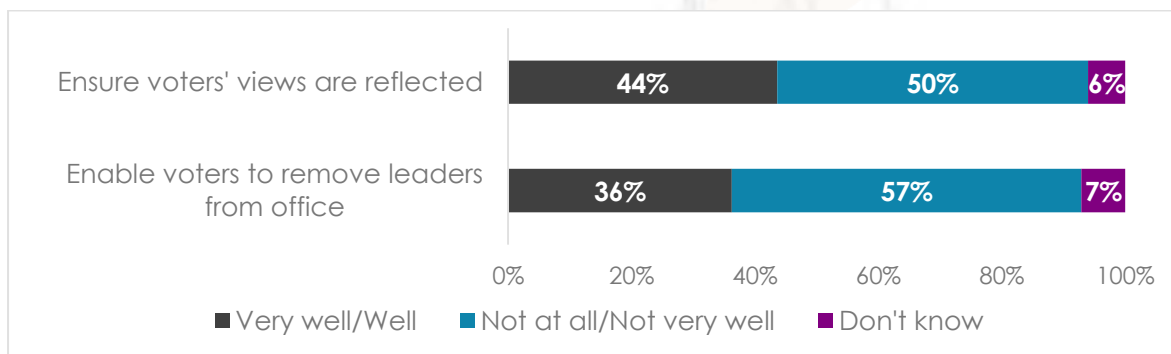
Analysis by race shows that Coloured citizens are the most likely to agree that ordinary South Africans can contribute to the fight against corruption (59%), followed by Black/African (57%), white (52%), and Indian (49%) respondents.

**Figure 10: Government accountability vs. efficiency | South Africa | 2011-2015**



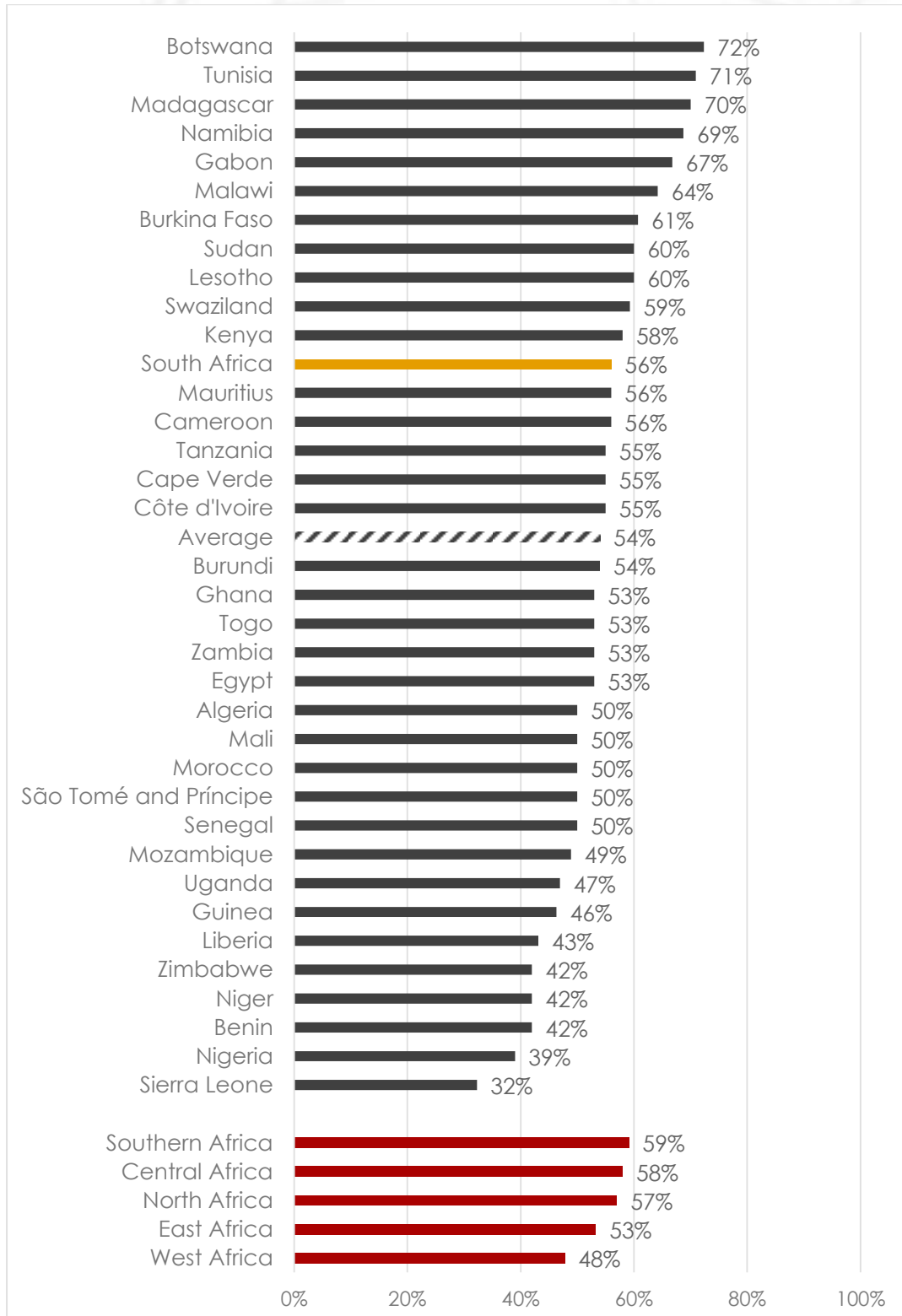
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.  
 Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

**Figure 11: Effectiveness of elections | South Africa | 2015**



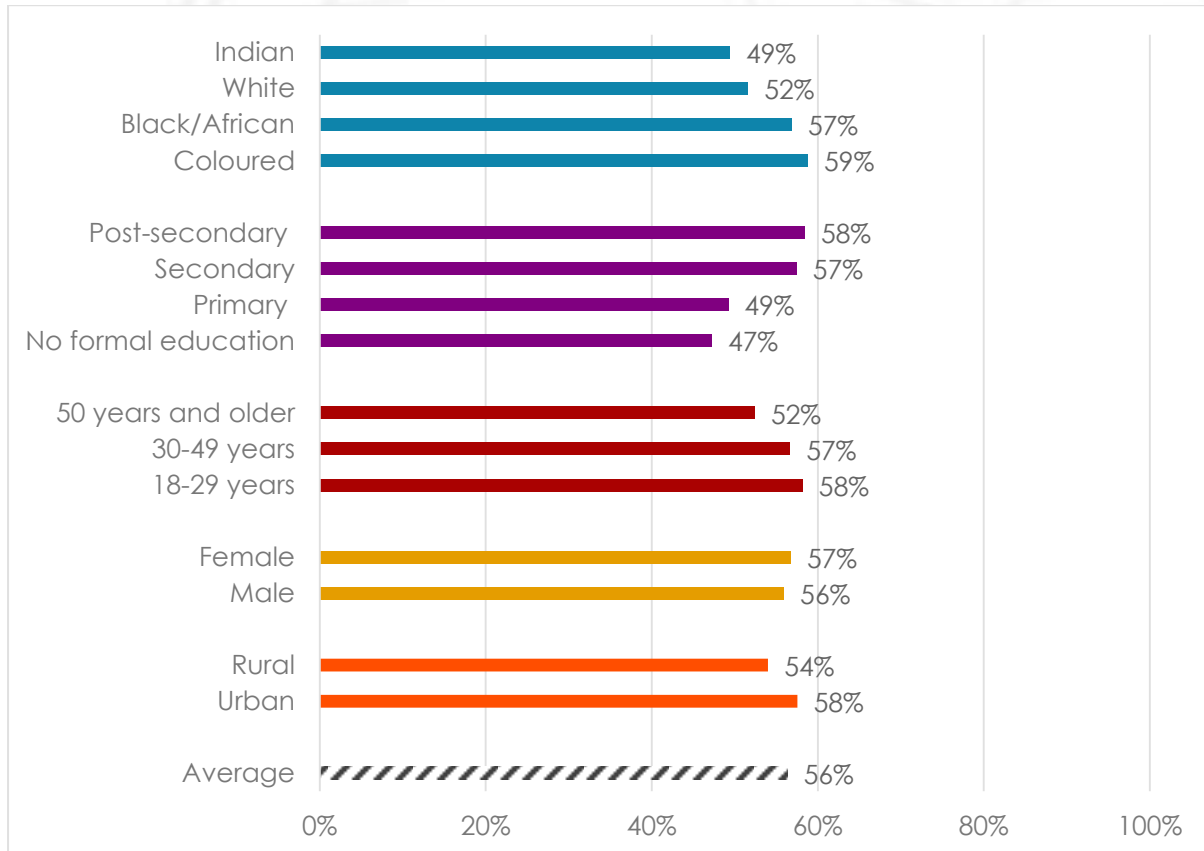
**Respondents were asked:** Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections:  
 1. Ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters?  
 2. Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

**Figure 12: Ordinary citizens can make a difference in the fight against corruption**  
 | 36 countries | 2014/2015



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

**Figure 13: Ordinary citizens can make a difference in the fight against corruption**  
 | by location, gender, age, education, and race | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: Ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption. (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

## Conclusion

South Africa's latest scandal is likely to intensify already-deep public concerns about official corruption. Based on 2015 survey findings, significant proportions of the population perceive high levels of corruption among key institutions, including Parliament and the Presidency. Among state institutions charged with holding the executive accountable, the Public Protector enjoys the greatest public trust, followed by the courts and the NPA, while fewer citizens trust Parliament. Trust in both the courts and Parliament has declined since 2011 amid growing perceptions that President Zuma regularly ignores these institutions.

Although confidence in the media's effectiveness to reveal government mistakes and corruption is high, citizens are divided on the importance of citizens' role in holding officials accountable. Furthermore, relatively few survey respondents see elections as an effective accountability measure. These results indicate a need for civil society organisations and the media to further educate ordinary South Africans about their rights and avenues for holding government accountable, both in the voting booth and through alternative forms of civic activism. These efforts should prioritize rural, older, and less educated South Africans, who are least likely to believe that ordinary citizens can make a difference in the fight against corruption.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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