

South Africa's opposition narrows trust gap but still faces mixed perceptions of vision and role

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 88 | Rorisang Lekalake

Summary

The African National Congress (ANC) has dominated post-apartheid South Africa's political landscape. Following the 2014 national and provincial elections, the party holds 62% of National Assembly seats and governs eight of the country's nine provinces (Independent Electoral Commission, 2016).¹ In the run-up to local elections on 3 August 2016, the two leading opposition parties – the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) – are portraying the poll as a political watershed for South Africa's democracy in the wake of the Constitutional Court judgment against President Jacob Zuma and other leading ANC members regarding the use of state funds in the construction of the president's private residence, Nkandla (Democratic Alliance, 2016; Economic Freedom Fighters, 2016). The two parties were the applicants in the court case, which invalidated the National Assembly's decision to absolve the president from remedial action determined by the Public Protector in March 2014 (Constitutional Court, 2016).

Results from the 2015 Afrobarometer survey, conducted before this latest development in the Nkandla scandal, suggest an evolving terrain for South Africa's opposition. Public trust in opposition parties has tripled since 2002 despite a dip in 2015, while trust in the ANC has dropped sharply over the past four years. But less than half of South Africans believe that opposition parties present a viable alternative vision and plan for the country. Furthermore, a majority of citizens say the ANC is better able than the opposition to address national priority areas such as controlling prices, creating jobs, improving health care, and fighting corruption. The proportion of South Africans who say that "opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable" has been decreasing since 2008, reaching 28% in 2015, although this was before opposition-led support for the Public Protector's findings succeeded at the Constitutional Court.

The ANC secured 64% of the votes in the 2011 municipal elections (Independent Electoral Commission, 2011). These survey findings suggest that opposition parties will face significant challenges in diminishing the ANC's electoral dominance in the upcoming elections, particularly since few South Africans cite policy issues as the main difference between parties. However, they could make inroads among large proportions of citizens who do not feel close to any political party.

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-

¹ The Democratic Alliance is the ruling party in the Western Cape and the leading opposition party in all other provinces except Limpopo and North West, where the Economic Freedom Fighters party leads the opposition.

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

- Public trust in the political opposition has tripled since 2002, from 12% to 36% of South Africans who say they trust opposition parties “a lot” or “somewhat.” Trust in the ruling party dropped by 18 percentage points over the same period.
- Support for the opposition is highest in the Western Cape, where 48% of survey respondents say they “feel close to” opposition parties, followed by the North West (33%) and Free State (30%). The proportion of self-identified opposition supporters is lowest in Mpumalanga (11%) and the Eastern Cape (14%).
- The proportion of South Africans who say that opposition parties should focus on monitoring and criticizing the government, rather than on playing a cooperative role, has declined from 36% in 2008 to 28% in 2015. Support for a monitoring role is somewhat higher among opposition supporters (34%) and citizens of minority race groups (31%).
- Four in 10 citizens (43%) say that opposition parties present a viable alternative vision and plan for the country, while 34% disagree. Agreement increases with levels of education and is higher among white (58%) and Coloured (49%) respondents than among Indian and black citizens (both about four in 10).
- Less than one-quarter (23%) of South Africans believe that opposition parties are better able than the ANC to address key national priorities such as fighting corruption, creating jobs, improving health care, and controlling prices.

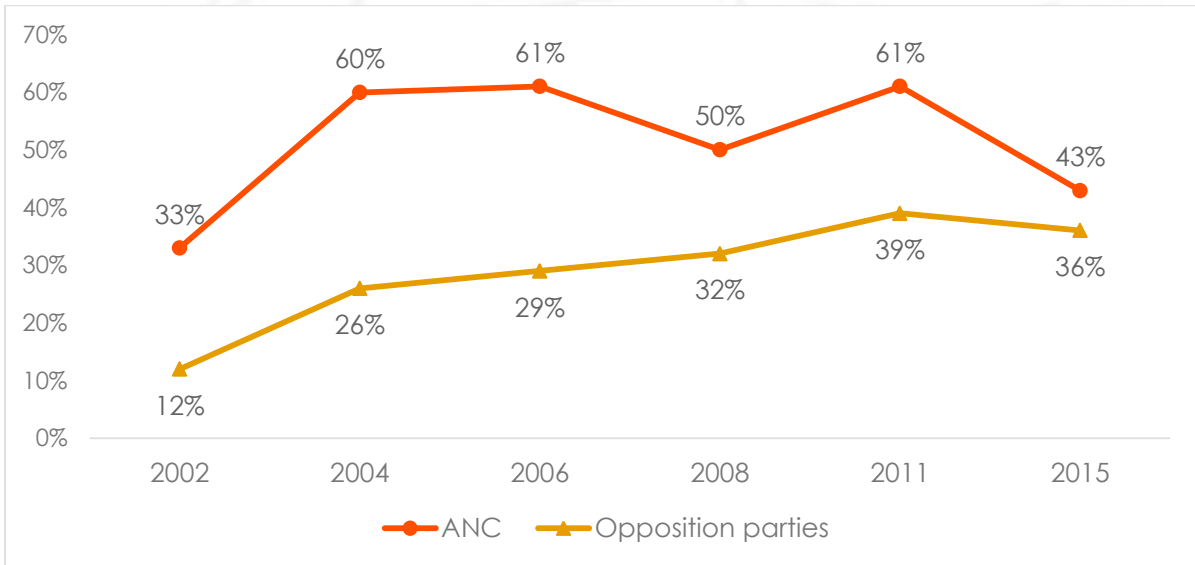
Public trust in and identification with opposition political parties

Since 2002, the ANC has consistently enjoyed higher levels of public trust than opposition political parties: On average over the period, half (51%) of survey respondents have said they trust the ruling party “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to three in 10 (29%) who have said the same about opposition parties (Figure 1). However, the ANC’s advantage over opposition parties has diminished substantially since the 2011 survey: Only 43% of South Africans now say they trust the ANC “somewhat” or “a lot,” an 18-percentage-point decline from 61% in 2011. Trust in opposition parties has tripled since 2002, from 12% to 36%, despite a slight dip in 2015.

The proportion of South Africans who say they “feel close to” the ANC has also been consistently higher than opposition support over time (44% vs. 13% on average since 2002). In 2015, about one-quarter (27%) of survey respondents say they do not feel close to any political party, down from 40% in 2011. This decline appears to be due to an increase in affiliation with opposition parties (from 13% to 25%), as support for the ANC remained stable during the same period (Figure 2).

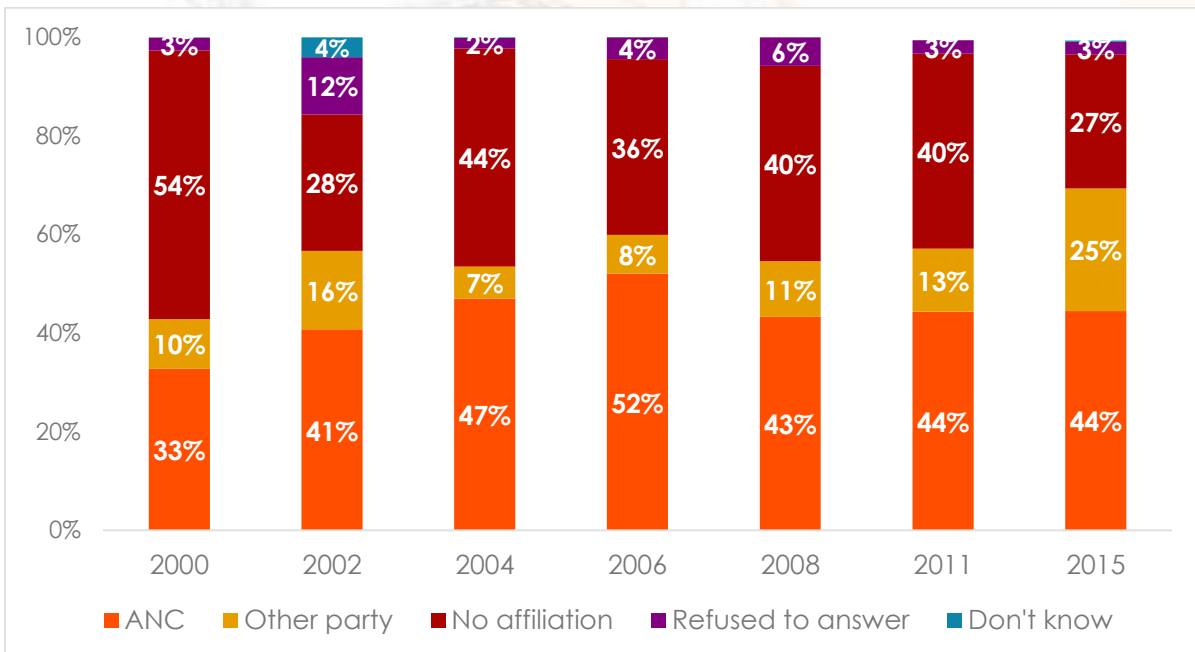
For more on respondents’ voting intentions and on institutional trust in the country, see Afrobarometer Dispatches No. 89 and 90, available at www.afrobarometer.org.

Figure 1: Public trust in political parties | South Africa | 2002-2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The ruling party? Opposition political parties? (% who say "a lot" or "somewhat")

Figure 2: Party affiliation | South Africa | 2000-2015



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes) Which party is that? (Note: Due to rounding, categories may not always add up to 100%.)

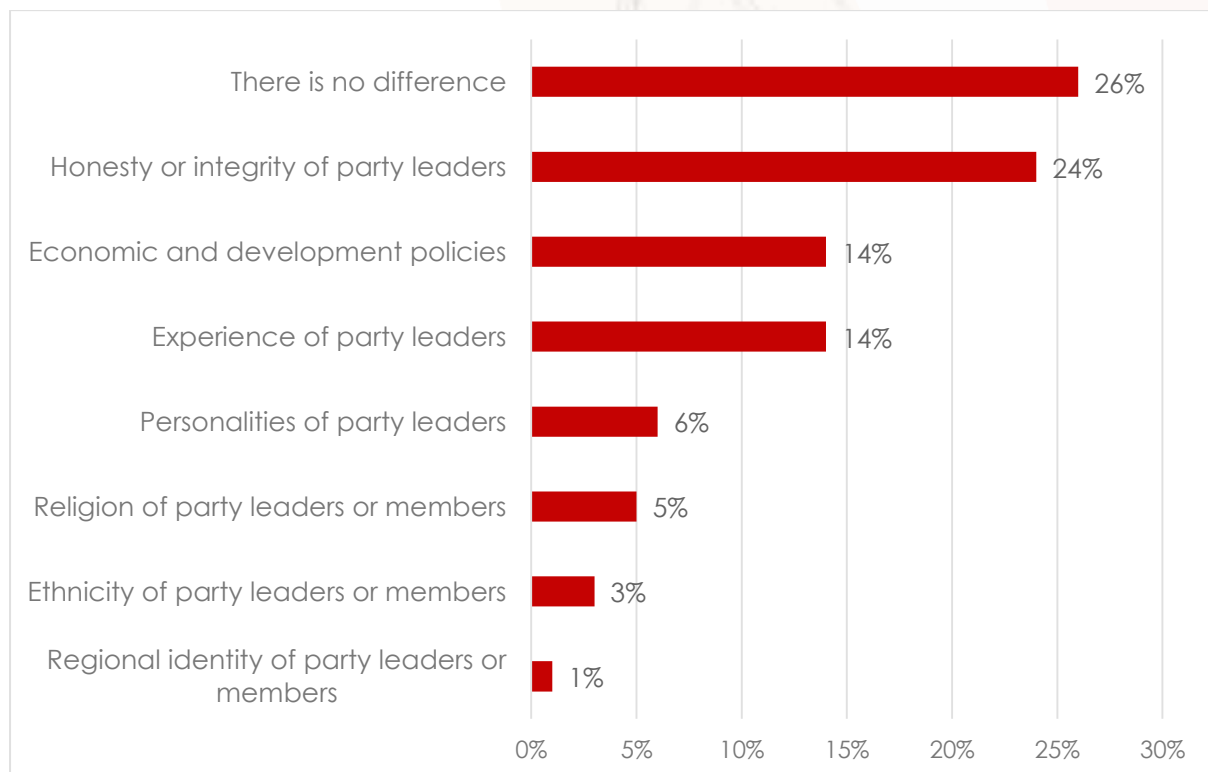
Opposition support is highest in the Western Cape (48%), which was the only province in which an opposition party (DA) secured a majority of votes in the national (57%) and provincial (59%) elections (Independent Electoral Commission, 2016). Conversely, opposition support is lowest in Mpumalanga (11%) and the Eastern Cape (14%) (Table 1). The Northern Cape has the largest share of citizens with no party affiliation (46%), followed by Gauteng (40%).

Table 1: Party affiliation | by province | South Africa | 2015

	ANC	DA	EFF	Other	No affiliation
Mpumalanga	66%	7%	3%	2%	22%
Eastern Cape	59%	9%	2%	3%	21%
Limpopo	55%	7%	12%	3%	17%
KwaZulu-Natal	51%	9%	2%	12%	23%
Average	45%	13%	7%	5%	27%
Free State	36%	6%	18%	5%	29%
North West	35%	8%	19%	6%	29%
Northern Cape	35%	13%	4%	0%	46%
Gauteng	34%	12%	9%	3%	40%
Western Cape	30%	44%	1%	2%	21%

When asked for their views on the primary difference between the ANC and opposition political parties, one-quarter (26%) of survey respondents say they see “no difference.” More than four in 10 respondents cite issues related to the integrity (24%), experience (14%), or personalities (6%) of party leaders, while 9% identify differences in religion, ethnicity, or regional identity among party leaders or members (Figure 3). Only 14% of respondents cite differences in economic and development policies.

Figure 3: Difference between ruling and opposition parties | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: Which of the following do you see as the most important difference between the ruling party and opposition parties in South Africa?

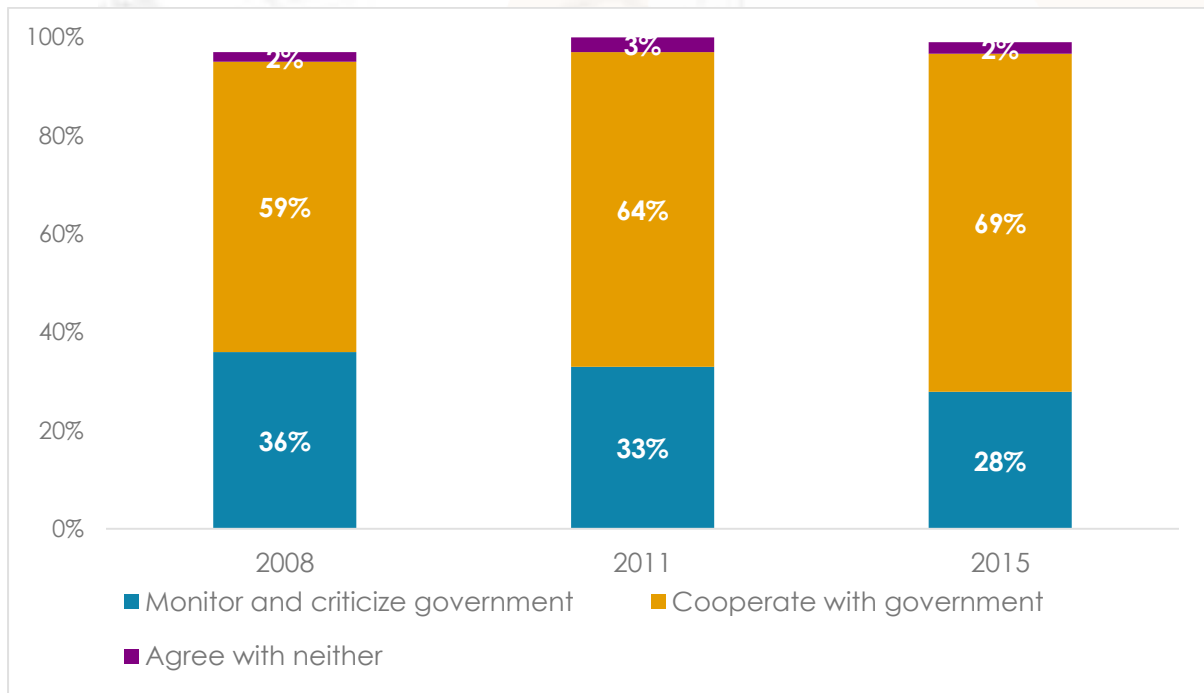
Role of opposition political parties

More than two-thirds of South Africans (69%) say opposition parties should focus on cooperation with the government to develop the country rather than on monitoring and criticizing government actions (28%). Support for a monitoring role for the political opposition has declined by 8 percentage points since the question was first asked in 2008 (Figure 4).

Further analysis of these preferences shows slight differences by urban/rural location, gender, and age (Figure 5). Unsurprisingly, opposition supporters are more likely than ANC supporters to say that opposition parties should play a monitoring role (34% vs. 26%). South Africans from minority race groups are somewhat more likely to hold this view than black respondents. Furthermore, respondents with at least primary schooling are more likely to support a critical political opposition than those with no formal education. However, this support does not increase with educational attainment levels.

South Africans' views on this question are similar to those in other countries in the region: Across 10 countries in Southern Africa, only three of 10 citizens say opposition parties should focus on monitoring and criticizing the government (Figure 6). Interestingly, citizens of the region's most enduring democracies are on opposite ends of the scale: A majority (57%) of Mauritians hold this view, while only about one in six Batswana (16%) agree.

Figure 4: Role of opposition parties in South African politics | 2008-2015



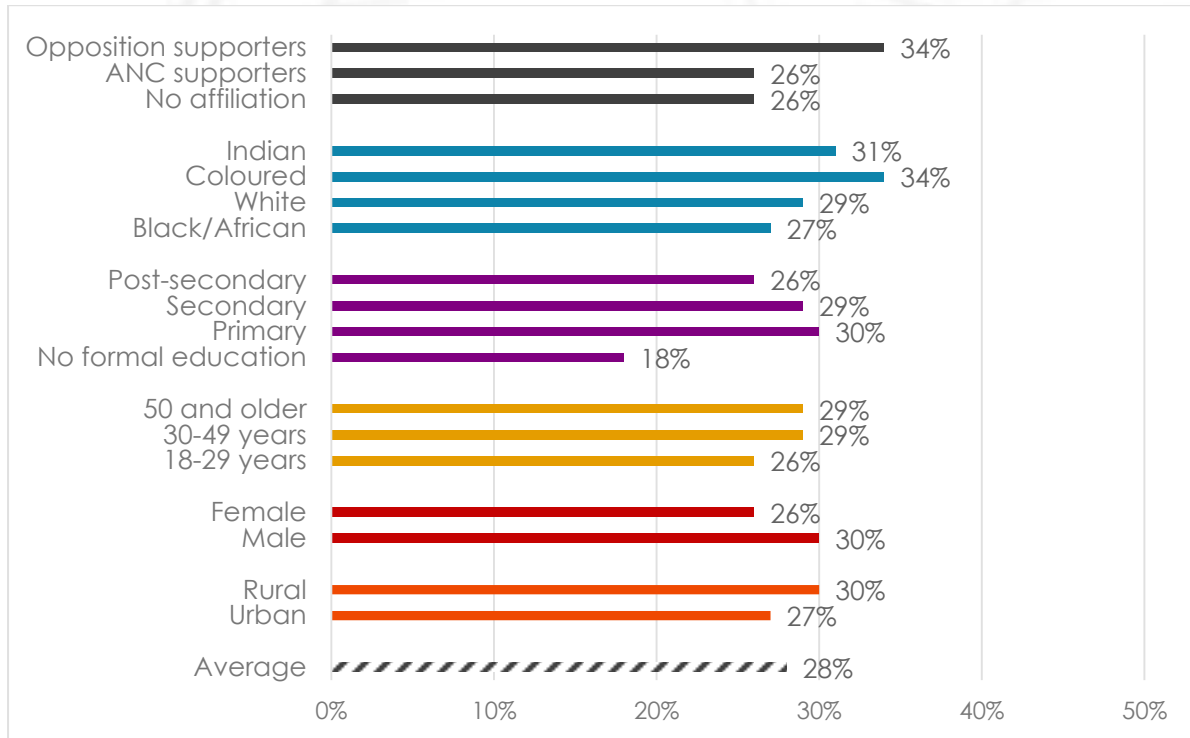
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2.

Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable.²

Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.

² In 2008 and 2011, this response option read "Statement 1: Opposition parties should regularly examine and criticize government policies and actions."

Figure 5: Opposition parties should monitor and criticize government | by party affiliation, race, education, age, gender, and location | South Africa | 2015



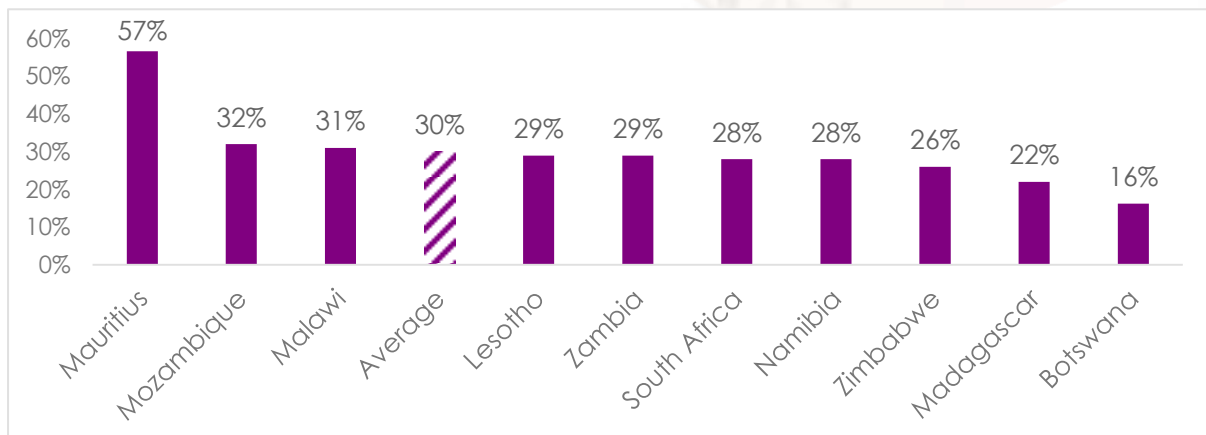
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(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that the opposition should monitor and criticize the government)

Figure 6: Opposition parties should monitor and criticize government | 10 Southern African countries³ | 2014/2015



(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that the opposition should monitor and criticize the government)

³ The questions addressed in this dispatch were not asked in Swaziland.

Viability of opposition vision for South Africa

When asked whether they agree that opposition parties offer a viable alternative vision and plan for the country, South Africans are more likely to say yes (43%) than no (29%). These views are also close to average evaluations across Southern Africa (Figure 7). Among 10 countries

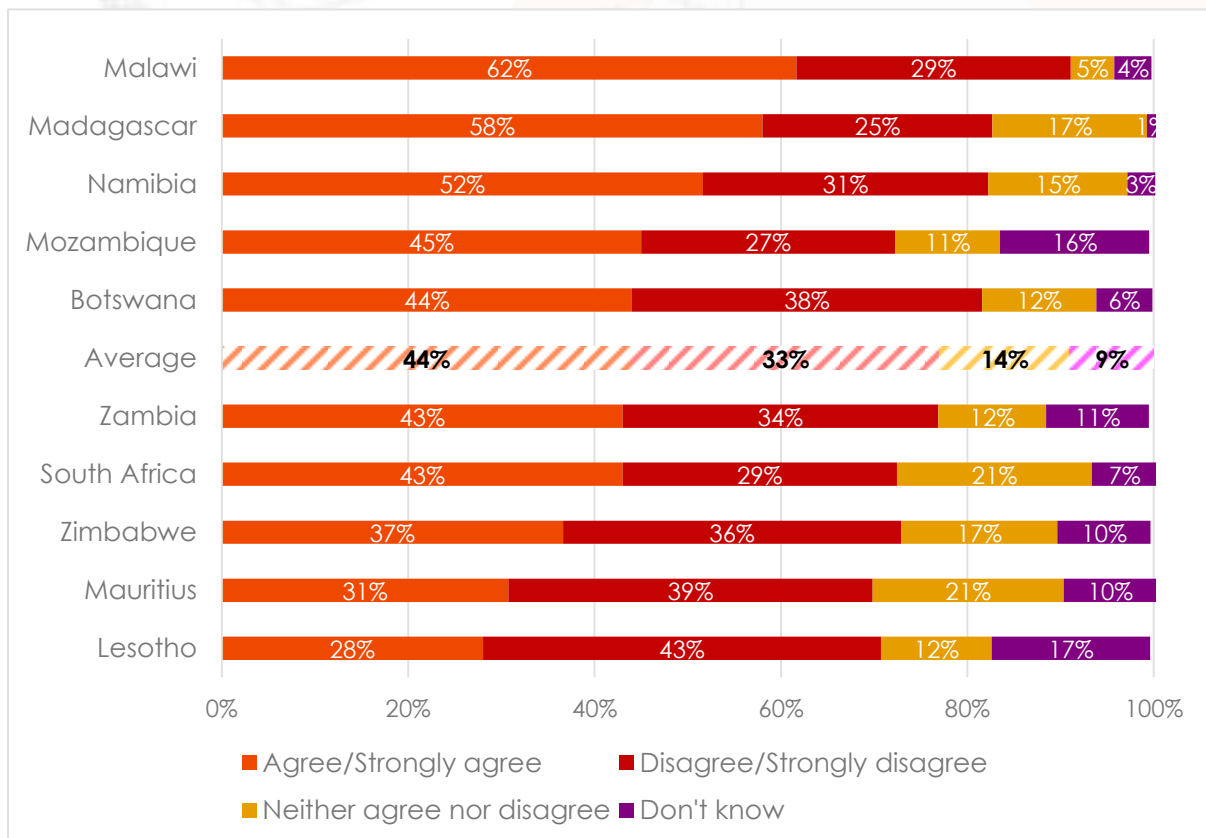
To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

in the region, the highest level of agreement was in Malawi (62%), where the opposition won the 2014 elections a few months after the survey (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of survey and election dates).

Among countries with dominant party systems – South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe – perceptions of the opposition's vision as a viable alternative is highest in Namibia (52%) and lowest in Zimbabwe (37%).

Since this question was not asked in previous survey rounds, no over-time comparison is possible.

Figure 7: Do opposition parties offer a viable alternative vision? | 10 Southern African countries | 2014/2015

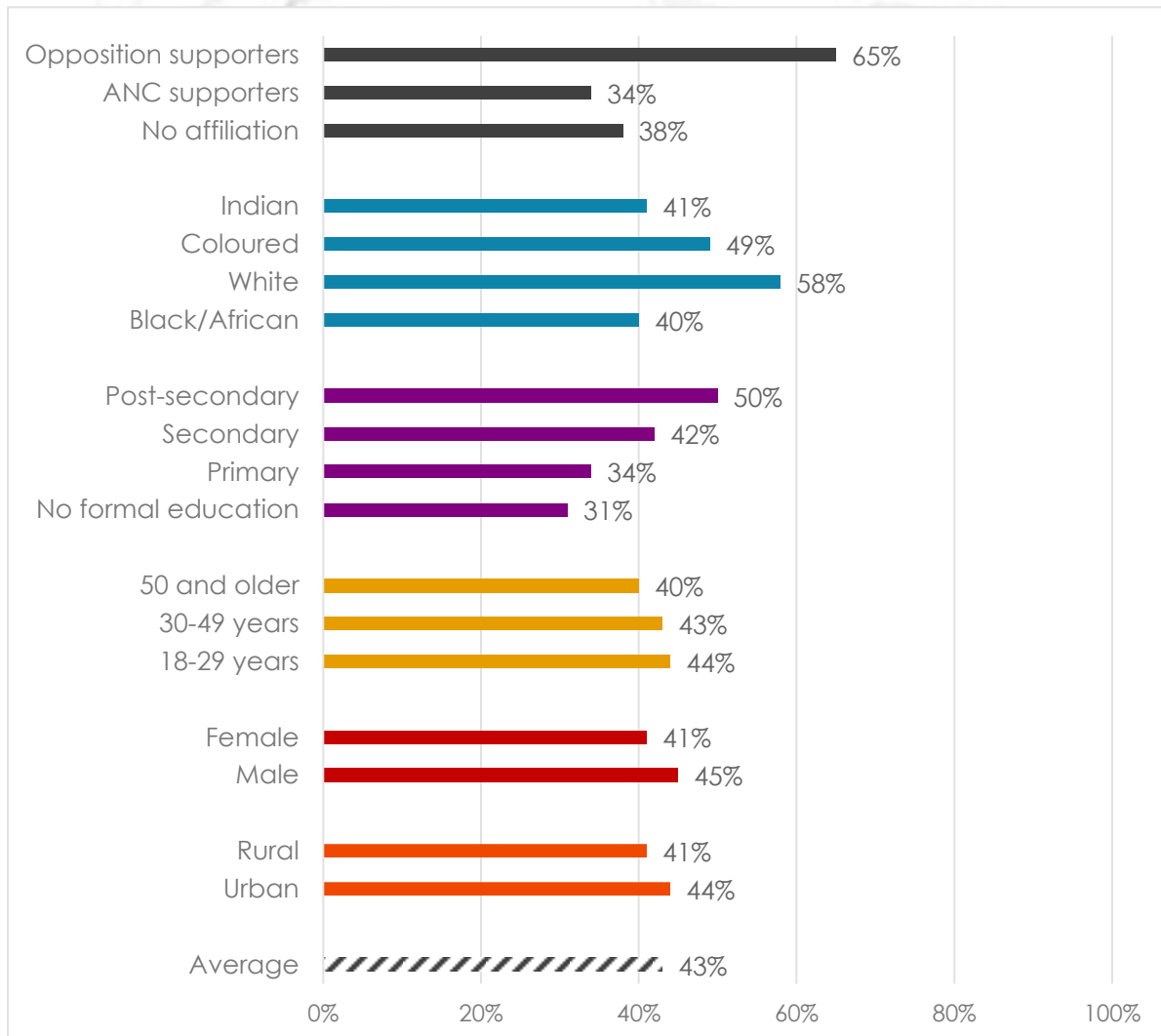


Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in South Africa presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country?

Analysis by key demographic and social indicators shows slight variation in South Africans' opinions by urban/rural location, gender, and age (Figure 8). Furthermore, agreement that the opposition is a viable alternative to the ANC increases with levels of educational attainment. Unsurprisingly, supporters of opposition parties are far more likely to agree with

the statement than ANC supporters (65% vs. 34%). Among race groups, white citizens are the most likely to believe in the viability of the opposition's vision (58%), followed by Coloured (49%), Indian (41%), and black (40%) South Africans.

Figure 8: Political opposition is a viable alternative | by party affiliation, race, education, age, gender, and location | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: *The political opposition in South Africa presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country?* (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

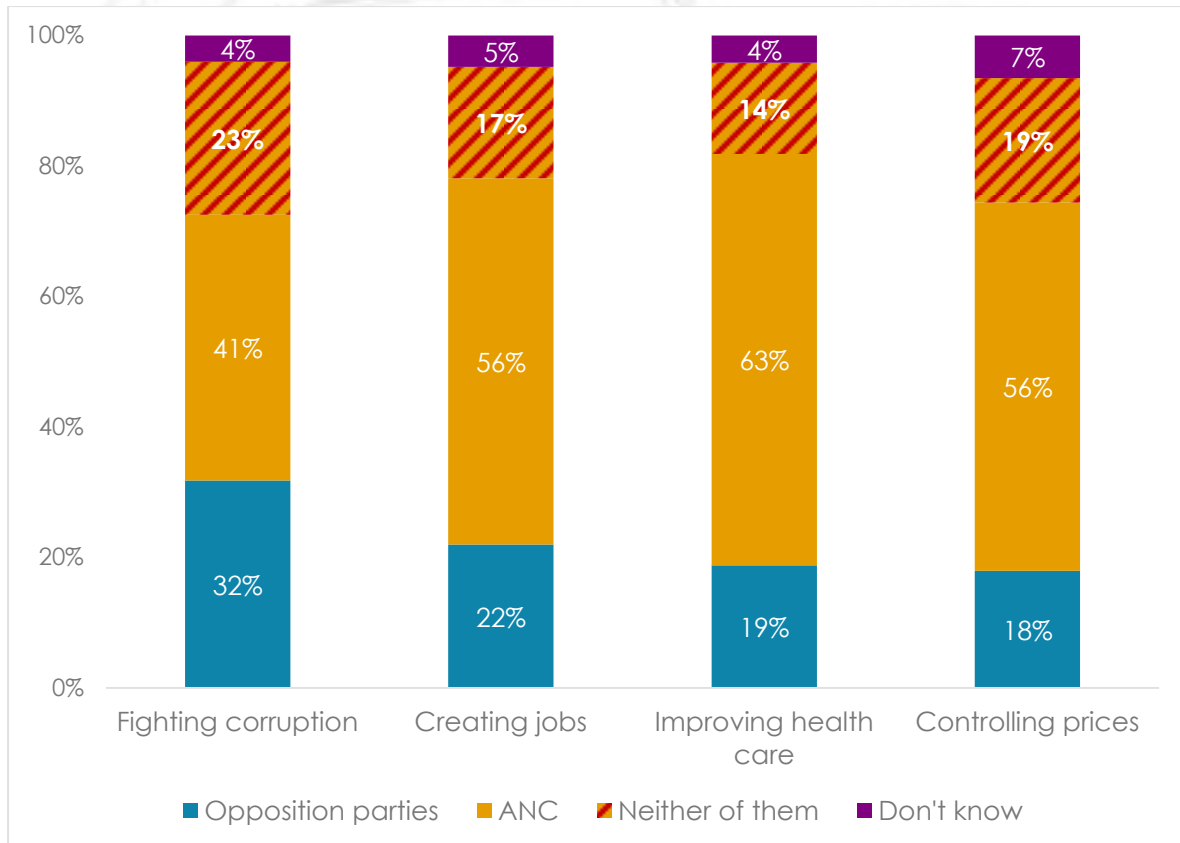
Political opposition's ability to address policy priorities

Previous analysis of 2015 Afrobarometer data found high levels of dissatisfaction with government performance on a wide range of issues. While a majority of South Africans (56%) give the government positive ratings on improving basic health services, only about two in 10 say the government is doing "very well" or "fairly well" on keeping prices down (24%), creating jobs (23%), and fighting corruption (20%). (For more details, see Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 64, available at www.afrobarometer.org).

Despite public dissatisfaction with government performance, only minorities of South Africans say that opposition parties are better placed than the ruling party to address these four key

policy areas (23% on average, vs. 54% for the ANC) (Figure 9). Fighting corruption in government is the area where citizens are most likely to see the opposition as better able to make a difference (32%), followed by job creation (22%), improving health services (19%), and controlling prices (18%).

Figure 9: Ability to address policy priorities | South Africa | 2015

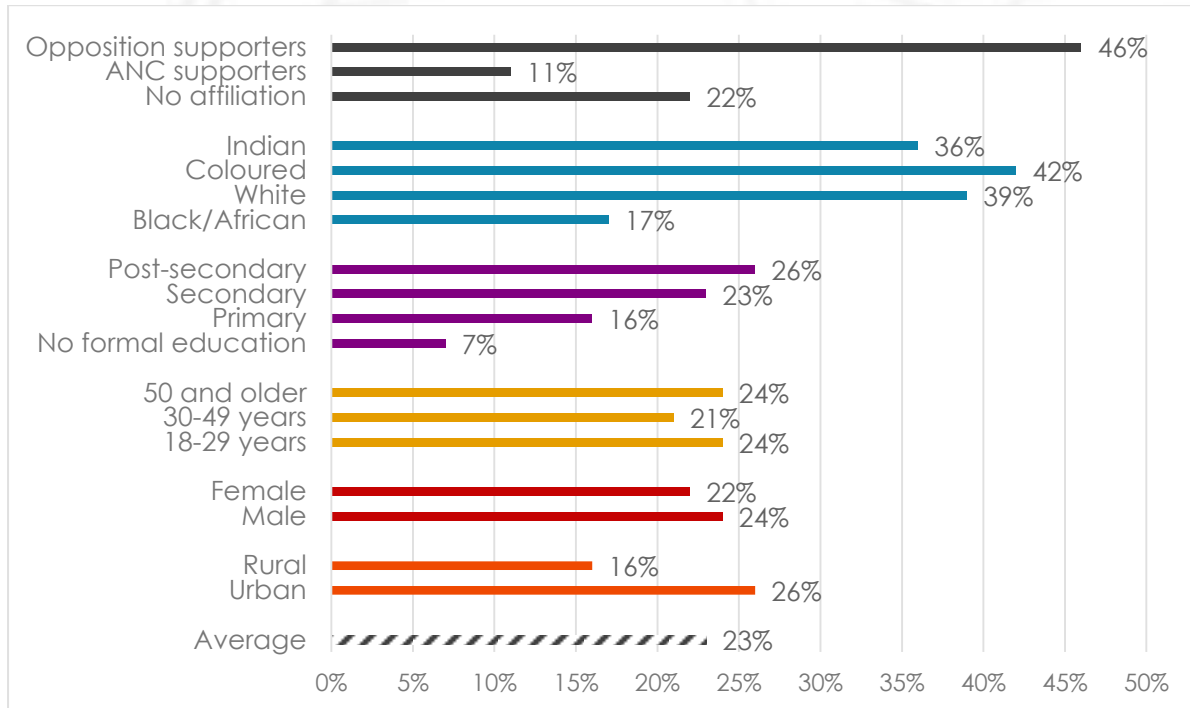


Respondents were asked: Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Controlling prices? Creating jobs? Improving basic health services? Fighting corruption in government?

Further analysis indicates little difference in opinion by gender and age. However, urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts to say that opposition parties are better able to address these priorities (26% vs. 16%), and this perception increases with levels of formal education (Figure 10). In line with their party preferences, minority race groups are significantly more likely to share this view (39%) than black respondents (17%).⁴ Although opposition supporters are more likely than ANC supporters to say that opposition parties are most able to address these priorities (46% vs. 11%), this still represents less than half of these respondents. This suggests that some respondents may interpret the phrase "most able" to mean greater access to opportunities and/or resources to address these issues, which would naturally favour the ruling party.

⁴ Almost half of Coloured respondents say they feel close to an opposition party (47%), followed by white (45%) and Indian (39%) citizens. Only 18% of black respondents say the same.

Figure 10: Opposition parties are most able to address policy priorities | by party affiliation, race, education, age, gender and location | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Controlling prices? Creating jobs? Improving basic health services? Fighting corruption in government? (% who say "opposition parties")

Conclusion

Results of the 2015 Afrobarometer survey show an increase in South Africans' trust in and support for opposition parties over time. However, less than half of survey respondents agree that these parties present a viable alternative vision for the country, and only minorities believe that they are better able than the ANC to address four key policy areas. South Africans increasingly believe that opposition parties should focus on cooperating with the government rather than monitoring and criticizing government actions, although the impact of the successful opposition-led support for the Public Protector's findings against the president and key ANC members may not be known until local election results are in.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 6 Southern Africa fieldwork dates and most recent elections

Country	Months when Round 6 fieldwork was conducted	Most recent election
Botswana	June-July 2014	24 October 2014
Lesotho	May 2014	28 February 2015
Madagascar	December 2015-January 2015	20 December 2013
Malawi	March-April 2014	20 May 2014
Mauritius	June-July 2014	10 December 2014
Mozambique	June-August 2015	15 October 2014
Namibia	August-September 2014	28 November 2014
South Africa	August-September 2015	7 May 2014
Swaziland	April 2015	20 September 2013
Zambia	October 2014	20 September 2011
Zimbabwe	November 2014	31 July 2013

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