

Are South Africans giving up on democracy?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 372 | Dominique Dryding

Summary

Well into its third decade of democracy, South Africa entered 2020 with a limp. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and its shutdowns began making most things worse (Roux, 2020), the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, also known as the Zondo Commission, was investigating large-scale corruption in government and private companies (Southhall, 2019). Lack of popular trust in the Public Protector, whose reports have been frequently contested in court, reached epic proportions as Parliament began steps to have her removed from office (Gerber, 2020). University protests dominated the news (Mahamba, 2020), and parliamentary disruptions and disorder remained a regular feature of the political landscape (Maqhina, 2020).

In March, the country slipped into an economic recession (Stats SA, 2020a), exacerbated by regular power outages thanks to Eskom, the failing national energy provider (Vollgraaff & Naidoo, 2020), and the financial drain of other unprofitable state-owned enterprises such as South African Airways, now under business rescue (Smith, 2020; Schulz-Herzenberg & Southhall, 2019). Unemployment rose to almost 40% (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020).

If South Africans were looking to political leaders for answers, they didn't demonstrate that on Election Day 2019, which saw the lowest voter turnout (49% of the voting-age population) in any of the country's six general elections since the end of apartheid in 1994 (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

Are South Africans giving up on their democracy as a way to deliver both political goods (such as good governance and freedoms) and economic goods (such as poverty reduction and employment)¹ that were part of post-apartheid expectations? Afrobarometer survey findings from mid-2018 show support for democracy weakening and acceptance of authoritarian alternatives growing. Many citizens see both freedoms and economic prospects as declining, and a solid majority remains willing to forego democratic elections in exchange for security, housing, and jobs. Findings suggest that South Africa was entering a democratic recession well before COVID-19.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys (2019/2020) are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans in August and September 2018.

¹ For broader discussions of Africans' views on democracy, see Mattes & Bratton (2016) and Mattes (2020).

A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, and 2015.

Key findings

- As of mid-2018, only a slim majority (54%) of South Africans said that democracy is preferable to any other form of government, a 16-percentage-point drop since 2011. This was one of the lowest levels of support for democracy recorded in 34 countries surveyed in 2016/2018.
- Opposition to authoritarian alternatives weakened as well, to 69% against presidential dictatorship, 62% against one-party rule, and 57% against military rule. Rejection of apartheid held fairly steady at 74%.
- A majority of South Africans still valued aspects of democratic governance, including 61% who favoured elections as the best way to choose leaders and 60% who said many political parties are necessary to ensure real choices for voters. But these proportions reflect declines of 16 and 9 percentage points, respectively, since 2015.
- Half (50%) of citizens preferred an accountable government over one that can “get things done,” an increase from 44% in 2011.
- South Africans perceived political space to be closing. Two-thirds (64%) said they now have less freedom than “a few years ago” to join any political organization they want, and about half saw declines in the freedom of the opposition to function (54%), of people to express their political views (49%), of the media to investigate (49%), and of independent organizations to advocate their views (49%).
- Satisfaction with the way democracy is working has declined steadily, from 60% in 2011 to 42% in 2018 who said they were “fairly” or “very” satisfied.
- Six in 10 South Africans (62%) were willing to give up elections for a non-elected government that is able to provide jobs, housing, and security. Young people (67% of those aged 18-35 years) were the most willing to forego elections.

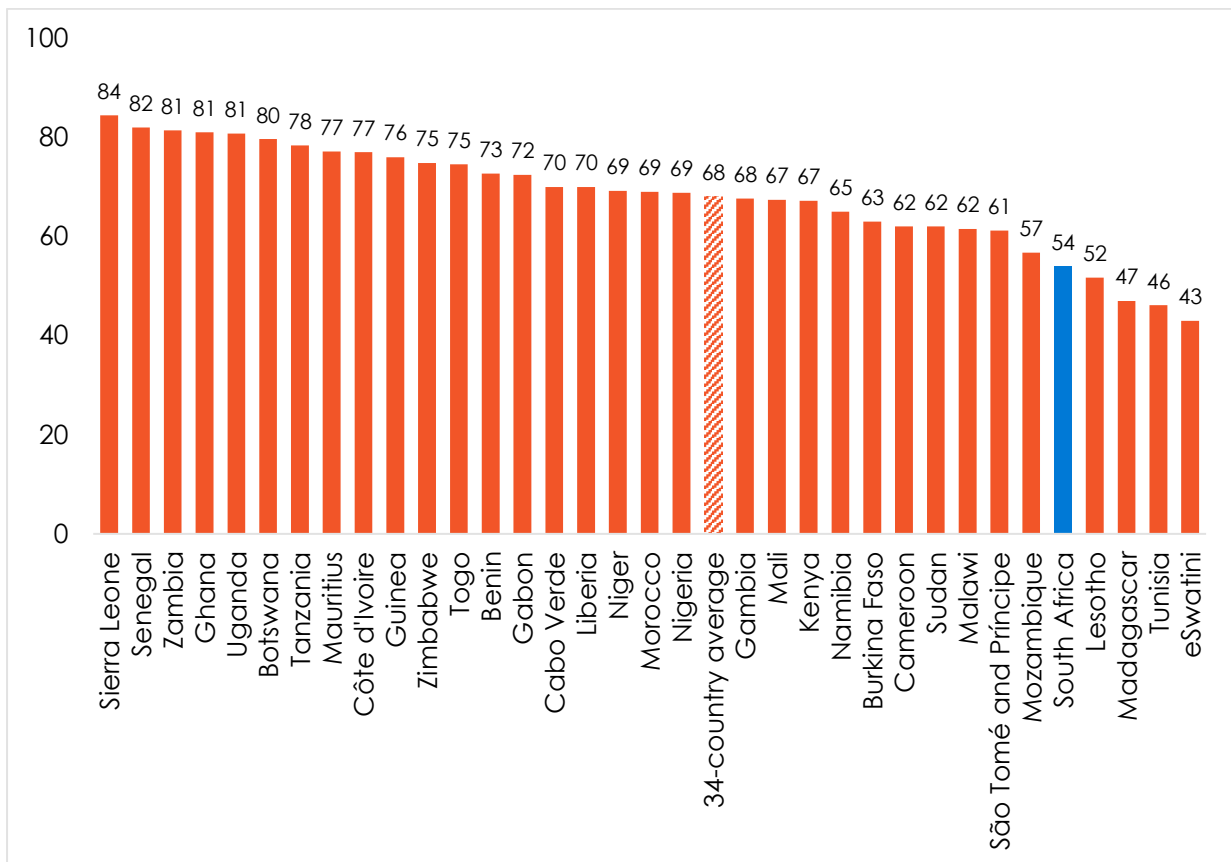
Do South Africans still value democracy?

Since ending apartheid and becoming a constitutional democracy in 1994, South Africa has been lauded as a defender of human rights and democratic institutions, and is one of just eight African countries considered “free” by Freedom House (2019). However, xenophobic violence (Ebrahim, 2019; Dryding, 2020), widespread state corruption (Southall, 2019), and declining trust in most public institutions² have tarnished this image.

South Africans appear less committed to democracy in recent years. As of mid-2018, just slightly more than half (54%) of South Africans said they preferred democracy over any other kind of government. Among 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018, South Africa ranked well below the average of 68%, ahead of only Lesotho, Madagascar, Tunisia, and eSwatini (Figure 1). Almost one in five South Africans (18%) said that “in some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable,” and even more (25%) said it makes no difference what kind of system they have.

² Between Afrobarometer surveys in 2015 and 2018, the proportion of South Africans who said they trusted officials “somewhat” or “a lot” declined for most state institutions, including for Parliament (-9 percentage points), local government councillors (-6 points), and the police (-12 points).

Figure 1: Support for democracy (%) | 34 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who say democracy is preferable to any other kind of government)

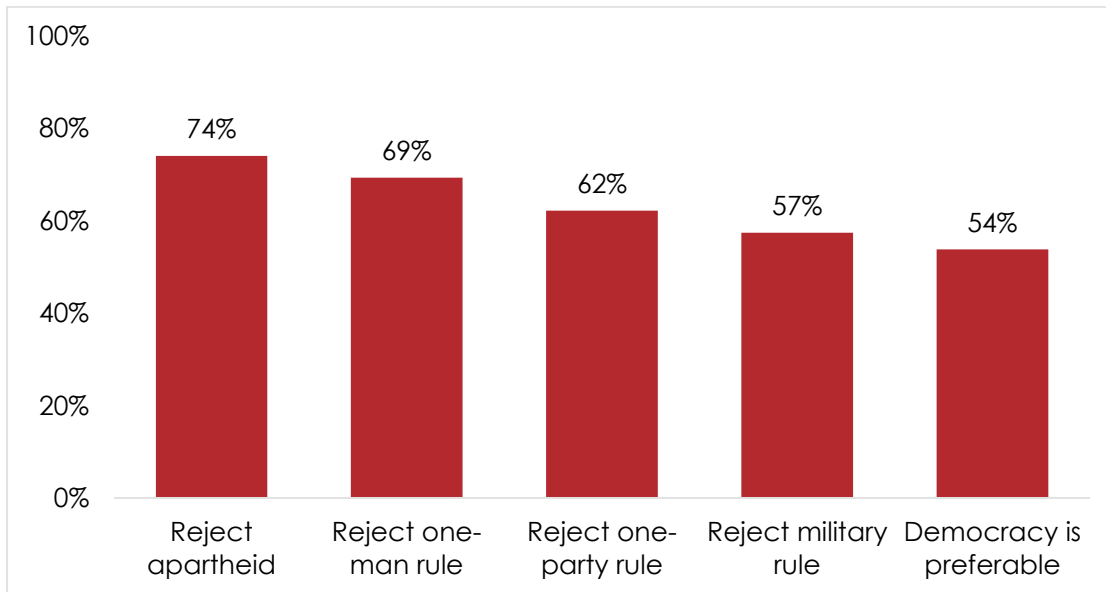
Majorities of South Africans rejected non-democratic forms of government: presidential dictatorship (69%), one-party rule (62%), and military rule (57%) (Figure 2). But in each case, the majorities were smaller than on average across Africa (78%, 74%, and 72%, respectively). More South Africans rejected apartheid (74%) as a preferred political system.

Moreover, support for democracy has dropped by 10 percentage points since 2015 (64%) and by 18 points since 2011 (72%) (Figure 3), reaching its lowest level since Afrobarometer first asked this question in 2000.

Rejection of military rule also dropped to its lowest level ever recorded, from 69% in 2011 to 58% in 2018. The generally low rejection rate of military rule might be a result, in part, of South Africans' infrequent engagement with the South African National Defence Force (SANDF). Since the survey was conducted, the military has been deployed to crime-prone areas in Cape Town (eNCA, 2019) and to assist the police in managing the COVID-19 lockdown (Quintal, 2020). Given its increased public presence and reports of SANDF abuses during its deployment (Arnold, 2020), public attitudes regarding military rule may have evolved since the 2018 survey.

Rejection of one-party rule also weakened (by 10 percentage points since 2015), while rejection of one-man rule returned to its 2011 level after a peak (80%) in 2015.

Figure 2: Key indicators of demand for democracy | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked:

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% who "disapproved" or "strongly disapproved")

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

If the country returned to the old system we had under apartheid.

Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

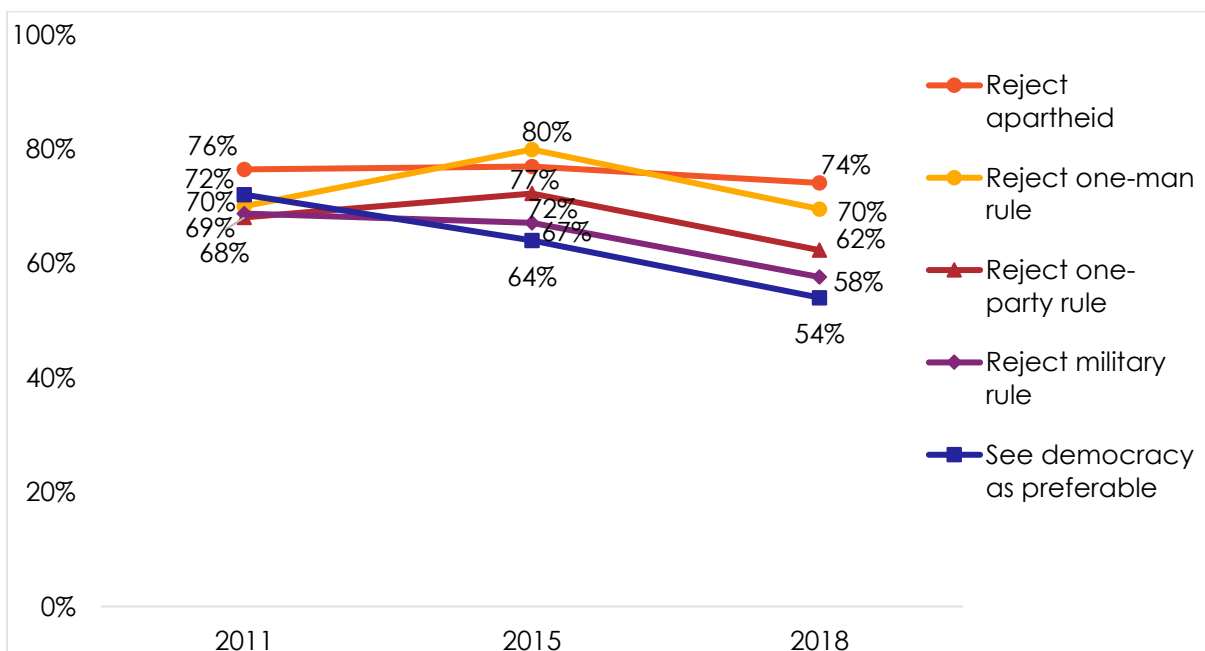
Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who say democracy is preferable to any other kind of government)

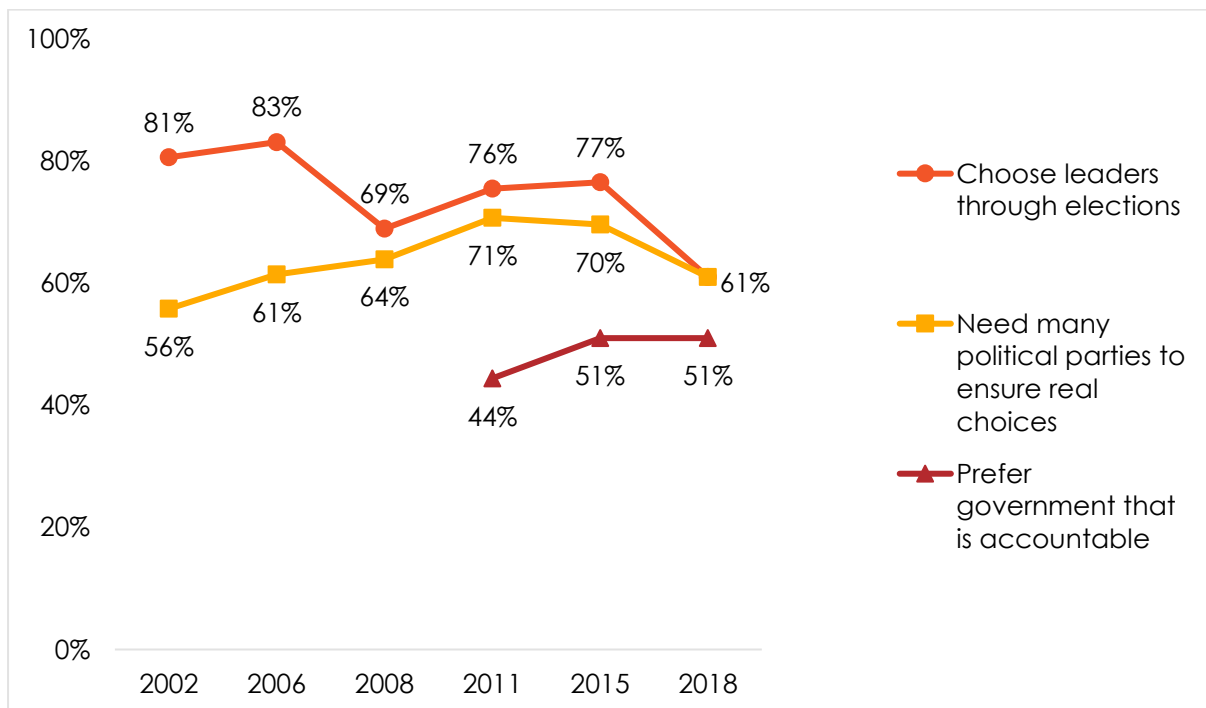
Figure 3: Key indicators of demand for democracy | South Africa | 2011-2018



While support for democracy has weakened, South Africans still value aspects of democratic governance (Figure 4). Six out of 10 (61%) said elections are the best way to choose leaders, vs. 36% who would prefer other means (Figure 4). The same majority (60%) affirmed that many political parties are needed to ensure that South Africans have real choices in who governs them. But only half (50%) said a government that is accountable is more important than one that can “get things done” without citizen input, favoured by 47%.

Over time, the picture is less positive. Between 2015 and 2018, the percentage of South Africans who agreed that leaders should be chosen through elections rather than other means dropped by 16 percentage points (from 77% to 61%), and fewer South Africans endorsed multiparty competition (70% in 2015, 61% in 2018). The proportion choosing government accountability over efficiency increased from 44% in 2011 to 51% in 2018.

Figure 4: Support for elections, multiparty competition, and accountability | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked:

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in South Africa.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that South African have real choices in who governs them.

Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

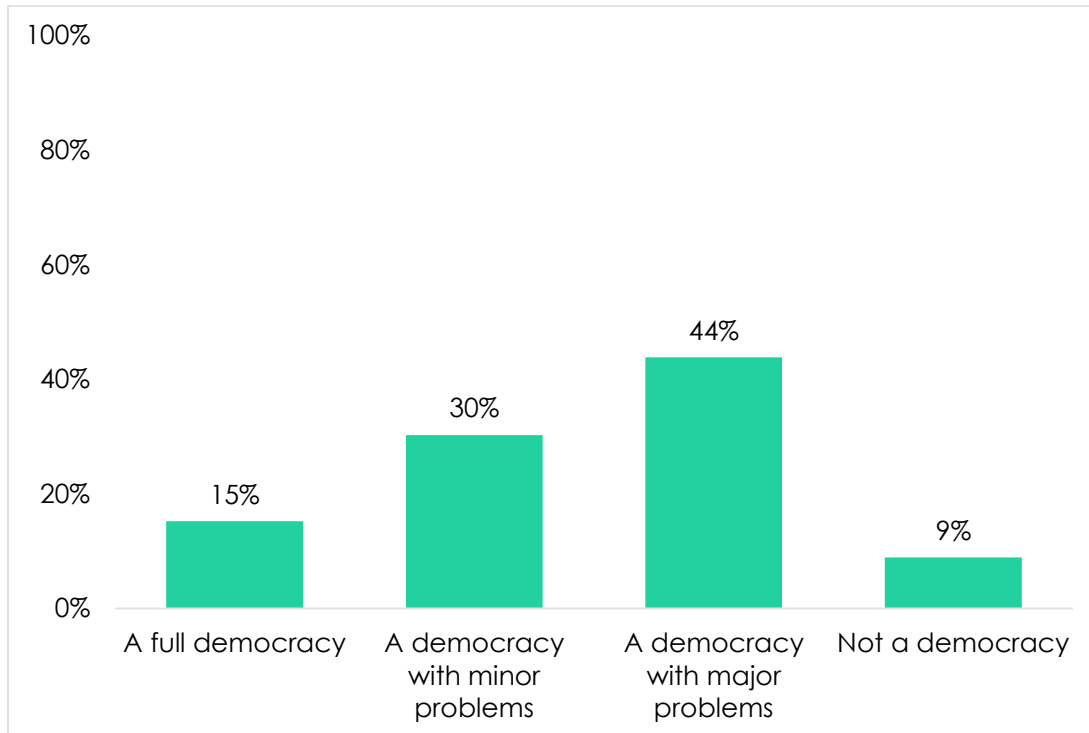
Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

How democratic do South Africans perceive their country to be?

In 2018, only one in seven South Africans (15%) believed that their country is “a full democracy,” while twice as many (30%) saw the country as “a democracy with minor problems.” But the most common perception (44%) was that South Africa is “a democracy with major problems.” One in 10 respondents (9%) went even further, describing it as “not a democracy” at all (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Extent of democracy | South Africa | 2018



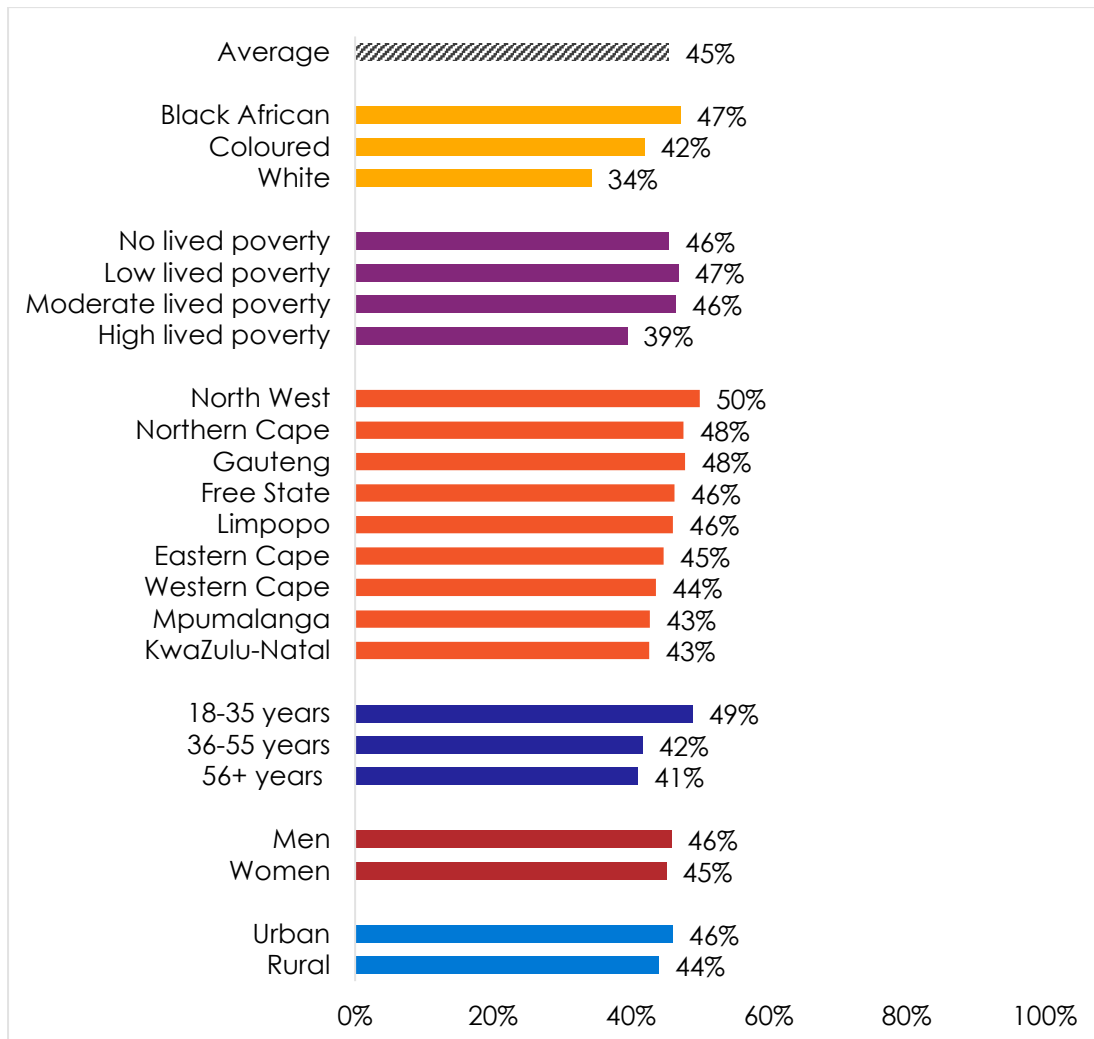
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is South Africa today?*

Black South Africans were more likely to consider South Africa a functioning democracy (“full” or “with minor problems”) (47%) than Coloured (42%) or white (34%) citizens (Figure 6). And half of younger respondents (49% of those aged 18-35) described the country as a functioning democracy, compared to only 41%-42% of their elders.

Citizens experiencing high levels of lived poverty³ were less positive about the extent of South Africa’s democracy (39%) than their better-off counterparts (46%-47%). Gender and rural vs. urban residency had little influence on how democratic people believed South Africa to be.

³ Afrobarometer assesses respondents’ “lived poverty” based on responses to the following questions: “Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?”

Figure 6: Perception of South Africa as a functioning democracy | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how much of a democracy is South Africa today? (% who said “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems”)

Among the political goods that citizens expect a functioning democracy to deliver are political and civic freedoms, such as freedom of expression, media freedom, and space for opposition parties and civil society to criticize the government. Survey findings show that many South Africans believe they have lost ground when it comes to democratic freedoms.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It’s easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

When asked to compare their freedoms to “a few years ago,” close to two-thirds (64%) of South Africans said they now have less freedom to join any political organization they want, and a majority (54%) said the freedom of the opposition to function has declined.

Furthermore, half (49%) of respondents said they have less freedom to speak freely about politics, the media is less free to investigate and report, and independent organizations are less free to advocate their views and criticize the government.

Figure 7: Less freedom than 'a few years ago' | South Africa | 2018

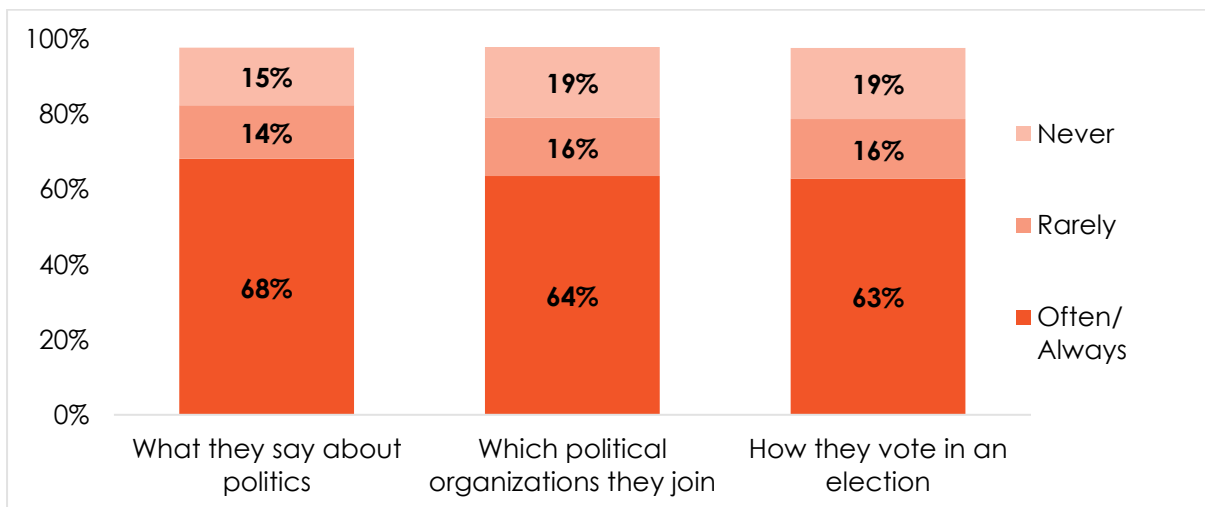


Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same? (% who said "somewhat less freedom" or "much less freedom")

- Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?
- Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?
- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?

Adding to concerns about limited freedoms, about two-thirds of respondents said they "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics (68%), about which organizations they join (64%), and about how they vote (63%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Caution in enjoying political freedoms | South Africa | 2018



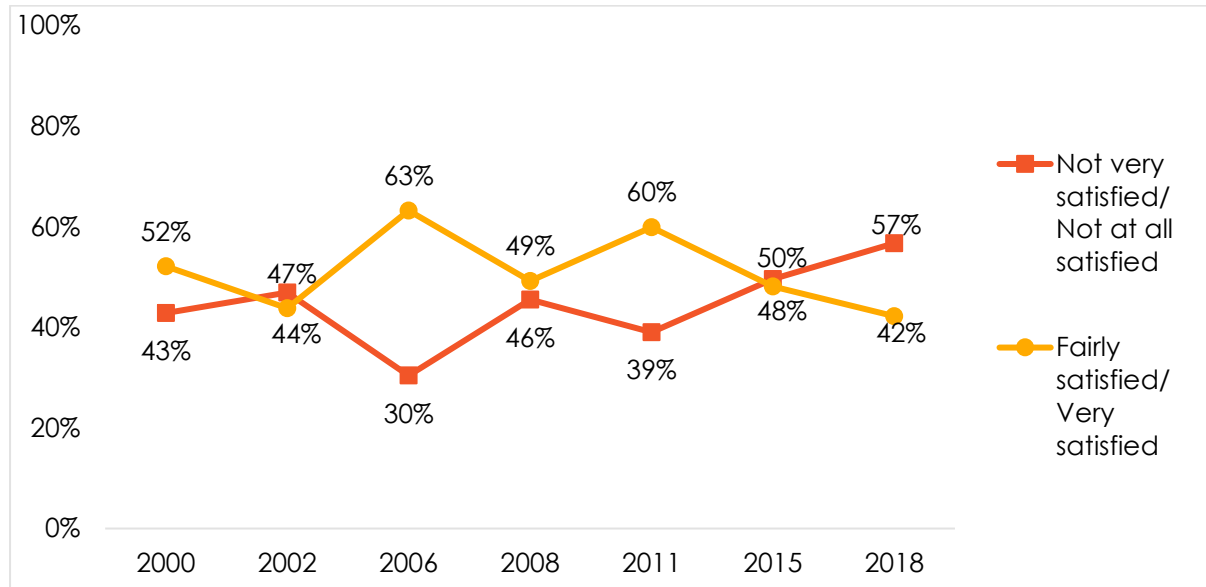
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country:

- Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?
- Do people have to be careful about which political organizations they join?
- Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?

Satisfaction with democracy

In line with decreasing support for democracy and mixed assessments of the extent of democracy in the country, fewer than half (42%) of South Africans said they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way their democracy is working. While satisfaction with democracy has fluctuated over time, it has declined steadily since 2011 (60%) to its lowest level since Afrobarometer’s first survey was conducted in South Africa in 2000 (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Satisfaction with democracy | South Africa | 2000-2018



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa?

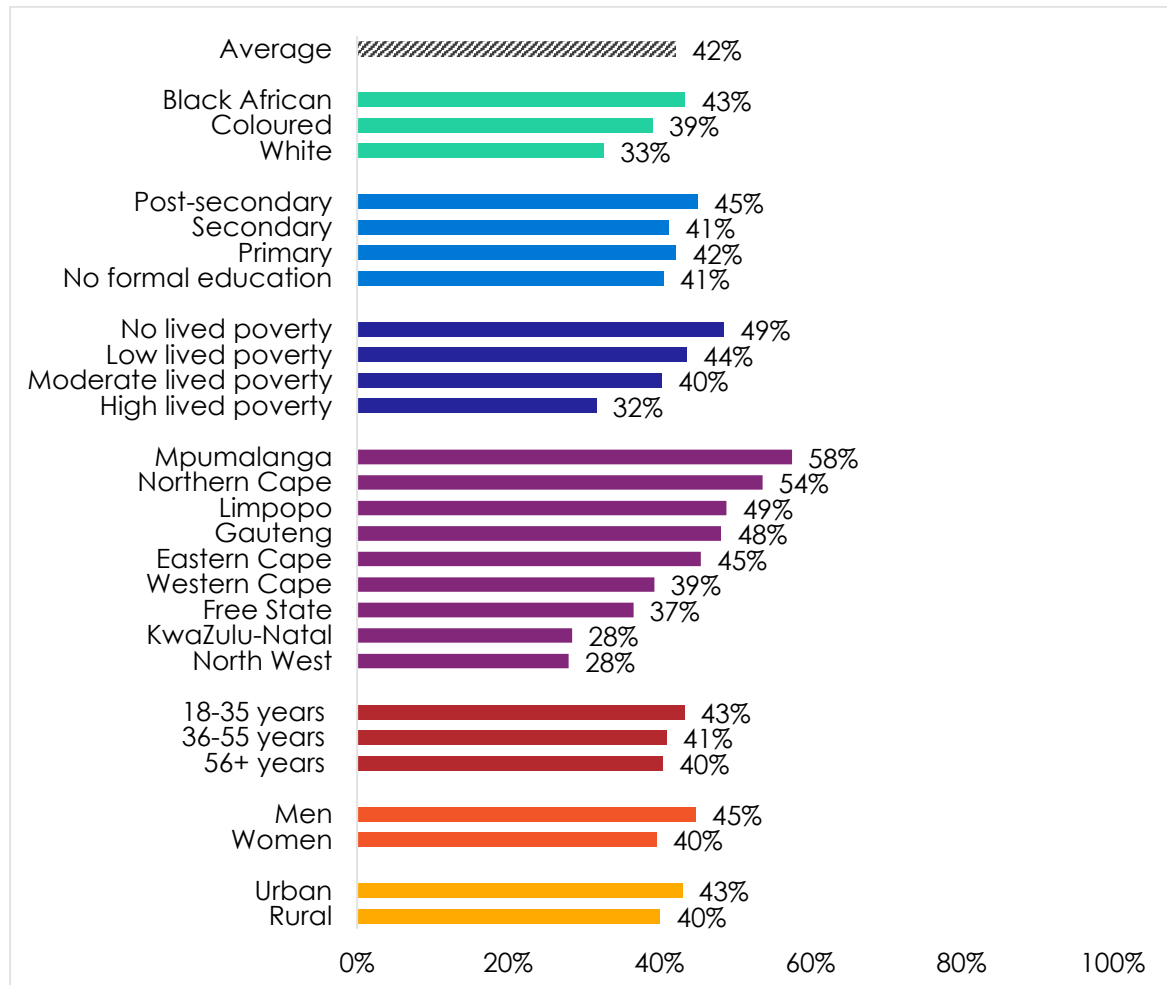
Satisfaction with democracy increased significantly with respondents' economic status, ranging from just 32% of the poorest to 49% of the best-off (Figure 10). Those with a post-secondary education (45%) were slightly more likely to be satisfied than their less-educated counterparts (41%-42%). Men were also more likely to be satisfied than women (45% vs. 40%).

These findings suggest a possible link between access to economic goods and satisfaction with democracy, which is highest among those most likely to enjoy well-paying jobs and other economic advantages.

Interestingly, despite higher levels of poverty, Black South Africans were more likely to express satisfaction with their democracy (43%) than Coloured (39%) or white (33%) respondents, although the proportion of satisfied citizens remained well below half for all groups.

While these findings may seem to contradict the link between satisfaction with democracy and economic status, data from South African Reconciliation Barometer (2017, 2019) surveys may point to a possible explanation. In the 2019 survey, white respondents were more likely to see Black than white South Africans as having the “most economic power” in the country. And in the 2017 survey, a plurality of white respondents said Black people have benefited most in terms of economic power since apartheid ended. These findings could be attributed to perceptions that affirmative action policies, such as broad-based black economic empowerment (BBBEE) (Labournet, 2019), have disproportionately helped Black South Africans, though this narrative runs counter to the reality that white South Africans still make up a majority of the elite and continue to be the highest income earners in the country (Scott, 2019) and that the burden of poverty is still greatest among Black South Africans (Chingwete, 2019).

Figure 10: Satisfaction with democracy | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018



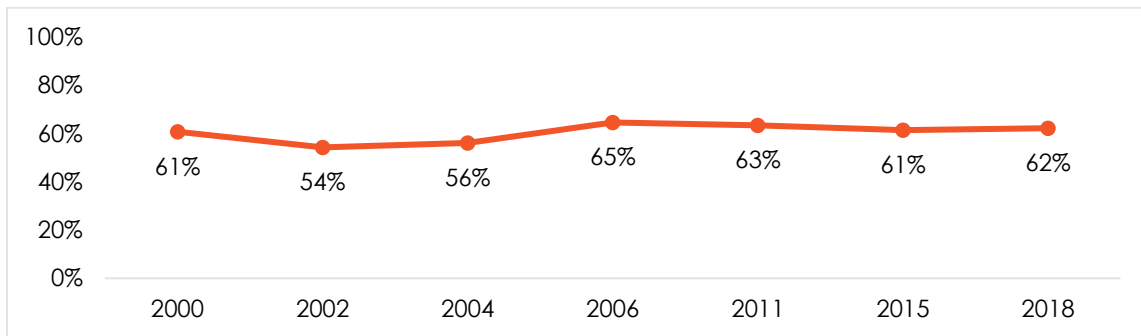
Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa? (% who said “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied”)

One consistent expression of the emphasis that South Africans place on the delivery of economic goods is their willingness to forego democratic elections in exchange for law and order, housing, and jobs. Since Afrobarometer surveys began in South Africa in 2000, a majority of respondents have consistently said they would be “willing” or “very willing” to live under a non-elected government or leader who could deliver these goods. In 2018, 62% of respondents agreed (Figure 11).

Willingness to forego elections varied little across race groups, levels of education, genders, and urban-rural residency. Younger people were most willing to give up elections (67% of respondents aged 18-35 years, vs. 59% in the middle and 53% in the elder categories). There are many reasons why this might be the case. First, unemployment is disproportionately high among young people (Magubane, Cronje, & van der Merwe, 2020). At the end of 2019, Statistics South Africa reported that 40% of people aged 15-34 were unemployed and not in any form of education or training (Stats SA, 2020b). Second, the high cost of property coupled with the lack of economic mobility and long waiting lists for government-subsidized housing makes access to housing difficult for young South Africans (Harrisberg, 2020).

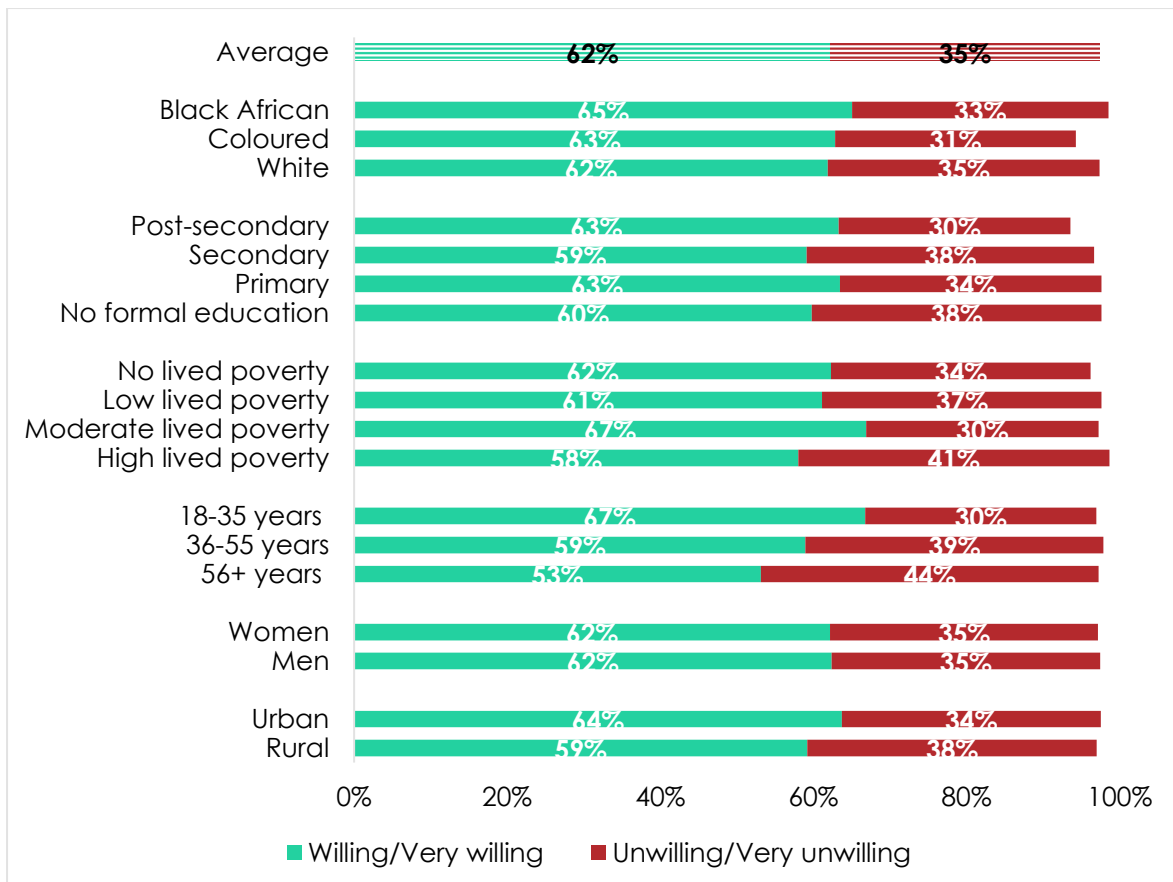
Third, people aged 18-35 are the first generation that did not live through the apartheid regime. While older South Africans lived under one possible alternative to democracy and can weigh democratic benefits against past experience, the younger generation has the luxury of looking at authoritarian regimes theoretically rather than experientially.

Figure 11: Willingness to forego democratic elections in exchange for security, housing, and jobs | South Africa | 2000-2018



Respondents were asked: *If a non-elected government or leader could impose law and order, and deliver houses and jobs, how willing or unwilling would you be to give up regular elections and live under such a government? (% who said "willing" or "very willing")*

Figure 12: Willingness to give up democracy | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2018

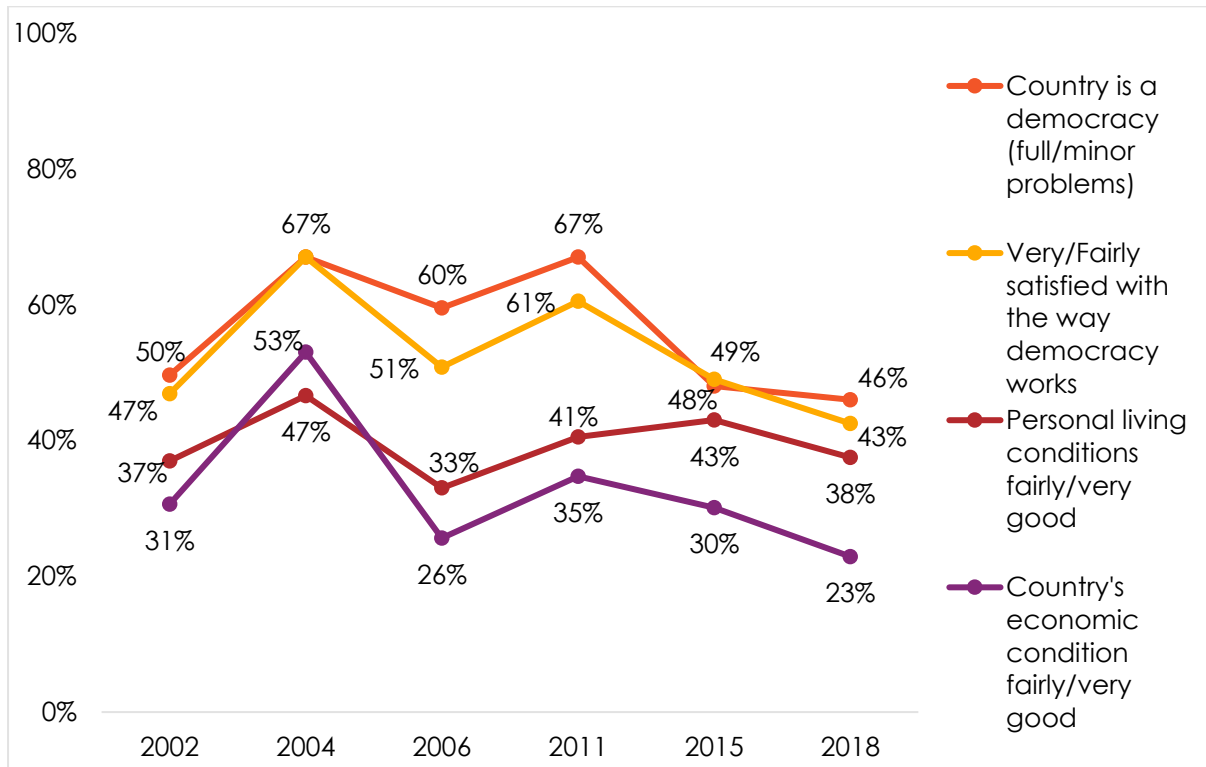


Respondents were asked: *If a non-elected government or leader could impose law and order, and deliver houses and jobs, how willing or unwilling would you be to give up regular elections and live under such a government?*

We find one other piece of evidence for the importance of economic goods when we look at how people's perceptions of the economy parallel their views on democracy over time. Figure 13 shows the similar patterns: Generally speaking, when assessments of the national economy and personal living conditions are relatively positive, so are assessments of the extent of South Africa's democracy and people's satisfaction with the way democracy is working.

In the 2004 survey, all four indicators were at peak levels. Within two years, all four scores dropped, by between 7 percentage points (for extent of democracy) and 27 percentage points (for the country's economic condition). They climbed again between 2006 and 2011 before plunging again in 2015 (except for personal living conditions) and in 2018 (to record lows for extent of democracy, satisfaction with democracy, and country's economic condition).

Figure 13: Views on economic circumstances and democracy | South Africa
 | 2002-2018



Respondents were asked:

- In your opinion, how much of a democracy is South Africa today? (% who said "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems")*
- Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa? (% who said "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")*
- In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who said "fairly good" or "very good")*
- In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions? (% who said "fairly good" or "very good")*

Conclusion

Survey findings from mid-2018 suggest that South Africa was entering a democratic recession well before COVID-19, with evidence that dissatisfaction with the system's delivery of both political and economic goods could be contributing to democratic disillusionment.

And the COVID-19 crisis is unlikely to improve matters as full or partial lockdowns exacerbate economic problems, curtail parliamentary and civil-society activities (Moosa, 2020), and create opportunities for potential police and military abuses in enforcing compliance (Seleka, 2020; IOL, 2020; Arnold, 2020). While the government's rapid and firm response to the pandemic initially won international praise (Harding, 2020), it remains to be seen whether democracy as we knew it – or envisioned it – will survive and recover.

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