

## South Africans' trust in institutions and representatives reaches new low

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 474 | Mikhail Moosa and Jan Hofmeyr**

### Summary

In July 2021, as South Africa grappled with a third wave of COVID-19 infections, widespread looting and rioting erupted in Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal, the two most populous provinces (Daily Maverick, 2021). The riots damaged businesses, public buildings, and key infrastructure and left at least 342 people dead, and order was restored only after the state deployed 25,000 army troops (Business Day, 2021; Davis, Nicolson, & Simelane, 2021).

The riots, the largest of their nature in the country's democratic history, followed the arrest of former President Jacob Zuma for defying a court order to appear before the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture (News24, 2021). There is emerging evidence that Zuma's supporters, particularly in his home province of KwaZulu-Natal, had planned to incite rioting, looting, and the destruction of property to remind the authorities of his power and influence (Haffajee, 2021).

The looting has been described as a perfect storm that combined disgruntled allies of Zuma, some of whom had undergone military training during the struggle against apartheid, with a population of largely poor, unemployed, and desperate civilians. In a vacuum of power and authority where elected leaders and the police were unable to persuade their constituents to cease looting, the unrest continued for several days (New Frame, 2021).

In South Africa, with its protracted history of legislated segregation, a significant burden falls on public institutions to provide the cohesive force that fragmented social relationships could not at the time of the country's political transition in 1994. To succeed, institutions of the democratic state must be viewed as fair, transparent, and accountable, and as capable of delivering on their core mandate to provide equitable access and redress in light of the country's deep, inherited social inequality. In South Africa, trust in public institutions represents more than an indicator of democratic consolidation; it also is an important marker for the country's vulnerability to social and political instability.

Against this background, how much do ordinary South Africans trust public institutions and their leaders?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey, carried out shortly before the July riots, show that South Africans' trust in a variety of institutions is at its lowest since first being measured by Afrobarometer in 2006. Trust in elected representatives is especially weak, and two-thirds of respondents would be willing to forego elections if a non-elected government could provide improved security and better services.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey 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.

Round 8 surveys in 2019/2021 cover 34 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 1,600 adult South Africans in May and June 2021. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

## Key findings

- Trust in nearly all institutions is low – and declining. Only media broadcasters, both independent (63%) and government (61%), and the Department of Health (56%) enjoy the trust of a majority of citizens.
- Only a minority of South Africans say they trust the president (38%) and Parliament (27%) “somewhat” or “a lot.” For the first time in Afrobarometer surveys, only a minority (43%) express trust in courts of law.
- Only about one in three citizens (36%) trust the Electoral Commission of South Africa, with trust levels particularly low among younger respondents. Slightly more (42%) trust the Public Protector.
- Trust in both the ruling African National Congress (ANC) (27%) and opposition parties (24%) continues to decline. Trust in the ANC is especially low among younger and more educated respondents.
- Two-thirds (67%) of South Africans would be willing to give up elections if a non-elected government could provide security, housing, and jobs. Nearly half (46%) say they would be “very willing” to do so, with higher levels of support among younger and more educated respondents.

## Trust in institutions

The Afrobarometer survey gauges South Africans' trust in a variety of institutions. This dispatch focuses on public trust in institutions central to the functioning of democracy: the three arms of the state (executive, legislative, and judiciary), oversight institutions (the Public Protector and the Electoral Commission), political parties, and the media.

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of public trust in a range of institutions, and the following sections provide greater detail on key institutions.

The levels of public trust presented here may be cause for concern on at least three counts. First, of the 17 institutions that Afrobarometer asked about, only three managed to instill at least “some” trust in more than half of South Africans: independent broadcasters (63%), government broadcasters (61%), and the Department of Health (56%), which has been in the spotlight since the first case of COVID-19 was identified in March 2020.<sup>1</sup>

Second, elected officials, political parties, and representative institutions that rely on elections are among the least trusted. Fewer than four in 10 South Africans (38%) indicate that they trust the president “somewhat” or “a lot,” and fewer than three in 10 say the same

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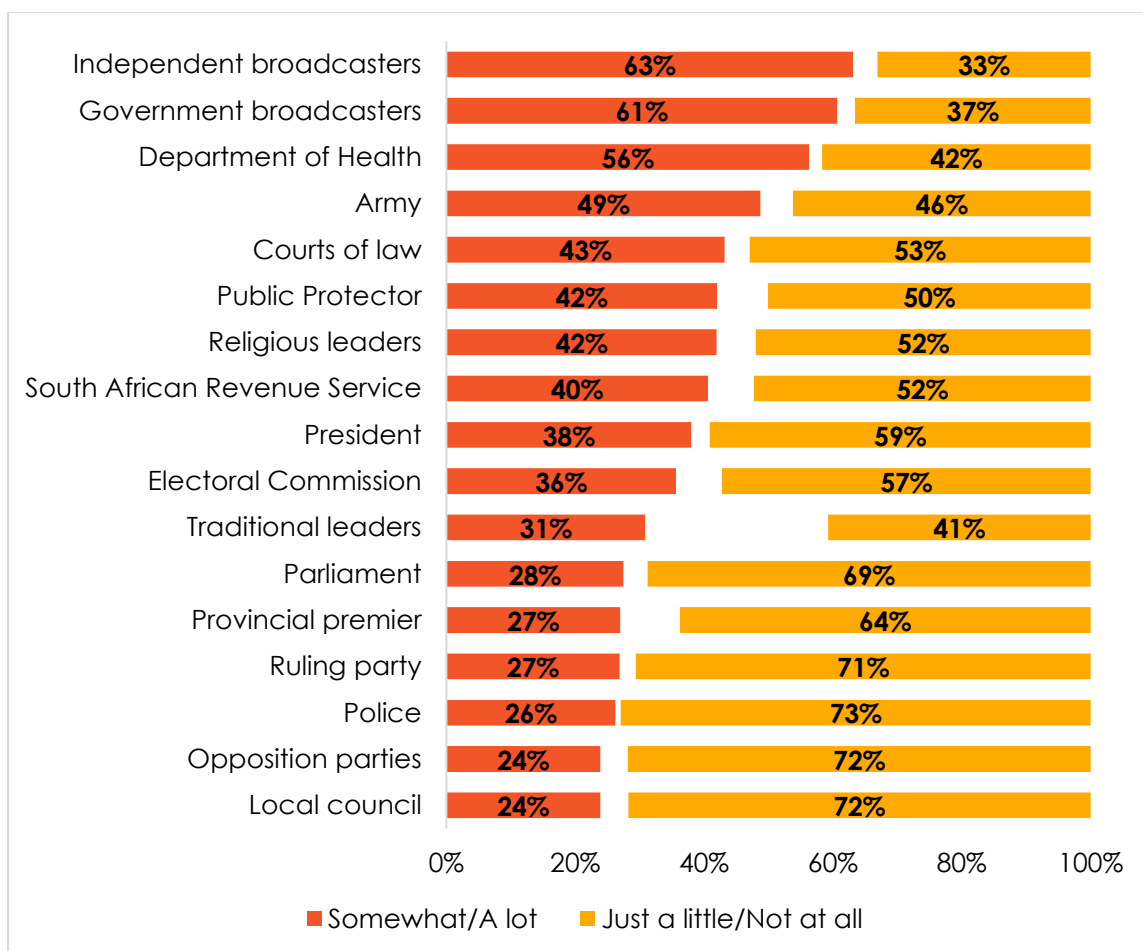
<sup>1</sup> These data were collected prior to an investigation into alleged corruption implicating Minister of Health Zweli Mkhize, who has since resigned.

for Parliament (28%), provincial premiers (27%), the ruling party (27%), opposition parties (24%), and local councils (24%).

Third, trust in institutional checks and balances on political power is also weak and, as we will see below, weakening. The Electoral Commission and the Public Protector, two institutions mandated by the Constitution to protect and uphold the democratic character of the state, could only muster trust among 36% and 42% of citizens, respectively. Equally concerning is weak trust in the country's courts of law (43%).

While the media remains trusted by a majority of the country's citizens, the rest of South Africa's democratic ecosystem is suffering from worrying trust deficits. The same can be said of institutions crafted expressly to protect the integrity of the democratic state.

**Figure 1: Trust in various institutions | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

### Trust in the executive

The trust scores shown in Figure 1 for institutions within the executive arm of the state are among the lowest recorded since Afrobarometer started its measurement of these items.

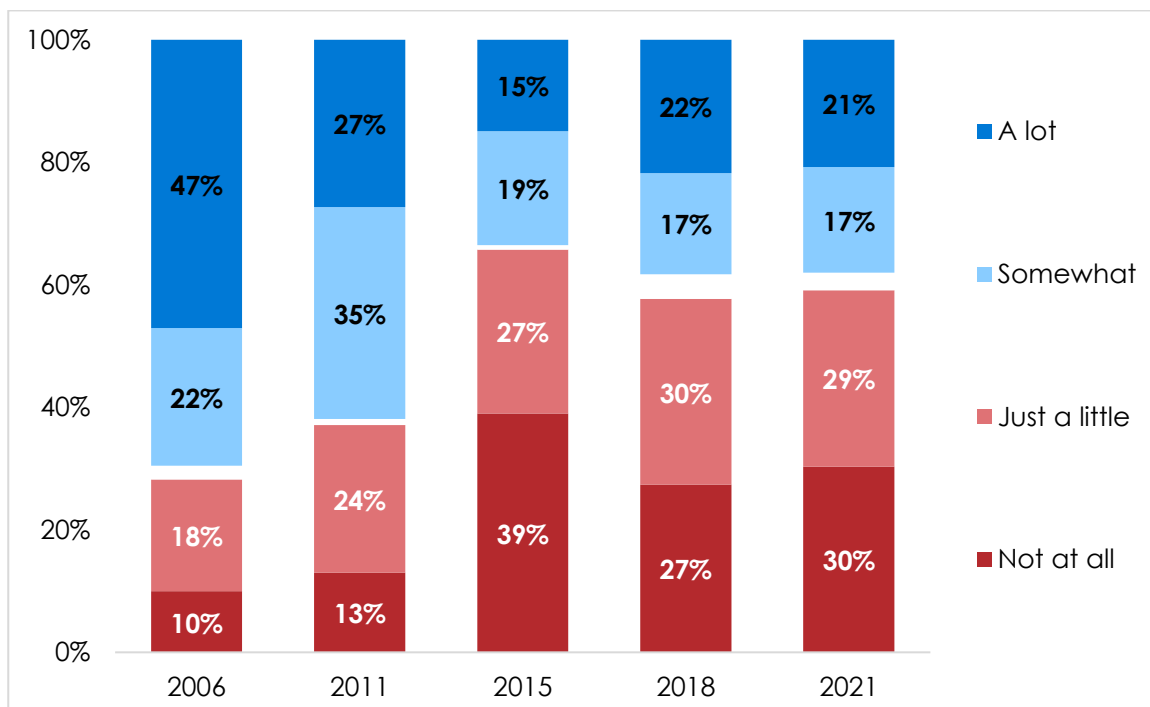
Regarding trust in the president, findings shown in Figure 2 cover the administrations of Thabo Mbeki, Jacob Zuma, and Cyril Ramaphosa. (Results from Afrobarometer's 2008 survey, which coincided with the brief caretaker presidency of Kgalema Motlanthe, are not shown.)

Trust in the president dropped by half, from 70%<sup>2</sup> to 34%, between the 2006 survey, conducted during the Mbeki presidency, and the 2015 survey, during the Zuma presidency, and has recovered only slightly, to 38%, during Ramaphosa's tenure.

Trust in Mbeki was likely buoyed by high levels of economic growth and relatively low levels of unemployment, while growing distrust during Zuma's first term may have been influenced by the economic decline during the global financial crisis in 2009. However, the precipitous drop that followed, leading to the lowest trust score yet recorded for a South African president, can probably be attributed to the almost industrial scale of corruption and "state capture" reported during the Zuma presidency. As such, an uptick in trust ratings was to be expected in 2018, when Ramaphosa assumed office. But the so-called "Ramaphoria" that followed was soon dampened by the realization that, as in the case of his predecessors, Ramaphosa's capacity for reform was severely constrained by the ruling party's factional machinations (Moosa, 2019).

Arguably, the strength of trust in the president has implications for the extent to which he has leverage within government and in the broader society to influence narratives and effect changes. The proportion who trust the president "a lot" has declined significantly, from almost half (47%) of respondents in 2006 to just one-fifth (21%) in 2021. In other words, the Ramaphosa presidency, facing a pandemic and an economic crisis, has substantially less social capital at its disposal than Mbeki had in 2006, or even than Zuma had in 2011. On the other hand, in the course of the Ramaphosa presidency, the share of respondents who do not trust the president "at all" declined from a high of 39% in 2015 to 30% in 2021. Even so, we can postulate that Ramaphosa's capacity for bold action is significantly constrained.

**Figure 2: Trust in the president | South Africa | 2006-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the president, or haven't you heard enough about him to say?

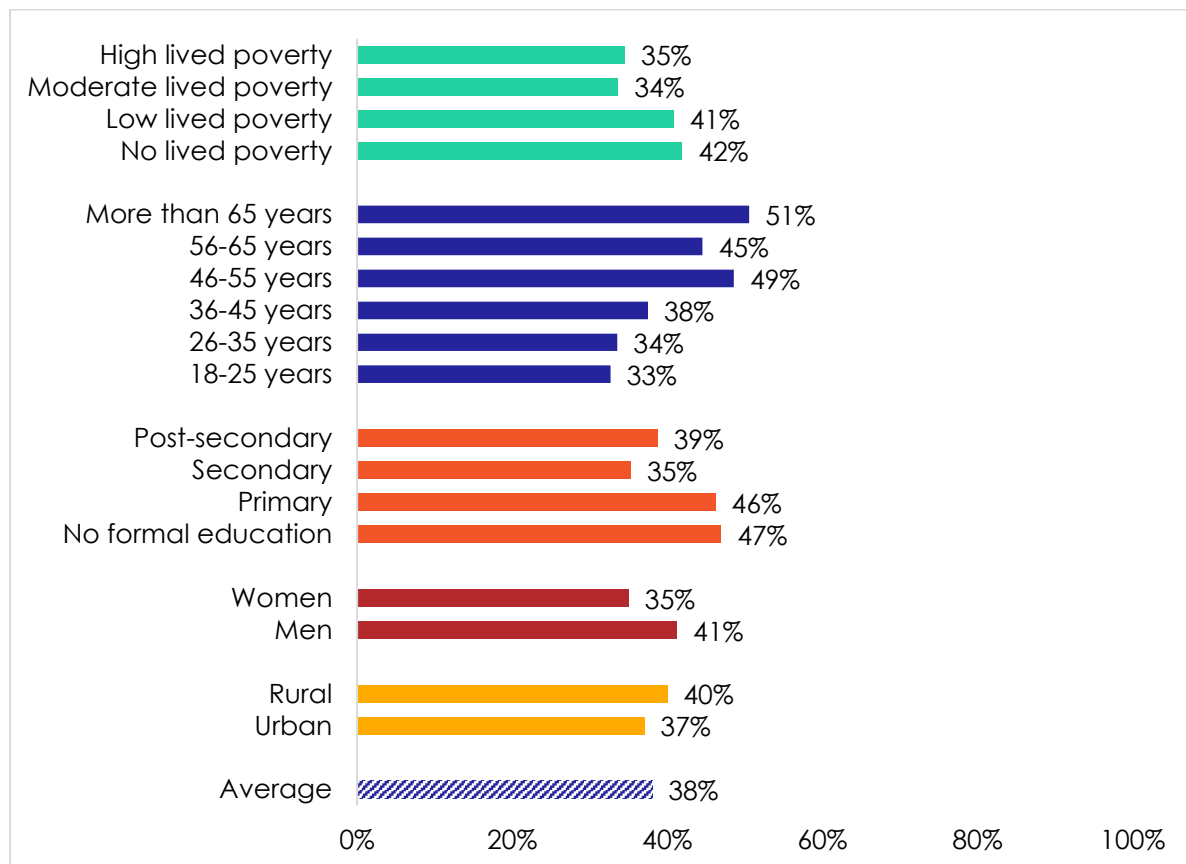
<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, totals for combined categories may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of the categories, e.g. 47% "trust a lot" plus 22% "trust somewhat" = 70% "trust."

Levels of trust in Ramaphosa are similar in urban and rural areas and are slightly higher among men (41%) than among women (35%) (Figure 3). Less educated citizens express greater trust in the president than those with more schooling.

A clearer division is visible from a generational perspective: Only about one-third of 18- to 35-year-olds express trust in the president, compared to roughly half of those above age 45.

Making use of Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index, a composite index detailing access to key resources required to survive, we see that respondents who are less affected by lived poverty are more likely to trust the president than those in more desperate circumstances.

**Figure 3: Trust in the president** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the president, or haven't you heard enough about him to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Trust in the legislature

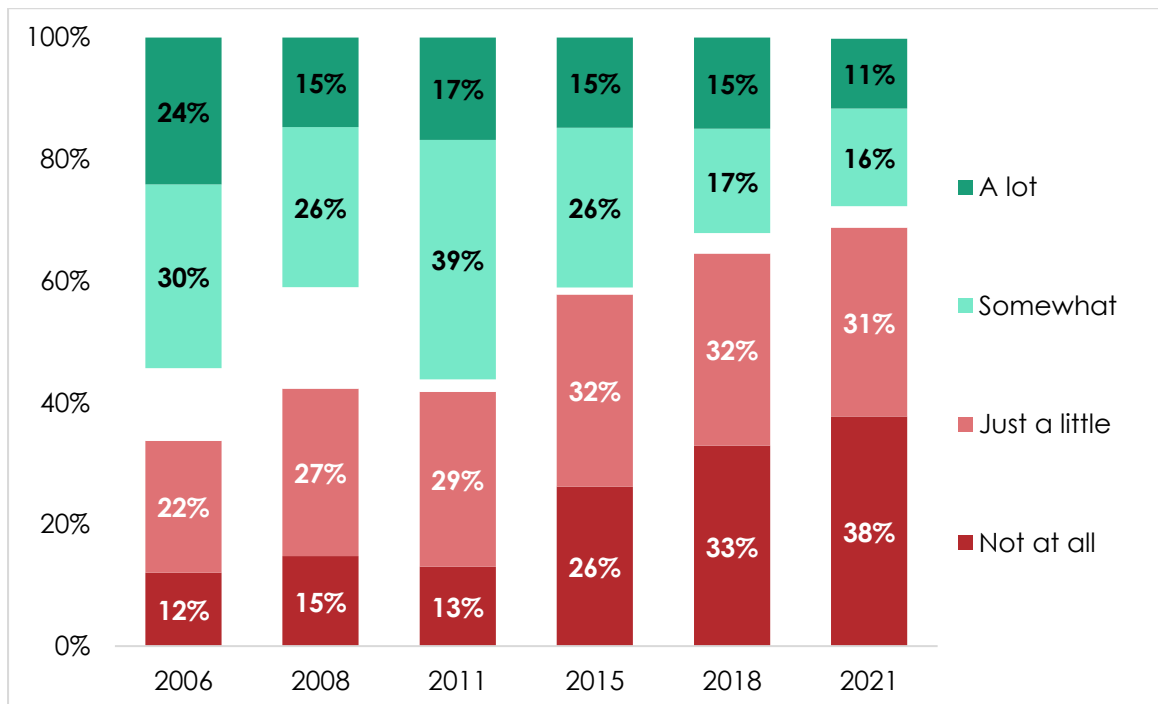
Like trust in the president, popular trust in Parliament has declined, and here the downhill slide is continuing (Figure 4). Majorities in 2006 (54%) and 2011 (56%) indicated that they trusted members of Parliament "somewhat" or "a lot." Since then, this proportion has fallen steadily, reaching just 27% in the most recent survey.

Core trust levels (those indicating "a lot" of trust) also plunged by more than half, from 24% in 2006 to 11% in 2021. Conversely, the percentage of respondents indicating no trust "at all" in Parliament tripled from 12% to 38% during the same period.

The reasons for this decline may be manifold. The dominance of the legislature by the ANC and the inability of major opposition parties to capture the imagination of voters with

plausible electoral alternatives may both be explanatory factors. Judging by the timeline, the data seem to suggest that the “Zuma effect” may be the most plausible explanation for the Parliament’s weakening trust ratings. In the course of Zuma’s presidency, following multiple corruption scandals, the South African Constitutional Court found that Parliament had failed in its oversight of the president in matters relating to security upgrades to his private residence in Nkandla. In testimony before the State Capture Commission, parliamentarians from the ruling party have also been accused of using their positions to support the looting of state resources (Ngalwa, 2021). These allegations of blatant malfeasance have, in all likelihood, strengthened public distrust in Parliament.

**Figure 4: Trust in Parliament | South Africa | 2006-2021**



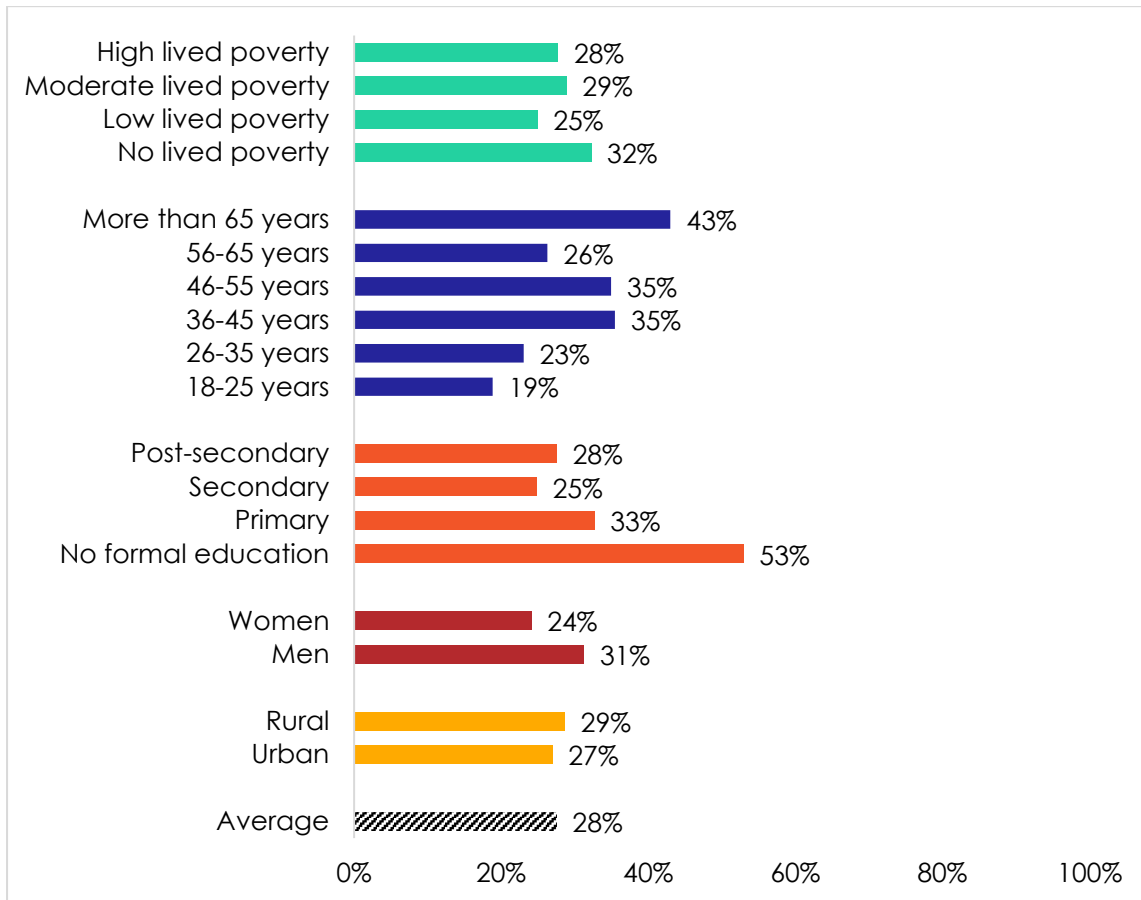
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust Parliament, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

While urban and rural residents express similarly low levels of trust in Parliament, trust varies significantly by respondents' age and education level (Figure 5). Those with no formal education are most likely to express trust (53%), compared to just 25%-33% of those with formal schooling.

As with trust in the president, trust in Parliament is weakest among younger respondents, ranging from just 19% in the 18-25 age category to 43% in the over-65 group. This again underscores a challenge to the legitimacy of democratic processes and procedures among the country's largest age cohorts.

Respondents in different lived-poverty categories differ little in their trust in Parliament. In a country with wide economic disparities, it appears that neither those at the top nor those at the bottom trust Parliament to act in their or the country's best interests.

**Figure 5: Trust in Parliament** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust Parliament, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Trust in the judiciary

Courts of law, the third arm of the state, are charged with ensuring that the rule of law is upheld. Throughout democratic South Africa's history, the judiciary has played an important role in expanding and protecting civil rights.

As shown in Figure 6, a majority of South Africans have expressed trust in the courts in each of the previous Afrobarometer surveys, but this trust has been weakening since the 2011 survey.

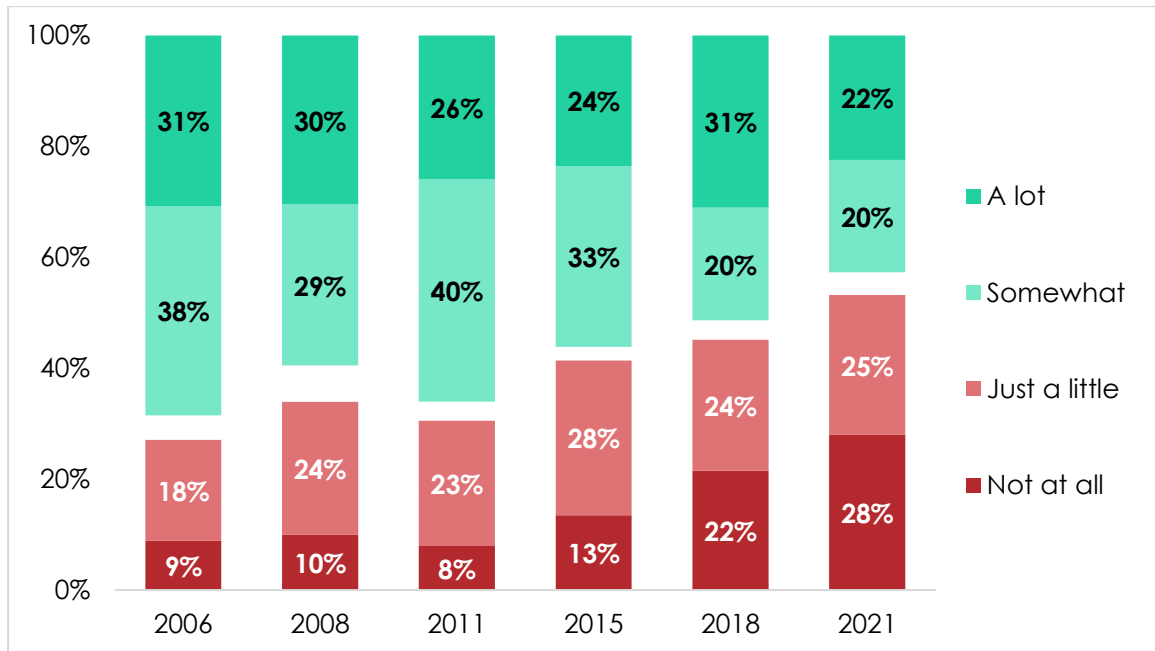
The 2021 survey was the first instance where a majority (53%) of respondents indicate little or no trust in the judiciary.

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While the courts are still considered more trustworthy (43%) than Parliament and the president, the share of respondents who trust the courts "just a little" or "not at all" has been climbing steadily since 2011.

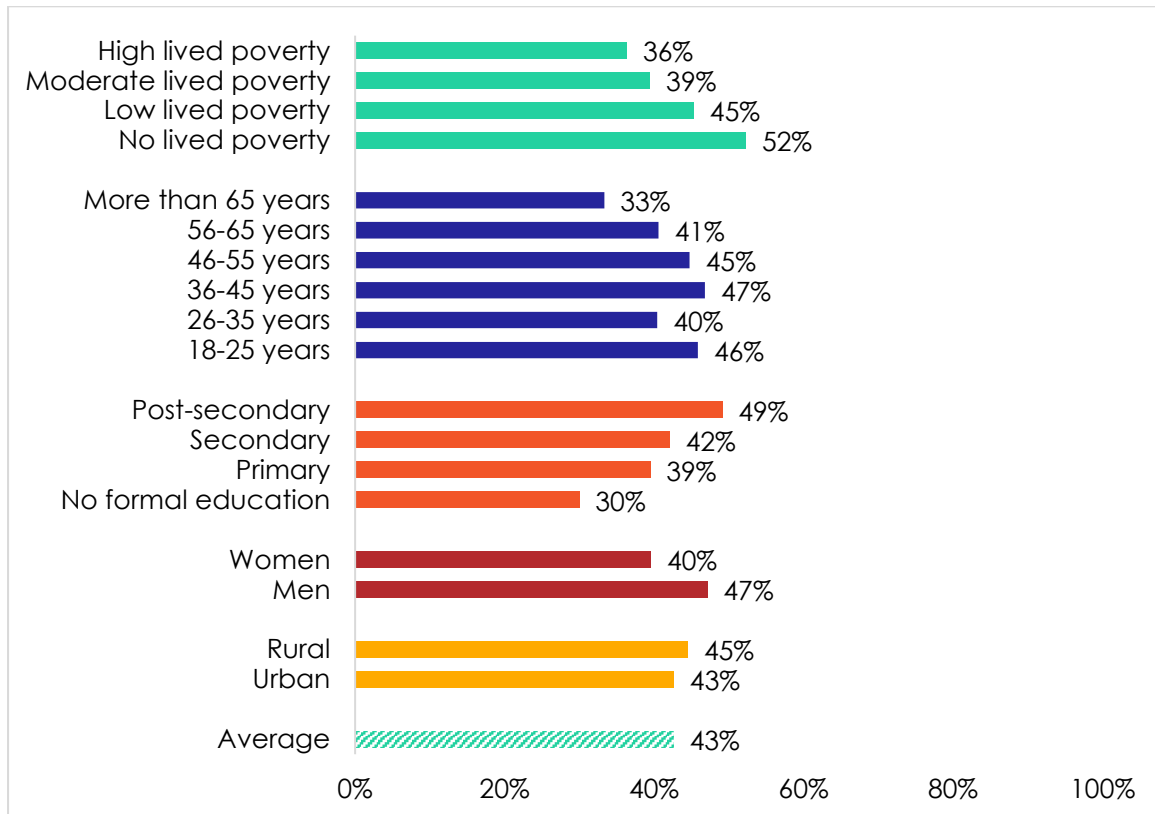
Respondents with greater experiences of lived poverty and less education are less trusting of the courts than are more secure and educated respondents (Figure 7).

**Figure 6: Trust courts of law | South Africa | 2006-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust courts of law, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

**Figure 7: Trust courts of law | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust courts of law, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

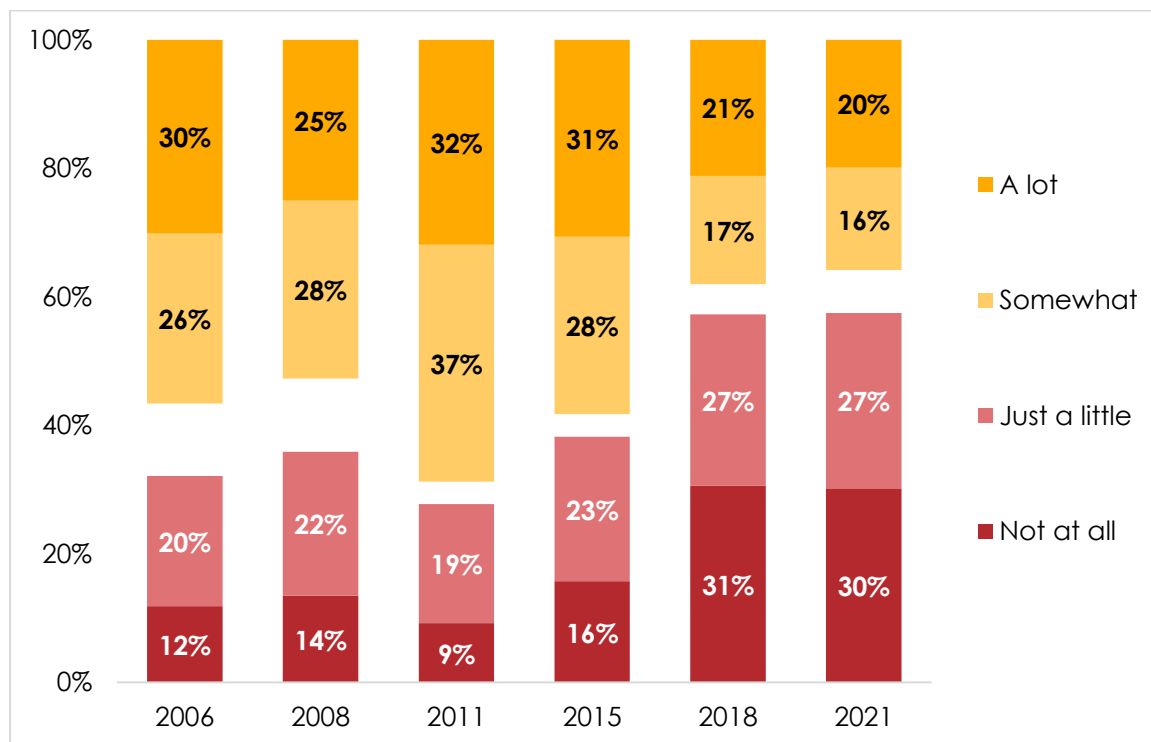


### Trust in oversight institutions

In addition to the three arms of the state, South Africa has several other state institutions whose purpose is to support constitutional democracy, including the Electoral Commission of South Africa (previously known as the Independent Electoral Commission) and the Office of the Public Protector.

To ensure the legitimacy of elections, it is essential that the Electoral Commission be considered trustworthy. In South Africa, public trust in the Electoral Commission, as in nearly all other institutions, has declined from its peak (69%) in 2011 (Figure 8). In 2021, nearly three in five South Africans (57%) trust the commission “just a little” or “not at all,” while only about a third (36%) trust it “somewhat” or “a lot.”

**Figure 8: Trust Electoral Commission | South Africa | 2006-2021**



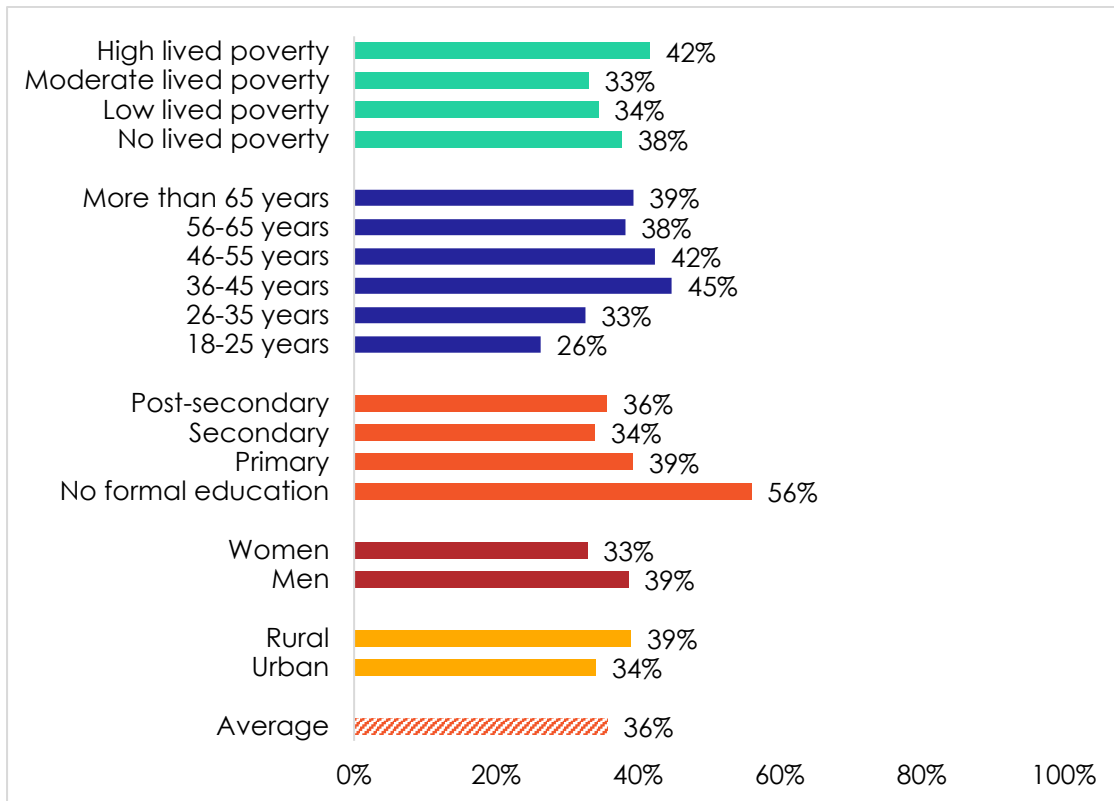
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the Independent Electoral Commission or IEC, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Trust in the Electoral Commission is lowest among young respondents: Only one-fourth (26%) of 18- to 25-year-olds and one-third (33%) of 26- to 35-year-olds say they trust the commission (Figure 9).

This finding coincides with Electoral Commission and voter-turnout data suggesting that young people are less likely to register on the voters' roll and participate in elections. As more young people become eligible to vote, the commission has reported a growing disparity between the number of eligible voters and the number of registered voters. Along with a decline in voter turnout from 74% in 2014 to 66% in 2019, fewer votes were cast in the 2019 election than in the 2014 and 2009 elections, despite a substantial rise in the voting-age population (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019).

Trust in the Electoral Commission is stronger among rural respondents (39%), men (39%), and citizens with no formal schooling (56%) than among urbanites (34%), women (33%), and respondents with formal education (34%-39%).

**Figure 9: Trust electoral commission** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



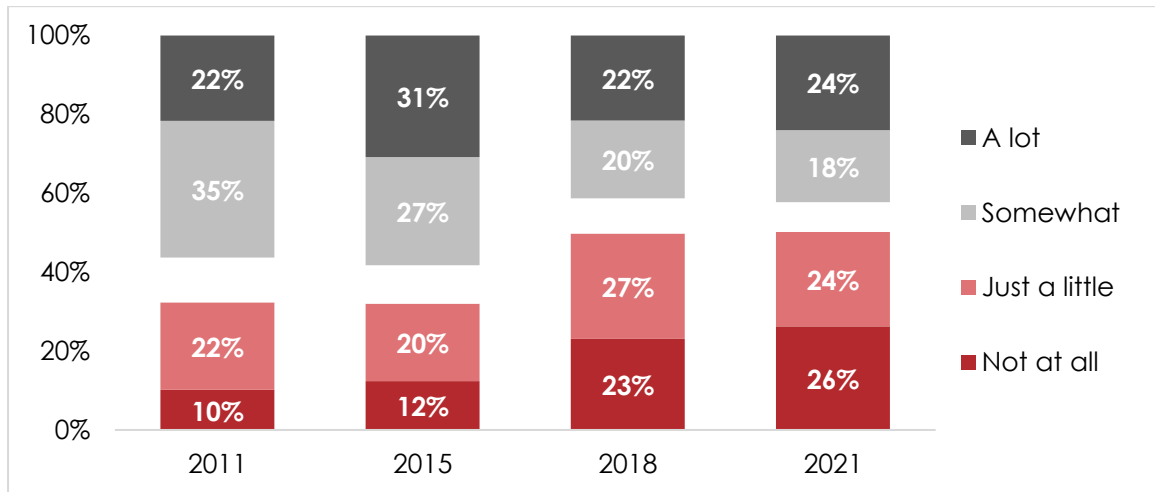
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the Independent Electoral Commission or IEC, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

The Office of the Public Protector serves a legal oversight function and has the authority to investigate any conduct in state affairs that is suspected to be improper. Under then-President Zuma, former Public Protector Thuli Madonsela rose to prominence for her insistence on investigating corruption allegations without fear or favour. Madonsela was replaced by Busisiwe Mkhwebane at the end of her term in 2016. In 2021, half (50%) of South Africans say they trust the Public Protector "just a little" or "not at all," while 42% trust the Public Protector "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 10).

One important difference in levels of trust in the Public Protector compared to trust in other institutions is the absence of a decline in trust between the 2011 and 2015 surveys. In fact, more South Africans expressed a high degree of trust in the Public Protector in 2015 (31%) than in 2011 (22%). Continued trust between 2011 and 2015, when nearly every other institution saw a decline, is indicative of public support for Madonsela and her efforts to identify and sanction state corruption. The decline in public trust after 2015 follows the trend of other institutions and suggests that Mkhwebane is less trusted than her predecessor.

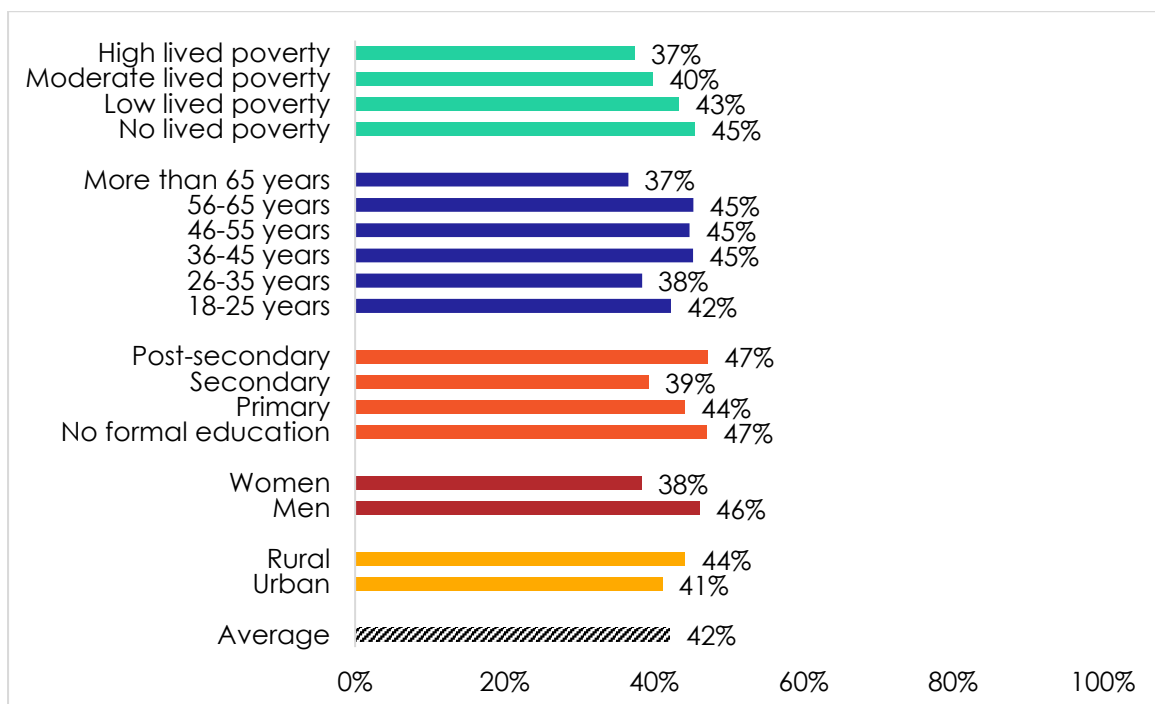
Trust in the Public Protector is somewhat stronger among men (46%, vs. 38% of women) and among those who are economically better off (Figure 11).

**Figure 10: Trust Public Protector | South Africa | 2011-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the Public Protector, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

**Figure 11: Trust Public Protector | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust the Public Protector, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

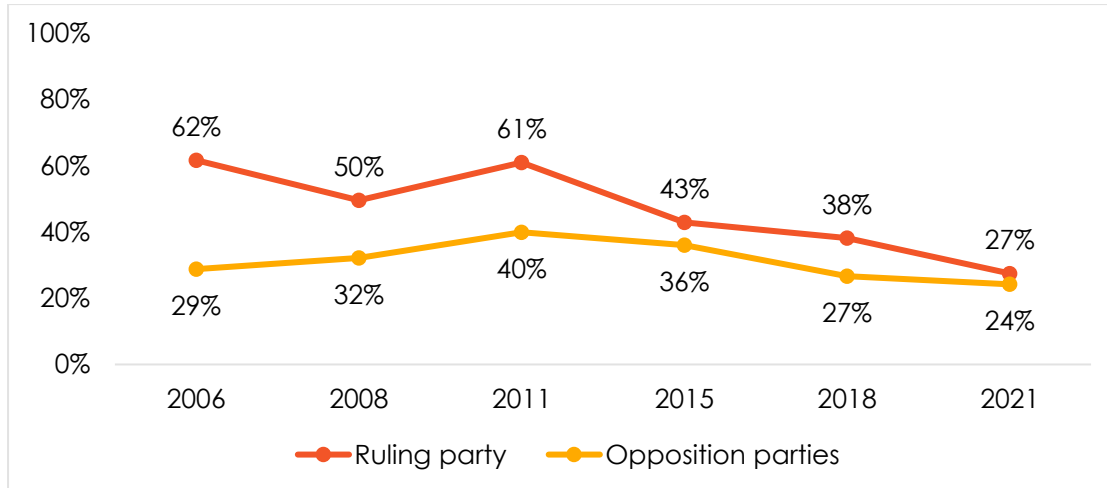
### Political parties

Like institutions of the state, political parties have been losing the trust of South Africans (Figure 12). Until 2011, a majority of survey respondents said they trusted the ruling ANC "somewhat" or "a lot," but this share has declined in every round since then, alongside the ANC's decreasing vote share in national elections since in 2004. Only about one-fourth (27%) of citizens now say they trust the ruling party – fewer than half as many as in 2011 (61%).

Trust in opposition parties has never exceeded 40% and now rests at just 24%, suggesting that opposition parties have failed to present an attractive alternative to the ruling party.

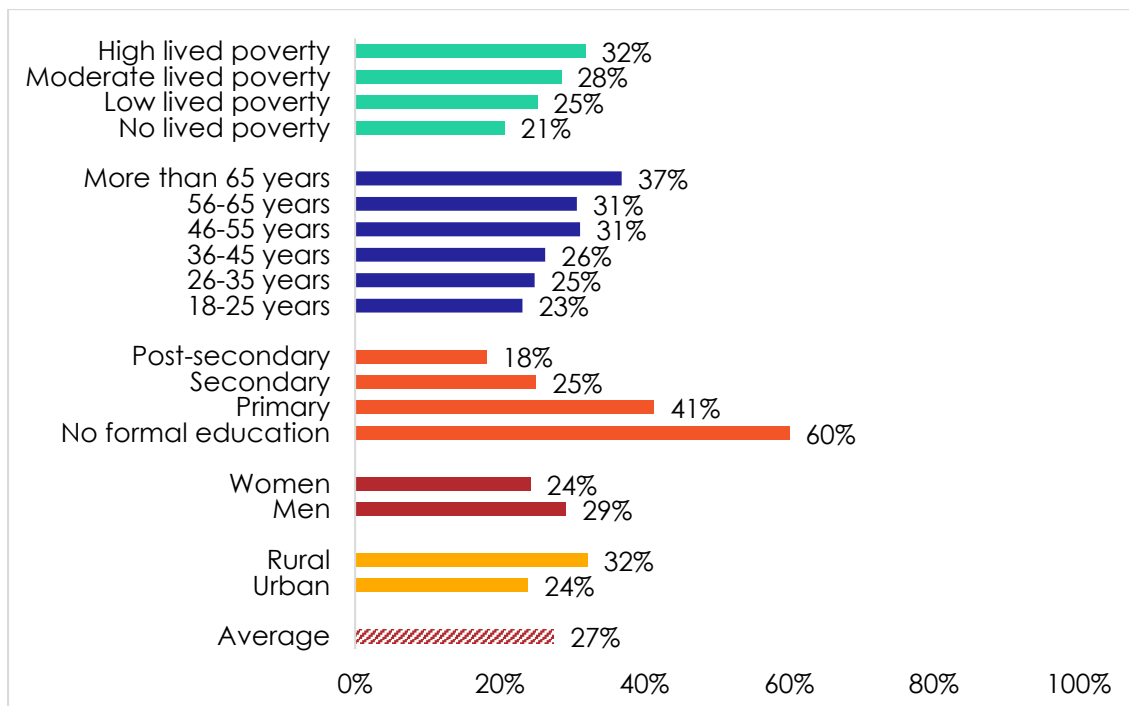
Trust in the ruling party is stronger in rural areas (32%) than in cities (24%) and among men (29%) compared to women (24%). Trust levels increase with respondents' age and poverty levels. They decrease sharply with respondents' education level, ranging from 60% of those with no formal schooling to just 18% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 13).

**Figure 12: Trust in the ruling and opposition parties | South Africa | 2006-2021**



**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 "somewhat" or "a lot")

**Figure 13: Trust in the ruling party | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021**



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

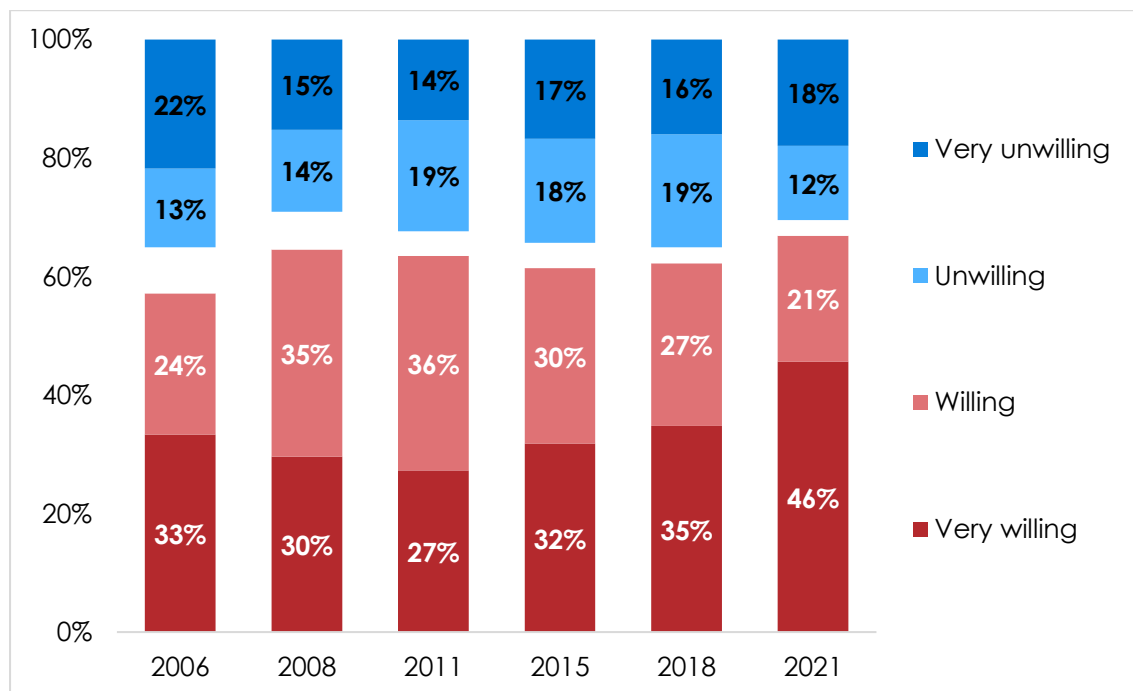
### Willing to forego elections?

South Africans' low levels of trust in public institutions signal a weakening of democratic norms. Over two decades of democracy, poverty, unemployment, inequality, and crime have remained prominent problems as the promise of South Africa's democracy has yet to introduce substantial material improvements for the majority of people.

In this context, a growing majority (67%) of South Africans would be willing to forego elections if a non-elected government could provide security, jobs, and housing (Figure 14).

This has been the majority view in all survey rounds since 2006, but in 2021, amid the health and economic crises presented by COVID-19, the proportion who say they would be "very willing" to give up regular elections for an unelected but efficient government has shot up to nearly half (46%).

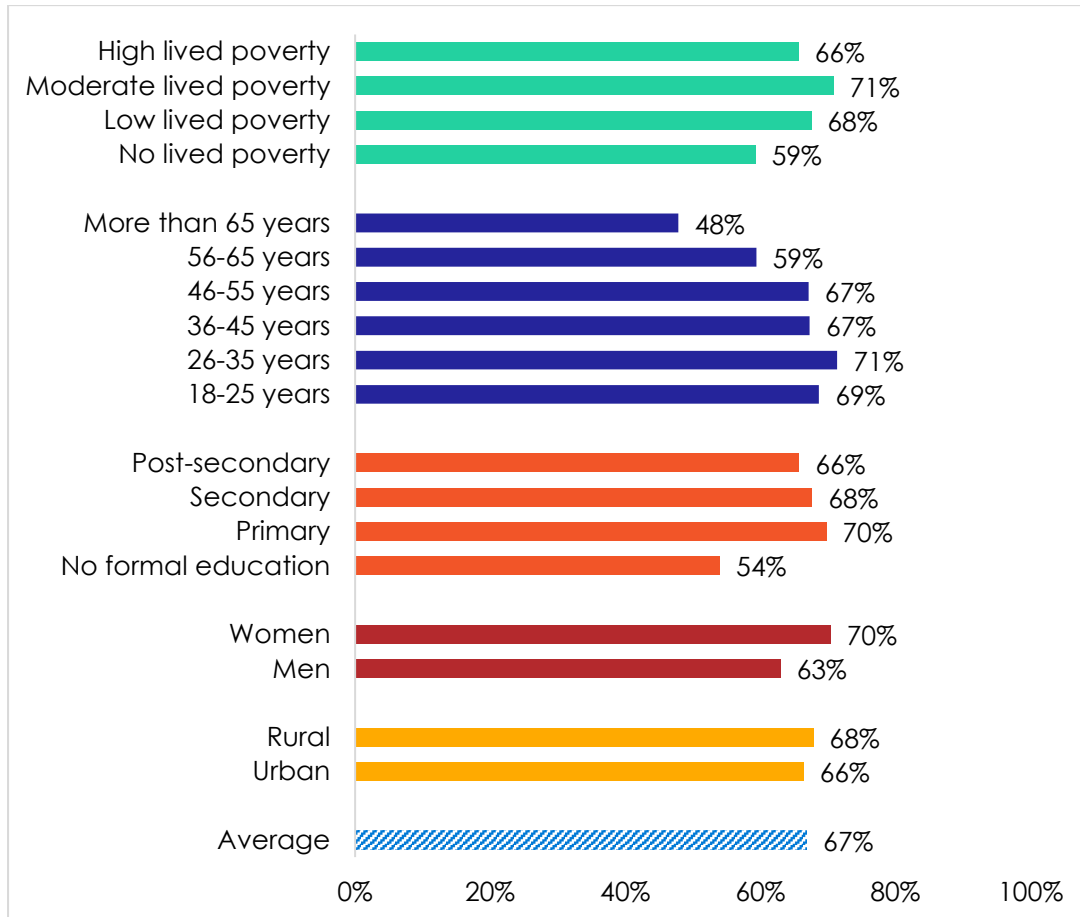
**Figure 14: Willing to forego elections | South Africa | 2006-2021**



**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?*

The willingness to forego elections in exchange for an effective government is common across key demographic groups (Figure 15). But respondents with no formal education (54%) are less likely to agree to such a trade-off, as are older citizens (48% of those over age 65), men (63%, vs. 70% of women), and those not experiencing lived poverty (59%).

**Figure 15: Willing to forego elections** | by socio-demographic group | South Africa | 2021



**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 say “willing” or “very willing”)*

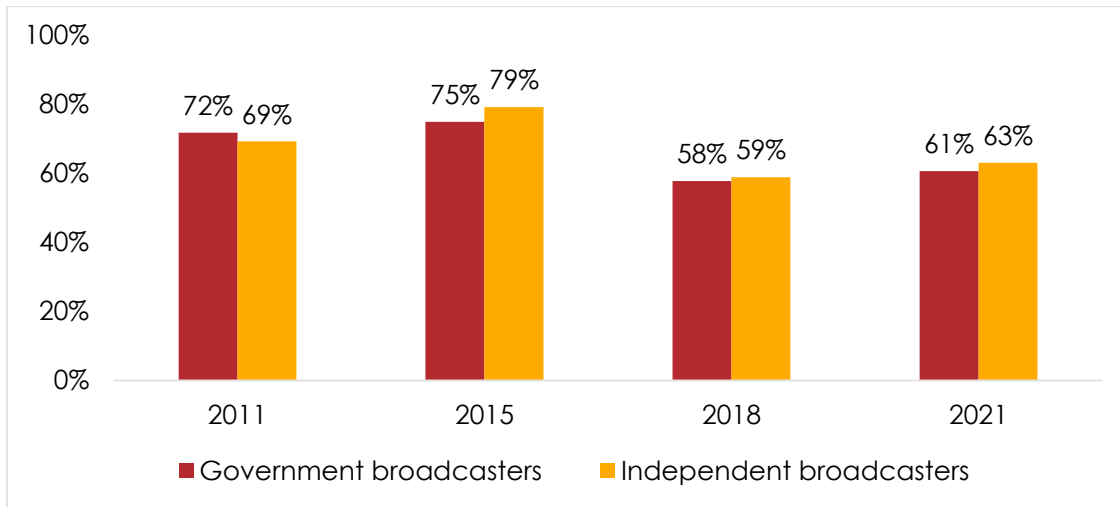
### Media broadcasters

The media plays a crucial role in any democracy, but perhaps especially in one where official corruption and poor service delivery impede the functioning of the state. Relatively high levels of trust that South Africans place in the media suggest that they appreciate the media's role in holding those in power to account.

In addition to its watchdog function, the media has played an important role in informing the public about COVID-19 and the government's response to it, with Afrobarometer data suggesting that most South Africans consider themselves well informed about the pandemic (Moosa, Mpako, & Felton, 2021).

Among institutions that Afrobarometer asked about, independent and government broadcasters are the only ones trusted by a comfortable majority (63% and 61%, respectively) of South Africans. Even so, trust in broadcasters declined between 2015 and 2018, regaining only a small percentage of public trust in 2021 (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Trust in media broadcasters | South Africa | 2011-2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Government broadcasting services, like SABC TV and radio? Independent broadcasting services, like eTV, Radio 702, and community radio stations? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

## Conclusion

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show a worsening deficit of public trust in South Africa's key democratic institutions. Low levels of trust in elected representatives point to a democratic malaise matched by decreasing voter turnout at elections and decreasing trust in the Electoral Commission. Two-thirds of South Africans say they would be willing to forego elections if a non-elected government could improve public safety and provide housing and employment – evidence that a decade of poor service delivery, sluggish economic growth, high-profile government corruption scandals, and increasing levels of unemployment, poverty, and inequality is taking a toll on South Africa's democracy.

Many of the declines in public trust originated between 2011 and 2015, a period when then-President Zuma was accused in several corruption scandals and Parliament and courts of law appeared unable or unwilling to provide oversight and accountability. A precipitous decline of public trust in the state, elected representatives, and oversight institutions may be one of Zuma's lasting legacies.

Ramaphosa has succeeded in reversing the decline in public trust in the presidency, but only marginally, and this improvement has not extended to other institutions. Trust in independent and government broadcasters far outpaces trust in most state institutions, indicating that South Africans look to the media to help ensure government accountability.

Amid increasing mistrust of public institutions, the riots in July may have been a warning. The government will need to improve its delivery of services, provide greater social protection, and demonstrate a determination to punish corruption to have any chance of rebuilding trust between citizens and their state.

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**Mikhail Moosa** is project leader for the South African Reconciliation Barometer at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's national partner in Cape Town, South Africa. Email: [mmoosa@ijr.org.za](mailto:mmoosa@ijr.org.za).

**Jan Hofmeyr** is head of the research and policy program and acting executive director of the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Email: [jhofmeyr@ijr.org.za](mailto:jhofmeyr@ijr.org.za).

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