



*Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 102*

**PROTEST AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: TIME TRENDS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PROTESTERS**

*by Jerry Lavery*

May 2012

**Background**

On March 7, 2012 tens of thousands of demonstrators in 32 towns and cities across South Africa marched in protest over new tolls on roads.<sup>1</sup> From the “rolling mass action” of the 1980s<sup>2</sup> to the service delivery demonstrations of the 1990s and 2000s, South African citizens have regularly participated in mass protests to impact public opinion and influence policymakers on political, economic, or social matters.<sup>3</sup> Some scholars suggest that political protests have visibly increased in frequency and intensity in South Africa in recent years<sup>4</sup>, yet little work has systematically examined trends in protest over time. Moreover, despite the regularity with which South Africans demonstrate, we know little about South African protestors. This briefing paper begins with an assessment of trends in protest participation over the last decade in South Africa before providing insights into protestors’ demographic characteristics, perceptions of government accessibility, and political behavior.

**The Survey**

During Round 5, Afrobarometer surveys will be conducted in up to 35 countries in Africa, using a common survey instrument and methodology. The findings reported here draw from a recent survey in South Africa conducted October and November 2011. This is the sixth Afrobarometer survey conducted in South Africa (others were conducted in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008). The survey was based on a nationally representative random sample of 2400 adult South Africans drawn from all nine provinces of the country. The findings reported here have a margin of sampling error of +/- 2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.<sup>5</sup> Fieldwork was conducted by Citizens Surveys, Ltd., with technical support from the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa).

---

<sup>1</sup>“South Africans march in mass protest at toll roads”, BBC News, 7 March 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17283803>

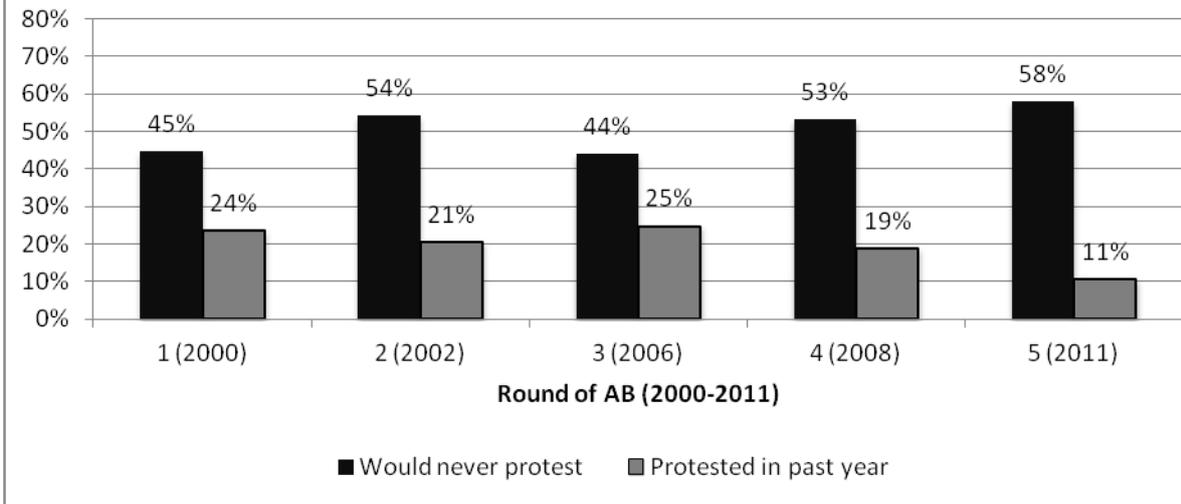
<sup>2</sup>Doreen Atkinson, 2007, “Taking to the streets: has developmental local governance failed in South Africa?” in Sakhela Buhlungu, John Daniel, Roger Southall, and Jessica Lutchman (eds.), *State of the Nation: South Africa 2007* (Cape Town: HSRC Press): 53.

<sup>3</sup>A recent Idasa study tracking South African protests from January 2009 to May 2010 determined that most protests are politically motivated (51%), followed by economic protests (39%) and social protests (13%): <http://www.idasa.org/media/uploads/outputs/files/Summary%20of%20Round%20table%20discussion.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Carl Death, 2010, “Troubles at the Top: South African Protests and the 2003 Johannesburg Summit”, *African Affairs* 109(437): 555.

<sup>5</sup>The margin of error decreases as the sample size increases. All analyses of protestor characteristics are on a small sub-sample. But, all differences highlighted herein are statistically significant at a 95 percent confidence level (or higher) unless otherwise noted.

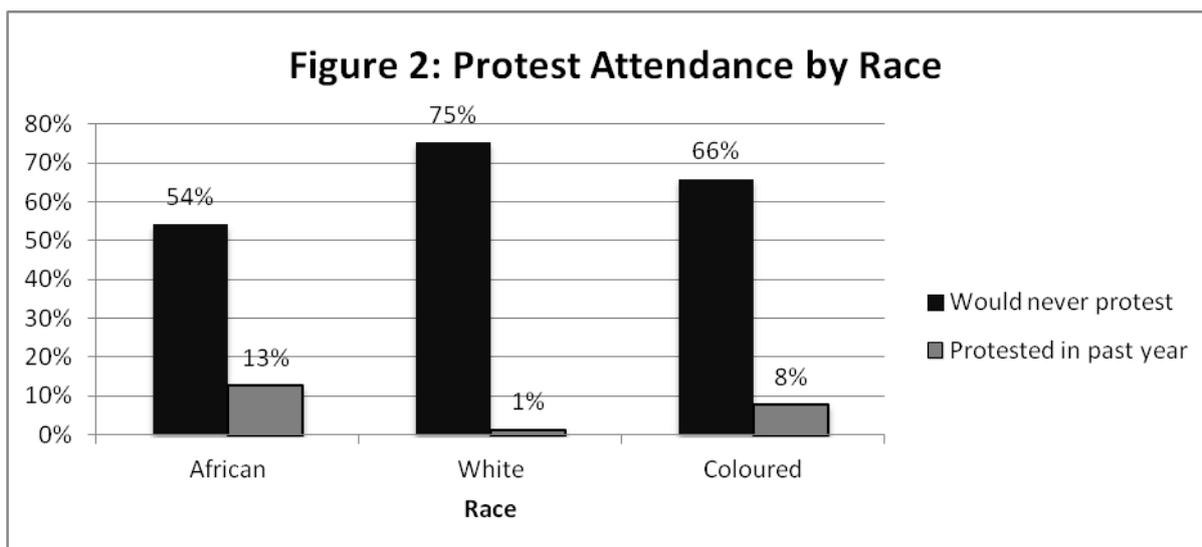
**Figure 1: Protest Trends Over Time**



- In 2011, when asked: “Please tell me whether you, personally, have attended a demonstration or protest march during the past year?”<sup>6</sup> only 11% of South Africans said that they had done so. Well over half (58%) reported that they had not and in fact would “never do this.”
- While not shown in Figure 1, a substantial percentage of the population states that they would have attended a protest given the opportunity: 30% in 2000, 24% in 2002, 29% in 2006, 25% in 2008, and 29% in 2011.
- As demonstrated in Figure 1 above, when viewed over time, fewer people in more recent rounds say they have protested and more South Africans say they would never protest. A quarter (25%) of South Africans stated that they had attended a protest in 2006 compared to 19% in 2008 and 11% in 2011. Only 44% of South Africans stated they would never protest in 2006 compared to 58% in 2011.
- In 2011, fewer South Africans reported having attended a protest and more South Africans reported never being willing to attend a protest than at any other period over the last decade. Perhaps the violent and destructive nature of many protests along with increasingly aggressive police and security responses<sup>7</sup> has contributed to this trend. It is reasonable to assume that many South Africans feared becoming victims of violence at demonstrations and consequently chose not to attend protests in 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Rounds 1 – 5 of the Afrobarometer ask the following: “Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?” with “Attended a demonstration or protest march” as one of the selected actions. “Yes” answer choices include: “often,” “several times,” “once or twice.” “No” answer choices include: “would if had the chance,” and “would never do this,” and “don’t know” was also recorded.

<sup>7</sup> In his 2010 memo “Understanding active citizenship in the light of protest,” Theo Chiviru describes a series of dialogues focused on how citizen agency has contributed to the depending of democracy in South Africa. Idasa examines protests in South Africa over a 17 month period (Jan. 2009 to 31 May 2010) and Chiviru notes “it was disturbing to see how violent and destructive the protests were and the aggressive response of police and security forces. . . it became apparent in the follow up discussions that these protests are not necessarily bad – what is of concern is the violent nature of these protests.” The complete memo can be accessed here: <http://www.idasa.org/media/uploads/outputs/files/Summary%20of%20Round%20table%20discussion.pdf>



As demonstrated by Figure 2 above, Whites (75%) and Coloureds (66%) are more likely to say they would never attend a demonstration or protest than Blacks/Africans (54%). In addition, Blacks (13%) reported much higher rates of attending a demonstration or protest march over the past year than their White (1%) or Coloured (8%) counterparts.

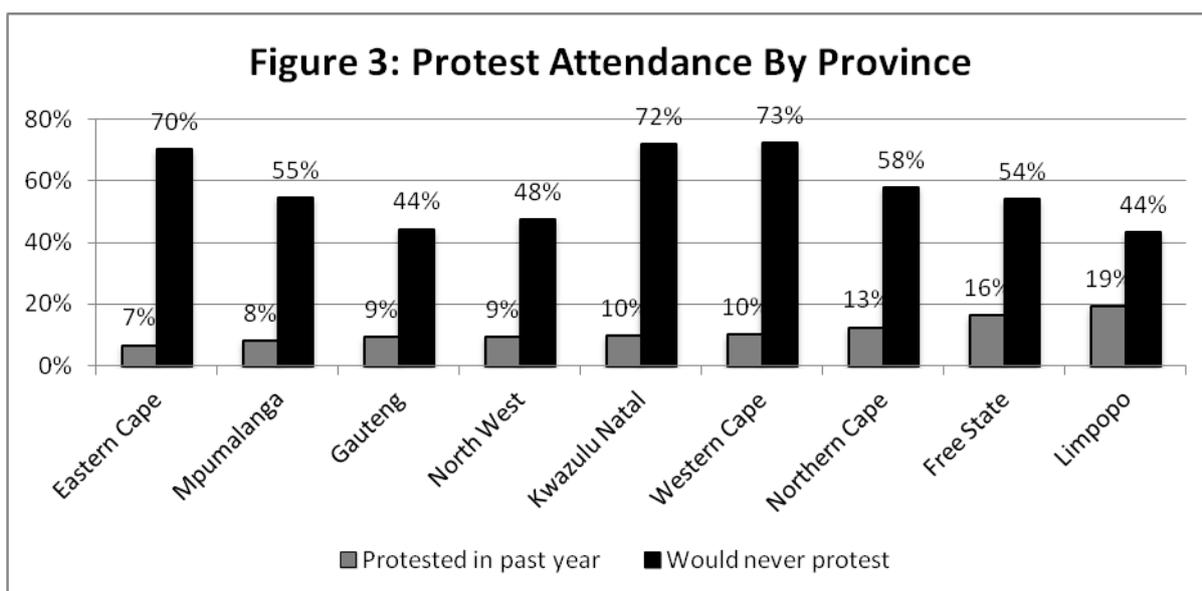
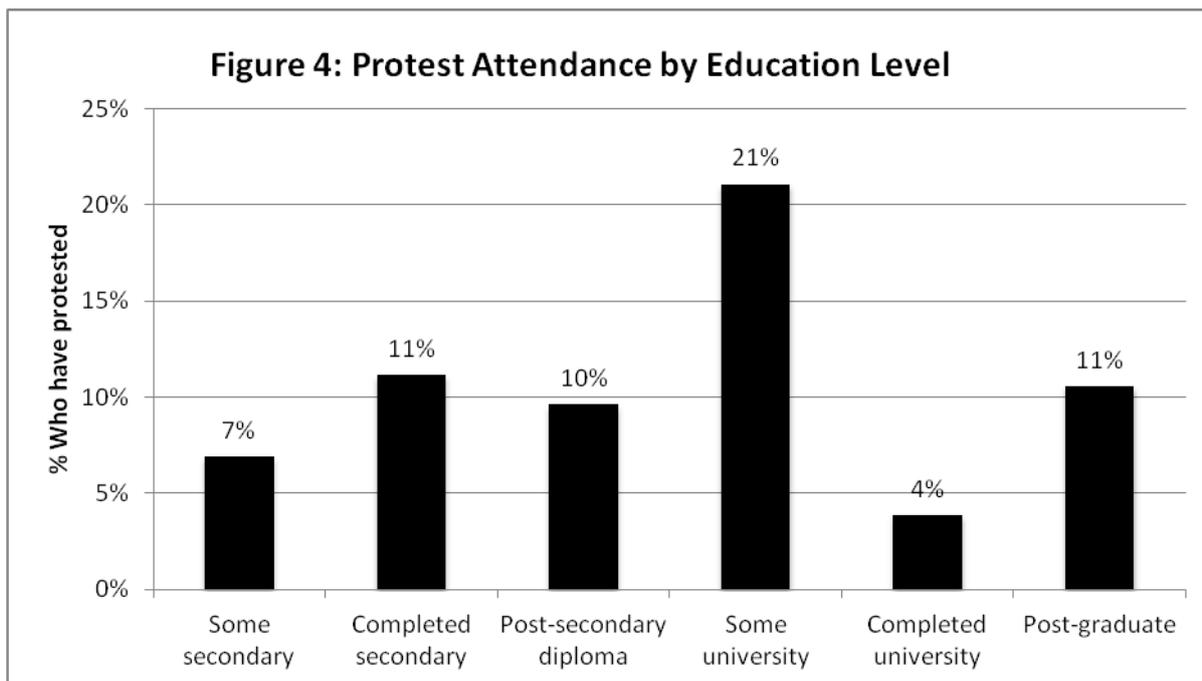
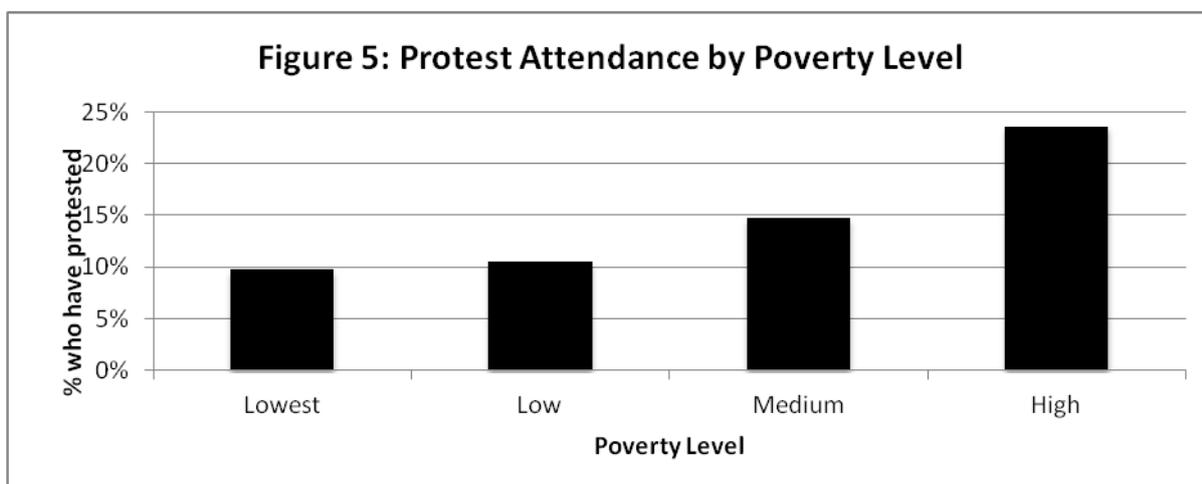


Figure 3 demonstrates variation in levels of protest across provinces. Western Cape (73%), Kwazulu Natal (72%), and Eastern Cape (70%) had significantly more respondents who said they would never attend a demonstration or protest compared to Gauteng (44%), Limpopo (44%) and North West (48%). Limpopo (19%), Free State (16%) and Northern Cape (13%) had the highest percentage of respondents who reported that they had attended a protest in the past year while Eastern Cape (7%), Mpumalanga (8%), Gauteng (9%), and North West (9%) had the lowest.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Please see table 2 in the aforementioned Idasa memo “Understanding active citizenship in the light of protest” for a breakdown of protests by province from 1 Jan. 2009 to 31 May 2010.



As seen in Figure 4, the relationship between education and propensity to protest is complex.<sup>9</sup> South Africans who have attended some university schooling, but not completed university, have the highest likelihood of having protested in the past year (21%).



A poverty score was created for each respondent based on how often they reported going without food, clean water, or medical treatment during the past year.<sup>10</sup> There is a strong correlation between these poverty scores and participation in protests: poorer people are more likely to have protested.

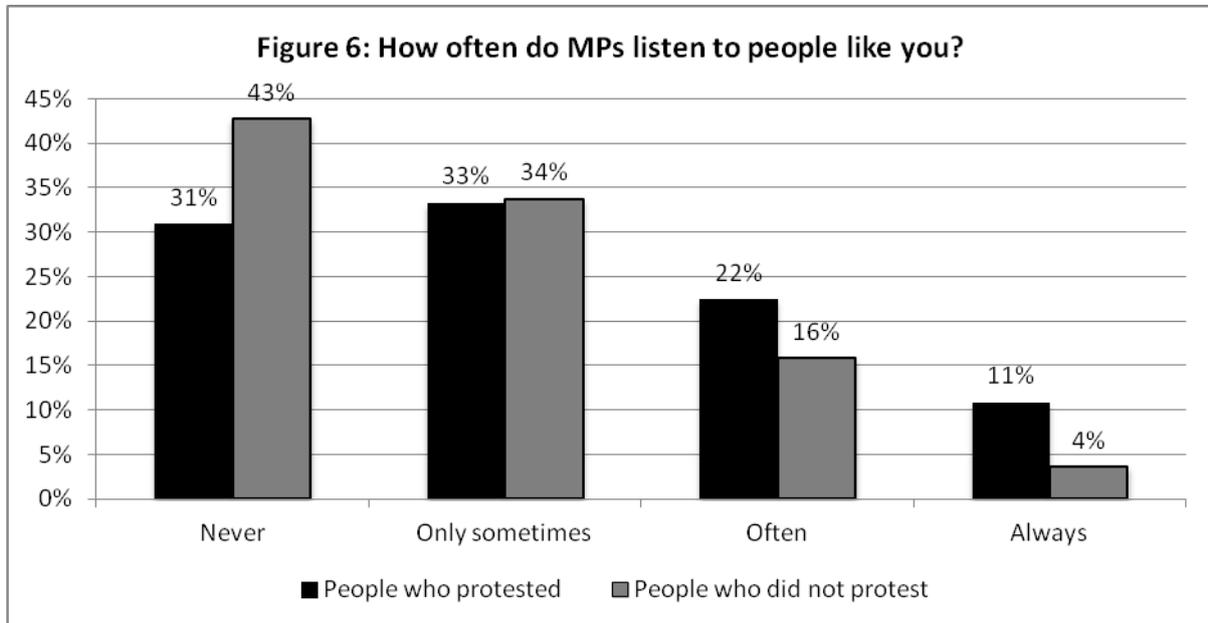
<sup>9</sup> In South Africa, unlike many other African nations, nearly all people attend at least some secondary school. Only 5 of the 2,400 respondents had no more than primary education and were consequently dropped from the analysis.

<sup>10</sup> Respondents were asked how often they went without enough food, clean water, or medical treatment in the past year. The response categories included, “never” (0), “just once or twice” (1), “several times” (2), “many times” (3), and “often” (4). To create the index score, responses to the three questions were summed and divided by three. Respondents who scored an average of less than 1 were categorized as “lowest” poverty; those who scored an average of 1 and less than 2 were categorized as “low” poverty; those who scored an average of 2 and less than 3 were categorized as “medium” poverty; and those who scored an average of 3 and less than 4 were categorized as “high” poverty. No one had an average score as high as 4 (highest poverty).

Figure 5 shows that 10% of South Africans in the lower poverty groups protested during the past year, compared to 24% of those in the highest group.

Additional analyses (not shown) demonstrate that having protested in the past year is not associated with age, sex, or residential location (urban/rural).

### Perceptions of Government Accessibility



As shown in Figure 6, in comparison to people who did not protest, people who protested more often reported feeling that MPs listen to them. Among people who protested, 33% said that MPs listen to them often or always. In contrast, among people who did not protest, only 19% said that MPs listen to them often or always. At the other end of the spectrum, 31% of people who protested felt that MPs never listen to them, compared to 43% of people who did not protest.

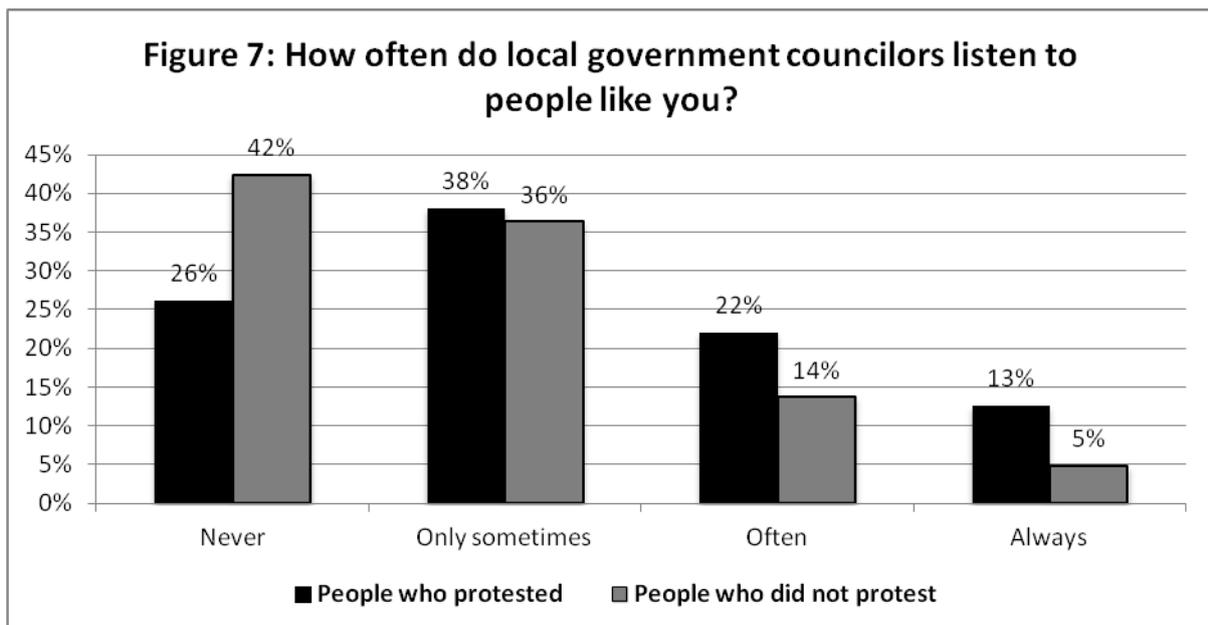
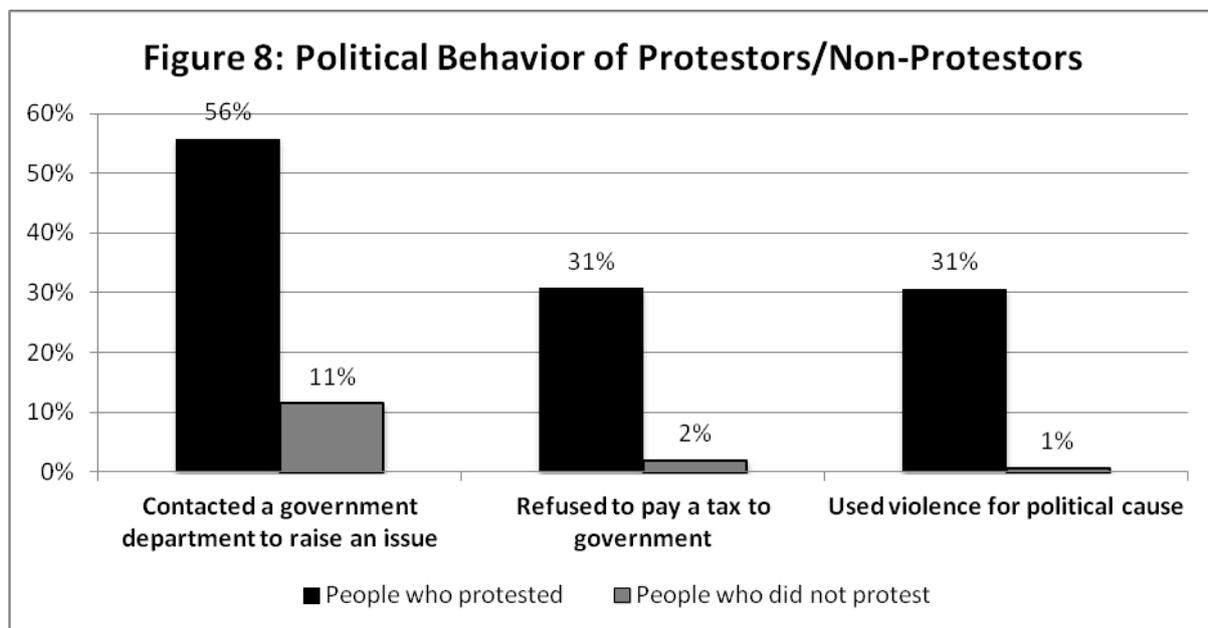


Figure 7 shows the same trend for Local Government Councilors. People who protested within the past year were more likely to report that their local government councilors listen to them often or always and less likely to say that their local government councilors never listen to them. From these data we cannot determine why this relationship exists. It could be that people who protest feel their voices are heard because they protest. Alternatively, it could be that people who perceive that it is worthwhile to express their opinions are both more likely to protest and more likely to think that government officials listen to them.

### Political Behavior of Protesters/Non-Protesters



Of those who protested, 56% contacted a government department, 31% refused to pay government tax, and 31% reported using violence for a political cause. Of those who did not protest, 11% contacted a government department, 2% refused to pay government tax, and 1% reported using violence for a political cause. Generally, in comparison to people who did not protest in the past year, people who protested were more likely to have used additional means to make their voices heard. One possible explanation for this association is that some people have cause for deeper grievances and therefore are more likely to need to use all available means to make their voices heard.

Only 75 respondents reported that they had used violence for a political cause in the past year. Of those respondents, 61 reported that they also attended a protest during the past year. Additional analyses (not shown) indicated that protestors who used violence are generally poorer than protestors who did not use violence. Approximately 12 percent of people who protested and did not use violence experience medium to high poverty. Of the people who reported that they protested and used violence for a political cause in the past year approximately 30 percent experience medium to high poverty. There is no mean age difference between protestors who use and those who do not use violence. Some provinces have higher rates of protestors who reported using violence for a political cause. Protestors in Kwazulu Natal had the highest likelihood of reporting that they had used violence.

### Conclusion

From 2000 to 2011, South Africans have become more likely to say they would never protest. Over the same time period, there was a decline in the percent of South Africans who reported that they have attended a protest in the past year. Race, province, and poverty level are powerful predictors of having protested in the past year. In comparison to people who did not protest in the previous year, people who protested were more likely to report that their MPs and local government councilors listen to them. Protestors were also more likely to have used other means—contacting a government

department, refusing to pay a government tax, or using violence for a political cause—to make their voices heard.

Prepared by Jerry Lavery, doctoral student, Michigan State University. He can be reached at [laveryge@msu.edu](mailto:laveryge@msu.edu) for questions or comments.

The **Afrobarometer** is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 20 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. We gratefully acknowledge generous core support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for Afrobarometer Round 5 research, capacity building, and outreach activities. Idasa is the Afrobarometer partner in South Africa - for more information on Afrobarometer work in South Africa please contact Anyway Chingwete, AB Project Manager, [achingwete@idasa.org.za](mailto:achingwete@idasa.org.za) or visit: [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).