

Traditional leaders have a weak hold on South Africans

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 621 | Sibusiso Nkomo and Samantha Kambule

Summary

In 2010, the South African government streamlined the number of officially recognised traditional kingdoms from 13 to seven to address issues created by the former apartheid and colonial governments (Government of South Africa, 2010). These kingdoms are subject to the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act 41 of 2003 and Chapter 12 of the Constitution of South Africa 1996.

Despite this legal framework, issues surrounding traditional leadership in South Africa are far from settled.

Since Parliament recognised several marginalised groups in the Traditional Khoi-San Leadership Act of 2019 (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2021), disputes have erupted over the leadership of the AmaMpondo, AmaXhosa, AmaZulu, BaPedi, VhaVhenda, and BaLobedu (Mkhwanazi, 2021). A major case before the KwaZulu-Natal High Court contests inheritance rights after the death of AmaZulu King Zwelithini kaBhekuzulu. When King Misuzulu kaZwelithini ascended to the throne in 2021, South Africans saw live footage of the Zulu royal family breaking out into a commotion that went as far as the High Court for arbitration (Makhaye, 2022; SABC, 2021).

In a blow to traditional leaders who had been collecting rents, the South African High Court recently declared that people living on customary land covering 30% of the province of KwaZulu-Natal, held in trust by the Zulu king, are the “true and beneficial owners” of that land. The judgment confirmed that the Ingonyama Trust Board, which was created before the 1994 elections, could not convert the customary land rights of occupiers to rent-paying leases as it has been doing over the past few years (Cousins, 2021; Harper, 2022).

In addition to infighting over positions and powers, traditional leaders have been the focus of politicians’ efforts to gain votes. Before the 2021 local government elections, the Economic Freedom Fighters party gifted the AbaThembu king a 1.8-million-rand car in the run-up to local government elections, and King Dalindyabo encouraged his people to vote for the EFF (SABC, 2021).

In this context, how do South Africans see the role of traditional leaders?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that many South Africans do not know much about traditional leaders. Relatively few citizens have contact with traditional leaders, think they listen to what people have to say, consider them influential and trustworthy, and give them positive ratings on their job performance. Only a quarter of South Africans think traditional leaders focus mainly on serving the interests of the people in their communities.

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. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus94 Research, interviewed 1,600 adult South Africans in May-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 standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, and 2018.

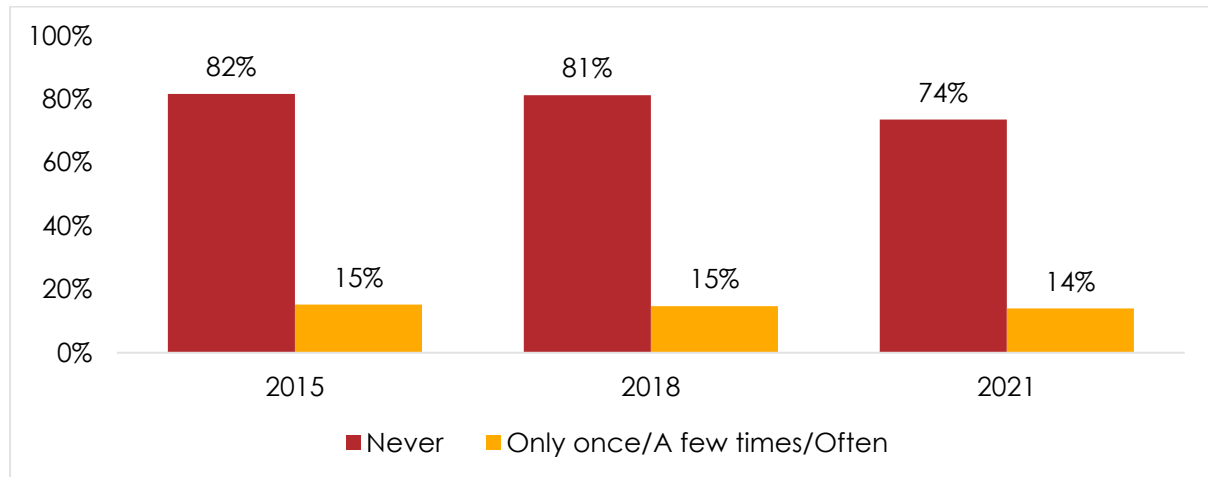
Key findings

- Only about one in seven South Africans (14%) said they contacted a traditional leader during the preceding year.
- Fewer than two in 10 citizens (18%) said traditional leaders “often” or “always” do their best to listen to what people have to say.
- Only three in 10 respondents (31%) said they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 44% in 2015. Four in 10 (41%) expressed little or no trust, while 27% said they “don’t know.”
- About one-third (35%) of citizens said “most” or “all” traditional leaders are involved in corruption.
- Only one in four South Africans (25%) approved of how their traditional leaders performed their jobs during the previous year.
- South Africans offered mixed assessments of traditional leaders' influence. About one-third saw them as having “some” or “a lot” of influence in resolving local disputes (33%) and allocating land (31%). Fewer saw them as influential in governing local communities (29%) and influencing how people vote (25%).
 - About one-third of citizens said they don't know whether traditional leaders play an important role in these matters.
- By a 2-to-1 margin, South Africans want traditional leaders to stay out of politics (48%) rather than to advise people on how they should vote (22%).
- Only a quarter (25%) of South Africans said traditional leaders focus on serving the interests of the people in their communities. More thought they mostly look out for their own personal interests (29%).
- Survey findings provide a complex view of South Africans' perceptions of ethnicity in their social relations. While most said they feel strong ties with other South Africans, eight in 10 (79%) valued their ethnic identity at least as strongly as their national identity, almost half (46%) said the government at least sometimes treats members of their ethnic group unfairly, and a majority (56%) expressed little or no trust in people of other ethnicities.

Traditional leaders: Contact, responsiveness, trust, and performance

Only about one in seven South Africans (14%) said they contacted a traditional leader during the previous year about some important problem or to share their views, a proportion that has remained steady since 2015 (Figure 1).

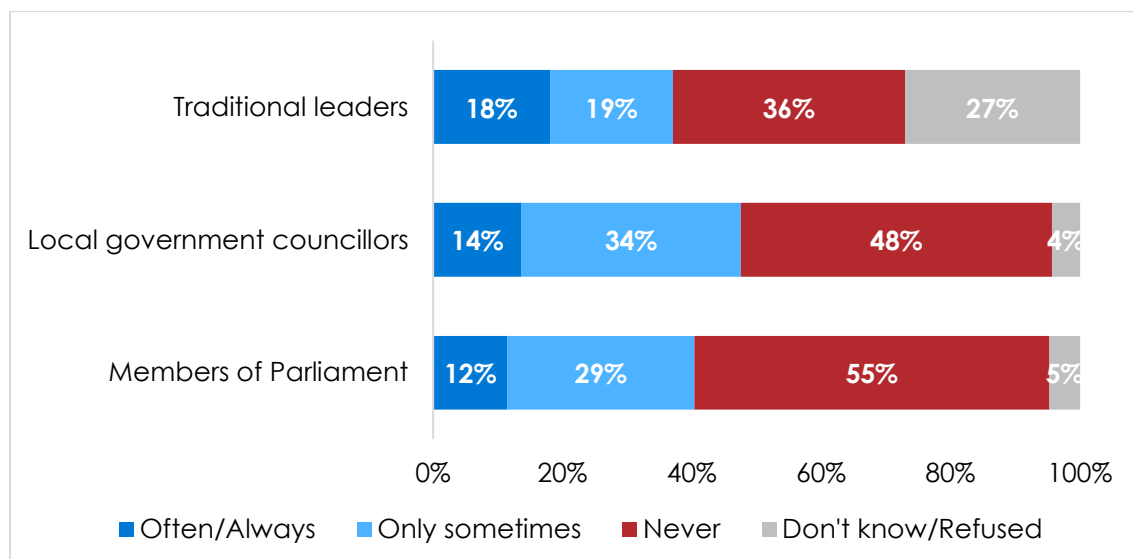
Figure 1: Contact with traditional leaders | South Africa | 2015-2021



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A traditional leader?

Fewer than one in five citizens (18%) said that traditional leaders “often” or “always” do their best to listen to what people have to say – a slightly more favourable rating than those given local government councillors (14%) and members of Parliament (12%), but hardly a ringing endorsement (Figure 2). Another 19% said traditional leaders “only sometimes” listen, while 36% said they “never” do. More than one in four respondents (27%) said they “don’t know” whether traditional leaders try to listen.

Figure 2: Do leaders listen to people? | South Africa | 2021



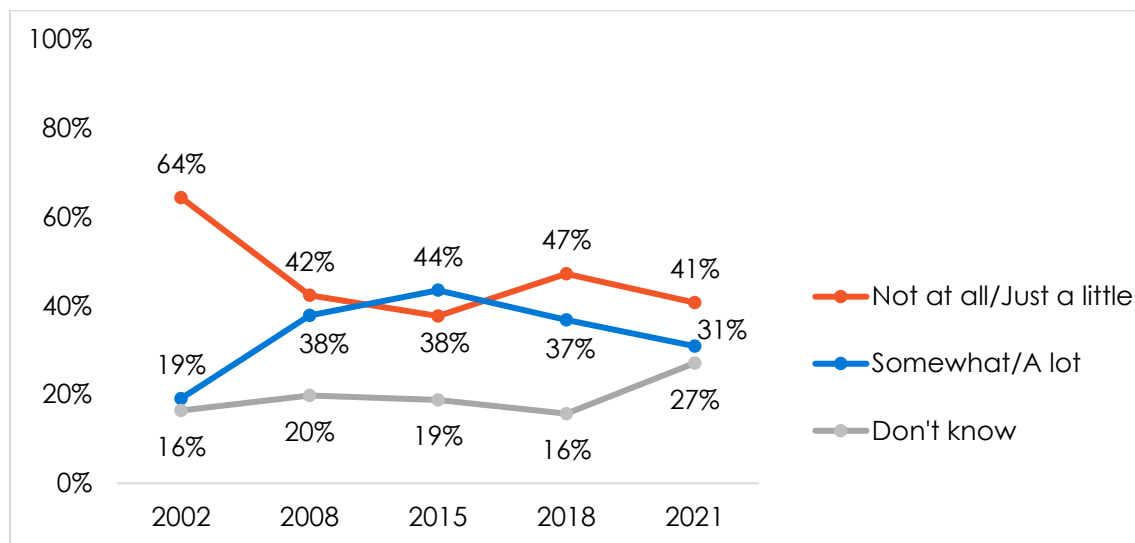
Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say?

Like contact and perceived responsiveness, trust in traditional leaders is not widespread in South Africa. Only 31% of respondents said they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 44% in 2015 (Figure 3). Four in 10 (41%) expressed little or no trust, while 27% said they “don’t know.”

About one-third (35%) of citizens said “most” or “all” traditional leaders are involved in corruption, an 11-percentage-point increase compared to 2015. Another 42% considered “some of them” corrupt (Figure 4).

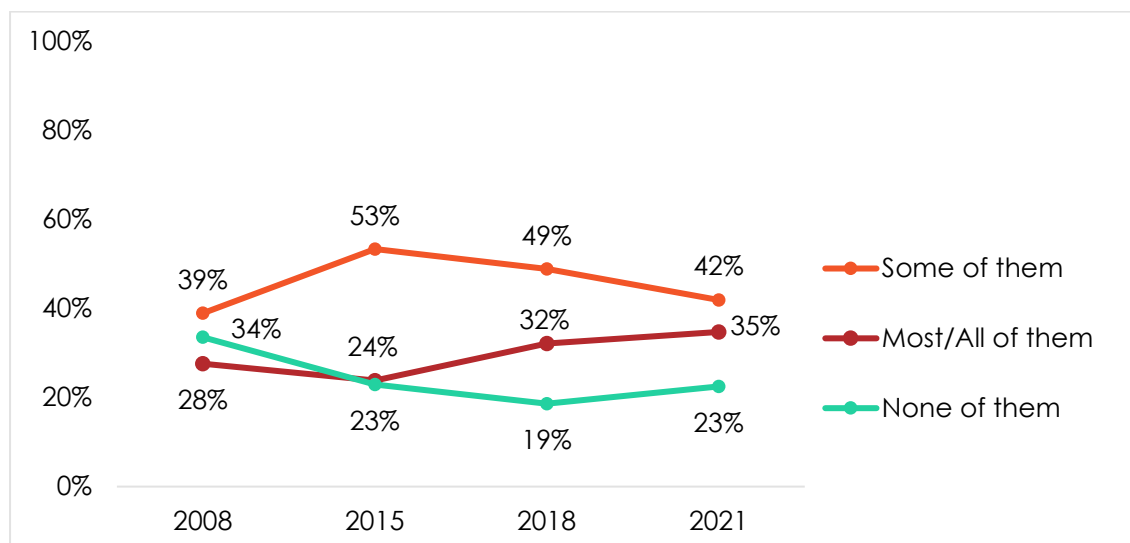
Only one in four respondents (25%) said their traditional leaders had performed “fairly well” or “very well” in the execution of their duties over the previous 12 months, down from 29% in 2018 (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Trust in traditional leaders | South Africa | 2002-2021



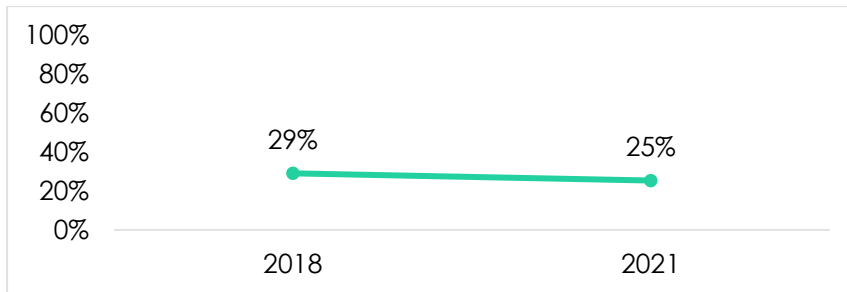
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 4: Perceived corruption of traditional leaders | South Africa | 2008-2021



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: Traditional leaders?

Figure 5: Performance of traditional leaders | South Africa | 2018-2021



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your traditional leader? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Traditional leaders' influence in local communities

Across Africa, traditional leaders are widely seen as playing an influential role in local governance (Logan & Amakoh, 2022), although observers have also argued that their integration into a modern liberal democratic system like South Africa's must be better harmonised to reduce inconsistencies and friction (Mathonsi & Sithole, 2017).

When asked about traditional leaders' influence in local communities, only about one-third of South Africans said they exert "some" or "a lot" of influence in resolving local disputes (33%) and allocating land (31%),¹ while about one-fifth saw them as having no influence at all on these matters (Figure 6).

Slightly fewer saw them as influential in governing local communities (29%) and influencing how people vote (25%).

Importantly, one-third of South Africans said they "don't know" whether traditional leaders play an important role in any of these functions. This may be explained by the fact that most South Africans (68%) live in cities and towns (World Bank, 2021), whereas traditional leaders are a largely rural phenomenon.

A demographic breakdown of perceived influence in allocating land, a major issue in rural South Africa, shows that rural residents (41%) were considerably more likely than their urban counterparts (27%) to see traditional leaders as influential, as were citizens who live in largely rural Limpopo (49%) compared to those in other provinces (24%-35%)² (Figure 7). But even in rural areas, 17% of respondents said traditional chiefs have no influence on land allocation, and 19% said they "don't know."

Citizens who were economically well off were less likely to consider traditional leaders influential in land allocation (23%, compared to 32%-33% of those who experienced low, moderate, or high "lived poverty" during the previous year).³

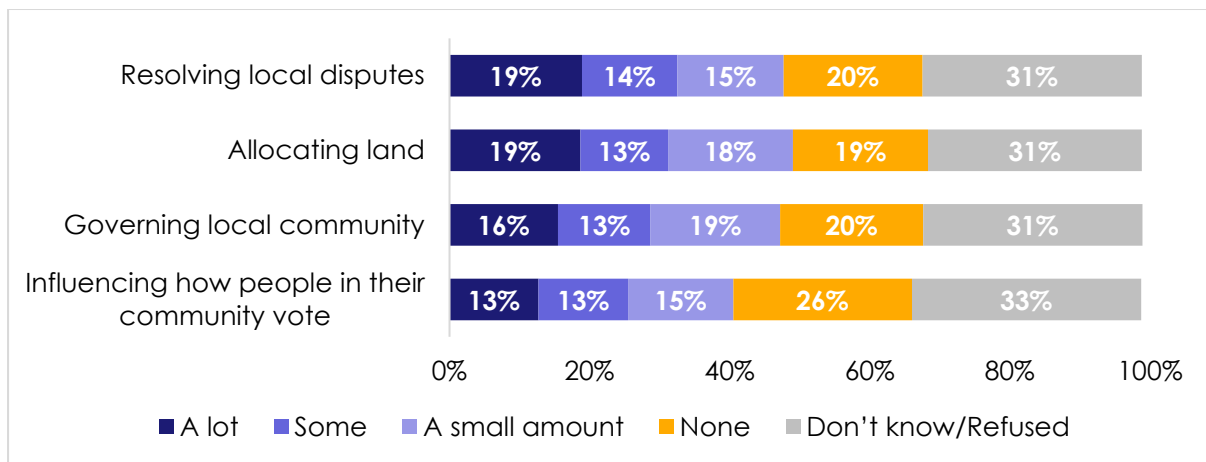
¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g., 19% "a lot" and 13% "some" sum to 31%).

² The Northern Cape province is excluded from this analysis because of its small sample size (proportionate to its share in the national population), which results in high margins of error.

³ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes (2020).

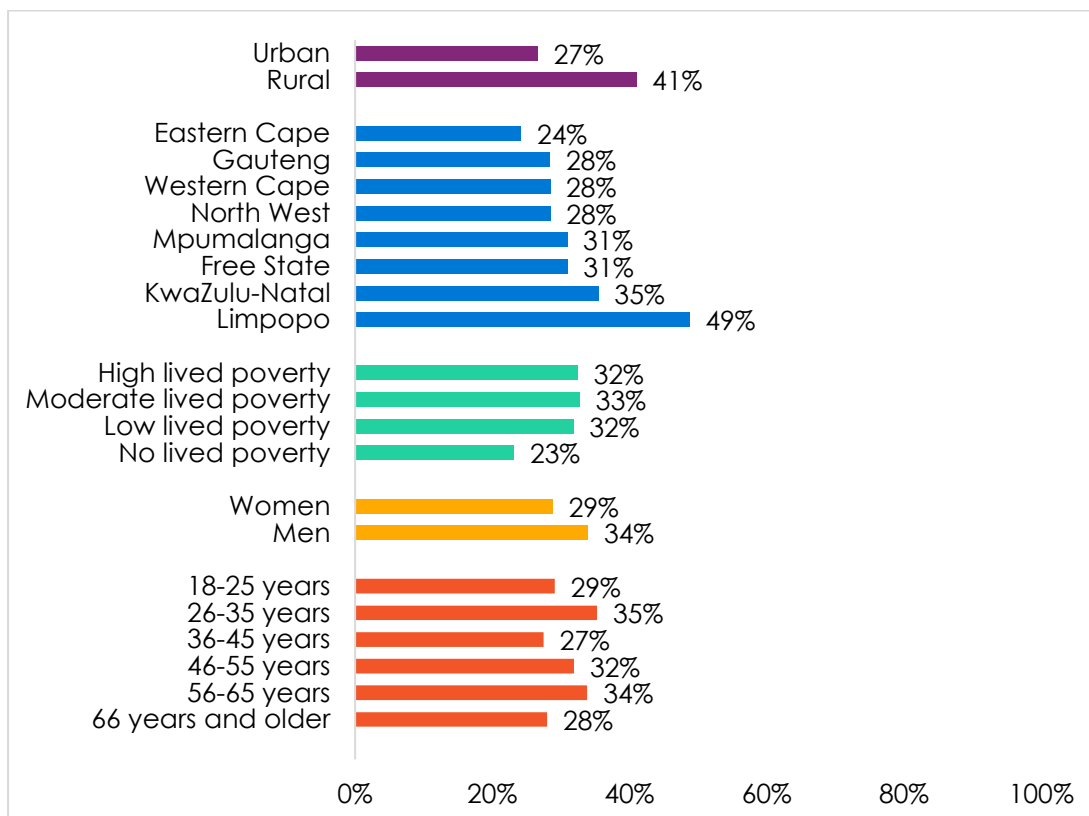
When it comes to how much influence traditional leaders have on how people vote, residents of Limpopo (35%) and the Western Cape (35%) were most likely to see them as somewhat or highly influential. But other key demographic groups show no strong patterns of difference (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Traditional leaders' influence in local communities | South Africa | 2021



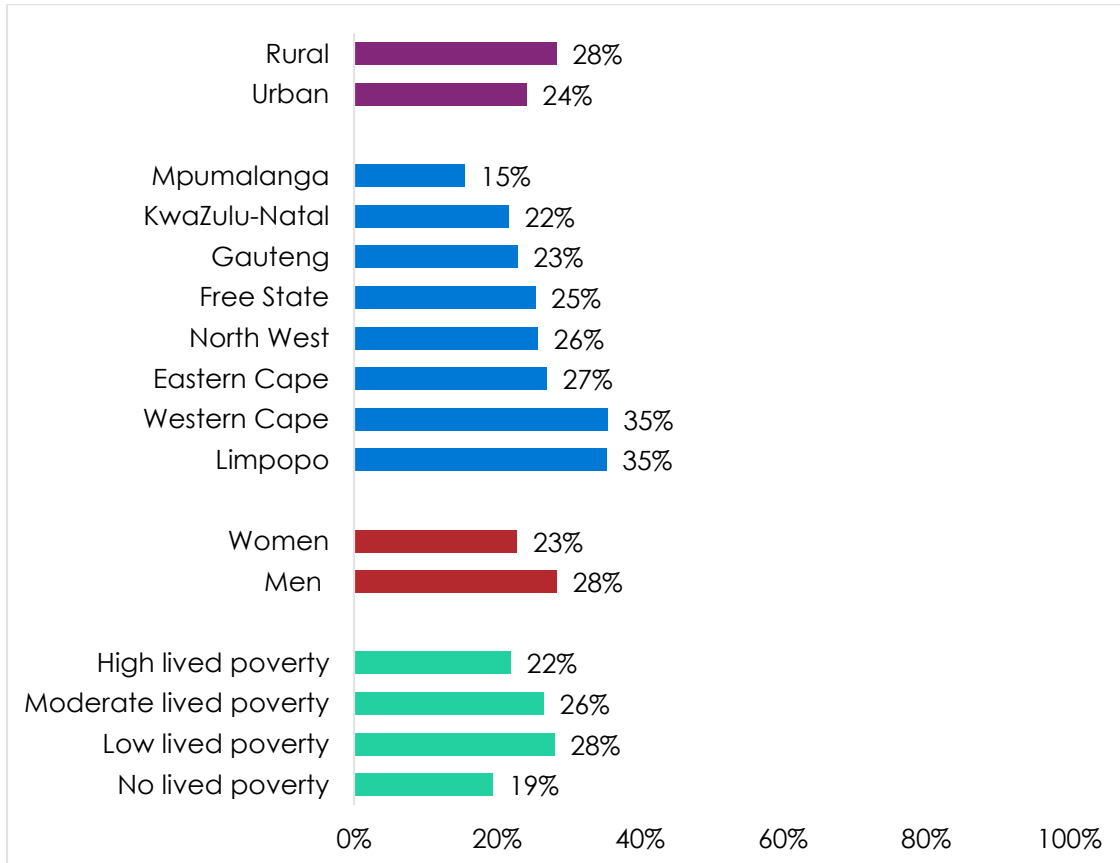
Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas?

Figure 7: Traditional leaders' influence in allocating land | by demographic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Allocating land? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

Figure 8: Traditional leaders' influence on how people vote | by demographic group
 | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Influencing how people in their communities' vote? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

Whose interests do traditional leaders serve?

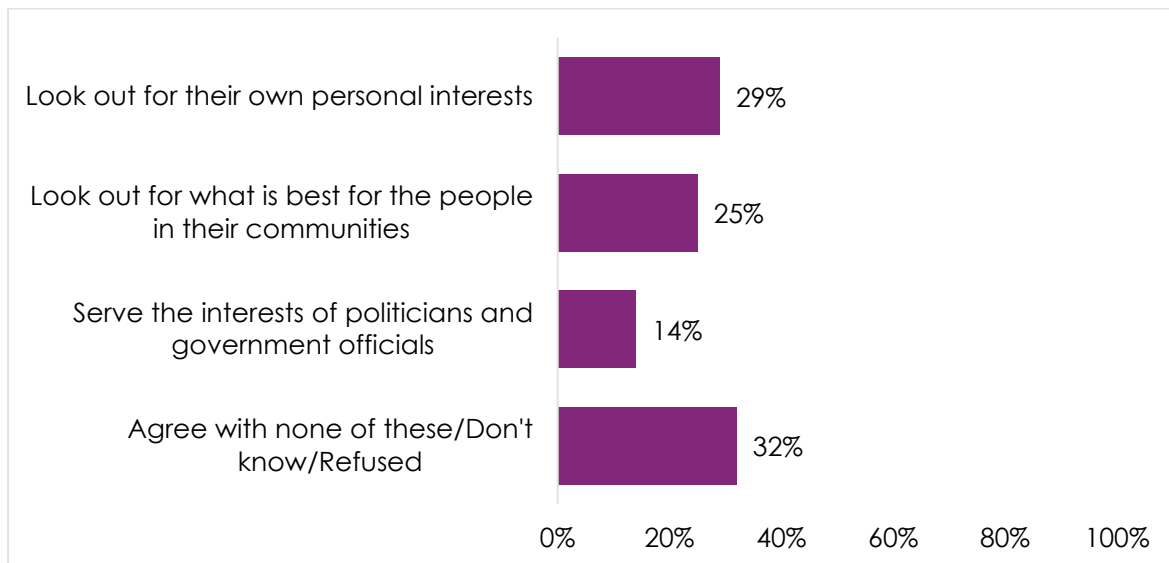
While a majority (54%) of citizens in 31 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2019/2021 saw traditional leaders as mostly serving the interests of the people in their communities, fewer than half as many South Africans (25%) agreed (Figure 9). Only Moroccans (13%) were less likely to see their traditional chiefs as serving their communities (Logan & Amakoh, 2022).

A larger share of South Africans (29%) said traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests, while 14% thought they mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials. Again, a third (32%) of respondents offered no opinion on this question.

Rural residents were more likely than urbanites to see traditional leaders as mainly pursuing their personal interests (36% vs. 25%) (Figure 10), though to be fair, they were also more likely to say that chiefs look out for what's best for their communities (30% vs. 23%). (Urban residents were about twice as likely as rural dwellers to say they "don't know" (32% vs. 17%).

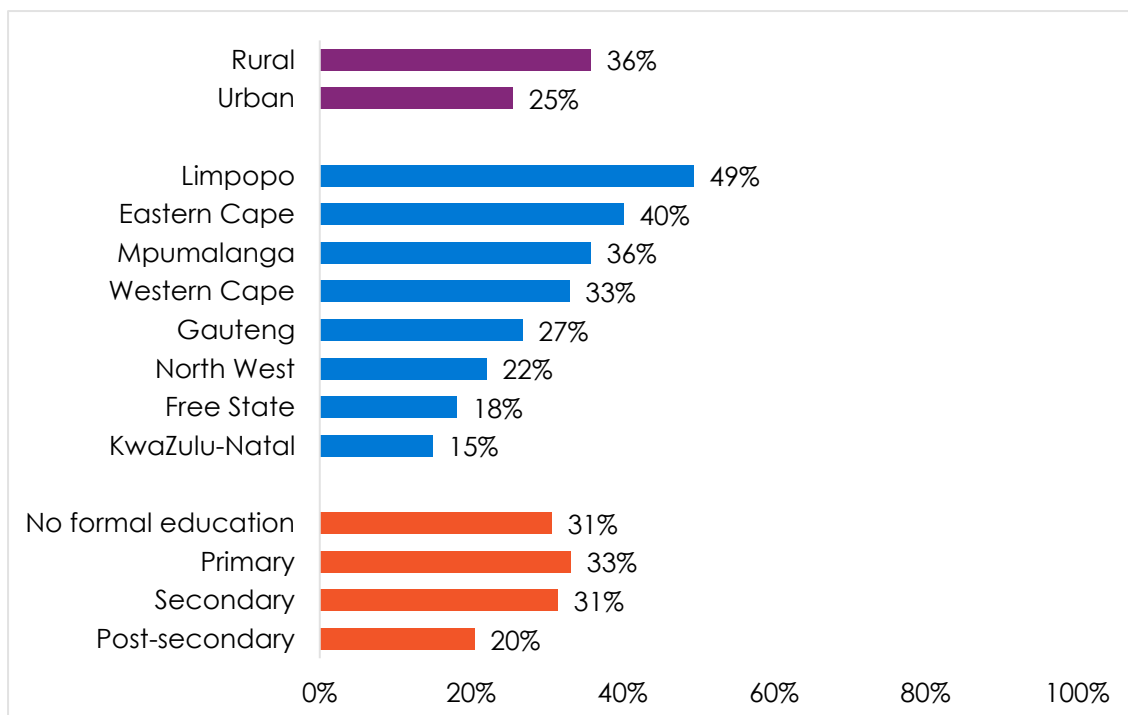
The perception that traditional leaders are out for their own interests was less common among respondents with post-secondary education (20%), the economically best off (23%), and residents of KwaZulu-Natal (15%) and Free State (18%).

Figure 9: Whose interests do traditional leaders' serve? | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials.
 Statement 3: Traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests.

Figure 10: Traditional leaders mostly serve their personal interests | by demographic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials.
 Statement 3: Traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests.
 (% who said they mostly look out for their own personal interests)

The role of traditional leaders in politics and democracy

So what role should traditional leaders play in politics and democracy? By a 2-to-1 margin, South Africans want them to stay out of politics (48%) rather than to advise people on how they should vote (22%) (Figure 11).

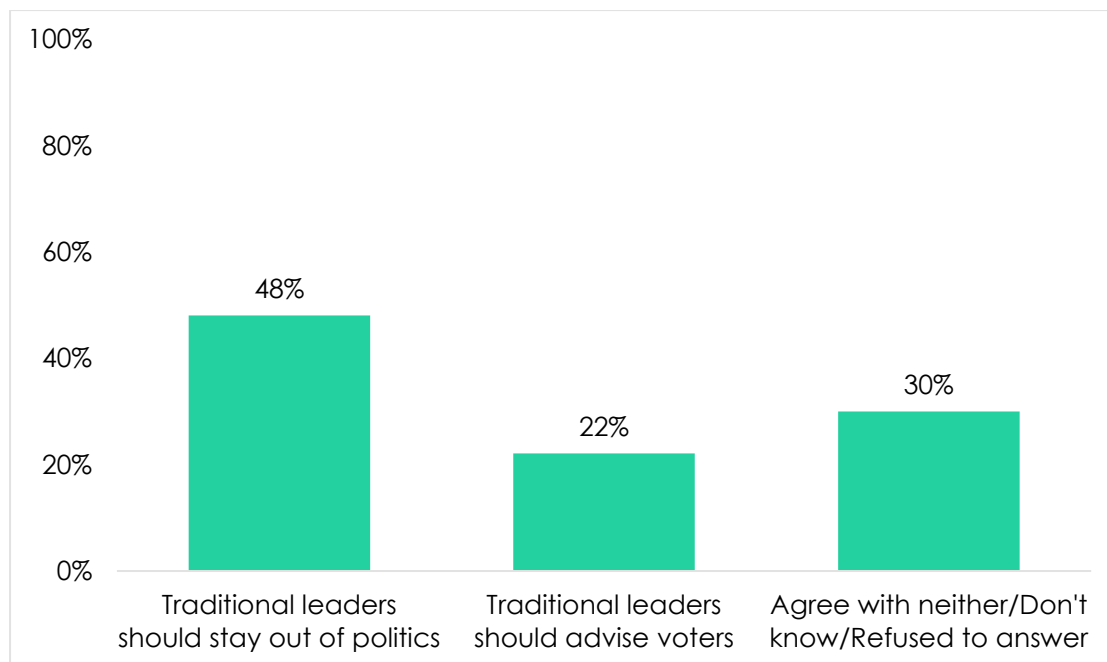
This preference was particularly strong in rural areas (53%, vs. 46% in cities) (Figure 12), but again it's not because more urbanites wanted voting advice from traditional chiefs but rather that they were more likely to say they "don't know."

The same is true of respondents with post-secondary education, who were least likely to reject the involvement of traditional leaders in politics (40%, vs. 47%-52% of less well-off citizens) but most likely to say they "don't know" (37%, vs. 19%-22%).

Residents of the Limpopo province (69%) were by far the most vehemently opposed to political engagement by traditional leaders.

As for the impact of traditional leadership on democracy, South Africans held mixed views, with the largest share (39%) seeing no effect (Figure 13). About one in five (22%) thought traditional leaders strengthen democracy, while 10% said they weaken it and 29% said they don't know or refused to answer the question.

Figure 11: Traditional leaders and politics | South Africa | 2021



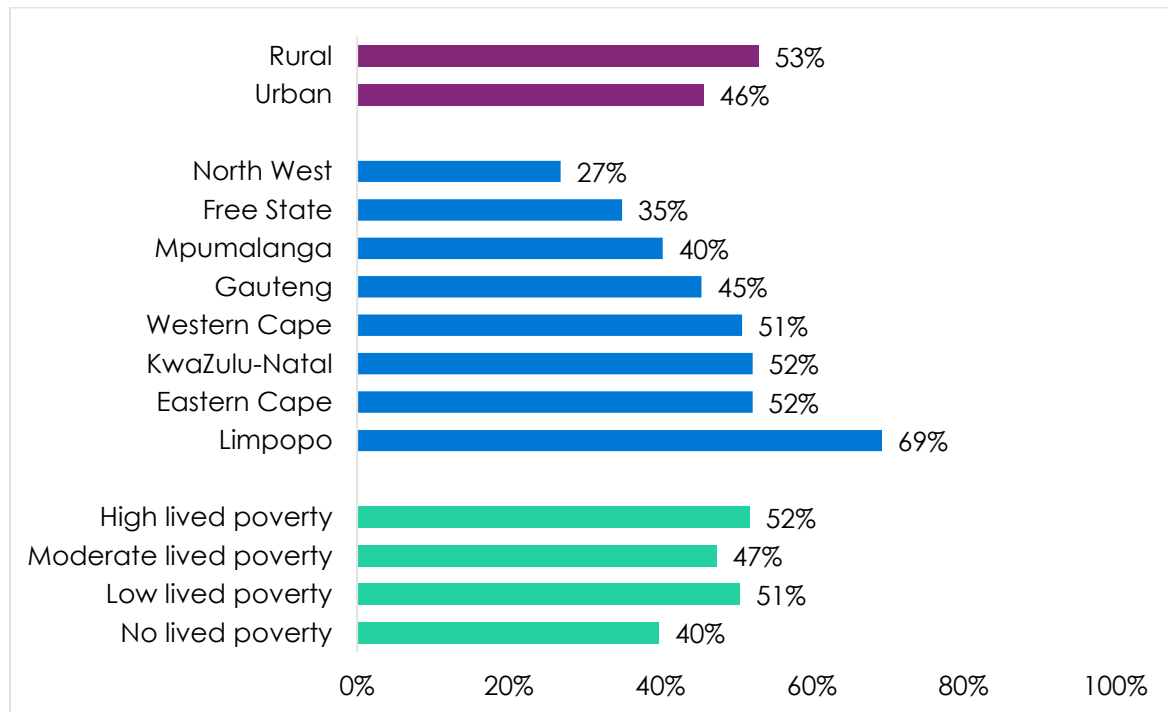
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.

Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.

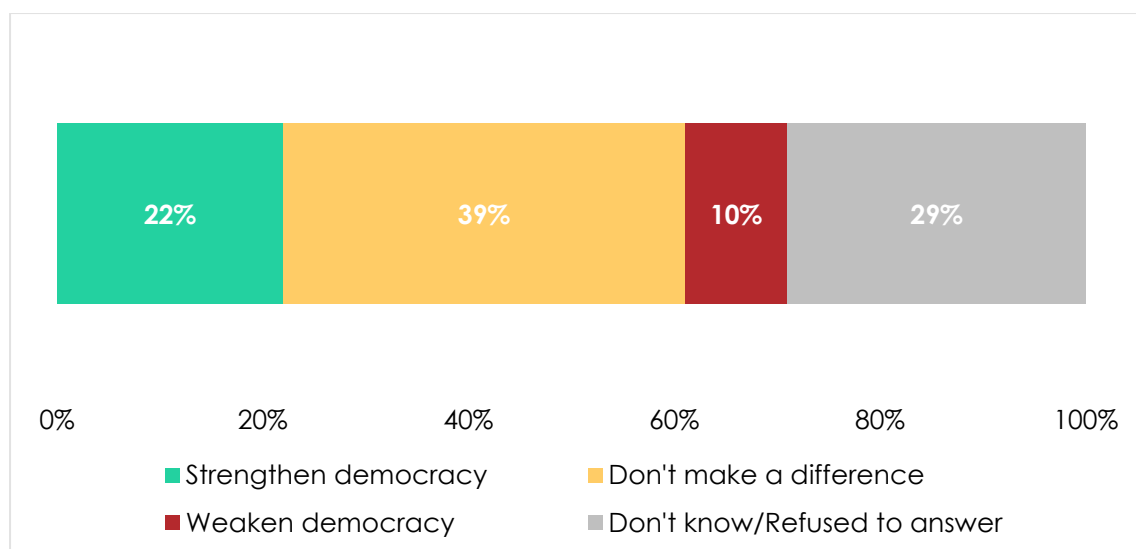
(% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each statement)

Figure 12: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics | by demographic group
 | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.
 (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with Statement 2)

Figure 13: Traditional leaders and democracy | South Africa | 2021



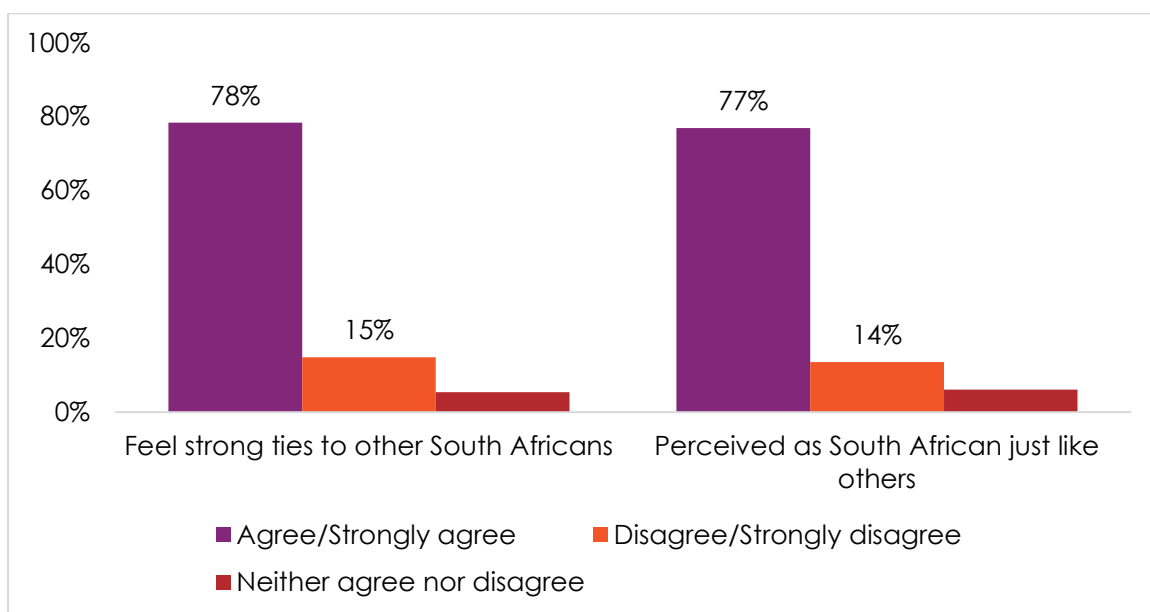
Respondents were asked: Some people think that because traditional leaders are not elected, they are bad for democracy, but other people think that traditional leaders can work together with elected leaders to make democracy work better. What about you? Do you think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy, weaken democracy, or don't make a difference?

Do traditional leaders and ethnicity impact social relations?

In South Africa, ethnicity and language groups often align with traditional leaders. For example, the BaSotho have King Letsie III of Lesotho as their traditional leader, and the AmaZulu have King Misuzulu kaZwelithini. Do these ethnic groupings have a bearing on perceptions of other people?

When asked about their ties to other South Africans in general, most respondents said that they feel strong ties with other citizens (78%) and that others think of them as South African just like themselves (77%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Ties to other citizens | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 I feel strong ties with other South Africans.
 Other South Africans think of me as a South African just like them.

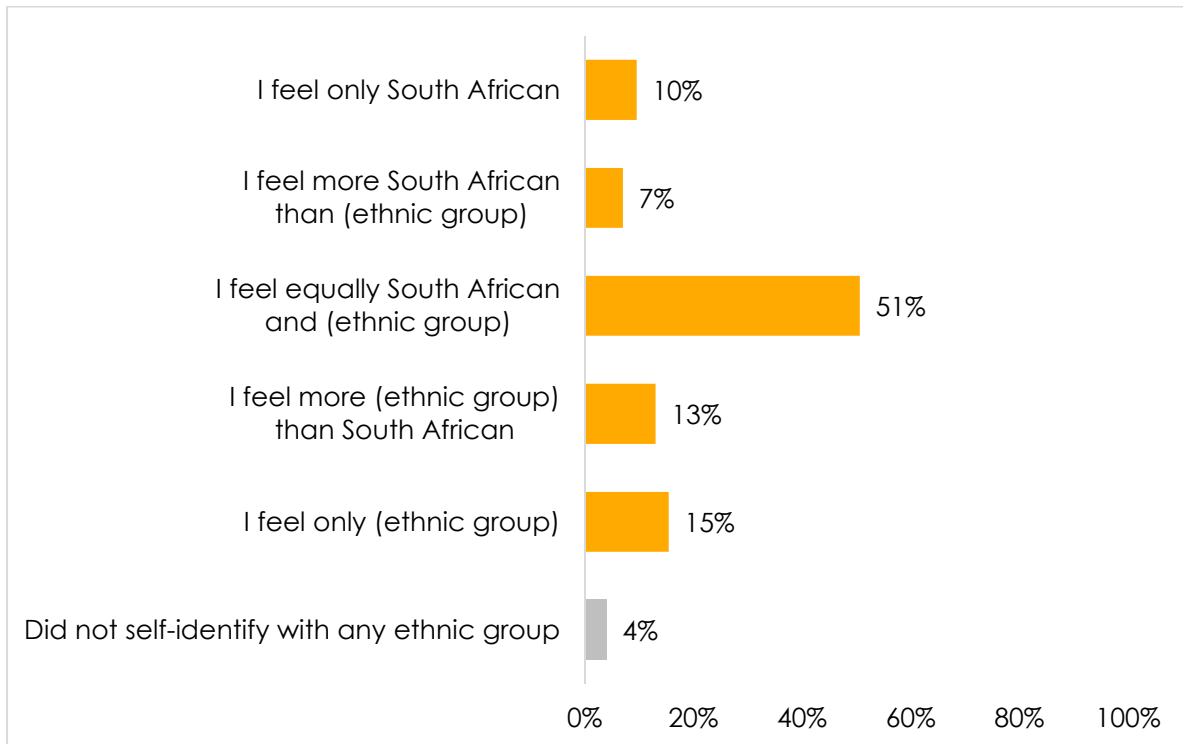
As for competition between ethnicity and nationality, more than half (51%) of South Africans said they identify equally strongly with their ethnic group and their nationality, while 17% felt more strongly about their national identity and 28% valued their ethnic identity more highly than their national identity (Figure 15).

Overwhelmingly, South Africans said they feel comfortable speaking their mother tongue in public (94%) and wearing their traditional or cultural dress in public (85%) (Figure 16).

But almost half of respondents said the government “sometimes” (29%), “often” (9%), or “always” (8%) treats members of their ethnic group unfairly (Figure 17). And a majority (56%) expressed “just a little” trust or no trust at all in people of other ethnicities (Figure 18).

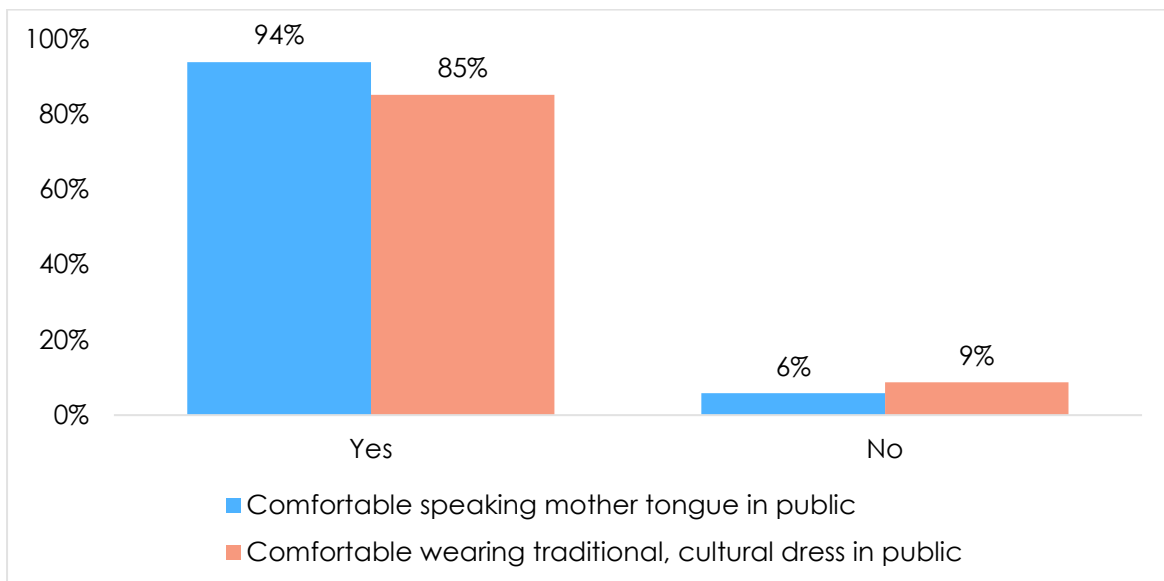
In contrast, most South Africans said they would like or would not mind if they lived next to someone from a different ethnic group (86%) (Figure 19) or if a family member married someone from another ethnic group (80%) (Figure 20).

Figure 15: Ethnic vs. national identity | South Africa | 2021



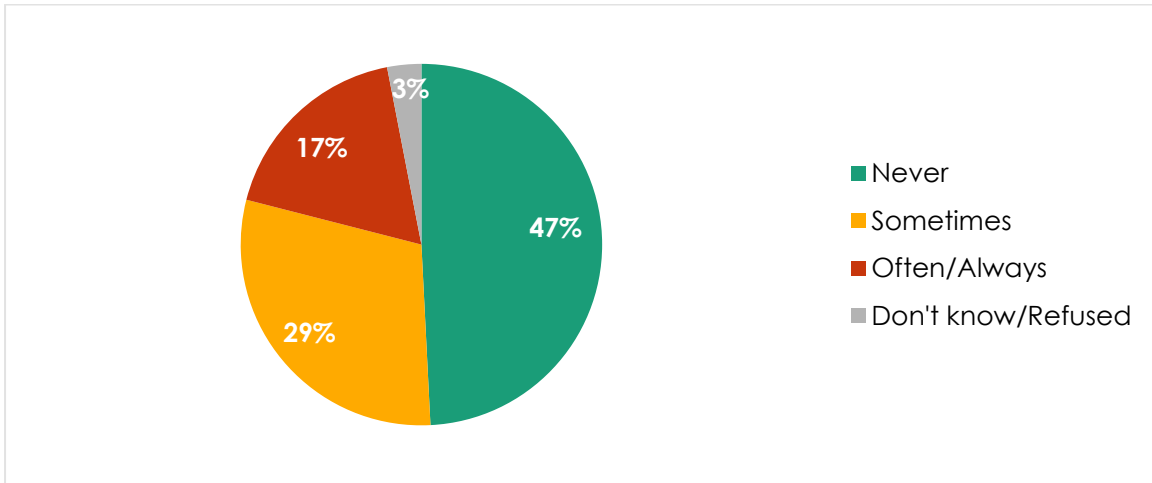
Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a South African and being a [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Figure 16: Comfortable wearing traditional dress and speaking mother tongue | South Africa | 2021



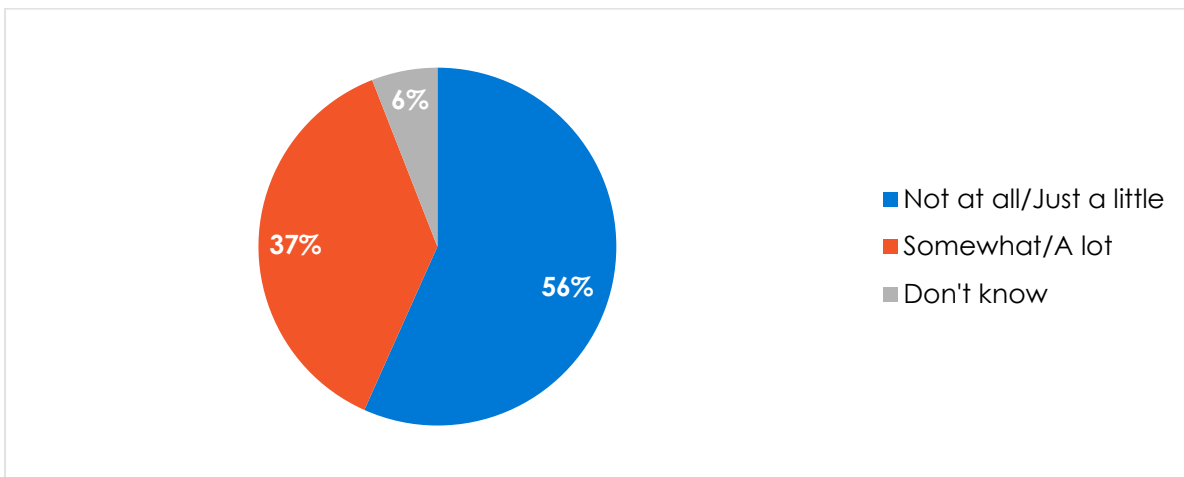
Respondents were asked: Do you feel comfortable: Speaking your mother tongue in public? Wearing your traditional or cultural dress in public?

Figure 17: Ethnic group treated unfairly by government | South Africa | 2021



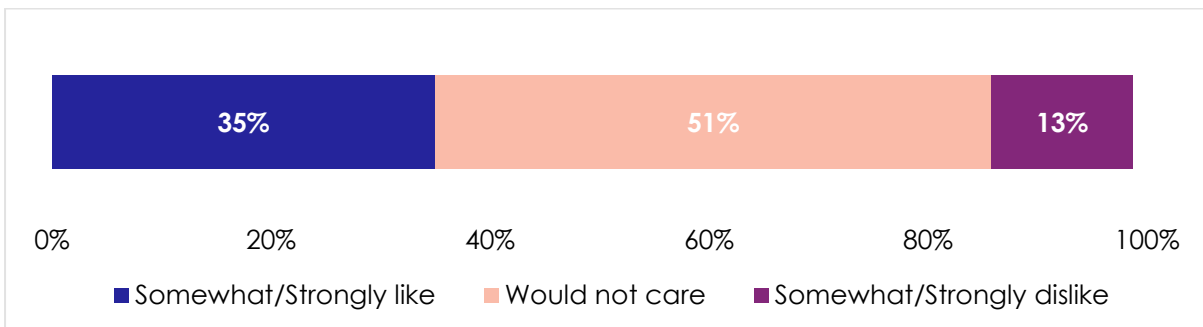
Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?

Figure 18: Trust people from other ethnic groups | South Africa | 2021



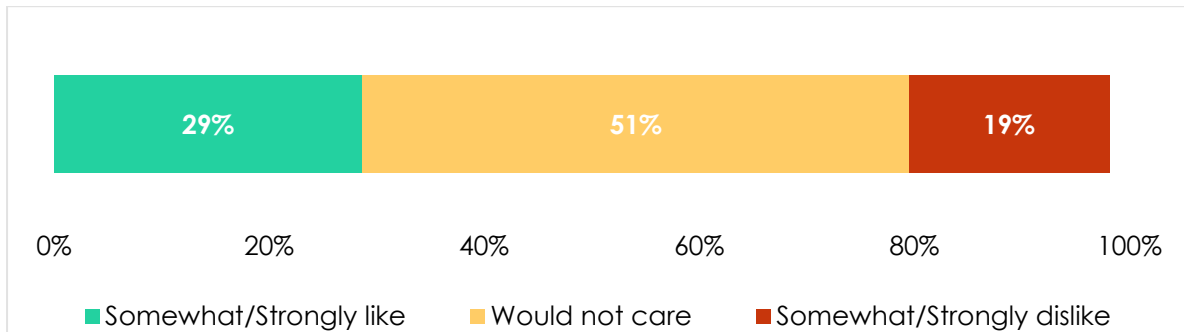
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 19: Tolerance toward neighbours of a different ethnicity | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People from other ethnic groups?

Figure 20: Marriage to different ethnic group | South Africa | 2021



Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having a family member marry people from this group, dislike it, or not care: Someone from a different ethnic group?

Conclusion

Survey findings suggest that traditional leaders have a weaker base in South Africa than in many African countries. While individual chiefs may be extremely powerful in specific areas, relatively small parts of South African society have contact with traditional leaders or consider them influential, especially in urban areas. Only a quarter of South Africans think traditional leaders are dedicated to serving the people in their communities, and even fewer want their advice on how they should vote.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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