

Amid electricity crisis, South Africans want end to government monopoly

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 644 | Asafika Mpako and Preston Govindasamy

Summary

South Africa is in the throes of a severe electricity crisis that has endured for years and is getting worse (International Finance Magazine, 2023). Eskom, the national power utility, has implemented occasional blackouts for more than a decade (BusinessTech, 2022; de Villiers, 2022), but since December 2019, “load-shedding” – as it’s known locally – has become a daily occurrence. After experiencing record levels of load-shedding in 2022, the country is on a path to having its worst year yet in 2023 (Reuters, 2022; BusinessTech, 2023).

The power crisis has been blamed on Eskom’s debt, old infrastructure, and poor planning in the face of increasing demand for electricity (Zulu, 2023; Vice News, 2023). Mismanagement and corruption have exacerbated the situation (Biznews, 2023).

The government declared a national “state of disaster” on electricity in February, then terminated it in April (Al Jazeera, 2023; South African Government, 2023). At the same time, President Cyril Ramaphosa installed a new minister of electricity, Kgosientsho Ramakgopa, charged with overseeing the electricity crisis response working closely with the Eskom board and management (South African Government News Agency, 2023).

Not surprisingly, a new Afrobarometer survey finds that citizens’ ratings of the government’s performance on providing reliable electricity are dismal, and half say they would be willing to pay more for electricity in exchange for better services.

Electricity ranks third among the most important problems that South Africans want their government to address, and about three-fifths say that Eskom must be privatised to ensure an effective supply of electricity in the country. An even greater share of citizens want the government to allow other actors to generate and distribute electricity.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in 2023. 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 of Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,582 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. 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, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

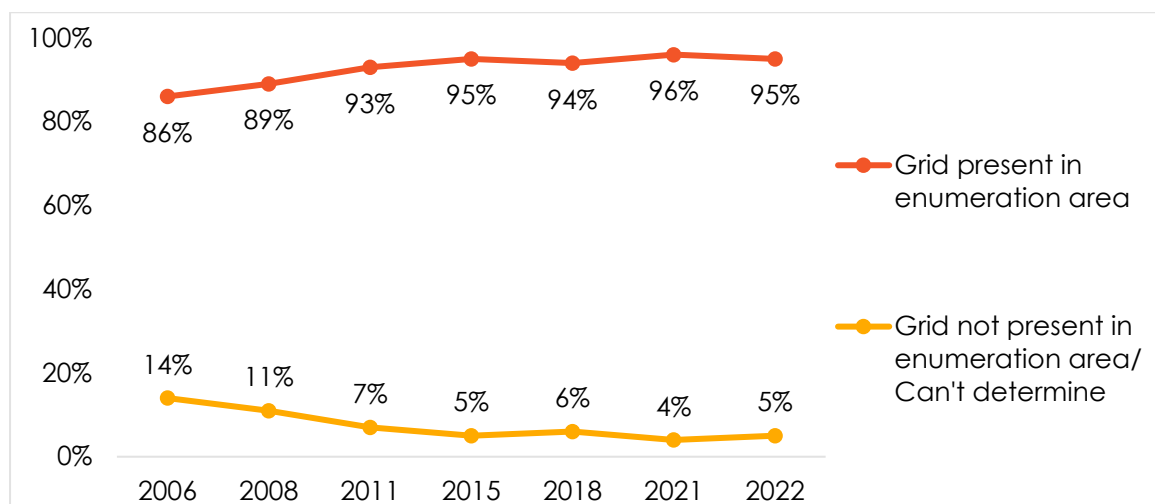
- More than nine in 10 South Africans (95%) live in zones served by the national electric grid, up 9 percentage points since 2006 (86%).
 - Urban residents (99%) and the economically well off (99%) are more likely to be in zones served by the electric grid than rural dwellers (90%) and the poor (88%).
- Similarly, fully 95% of citizens live in households that are connected to the national power grid, and among those who are connected, nearly seven in 10 (69%) say their electricity works “most of the time” or “all of the time.”
- Almost nine in 10 South Africans (87%) say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable supply of electricity, and a slim majority (51%) indicate they would be willing to pay more for electricity in exchange for better services, rather than paying less and receiving poor services.
- Almost six in 10 citizens (59%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that Eskom must be privatised to ensure effectiveness in the supply of electricity.
 - Support for privatisation is weaker among poor respondents (50%) than among their better-off counterparts (62%).
- Three-fourths (76%) of South Africans say the government should allow other actors to generate and distribute electricity.

Access to the electric grid

For most households, having access to an electricity grid will remain a prerequisite for obtaining power until alternative energy resources become more widely available.

In South Africa, Afrobarometer's survey teams found that access to an electricity grid does not appear to be a challenge for most citizens. Survey findings show that 95% of South Africans live in enumeration areas served by an electricity grid (Figure 1). This represents a 9-percentage-point increase compared to 2006 (86%), signalling that government efforts to ensure greater access to the grid for citizens have achieved success.

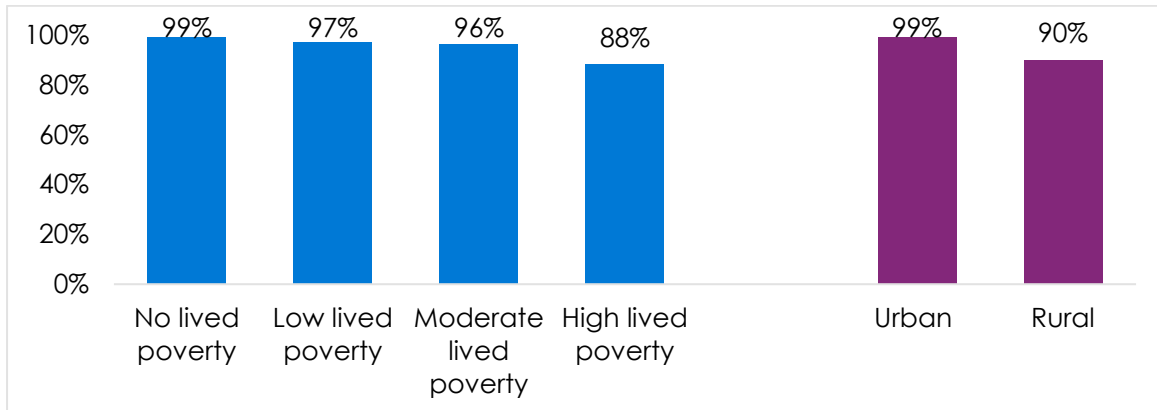
Figure 1: Presence of electricity grid | South Africa | 2006-2022



Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access? (% “yes”)

Presence of the electricity grid is almost universal (99%) in urban areas, compared to 90% in rural areas (Figure 2). Citizens who are economically well-off (99%) are more likely to live in zones served by an electricity grid than their poorer counterparts¹ (88%).

Figure 2: Presence of electricity grid | by lived poverty and urban-rural location | South Africa | 2022



Survey enumerators were asked to record: Are the following services present in the primary sampling unit/enumeration area: Electricity grid that most houses can access? (% "yes")

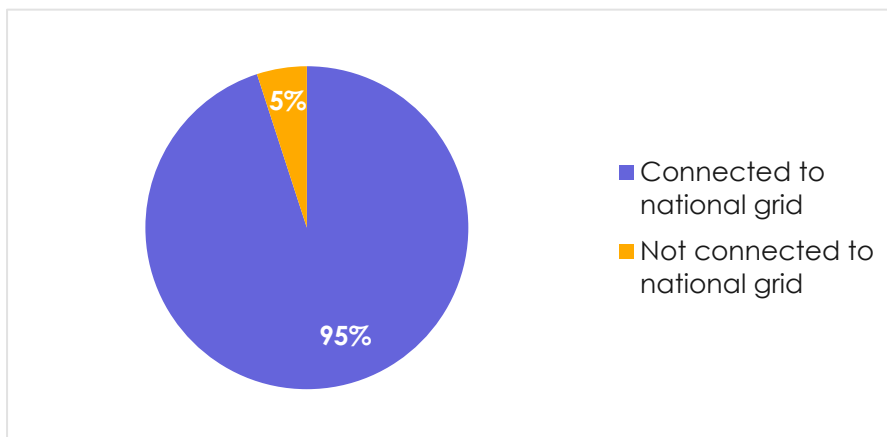
Connection to the electric grid

However, living in zones served by an electricity grid does not guarantee a supply of electricity. Costs associated with service from the power grid – including fees for inspection, house wiring, and connection – may present prohibitive hurdles for many citizens.

How many South Africans are actually connected to the national grid?

More than nine in 10 citizens (95%) live in households that are connected to the electric grid (Figure 3). As might be expected, urbanities (97%) are somewhat more likely to be connected to the power grid than rural residents (92%), as are the economically well-off (99%) compared to the poor (89%) (Figure 4).

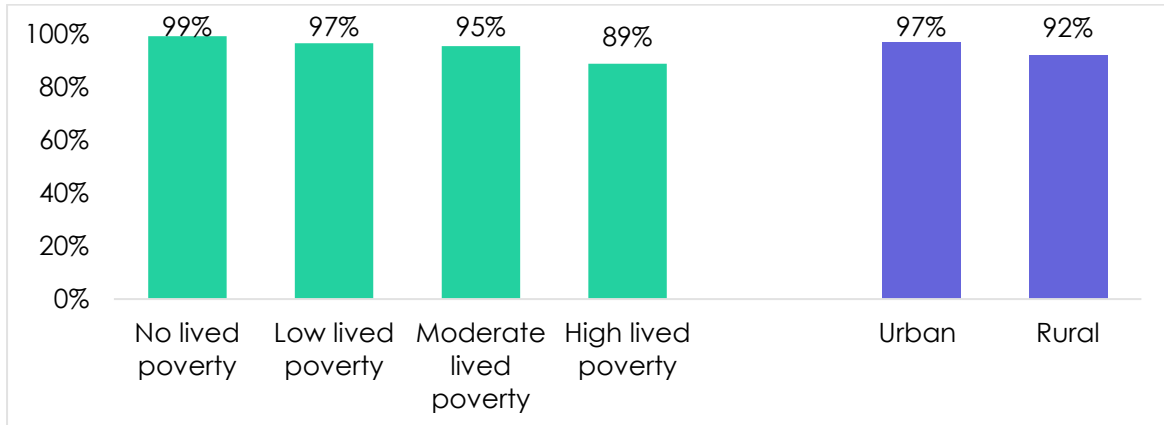
Figure 3: Connection to the national electric grid | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from Eskom?

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without 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 and Patel (2022).

Figure 4: Connected to the national electric grid | by lived poverty and urban-rural location | South Africa | 2022



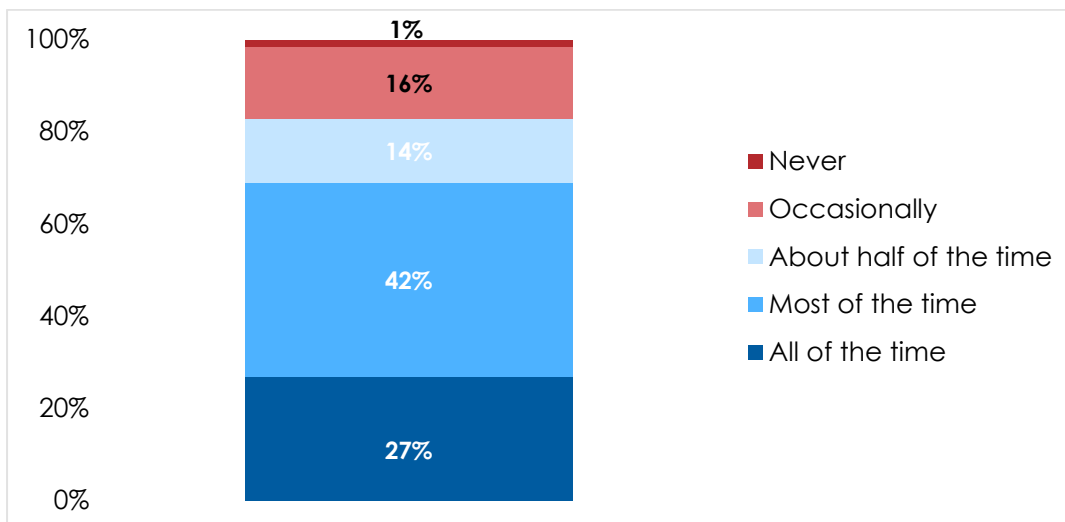
Respondents were asked: Do you have an electric connection to your home from Eskom? (% “yes”)

Reliable supply of electricity

Even if houses are connected to an electric grid, the reliability of their power supply may be poor. Among South Africans who report being connected to the power grid, how often is power actually available?

Among citizens who report being connected to the power grid, close to seven in 10 (69%) say that their electricity works “most of the time” (42%) or “all of the time” (27%) (Figure 5). Three in 10 (30%) say that power is available only “about half of the time” or less.

Figure 5: How often is electricity power available? | South Africa | 2022

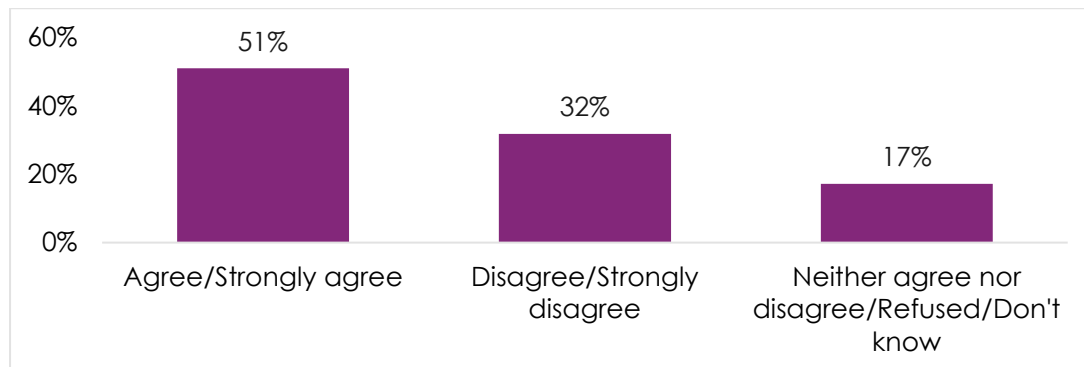


Respondents who said they have a connection to the national electric grid were asked: How often is electricity actually available from this connection? (Respondents without a connection to the national grid are excluded.)

Asked whether they would prefer to pay more for electricity in exchange for better services, rather than paying less and receiving poor services, a slim majority (51%) of South Africans “agree” or “strongly agree” that they would be willing to pay more, while about one-third (32%) disagree (Figure 6).

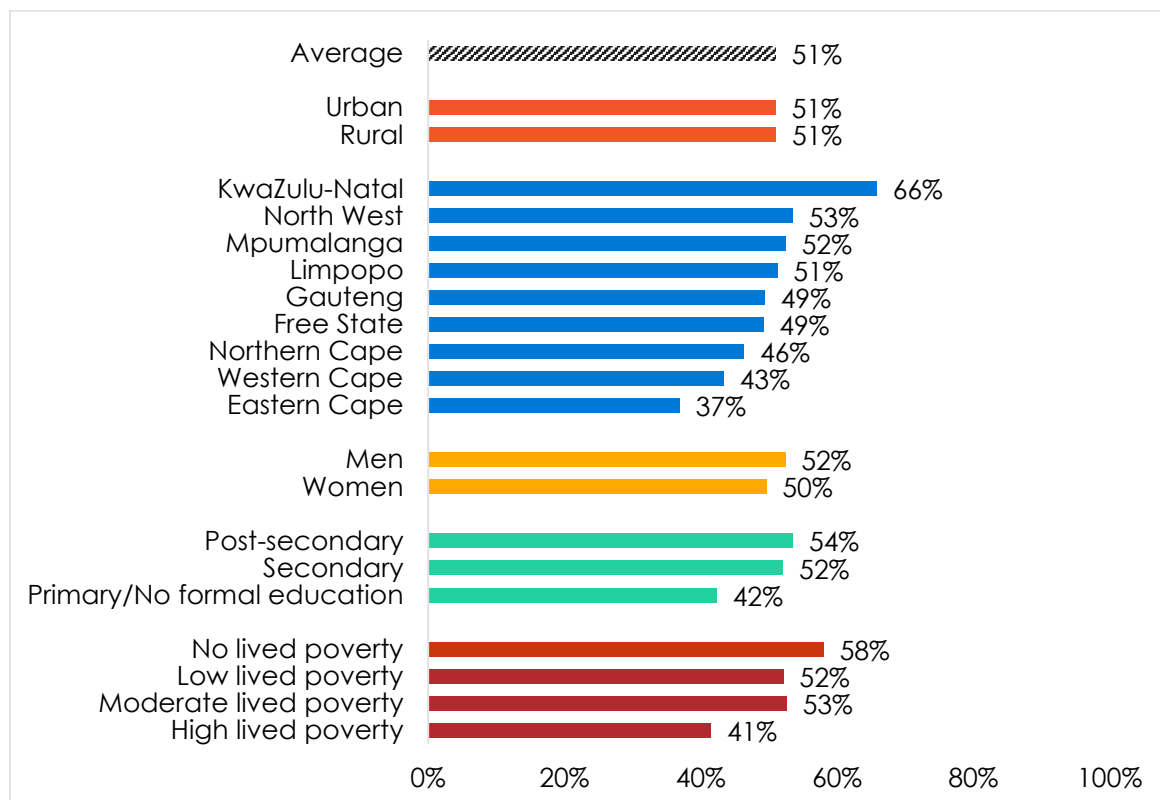
KwaZulu-Natal (66%) registers the highest support for this proposition, while only 37% of Eastern Cape residents agree (Figure 7). Support for higher prices in exchange for better services increases with respondents' economic status and education level, ranging from lows of 42% of those with primary or no formal schooling and 41% of the poorest to highs of 54% among those with post-secondary qualifications and 58% among economically well-off respondents.

Figure 6: Pay more for electricity for better services or less for poor services?
 | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: It is better to pay more for electricity for better services than paying less and receiving poor services?

Figure 7: Better to pay more for electricity for better services | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



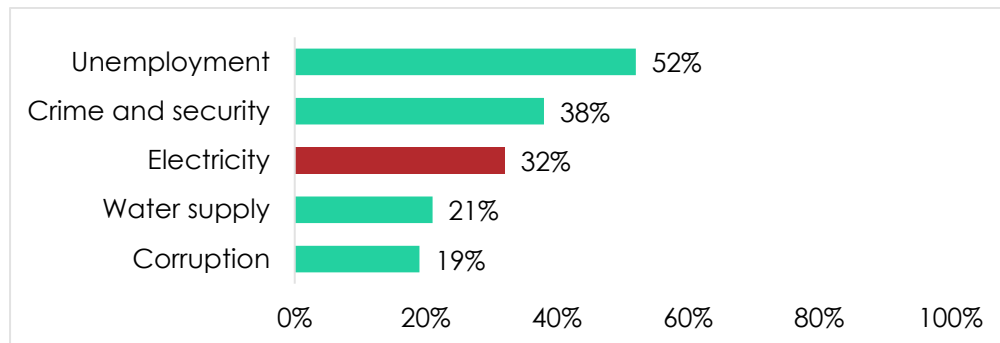
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: It is better to pay more for electricity for better services than paying less and receiving poor services? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Priorities and government performance

The provision of electricity ranks third among the most important problems that South Africans want their government to address, cited by 32% of respondents as one of their three priorities, trailing only unemployment (52%) and crime/security (38%) (Figure 8).

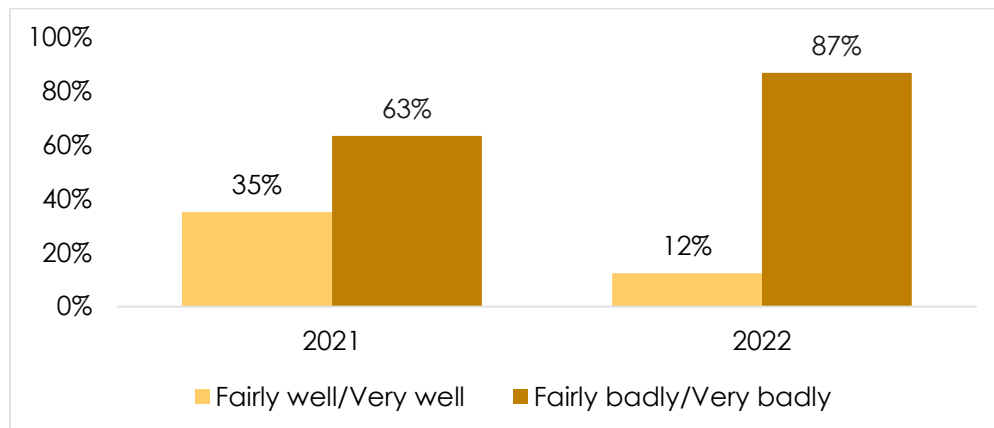
Almost nine in 10 South Africans (87%) say the government is doing a poor job of providing a reliable electricity supply, a 24-percentage-point increase from the last Afrobarometer survey in 2021. Seven in 10 (69%) describe the government's performance as "very bad." Only 12% consider it "fairly" or "very" good (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Most important problems | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person. Figure shows percentage of respondents who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities.)

Figure 9: Government performance in provision of reliable electricity supply | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Providing a reliable supply of electricity?

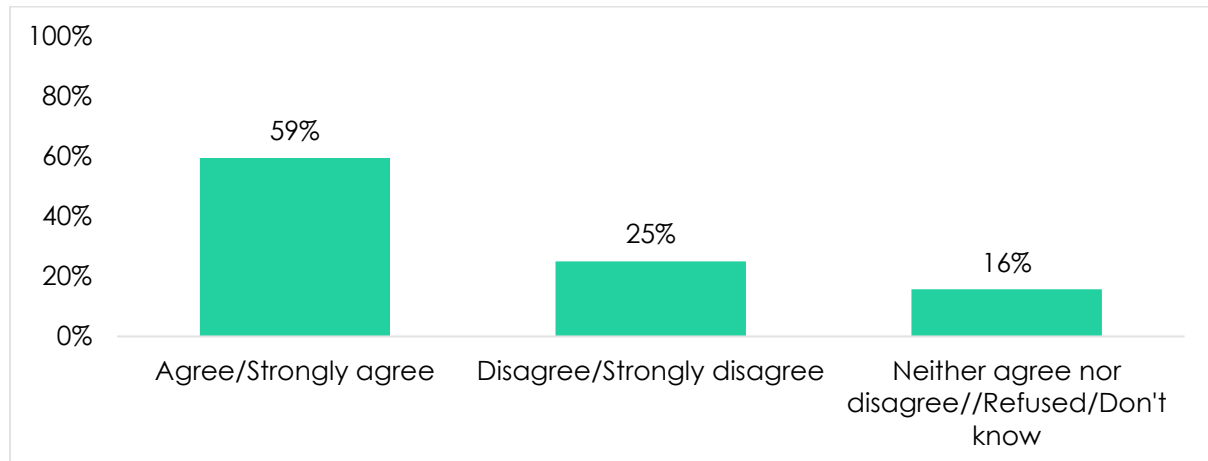
The future of electricity supply

What should the future of electricity supply look like in South Africa?

About six in 10 citizens (59%) say that to ensure an effective supply of electricity, Eskom must be privatised (Figure 10). Residents of the Western Cape (73%) record the strongest support for this proposition, while only about half of respondents agree in the North-West (49%), Mpumalanga (51%), and Gauteng (52%). Support for privatisation is relatively weak among poor citizens (50%) (Figure 11).

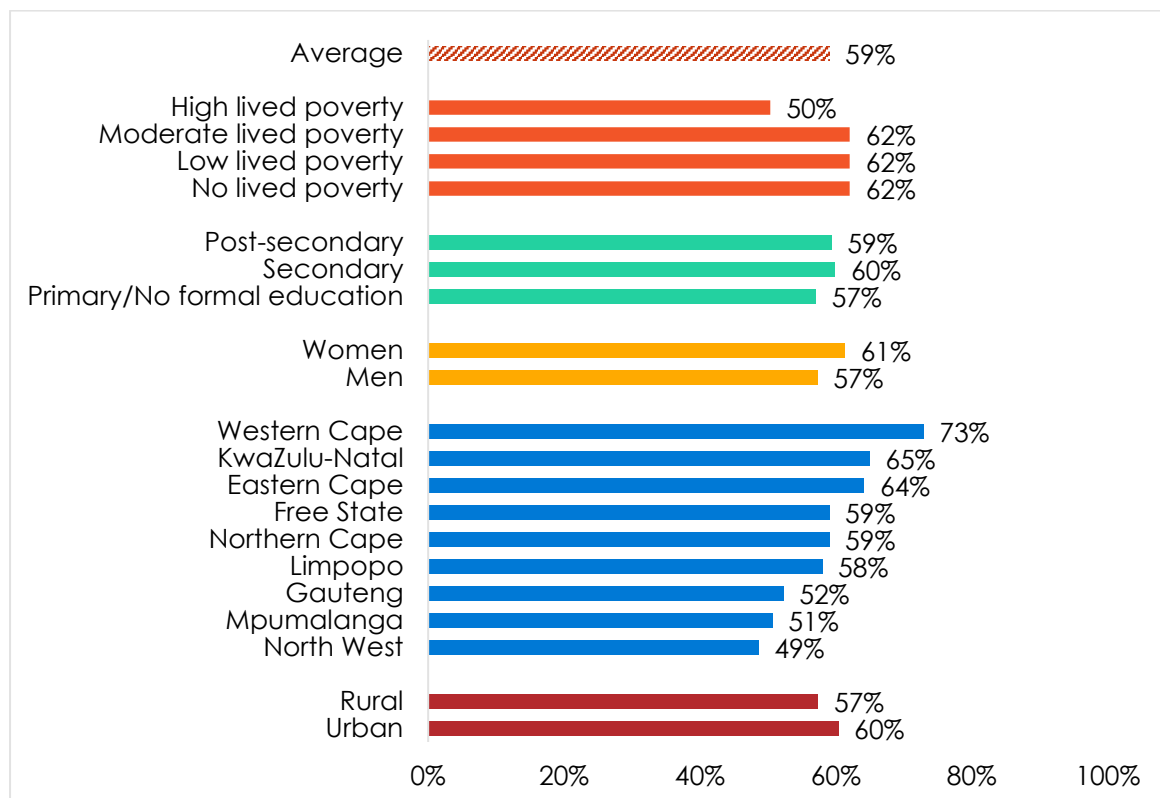
A greater majority (76%) of citizens support ending Eskom's monopoly, saying that the government should allow other actors to generate and distribute electricity in South Africa. Only 13% of South Africans disagree with this idea (Figure 12). Support for opening up the electricity market is highest in the Free State (89%) and the Northern Cape (84%) (Figure 13).

Figure 10: Should Eskom be privatised? | South Africa | 2022



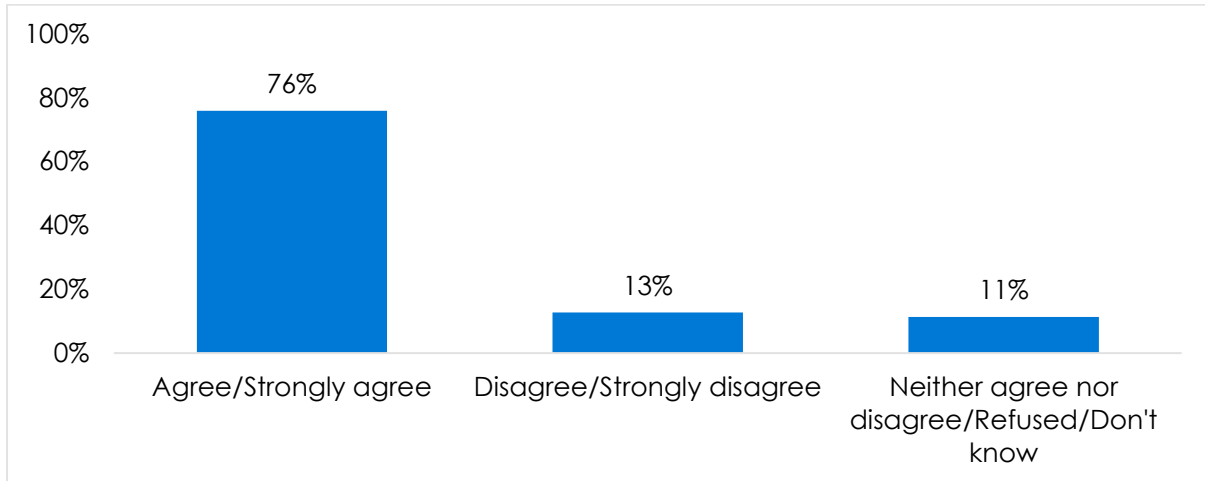
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't you heard enough to say: To ensure effectiveness in the supply of electricity in our country, Eskom should be privatised?

Figure 11: Eskom should be privatised | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



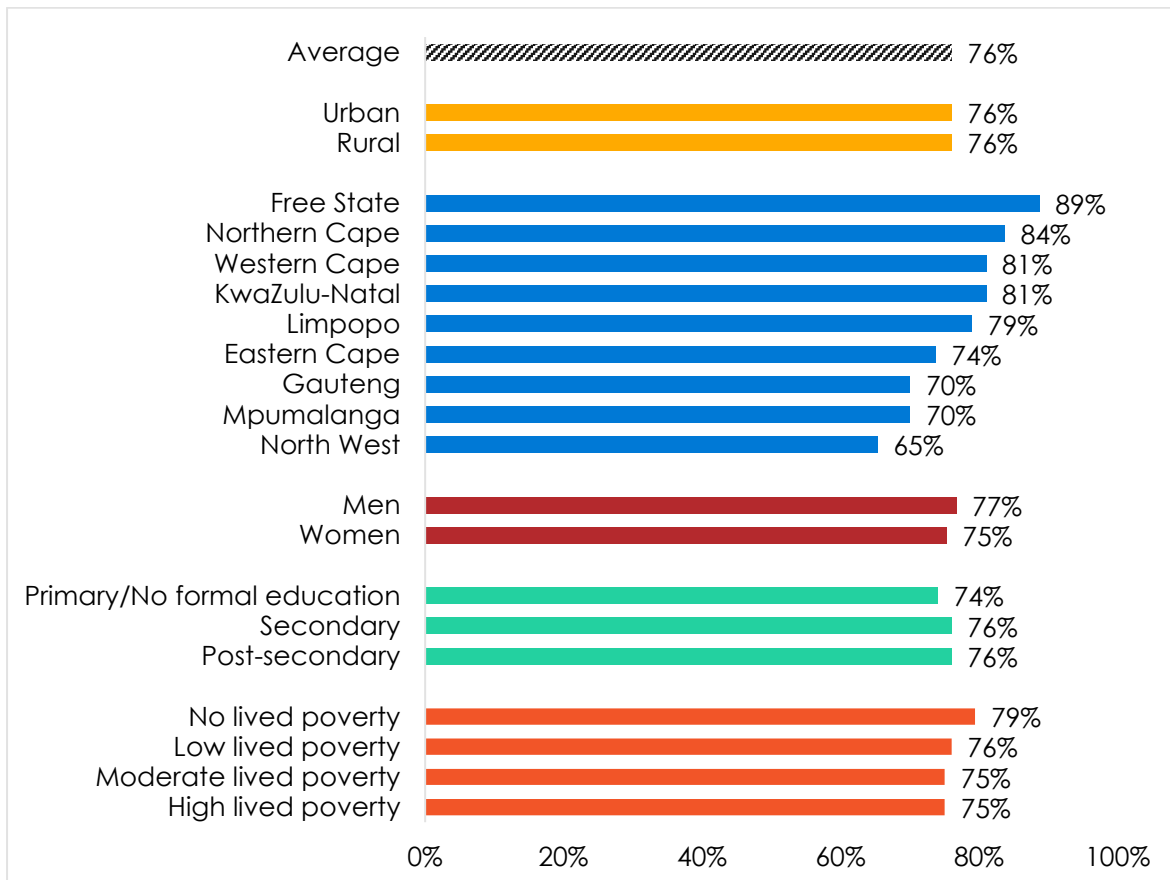
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree or haven't you heard enough to say: To ensure effectiveness in the supply of electricity in our country, Eskom should be privatised? (% who say "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 12: Should other actors be allowed to generate and distribute electricity?
 | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't heard enough to say: The government should allow other actors to generate and distribute electricity in South Africa?

Figure 13: Other actors should be allowed to generate and distribute electricity
 | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: The government should allow other actors to generate and distribute electricity in South Africa? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Conclusion

Survey findings show that most South Africans are connected to the national power grid, reflecting the government's success in ensuring access to electricity. But the government's performance on providing reliable electricity receives a dismal rating, and citizens indicate they want an end to the government monopoly on electricity provision.

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.

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