

South African youth say government is failing to address their top priority: jobs

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 681 | Asafika Mpako and Mikhail Moosa

Summary

In June, South Africa celebrated its annual Youth Day and Youth Month under the theme “Accelerating youth economic emancipation for a sustainable future” (South African Government, 2023). Key to meeting this goal is the creation of decent and meaningful jobs (Lee, 2023).

The country's unemployment rate has been stubbornly high for decades; a recent Ipsos South Africa (2023) survey found that South Africa was “the world's most worried nation on this issue.”

Youth are especially hard hit: Unemployment among 15- to 34-year-olds rose to 46.5% in the first quarter of 2023, compared to the national average of 32.9% (Statistics South Africa, 2023; Department of Communications and Digital Technologies, 2023). Forecasts from the International Monetary Fund's (2022) World Economic Outlook suggest that even tougher times lie ahead, as the country is set to experience the highest joblessness rate in the world. Estimates project that total unemployment in South Africa will surge to 35.6% in 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Economic participation is one of five principles anchoring South Africa's National Youth Policy (2020-2030), joining quality education and skills, physical and mental health promotion, nation building and social cohesion, and effective and responsive youth development institutions as pathways toward holistic youth development (United Nations Population Fund, 2021).

The 2020 Global Youth Development Index ranks South Africa 131st out of 181 countries when it comes to promoting youth education, employment, health, equality and inclusion, peace and security, and political and civic participation, well behind other regional powers such as Mauritius (No. 54), Botswana (No. 108), and Namibia (No. 119) (Commonwealth, 2021; Bhengu, 2021).

The most recent Afrobarometer survey provides further insights on the situation of South Africa's youth. Findings show that in a list of concerns that includes crime, electricity, and corruption, unemployment is the most important problem that young South Africans want their government to address. While youth are more educated than middle-aged and older citizens, they are also more likely to be unemployed.

Like their elders, youth are overwhelmingly critical of the government's efforts on job creation, crime, electricity, and corruption, and few approve of the performance of their elected officials.

But survey findings also suggest that young South Africans are not taking full advantage of political and civic avenues to make their voices and priorities heard.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. 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, 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, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

- Unemployment is the most important problem that South African youth want their government to address, cited by 54% of 18- to 35-year-old respondents as one of their top three priorities.
- On average, South African youth are more educated than their elders. More than nine out of 10 young citizens (94%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling.
- But youth are also more likely to be unemployed: 47% of young South Africans say they are looking for a job, compared to 35% of the middle-aged and 10% of older citizens.
- Almost half (45%) of South African youth describe their personal living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad."
- About nine out of 10 young South Africans say they own a mobile phone (92%) and a bank account (88%).
- Only about one in 10 young people give the government a passing grade on its efforts to create jobs (11%), reduce crime (10%), provide electricity (12%), and fight corruption (10%).
- Fewer than three in 10 young respondents approve of the job performance of President Cyril Ramaphosa (29%), their provincial premier (26%), their local government councillor (25%), and their member of Parliament (23%).
- Young South Africans are less likely than their elders to vote in elections, contact local government councillors, attend community meetings, and join others to raise an issue.

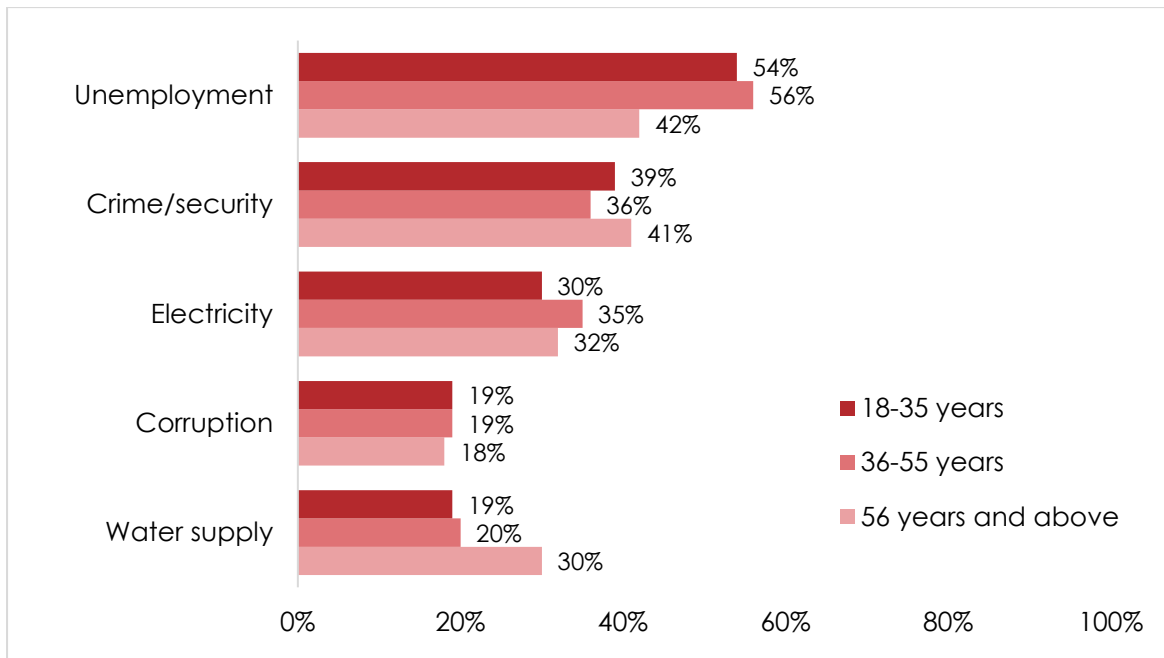
Most important problems

When asked what they consider the most important problems that their government should address, South African youth (aged 18-35 years) generally agree with their elders (Figure 1).

Unemployment tops the list of their concerns, cited by 54% of young respondents as one of their top three priorities, followed by crime and security (39%), electricity (30%), corruption (19%), and water supply (19%).

The largest disparities in priorities by age group concern unemployment, which only 42% of older respondents cite as a top problem, and water supply, which is a priority for 30% of seniors.

Figure 1: Most important problems | by age group | South Africa | 2022



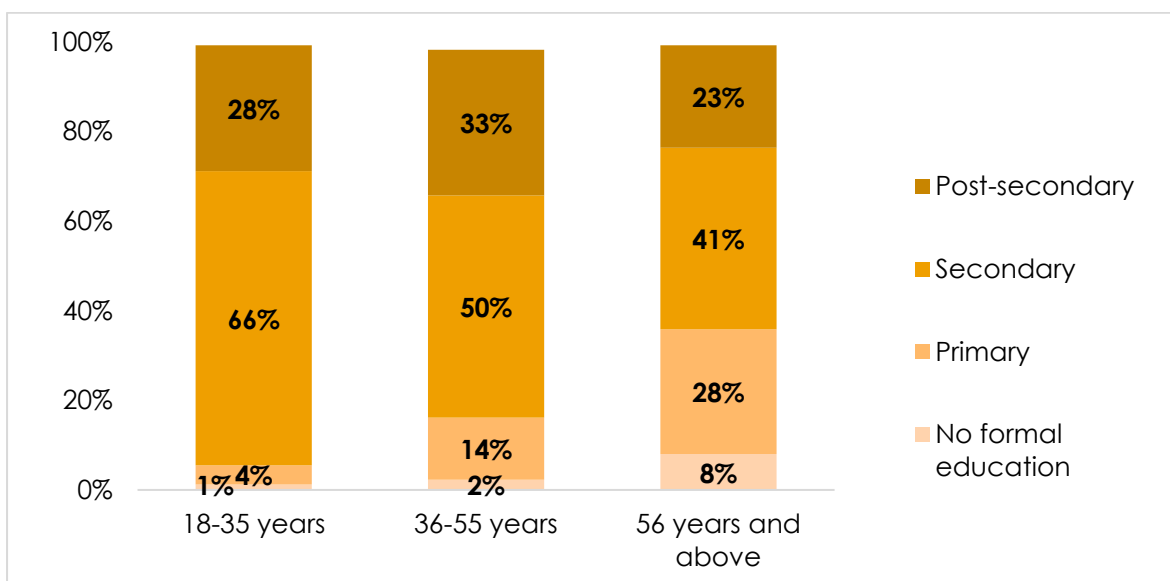
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three answers per respondent were recorded. The figure shows the % of respondents who cited each problem among their three priorities.)

The status of youth: More educated, less employed

South African youth are more likely than their elders to have an education, but they are less likely to have a job.

More than nine in 10 young South Africans (94%) have secondary or post-secondary schooling, compared to 83% of 36- to 55-year-olds and 64% of those over age 55 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Education level | by age group | South Africa | 2022

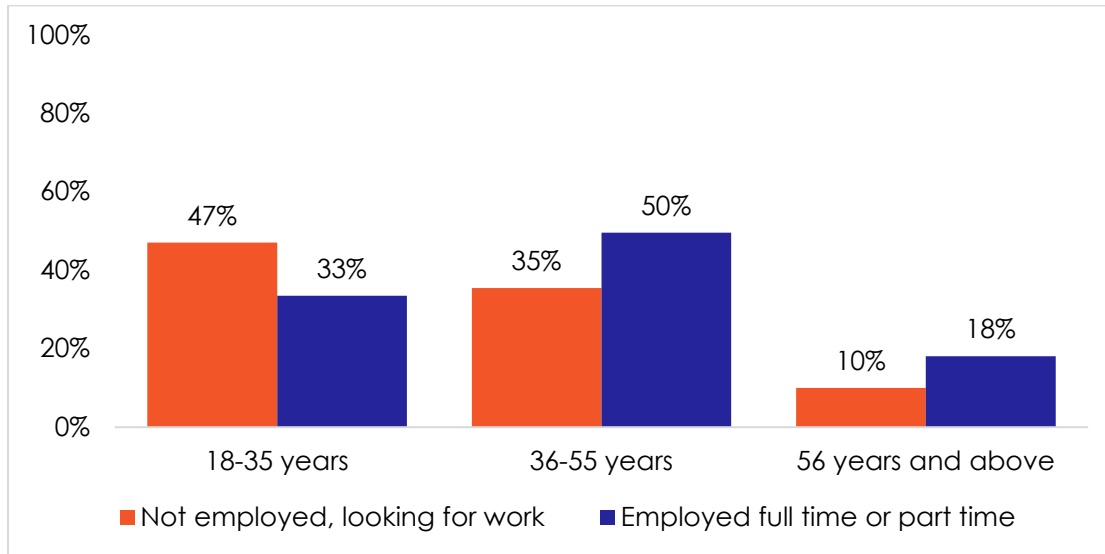


Respondents were asked: What is your highest level of education?

Even though they are more likely than their elders to be educated, young people are also more likely to be looking for jobs. Almost half (47%) of 18- to 35-year-olds say they are not employed but are looking for work, compared to 35% of the middle-aged and 10% of older citizens (Figure 3).

Just one-third (33%) of young respondents report that they have full-time or part-time jobs, compared to half (50%) of middle-aged respondents and 18% of older respondents.

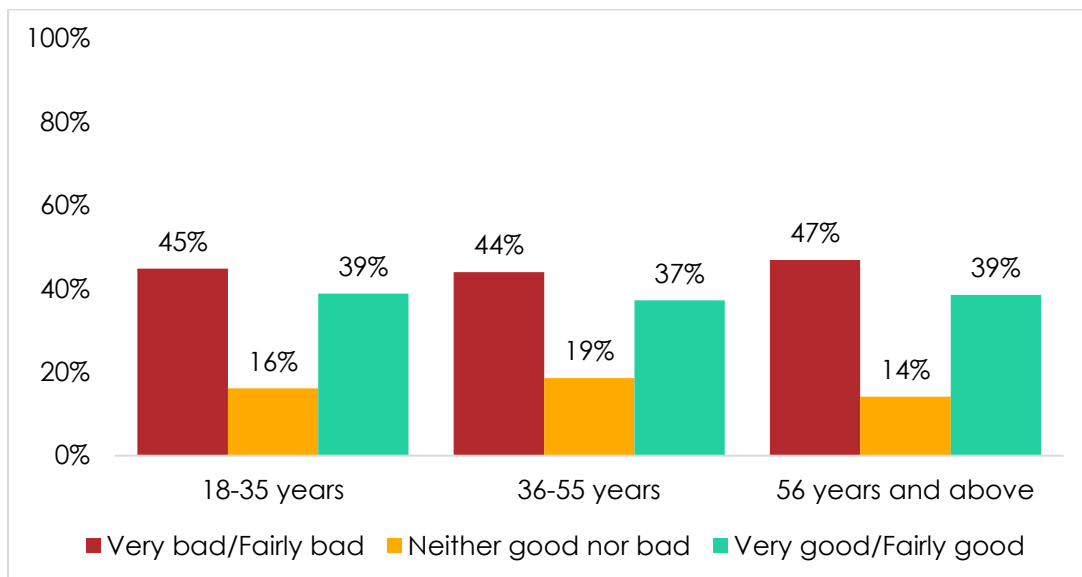
Figure 3: Employment status | by age group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you have a job that pays a cash income? [If yes:] Is it full-time or part-time? [If no:] Are you currently looking for a job? (% who say “no, but looking”)

Like their elders, young South Africans are less than enthusiastic about their personal living conditions. Almost half (45%) describe their living conditions as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” while 39% say they are fairly/very good (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Personal living conditions | South Africa | 2022

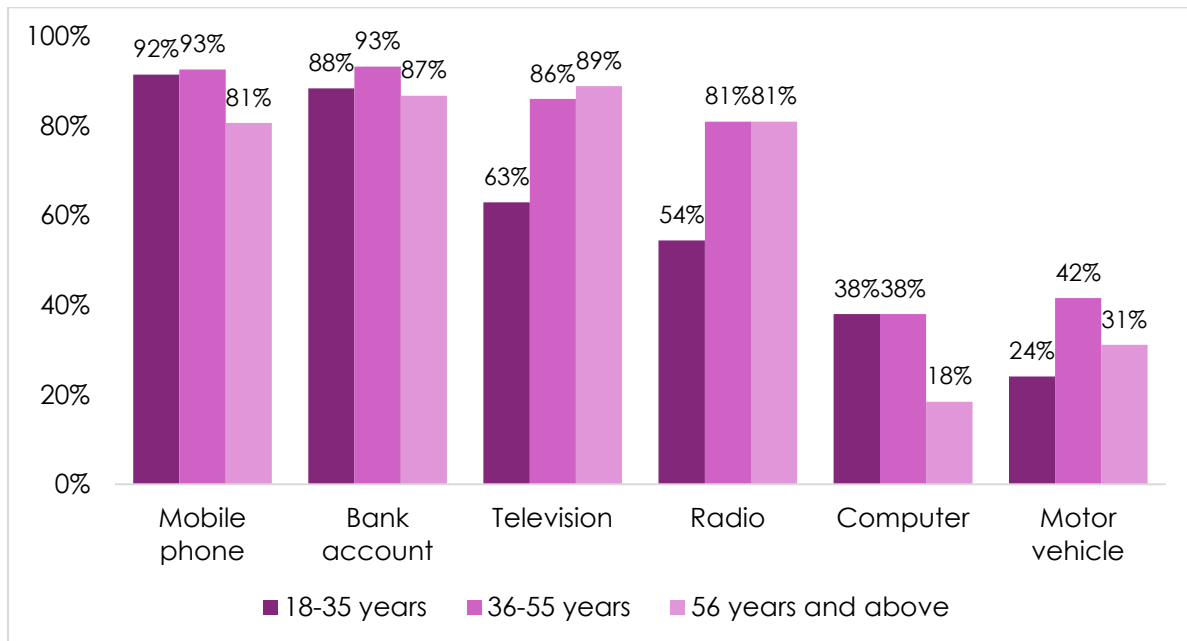


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

When it comes to asset ownership, about nine out of 10 young South Africans say they own a mobile phone (92%) and a bank account (88%) – not very different from those in the middle age range (93% for both mobile phones and bank accounts) (Figure 5).

Compared to their elders, young citizens are less likely to own a television (63%), a radio (54%), and a motor vehicle (24%). About four in 10 young and middle-aged respondents (38% each) report that they own a computer.

Figure 5: Asset ownership | by age group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of these things do you personally own?

Is the government meeting the needs of South Africa's youth?

Only small minorities of South Africans say the government is doing a good job on their priority problems of unemployment, crime, electricity, and corruption (Figure 6). About one in 10 young respondents say the government is performing “fairly well” or “very well” on creating jobs (11%) and reducing crime (10%).

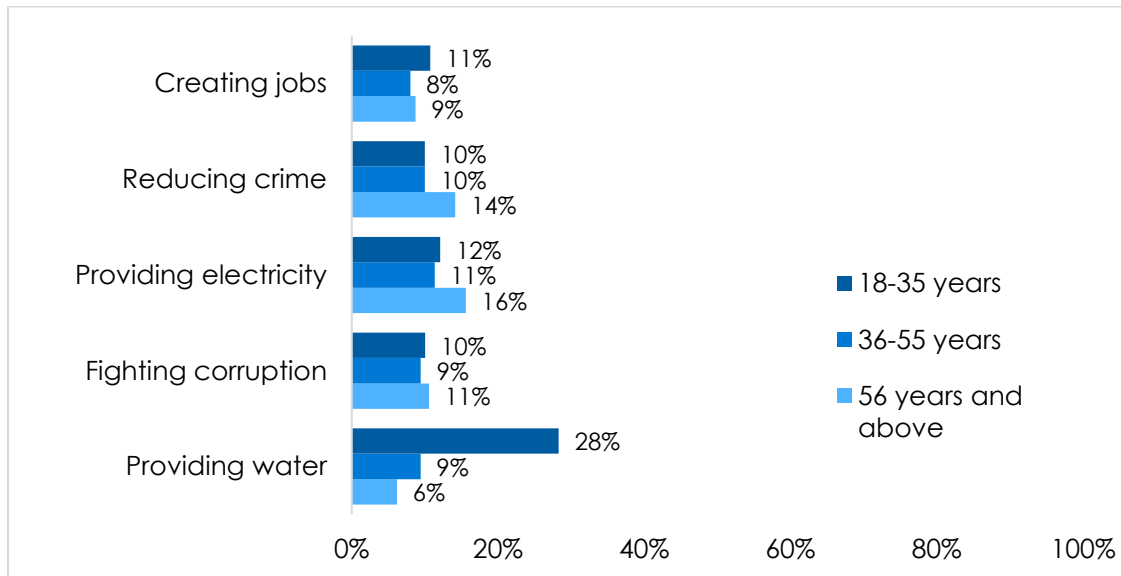
Similarly dismal proportions of young respondents approve of the government's provision of electricity (12%) and handling of the fight against corruption (10%).

Young South Africans are more likely to give the government good marks on its provision of water (28%) than their elders (6%-9%).

In line with their negative assessments of the government's performance, fewer than one-third of young citizens (29%) “approve” or “strongly” approve of the performance of President Cyril Ramaphosa (Figure 7).

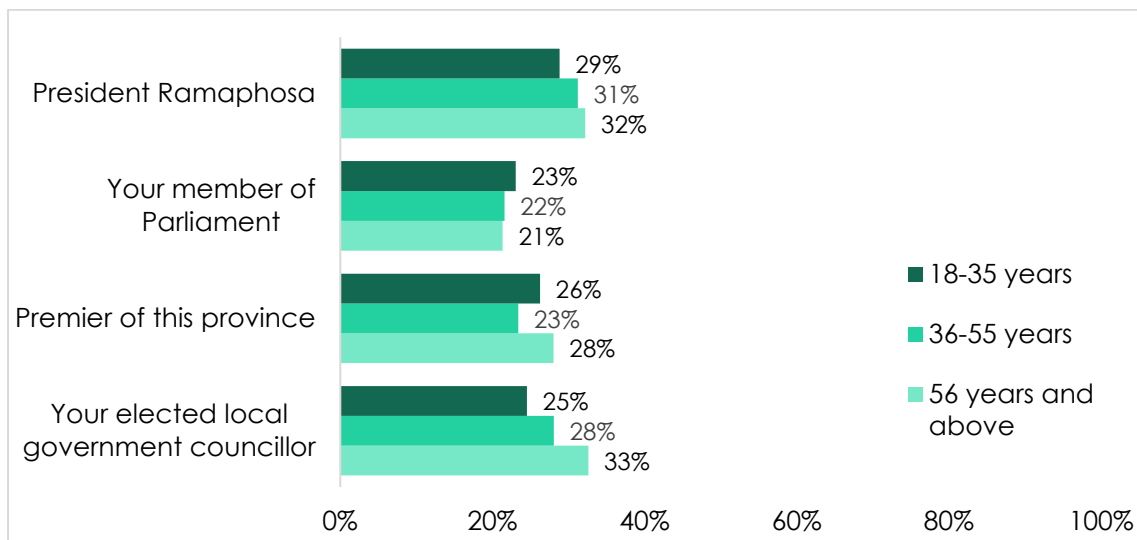
Their views are even more unfavourable on the performance of members of Parliament (23% approve), their provincial premier (26%), and their elected local government councillor (25%). Differences across age groups are not pronounced, although older citizens are somewhat more approving of their local government councillor (33%) than their younger counterparts (25%-28%).

Figure 6: Government performance on youth priorities | by age group | 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? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 7: Performance of elected leaders | by age group | South Africa | 2022



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? (% who say "strongly approve" or "approve")

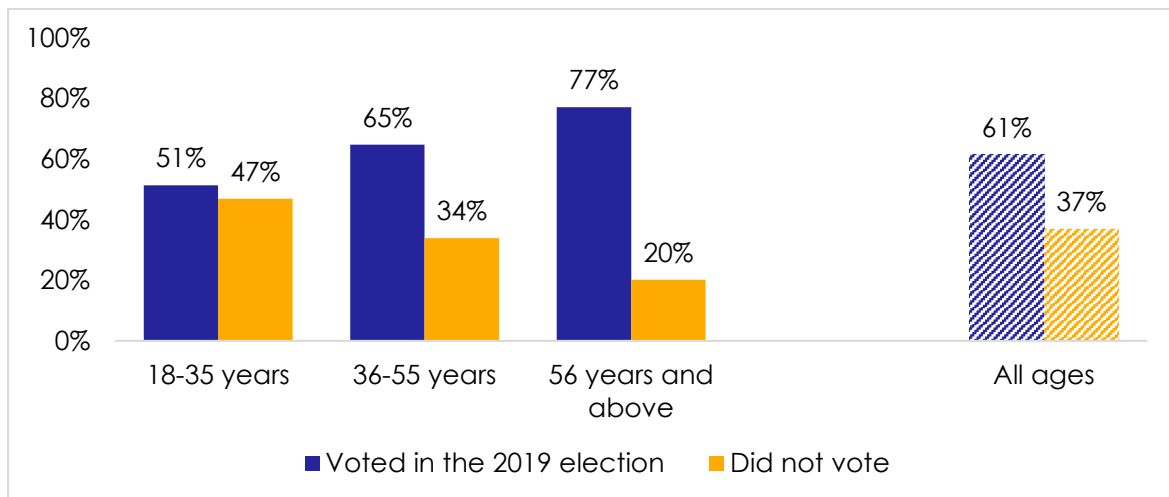
Political and civic engagement by the youth

In a democracy, dissatisfied citizens have a variety of outlets to express their views, ranging from community meetings and interaction with elected officials to national elections. Survey findings suggest that young South Africans have room to expand their influence through political and civic engagement.

Around the world, young people are generally less likely than their elders to vote in elections (Barrett, 2018). Evidence from voting patterns show that this is particularly true in South Africa

(Schulz-Herzenberg, 2019), and Afrobarometer findings confirm the trend. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote at the time, only 51% of young respondents say they voted in the most recent national election, in 2019, compared to 65% of middle-aged and 77% of older citizens (Figure 8). Almost half (47%) of youth say they did not vote.

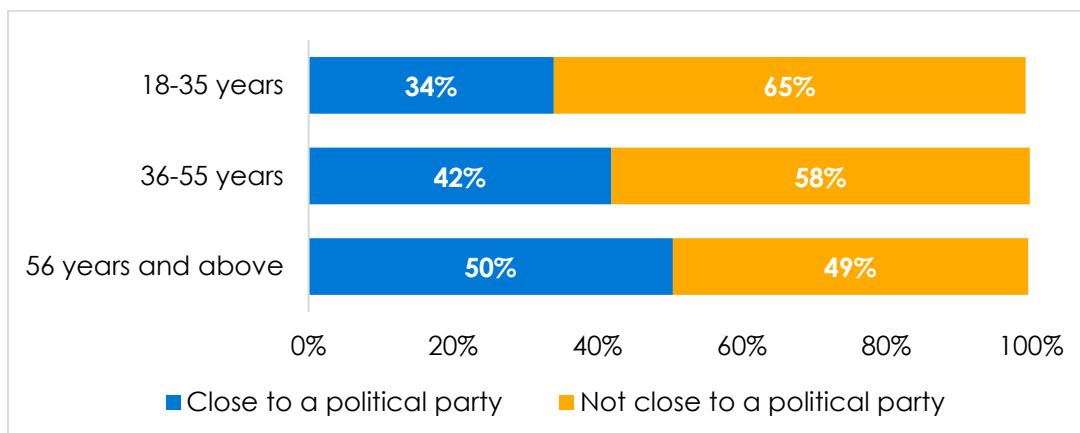
Figure 8: Self-reported voting in the 2019 election | by age group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2019, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2019 are excluded.)

Similarly, young people in South Africa are significantly less likely than their elders to identify with a political party (Figure 9). Only about one-third (34%) of young respondents say they “feel close” to a party, compared to 42% of the middle-aged and 50% of older respondents. While partisanship has declined in South Africa in recent years (Felton, 2018), the lack of attachment to a political party is most acute among young citizens.

Figure 9: Political party affiliation | by age group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party?

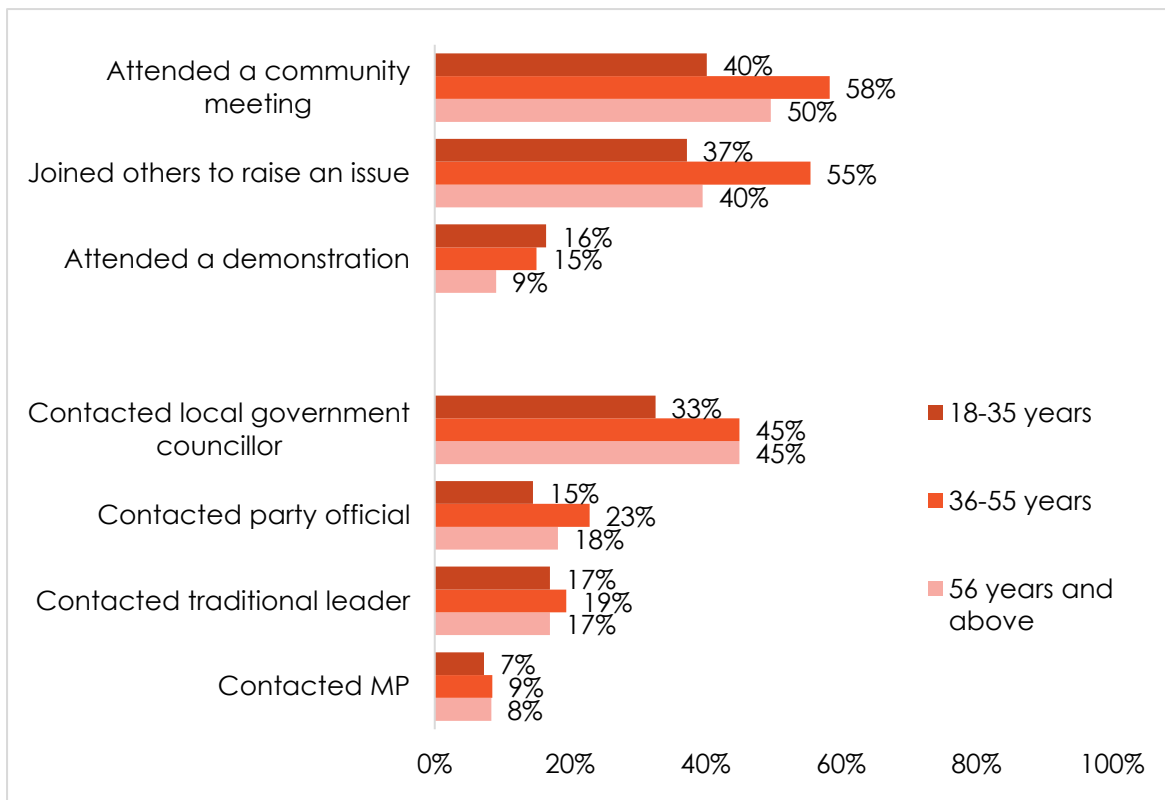
The same pattern is clear when it comes to some other forms of political and civic engagement (Figure 10). Young South Africans are less likely to say they attended a

community meeting during the previous year (40%, vs. 50%-58% of other age groups) or joined others to raise an issue (37%, vs. 40%-55% of older citizens).

They are also less likely to report having contacted a local government councillor (33%, vs. 45% of their elders) or a political party official (15%, vs. 18%-23% among older respondents) during the previous year.

In contrast, they were no less likely than their elders to participate in a demonstration or protest (16%) or to contact a traditional leader (17%) or a member of Parliament (7%).

Figure 10: Participation in civic and political activities | by age group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked:

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: Attended a community meeting? Got together with others to raise an issue? Participated in a demonstration or protest march? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

Conclusion

Young South Africans rank unemployment as the top priority needing urgent government action, and they are dissatisfied with their government's failure to create jobs. At the same time, survey findings suggest that the youth are not taking full advantage of political and civic avenues to make their voices and priorities heard.

Looking ahead to the 2024 elections, concrete solutions to the youth unemployment crisis could be the key to a win both for political parties and for South Africa's youth.

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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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