

# As South Africa looks to Russia, how do citizens see influence of foreign powers?

---

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 690 | Jaynisha Patel**

## Summary

Emboldened by the rise of a multipolar world order, South Africa's political elite is increasingly caught between its allegiance to traditional Western allies – whose values represent the national ambition and are enshrined in the Constitution of a liberal democratic order – and emerging powers such as China and Russia, the former representing a key economic partner and the latter having fostered a warm relationship with the African National Congress (ANC) leadership during the Cold War and the apartheid resistance movement (Chan, 2023).

As this global reorientation evolves, South Africa finds itself at a critical juncture that necessitates a recalculation of its alignment to foreign powers. The recent allegation by the United States that a South African navy vessel carried weapons to Russia in aid of its war in Ukraine brought into clear focus the consequences of alignment without calculation (Khumalo, 2023). Not only did the incident cause the South African rand to tumble to its lowest trading value yet, but it also threatened broader trade relationships with the United States, including the extension of the favourable African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). South African exports to the United States, one of South Africa's largest trading partners, represented 8.8% of total exports in 2022, eclipsed only by exports to China (9.7%) (International Trade Centre, 2023), while trade with Russia represents a fraction of U.S. or China trade (Cohen, 2023).

More broadly, the calculus affects the investment climate in South Africa. Already alarmed by the country's electricity crisis, low growth prospects, and mounting crime rates, investors will likely add a geopolitical risk premium to their assessments. An added layer of complexity was created around the conference of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in August when South Africa, the conference host, faced pressure to take action against Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose wanted status by the International Criminal Court divided opinion on the necessity for his in-person attendance. In July, a month before the conference was set to kick off, South Africa's government announced that by mutual agreement Putin would attend the conference virtually, represented in person by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (Bartlett, 2023).

Does the government's drift toward the Sino-Russian orbit represent the views of South Africans? Given that the Russian alliance is driven by the ANC elite, do ANC supporters see Russian influence as positive? And where do South Africans stand on the influence of the country's traditional Western allies and core investment partners such as the United States and European Union (EU)?

## 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.

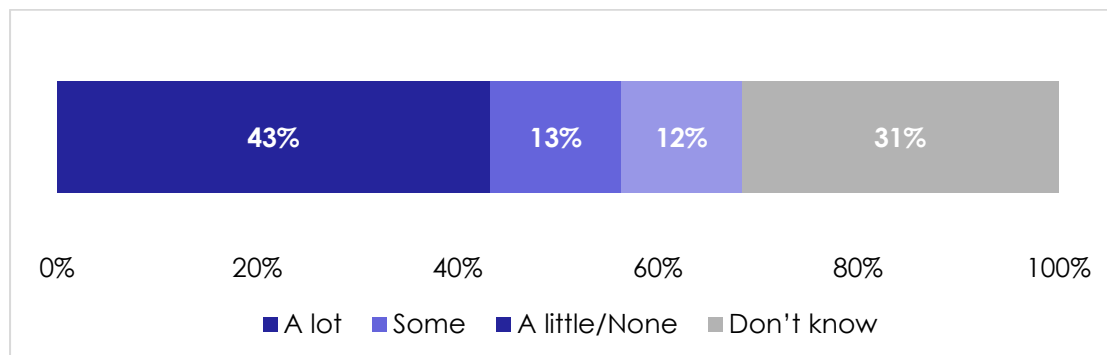
## Key findings

- More than four in 10 South Africans (43%) say China's economic activities have “a lot” of influence on the country's economy.
  - About three in 10 (31%) say they “don't know” enough to assess China's economic influence.
- Positive perceptions of foreign influence have decreased since 2021, including a 16-percentage-point drop for the United States.
- Still, positive outnumber negative perceptions by roughly 2-to-1 regarding the economic and political influence of China (37% positive vs. 20%), the United States (32% vs. 15%), and the EU (20% vs. 14%).
  - Assessments of Russian influence are almost equally negative (22%) and positive (25%).
- ANC supporters are no more likely than adherents of other political parties to see Russia's influence as positive. Adherents of the ANC and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) are most likely to see China's influence as positive, while Democratic Alliance (DA) supporters favour U.S. influence.
  - Large shares of citizens say they “don't know” enough to assess the influence of foreign powers, especially the EU.

## Chinese economic activity in South Africa

Understanding the influence of South Africa's largest trading partner on the domestic economy is critical. When asked how much influence China's economic activities have on their country's economy, 43% of South Africans say “a lot,” 13% “some,” and 12% “a little” or “none” (Figure 1). Importantly, 31% of South Africans do not feel confident enough to share an opinion, suggesting either a lack of interest or inadequate domestic media coverage of developments in Chinese economic activity in South Africa.

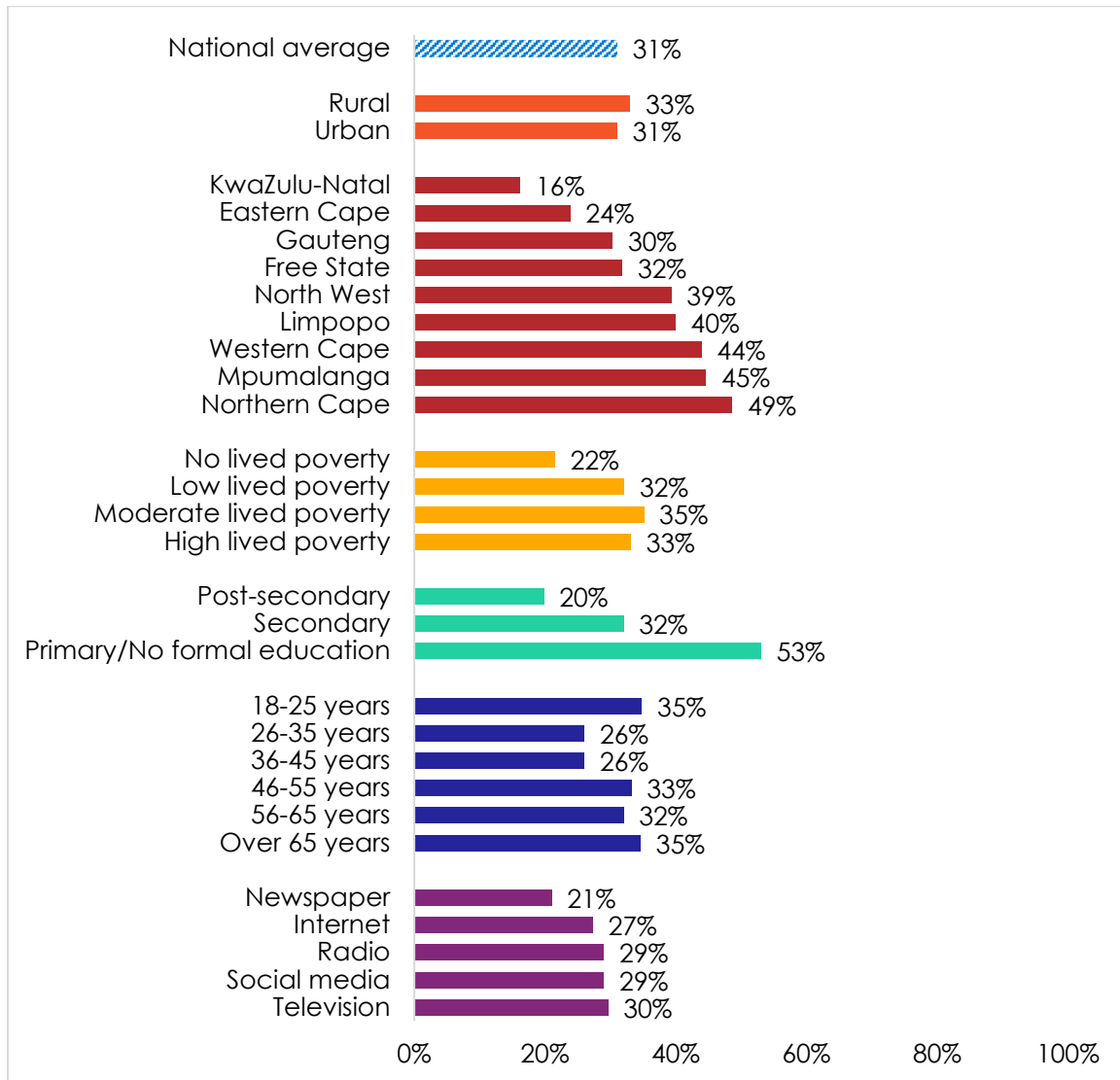
**Figure 1: Chinese influence on the economy | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in South Africa have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Among those who say they “don’t know” about Chinese influence on the South African economy, some clear demographic trends emerge (Figure 2). Economically better-off citizens are less likely to fall in this category (22%) than those experiencing some level of “lived poverty”<sup>1</sup>) (32%-35%). And more than half (53%) of citizens with primary schooling or less say they “don’t know,” compared to 32% and 20%, respectively, of those with secondary or post-secondary education.

**Figure 2: Who hasn’t heard enough about China’s influence on the South African economy? | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do you think China's economic activities in South Africa have on our economy, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say “Don’t know”)  
 (Note: Media categories reflect the percentage of respondents who say they get news “every day” from these sources.)

<sup>1</sup> 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 and Patel (2022).

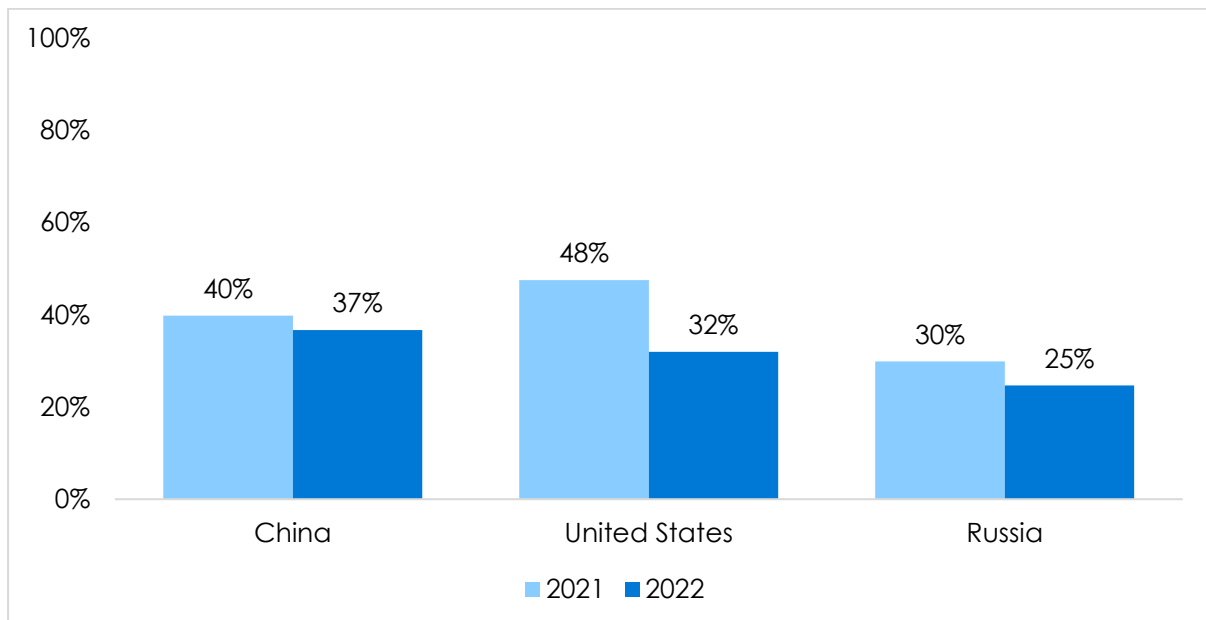
While urban and rural residents are about equally likely to say they have not heard enough on this topic, there is significant inter-provincial variation, ranging from 16% in KwaZulu-Natal to 49% in the Northern Cape.

Interestingly, respondents who say they get news “every day” from newspapers are less likely to feel uninformed on Chinese economic influence on South Africa (21%) than those who get daily news from television, social media, the Internet, and radio (27%-30%).

### Foreign influence in South Africa

China’s economic and political influence on South Africa is viewed as positive by 37% of respondents, exceeding positive perceptions of the influence of the United States (32%) and Russia (25%) Figure 3). But positive perceptions of foreign influence declined between 2021 and 2022 – sharply so in the case of the United States (by 16 percentage points) and marginally for China (3 points). Despite the government’s drift toward the Russian orbit, citizens’ positive opinions on Russian influence declined as well, by 5 points.

**Figure 3: Changes in positive perceptions | South Africa | 2021-2022**

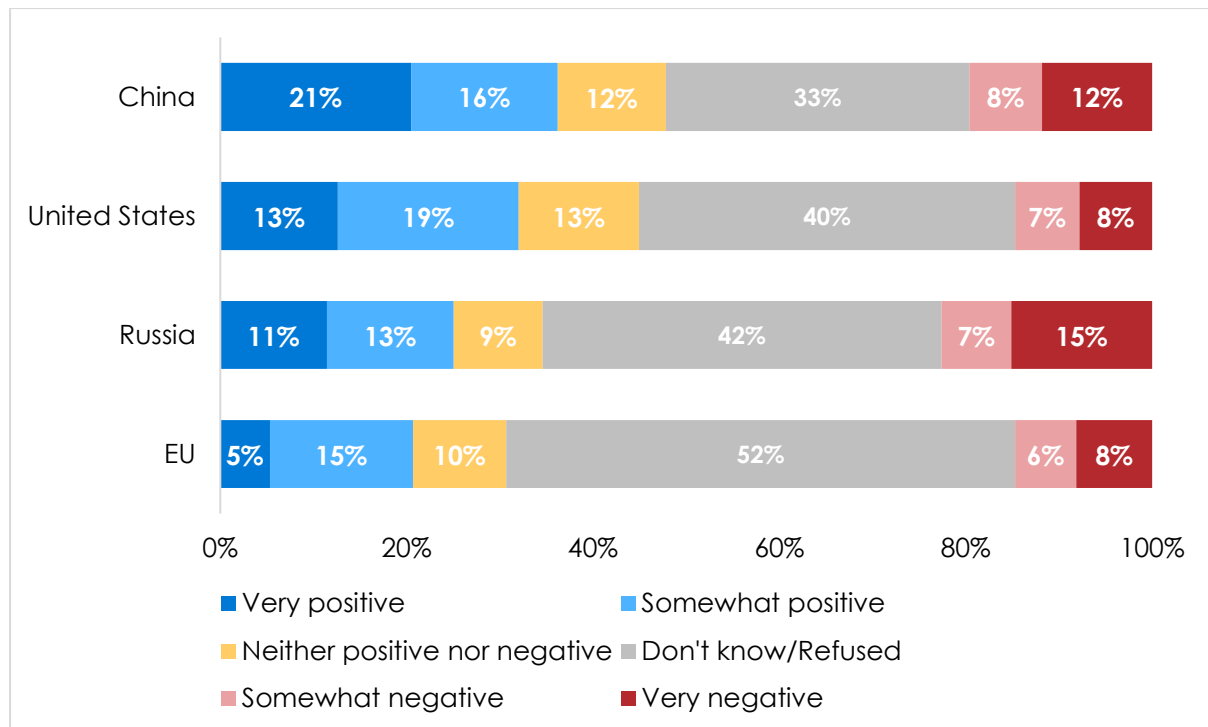


**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven’t you heard enough to say? (% who say “somewhat positive” or “very positive”)

Further unpacking the latest perceptions, Figure 4 shows that South Africans’ divided perceptions of foreign influence mirror global and regional dynamics that are shifting toward a multipolar world order not solely dominated by influence from the traditional “West.” While the EU’s influence is seen as positive by 20% of South Africans, it is also viewed as negative by 14%. Russia’s and China’s influence draw the largest shares of negative perceptions (22% and 20%, respectively).

The figure also shows the large proportions of South Africans who say they “don’t know” enough to answer the question, highlighting a widespread lack of interest or of accessible information on the activities of foreign powers in South Africa. This ranges from 33% on China – almost equal to those who hold positive perceptions of Chinese influence – to more than half (52%) on the EU.

**Figure 4: Perceptions of foreign influence | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

### Does the foreign engagement of the ruling party align with voter preferences?

Figure 5 further breaks down perceptions of foreign influence among supporters of various political parties. Among respondents who say they “feel close to” the ruling ANC, negative perceptions of Russian influence (20%) almost match positive ones (24%), while Chinese influence is most likely to be seen as positive (33%, vs. 19% negative). However, large portions of ANC supporters say they “don't know” enough about these issues to have an opinion, ranging up to 50% for Russia and 60% for the EU.

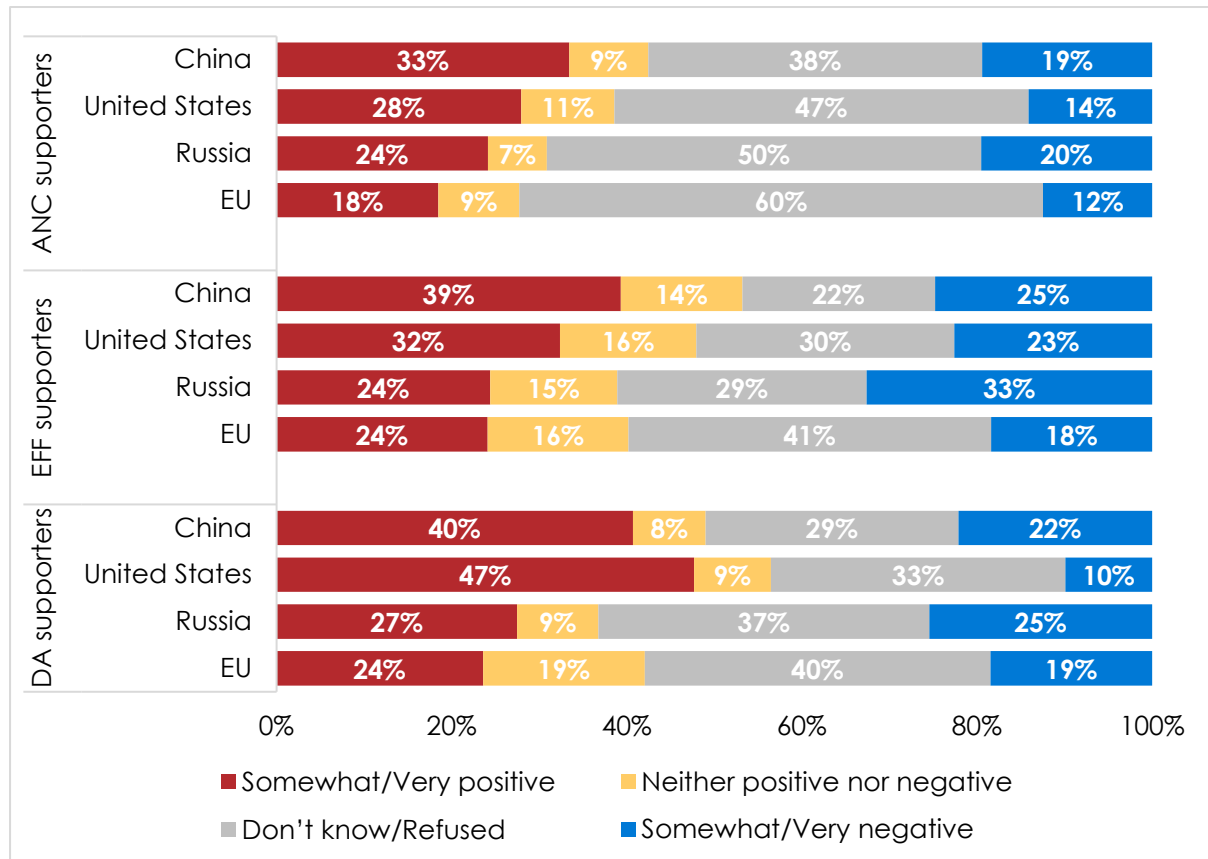
Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

Supporters of the two leading opposition parties, the EFF and the DA, are less likely to say they “don't know” enough about foreign influence. Despite the EFF's dominant anti-colonial narratives, the same proportion of its supporters see Russian and EU influence as positive (24%), and greater shares welcome the influence of China

(39%) and the United States (32%). One in three EFF supporters (33%) perceive Russian influence as negative – the largest share of negative perceptions across political parties and foreign actors. Again, citizens seem to know least about the influence of the EU (41%).

Nearly half (47%) of DA supporters perceive U.S. influence as positive, followed by Chinese influence (40%). As with ANC and EFF adherents, DA supporters are most likely to perceive Russian influence negatively (25%), and again the EU's influence is least known (40%).

**Figure 5: How do potential voters view foreign influence? | by political party affiliation | South Africa | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on South Africa is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

## Conclusion

South Africans' perceptions of foreign powers such as China, the United States, and Russia have tilted away from positivity since the previous round of Afrobarometer surveys. The ANC's drift toward Russia is not reflected in public opinion, as negative perceptions nearly match positive views of Russian influence, including among the ANC's voter base. On the other hand, popular perceptions of Chinese and U.S. influence, despite declines compared to 2021, are more positive than negative, reflective also of South Africa's economic ties to these nations.

Large portions of society say they have not heard enough to have an opinion on foreign influence, an important finding at a time of flux in global power relations and in a country relatively open to foreign influence. One in three South Africans are in the dark about the impact of Chinese economic activity in South Africa, despite China's emergence as a key economic partner. Similarly, the EU contributes to large inflows of investment and aid, yet South Africans know least about EU influence in their country. To take public opinion into account in the alignment of international partnerships, foreign policy debates in South Africa will need to reach and engage wider audiences with a concerted effort from television and radio news broadcasters.

## References

- Bartlett, K. (2023). Putin won't attend a South Africa summit next month, avoiding possible arrest. NPR. 19 July.
- Chan, S. (2023). Russia rekindles old friendship with South Africa, its ally against apartheid. Conversation. 24 January.
- Cohen, M. (2023). Putin embrace is a big gamble for South Africa. Bloomberg. 16 May.
- International Trade Centre. (2023). Trade map.
- Khumalo, J. (2023). US ambassador says South Africa gave weapons, ammunition to Russia for Ukraine war. News24. 11 May.
- Mattes, R., & Patel, J. (2022). Lived poverty resurgent. Afrobarometer Policy Paper 84.

**Jaynisha Patel** is an analyst in the Geopolitics Unit at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Email: [j.patel@institute.global](mailto:j.patel@institute.global).

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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer is provided by Sweden via the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations - Africa, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the European Union Commission, the Mastercard Foundation, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the University of California San Diego, the World Bank Group, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Uganda, GIZ, and Luminare.

Donations help Afrobarometer give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)) or contact Felix Biga ([felixbiga@afrobarometer.org](mailto:felixbiga@afrobarometer.org)) or Runyararo Munetsi ([runyararo@afrobarometer.org](mailto:runyararo@afrobarometer.org)) to discuss institutional funding.

Follow our releases on #VoicesAfrica.



Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 690 | 22 August 2023