

A long to-do list for the victors of South Africa's 2024 election

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On 29 May, South Africans will cast their ballots for the seventh time since the end of apartheid. Irrespective of who wins the general election, the new government will face formidable challenges. In 2023, citizens experienced a record [332 days of power cuts](#), which caused severe disruptions in the economy as well as people's daily lives. The unemployment rate hovered at 32% and was even higher among young people (40%). The country's education system continues to struggle to [provide quality education](#) for all children, while [water infrastructure](#) is crumbling due to insufficient maintenance and failing to expand to meet growing demand. The country's [murder rate](#) recently climbed to its highest levels in 20 years.

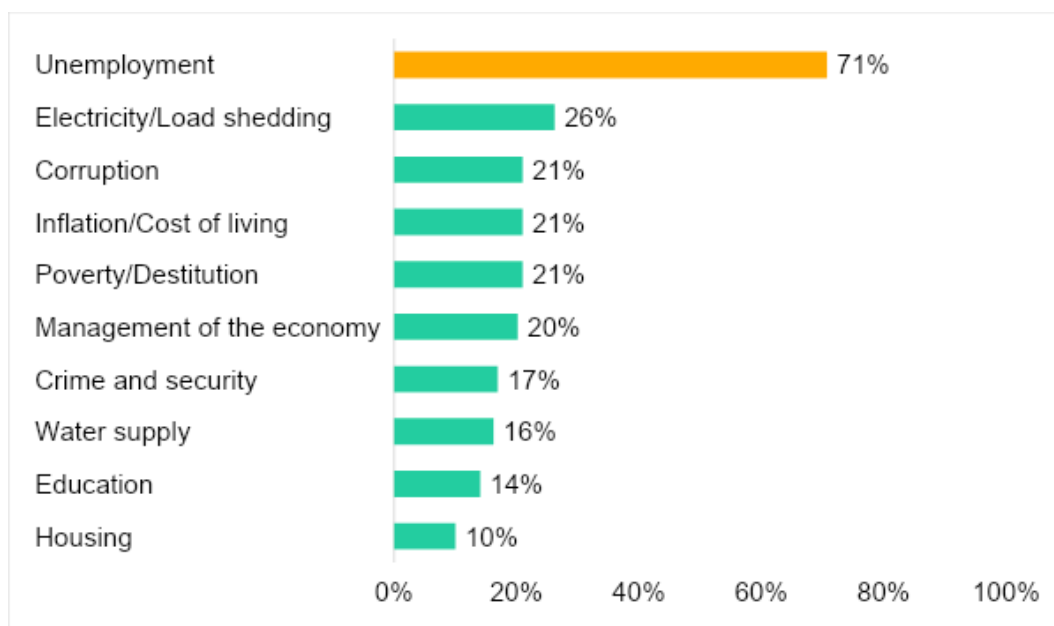
After Election Day, which of South Africa's challenges should the new government prioritise?

We present a citizen perspective on this question using data from a new Afrobarometer survey, which [interviewed 1,800 adult South Africans via telephone](#) between 23 April and 11 May 2024.

South Africa's most important problems

Respondents were asked to identify the three most important problems that the government should address after the election. A clear picture emerges that emphasises economic challenges, service delivery, and corruption (Figure 1). Unemployment was given by far the highest priority (cited by 71% of respondents). Many South Africans also mentioned inflation/cost of living (21%), poverty (21%), and management of the economy more broadly (20%). Other priority issues include service delivery (electricity, safety, water supply, education, and housing) and corruption.

Figure 1: Most important problems | South Africa | 2024

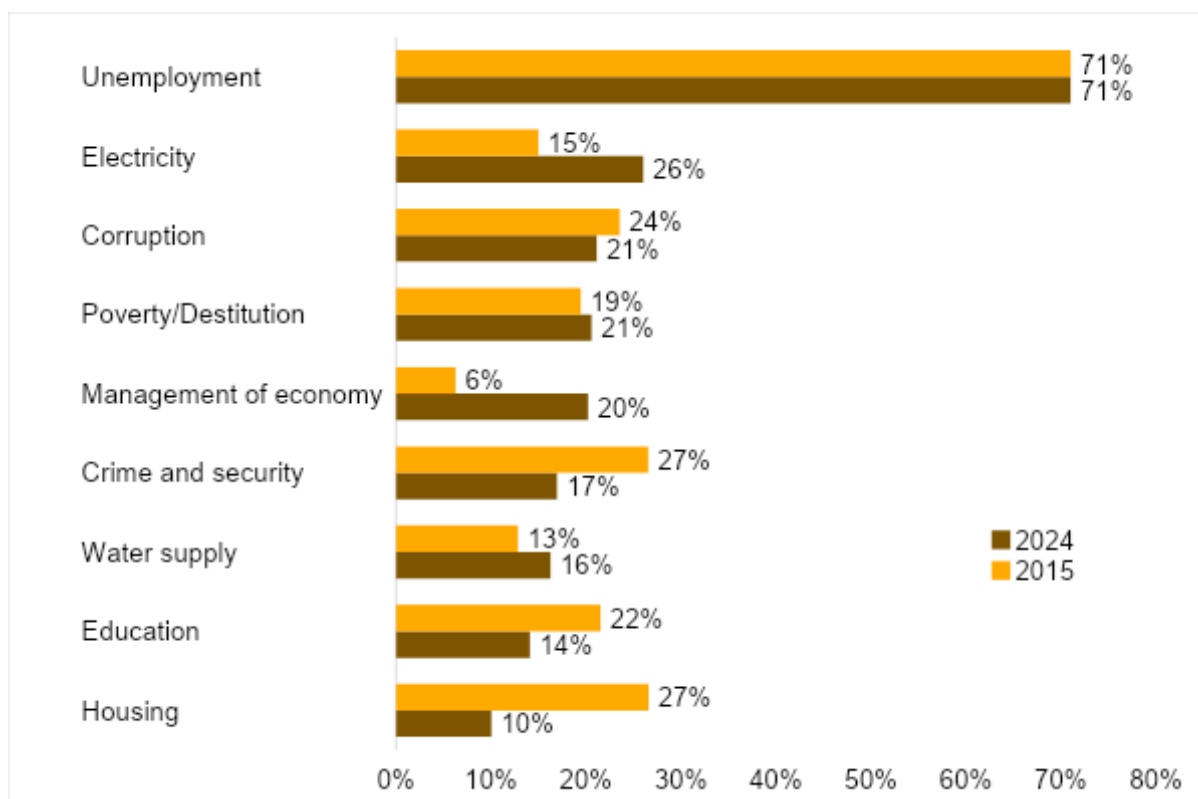


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the three most important problems facing this country that the government should address after the forthcoming elections?*

Over the past decade, Afrobarometer has [consistently](#) found that [unemployment is South Africans' leading national priority](#). Indeed, the share of citizens who cited this problem in 2024 is identical to that in 2015 (Figure 2). In contrast, overall economic management (+14 percentage points) and electricity supply (+11) have risen in importance since 2015 as worsening power cuts have had significant negative repercussions for people's quality of life and the economy at large.

We see lower prioritisation of housing (-17), crime and security (-10), and education (-8) between the two points in time. This is not necessarily because the government has resolved these challenges, but perhaps because others have become more urgent.

Figure 2: Most important problems | South Africa | 2015 and 2024



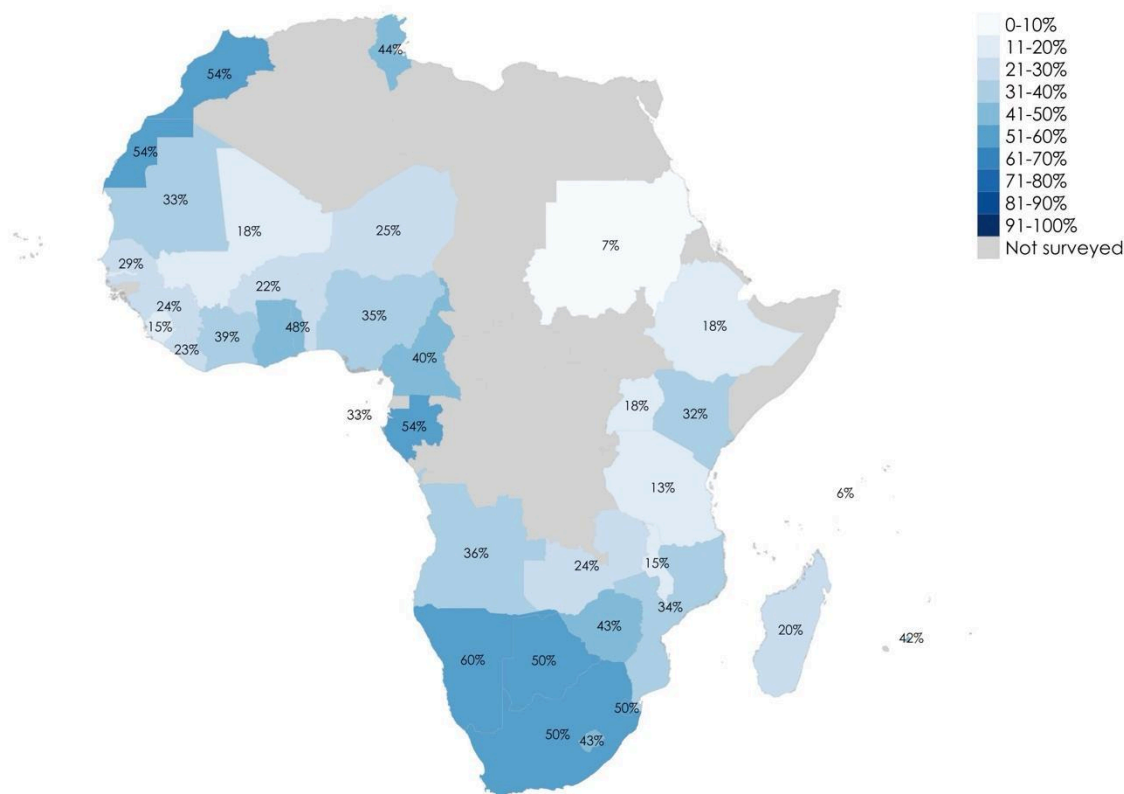
Respondents were asked:

In 2015: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address?

In 2024: In your opinion, what are the three most important problems facing this country that the government should address after the forthcoming elections?

South Africans are not unique in their focus on unemployment as a top priority for government action. On average across 39 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in Round 9 between late 2021 and mid-2023, unemployment also outranked all other problems (Figure 3). In Round 9, unemployment was a top priority for 50% of South Africans, placing the country fifth after Cabo Verde (60%), Namibia (60%), Gabon (54%), and Morocco (54%). In contrast, unemployment was a priority for fewer than one in 10 respondents in Seychelles (6%) and Sudan (7%).

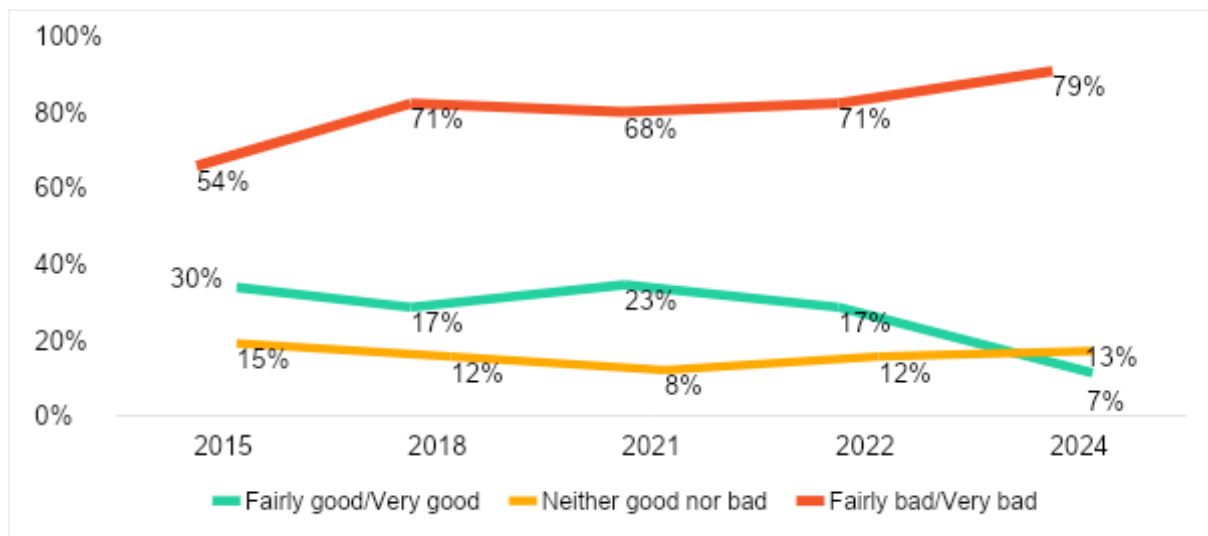
Figure 3: Prioritisation of unemployment | 39 countries | 2021/2023



(% of respondents who cite "unemployment" among their top 3 priorities)

South Africans' strong emphasis on economic challenges is unsurprising given the significant deterioration in their evaluations of economic conditions over the past decade. In 2015, about six in 10 respondents (58%) said the country was in poor economic shape, an assessment shared by a staggering 79% in the weeks before the 2024 election (Figure 4). The 7% of South Africans who say the economy is doing "fairly good" or "very good" represents a lower level of satisfaction with economic conditions than recorded in any country surveyed in 2021/2023, except Tunisia (4%) and Eswatini (6%).

Figure 4: National economic conditions | South Africa | 2015-2024

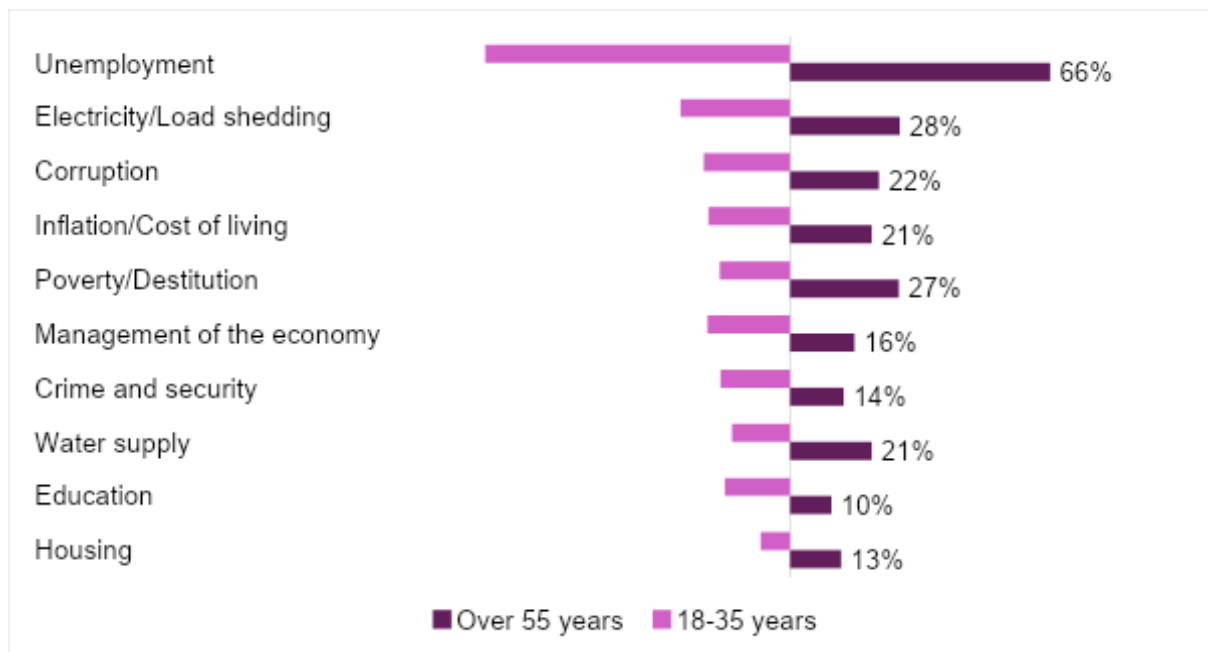


Respondents were asked: *In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?*

Priorities vary with age and location

Young South Africans (aged 18-35 years) are significantly more likely than seniors (over age 55) to cite unemployment as a priority issue (77% vs. 66%) (Figure 5). On the other hand, poverty, water supply, and housing are more urgent issues for older respondents. The issue of housing holds particular significance given South Africa's apartheid past and [previous survey findings](#) that citizens prefer for the government to prioritise the provision of housing over land redistribution.

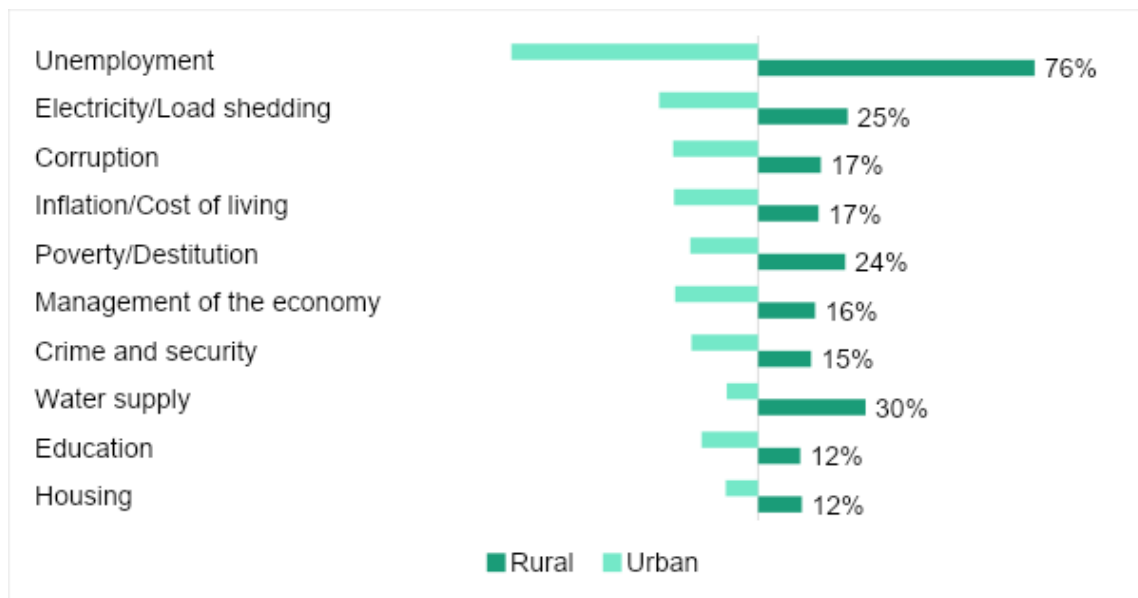
Figure 5: Most important problems | by age group | South Africa | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the three most important problems facing this country that the government should address after the forthcoming elections?*

We also find differences in issue prioritisation between urban and rural residents (Figure 6). Water supply is the second-highest priority for citizens in villages (30%), while 9% of urban residents mentioned water. This mirrors [differences in access](#): In 2022, nine out of 10 urbanites (92%) had their main water source inside their property, compared to 67% of rural households, a 25-percentage-point gap. Nevertheless, it is important to note the government's progress in this area: A decade ago, the urban-rural gap in access to piped water was 38 percentage points.

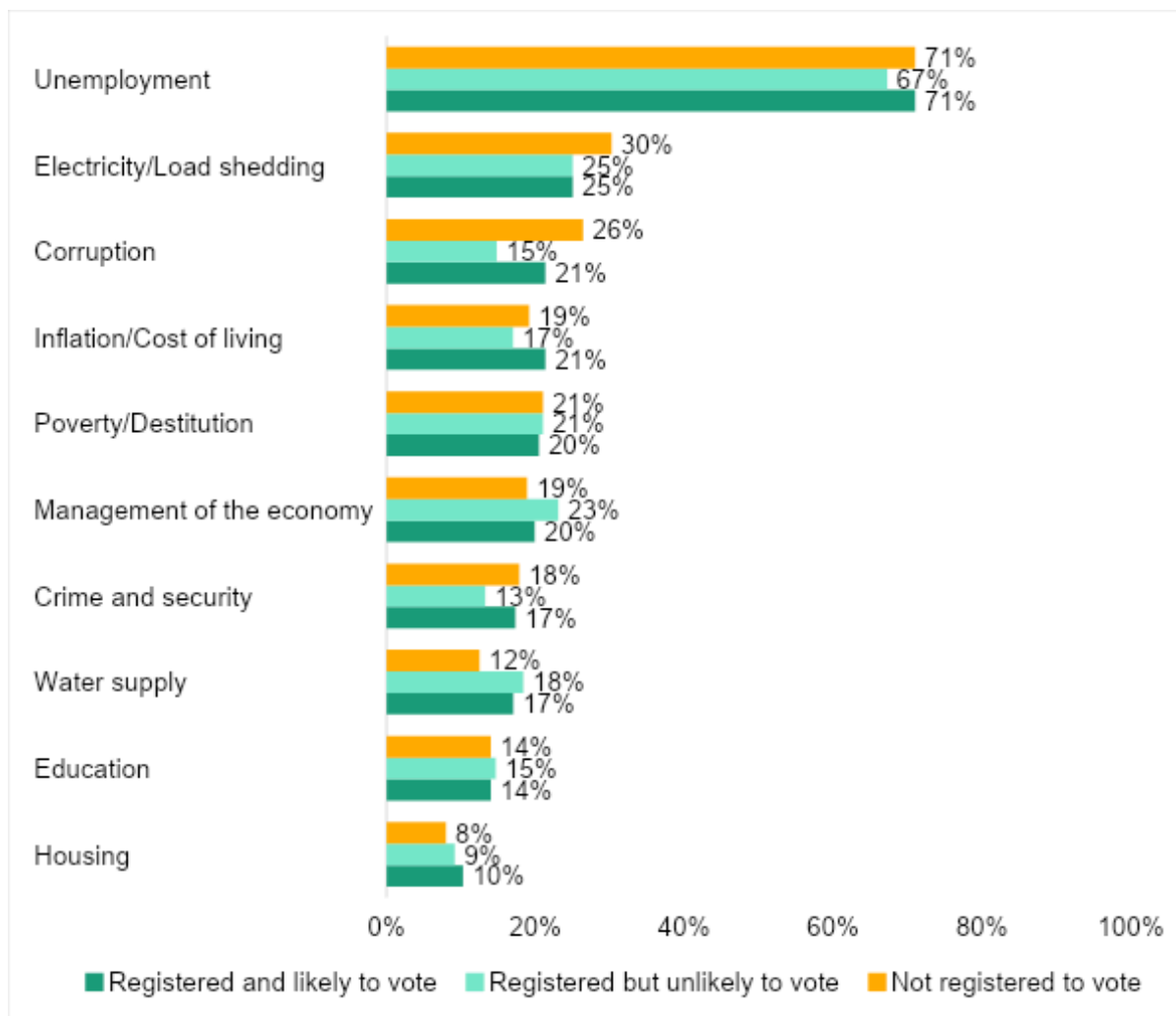
Figure 6: Most important problems | by urban-rural location | South Africa | 2024



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Lastly, we can get a glimpse of whether priorities vary between those who intend to vote on 29 May and those planning to stay home. Almost nine in 10 survey respondents (86%) said they are registered to vote in the 2024 election, with 88% of this group reporting that they are “probably” or “definitely” going to vote. As Figure 7 shows, likely voters don’t differ dramatically in their policy priorities from registered South Africans who say they are unlikely to vote or from those who are not registered. We see some differences in their relative prioritisation of corruption and provision of water and electricity, though the pattern is not clear.

Figure 7: Most important problems | by registration status and intention to vote | South Africa | 2024



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The South African election campaign season is in full swing, and political parties have launched their manifestos, campaign posters, and media messaging about how to address the country's economic and social challenges. Our survey indicates that party policies are influential for two-thirds of registered voters. It remains to be seen whose messages will resonate most with South African voters.

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