



Dispatch No. 901 | 15 November 2024

South Africans embrace diversity, but trust between citizens is lacking

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 901 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Every year on Heritage Day (24 September), South Africans celebrate the country's rich cultural tapestry, woven over centuries. Affectionately known as the "Rainbow Nation," South Africa boasts a multitude of varied and dynamic languages, traditions, and cultures that reflect its long, complex history and diverse population. According to the 2022 South African National Census, 81.4% of South Africans are Black Africans, 8.2% are Coloured, 7.3% are White or of European descent, and 2.7% are Indian or Asian (Statistics South Africa, 2023).

But while its multicultural society is a source of national pride, South Africa continues to grapple with racial and ethnic tensions stretching back to the colonial era (South African History Online, 2015). These tensions reflect a country that has yet to fully address the scars of its history: unequal access to quality education, unequal pay, segregated communities, large economic disparities, and a lack of racial transformation in land ownership, to name a few (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2024; Pikoli, 2021).

Ahead of the 2019 general elections, a group of Khoisan activists camped outside the Union Buildings in Pretoria for several months, demanding that the government recognise their people as the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, remove the "Coloured" label in reference to people of mixed race and replace it with "Khoisan," make Kwadi-Khoe an official language, and grant the Khoisan people access to land and resources (Mitchley, 2019). Coloured citizens, many of whom embrace the "Coloured" label, have also been vocal about their marginalisation and economic exclusion, accusing the government of turning a blind eye to the high unemployment, gangsterism, and drugs in their communities (Parkinson, 2018).

In light of the ongoing discourse on nation building, and ahead of International Day for Tolerance (16 November), this dispatch looks at the state of social cohesion and identities in the country based on citizens' views collected by the 2022 Afrobarometer survey.

Survey findings show that majorities of South Africans express tolerance for differences in religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and, to a smaller degree, nationality. But while most say they trust their relatives, far fewer think they can trust other people. A majority value their identity as South Africans at least as highly as their ethnic identity. But fully half of citizens also say the government at least "sometimes" treats their ethnic group unfairly.

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 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, based at 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

Social fabric of trust and tolerance

- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of South Africans say they trust their relatives “somewhat” or “a lot,” but only half (51%) express trust in their neighbours.
 - Fewer than four in 10 respondents say they trust other South Africans (39%), people of other religions (39%), people from other ethnic groups (37%), and other people they know (36%).
 - Differences in trust levels across key demographic groups are fairly modest, although youth tend to be somewhat less trusting than their elders.
- Most South Africans express tolerant attitudes toward people of different religions (86%), ethnicities (85%), political affiliations (83%), and sexual orientations (71%).
 - About eight in 10 (79%) say they would like it or would not mind it if a member of their family married someone from a different ethnic group.
 - But a much slimmer majority (57%) would welcome a foreign worker or immigrant as a neighbour, while a significant minority (39%) express dislike.

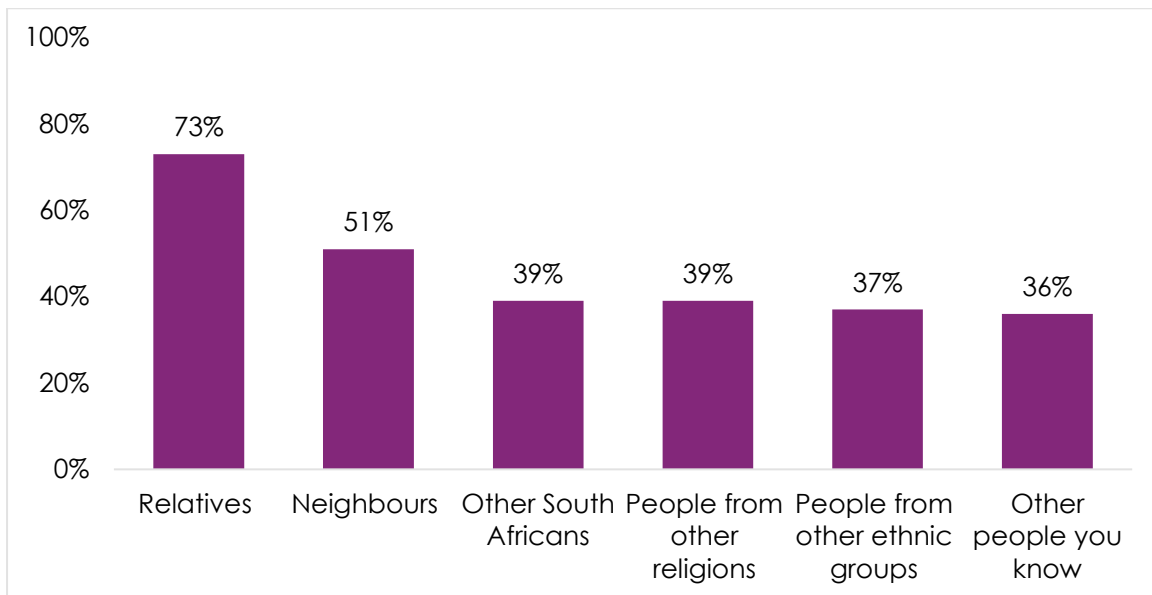
National and ethnic identities

- More than half (53%) of respondents say they feel equally attached to their South African and ethnic or cultural identities.
 - One-fifth (19%) say they feel “only South African” or value their national identity more than their ethnic identity, while one-quarter (26%) place greater value on their ethnic than their national identity.
- Roughly two in 10 citizens (21%) say the government “often” or “always” treats their ethnic group unfairly. Another 29% say this happens “sometimes,” while 44% say it “never” happens.
 - Among the major ethnic groups in South Africa, Xhosa and Coloured people are most likely to feel frequently discriminated against by the government: Half (50%) of the members of each group say unfair treatment occurs “often” or “always.”

Trust in individuals and groups

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of South Africans say they trust their relatives “somewhat” or “a lot,” but only half (51%) say they trust their neighbours (Figure 1). Roughly four in 10 respondents express trust in their fellow citizens and people from other religions (both 39%), while even fewer say they trust people from other ethnic groups (37%) and other people they know (36%).

Figure 1: Trust in other people | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Differences in trust levels across key demographic groups are fairly modest (Figure 2). Youth tend to be somewhat less trusting than their elders: They are the least trusting age group for four of the six categories of people the survey asked about. The largest gap concerns people of different religious backgrounds, in whom 36% of 18- to 35-year-olds express trust compared to 41%-43% of older cohorts.

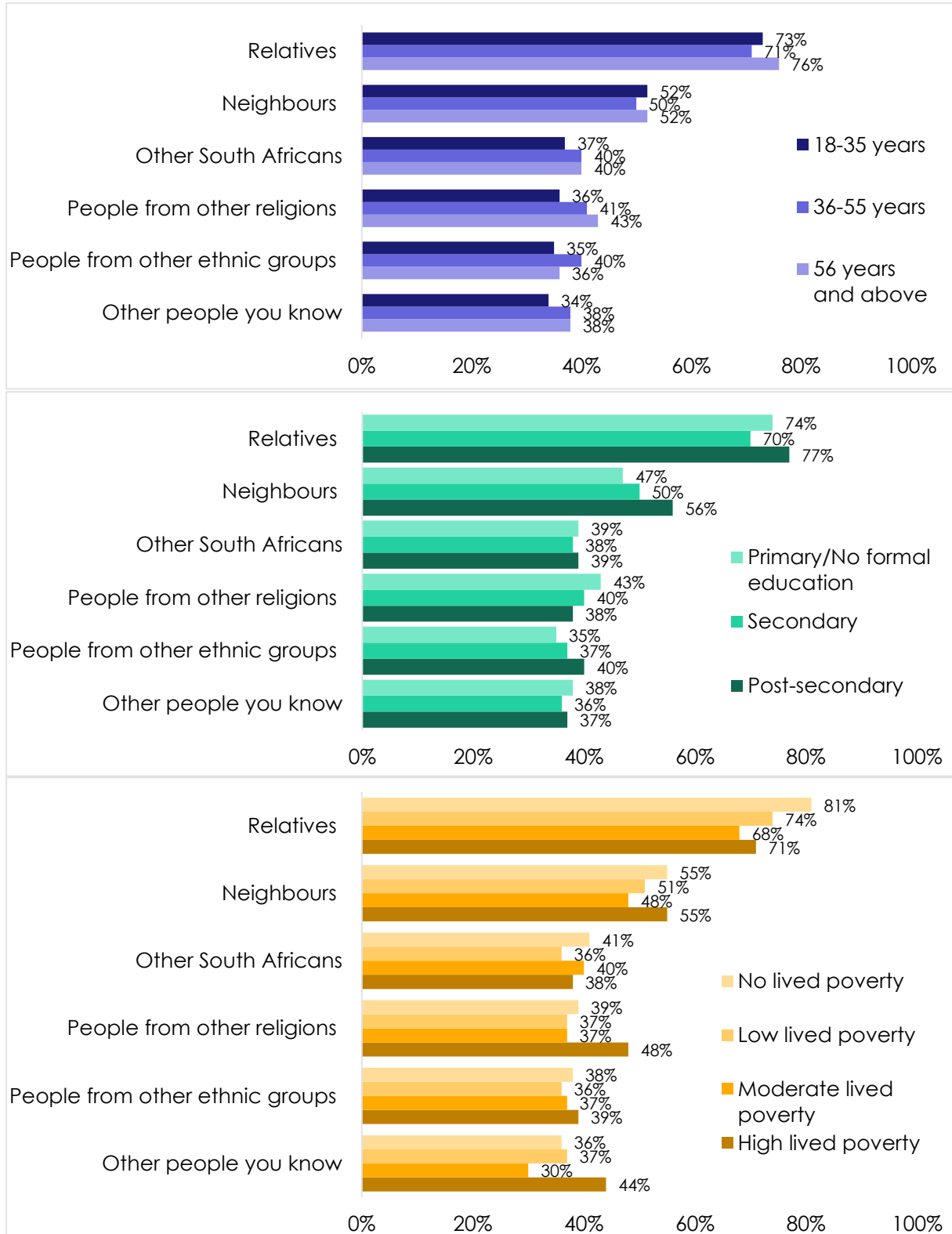
Compared to their less educated counterparts, South Africans with post-secondary qualifications are inclined to be more trusting of relatives (77% vs. 70%-74%), neighbours (56% vs. 47%-50%), and people from other ethnic groups (40% vs. 35%-37%). Citizens with primary education or less are more likely than the most educated to trust people from other religions (43% vs. 38%).

Wealthier citizens (81% of those experiencing no lived poverty¹) are generally more trusting of their relatives than their poorer counterparts (71% of those experiencing high lived poverty), but they are less trusting of people from other religions (39% vs. 48%) and other people they know (36% vs. 44%). But better-off respondents match the less well-off in their trust in their neighbours (both 55%) and people from other ethnic groups (38% vs. 39%).

As for gender and location (not shown), they seem to make less difference when it comes to trust. Men are generally as trusting as women, although women are somewhat more likely than men to say they trust people from other religions (42% vs. 37%). Rural residents are somewhat more likely than their urban counterparts to express trust in relatives (75% vs. 72%) and neighbours (53% vs. 50%), but urbanites are somewhat more likely than rural South Africans to say they trust people from other ethnic groups (39% vs. 34%) and other people they know (38% vs. 33%).

¹ 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).

Figure 2: Trust 'somewhat' or 'a lot' | by age, education, and lived poverty
| South Africa | 2022



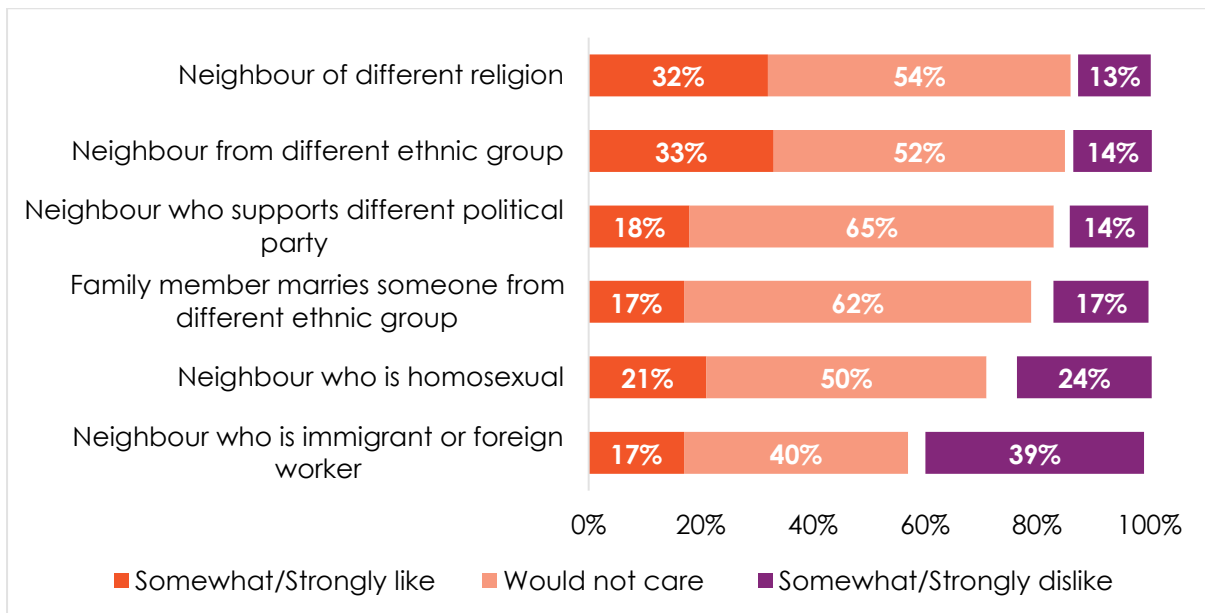
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following types of people? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Tolerance

South Africans generally express high levels of tolerance for diversity. More than eight out of 10 respondents say they “would strongly like,” “would somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they had neighbours of a different religion (86%), from a different ethnic group (85%), or with a different political party affiliation (83%) (Figure 3). Seven in 10 say the same about neighbours who are homosexual (71%). And 79% say they would like or would not mind if a family member married someone from a different ethnic group.

However, some quarters of South African society are less tolerant toward immigrants or foreign workers. While more than half (57%) of citizens say they “would strongly like,” “would somewhat like,” or “would not care” if they had neighbours who are immigrants or foreign workers, a significant minority (39%) disapprove of the prospect.

Figure 3: Social tolerance | South Africa | 2022



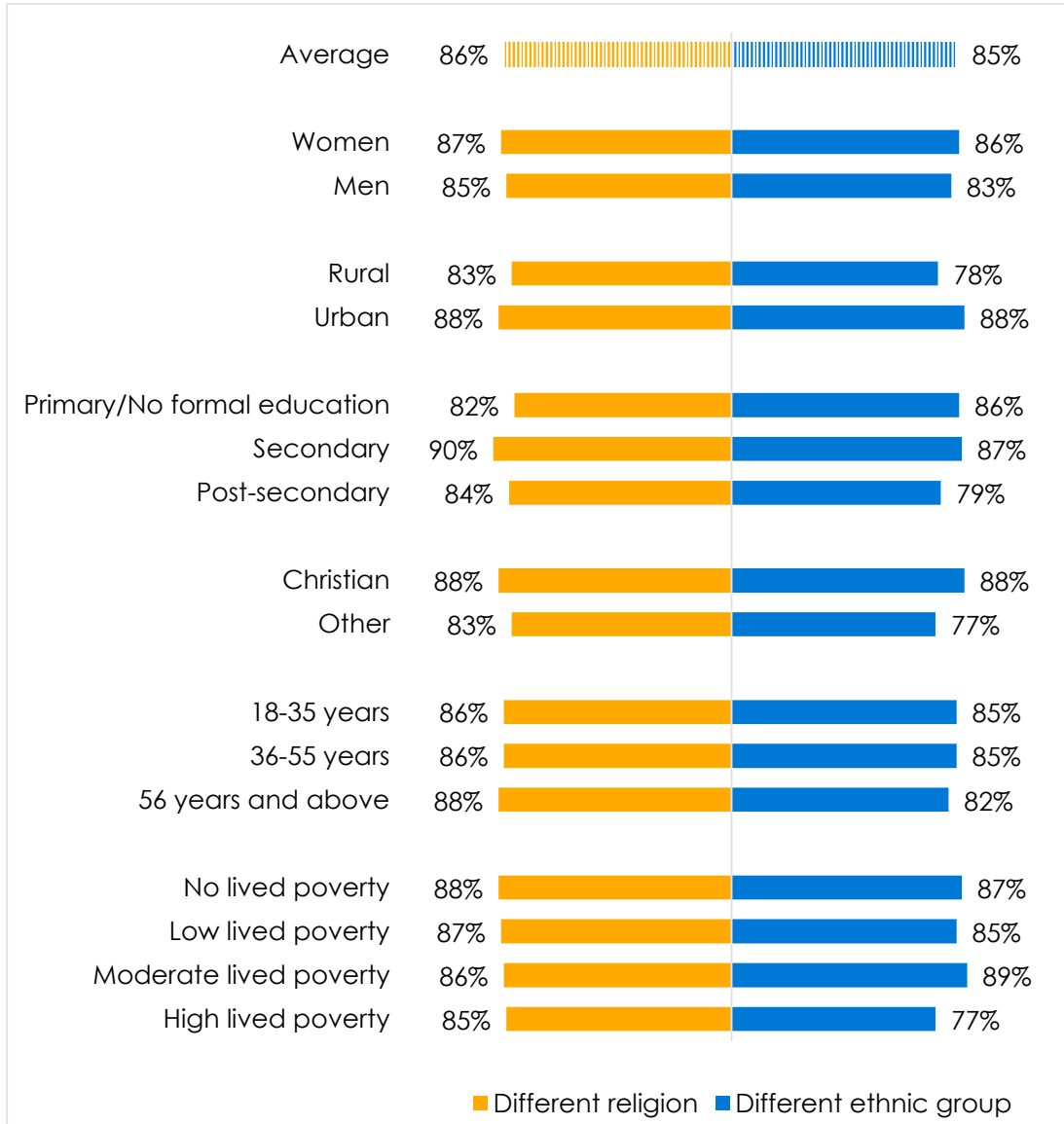
Respondents were asked:

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 of a different religion? People from other ethnic groups? Homosexuals? Immigrants or foreign workers? People who support a different political party? Please tell me whether you would like having a family member marry a person from a different ethnic group, dislike it, or not care?

Tolerance of religious diversity is higher in cities (88%) than in rural areas (83%) and among Christians compared to non-Christians (88% vs. 83%) (Figure 4). But in general, tolerance of religious diversity is strong across the board.

Tolerance of ethnic diversity is also higher in cities than in rural areas (88% vs. 78%) and among Christians than among non-Christians (88% vs. 77%). Citizens with secondary schooling or less (86%-87%) are more likely than their more educated counterparts (79%) to express tolerant attitudes toward people of different ethnic backgrounds. The poorest respondents (77%) are 8-12 percentage points less likely to express tolerance than better-off citizens (85%-89%).

Figure 4: Tolerance toward different religions and ethnic groups | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022

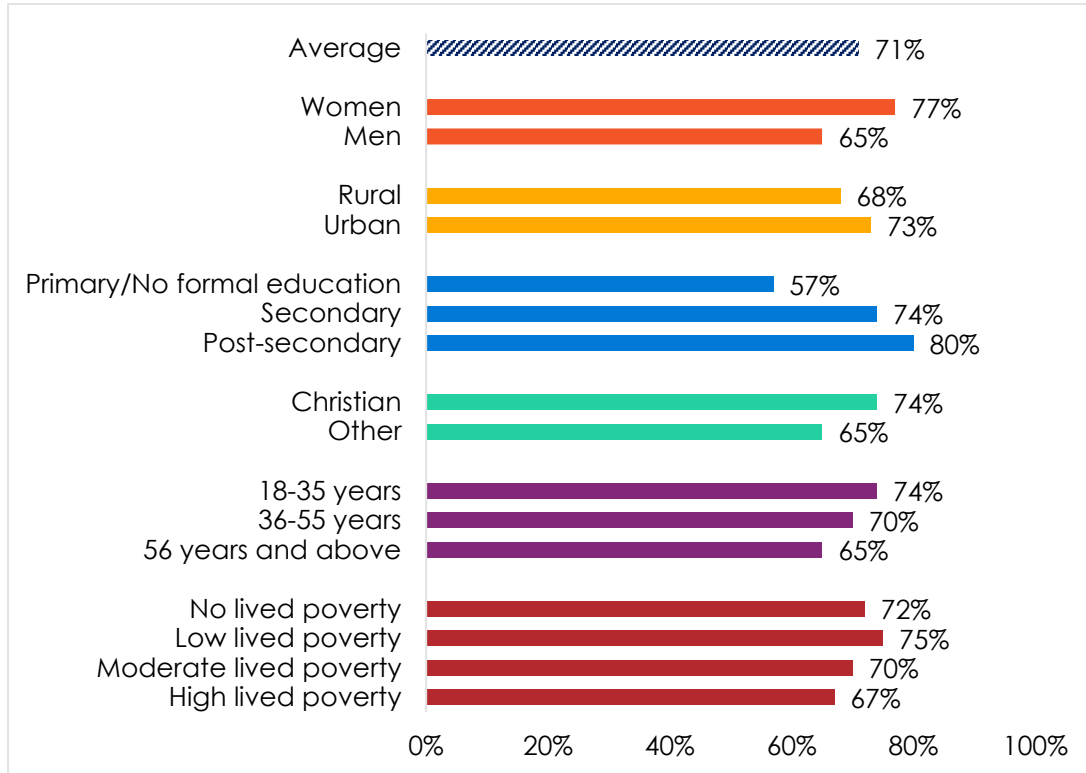


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People of a different religion? People from other ethnic groups? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

Women are more likely than men to hold tolerant attitudes toward people in same-sex relationships (77% vs. 65%), as are urbanites compared to rural residents (73% vs. 68%) and Christians compared to other religious groupings (74% vs. 65%) (Figure 5). Tolerance decreases with age, ranging from 74% among youth to 65% of the elderly. But it increases with respondents’ education level, from 57% among those with primary schooling or less to 80% among individuals with post-secondary education.

The poorest respondents (67%) are 3-8 percentage points less likely to be tolerant than their better-off counterparts (70%-75%).

Figure 5: Tolerance toward homosexuals | by demographic group | South Africa
 | 2022



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: Homosexuals? (% who say “strongly like,” “somewhat like,” or “would not care”)

In South Africa, foreigners are somewhat more welcome in cities than in rural areas (60% vs. 53%) and among women than among men (61% vs. 54%) (Figure 6). Only 39% of the least educated South Africans are happy to live next door to foreign nationals, compared to majorities of citizens with higher levels of education (57%-63%). Supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) are almost equally likely to express tolerance toward immigrants and foreign workers (54% vs. 52%), but Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) supporters and non-partisans are the most accepting of foreign nationals (both 59%).^{2, 3}

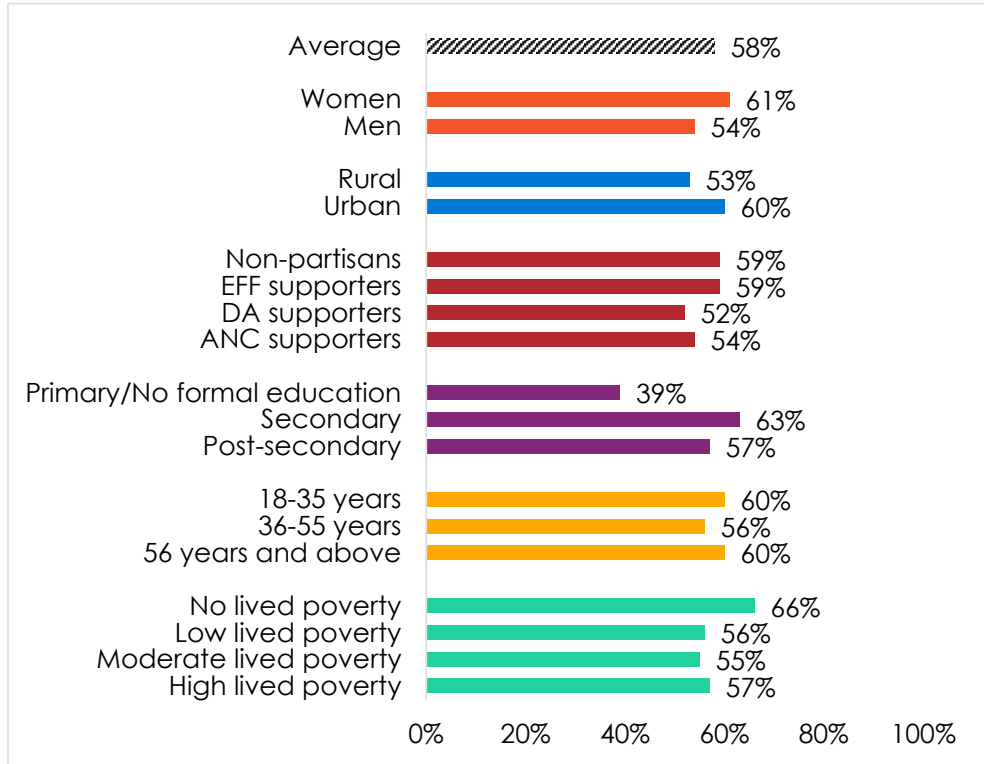
The wealthiest respondents (66%) are 9-11 percentage points more likely to express tolerance toward foreign nationals than their less well-off counterparts (55%-57%).

Tolerance toward people with different political views, though widely shared, is higher among urbanites than rural residents (86% vs. 78%) (Figure 7). Political tolerance is less prevalent among supporters of the DA (70%) than among supporters of the EFF (80%), the ANC (85%), and non-partisans (83%).

² Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

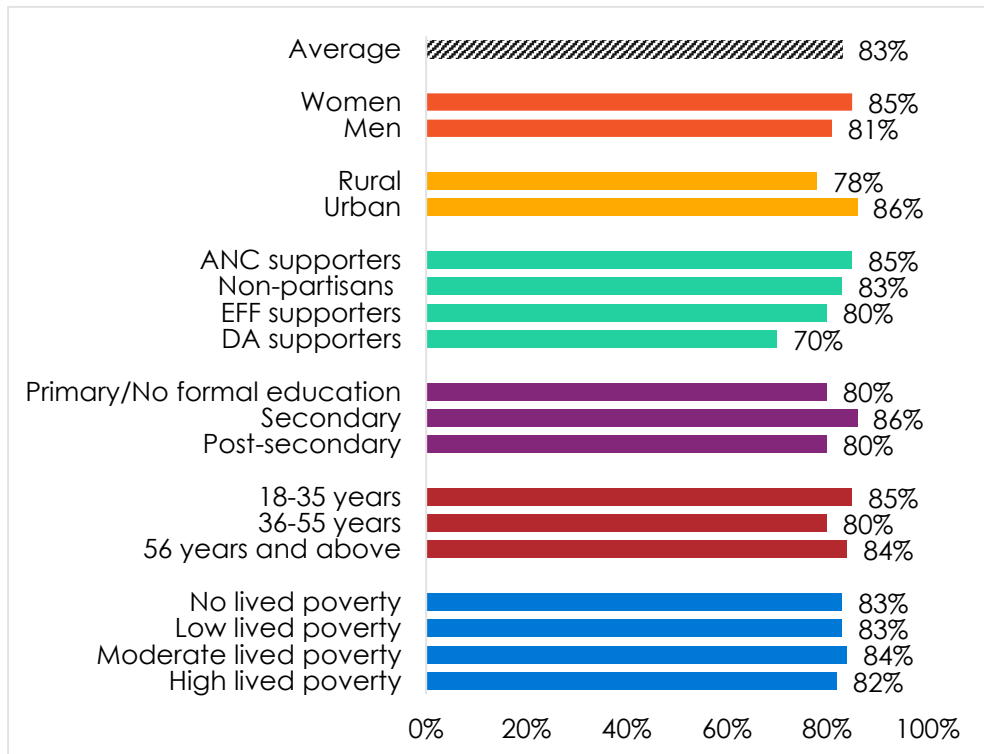
³ Because of smaller sample sizes for DA and EFF supporters, results have larger margins of error.

Figure 6: Tolerance toward foreign nationals | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



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: Immigrants or foreign workers? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

Figure 7: Tolerance toward people with different political views | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022

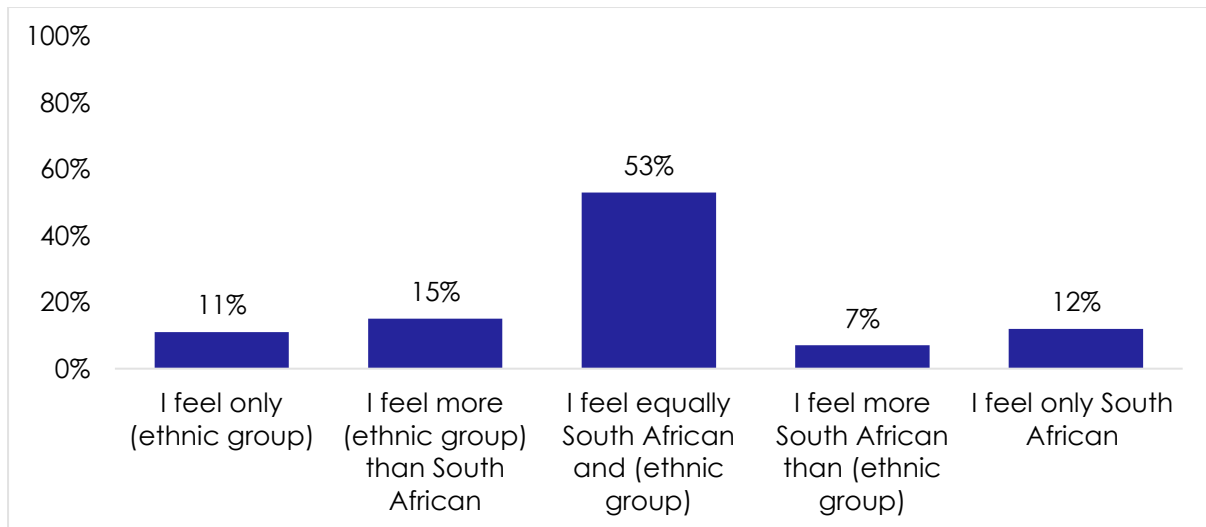


Respondents were asked: For each of the following types of people, please tell me whether you would like having people from this group as neighbours, dislike it, or not care: People who support a different political party? (% who say "strongly like," "somewhat like," or "would not care")

National vs. ethnic identities

Within their diverse country, many South Africans embrace their ethnic as well as their national identity. More than half (53%) of citizens say they identify equally with their national and ethnic identities (Figure 8). One-fifth (19%) feel exclusively or predominantly attached to their national identity, while one-quarter (26%) identify more strongly or only with their ethnicity.

Figure 8: National vs. ethnic identities | South Africa | 2022



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

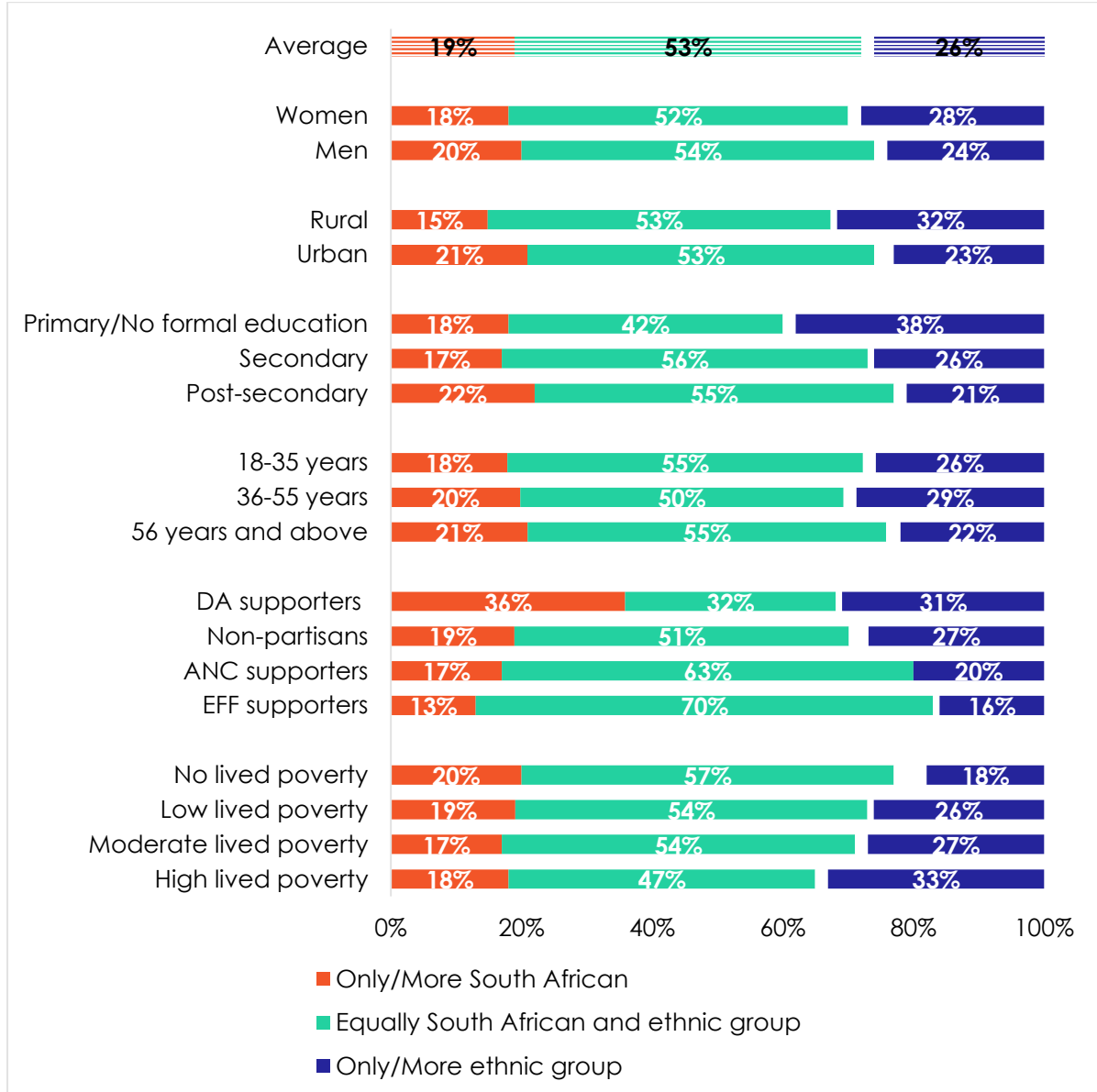
Interestingly, DA supporters are twice as likely as ANC supporters to say they feel “only” or “more” South African (36% vs. 17%), while the bulk of EFF supporters identify equally with their South African and ethnic identities (70%) (Figure 9).

Equal identification with national and ethnic identities drops to a minority view among the poorest respondents (47%), citizens with primary education or less (42%), and DA supporters (32%).

Those least likely to identify exclusively or predominantly with their ethnic group include the wealthiest respondents (18%), citizens with higher education (21%), the elderly (22%), urbanites (23%), and men (24%).

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Figure 9: National vs. ethnic identities | by demographic group | South Africa
 | 2022



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

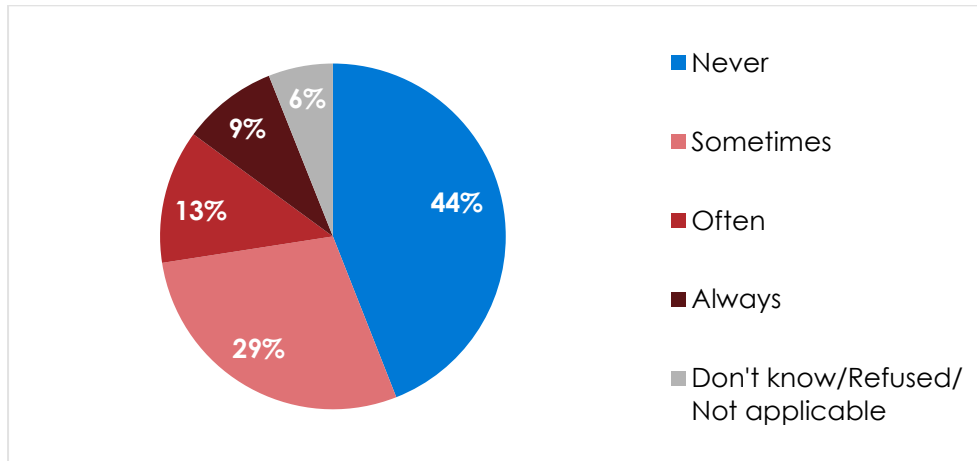
Government treatment of ethnic groups

One factor that might threaten the nation-building agenda is the perception of unfair treatment of some ethnic groups by the government. Fully half (50%) of citizens say their ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government at least “sometimes,” including one-fifth (21%) who say this happens “often” or “always” (Figure 10). In contrast, more than four in 10 respondents (44%) say members of their ethnic group are “never” treated unfairly.

Half of respondents who identify as Xhosa or Coloured (both 50%) say the government “often” or “always” treats their ethnic group unfairly, while about three in 10 of those who identify as Pedi/North Sotho (32%) and as Afrikaans/Afrikaner/Boer (28%) say the same

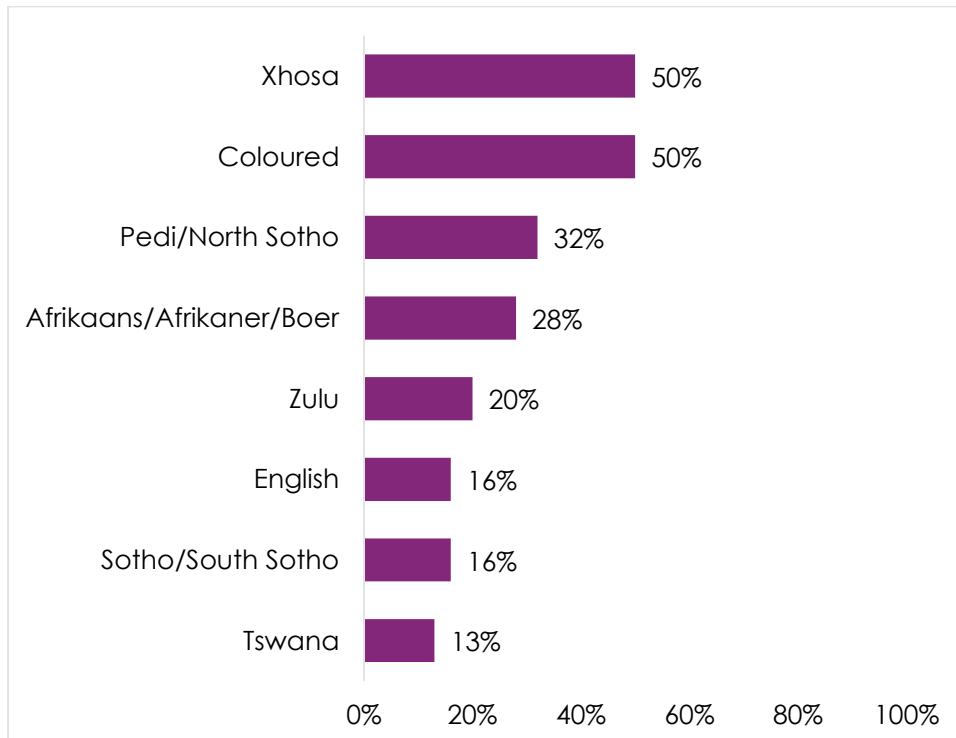
(Figure 11). One-fifth (20%) of Zulus also believe that the government regularly treats their ethnic group unfairly.

Figure 10: Discrimination against ethnic groups by the government | South Africa | 2022



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

Figure 11: Discrimination against ethnic groups by the government | by ethnic group⁴ | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How often, if ever, are [members of the respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government? (% who say "often" or "always")

⁴ Because of smaller sample sizes for Afrikaans/Afrikaner/Boer and English, results have larger margins of error.

Conclusion

Afrobarometer survey findings indicate that South Africa has a good base upon which to build the nation. South Africans' strong citizenship ties and high levels of tolerance for religious, ethnic, political, and sexual differences are important foundations for constructing or consolidating a national identity.

One weak spot is citizens' relationship with foreign nationals, in which socioeconomic challenges may combine with unwelcoming attitudes to feed persistent tensions.

The findings also point to a need to bridge trust gaps that can undermine security, peace, reconciliation, and sustainable development. It is especially concerning that younger South Africans express less trust than their elders and that some groups routinely experience discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity.

It is clear from these data that government, civil society organisations, religious leaders, the media, and other societal actors have important openings to combat discrimination and consolidate South Africa's still-fragile national unity.

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