

South Africans disapprove of government's performance on unemployment, housing, crime

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Summary

For two decades, South Africa has been grappling with the agonizing triple challenges of poverty, unemployment, and inequality. President Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation address in February 2015 called upon the nation to be united in advancing economic freedom. Most South Africans would acknowledge that despite gains in political freedom, much remains to be done to overcome poverty and bring economic justice to the Rainbow Nation.

A new Afrobarometer survey shows that unemployment remains the most important problem for government to address, cited as one of their three top priorities by nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents. In a list of citizen priorities that is largely unchanged from Afrobarometer's previous survey in 2011, unemployment is followed by housing, crime, education, poverty, and corruption.

Yet on most of these high-priority issues, large majorities of South Africans say their government has performed "fairly badly" or "very badly" – an assessment that parallels increasing public dissatisfaction with elected leaders, especially President Zuma (**see Afrobarometer dispatches No. 65 and 66, available at www.afrobarometer.org**). Notable exceptions are majority approval of government performance in the areas of welfare distribution, uniting the country, and meeting educational needs.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August-September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in South Africa in 1999, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2008, and 2011.

Key findings

- Unemployment remains by far the most important problem for South Africans, followed by housing, crime, education, poverty, and corruption. Education moved up in the priority list, but overall the popular assessment of problems that government should address have not changed substantially since 2011.
- Public evaluations of government performance on key issues – especially economic issues – are overwhelmingly negative. More than seven in 10 South Africans say the government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in fighting corruption in

government (80%), narrowing income gaps (78%), reducing crime (77%), creating jobs (77%), keeping prices down (76%), and managing immigration (72%).

- South Africans give the government high marks for its performance in ensuring welfare payments to eligible recipients, and a majority of respondents also approve of the government's performance in uniting the country, addressing educational needs, maintaining roads and bridges, improving basic health care, and providing water and sanitation.
- While most ratings are similar to 2011 assessments, public disapproval of government performance on crime reduction, management of the economy, and the fight against corruption increased by more than 10 percentage points from the previous survey.
- On most performance indicators, Indian/South Asian and white South Africans rate the government more negatively than do their black and coloured counterparts.
- Even among supporters of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, majorities are critical of the government's performance on job creation, keeping prices down, fighting corruption, and reducing crime.

Unemployment, housing, and crime top list of problems

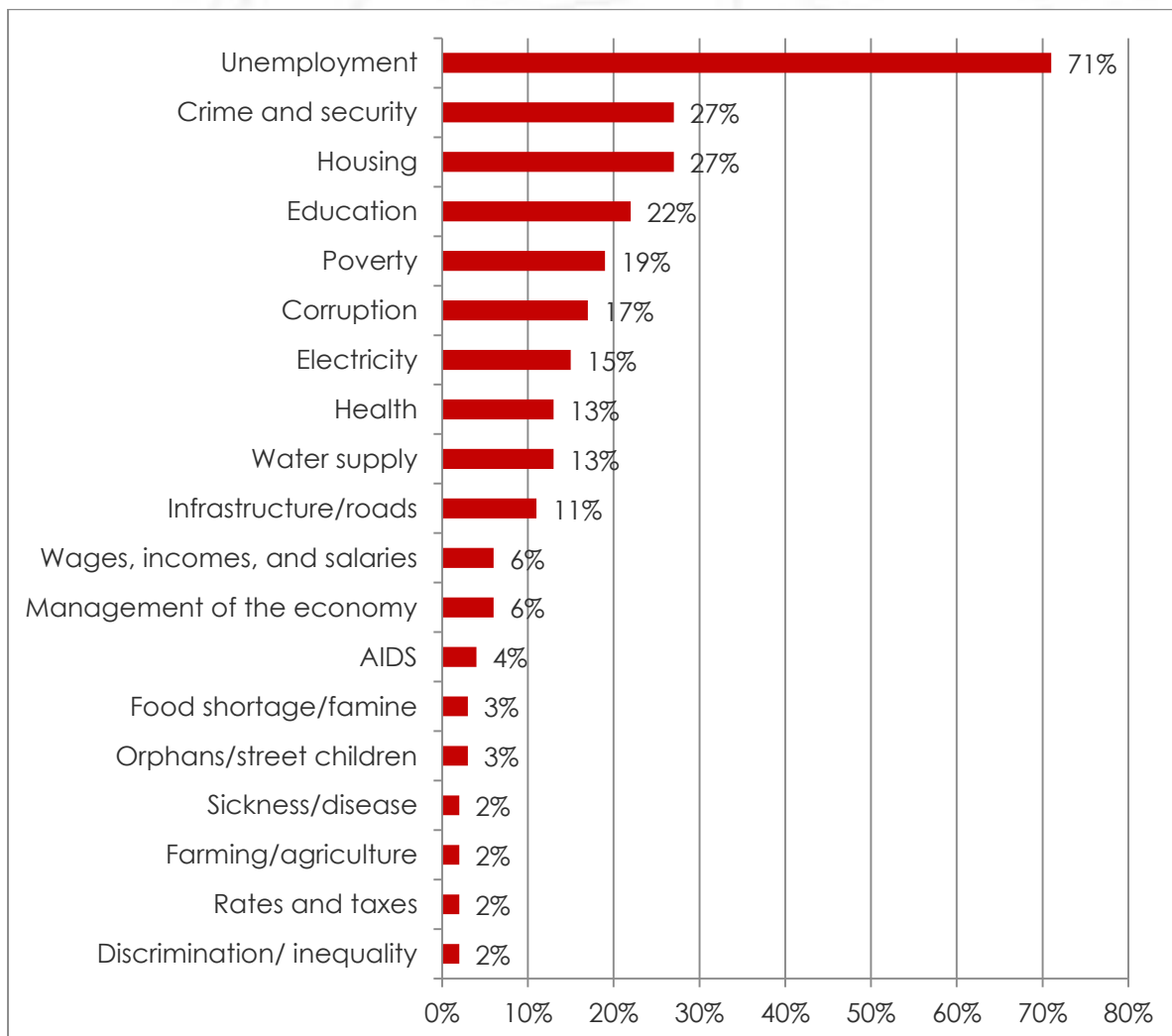
Asked what are "the most important problems facing this country that the government should address," seven of 10 South Africans (71%) cite unemployment among their top three priorities (Figure 1). This proportion is almost unchanged from 2011 (70%), suggesting that the public perceives little progress on the job-creation front.

Next on the priority list are provision of decent housing and crime/security, each mentioned by 27% of survey respondents. Concerns about crime align with crime rate statistics released in September 2015 by the South Africa Police Services, in which 16 of 27 crime categories saw increases from the previous year (Business Tech, 2015).

For the first time, education ranks among citizens' top five priorities, moving up from sixth to fourth place since the 2011 survey. Although the 2015 survey was conducted a month before the recent student protests against fee increases and the call for free education at South Africa's universities, survey respondents clearly endorse education as a major issue. Interestingly, six of 10 citizens (60%) approve of the government's efforts to meet the country's educational needs, though this proportion has declined from 67% in 2011.

Poverty and corruption round out the top six priority issues. The Nkandla corruption scandal surrounding President Zuma, which the Public Protector's office ruled involved gross abuses of public funds, may have been a contributory factor in the corruption rating.

Figure 1: Citizens' top-priority concerns | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address? (Respondents could give up to three responses. Numbers shown are % of all respondents identifying each problem as one of their three most important problems. Since respondents could give more than one response, numbers total more than 100%.)*

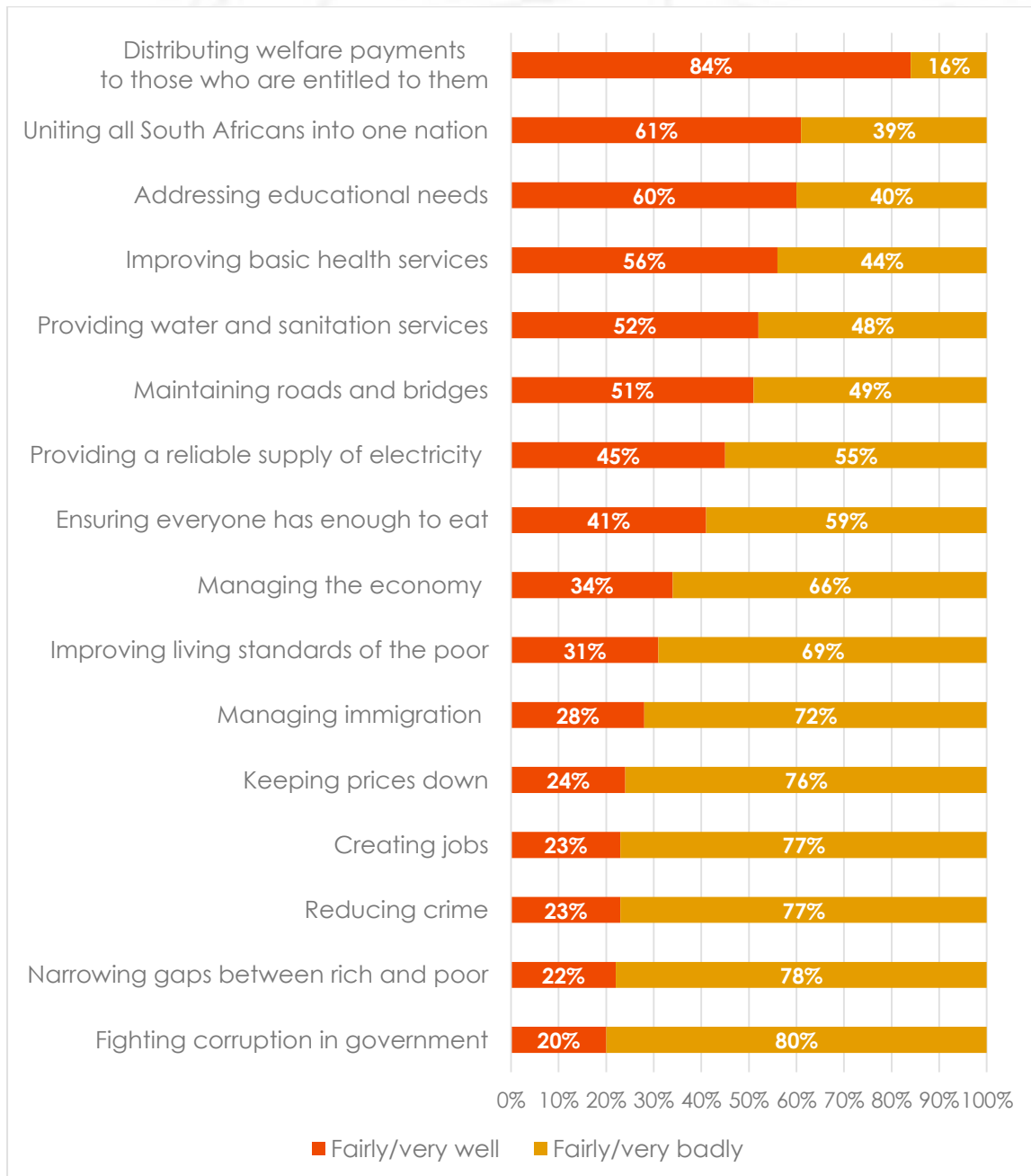
Government performance rated as poor on key issues

Most citizens rate the government's performance as "fairly bad" or "very bad" on key economic indicators. In nine of 16 performance areas, a majority of citizens give the government a failing grade (Figure 2). In a list that is fairly consistent with citizens' most important problems, the worst rating is reserved for the fight against corruption in government, in which four of five citizens (80%) say the government is performing badly.

The government also receives strongly negative ratings on reducing income gaps (78% "fairly" or "very" badly), reducing crime (77%), job creation (77%), and keeping prices down (76%). About two-thirds believe the government has done a poor job of managing the economy (66%) and of improving the living standards of the poor (69%).

The negative ratings of the government's performance on economic issues align with South Africa's slower economic growth rate (1.5% growth in the gross domestic product in 2015 compared to 2% during the period 2008-2012) and rising unemployment (25.5% after a loss of 188,000 jobs during the third quarter of 2015 (Trading Economics, 2015).

Figure 2: Assessment of government performance | South Africa | 2015



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? (Numbers exclude "Don't know" responses, which made up 3% or less of all responses)

As shown in Figure 2 above, despite negative ratings on a number of government performance indicators, a majority of South Africans say their government has done "very well" or "fairly well" on a number of social-service delivery issues. More than eight of 10 respondents (84%) applaud the government's performance in distributing welfare payments to citizens who are entitled to them, an improvement from 76% in 2011. A majority also approve of the government's efforts in uniting the country (61%) and meeting educational needs (60%), improving basic health care (56%), providing water and sanitation (52%), and maintaining roads and bridges (51%). The proportion of respondents who say the

government has performed well on food security continues to rise (from 22% in 2002 to 31% in 2008, 38% in 2011, and 41% in 2015) but still remains a minority.

Several of these positive ratings are somewhat less positive than they were four years ago. The survey shows a decline in approval ratings with regard to addressing education needs (from 67% who said fairly/very well in 2011 to 60% in 2015) and providing water and sanitation (from 59% approval to 52%), among others.

Disapproval increases on crime, corruption, the economy, immigration

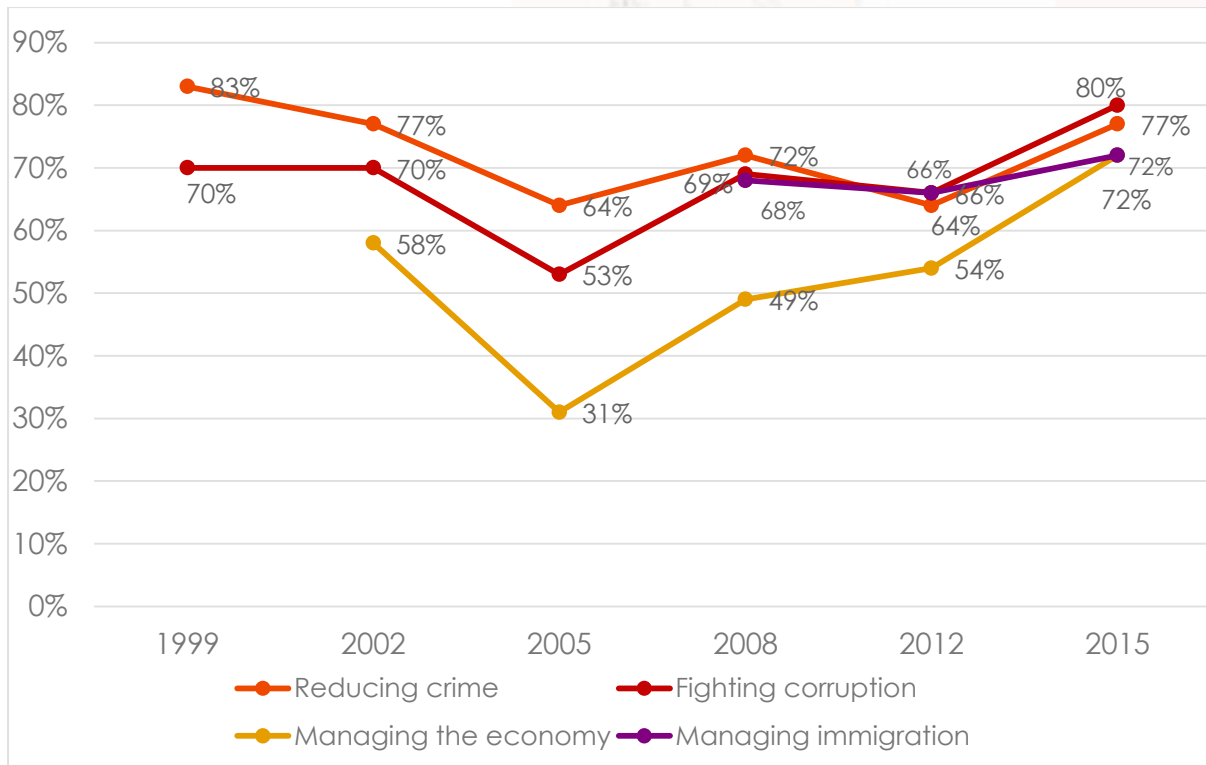
Though negative, public assessments on most economic indicators are not substantially more negative in 2015 than they were in 2011. In contrast, four performance areas saw significant increases in public disapproval of government performance, suggesting a need for urgent action: reducing crime, fighting corruption in government, managing the economy, and immigration.

Eight of 10 respondents (80%) rate government performance as poor in fighting corruption, a 14-point increase from 2011 on an issue that has been a priority for major international organisations and many political leaders since the mid-1990s (Figure 3).

The largest increase in public disapproval (18 percentage points) concerns management of the economy (72%, up from 54% in 2011). Disapproval of the government's performance on crime reduction increased by 13 percentage points to 77%, up from 64% in 2011.

The government also received a gloomy assessment of its performance on managing immigration. Despite its own challenges, South Africa remains Africa's major economic hub and attracts many migrants from neighbouring countries and beyond. A spike in xenophobic attacks in April 2015 may have contributed to this 72% negative rating – a 6-percentage-point increase from 2011.

Figure 3: Increases in negative ratings | South Africa | 1999-2015



(% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

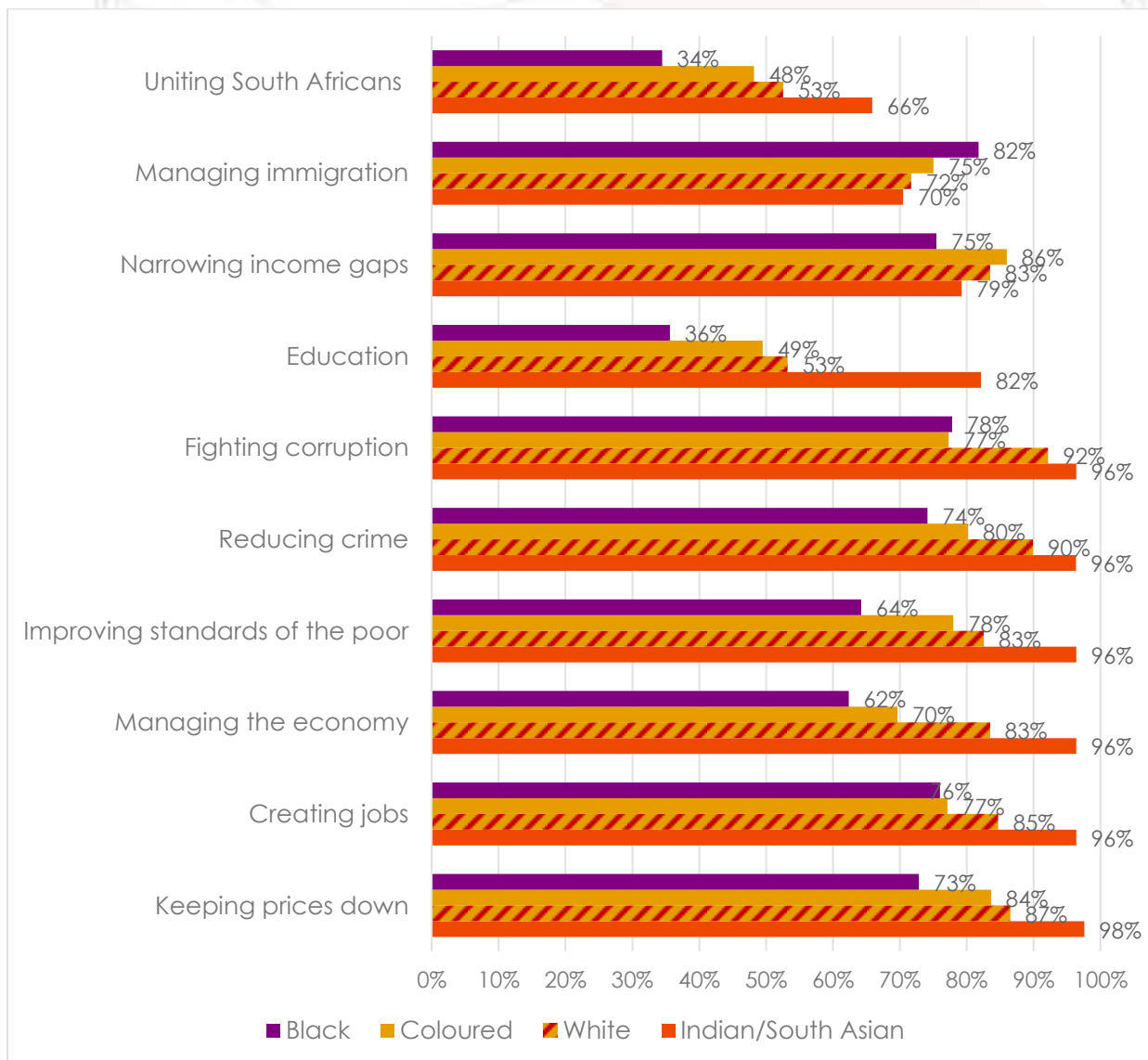
Disapproval high across all demographic groups – even ANC supporters

An analysis of evaluations by various demographic groups shows that on almost all performance indicators, Indian/South Asian and white South Africans paint a gloomier picture than their black and coloured counterparts (Figure 4). On job creation, for example, disapproval is registered by 96% of Indian/South Asian South Africans and 85% of white South Africans, compared to 77% of coloured and 76% of black citizens. Similarly, on reducing crime, more Indian/South Asian (96%) and white South Africans (90%) disapprove of the government's performance than do coloured (80%) and black South Africans (74%).

Exceptions to this pattern are seen on the issues of narrowing income gaps, where coloured South Africans register the highest level of disapproval (86%), and immigration, where black citizens are most critical (82%).

The survey reveals no significant variations of perception by sex or age group.

Figure 4: Disapproval of government performance | by race | South Africa | 2015



(% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

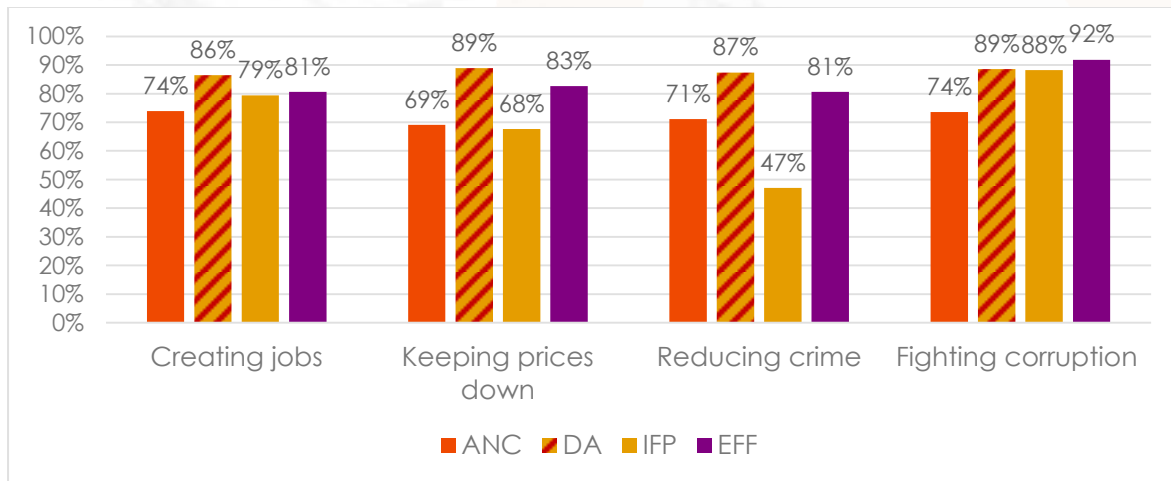
Note: Given the smaller sample size of demographic and political subgroups, these findings have significantly larger margins of sampling error than the +/-2% margin for the overall survey.

Supporters of the ruling ANC¹ rate the government less negatively than opposition supporters on most performance indicators, including on managing the economy, improving living standards of the poor, narrowing income gaps, meeting educational needs, improving basic health services, ensuring food security, and managing immigration. On management of the economy, for example, 54% of ANC supporters say the government is performing “fairly” or “very” badly, compared to 84% of Democratic Alliance (DA) supporters, 68% of Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) supporters, and 80% of Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) supporters.

Similarly, fewer ANC members (56%) give a thumbs-down to the government on improving the living standards of the poor, as opposed to 87% of DA, 77% of IFP, and 76% of EFF supporters.

Nonetheless, it is clear that even among ANC supporter, large proportions – and in many cases majorities – are critical of the government's performance, especially with regard to the country's major challenges of unemployment, inflation, corruption, and crime (Figure 5). On the issue of job creation, for example, almost three-quarters (74%) of ANC supporters say the government is performing “fairly badly” or “very badly” – a level of disapproval that is only marginally lower than that of IFP supporters (79%). The fact that ANC supporters acknowledge the government's failure to effectively address South Africa's major problems is a particularly telling indication of broad public disenchantment.

Figure 5: Disapproval of government performance | by party affiliation | South Africa | 2015



(% who say “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

Findings on differences by party affiliation align with provincial breakdowns (Table 1), which show that a majority of respondents in the Western Cape Province (the DA's stronghold) rate the national government more poorly on nearly all performance indicators. For example, more than four of five Western Cape residents (83%) disapprove of the government's performance in improving the living standards of the poor – 14 percentage points above the average of 69% and more than 20 points higher than in the Eastern Cape (59%), Mpumalanga (57%), and Free State (56%). Similarly, close to nine of 10 residents in Limpopo (87%) and Western Cape (85%) disapprove of the government's performance in reducing crime, compared to 69% in Northern Cape, 68% in Eastern Cape, and 67% in Mpumalanga.

¹ Survey respondents were asked whether they feel “close” to a particular political party and if so, to which one.

Table 1: Disapproval of government performance | by province | South Africa | 2015

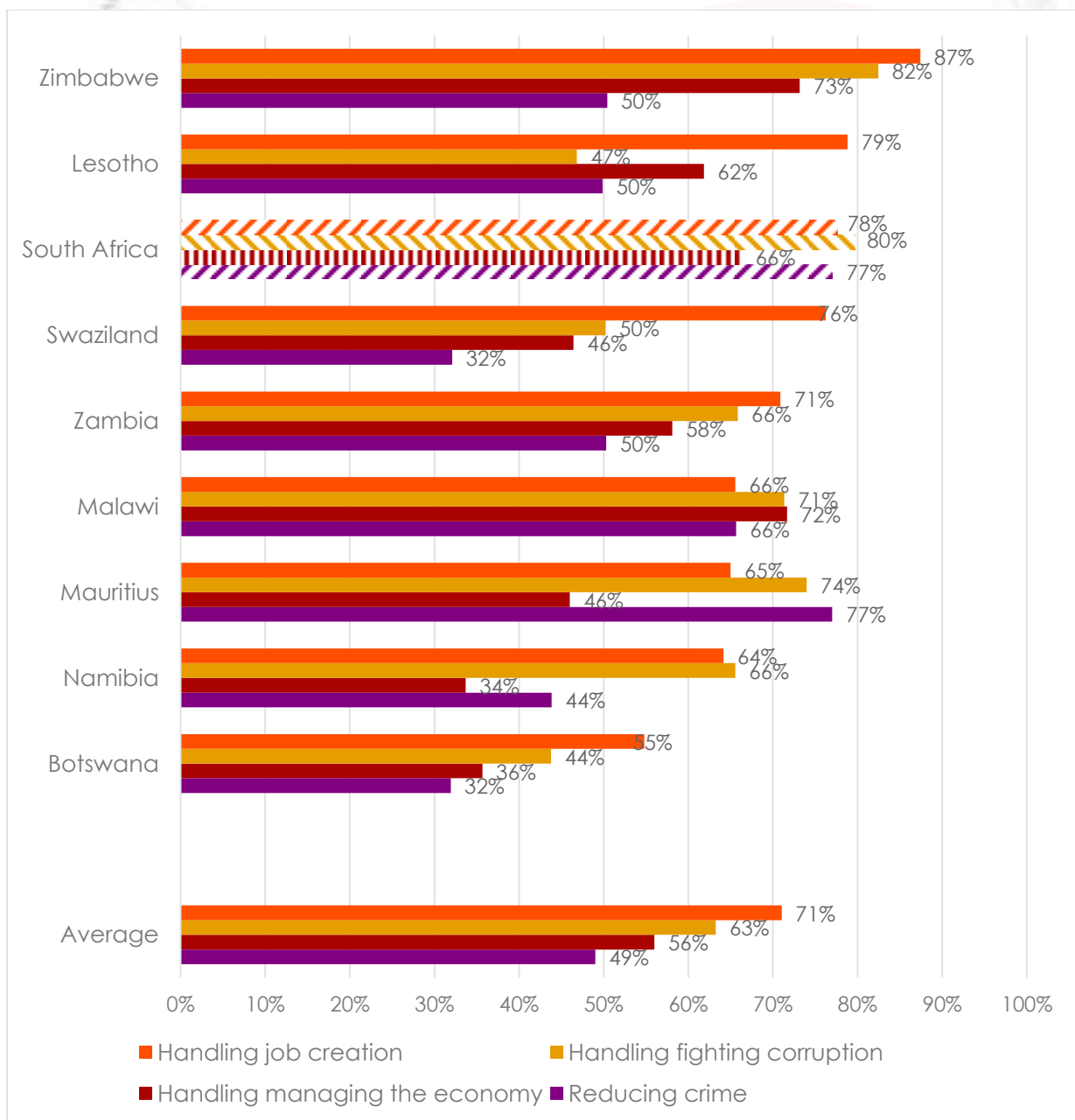
	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng	KwaZulu-Natal	Limpopo	Mpumalanga	North West	Northern Cape	Western Cape	Total
Managing the economy	60%	69%	75%	54%	73%	67%	64%	57%	71%	66%
Improving living standards of the poor	59%	56%	74%	63%	73%	57%	77%	69%	83%	69%
Creating jobs	66%	63%	78%	79%	91%	86%	72%	67%	82%	77%
Keeping prices down	69%	79%	82%	73%	65%	77%	81%	67%	84%	76%
Narrowing gaps between rich and poor	66%	84%	82%	71%	78%	71%	85%	77%	86%	78%
Reducing crime	68%	75%	82%	71%	87%	67%	80%	69%	85%	77%
Improving basic health services	33%	56%	48%	35%	48%	30%	50%	44%	54%	44%
Addressing educational needs	23%	46%	41%	40%	45%	33%	44%	33%	56%	40%
Provision of water/sanitation services	54%	47%	37%	46%	68%	46%	67%	46%	42%	48%
Ensuring everyone has enough to eat	74%	59%	62%	54%	57%	40%	62%	53%	62%	59%
Fighting corruption in government	70%	84%	85%	73%	85%	87%	81%	75%	77%	80%
Maintaining roads and bridges	59%	52%	47%	37%	59%	70%	60%	48%	36%	49%
Provision of reliable electric supply	57%	52%	62%	52%	52%	30%	69%	51%	57%	55%
Uniting all South Africans into one nation	29%	55%	45%	36%	43%	26%	18%	32%	53%	39%
Distributing welfare payments	30%	19%	15%	18%	13%	5%	4%	15%	21%	16%
Managing immigration	50%	85%	83%	73%	86%	59%	68%	49%	67%	72%

(% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

South Africa scores poorly in regional comparison

Among nine southern African countries for which 2014/2015 Afrobarometer data were available at the time of writing, the South African government compares poorly on the issues of creating jobs, fighting corruption, reducing crime, and managing the economy (Figure 6). South Africa ranks highest (along with Mauritius) in public disapproval of government performance in reducing crime, surpassing the regional average of 49% by 26 percentage points. On job creation, corruption, and management of the economy, South Africa also ranks in the top three in terms of public disapproval. On all four performance indicators, the Rainbow Nation scores well above regional averages for public disapproval.

Figure 6: Disapproval of government performance | 9 countries in southern Africa | 2014/2015



(% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Resonating with South Africa's current economic environment, public evaluations of the government's recent performance suggest there is more to worry about than to celebrate. Backed by broad agreement on national priorities, survey findings point to areas where concerted government action is needed.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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