Support for democracy in South Africa declines amid rising discontent with implementation

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Summary

In April 2015, South Africa marked the 21st anniversary of its inaugural elections under full universal suffrage, the country's formal transition from apartheid to electoral democracy. South Africa's political system is well-regarded by international experts and is one of only 11 on the continent that Freedom House currently classifies as "free" (Freedom House, 2015).[1] Despite this success, 2015 is best remembered for its political turmoil, including corruption scandals, a combative atmosphere in Parliament, and nationwide student protests against higher education tuition. In December, these events culminated in large protest marches under the banner of #ZumaMustFall to demand President Jacob Zuma's resignation following the economic fallout from his unexpected replacement of the country's well-regarded finance minister (Telegraph, 2015).

Recent analysis of public opinion data from the 2015 Afrobarometer survey in South Africa shows significant declines in approval of government performance on a wide range of high-priority issues as well as in citizens' confidence in President Zuma (see Afrobarometer dispatches No. 64 and No. 66, at www.afrobarometer.org). The 2015 data also indicate that South Africans have grown more dissatisfied with the state of the country's democracy in general. Although public disapproval of alternative political systems is high, outright support for democracy has declined since 2011, and a majority of citizens would be willing to give up elections in favour of a non-elected government that would provide basic services. Furthermore, there have been corresponding declines in the proportions of citizens who believe that South Africa is a democracy and who are satisfied with its implementation.

Race continues to be a leading source of differences in South Africans' attitudes toward democracy. Black citizens report significantly higher levels of support for democracy and its current institutionalization in the country. However, they are also are more willing to give up regular elections in return for basic service provision, indicating a lack of full commitment to the system.

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. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 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 and September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95%

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[1] The other 10 countries are: Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, and Tunisia.

confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

Key findings

- Support for democracy has declined from 72% of South Africans in 2011 to 64% in 2015, which is slightly below the continental average (67%). Support for democracy is higher than average among better-educated, rural, younger, and black South Africans.

- Six of 10 South Africans (61%) say they are willing to forego elections in favour of a non-elected government that would guarantee basic services such as safety, rule of law, housing, and jobs.

- Substantial majorities of South Africans reject alternatives to democracy, with public disapproval highest for one-man rule (80%), followed by a return to apartheid (77%), one-party rule (72%), and military rule (67%). Only 44% of white South Africans reject a hypothetical return to apartheid, while 30% would support such an initiative and 26% are ambivalent or "don't know."

- Less than half (47%) of respondents say the country is a "full democracy" or "a democracy, but with minor problems," a 19–percentage-point decrease since 2011.

- Public satisfaction with the country's democracy has also declined significantly since 2011, from 60% to 48%.

Support for democracy

On average since 2000, about two-thirds (64%) of South Africans have said that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government." Support for democracy gradually increased from 60% in 2000 to a peak of 72% in 2011 but has since declined by 8 percentage points (Figure 1).

Comparison with 35 other African countries covered by Afrobarometer Round 6 surveys shows that this level is slightly below average (67%). Support for democracy on the continent varies widely, from almost nine in 10 Burundians (86%) to only four in 10 Sudanese citizens (44%).

In South Africa, levels of support for democracy vary significantly by residential location, age, education level, and race, though not by gender (Figure 2). Rural residents (68%) are more likely to support democracy than urbanites (61%), and younger respondents (ages 18-49 years) show greater support than those ages 50 years and older (66% vs. 57%). Preference for democracy increases with education, from 56% of citizens with no formal education to 65% of those with at least secondary education. Disaggregation by race shows that black South Africans have the highest levels of support (67%), followed by Coloured (57%), Indian (56%), and white (49%) South Africans.

Despite stated support for democracy, six in 10 citizens (61%) would be willing to give up regular elections in favour of a non-elected government that could deliver basic services. According to this alternative measure, support for democracy was at its peak in 2002 – the only survey in which a majority (55%) of South Africans said they would be "unwilling" or "very unwilling" to give up elections in favour of a non-elected government (Figure 3).

Disaggregation of 2015 responses shows modest differences by location and gender, and no clear pattern by education level. Interestingly, willingness to give up elections decreases with age: Citizens aged 50 and older are least willing (56%), compared to 61% of those aged 30-

49 years and 65% of youth aged 18-29. Black respondents are significantly more willing to accept non-democratic rule (64%) than minority race groups (52%, on average) (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Support for democracy | South Africa | 2000-2015
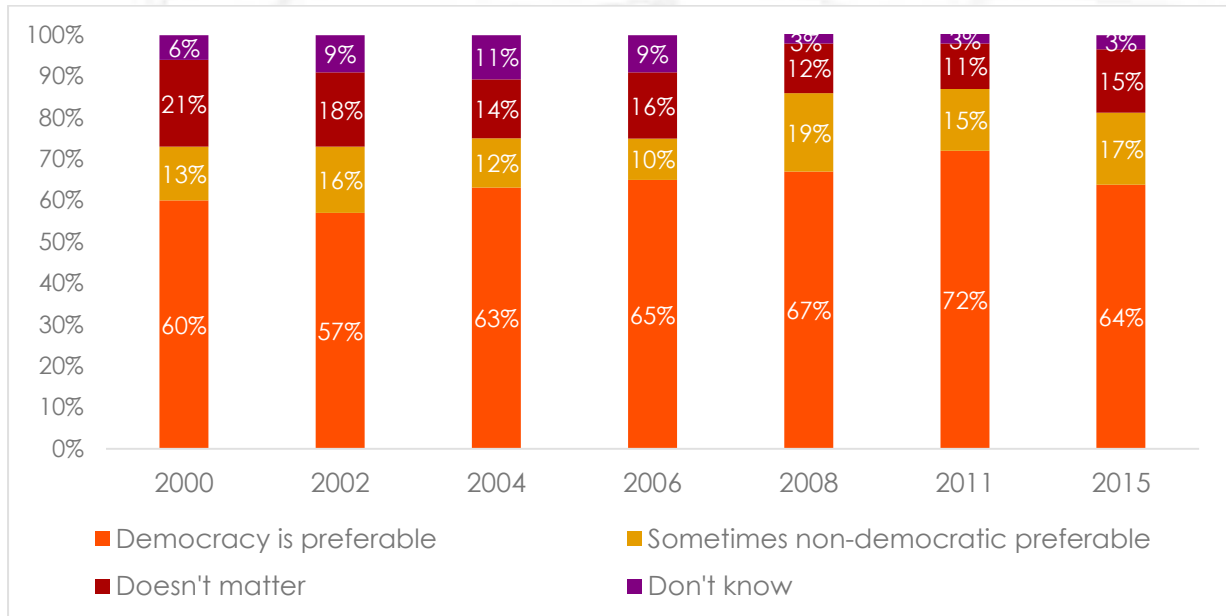
**Respondents were asked:** *Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?*
  Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
  Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
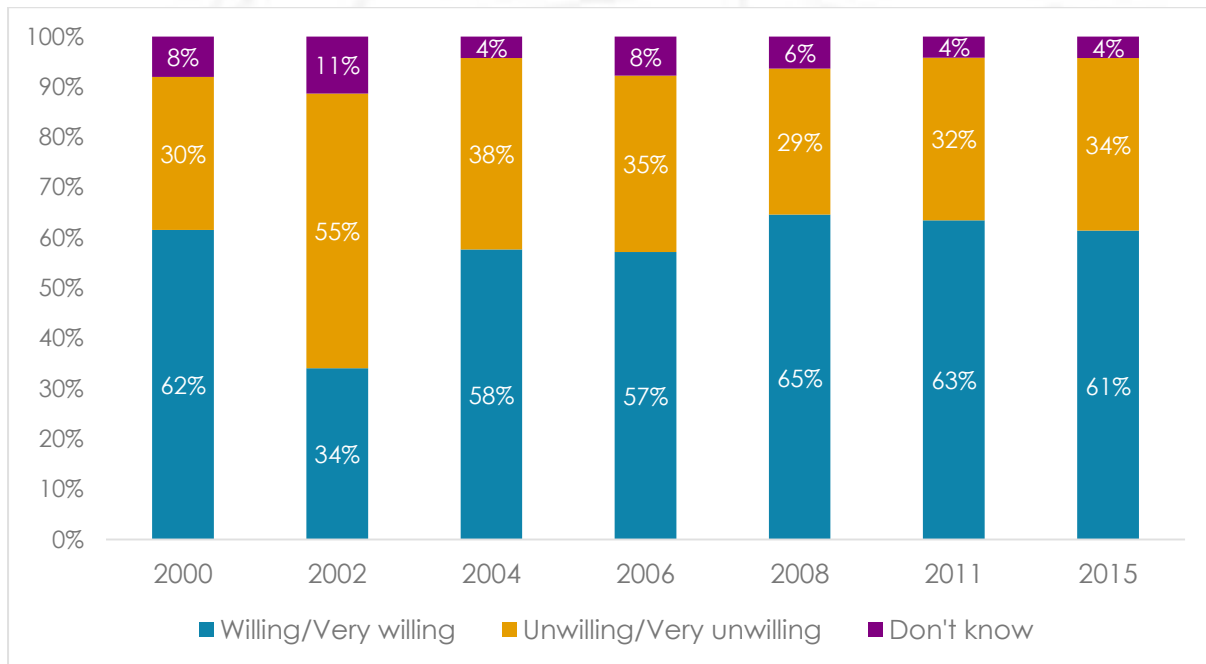 *Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.*
Note: Due to rounding, categories may not always total 100%.

Figure 2: Support for democracy | by social attributes | South Africa | 2015
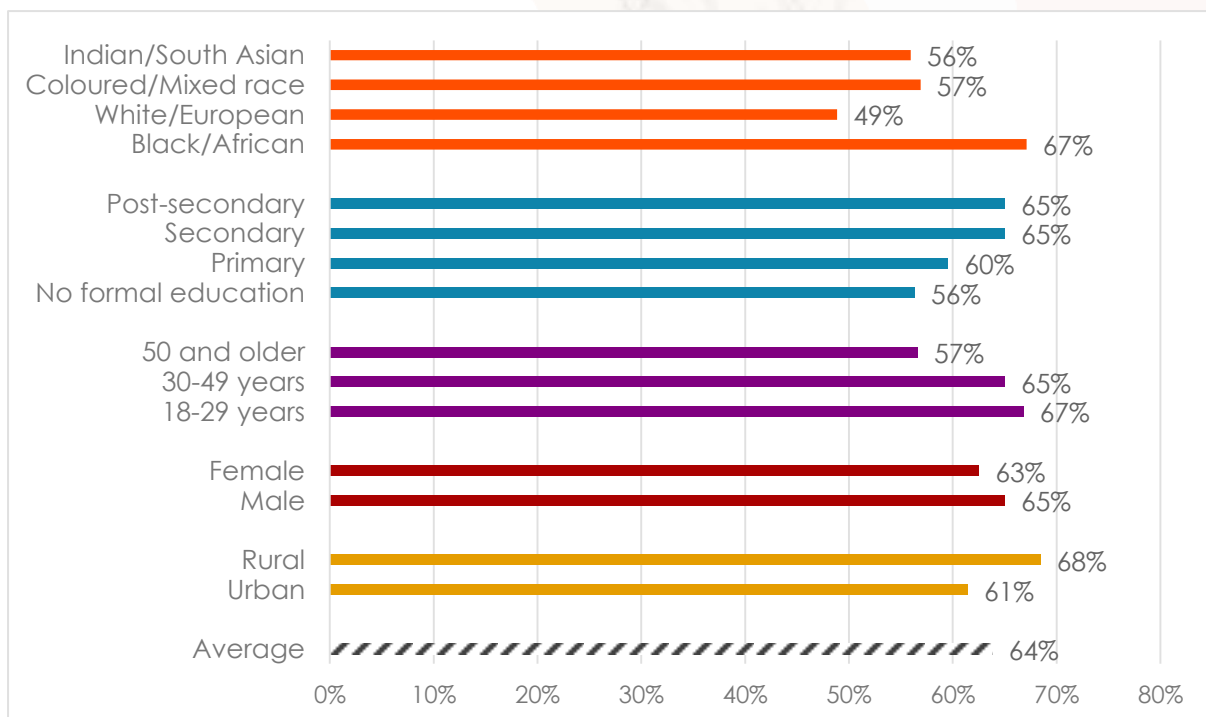

(% who say "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government")

Figure 3: Willingness to give up elections | South Africa | 2000-2015

Respondents were asked: *If a non-elected government or leader could impose law and order, and deliver houses and jobs, how willing or unwilling would you be to give up regular elections and live under such a government?*

Figure 4: Willingness to give up elections | by social attributes | South Africa | 2015
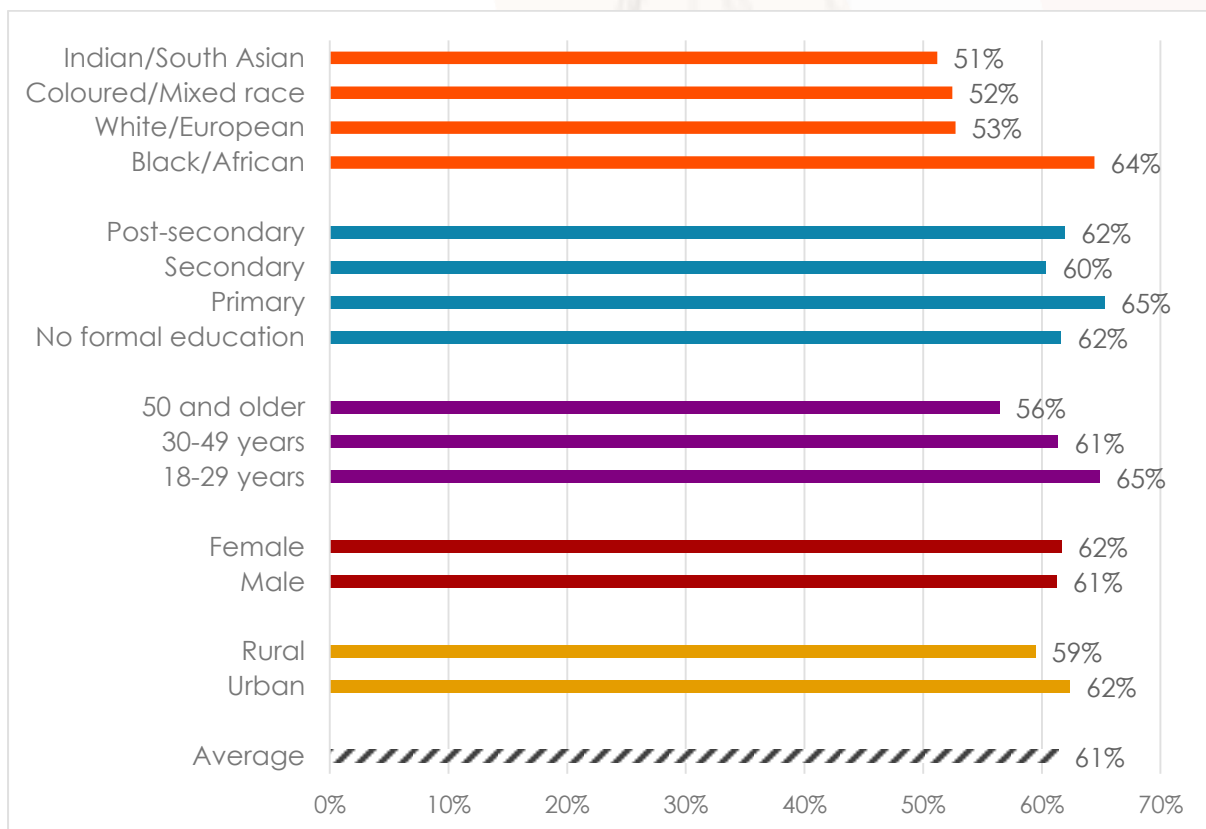
(% "willing" or "very willing")

## Rejection of alternative regimes

Mattes and Bratton (2003) argue that "[while] it is necessary for committed democrats to profess support for democracy, it is not sufficient" as a measure of support for democracy in part because of potential variation in interpretations of democracy (p. 3). Consequently, commitment to democracy should also incorporate the rejection of real-world alternative political systems. As shown above, although six in 10 South Africans (64%) profess their support for democracy, almost the same proportion (61%) say they would be willing to forego elections in exchange for basic service provision.

At present, strong majorities of South Africans disapprove of one-man rule (80%), one-party rule (72%), and military rule (67%), in addition to rejecting a hypothetical return to the apartheid system (77%). These measures of disapproval are currently at peak levels since 2000 except for disapproval of military rule, which was 10 percentage points higher in 2000/2002 (Figure 5).

Comparison with the rest of the continent shows that South Africans' rejection of one-party and military rule is below the African average (by about 6 percentage points), while disapproval of one-man rule matches the average of 80%.

Despite a substantial rise in the proportion of citizens who reject apartheid rule (from 65% in 2000 to 77%), analysis by race shows significant differences in disapproval levels. Unsurprisingly, black South Africans report the highest levels of disapproval (82%), followed by majorities of both Coloured (73%) and Indian (61%) respondents. But only a minority of white South Africans (44%) say they "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of returning to the apartheid system, while 30% would endorse such an initiative and a further 26% say they "neither approve nor disapprove" (23%) or "don't know" (3%) (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Rejection of alternative regimes | South Africa | 2000-2015
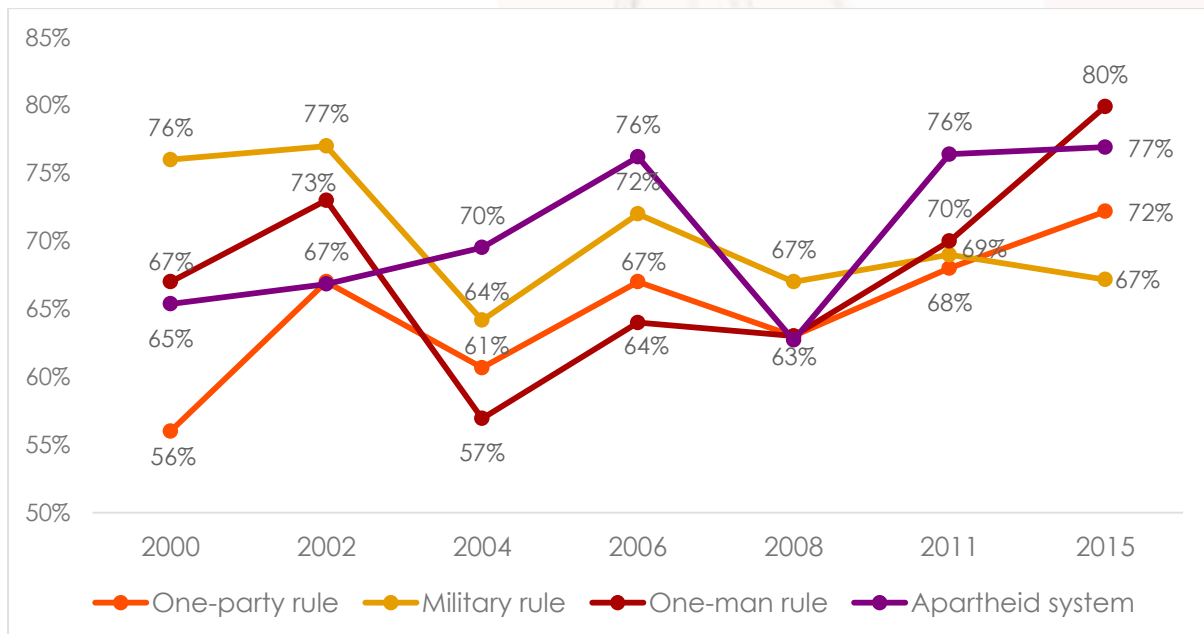
Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?*
- *Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.*
- *The army comes in to govern the country.*
- *Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the President can decide everything.*
- *If the country returned to the old system we had under apartheid.*
(% "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

Figure 6: Rejection of apartheid system | by race | South Africa | 2015

Legend:
- ■ Disapprove/Strongly disapprove
- ■ Neither approve nor disapprove
- ■ Approve/Strongly approve
- ■ Don't know
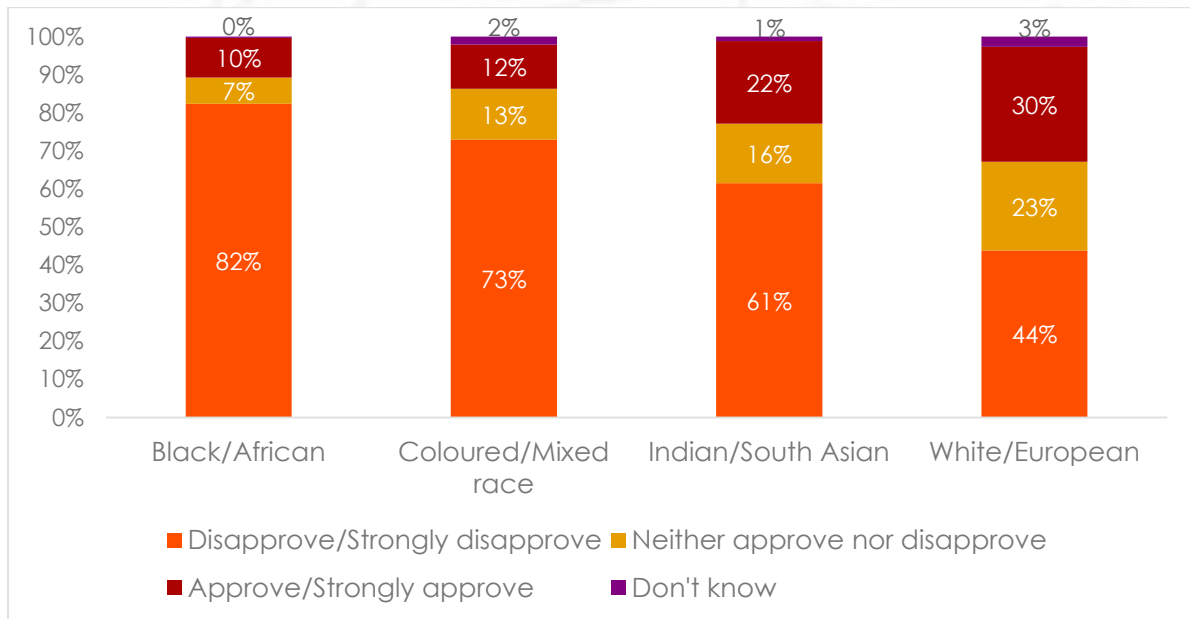
Evaluations of South Africa's democracy

Both perceptions of the extent of democracy in South Africa and public satisfaction with its implementation have declined significantly since 2011 (Figure 7), mirroring steep drops during the periods 2000-2002 and 2004-2008 that may reflect some of the controversies of the Thabo Mbeki presidency, such as his denial of the link between HIV and AIDS, his policy of "quiet diplomacy" following Zimbabwe's 2008 elections, and his conflict with now-President Zuma over control of the ruling African National Congress (ANC).

The belief that South Africa is a "full democracy" or "a democracy, but with minor problems" has dropped by 19 percentage points since 2011, from 66% of respondents to 47%. Fully half (50%) of South Africans now say that their country is "not a democracy" or "a democracy with major problems." Similarly, satisfaction has decreased from a majority of 60% in 2011 to a minority of 48% who now say they are "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the way democracy is working in South Africa.

Comparison with 35 other countries in the Afrobarometer data set indicates that although South Africans' satisfaction with democracy is significantly lower than in 2011, it is still slightly above the continental average of 44%. Conversely, the perceived extent of democracy in the country (47%) is slightly below the continental average (49%). But of the 11 African countries characterized as "free" by Freedom House, only Lesotho (37%) and Tunisia (38%) recorded lower levels on this measure.

The perceived extent of democracy in South Africa varies only slightly by gender and age. However, rural residents (59%) are significantly more likely to believe that South Africa is a "full democracy" or one with "minor problems" than urban residents (41%). So are respondents with at least primary education (average of 47%) compared to those with no formal schooling (36%). Analysis by race indicates that this perception is highest among black respondents, at 52%, and ranges as low as 28% among white South Africans (Figure 8).

Satisfaction with democracy follows similar patterns, but the pattern by education levels is unclear. Again, black respondents are the only race group with a majority of satisfied citizens, at 53%, while this proportion ranges as low as 24% among Indian and 28% among white South Africans (Figure 9).
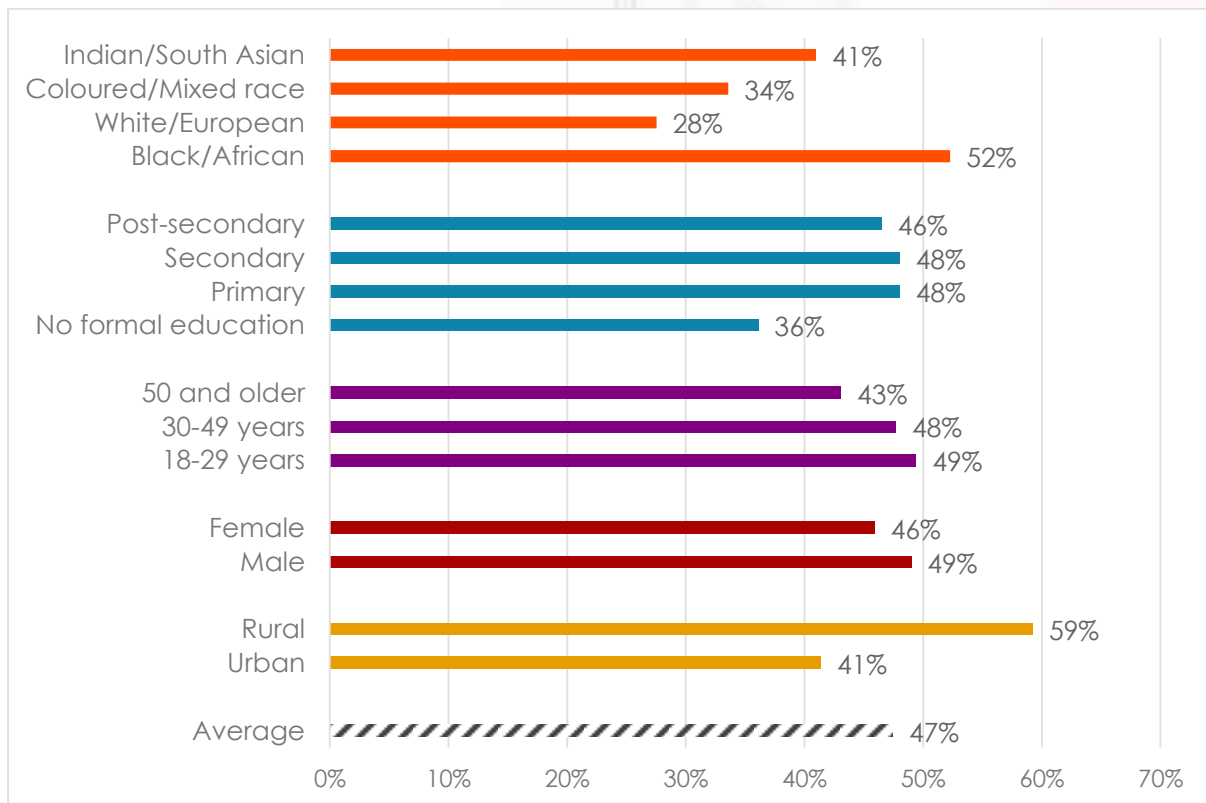
Figure 7: Extent of democracy and satisfaction with democracy | South Africa | 2000-2015

Legend:
- A full democracy/A democracy with minor problems
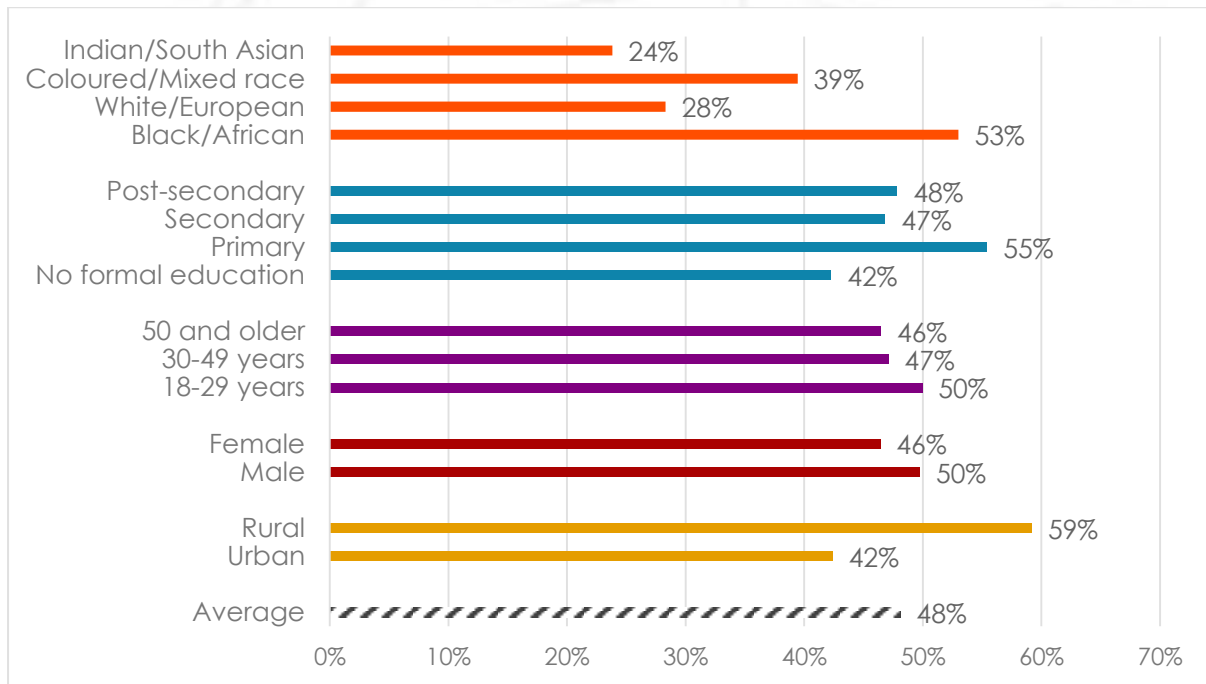- Very/Fairly satisfied with democracy
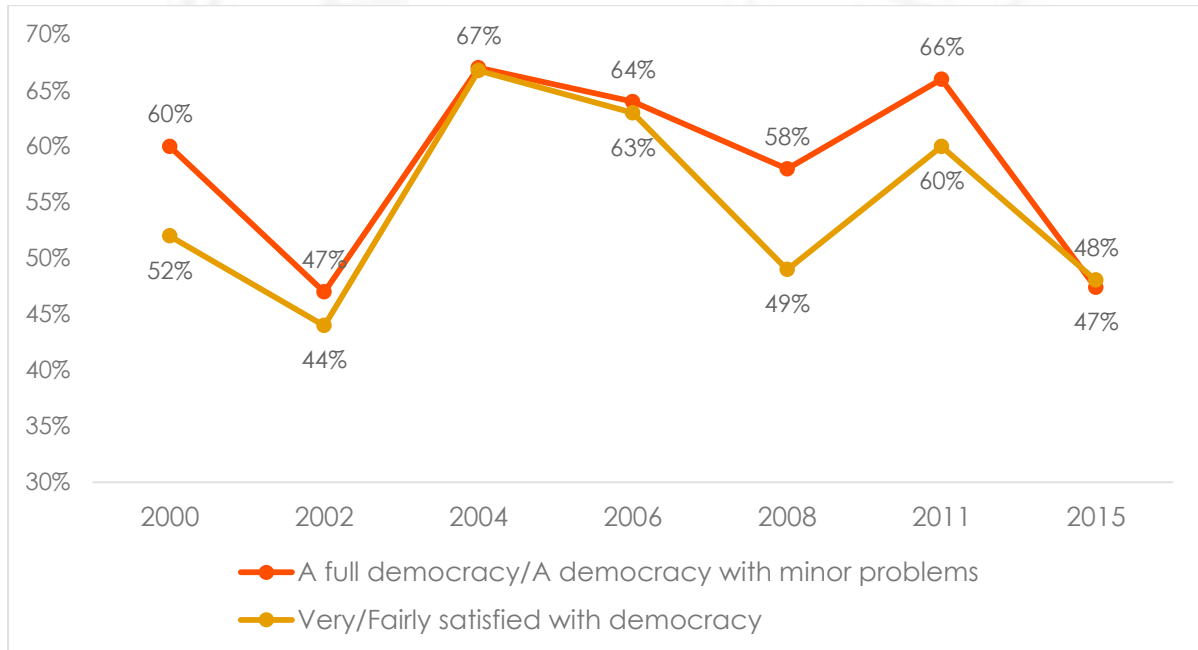
Respondents were asked:
- *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is South Africa today?*
- *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa?*

Figure 8: Extent of democracy | by social attributes | South Africa | 2015

Attribute	Value
Indian/South Asian	41%
Coloured/Mixed race	34%
White/European	28%
Black/African	52%
Post-secondary	46%
Secondary	48%
Primary	48%
No formal education	36%
50 and older	43%
30-49 years	48%
18-29 years	49%
Female	46%
Male	49%
Rural	59%
Urban	41%
Average	47%

(% "a full democracy" or "a democracy, but with minor problems")

Figure 9: Satisfaction with democracy | by social attributes | South Africa | 2015

Indian/South Asian — 24%
Coloured/Mixed race — 39%
White/European — 28%
Black/African — 53%

Post-secondary — 48%
Secondary — 47%
Primary — 55%
No formal education — 42%

50 and older — 46%
30-49 years — 47%
18-29 years — 50%

Female — 46%
Male — 50%

Rural — 59%
Urban — 42%

Average — 48%

(% "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")

Conclusion

Results of recent public opinion research suggest that increasing dissatisfaction with South Africa's current leadership has spilled over into waning support for democracy itself. Despite the country's successes since its 1994 transition, South Africans generally have slightly lower levels of pro-democratic attitudes than the continental average. Support for democracy has declined since 2011, and although disapproval of non-democratic alternative regimes is high, a majority of citizens are willing to give up regular elections in favour of basic service provision. Furthermore, less than half of South Africans believe that the country is a "full democracy" or "a democracy, but with minor problems," and less than half are at least "fairly satisfied" with its current implementation.

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

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