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The Unconvinced Vote: The Nature and Determinants of Voting Intentions and the Changing Character of South African Electoral Politics

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ABSTRACT

In the lead up to South Africa's sixth National and Provincial Elections in May 2019, the recent performance and leadership dynamics within the country's major political parties raised fundamental concerns about the potential impact on voter turnout. These concerns were not unfounded, given that the 2019 General Elections recorded the lowest voter turnout since 1994, with only 49% of the voting age public participating. Despite this, relatively little remains known about the factors that differentiate decided voters from abstainers, undecided voters and undisclosed voters. To contribute further to the understanding of the determinants of planned electoral participation in the country, this article tests several dominant theoretical accounts of turnout using cumulative data from sixteen annual rounds of the South African Social Attitudes (SASAS) series conducted between 2003 and 2018. Specifically, the relative influence of key socio-demographic attributes, psychological engagement and regime evaluations is examined. The results point to psychological engagement variables playing a decisive role in separating different categories of voter, with age and education also exerting an influence. The article concludes by reflecting on the role of the unconvinced vote in the 2019 Elections, teasing out the implications for future elections in the country.

Introduction and background

This article explores the question of what drives voting intentions in South African elections, using data covering the period between 2003 and 2018, and reflects on the changing nature of the electorate in the country. Despite a national voter outreach campaign organised by the Electoral Commission of South Africa, the country's sixth General Elections had the lowest voter turnout of any national and provisional election since 1994. In addition, there is mounting concern over a growing disinclination to register among younger members of the electorate. The 2019 General Elections represented a pivotal point in the history of electoral democracy in the country. After all, the election came after a decade of increased intra-party factionalism, a diminishing margin of victory for the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in local government elections, high-profile corruption scandals as well as growing discontent with the quality of governance and pace of socio-economic change. Against this background, understanding voter behaviour has become critically important. However, relatively little is currently known about the factors that differentiate decided voters from abstainers, undecided voters and undisclosed voters.

The key narrative of Election 2019 arguably relates to declining participation and it is important to consider this decline in more detail. Despite concerted efforts, voter turnout in the 2019 General Elections was considerably lower than in previous national and provincial elections. Electoral participation among registered voters was 66% in 2019, signifying a drop of seven percentage points relative to the 2014 NPE results (see [Table 1](#)). Moreover, turnout as a share of the voting age population (VAP) fell from 57% in 2014 to 47% in 2019. Many young people did not even register to vote ahead of the 2019 NPE. Voter registration among 18–29 year-olds declined from 58% to 49% between the 2014 and 2019 elections, while among 18–19 year-olds the reduction fell more precipitously from 33% to a mere 19%, which translates into a 42% decline (Schulz-Herzenberg [2019b](#)). Despite lower turnout, the ANC secured an electoral victory with 58% of the vote. This represented a decline from the 62% achieved in 2014 and is the third successive drop in a NPE contest since the high of 70% recorded for the party in 2004.

Since the late 2000s scholars expressed concern over this pattern of declining public participation in South African elections (Kersting [2007](#); Schulz-Herzenberg [2007](#); Kimmie, Greben, and Booyesen [2010](#)), and the aforementioned 2019 statistics are likely to be the source of substantive focus as the country moves to future elections. In many respects, this parallels the growing acknowledgment of, and disquiet over, declining turnout rates in democracies worldwide (Hooghe and Kern [2017](#)). Turnout as a percentage of VAP in South Africa is lower than many advanced industrial countries, though the country still fares better than democracies such as France and Switzerland (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance [2019](#)). The diminishing voting rate raises critical questions about what social and political mechanisms might be influencing voting intentions in South African elections. In this article, we examine the impact of both socio-demographic attributes and attitudinal factors on individual predispositions towards electoral participation in South Africa, drawing in particular on select theoretical accounts advanced in international turnout literature. It should be stated that quantitative (multi-variate) examinations of electoral behaviour in the country remain surprisingly rare, although there is a burgeoning body of evidence on both turnout and voting choice (Roberts, Struwig, and Grossberg [2012](#); Struwig, Roberts, and Gordon [2016](#); Schulz-Herzenberg [2019a](#)). The present study differs firstly by focusing on voter turnout decisions ahead of the 2019 General Elections, not only as a binary choice between participation and abstention, but also accommodating voter indecision and undisclosed preferences and

Table 1. Electoral participation in South Africa during national and provincial elections, 1999–2019 (Count '000 and % of the eligible voting age population).

	Voting age population (VAP)		Registered population (RP)		Total votes cast			Spoilt votes			Total valid votes		
			Count	%	Count	%	%	Count	%	%	Count	%	%
	Count	VAP											
1999	22,589		18,173	80	16,480	73	91	251	1	1	16,228	72	89
2004	27,437		20,675	75	16,114	59	78	251	1	1	15,864	58	77
2009	29,957		23,182	77	18,159	61	78	239	1	1	17,920	60	77
2014	32,688		25,388	78	18,907	58	78	252	1	1	18,655	57	73
2019	35,868		26,757	75	17,924	50	67	252	1	1	17,672	49	66

Source: Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC); Schulz-Herzenberg [2019b](#).

how these constituencies vary in profile. It also looks at the recent election against a broader period of time, by relying on data covering late 2003 to late 2018, as a means of locating current tendencies against emerging dynamics in political culture. In so doing, the study aims to extend certain aspects of the modelling undertaken by Schulz-Herzenberg (2019a) based on data relating to turnout in the 2014 General Elections.

Classic studies of electoral participation suggest that certain socio-economic characteristics are associated with electoral participation (see, for instance, Campbell et al. 1960; Lipset 1960; Parry, Moyser, and Day 1992; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The socio-economic status (SES), material wealth and educational attainment of individuals is said to shape the level of resources (time, money and civic skills) available to facilitate participation in political activities, such as voting (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). Evidence on the predictive power of SES variables associated with the resources model remains weak. Education is nonetheless a stronger predictor of turnout decisions, while age, and gender to a lesser degree, are other significant socio-economic factors informing individual differences in turnout (Blais 2000; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobrzynska 2003; Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte 2004; Nevitte et al. 2009). Specifically, the weight of evidence suggests that electoral participation increases with age and higher levels of education, and is more common among men than women.

One of the most widely recognised determinants of electoral participation is psychological engagement with politics. Democracy theorists consider low levels of engagement to be damaging to voter turnout. In the seminal study by Almond and Verba (1963), *Civic Culture*, it is maintained that one of the central features of a model citizen in normative democratic theory is engagement in politics (see also Campbell et al. 1960; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Carpini and Keeter 1996). In most empirical research, such engagement has been characterised by the degree to which individuals think and talk about politics. Political interest is consequently considered a good measure of how much political information and knowledge an individual possesses (Norris 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dalton 2006). A sense of duty to vote and belief in the efficacy of voting is also seen to play a role (e.g. Blais 2000; Blais, Massicotte, and Dobrzynska 2003; Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte 2004; Blais and Achen 2019). Research in South Africa shows that an individual's voting efficacy is, to a degree, a product of being on the winning political side (Gordon, Struwig, and Roberts 2018). This finding demonstrates the influence that political partisanship has on an individual's beliefs about the political world. The results suggest further questions on how partisanship may drive political attitudes in the country.

Apart from psychological engagement, Almond and Verba (1963) contended that certain civic attitudes might further motivate political participation, identifying evaluative orientations as important. The associated valence politics or regime evaluations model centres on the idea that 'citizen involvement will vary according to levels of (dis)satisfaction with the performance of political leaders, the incumbent government and the wider political system' (Clarke et al. 2009, 244–245). For Almond and Verba, citizens' negative attitudes towards the political system could result in alienation, which erodes their willingness to participate in the system. In a comprehensive analysis of public opinion trends in South Africa, Struwig, Roberts, and Gordon (2016) found that a considerable segment of the public lost faith in the political class. Satisfaction with democracy and political institutions was low, and public trust in key political institutions (such as national government) had significantly eroded. Such discontent, particularly among the poor, seems to be linked

in large part to widespread public dissatisfaction with government's efforts to create jobs and keep people safe (also see Gouws and Schulz-Herzenberg 2016). Disillusionment with politicians and political parties may lead citizens to embrace what some have termed 'anti-politics' or 'anti-formal politics', involving a rejection of conventional forms of political participation and a turn towards alternative forms of political action, such as protest action (Dalton 2006). Concomitantly, a number of studies have been quite critical of the supposed relationship between disillusionment and political behaviour (for, example, Saunders 2014). The question therefore remains whether such discontentment with aspects of regime performance in the country ultimately sways decisions regarding electoral participation.

While a sizeable number of other factors have been proposed as potential influences on turnout, such as mobilising agencies and networks, as well as social context (see Schulz-Herzenberg 2019a), this article focuses on testing of the individual resources, psychological engagement and regime evaluations hypotheses. Following an outline of the data and methods employed for the study, we systematically examine the role of these socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates on planned electoral participation using multivariate modelling. This leads into a concluding discussion that teases out the implications for successive elections in the country.

Methodology

The data used to examine the patterns and determinants of electoral participation derives from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), a repeat cross-sectional survey series conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council on an annual basis since 2003. The series was designed to be nationally representative of the adult population aged 16 years or older living in private residence. The sample for each round of surveying consisted of 500 Population Census Small Area Layers (SALs) as primary sampling units, stratified by province, geographical sub-type and majority population group. In each of the sampled localities, seven visiting points were randomly selected for interviewing, followed by the random selection of a single, age-eligible member in each household using a Kish grid. Questionnaires were administered using face-to-face interviewing in the respondent's language of choice. The realised sample size was for each survey round ranges between 2500 and 3300. Data for this study is available for the period 2008–2014. The research instruments and protocols were approved by the HSRC Research Ethics Committee.

For the present study, the main measure used to examine electoral predispositions is a constructed categorical variable deriving from a question on the planned intention to vote. Each SASAS round since 2003 has asked respondents the following: 'If there were an election tomorrow, for which party would you vote?' Those specifying that they would vote for a specific political party were coded as 'decided voters', while those indicating that they would not vote were classified as 'abstainers'. Two additional categories were identified based on the pattern of responses, namely 'undecided voters' who were uncertain of their electoral choice, and 'undisclosed voters' who refused to voice a clear preference when asked the voting intention question. Data from the sixteen survey rounds conducted between 2003 and 2018/19 were combined into a cumulative file, permitting an examination of trends over time and the conducting of multivariate analysis that covers all years of data while controlling for year effects. The study is confined to

those age-eligible to vote in each survey round, irrespective of registration status. Trends in electoral intentions and select relevant independent variables are presented over the full period from 2003 onwards, while the modelling is restricted to the 11 rounds conducted between 2008 and 2018/19 due to certain key variables not being fielded during the first five rounds of the SASAS series. The sample size for the combined 2003–2018 data is 47,882, while the 2008–2018 modelling is based on a sample of 33,648 cases. A description of the coding of the independent variables used to test the resources, psychological engagement and regime evaluations hypotheses is presented in an [Addendum](#) to the article.

Trends in electoral intentions since the early 2000s

Figure 1 presents trends in relation to responses to the intention to vote question over sixteen rounds of annual SASAS surveying between 2003 and 2018/19. For ease of interpretation, the pattern for the four category of responses – decided voters (those who will vote), abstaining voters, undecided voters and undisclosed voters – are presented on separate line graphs. Firstly, in relation to decided voters, who unequivocally declare an intention to vote for a particular political party if there were to be an election tomorrow,

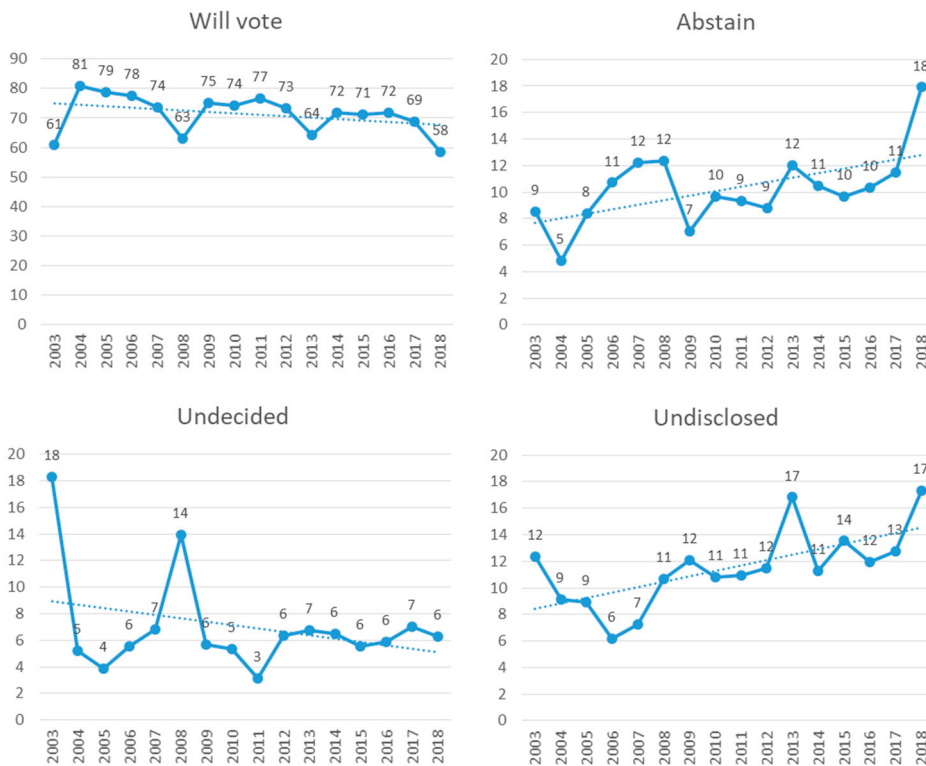


Figure 1. Trends in electoral intention among the voting age public, 2003–2018/19 (%). Source: HSRC SASAS 2003–2018.

Notes: (1) Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the voting age population (18 years and older) living in South Africa, (2) the vertical axis scale in the decided voters ('will vote') graph differs from the other three graphs, with the latter on a finer grained scale in order to better depict dynamics for these unconvinced voters.

there have been fluctuations over time, with a generally declining trend. In the survey rounds conducted approximately six months prior to General Elections (the 2003, 2008, 2013 and 2018 rounds), there are discernible dips in the share of the voting age public openly declaring an intention to vote. Downturns of this type in the pre-election cycle ranged from 10 to 20 percentage points, and are likely to reflect a combination of influences. This may include growing introspection about electoral choice in the build-up to a specific electoral contest as well as a heightened sensitivity to disclosing electoral participation preferences during such periods. The share reporting an intention to vote in the lead-up to the 2019 General Elections (58%) was the lowest recorded over the examined period.

In contrast with decided voters, the tendency to report planned abstention has been increasing on aggregate over time. A careful examination of the year-on-year patterns, shows that there have been ebbs and flows that correspond with political terms of office and contextual events. During former President Thabo Mbeki's second term of office, from 2004 until his 'resignation' in September 2008, there is an observable surge in reported abstention, rising from 5% in late 2004 to 12% in late 2008. This declined again to 7% in the aftermath of the 2009 General Elections, and during the first term and most of the second term of the Zuma administration, this fluctuated within a 7–12% range, with a slight inclining pattern. The results of the 2018 survey, conducted between November 2018 and February 2019, show a rapid upswing in planned abstention, from 11% in late 2017 to 18%. This is the highest recorded share indicating that they would not vote if an election were held tomorrow. This corroborates official registration and turnout statistics, which also displayed a notable downturn, especially among younger age cohorts (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019b). The decline in the share of decided voters and a corresponding upswing in planned abstention remains a defining factor of the 2019 General Elections. Growing absenteeism raises fundamental questions about the underlying determinants and future trajectory of this emerging pattern of behaviour.

Beyond the behavioural extremes of confirmed participation and abstention lie the other two categories of voters presented in Figure 1, namely undecided and undisclosed voters. Expressions of electoral indecision were especially high in the lead-up to the 2004 and 2009 general elections, accounting for 18% and 14% of the voting age population (18 years and older) respectively. The 2004 General Elections posed the electorate with the difficult choice of a second term under the leadership of President Mbeki in the context of growing discontent about the pace and nature of post-apartheid reconstruction and development. The 2009 General Elections, however, occurred barely six months after the recalling of President Mbeki, the rise in electoral fortunes of President Zuma, the outbreak of widespread xenophobic riots and an intensification of protest events around the country. The run up to the 2009 General Elections was also the period of the global financial crises and often considered by many economists as the most serious financial crises since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In a context of complex electoral and broader political dynamics, the observable spikes in voter indecision is perhaps somewhat unsurprising. These spikes did not recur in the context of the 2014 and 2019 General Elections, and with the exception of the 2003 and 2008 survey rounds, the share of undecided voters has remained relatively unchanged, ranging narrowly between 3% and 7% in the other 14 years of observation.

The undisclosed vote is the most difficult group among the electorate to profile. Do these adults with clear party allegiances but a reticence to openly discuss such identification with interviewers? Are they voters with weak levels of partisanship, or even voters with no particular sense of party attachment at all? Could they even be discerning swing voters who decide on their electoral choices following campaigning or on voting day itself based on a careful weighing-up of different factors? It could also be they are a group encompassing a blend of all the above. What is again apparent is that there are upswings in the share of undisclosed voters in each of the survey years prior to general elections falling within the period under examination (the 2003, 2009, 2013 and 2018 survey rounds). Furthermore, like abstention, the share of undisclosed voters shows an upward trend over time, with the highest reported shares falling into this category in both 2013 and 2018/19 (17%). Exploring the factors informing lack of disclosure of electoral intentions, and the manner in which this group differs or approximates decided and abstaining voters would also help to enrich our understanding of the South African voter.

Testing the relative influence of different theoretical models

Using pooled, annual data from the SASAS survey series covering the period from late 2008 through to early 2019, we tested the theoretical assumptions underlying the individual resource, psychological engagement and regime evaluation models. Given the nature of our categorical dependent variable measuring voting intention, we used a multinomial regression approach to model voting intention. The base category for analysis are decided voters, meaning that the models essentially test for the similarities and variances in the predictors of planned electoral turnout relative to the categories of abstaining, undecided and undeclared voters. The approach employed is similar to that adopted by Schulz-Herzenberg (2019a) in her examination of the determinants of turnout in the context of the 2014 General Elections. Specifically, we begin by independently testing the predictive effect of the three theoretical explanations. This is followed by a fully specified model that includes all clusters of indicators as a means of ascertaining which factors and specific indicators predominate when entered simultaneously. Since the modelling is based on combined data from eleven consecutive annual SASAS rounds, we include a control in the models for year of surveying, in order to account for year effects. This is important given the swings in the relative electoral predispositions of the adult public observed over this period of time.

Individual resources (socio-demographic traits)

The results of the initial testing of the individual resources hypothesis are presented in Table 2. Compared to voters that express a clear intention to vote, abstaining voters are more inclined to be younger on average, Indian or coloured adults, and tend to reside in formal urban areas rather than in rural, former homeland areas. No gender or strong educational effects are apparent. Similarly, the main discernible differences between decided and undecided voters is that the latter are slightly more likely to be younger, and Indian or coloured adults rather than black African adults. Again, no statistically significant difference is evident in relation to gender or educational attainment, and there is only a

Table 2. Multinomial logistic regression results testing the impact of individual resources on voter predispositions in South Africa, pooled 2008–2018/19 data.

Individual resources model	Abstainer		Undecided voter		Undisclosed voter	
	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.
Female (ref. male)	−0.088	n.s.	0.119	n.s.	−0.168	**
Age (in years)	−0.024	***	−0.015	***	0.001	n.s.
<i>Population group (ref. Black African)</i>						
Coloured	0.426	***	0.651	***	0.364	***
Indian/Asian	1.178	***	1.215	***	0.739	***
White	−0.014	n.s.	0.135	n.s.	0.317	***
<i>Type of geographic location (ref. Urban formal)</i>						
Urban informal	−0.136	n.s.	0.070	n.s.	−0.200	n.s.
Rural traditional authority areas	−0.273	**	−0.132	n.s.	−0.306	***
Rural farms	−0.200	n.s.	−0.275	*	−0.325	**
<i>Educational attainment (ref. Post-secondary)</i>						
Junior primary schooling or less	0.319	*	−0.046	n.s.	−0.343	*
Senior primary schooling	0.222	n.s.	−0.011	n.s.	−0.416	***
Incomplete secondary schooling	0.199	n.s.	0.024	n.s.	−0.375	***
Complete secondary schooling	0.146	n.s.	0.033	n.s.	−0.200	*
Year of survey	0.056	***	−0.025	*	0.040	***
Constant	−113.429	***	48.013	*	−81.475	***

Notes: (1) Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the voting age population (18 years and older) living in South Africa, (2) the base outcome is 'Decided voters' and (3) the regression model controlled for an individual's province of residence. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant.

marginal effect on type of geographic location. Finally, the undisclosed voter displays a greater tendency to be male, a coloured, Indian or white adult, and more likely to have a tertiary education than a completed secondary or lower level of educational attainment.

These findings therefore suggest that, in terms of socio-demographic attributes, the factors differentiating decided voters from both undecided and abstaining voters are broadly equivalent. Age and race are the main determinants, coupled with a modest locational influence. Younger Indian and coloured voters are accordingly more likely than to voice a preference for abstention or uncertainty about electoral participation. By contrast, in profile the undisclosed voter seems characteristically better educated, more decidedly urban-based, and has a greater chance of being male than the decided voter. Whether these patterns remain, modify or fall away altogether once other attitudinal factors are taken into account for will be determined a little later on, under the discussion of the fully specified model presented in Table 5.

Psychological engagement

The psychological mood of the voting age public ahead of the 2019 General Elections could be regarded as rather sombre in character, especially in perspective of the trends observed over more than a decade (Figure 2). Levels of political interest have remained fairly stable at a relatively low level, with those declaring that they are 'very' or 'quite' interested in politics varying between a modest 28% and 38% over the 2008–2018 period. In late 2018, the figure stood at 30%, which is below the all-year average of 34%, and in a similar range to that observed over the 2016–2018 period (28–30%). By contrast, the sense of political efficacy expressed by the electorate has shown an appreciable decline since the early 2000s, with 2018 representing a pre-electoral low-point. The political efficacy index represents a combination of internal and external efficacy measures,

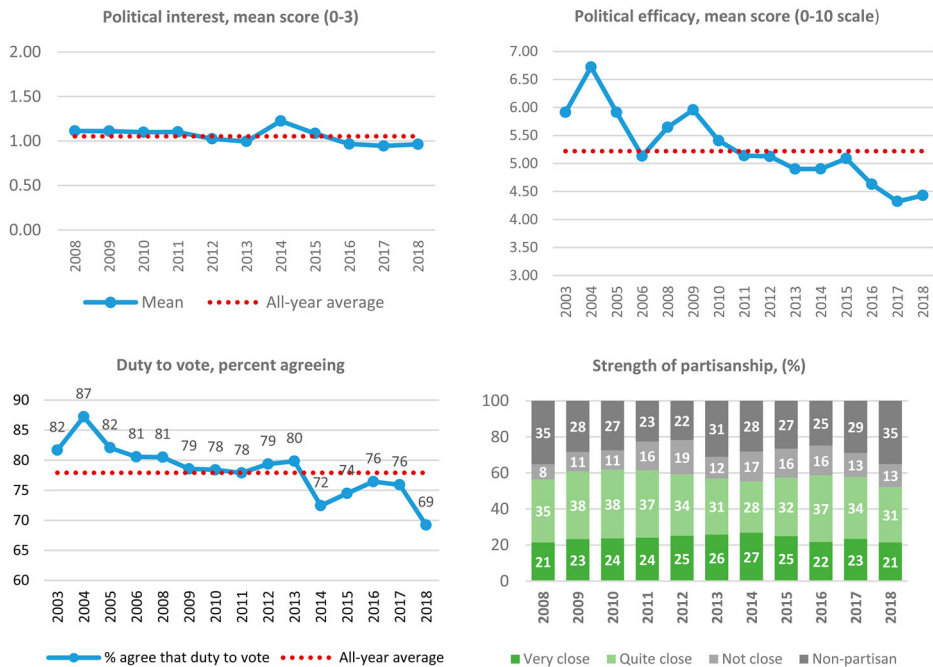


Figure 2. Trends in psychological engagement variables among the voting age public, 2003–2018/19 (%). Source: HSRC SASAS 2003–2018.

suggesting that the public is losing faith in the power of their vote and the accountability of elected officials.

South Africans have tended to display a resolute sense of the duty to vote, a trait that is a likely reflection of the hard-won struggle for the franchise, which was secured for the first time in the country's history in 1994. While this remains true for a clear majority of the voting age population, there has nonetheless been a clear downward trend in this belief, falling from a highpoint of 87% in 2004 to a low of 69% in 2018. Strength of partisanship shows a less distinctive pattern over time, with the share declaring non-partisanship fluctuating between 22% and 35% since 2008, with 2018 falling at the upper limit of this range. Taken together with the other indicator trends, it suggests that entering into the 2019 electoral context, not only was the electorate expressing a lower degree of partisanship than in preceding years, but there was also an unprecedented low level of political efficacy and sense of duty to vote, coupled with a low general level of political interest. The question remains what bearing this has on electoral behavioural intentions, and what it might mean for future electoral contests if the observed patterns continue along the current trajectory.

The multivariate analysis presented in Table 3 tests the combined effect of the psychological engagement factors on the voting age public. The results suggest that political interest, political efficacy and party closeness all yield a significant effect to some degree. In contrast with decided voters, abstaining voters possess significantly lower political interest, political efficacy and duty to vote. They are also less likely than decided voters to have stronger party ties, and instead display a tendency towards non-partisanship. Like abstainers, undecided voters also demonstrate weak partisanship, but fundamentally differ in

Table 3. Multinomial logistic regression results testing the impact of psychological engagement factors on voter predispositions in South Africa, pooled 2008–2018/19 data.

Psychological engagement model	Abstainer		Undecided voter		Undisclosed voter	
	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.
Political interest	−0.161	***	−0.021	n.s.	0.112	*
Political efficacy	−0.171	***	−0.024	n.s.	0.019	n.s.
Duty to vote	−0.199	***	0.028	n.s.	0.031	n.s.
Party closeness (ref. Non-partisan)						
Very close	−4.277	***	−4.633	***	−5.444	***
Quite close	−3.842	***	−3.881	***	−5.490	***
Not close	−3.608	***	−3.654	***	−5.129	***
Year of survey	0.066	n.s.	0.008	n.s.	0.081	***
Constant	−131.439	n.s.	−16.532	n.s.	−162.929	***

Notes: (1) Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the voting age population (18 years and older) living in South Africa, (2) the base outcome is 'Decided voters' and (3) the regression model controlled for an individual's province of residence (not shown) and year of survey. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant.

that political interest, political efficacy and duty to vote have no bearing in differentiating them from decided voters. As for undisclosed voters, they tend to exhibit marginally higher political interest than undecided voters but there is no distinguishing political efficacy or duty to vote effect. Most notably, undisclosed voters demonstrate a weaker degree of partisanship than abstainers and undecided voters.

Regime evaluations

Moving from psychological engagement to confidence in the democratic regime, we examine three factors of performance and trust. Before moving to the predictive power of such variables among voting-age citizens, we again examine the general trends for the select indicators used in the multivariate analysis (Figure 3). Despite fluctuations over time, satisfaction with the functioning of democracy in the country has displayed a general downward tendency. Although there was a slight recovery in the transition from the Zuma to Ramaphosa administrations between late 2017 and 2018, barely a third (34%) of the electorate was satisfied with democracy ahead of the 2019 election. Evaluations of specific areas of government performance have not demonstrated the same degree of downturn across the 2003–2018 period. Nonetheless based on a composite index of performance in six areas of government service delivery performance (water and sanitation, electricity, low-cost housing, access to health care, crime reduction and job creation), it is evident that satisfaction with service delivery has fallen sharply since 2016 to an all-period low in 2018, slightly below that recorded in 2003. Trust in core political institutions (national and local government, as well as Parliament) has not been immune to the critical evaluations provided for other political support measures. The mean political trust index score fell from a high of 3.47 (on the 1–5 scale) in 2004 to a low of 2.60 in 2018, with scores below the scalar midpoint (of 3.0) evident every year since 2012. There has again been a modest increase in trust between 2017 and 2018, though the level of expressed confidence remains worryingly low.

From this review of trends, it is evident that the 2019 electoral context was one in which greater psychological disengagement among the voting-age public was accompanied by decidedly harsher views on the supply of democracy, the basic performance of the democratic regime, and the level of confidence vested in political institutions. Yet, do these

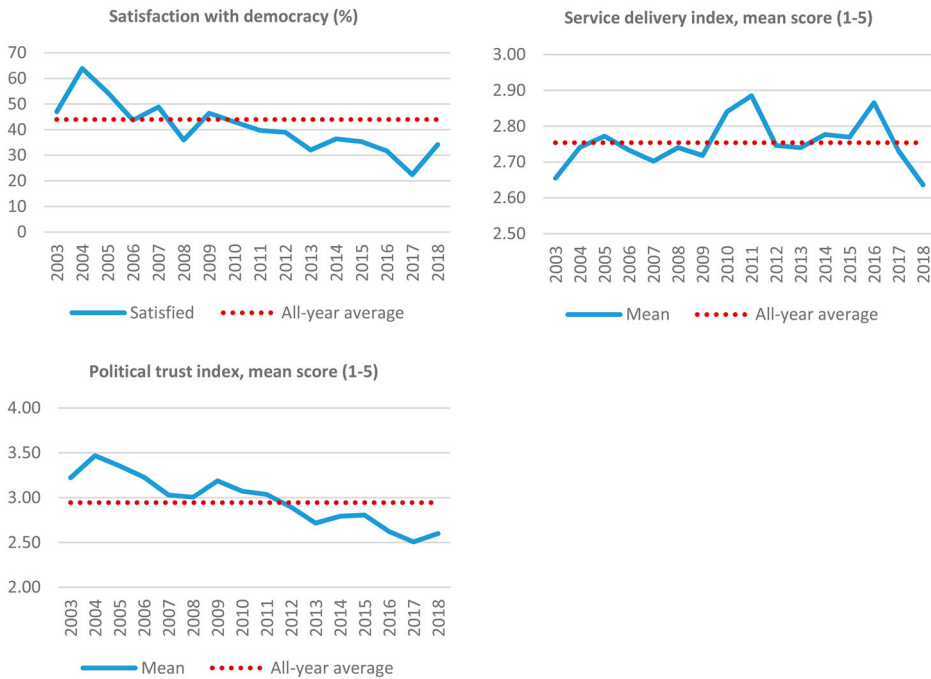


Figure 3. Trends in regime evaluations variables among the voting age public, 2003–2018/19 (%). Source: HSRC SASAS 2003–2018.

critical voices matter for planned electoral behaviour? We find that these regime evaluations measures exert an influence on the electoral inclinations of the voting age public, though arguably to a lesser extent than psychological engagement variables (Table 4). Views on the functioning of democracy in South Africa, evaluations of service delivery performance, and confidence in political institutions are significant factors that distinguish decided voters from other voters. Those more satisfied with overall democratic functioning and voicing more confidence in key political institutions display a greater likelihood of being a decided voter than an abstaining, undecided or undisclosed voter. By contrast, decided voters are less likely to be content with government’s performance in delivering select basic services on average than undecided and undisclosed voters, though no significant effect is present in the case of abstaining voters.

Table 4. Multinomial logistic regression results testing the impact of psychological engagement factors on voter predispositions in South Africa, pooled 2008–2018/19 data.

Regime evaluations model	Abstainer		Undecided voter		Undisclosed voter	
	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.
Satisfaction with democracy	–0.115	***	–0.122	***	–0.130	***
Service delivery index	0.020	n.s.	0.133	**	0.112	**
Political trust index	–0.251	***	–0.158	***	–0.130	***
Year of survey	0.036	***	–0.034	**	0.033	***
Constant	–72.859	***	66.415	**	–66.798	***

Notes: (1) Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the voting age population (18 years and older) living in South Africa, (2) the base outcome is ‘Decided voters’ and (3) the regression model controlled for an individual’s province of residence. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant.

It is worth mentioning that when the three regime evaluations measures are modelled individually rather than jointly, the pattern of results remains unchanged in relation to satisfaction with democratic functioning and political trust, but there are slight differences in relation to service delivery evaluations. We find firstly that the coefficient on this measure for abstainers is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) and negative. This implies that abstainers are less satisfied with government's service delivery performance than decided voters on average. Secondly, we find an absence of service delivery performance effect for undecided and undisclosed voters. However, when the three measures are included jointly in a single multinomial regression model, the service delivery effect for abstainers cancels out, while this variable becomes significant ($p < 0.01$) for undecided and undisclosed voters.

Full model

The results of the full model, which jointly includes all sets of measures corresponding to the different theoretical hypotheses explaining electoral intentions, are presented in Table 5. In this final analysis, we find that abstainers differ from decided voters in that

Table 5. Fully specified multinomial logistic regression results testing the impact of individual resources, psychological engagement and regime evaluations factors on voter predispositions in South Africa, pooled 2008–2018/19 data.

	Abstainer		Undecided voter		Undisclosed voter	
	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.
Individual resources						
Female (ref. male)	-0.071	n.s.	0.072	n.s.	-0.166	*
Age (in years)	-0.020	***	-0.011	**	0.005	n.s.
<i>Population group (ref. Black African)</i>						
Coloured	0.334	**	0.560	***	0.298	*
Indian/Asian	0.576	***	0.698	***	0.121	n.s.
White	-0.335	*	-0.150	n.s.	0.033	n.s.
<i>Type of geographic location (ref. Urban formal)</i>						
Urban informal	-0.103	n.s.	0.274	n.s.	0.050	n.s.
Rural traditional authority areas	-0.101	n.s.	0.007	n.s.	-0.148	n.s.
Rural farms	-0.201	n.s.	-0.320	n.s.	-0.415	**
<i>Educational attainment (ref. Tertiary)</i>						
Junior primary schooling or less	0.020	n.s.	-0.255	n.s.	-0.796	***
Senior primary schooling	0.028	n.s.	-0.025	n.s.	-0.475	**
Incomplete secondary schooling	0.074	n.s.	-0.014	n.s.	-0.459	**
Complete secondary schooling	0.013	n.s.	-0.040	n.s.	-0.284	*
Psychological engagement						
Political interest	-0.136	**	-0.004	n.s.	0.095	*
Political efficacy	-0.167	***	-0.010	n.s.	0.020	n.s.
Duty to vote	-0.167	***	0.037	n.s.	0.032	n.s.
<i>Party closeness (ref. Non-partisan)</i>						
Very close	-4.473	***	-4.660	***	-5.445	***
Quite close	-3.927	***	-3.867	***	-5.508	***
Not close	-3.651	***	-3.625	***	-5.125	***
Regime evaluations						
Political trust index	-0.090	*	-0.033	n.s.	0.025	n.s.
Satisfaction with democracy	-0.020	n.s.	-0.077	n.s.	-0.061	n.s.
Service delivery index	0.063	n.s.	0.087	n.s.	0.009	n.s.
Year of survey	0.055	***	0.002	n.s.	0.089	***
Constant	-108.392	***	-4.008	n.s.	-177.394	***

Notes: (1) Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the voting age population (18 years and older) living in South Africa, (2) the base outcome is 'Decided voters' and (3) the regression model controlled for an individual's province of residence. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$. n.s. = not significant.

they are younger, more likely to be a coloured or Indian adult than a black African adult. Select psychological engagement factors continue to separate abstainers from decided voters, with the former more inclined to exhibit lower levels of political interest, political efficacy and a belief in the civic duty to vote than the latter, together with much lower levels party closeness. The only regime evaluations effect that can be observed in the full model is in relation to political trust, with abstainers generally displaying slightly lower confidence in core political institutions than decided voters.

In the case of undecided voters, in common with abstainers they tend to be younger and more likely to be a coloured or Indian adult than a black African adult than decided voters. The predominant basis of variation is party closeness, with undecided voters less likely to display a stronger degree of partisanship than decided voters. The other psychological engagement factors remain statistically insignificant, and continue to be the traits that differentiate abstainers from the electorally undecided. None of the regime evaluations measures retain statistical significance once the individual resources and psychological engagement measures are controlled for.

Lastly, in comparison to decided voters, undisclosed voters tend to be better educated, while also displaying a modest tendency towards being male, coloured, and based in a formal urban area. As with undecided voters, the main psychological engagement attribute that is statistically significant is party closeness. However, in this instance, undisclosed voters demonstrate a lower strength of partisanship than undecided voters and abstainers. Undisclosed voters also tend to be marginally more politically interested than decided voters. The lack of observable effect on regime evaluations measures repeats for undisclosed voters.

Concluding discussion

The analysis presented in this paper comes at a time of earnest reflection about Election 2019 and the state of South Africa's electoral democracy, the changing patterns of registration, turnout and abstention, and what this might presage for future electoral contests (Schulz-Herzenberg and Southall 2019). It has drawn on nationally representative, survey-based data covering a fuller sweep of recent history in an attempt to provide deeper insight into the changing persuasions of the South African electorate leading up to the 2019 General Elections, and test the extent to which three distinct theoretical constructs inform planned electoral behaviour. The results suggest that these theoretical models have a significant though differential degree of influence over electoral intentions.

Psychological engagement

Psychological engagement with politics clearly plays a dominant motivating role in determining whether South Africans turn out to vote, stay away from the ballot box, display electoral indecision or refuse to disclose their preferences. The extent and strength of partisanship is a common factor that separates decided voters from abstainers, undecided voters and undisclosed voters alike. An increasing sense of party closeness therefore serves to raise the likelihood of reporting an intention to vote, whereas weaker party attachment or non-partisanship conversely sways individuals towards uncertainty or a disinclination to vote. The survey series points to party non-identifiers accounting for

approximately a third of the voting age population by early 2019. As Schulz-Herzenberg (2019a, 15) maintains, this represents a 'large potential pool of (swing) voters' that political parties should try and persuade to vote, though convincing them to do so is inevitably going to be an exceptionally challenging undertaking.

Apart from party closeness, other psychological orientations to politics variables, such as political interest, sense of efficacy and belief in the civic duty to vote, have a strong bearing in differentiating abstaining from decided voters specifically. Compared to decided voters, abstainers are less interested in politics, less convinced that their vote makes a difference or that the elected are responsive to their needs, and possess a weaker sense of moral obligation to vote. This is perhaps one of the most disconcerting findings from the study, considering the reduced turnout recorded in the 2019 General Elections, as well as the declining trends in political efficacy and duty to vote observed since the early 2000s. Compounding this picture is the effect of age, with abstainers generally presenting as younger on average than decided voters. It should also be mentioned that psychological engagement is the main factor that distinguishes abstainers from undecided voters. On face value, voter indecision emerges as a seemingly unimportant aspect of electoral participation dynamics in the country, reported by a fairly stable 3%–7% of the electorate in general over time. Nonetheless, as the multivariate results signal, if indecision combines with a mounting sense of psychological disengagement, there remains a real possibility that this could fuel the rising tendency towards electoral abstention in future elections.

Regime evaluations

In contrast with psychological engagement in politics, the study findings indicate that regime evaluations do not appear to have a particularly decisive role in motivating electoral intentions in the country. Admittedly, abstainers, undecided voters and undisclosed voters voice less confidence in core political institutions and more general discontent with the functioning of democracy than decided voters. Yet, apart from a modest inverse effect on satisfaction with democracy among abstainers, these influences fell away in the full multinomial logistic regression model, especially following the addition of psychological engagement factors. This is likely due to the fact that those with lower political interest, efficacy, duty and partisanship are also likely to express more critical views on the performance of the democratic regime and institutions post-1994.

Socio-demographic factors

As for the socio-demographic traits that remain salient from the modelling, age, race and education to a lesser degree seem to play a role. Age has already been mentioned as a factor differentiating decided from abstaining voters. Similarly, undecided voters are younger on average than decided voters. The fact that abstention and voter indecision is more likely among younger age eligible adults is worrying given the demographic composition of the electorate. As of 2019, 18–29 year-olds represented approximately a third (33%) of all eligible voters, with a further quarter (25%) in their thirties (Schulz-Herzenberg 2019b). Although a majority of youth still vote, an emerging pattern of lower registration and turnout rates among youth, coupled with generational

replacement over time, is likely to have a bearing on the level of participation in future elections.

It is interesting that race remains a significant factor underlying electoral intentions in the country, even after controlling for all the other socio-demographic, attitudinal and evaluative variables in the modelling. The results suggest that black adults are more likely to be decided voters, and less likely than coloured and Indian adults to be abstainers or undecided voters. While controlling for psychological engagement and regime evaluation factors has largely removed the significance of race in separating decided from undisclosed voters, the same is not true for abstainers and undecided voters. This implies that there remain explanatory factors that have not as yet been accounted for that differentiate black adults from other South Africans in motivating electoral participation.

Educational attainment was only significant in explaining differences between decided and undisclosed voters, with the latter tending to be better educated in general. This, taken together with a greater propensity than decided voters towards being urban-based, displaying slightly higher political interest and being appreciably lower levels of partisanship suggests that undisclosed voters might possibly be opposition supporters reluctant to openly state their affiliation with a particular opposition party, or even strategic voters that postpone their vote decision until well into the campaigning period in the lead-up to Election Day.

Limitations and future areas of research

The article examined the relative influence of two of the three core components of the civic voluntarism model of political participation (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995) in the South African context, namely individual resources and psychological engagement with politics. It has not tested the role of recruitment networks that bring people to vote, including social networks and news media. Recently, Schulz-Herzenberg (2019a) showed that this might be a particularly salient explanation of turnout in the country, based on data from 2014. Moreover, recent quantitative election research has also point to the existence of a culture of voting, with past electoral participation emerging as a strong determinant of voting intention (Roberts, Struwig, and Grossberg 2012, Struwig, Roberts, and Gordon 2016). Future South African electoral research should continue to monitor the salience of these and other emerging theoretical explanations for electoral behaviour.

Implications for electoral democracy in South Africa

From a broader electoral democracy perspective, how distinctive are the conclusions about the character of the South African voter (and non-voter) described above? In many respects, the decline in electoral turnout, the changing civic norms away from electoral participation among youth, and the rise of critical citizens who are discontent with politics and democratic performance are broadly observed trends in many established liberal democracies (Dalton 2008; Hooghe and Kern 2017). This has given rise to discussions of a global democratic recession or retreat (Schenkkan and Repucci 2019). We would contend that, despite the parallels, these democratic reversals matter more fundamentally in the context of young democracies such as South Africa. In such instances,

continued patterns of political disengagement and electoral abstention have the potential to undermine democratic legitimacy and frustrate ongoing efforts at democratic consolidation. In addition, the youthful population structure of the country is a key element that has to be considered. Accordingly, any tendency towards abstention and declining psychological engagement in politics among younger members of the electorate may mean that the process of electoral non-participation and democratic retreat is likely to occur at a faster pace than has been recorded in other more established democracies, which are generally typified by older or ageing electorates.

Further research is needed to disentangle the relative contribution of generational and life-cycle effects underlying changes in electoral attitudes and behaviour in the local context. The South African electorate has clearly become more critical over time, disillusioned with the quality of governance and party politics, and questioning the efficacy of electoral participation. It may however be premature to state that democracy is in crisis. Instead, the findings could be interpreted as an appeal for viable party alternatives and greater representation, as well as a demand for greater accountability and integrity in inter-election periods. The degree to which elected representatives heed this appeal will be decisive in shaping the evolving character of South African political culture.

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Addendum

Coding of indicators

Individual resource measures

Gender of respondent: (1) Male (2) Female. Age of respondent in years (at time of last birthday). Interviewer recorded respondent's race: (1) Black African (2) Coloured (3) Indian or Asian (4) White. Type of geographic location: (1) Urban formal (2) Informal urban settlement (3) Rural traditional authority areas (4) Rural formal (farms). What is the highest level of education that you have ever completed? (1) Junior primary schooling or less (2) Senior primary schooling (3) Incomplete secondary schooling (4) Complete secondary schooling (5) Post-secondary.

Psychological engagement measures

How interested would you say you are in politics? (0) Not at all interested (1) Hardly interested (2) Quite interested (3) Very interested. Political efficacy is measured through an index constructed based on responses to the following three statements - 'Whether I vote or not makes no difference'; 'After being elected all parties are the same, so voting is pointless'; 'Voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted'. Responses were captured using a 5-point agreement scale: (1) Strongly agree (2) Agree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Disagree (5) Strongly disagree. The items combined using an averaging approach to produce a reliable scale, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.8272, and the original 5-point scale was reversed and transformed into a 0–10 score, with (0) representing low political efficacy and (10) high political efficacy. 'Do not know' responses were coded as missing. Duty to vote is measured based on responses to a single attitudinal item: 'It is the duty of all citizens to vote' – 5 point scale, reversed for analysis (higher values = higher sense of duty): (1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neither agree nor disagree (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree.

Party closeness is a constructed measure based on the pattern of responses to two consecutive survey questions: 'To which political party do you feel most close?' and 'How close do you feel to this party?'. The first question included a coded set of 15 political parties followed by an 'other party' option. Additional categories were included for 'no party', 'refusal' and 'do not know'. If a respondent identified with a specific political party, they were asked the follow-up strength of partisanship. The variable was coded as: (0) Non-partisan (1) Not close (2) Quite close (3) Very close.

Regime evaluation measures

How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy is working in South Africa? – reversed 5-point scale: (1) Very dissatisfied (2) Dissatisfied (3) Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4) Satisfied (5) Very satisfied. 'Do not know' responses were coded as missing.

The service delivery index is a measure combining responses to six questions evaluating government performance in one's local area of residence. How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way that the government is handling the following matters in your neighbourhood? 'Supply of water and sanitation', 'Providing electricity', 'Affordable housing', 'Access to health care', 'Cutting crime', 'Creating jobs' – 5 point scale: (1) Very dissatisfied (2) Dissatisfied (3) Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (4) Satisfied (5) Very satisfied. 'Do not know' responses were coded as missing. The items combined to produce a reliable scale, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.7150, making use of a reversed satisfaction scale ranging from 1 to 5, where (1) represents strong dissatisfaction and (5) strong satisfaction.

Political trust was measured using an index constructed from three measures capturing confidence in core political institutions. Indicate the extent to which you trust or distrust the following institutions in South Africa at present: National government, Parliament, Local government. (1) Strongly trust (2) Trust (3) Neither trust nor distrust (4) Distrust (5) Strongly distrust. The items combined to produce a reliable scale, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.7580, making use of a reversed trust scale ranging from 1 to 5, where (1) represents strong distrust and (5) strong trust. 'Do not know' responses were coded as missing.