

THE POWER OF THE BALLOT BOX: PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE RIGHT TO VOTE

As the nation celebrates the successful completion of the fifth national and provincial elections, it is important to reflect on how South Africans generally feel about voting. As a response, this article by *Benjamin Roberts, Jarè Struwig* and *Steven Gordon* examines the nature of public attitudes towards voting.

They seldom experienced robberies, but when they did they were mostly at the hands of locals. Although there was general disgruntlement by local spaza owners about the way in which migrant entrepreneurs conducted their businesses, especially the lowering of prices and selling of alternative brand products, such as cool drinks that sell fast at low prices, the attacks could not be directly attributed to business strategy tensions and xenophobia. They were more often linked to general acts of hooliganism and store owners being caught in the crossfire during service delivery protests as easy targets.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Migrants are increasingly participating in the spaza shop business in South Africa's townships. They are attracted by the large, lucrative market of high-density populations, and have resiliently and strategically recorded huge successes compared to their local counterparts.

There is therefore a need for local government officials and community leaders to formulate policies, programmes and strategies that promote the inclusive development of spaza shop businesses and township communities in general. Migrants should be actively involved in community development. They should be encouraged to employ locals and enter into partnerships with young South Africans and share their experiences and business skills as a strategy for peaceful integration. ■

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This is a summary of a research paper presented at the Urban Informality and Migrant Entrepreneurship in Southern African Cities workshop, hosted by the University of Cape Town, February 2014.

Since its inception in 2003, the HSRC's annual South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) series has asked representative samples of adults a range of questions designed to understand underlying values concerning citizenship, democracy and governance. These included a set of conventional measures concerning attitudes towards the act of voting. This article reflects some of the longitudinal findings but also focuses specifically on the 2013 survey round, which was conducted between October and December 2013 and consisted of a representative sample of 2 885 respondents aged 16 years and older living in private homes.

South Africans placed a high value on the right to vote.



The civic responsibility of voting

The 2013 survey showed that most South Africans place a high value on the right to vote. Almost four-fifths of the adult public (79%) agreed with the statement 'it is the duty of all citizens to vote'. This robust belief in the duty of citizens to vote is not surprising, given that prior to 1994 a majority of South Africans were denied the fundamental democratic right of being able to vote in free and fair elections.

When asked if they thought they could effectively participate in and influence politics through voting, the 2013 SASAS round revealed that close to half of all adult South Africans (46%) believed that their vote would not make a difference to electoral outcomes, while a similar share (45%) were positive about the power of their vote.

Looking at trends over the last decade (Figure 1 on page 9), there are distinct upswings in this belief before and after national elections (i.e. between 2003 and 2004, and 2008 and 2009), but these feelings appear short lived. The data also suggests there has been a decline in this belief since 2009, reaching its lowest observed level in 2013.

A sizeable minority believed voting had no discernible effect on electoral outcomes.

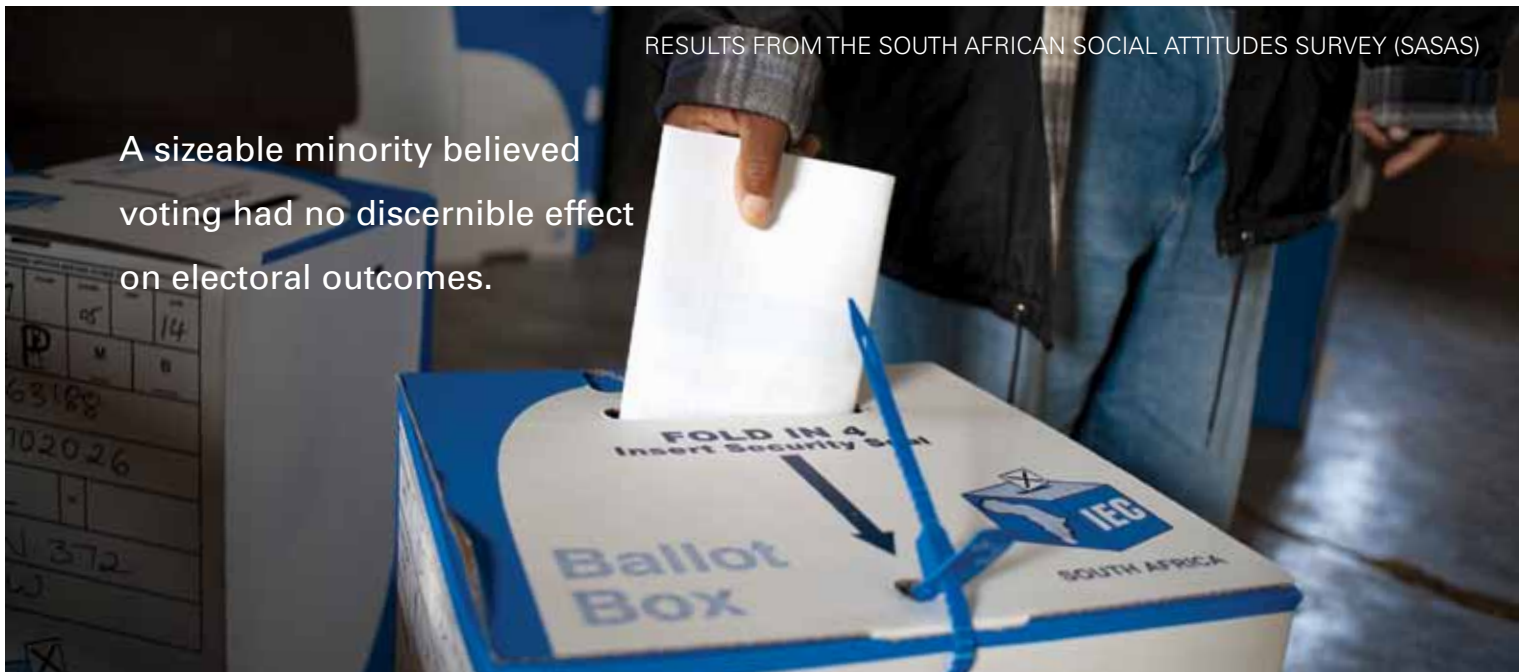
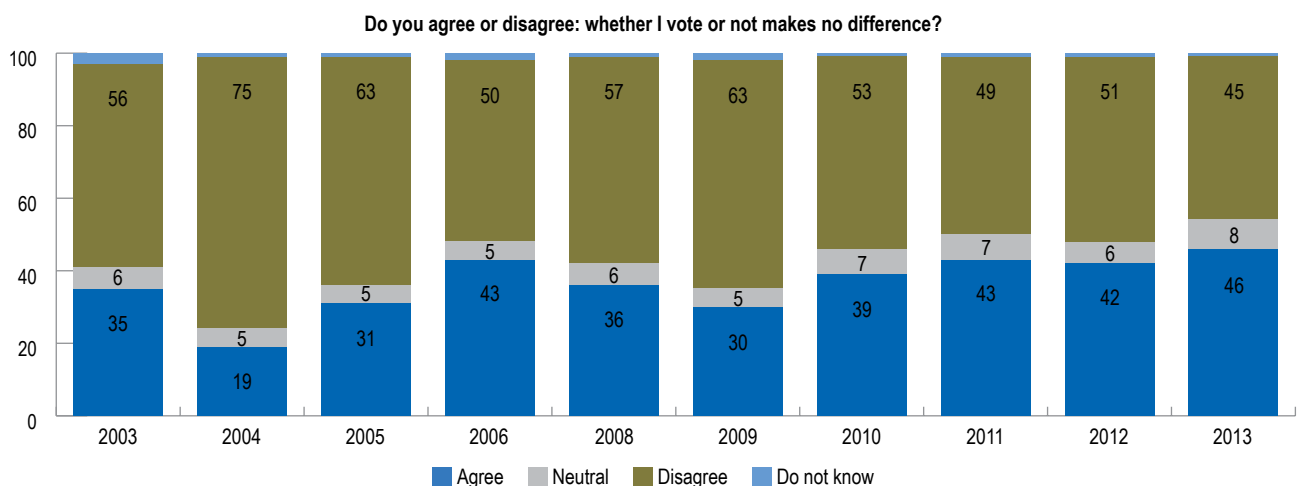


Figure 1: Internal political efficacy in South Africa, 2003–2013 (percent)



Note: Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the adult South African population. The question was not fielded as part of the 2007 SASAS round.

Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2003–2013

Do voters believe politicians respond to what they think?

When it comes to perceptions relating to the responsiveness of elected officials, politicians and political institutions to the demands and needs of voters, a similar pattern existed. In 2013, two-fifths (41%) of the adult population agreed with the statement: ‘after being elected, all parties are the same, so voting is pointless’. A further expression of public scepticism towards politicians was the finding that approximately two-fifths (43%) agreed with the statement, ‘voting is meaningless because no politician can be trusted’.

In the case of both these questions, the proportion of respondents that was critical of elected officials and politicians increased by approximately 10 percentage points relative to the pre-election survey rounds in 2003 and 2008.

The evidence therefore showed that a sizeable minority believed that voting had no discernible effect on electoral outcomes or the responsiveness of the elected to the electorate, and that this perspective had become more widespread among South Africans in recent years.

More sophisticated analysis showed that the belief in

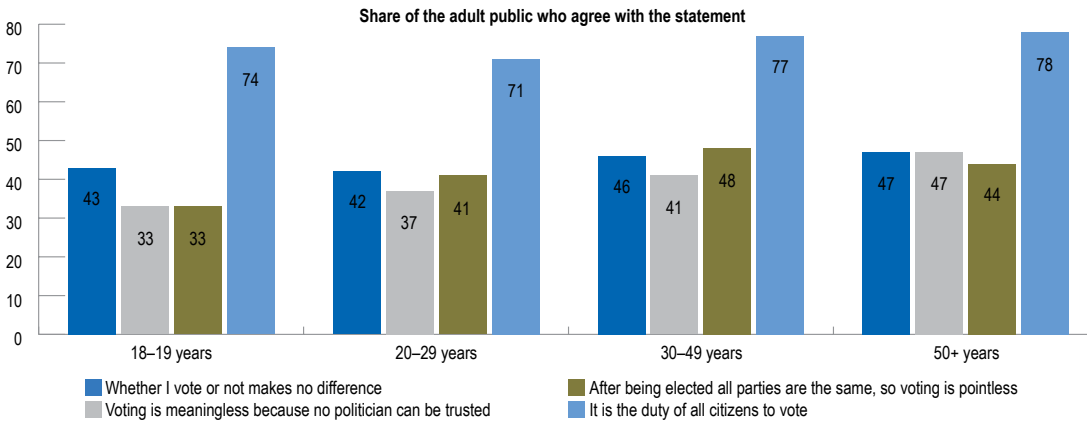
the effectiveness of the vote had a significant effect on the intention to vote and that this is likely to be of increasing importance in successive elections in the country.

Elections and their discontents

The 2014 poll was the first election in which citizens born after 1994 were eligible to vote, and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) embarked on various campaigns to attract the youth vote. Apart from monitoring patterns of voter registration among this cohort, there was also much speculation about whether the so-called ‘born free’ generation would differ from or approximate other South Africans in their attitudes to democracy and politics.

From Figure 2 on page 10 it is apparent that today's youth were not found to be considerably different from older generations in terms of the perceived efficacy of their vote and sense of duty to vote. If anything, younger South Africans tended to be a little more positive in their viewpoint. It is also worth emphasising that the sense of duty to vote remained high among young South Africans, with 74% of 18–19-year-olds believing in this civic duty compared to 78% of those aged 50 years and older.

Figure 2: Political efficacy and perceived duty to vote in 2013, by age group (percent agreeing with statements)



Note: Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the adult South African population. Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2013

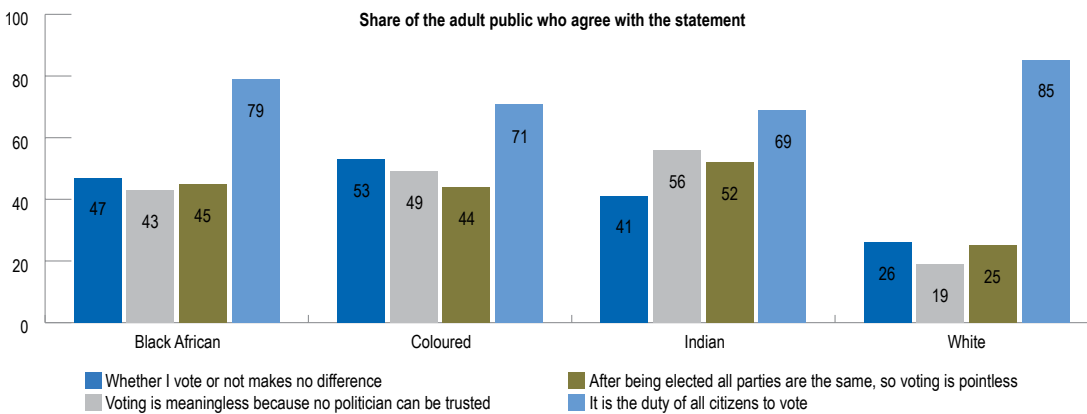
Figure 3 illustrates population group differences in civic attitudes. It is evident that in 2013, a significant share of the black African majority believed that their vote did not make a difference and was concerned about the responsiveness of elected representatives, indicating a level of political disillusionment.

By contrast, the sense of duty to vote and the belief that their vote could change politics was more common among the white minority. For instance, only a quarter (25%) of white South Africans thought their vote made no difference and less than a fifth (19%) supported the view that voting was pointless because all political parties were the same.

Coloured respondents believed the most that their vote made no difference, while Indian respondents had the least faith in the ability of elected officials to respond to the demands and needs of voters.

To some degree the observed variance may be a function of the socioeconomic differences between population groups. Affluent and tertiary-educated respondents tended to demonstrate much higher levels of perceived voter efficacy than their less educated and poorer counterparts. Yet, political beliefs and evaluations of the performance of political institutions and representatives are also likely to inform the differences that exist, for example, between Indian and white respondents.

Figure 3: Political efficacy and perceived duty to vote in 2013, by population group (percent agreeing with statements)



Note: Data is weighted to be nationally representative of the adult South African population. Source: South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2013

Conclusion

As democracy in South Africa continues to change and evolve, it is heartening to note that the civic duty to vote is still firmly embedded in the national consciousness. However, the findings of this review seem to indicate that the mass public is increasingly questioning the power of their vote to shape election outcomes and hold elected leaders to account. In particular, it is the poor and disadvantaged who are more likely to question the efficacy of their vote, suggesting a sense of disillusionment among this socioeconomic subgroup towards electoral politics.

As the South African democracy continues to consolidate, there is a need to monitor and evaluate the trends outlined in this review, for rising disaffection among the voting-age population has the potential to increasingly place downward pressure on conventional forms of political engagement such as voting. ■

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