

the performance of the government in national affairs. This suggests institutional trust was associated with how the public viewed the nation's performance on foreign affairs.

Conclusion

This study showed considerable majorities of South Africans placed a high priority on foreign policy goals relating to domestic socioeconomic wellbeing (job security, economic growth and controlling immigration), though notable shares of the adult population also viewed humanitarian objectives as important. Although significant numbers of citizens continue to experience material disadvantage and vulnerability, popular support was found for an outward looking foreign policy in the country, and there were encouraging messages about development aid and fair and ethical trade relations. While concerns about immigration and appropriate diplomatic responses to regional political situations remained, the public was also clearly divided about the role of military peacekeeping operations.

More research is required to investigate differential support for the interventionist (versus isolationist) role that South Africa seeks to adopt. To this end, the HSRC as part of a grant from the Open Society Foundation is currently undertaking a more detailed examination of the results represented in the overview presented in this article. ■

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A FOREIGN CONCEPT: WHAT SOUTH AFRICANS KNOW ABOUT INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

How knowledgeable are South Africans about world affairs; and do they care? *Benjamin Roberts, Steven Gordon and Jaré Struwig* examine new survey evidence on levels of interest and knowledge of foreign policy issues.

There exist relatively few representative studies on the public knowledge of foreign affairs in contemporary South Africa. To address this lack of evidence, the Open Society Foundation's (OSF) South African Foreign Policy Initiative funded the inclusion of a module on foreign policy in the 2013 round of the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). A representative sample of 2 739 respondents, aged 16 years and older and living in private homes, took part in the survey.

Interest in the outside world

To gauge general levels of interest in world affairs, respondents were asked how interested they were in 'news about the relations of South Africa with other countries'. Around a fifth (21%) reported being very interested, 30% were somewhat interested and almost two-fifths (38%) were either hardly interested or not at all interested. The remainder either did not know (4%), or indicated that they did not follow the news (8%).

Studies from other countries tended to show a much higher interest in foreign affairs. For example, a study by the Chicago Council of Global Affairs in 2007 found that, in general, at least two-thirds of the public in 15 countries tended to be somewhat or very interested in their country's relations with other nations, ranging from countries such as Russia, Poland and India (all around 67%) to highs in countries such as the US (84%) and Australia (92%).

South Africans on average exhibited relatively low levels of interest in international affairs.

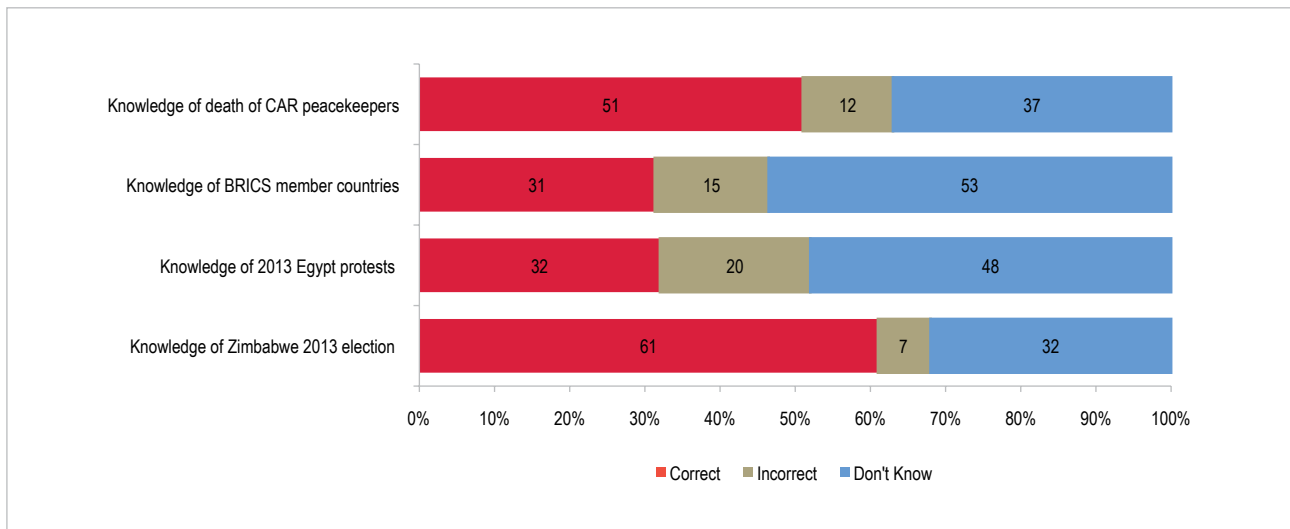
With only 51% indicating they were somewhat or very interested, South Africans on average exhibited relatively low levels of interest in international affairs, slightly below that of other developing and transition countries. Yet, a notable minority showed a very strong interest in news

coverage of foreign policy, similar to that evident in China, Thailand, Russia and Indonesia. In this, education and living standards played a role.

Sources of information

Where did South Africans obtain information about foreign affairs? Mostly from television news on local news channels such as SABC or e.tv (63%), newspapers (40%) and the radio (30%). Only a small proportion obtained foreign affairs news from television news on international news channels such as CNN or BBC (11%) and the internet (12%). Informal discussions with family, friends or colleagues were mentioned in 11% of cases.

Figure 1: Sources of news about foreign policy issues (%)



Note: Data is weighted to nationally representative of the adult South African population.

Source: HSRC SASAS 2013

Economic status again played a significant role in determining the range of media sources from which the public obtained information on foreign events. While the poor mostly obtained information through radio, more affluent citizens more likely relied on the internet and international news channels.

Quizzing South Africans on foreign policy issues

To assess individual knowledge of foreign affairs, respondents were asked both subjective and objective questions. When asked to rate their own level of knowledge about events in Africa and the world, a quarter (25%) reported that they had no knowledge, nearly a third (30%) that they were not very knowledgeable, while more than two-fifths (44%) responded that they were either somewhat or very knowledgeable.

To test whether participants were good judges of their own knowledge of foreign affairs, a series of objective questions was designed in the form of a quiz. It included four questions on Zimbabwe, peacekeeping in Africa, the political situation in Egypt, and South Africa's foreign partnerships.

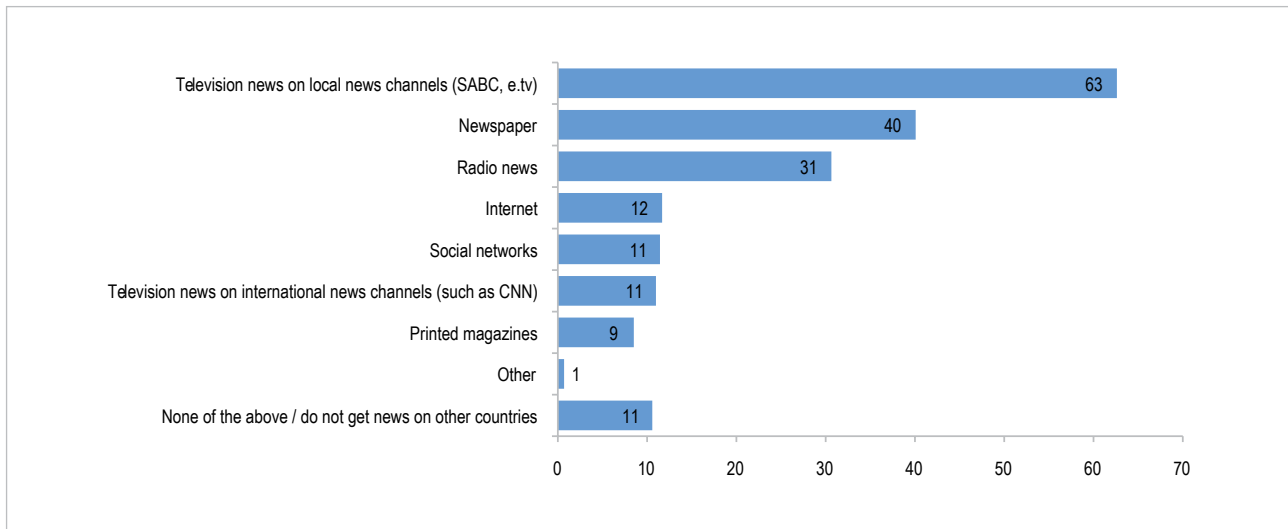
More than 50% of respondents demonstrated knowledge of regional issues, such as the 2013 Zimbabwean elections

and peacekeeper fatalities in the Central African Republic. However, barely a third were aware of the protests in Egypt and subsequent removal of President Morsi, or were able to correctly identify BRICS member countries (Figure 2). Combining these results, we found that around a quarter (27%) had none of the correct answers, two-fifths (40%) had between one and two correct, and only a third (33%) had either three or four correct answers. On average, South African adults scored 1.7 out of four in the knowledge quiz.

A relatively strong association existed between the subjective and objective knowledge evaluations. Those South Africans who self-reported high levels of knowledge on the subjective measure also scored well on the objective questions, and vice versa.

With regard to how evenly foreign knowledge was distributed across the adult population, we found strong educational and poverty status differences underlying knowledge, with the better educated, the materially advantaged, the formally employed, and residents in formal urban areas all presenting as relatively more knowledgeable. Men were found to be better informed than women. Remarkably, there was not a significant age-related association with foreign policy knowledge.

Figure 2: Foreign affairs quiz (%)



Note: Data is weighted to nationally representative of the adult South African population.

Source: HSRC SASAS 2013

We found strong educational and poverty status differences underlying knowledge.



Conclusion

The survey results showed that the South African public was relatively ill-informed about international affairs, a situation being influenced by disinterest in such issues, as well as persisting social inequalities. However, public opinion research over the last 60 years, especially in America, amassed consistent evidence of poor public foreign affairs knowledge.

In recent decades there is growing evidence that citizens base their thinking and views about foreign policy on simple general beliefs and experiences, showing that public opinion on foreign affairs is more rational and stable than conventionally assumed.

Does this hold true in South Africa? While policy-makers and the mass public agree on the clear need for South Africa to play an active international role if the country is to achieve its national interests, remarkably little is known about foreign policy attitudes and the influencing role of knowledge, ideology and other factors.

The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive and consultative processes in crafting strategic priorities and plans in relation to foreign policy. Despite this, the share of South Africans who participates in such decision-making is rather restricted. As such, representative surveys that offer a better appreciation of foreign policy interest, knowledge, values and preferences, and how these relationships are changing over time, serve as a potentially important resource in ensuring that mass

opinion features more prominently alongside elite opinion in determining the focus and nature of foreign policy in the country. ■

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