

## **As South Africa's local elections approach, public confidence underpins system in turmoil**

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 89 | Sibusiso Nkomo and Jamy Felton**

### **Summary**

South Africa's fourth democratic local government elections, in August 2016, will be a test for the long-ruling but troubled African National Congress (ANC), for opposition parties hoping to claim some major cities, for an Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) caught between court orders and logistical realities, and for local government councillors facing their constituents.

The IEC, in particular, confronts a mammoth task and a legitimacy test after the Electoral Court ruled last year that certain by-elections were not free and fair because of incomplete voter rolls. The court ordered the IEC to make sure all voters' formal addresses are verified – a requirement that the IEC is challenging as unrealistic (Cele, 2016; Independent Electoral Commission of South Africa, 2016; Rabkin & Mashego, 2016).

The latest Afrobarometer survey in South Africa, conducted in August-September 2015, sheds some light on an election system in turmoil. Most South Africans are still confident that the electoral system has integrity and elections are free and fair without intimidation or violence. But South Africans have become more skeptical about whether elections ensure that voters' views are represented and that voters are able to remove non-performing leaders from power. Survey responses indicate that if national elections had been held last year, the ANC would have seen its majority shrink while opposition parties gained ground.

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

### **Key findings**

- One in four South Africans (24%) say they attended a campaign rally in the last national election in 2014.
- Less than half of South Africans believe that elections ensure that their views are represented (44%) or enable them to remove non-performing leaders from office (36%). Both measures have decreased from previous surveys.

- Seven in 10 respondents (72%) say that elections in South Africa are “completely free and fair” or “free and fair, but with minor problems.” Two-thirds say that elections guarantee they have genuine choices (68%) and that votes are “often” or “always” counted fairly (66%).
- Less than one in six South Africans say that elections are “always” or “often” marred by opposition parties being prevented from running (16%) or voters being threatened (13%).
- In a hypothetical national election in August-September 2015, 48% of respondents say they would vote for the ANC and 32% for opposition parties.
- Six of 10 South Africans (61%) disapprove of the way their local government councillors did their jobs over the previous 12 months.
- Support for the idea that it is voters' responsibility to make sure that councillors do their job is still a minority view (28%) but has doubled since 2008.

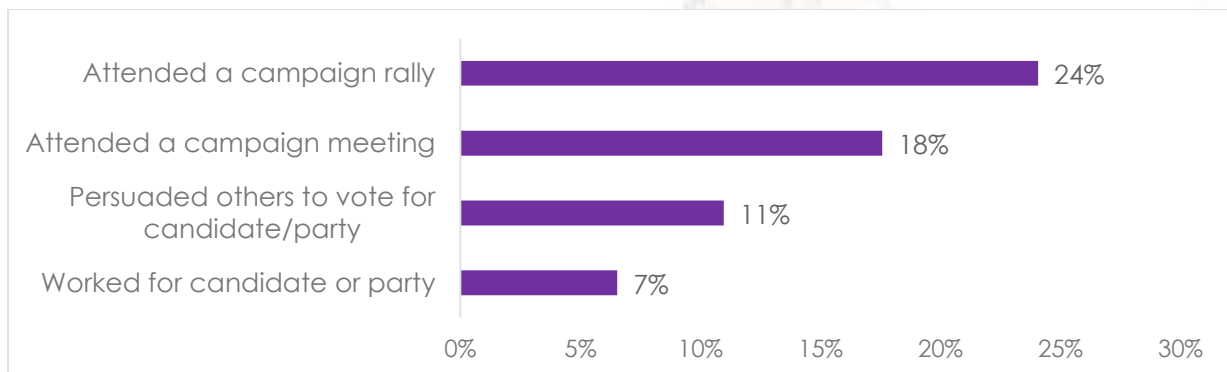
### Voter engagement

Putnam (1993, 1995) emphasizes the importance of political participation and an active civil society in ensuring that democracies become consolidated. Given that South Africa is a young democracy in which civic engagement was strongly encouraged and the local electoral system uses a form of direct representation, we may expect political participation, in the form of attending rallies, campaigning, and voting, to be relatively high.

But voting appears to be on the decline. Schulz-Herzenberg (2014) found that the turnout of registered voters in the 2014 elections was 73%, a decline of 4 percentage points from the two previous elections. When turnout is examined as a proportion of the eligible voting-age population, the figures confirm a decline in participation from 86% in 1994 to 72% in 1999, 58% in 2004, 60% in 2009, and 57% in 2014.

During the campaign for the May 2014 national elections, one-quarter (24%) of South Africans attended a campaign rally, and 18% attended a campaign meeting, according to 2015 survey findings. One in 10 (11%) say they persuaded others to vote for a candidate or party, up from 7% reported in the 2011 survey, and 7% say they worked for a candidate or party (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Pre-election voter engagement | South Africa | 2015**

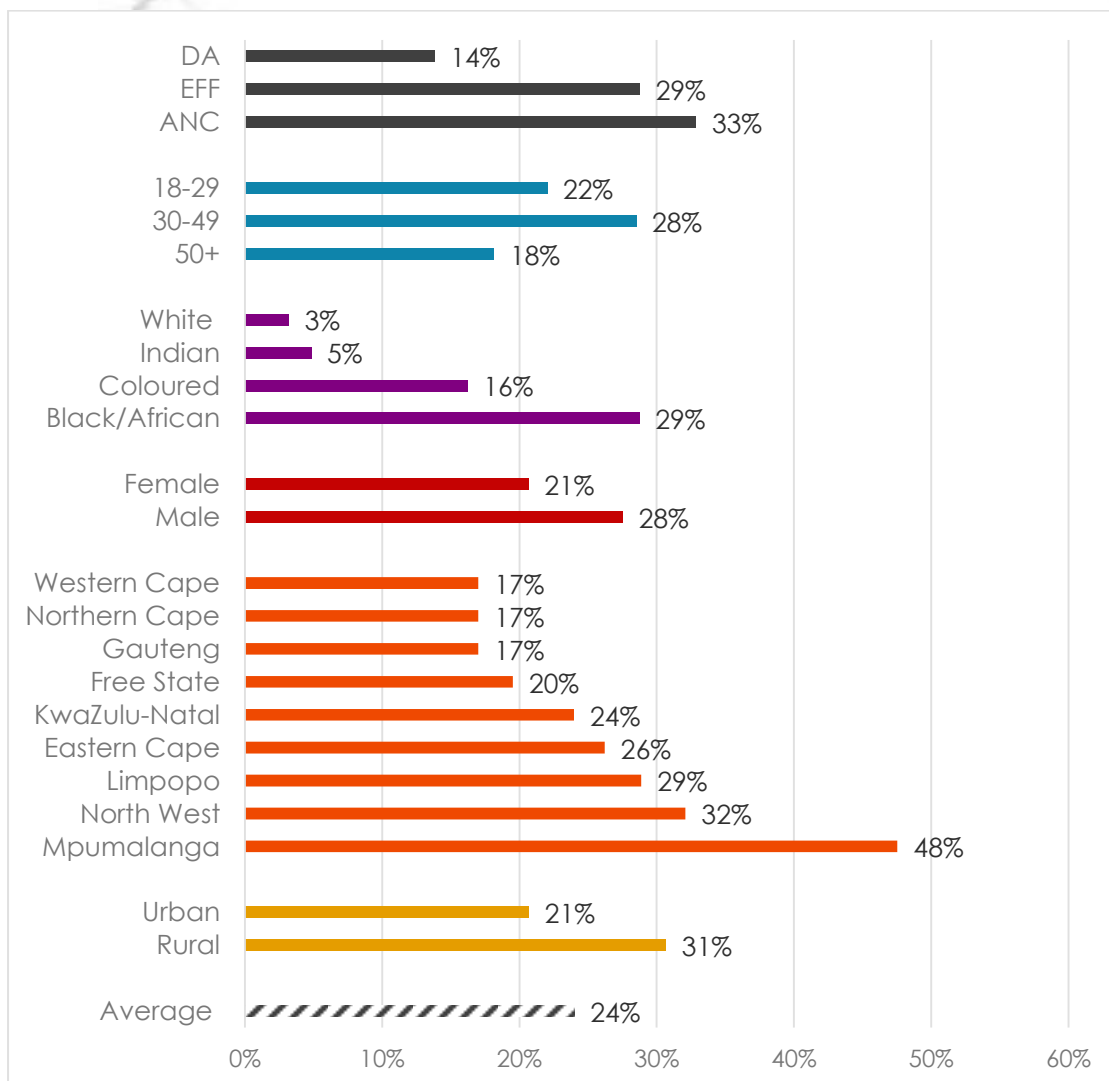


**Respondents were asked:** Thinking about the last national election, did you: Attend a campaign rally? Attend a meeting with a candidate or campaign staff? Try to persuade others to vote for a certain presidential or legislative candidate or political party? Work for a candidate or party? (% who say “yes”)

Attending campaign rallies is more popular among citizens who “feel close to” the ANC (33%) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (29%) than among Democratic Alliance (DA) supporters (14%) (Figure 2). Respondents in the middle age range (30-49 years old) are more likely to attend a rally (28%) than their younger (22%) or older counterparts (18%), and black respondents (29%) are far more likely to attend a rally than other races.

In a breakdown by province, residents of Mpumalanga (48%) are at least twice as likely to attend a campaign rally as those in in Gauteng, the Northern Cape, the Western Cape, Free State, and KwaZulu-Natal. About three in 10 rural respondents (31%) say they attended a rally, compared to only 21% of urban dwellers.

**Figure 2: Attending a rally** | by party affiliation, age, race, gender, province, and urban/rural location | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** Thinking about the last national election, did you: Attend a campaign rally? (% who say “yes”)

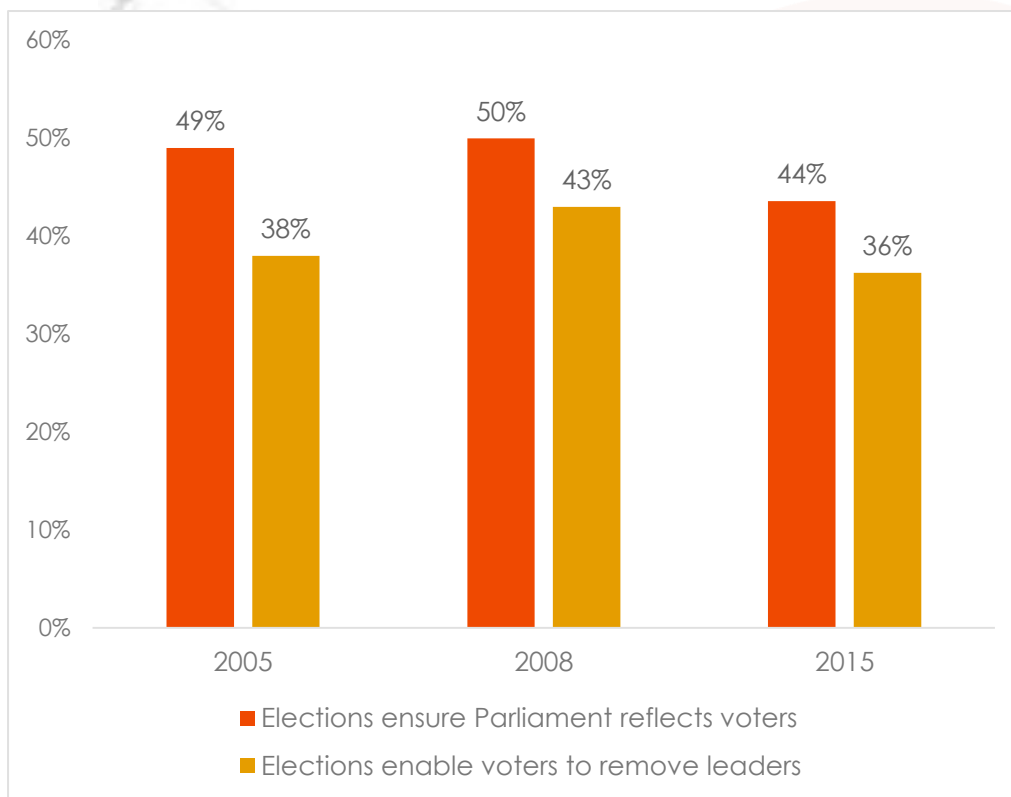
### Holding leaders accountable

While participation in campaigns may reflect some faith in the efficacy of the electoral system, recent protest action surrounding the Fees Must Fall movement would indicate that South Africans feel a need to hold leaders accountable through other forms of participation.

Ideally, elections are designed to suit the needs of a society based upon historical events as well as desired outcomes (Duverger, 1972; Lindberg, 2005). In a previously divided society, there is a strong need for representation and accountability. At the local level, where South Africans vote for specific ward councillors and parties, elections should allow citizens to feel that they are represented and are holding leaders and parties accountable.

When South Africans are asked to reflect on how well elections work, a plurality (44%) say they ensure that Parliament reflects the views of voters (a decrease from 49% in 2005 and 50% in 2008). A smaller proportion (36%) say elections enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what they people want (Figure 3). These results suggest that for the majority of South Africans, their power stops at the vote; once they have voted, there is no control over their representation.

**Figure 3: How well do elections work? | South Africa | 2005-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections: Ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want (% who say "well" or "very well")*

## Quality of elections

### *Freeness and fairness of elections in South Africa*

To a large extent, the legitimacy of a political and electoral system lies in what people perceive it to be. Lipset (1959) points out that legitimacy and efficacy are important factors in creating stable democracies. A majority of South Africans do not believe that their electoral choice controls decision-making beyond the vote, but do they believe that the system is legitimate? Elections have consistently been seen as a success based upon their freeness and fairness.

Since the first Afrobarometer survey in South Africa in 2000, more than seven in 10 respondents have consistently said elections are either “completely free and fair” or “free and fair, but with minor problems.” In 2015, 72% agree with this assessment, while only 20% say elections are “not free and fair” or are “free and fair with major problems” (Figure 4).

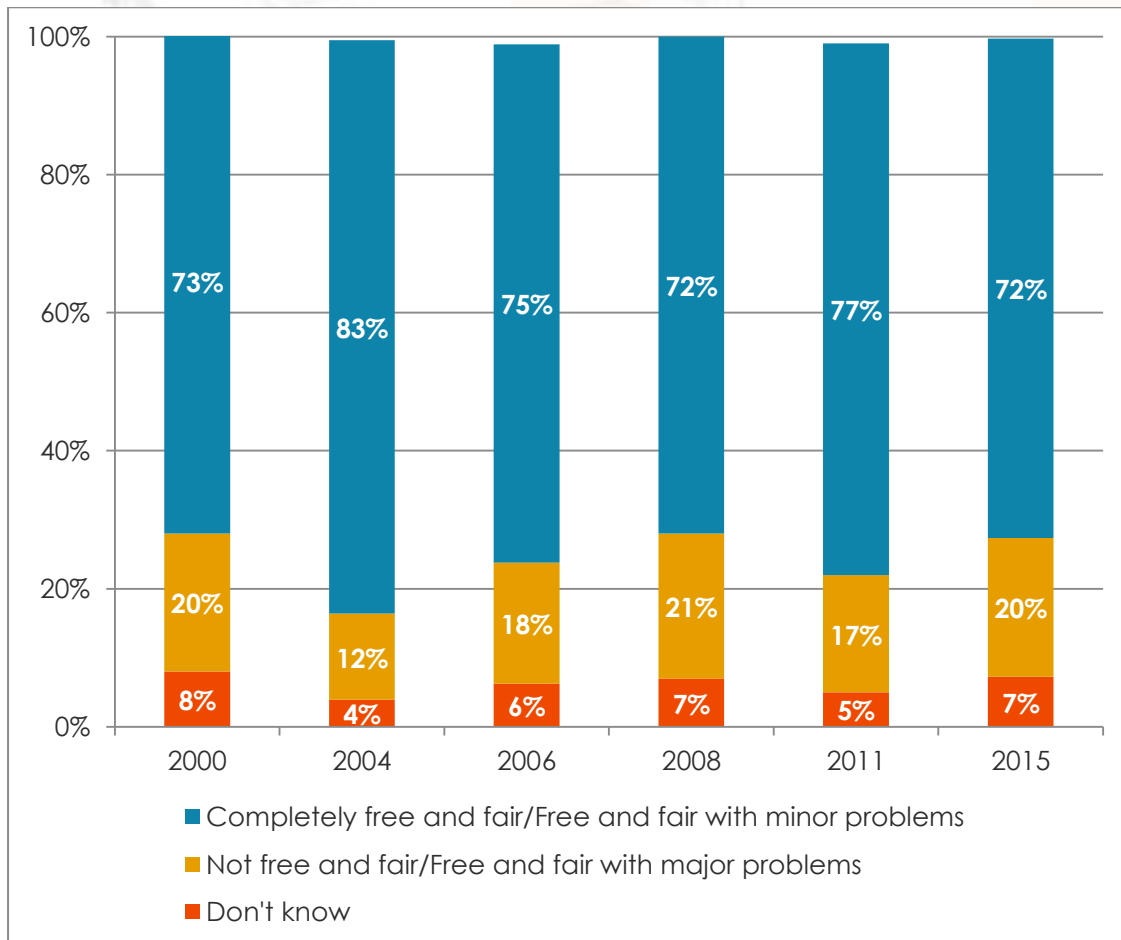
To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

Black respondents are more likely to see the 2014 national election as free and fair (76%) than Coloured (66%), white (57%), or Indian citizens (49%) (Figure 5).

Eight in 10 ANC supporters (81%) say the election was free and fair, and even among opposition and unaffiliated respondents, more than six in 10 agree. Respondents with no formal education are less likely to see the election as free and fair than those with at least some schooling.

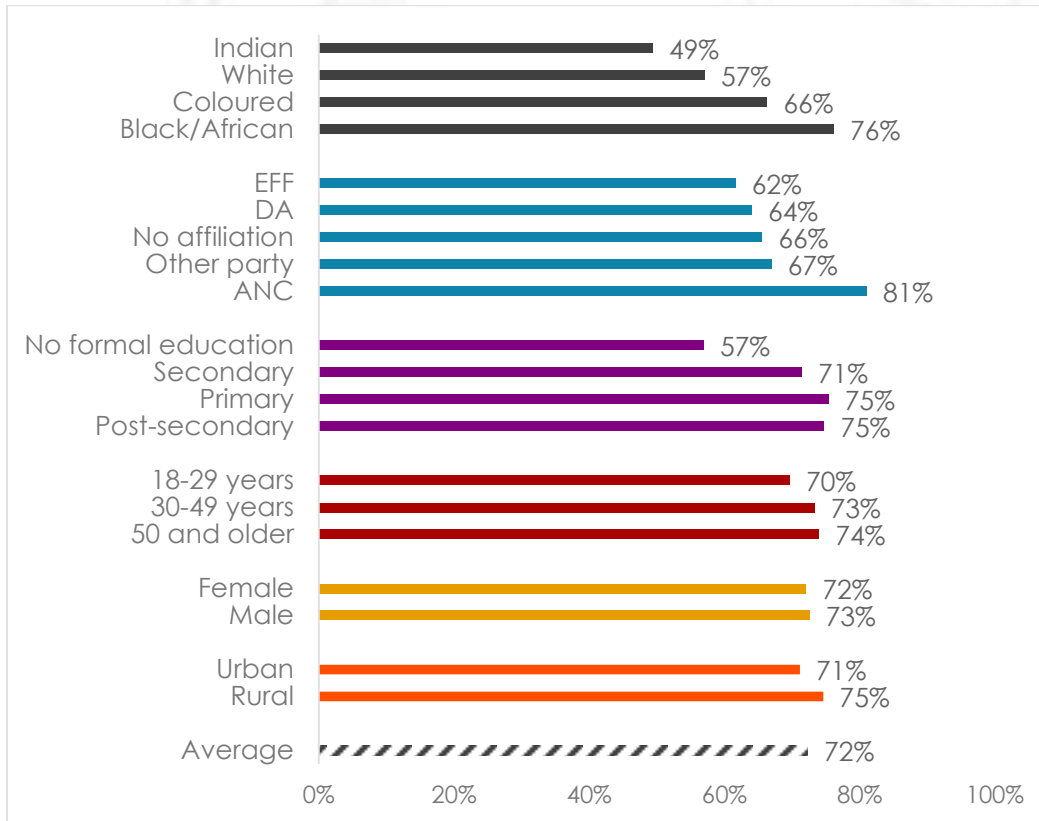
On other indicators of the freedom and fairness of elections, majorities of South Africans say that the votes are “always” or “often” counted fairly (66%), the media “always” or “often” provides fair coverage of all candidates (54%), and voters “always” or “often” have a genuine choice (68%) (Figure 6).

**Figure 4: How free and fair are elections?** | South Africa | 2000-2015



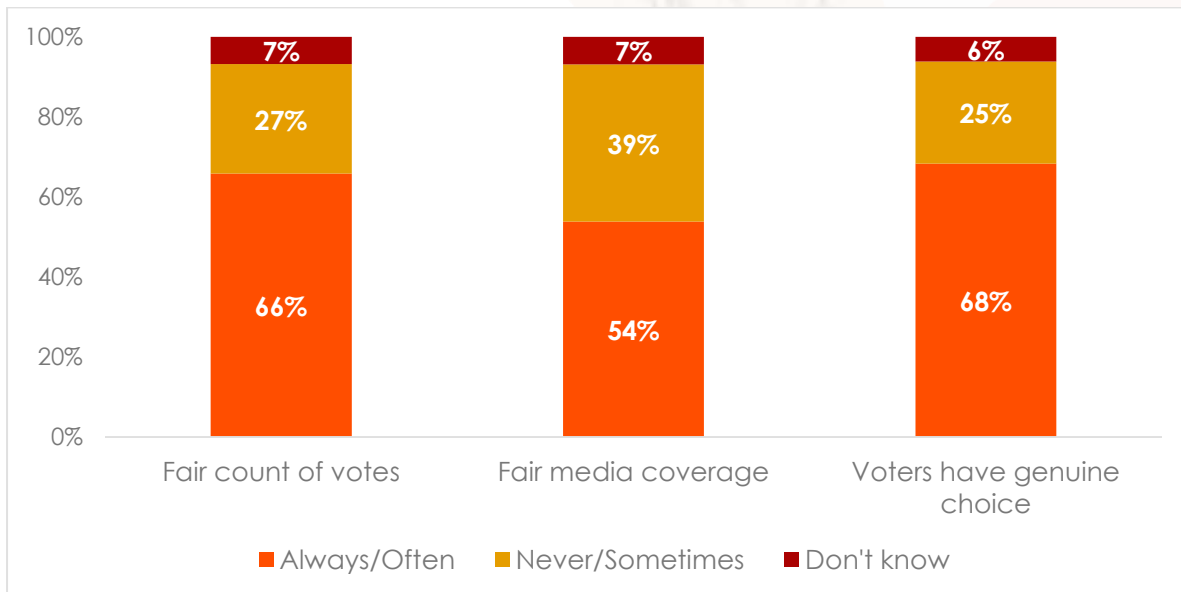
**Respondents were asked:** *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election?*

**Figure 5: Elections are free and fair** | by race, party affiliation, education, age, gender, and location | South Africa | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election? (% who say "completely free and fair" or "free and fair, but with minor problems")

**Figure 6: Fair vote count, fair media coverage, genuine choice** | South Africa | 2015



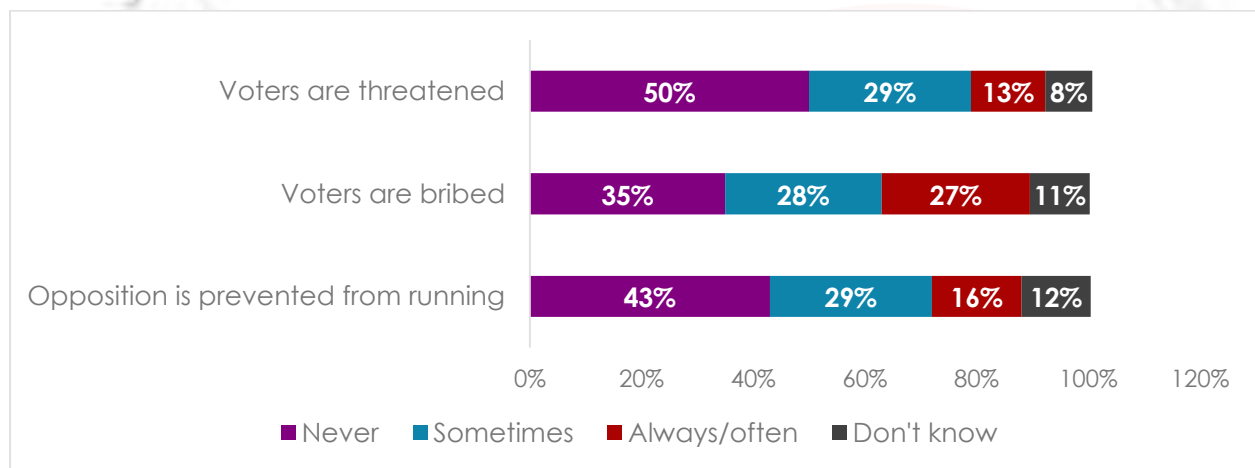
**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Votes are counted fairly? The media provides fair coverage of all candidates? Voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections?

*Fear and intimidation during elections*

Another aspect of electoral legitimacy lies in the voter's ability to make a choice without fear or interference. When asked to assess the frequency of threats to election quality, 13% say voters are "always" or "often" threatened with violence at the polls, 27% say voters are "always" or "often" bribed, and 16% say opposition candidates are "always" or "often" prevented from running for office (Figure 7).

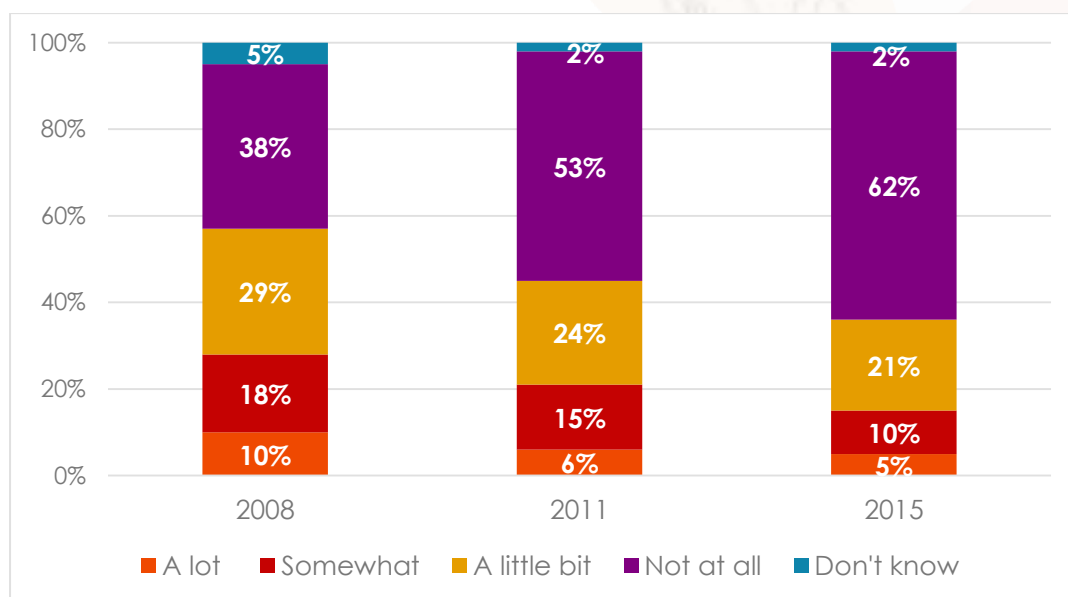
A large majority of respondents do not personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns (Figure 8). Over time, the proportion who say they are "not at all" afraid has increased from 38% in 2008 to 53% in 2011 and 62% in 2015.

**Figure 7: Frequency of threats to election quality | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Voters are threatened with violence at the polls? Voters are bribed? Opposition candidates are prevented from running for office?*

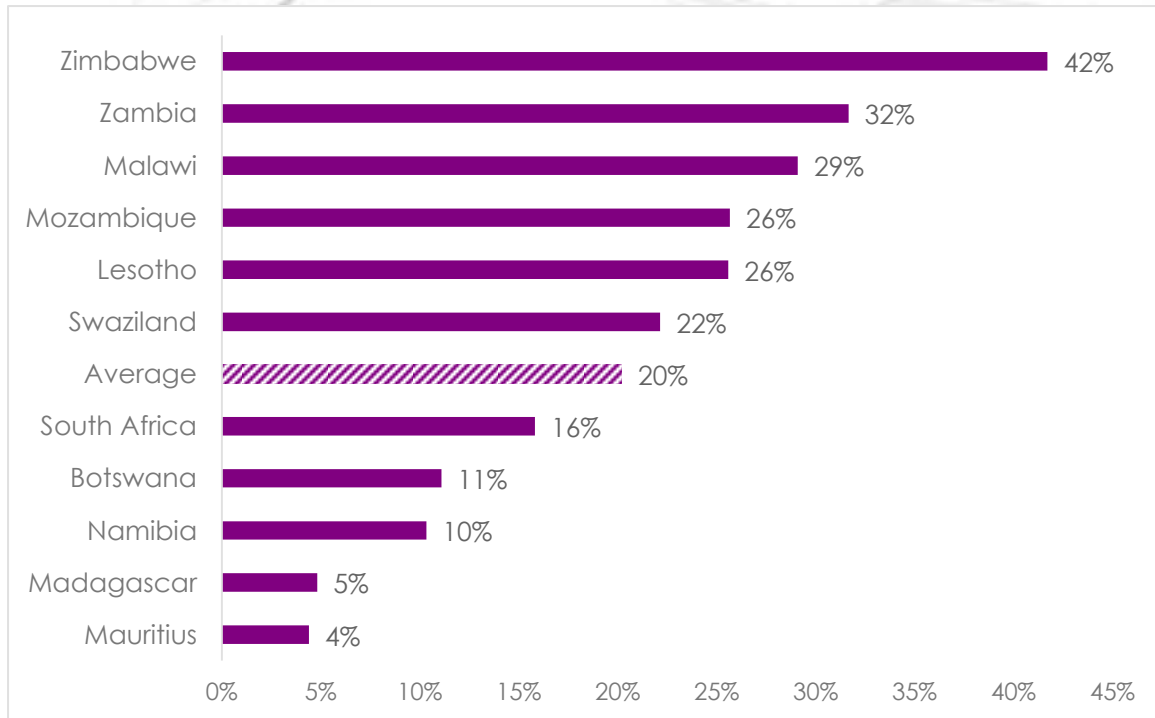
**Figure 8: Fear and intimidation during elections | South Africa | 2008-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?*

A comparison of Southern African countries shows that on average, 20% of respondents say they fear political intimidation or violence “a lot” or “somewhat.” South Africa falls below average with 16%. More than four in 10 Zimbabweans (42%) say they fear intimidation “a lot” or “somewhat,” while Mauritians (4%) express the least fear (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Fear and intimidation during elections** | 12 Southern African countries  
 | 2014/2015



**Respondents were asked:** During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say “a lot” or “somewhat”)

### Voting intentions

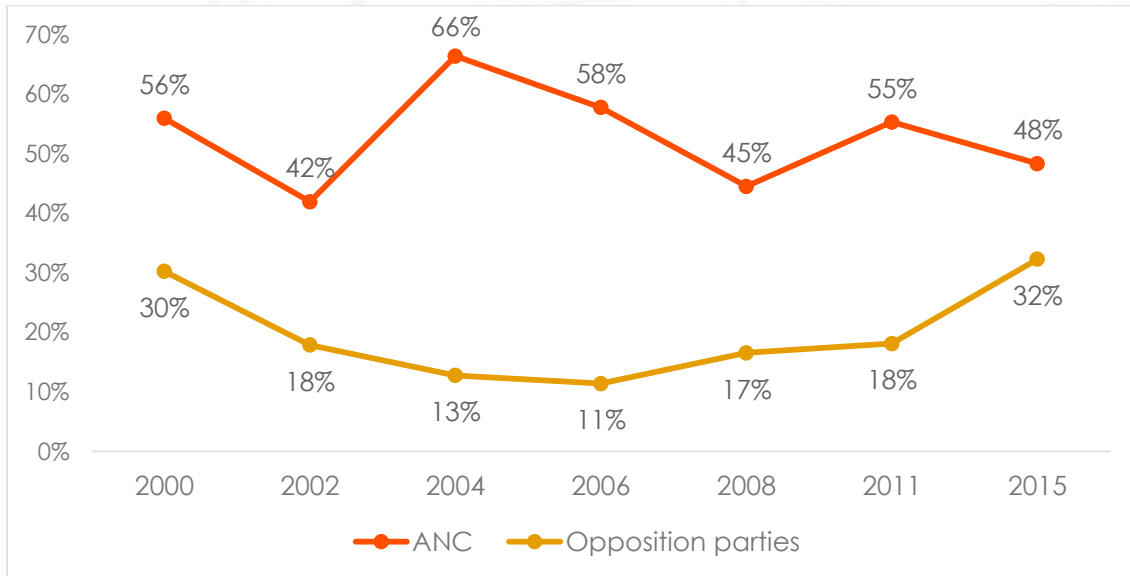
In the 2014 national elections, South Africans gave the ANC 62% of the vote. The largest opposition party, the DA, secured 22% of the vote, while the new EFF established itself as the third-largest political party nationally with 6% of the vote. The other 29 political parties that contested the national elections shared the remaining 9%, with no party obtaining more than 2% (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2014).

When asked how they would vote in a hypothetical national election in August-September 2015, 48% of respondents chose the ANC, compared to 32% for opposition parties, 6% who would not vote, and 14% who were undecided. Over time, survey respondents' intended vote for the ANC has fluctuated, from 56% in 2000 to a high of 66% in 2004 to a low of 45% in 2008. The proportion of respondents intending to vote for opposition parties declined from 30% in the 2000 survey to a low of 11% in 2006, followed by steady gains totalling 21 percentage points by 2015 (Figure 10).

In these expressions of voting intentions at the national level, support for the ANC is highest among black Africans (59%), compared to only 3% of white citizens (Figure 11). Majorities of those with secondary, primary, or no formal education say they intend to vote for the ANC, while only 36% of those with post-secondary education say the same. Rural residents (61%) are far more likely than urbanites (42%) to say they'll vote for the ANC, while youth (46%) are slightly less supportive than those over age 29.

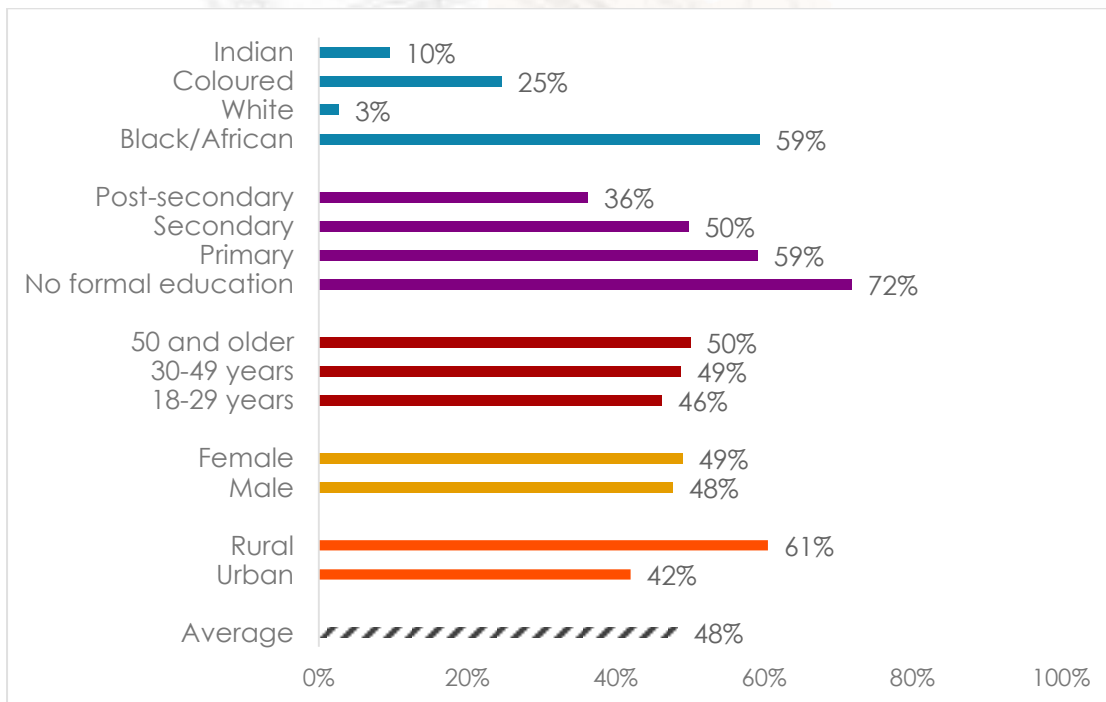


**Figure 10: Who would South Africans vote for? | South Africa | 2000-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

**Figure 11: Who is most likely to vote for the ANC? | by race, education, age, gender, and location | South Africa | 2015**

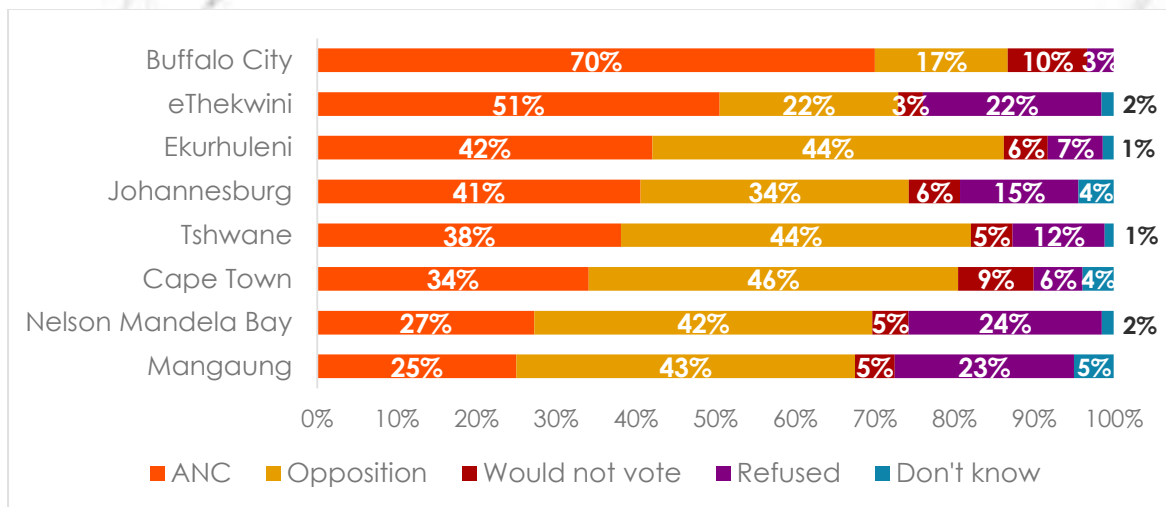


**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for? (% who say they would vote for the ANC)*

These results seem to confirm previous voting behaviour literature describing voting in South Africa as dominated by racial and other identities (Ferree, 2006; Norris & Mattes, 2003; Du Toit, 1999). Thus support for the ANC may often be a function of racial identity, lived experience under apartheid, and loyalty to the former liberation movement (Mattes, 2011).

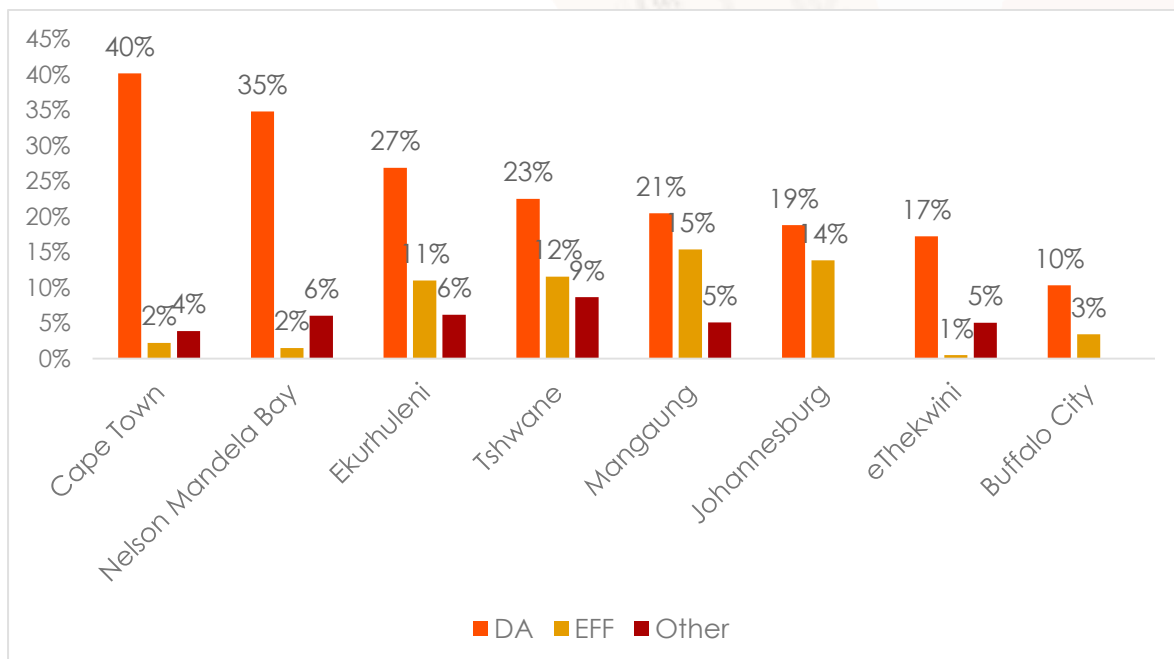
Breaking survey responses down by major city may provide some insight, although the voting intentions still focus on national (rather than local) elections. In the hypothetical national election in 2015, the ANC would have won by majorities in Buffalo City (70%) and eThekweni (51%) and by a plurality in Johannesburg (41%) (Figure 12). Opposition parties in a coalition would have fared better in Tshwane (44%), Nelson Mandela Bay (42%), and Mangaung (43%). A breakdown by individual party shows that the DA would have come out on top in Cape Town (40%), taken a plurality in Nelson Mandela Bay (35%), and pushed the ANC below 50% and increased its seats in Ekurhuleni (27%) and Tshwane (23%) (Figure 13).

**Figure 12: Voting intentions for political parties | by major city | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

**Figure 13: Voting intentions for opposition parties | by major city | South Africa | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *If national elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for? (% who say "DA," "EFF," or "Other")*

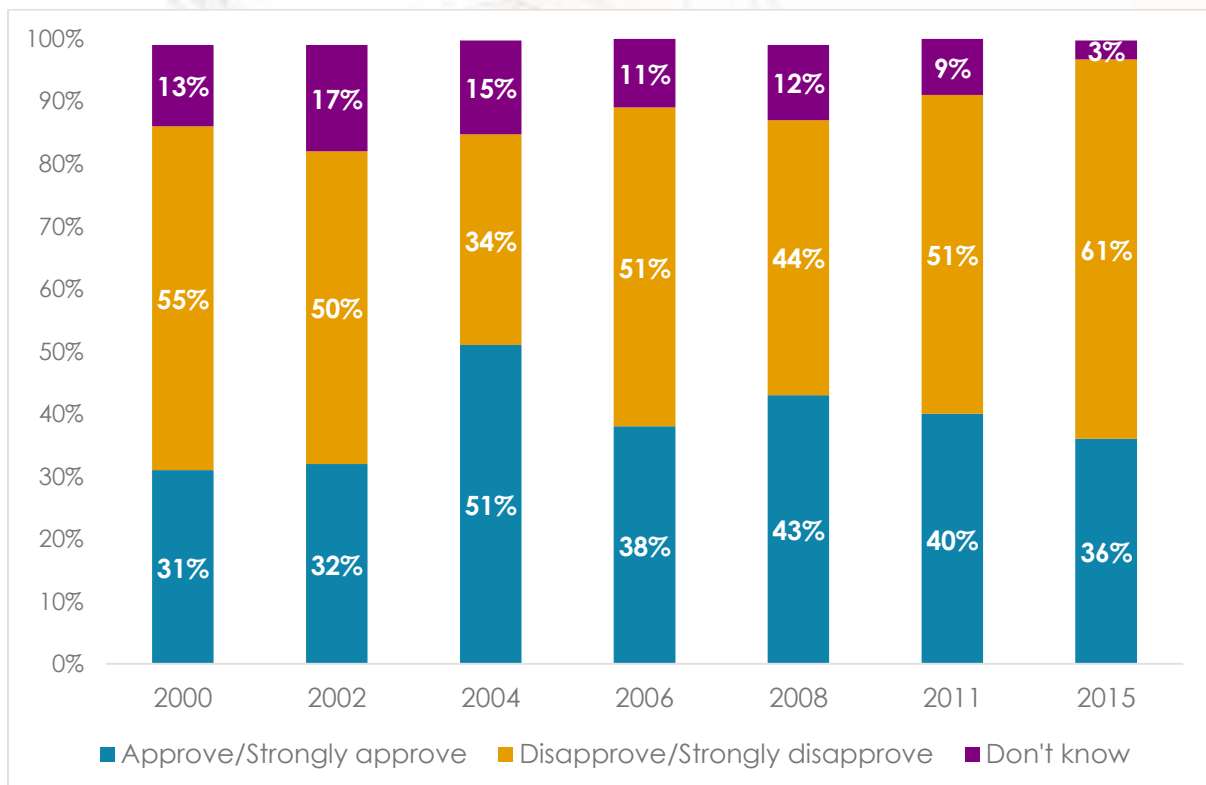
While these survey results offer a view of the landscape for national elections at various points in time, they don't necessarily predict local races, where familiarity with local government councillors and candidates, councillors' previous job performance, and other local factors may play important roles.

### Local government elections and councillor performance

One of the drivers of competitive local elections should be how well councillors do their jobs. On average across South Africa, 61% of respondents "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of the way their elected local councillors performed over the previous 12 months (Figure 14). Disapproval has been the majority assessment in all surveys except in 2004 (34%) and 2008 (44%) (Chingwete, 2015). Nearly five in 10 respondents say local government performed "fairly well" or "very well" in maintaining roads (48%) and markets (49%), an improvement on both ratings from previous years (Figure 15).

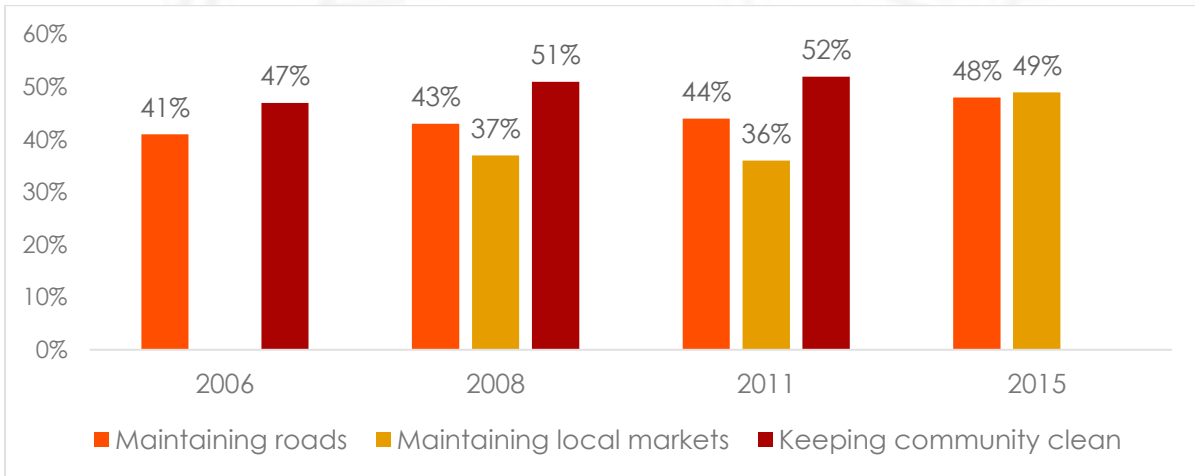
When asked who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, local government councillors do their jobs, respondents are split (Figure 16). Three in 10 (31%) say the local council should hold councillors accountable, 28% say the voters, 22% say their political party, and 16% say the national government (executive). Support for the idea that voters should hold councillors responsible has doubled since 2008, including a 7-percentage-point increase since 2011.

**Figure 14: Local government councillors' performance ratings** | South Africa  
 | 2000-2015



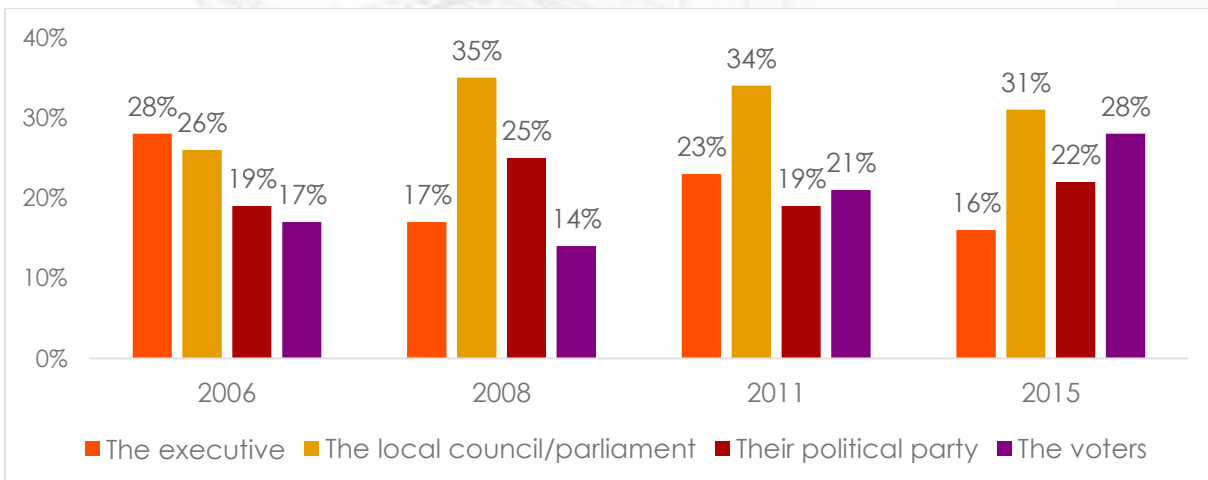
**Respondents were asked:** Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your elected local government councillor?

**Figure 15: How well do local government councillors do their job? | South Africa | 2006-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say your local government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Maintaining local roads? Maintaining local market places? Keeping the community clean? (% who say "very well" or "fairly well")

**Figure 16: Who should make sure local government councillors do their job? | South Africa | 2006-2015**



**Respondents were asked:** Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, local government councillors do their jobs?

## Conclusion

South Africans generally perceive their elections as free and fair and express little fear of election-related violence or intimidation. But they have become more skeptical about how well elections work to ensure that voters' views are represented and that voters are able to remove non-performing leaders from power. Survey responses indicate that if national elections had been held last year, the ANC would have seen its majority shrink while opposition parties gained ground.

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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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