



Low on trust and satisfaction, South Africans want their MPs to listen

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 921 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

After a general election in May, South Africa's seventh democratic Parliament was formally constituted on 14 June 2024 and re-elected Cyril Ramaphosa as the country's president for a second term (Parliament of South Africa, 2024). In the days following, 10 parties with seats in Parliament formed a "government of national unity" coalition to rule the country (Anders, 2024).

The 400-member National Assembly is made up of 18 political parties elected proportionally according to the people's vote (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2024).

Parliament bears the responsibility for passing laws, facilitating public participation in decision-making processes, and exercising oversight over the executive to ensure that the needs of citizens are met (Moodley, 2021).

One of the most spectacular failures of the South African Parliament with regard to public accountability was laid bare during the 2018-2022 investigation of the Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, which looked into claims of fraud and corruption in state institutions (Republic of South Africa, 2024). The commission was unequivocal in its finding on the legislature: Parliament "failed to use the oversight and accountability measures at its disposal," and urgent reforms are needed (Doyle, 2022).

Parliamentary oversight earlier met the glare of publicity in 1999 when the ruling African National Congress (ANC) took advantage of its majority in the National Assembly to halt a probe by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts into a major arms deal linked to high-ranking ANC officials (Pillay & Meny-Gibert, 2023). A repeat of this scenario occurred years later: The Constitutional Court found that Parliament failed to exercise oversight and hold then-President Jacob Zuma to account over unlawful upgrades to his Nkandla home (Cohen, 2017).

A 2021 report on parliamentary oversight by the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse makes plain the kind of legislature that would benefit citizens: "The improvement we are looking for is a responsive Parliament, whose operations take place in a transparent manner and which shows a welcoming and proactive stance towards public participation" (McDaid, 2022).

How do South Africans perceive their Parliament?

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey shows that most citizens want members of Parliament (MPs) to exercise oversight over the president and to prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas. Large majorities are dissatisfied with how their MPs are doing their jobs, perceive most or all of them as unresponsive and corrupt, and don't trust them.

Citizen-initiated contact with MPs is low, perhaps reflecting weak links between voters and their representatives. Majorities say that elections are not effective in ensuring that voters' views are reflected in Parliament or in enabling voters to remove unrepresentative leaders.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, based at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, interviewed 1,580 adult South Africans in November-December 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of ± 2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2021.

Key findings

- Seven in 10 South Africans (69%) say elected officials should prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas.
- Only a small minority (13%) of citizens say MPs "often" or "always" try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say.
- Fewer than one in 10 South Africans (8%) report that they contacted an MP during the previous year about some important problem or to give them their views.
- Majorities say that Parliament should have the power to make laws (57%) and that the president should explain to Parliament how his government spends taxpayers' money (59%).
- More than six in 10 respondents (63%) say that "most" or "all" MPs are involved in corruption, while a further 29% believe that "some" of them are.
- Popular trust in MPs has declined by more than half since 2011, from 56% to 24%.
- Only about one-fifth (22%) of citizens "approve" or "strongly approve" of the way their MPs have performed over the previous 12 months, while two-thirds (67%) express disapproval.

Elections as a means to represent voters' views

In a democracy, elected officials are expected to lead as well as to represent their constituents. When it comes to making difficult policy choices, should they follow their own instincts or the will of the people?

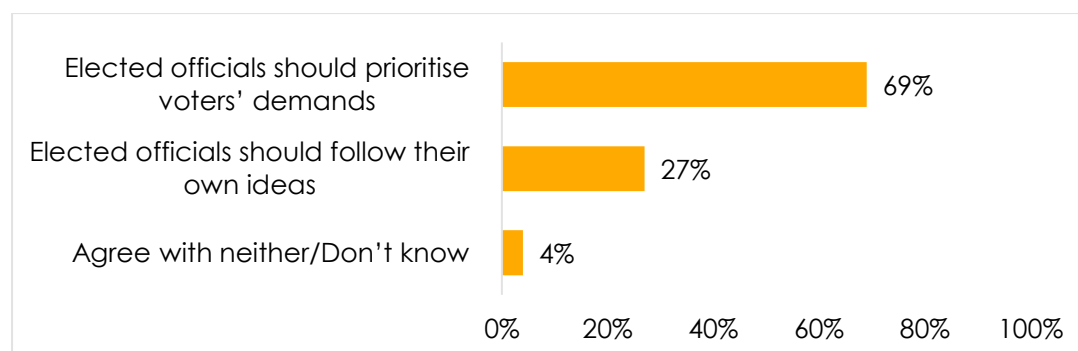
About seven in 10 South Africans (69%) say their elected officials should prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas. About one-fourth (27%) think elected officials should be guided primarily by their own ideas (Figure 1).

The view that elected officials should prioritise voters' demands is shared by large majorities across key demographic groups. It is more widespread in cities than in rural areas (73% vs. 63%) and among the youth and the middle-aged compared to senior citizens (69%-72% vs. 66%) (Figure 2).

Support for this view increases with respondents' level of education, ranging from 61% among those with primary education or less to 78% among those with post-secondary

education. Wealthy citizens (74% of those experiencing no lived poverty) are more likely than their poorer counterparts to say that elected officials should follow voter demands.¹

Figure 1: Should elected officials prioritise voter demands or their own ideas?
| South Africa | 2022



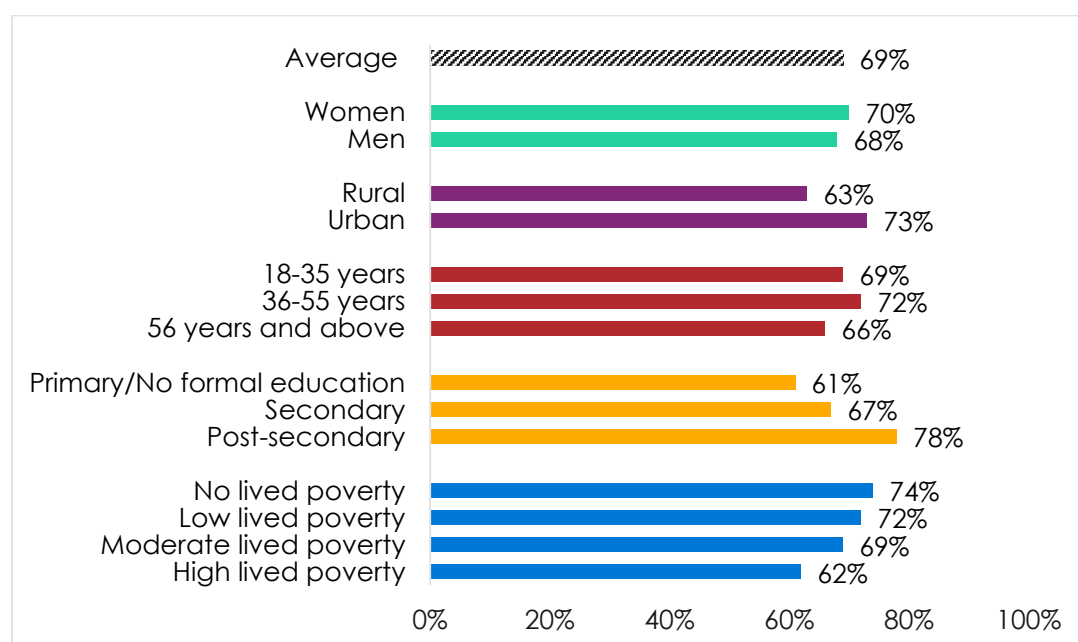
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Our elected officials should listen to voters' views and do what they demand.

Statement 2: Our elected leaders should follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 2: Elected officials should prioritise voter demands | by demographic group
| South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Our elected officials should listen to voters' views and do what they demand.

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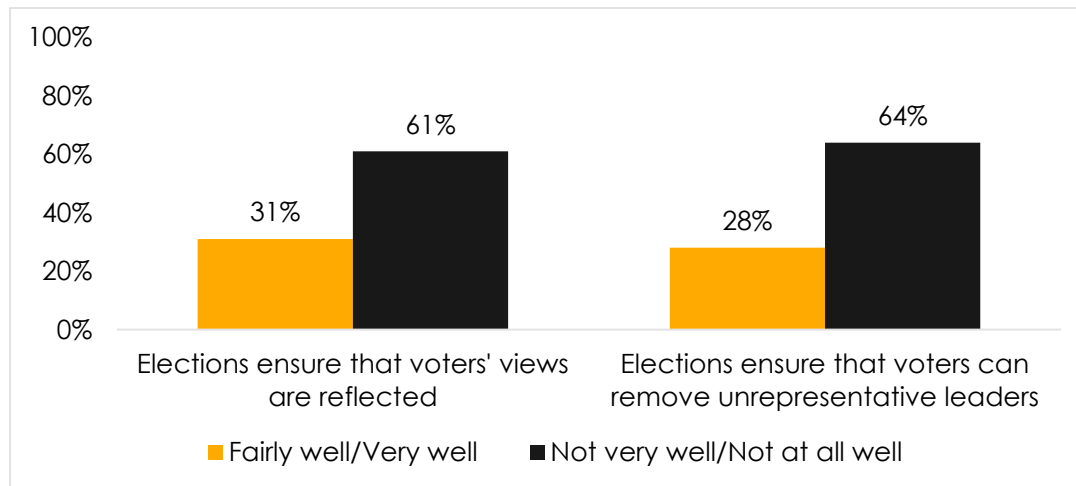
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Elections may be considered a vital tool for citizens to make their demands heard and hold leaders to account, allowing voters to remove from office politicians who go against the people's will. But how well do elections fulfil this function in practice?

In South Africa, majorities of citizens say elections do not work well to ensure voters' views are reflected in Parliament (61%) and fail to enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want (64%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Efficacy of elections | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections: Ensure that MPs reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

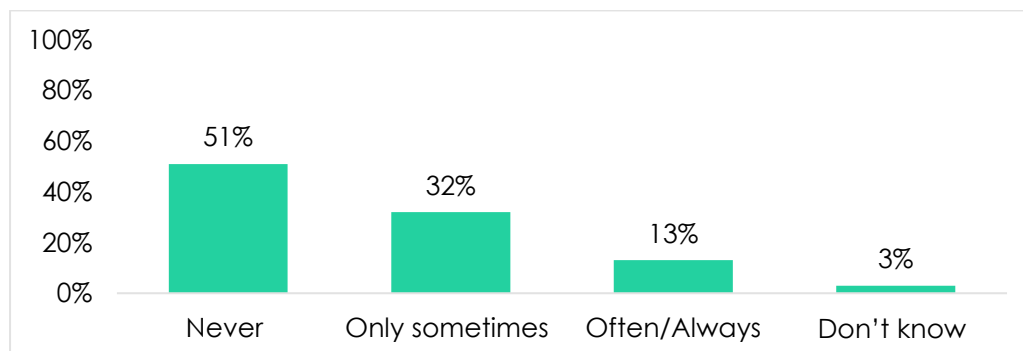
Responsiveness of MPs

To be guided by voters' demands requires hearing voters' demands. Do MPs listen to their constituents' views?

More than half (51%) of South Africans say MPs "never" do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say, while another 32% say they "only sometimes" do so. Only 13% think MPs "often" or "always" listen (Figure 4).

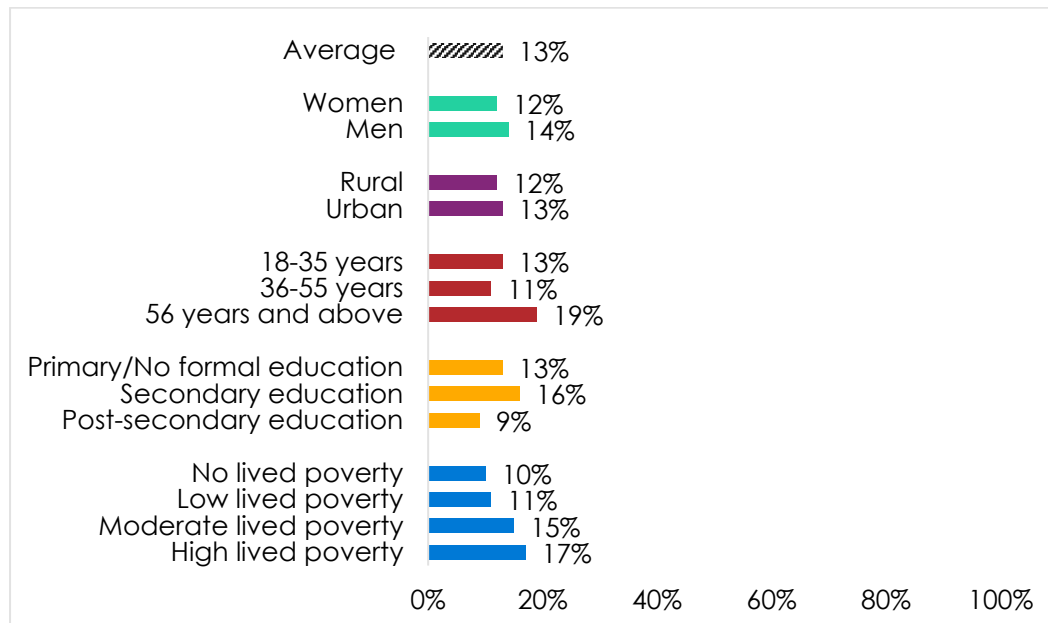
Older South Africans (19%) are more likely than younger cohorts (11%-13%) to say that MPs "often" or "always" listen to ordinary people, as are the poorest respondents (17%) compared to the wealthiest (10%) (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Perceived responsiveness of MPs | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: MPs?

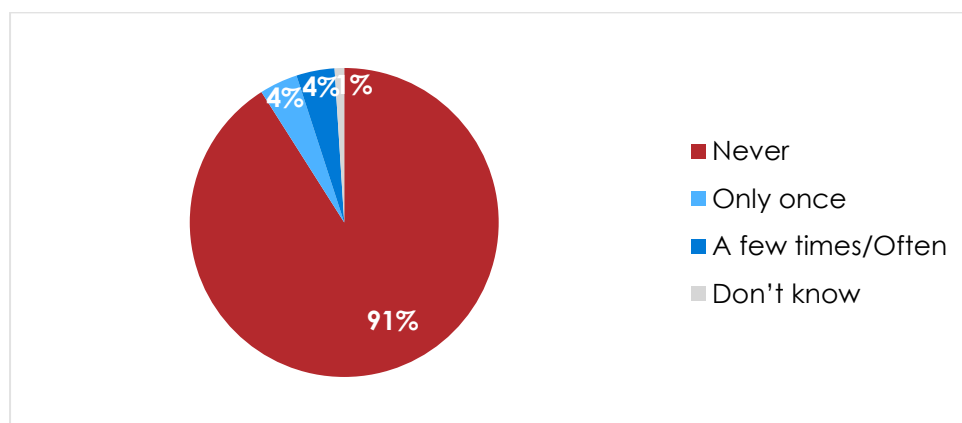
Figure 5: MPs often/always listen | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: MPs? (% who say "often" or "always")

The vast majority (91%) of citizens say they did not contact their MP at all during the year preceding the survey, while 8% say they made contact "only once," "a few times," or "often" (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Contact with MPs | South Africa | 2022



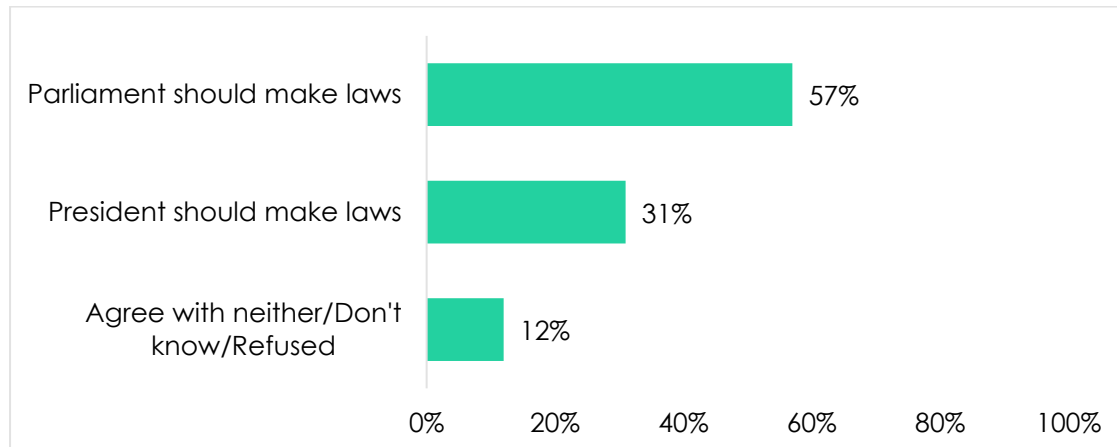
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: An MP?

President's accountability to Parliament

One of the critical challenges facing many countries is how to make governments work for the people by developing laws that respond to citizens' needs, using resources efficiently, and delivering public goods and services. Asked whether Parliament or the president should make laws, more than half (57%) of South Africans say Parliament should make laws for the country because its members represent the people, but three in 10 (31%) believe the president should make laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks (Figure 7).

Do South Africans expect the president to answer to Parliament? About six in 10 respondents (59%) think Parliament should ensure that the president regularly accounts for fiscal expenditures, while 35% say the president should be free to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting his time justifying his actions (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Should Parliament or the president make laws? | South Africa | 2022



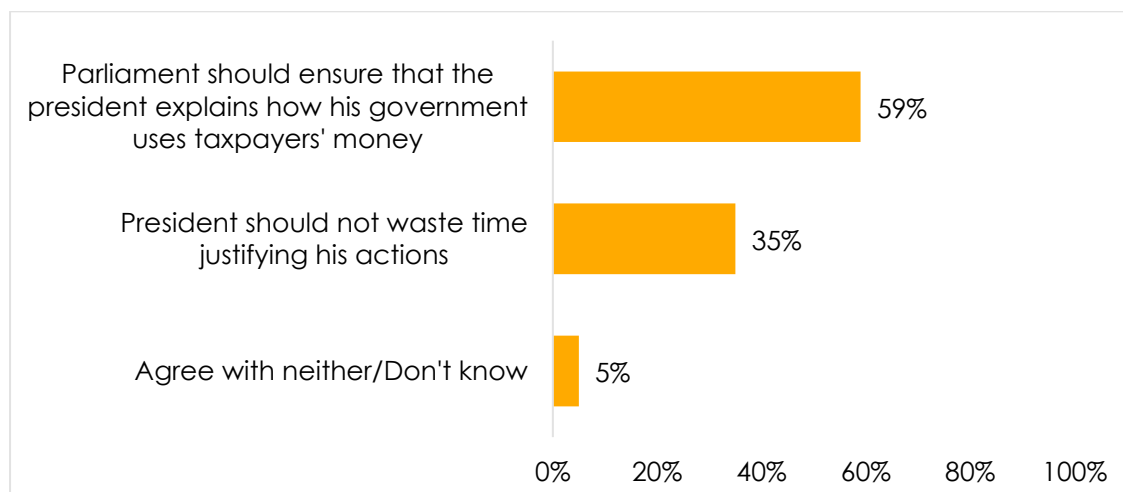
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: MPs represent the people; therefore they should make laws for this country, even if the president does not agree.

Statement 2: Since the president represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 8: Should MPs hold president accountable? | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

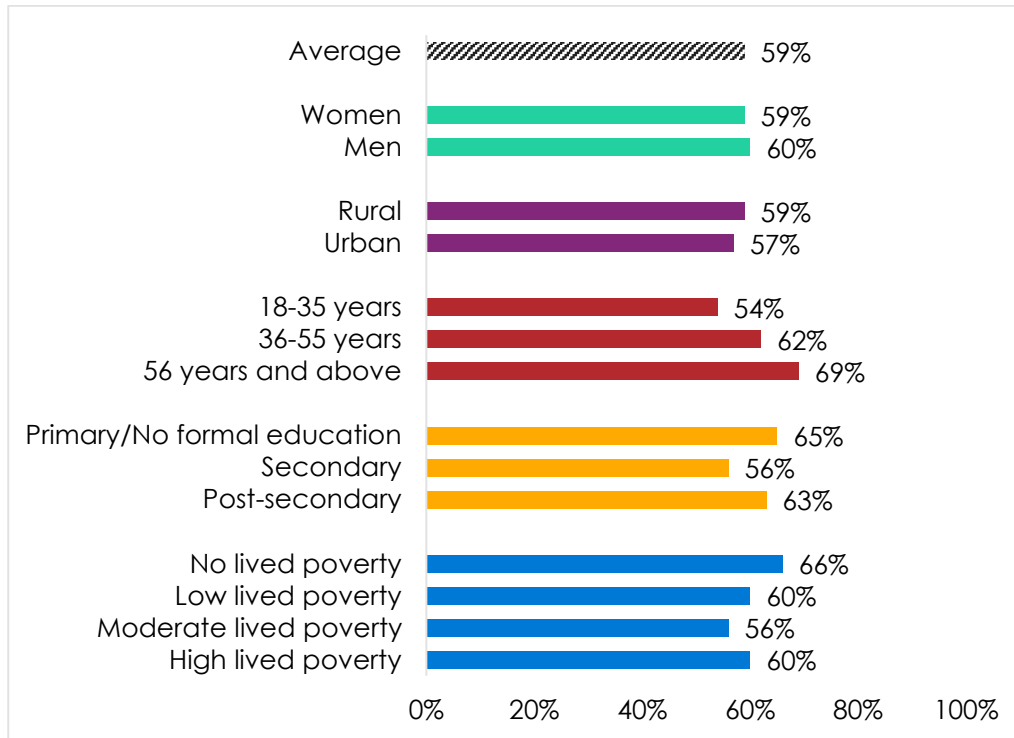
Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Wealthy (66%) and older (69%) citizens are more likely than poorer and younger respondents to say Parliament should ensure that the president explains how his government spends taxpayers' money (Figure 9).

But nearly half (48%) of respondents think the president in fact “often” or “always” ignores Parliament and does as he pleases, while only 42% say this “rarely” or “never” happens (Figure 10).

Figure 9: MPs should hold president accountable | by demographic group
| South Africa | 2022



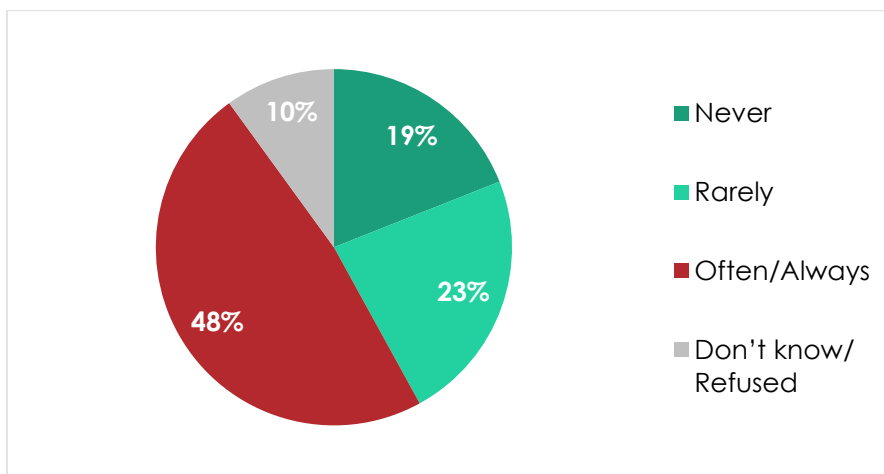
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

Figure 10: Does the president ignore Parliament? | South Africa | 2022



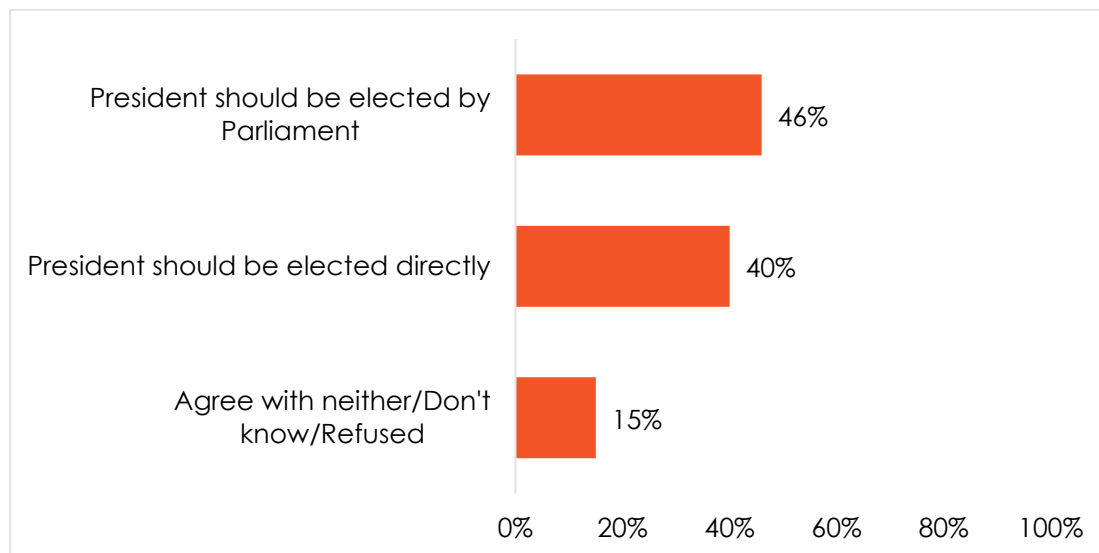
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?

Methods of electing the president

With the exception of independent candidates, whose first-time inclusion in the 2024 general election ushered in a more direct form of choosing representatives to the South African Parliament (VOA Africa, 2023), South Africa's MPs generally make it to Parliament as a result of their political party. Each party gains seats according to the number of votes it wins in the election (Thorne, 2024).

One of Parliament's powers is to elect the country's president, but some political parties have called for direct election of both MPs and the president (Nkadimeng, 2024). Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they would prefer to keep the current arrangement or change it to allow for direct election of the president. Citizens are divided on this question: 46% say the current system has served South Africa well and should be maintained, while a slightly smaller proportion (40%) prefer direct election of the president (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Which system should be used for electing the president? | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The current system where Parliament chooses the president should be changed to allow for direct election of the president.

Statement 2: The current system where the president of the country is chosen by Parliament has served South Africa well and should be maintained.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

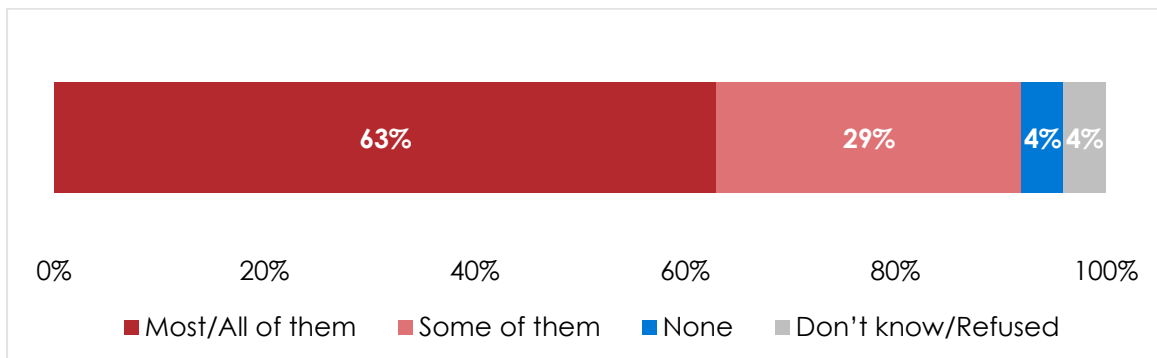
Perceived corruption and trust in Parliament

Even though elected officials are expected to uphold the rule of law, promote good governance, and hold other public officials to account, MPs in many countries are often accused of being corrupt themselves (Harutyunyan, 2021). How do South Africans see corruption among their MPs?

Almost two-thirds (63%) of survey respondents think that "most" or "all" MPs are involved in corruption, in addition to 29% who say that "some" of them are corrupt. Only 4% think there is no corruption among MPs (Figure 12).

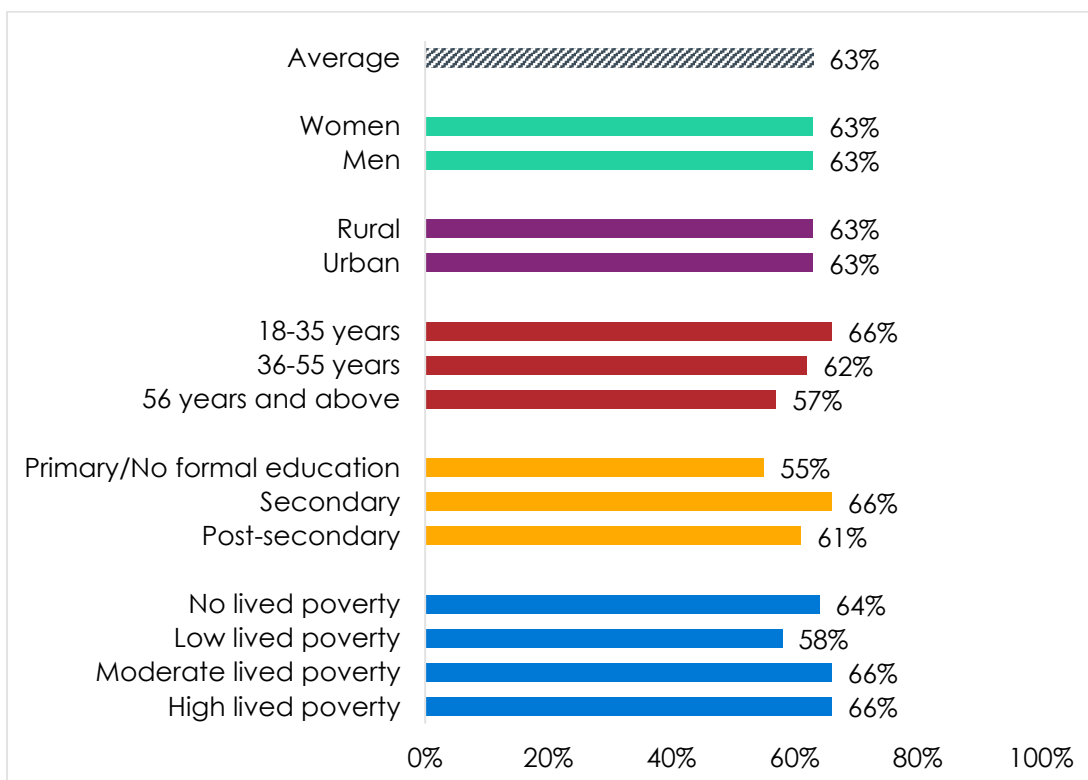
Youth (66%) are more likely than their older counterparts (57%-62%) to see most MPs as corrupt, as are more educated respondents (61%-66%) compared to those with primary schooling or less (55%) (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Perceptions of corruption among MPs | South Africa | 2022



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: MPs?

Figure 13: Perception that most/all MPs are corrupt | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022

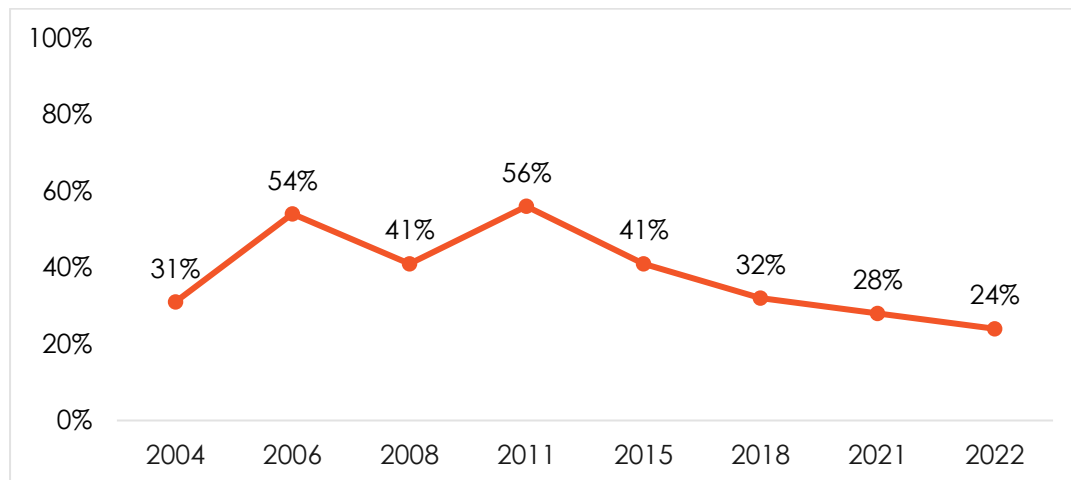


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? MPs? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

One effect of perceived corruption is that it undermines popular trust in elected officials (Corruption Watch, 2024). In South Africa, trust in MPs has experienced a sharp decline over the past two decades, dropping from a high of 56% in 2011 to 24% in 2022 (Figure 14).

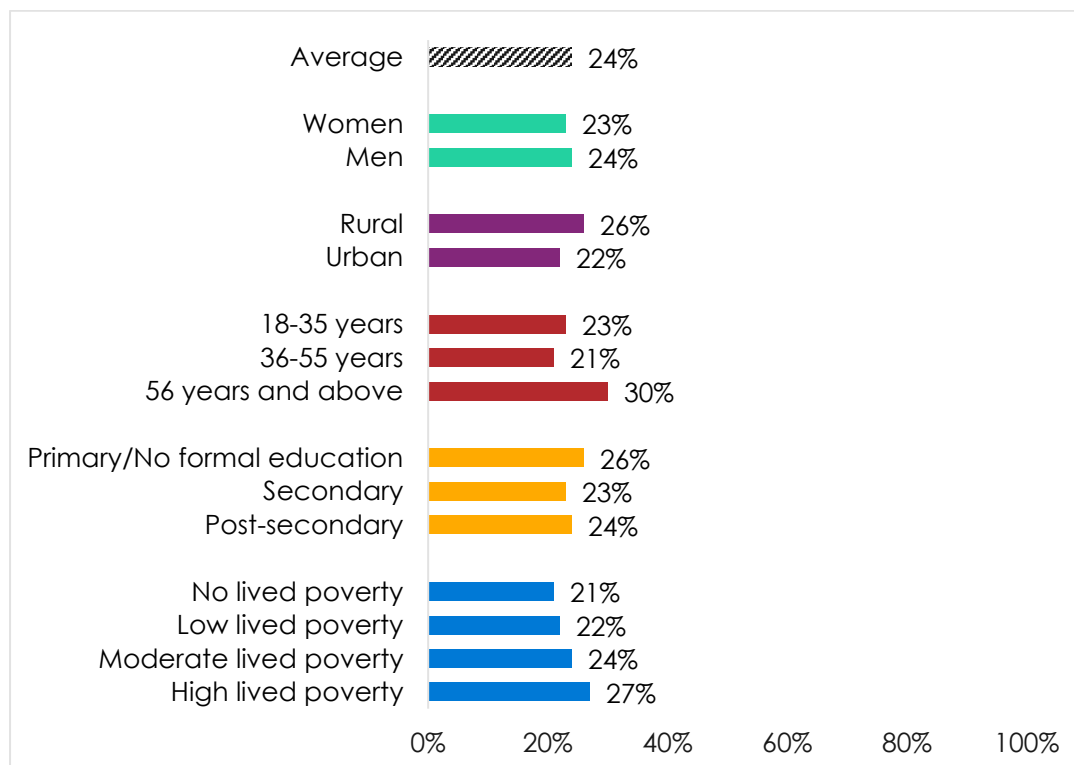
Older respondents (30%) are somewhat more likely to trust MPs than their younger counterparts (21%-23%) (Figure 15). Trust increases with respondents' experience of lived poverty, ranging from 21% among the wealthiest citizens to 27% among the poorest.

Figure 14: Trust MPs somewhat/a lot | South Africa | 2004-2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Parliament? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 15: Trust MPs somewhat/a lot | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



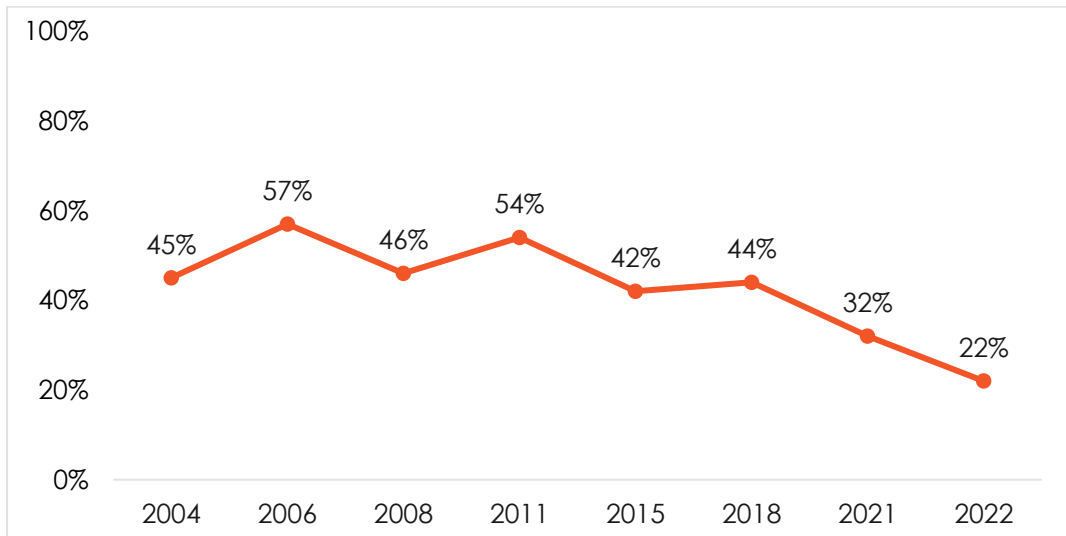
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Parliament? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Performance of MPs

Overall, how well do South Africans think their elected MPs are doing their jobs?

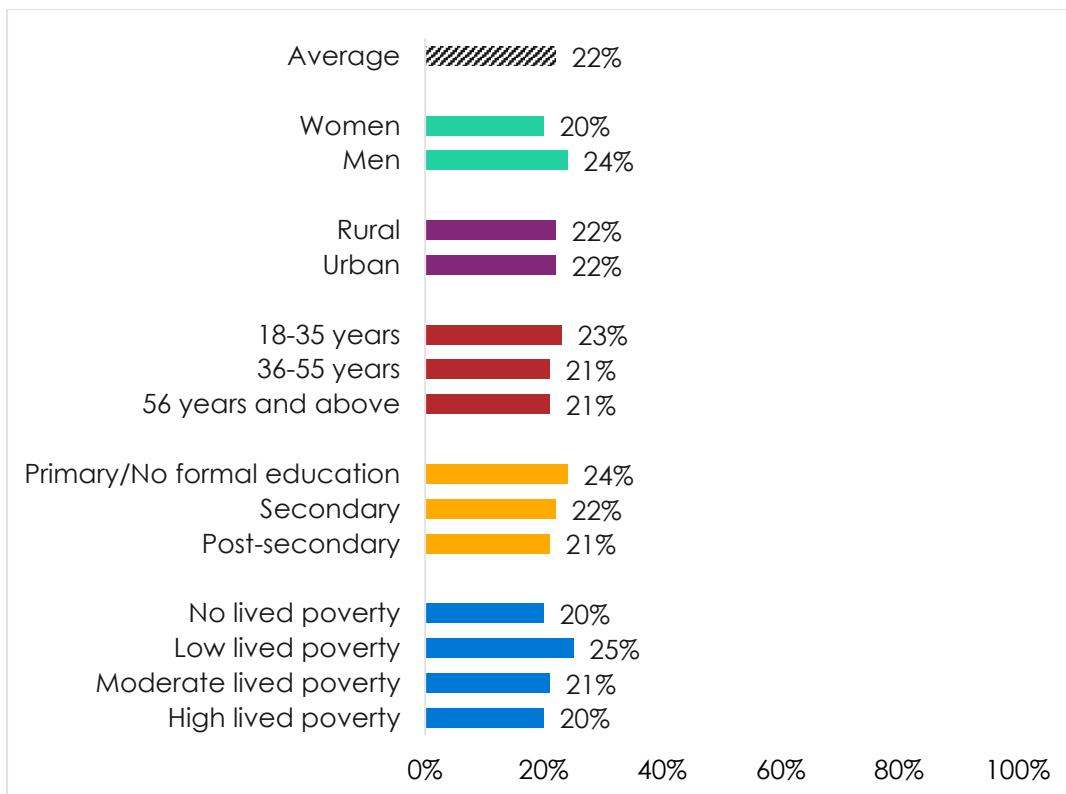
Since 2011, approval ratings for MPs have experienced a drop of 32 percentage points, decreasing from 54% to 22% (Figure 16). Low approval is consistent across key demographic groups, climbing no higher than 25% in any group (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Approval of MP performance | South Africa | 2004-2022



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 MP? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Figure 17: Approval of performance of MPs | by demographic group | South Africa | 2022



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 MP? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Conclusion

If these survey findings contain a message for South Africa's new government, it's that citizens want their elected officials to listen and respond to their calls for action on policy matters that matter most to them.

Large majorities say MPs should prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas, and most complain that their elected representatives don't listen to what ordinary people have to say.

As things stand, South Africans are highly critical of the job their MPs have been doing and perceive widespread corruption in Parliament, while public trust in these elected leaders has been declining for the past decade.

Changing these perceptions most likely requires a cohort of MPs who are in touch with their constituents' concerns, committed to delivering the services they need, and intentional about upholding the rule of law.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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