

# The young and the restless: Political apathy and the youth

Are the youth disconnecting from conventional politics, apathetic, individualistic and disinterested, as is often speculated? As the 2009 general election draws nearer, the debate is about whether young people will be turning up at the ballot box. Using SASAS data, **Ben Roberts** and **Thabo Letsoalo** examine the political attitudes of young people relative to their older contemporaries.

Interest in politics is commonly included in attitudinal surveys as a means of assessing levels of engagement and concern with politics and current affairs. It has been found to strongly influence voting behaviour in mature democracies.

Between 2003 and 2006, the percentage of South Africans who reported that they discussed politics frequently ('very often' or 'often') increased slightly from 14% to 20%. Over this interval, political discussion rose across all age groups (Figure 1). In both 2003 and 2006, the 16-24 year-old age group appears slightly less likely to talk often about politics than middle-aged citizens aged 30-59 years, and instead more closely approximate the levels of interest demonstrated by the oldest generation aged 60 years and above.

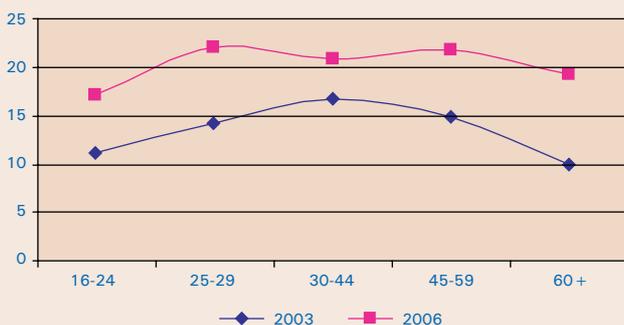


Figure 1: Percentage discussing politics ('very often' or 'often'), 2003 and 2006 (16 years +)  
Source: HSRC SASAS 2008



In 2008, respondents were asked directly how interested they are in politics. On aggregate, 37% of South Africans aged 16 and older indicated that they were 'very' or 'quite' interested in politics (Figure 2). Although political interest seemed lower among youth (16-29 year-olds) and the oldest generation (60+), it did not differ significantly from middle-aged South Africans.

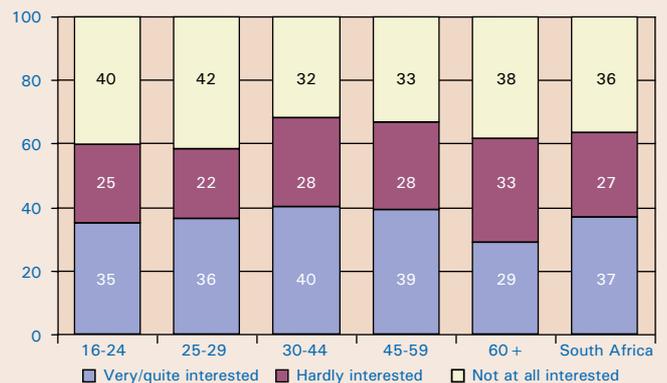


Figure 2: Interest in politics, by age group, 2008 (16 years +)  
Source: HSRC SASAS 2008

Men and women in the 16-29-year-old age group show equal levels of interest in politics. By contrast, middle-aged (30-59) and older men (60+) are significantly more politically interested than their female counterparts. With regard to political discussion, men in all three age groups are significantly more likely to talk about politics than women.

This suggests that there may have been a convergence between generations in the gender gap in political interest, though the same does not appear true in respect of political discussion. Differences in political interest between black and other population groups across the three age groups were not discernible.

## On the importance of voting

To understand whether today's young people are distinctive in their views about voting in general elections, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement that it 'makes no difference' whether they vote or not. In 2008, 58% of South Africans disagreed that voting in general elections does not make a difference.

There are relatively small fluctuations in attitude across age groups, ranging from 54% among those in their late twenties (25-29 years) to a high of 61% for 16-24 year-olds. However, none

of the observed differences between the different age groups are statistically significant. This signifies that youth are just as likely as middle-aged and older citizens to believe in the power of the vote.

Respondents were also asked to specify their level of agreement with the statement that it is the 'duty of all citizens to vote'. The sense of civic duty to vote is deeply entrenched, with 80% of South Africans over 16 years subscribing to this viewpoint in late 2008.

Signs of political disengagement among young people are again not evident. Variation by age group ranged in a narrow band from 78% among 25-29 year-olds to 85% for 45-59 year-olds. While 45-59 year-olds (the so-called 'Young Lions') are more likely to believe in the civic duty to vote than those aged between 25-44 years, the youngest (16-24 year-olds) and oldest (60+) age groups are not characteristically different from each other or from middle-aged citizens.

### Intention to vote

As for the level of intention to vote, in late 2008 63% of those 18 years and older were able to indicate who they would support if a general election was to be held the next day, 14% was undecided and 12% would not vote (Figure 3).

Those in their late teens and early twenties (18-24 years) appear less inclined to know who they would vote for (59%) relative to the average South African of voting age, and more likely to say they would not vote (20%). Conversely, those in their late twenties (25-29 years) appear moderately more certain of who they would vote for.

Irrespective of these traits, the percentage point differences between younger and older age groups are relatively small in most instances. The predominant reasons cited by 18-29 year-olds indicating they will not vote are lack of interest (53%), a failure to register (17%), lack of an I.D. book (16%) and disillusionment with politics (11%).

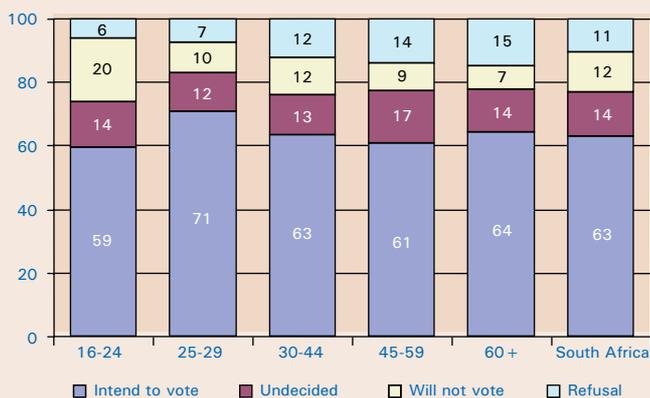


Figure 3: Intention to vote in general elections, by age group, 2008 (18 years+)

Source: HSRC SASAS 2008

Compared to the 2003 SASAS round, the percentage reporting that they would cast their vote at the election has risen marginally from 61% to 63%, and it would appear that young people under 30 years, but especially those aged 25-29 years, are more predisposed towards voting in the 2009 election than in the 2004 election. Those older than 30 years have remained fairly consistent in their intention.

Although age differences in voting intention in late 2008 were not especially pronounced, when one looks at the results by age

and population group, a more striking gradient of difference emerges (Figure 4). The most distinct difference in the intention to vote is between young black respondents aged 18-29 and those similarly aged in other population groups (67% and 43% respectively). This divergent pattern is largely accounted for by the high level of indecision (30%) regarding whether or who to vote for among non-black youth. The generational gap in the intention to vote is also less apparent among black respondents than among other population groups.

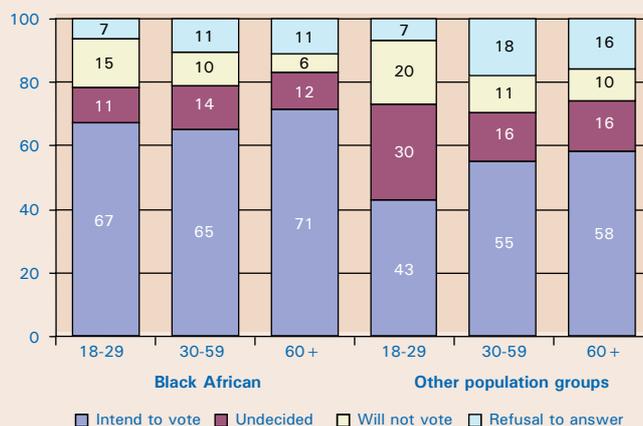


Figure 4: Intention to vote, by age and population group, 2008 (18 years+)

Source: HSRC SASAS 2008

The intention to vote does not equate with actual voting behaviour on Election Day, and previous national elections bear this out, with the low turnout among young people. Relative to the expressed intention to vote in the 2004 election, reported turnout in the 2004 election (based on the 2008 data) was on average 16% higher among those aged 18-24 years, but around 5-10% lower among those older than 25 years. Nonetheless, this should not detract from the encouraging stated interest in the forthcoming national election among youth.

### Concluding reflections

Although young people appear less likely to have voted in previous general elections, they claim to have a strong commitment to the democratic process. A sizable majority of young people consider it a duty to vote and smaller but equally notable shares hold the view that voting ultimately makes a difference. Therefore, without even considering non-electoral forms of participation, young South Africans emerge as interested, aware and engaged in political matters to the same extent as their elders. These results pose a convincing challenge to the stereotypical representations depicting youth as 'disengaged' or 'lost'.

Underlying these general findings, there are, however, significant racial differences in attitudes within the younger generation, with black youth expressing more positive attitudes or 'democratic enthusiasm' than other population groups towards voting. This reflects the diversity in the historical background and contemporary situation of young people. It also highlights the need for targeted interventions for various sub-categories of youth to encourage civic and political participation.

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