

The numbers game

Public support for sports quotas

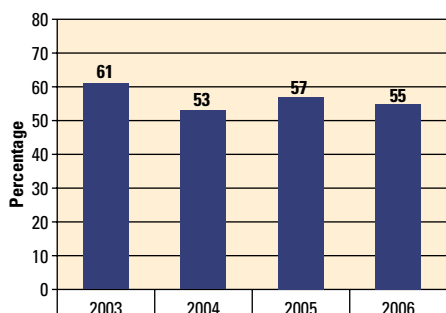
After the euphoria of the Springboks' victorious return from the 2007 Rugby World Cup has died down, there is still serious discontent with the pace and process of transformation in sport, but also much division on the desirability of sports quotas as a means to fast-track transformation. JARÈ STRUWIG and BEN ROBERTS analyse the results from the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) on this issue.

THE RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY indicate that over the four-year period from 2003–2006, a slim majority of the population favours racial quotas in national sports teams. However, there are strong racial disparities in the level of support, with the black African population more than four times as supportive as the white population.

Politicians have openly stated that the representativeness of South African teams is more important than victories, and that transformation should be sped up even if this undermines the ability to be successful at international level. The other view is that the highly controversial system of sport quotas will undermine the nation-building capacity of sport and also that it is detrimental to the ability of teams to compete successfully.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the percentage of South Africans aged 16 and older who agreed that there should be racial quotas in national sports teams stood at 55% in late 2006. Between 2003 and 2004, levels of support dropped, after which it seems to have fluctuated within a narrow band.

Figure 1: Percentage of South Africans aged 16 and older that support racial quotas in national sports teams

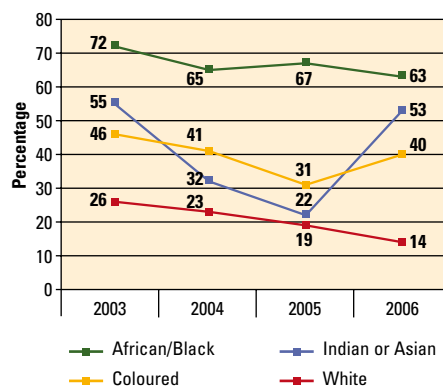


We can only speculate at this stage about possible explanations for the decline in support between 2003 and 2004. It may have had something to do with the relatively poor performance of our national teams in the 2003 cricket and rugby world cups. It is also quite likely to reflect the public debate on quotas that ensued for most of 2004. Highlights of this debate included SA Rugby Football Union (SARFU) president Brian van Rooyen's campaign for scrapping the quota system in rugby, as well as ANC Secretary General Kgalema Motlanthe's firm defence of race quotas in sport in contrast to Sports Minister Makhenkesi Stofile's announcement that they were no longer required.

Turning attention to population group differences, we can immediately observe that support for sports quotas has consistently been the highest among the black African population group and the lowest among the white population (see Figure 2). In late 2006, the gap between the groups could not have been starker, with 63% of black African people voicing support for the quota system, compared to the rather dismal 14% among the white population.

Despite this attitudinal gulf, it is nonetheless important to underscore that declining support has occurred for both groups over the interval. Support among the black African population reflects the national picture, with a discernible drop in support between 2003 and 2004, followed by more subtle fluctuations thereafter. For the white population, there has been a continuous, gradual erosion of support, dropping from approximately a quarter of the group in 2003 to less than one in seven in 2006.

Figure 2: Percentage that supports racial quotas in national sports teams, by population group



For both the coloured and Indian population groups, the results are more ambiguous. Although there was a notable decline in support for both groups between 2003 and 2005, this was followed by a firm upswing between 2005 and 2006, especially amongst Indian respondents.

It remains unclear what factors have produced this change in direction. For instance, does it reflect confusion and ambiguity or does it mirror sports developments between 2005 and 2006? Examples could include the record breaking One Day International against Australia at the Wanderers in March 2006, or the racial slur by an Australian commentator against Hassim Amla, the first Indian player in the national team, in August 2006. The jury remains out and such trends should be the subject of critical reflection as we continue to discuss the merits and shortcomings of sports quotas.

There are small gender differentials in support for quotas in sport, to the extent

that the figures are virtually indistinguishable in certain years. There is also a moderate age effect, with the youth (those aged 16–34 years) being more in favour of quotas than older cohorts, especially those aged 65 and older.

While the SASAS data point to strong national pride and unity (results not shown), the sports quota results suggest that decision-makers need to be sensitive in ensuring that the progressive realisation of sports teams that reflect the country's demography does not further polarise segments of the population. The focus should be on a joint partnership between government and civil society to address fundamentals, such as the lack of training and coaching facilities.

Initiatives being undertaken by Sports and Recreation South Africa to facilitate access to sport and recreation, such as at school sport level and Siyadlala ('Let's play') mass participation programmes, represent a crucial step in the right direction. However, the department currently receives less than 1% of total government budget expenditure, which constrains the scope of such interventions. And this figure includes the allocation to the department's 2010 FIFA World Cup Unit. If we were to remove this amount from consideration, the percentage drops to below 0.1% of total government expenditure. While private initiatives and corporate social investment in sport development obviously need to be factored in, ultimately more weight needs to be given to this social service if we are to break down social and cultural barriers in the pursuit of equity and unity in South African sport. ●

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¹ Realised sample sizes were 4 980 respondents in 2003, 5 583 in 2004, 2 884 in 2005, and 2 939 in 2006. The smaller samples in 2005 and 2006 were due to the inclusion of the sports quota question in only one of the two versions of the SASAS questionnaire fielded in those years.

