

## **South African youth patriotic, optimistic about national cohesion, but low on civic engagement**

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 35 | Rorisang Lekalake**

### **Summary**

South Africa celebrates Youth Day every June 16 to commemorate the students who lost their lives during the Soweto Uprising in 1976. An estimated 3,000-10,000 students marched to protest the apartheid government's directive to make Afrikaans a compulsory medium of instruction in public education, alongside English. The violent police response to this peaceful protest led to a widespread revolt against the government and exposed the brutality of the apartheid state to the international community. These events brought energy back into the liberation struggle and pushed young citizens to play a pivotal role in ending apartheid (South African History Online, 2015).

One of the legacies of this history is the paradoxical perception of youth in South Africa today as "the primary catalyst of activism and political change" on one hand and a generation in "crisis" on the other (Mattes & Richmond, 2015, page 1). In January 2015, the government introduced a draft National Youth Policy for 2014-2019, which highlights three key objectives related to consolidating the country's political culture: strengthening patriotic citizenship, fostering national cohesion, and "encouraging visible and active participation in different youth initiatives/projects and nation-building activities" (Presidency, 2014, page 12).

Findings from Afrobarometer surveys in South Africa from 2000 to 2011 indicate that young adults are highly patriotic and support the creation of a united country across racial lines, but that their civic engagement is low. As previous analyses have pointed out (e.g. Mattes, 2011; Mattes & Richmond, 2015), there are significant deficits in the country's political culture across all generations, including the issue of low engagement. The national education system does little to address this issue, because democratic values are not an explicit part of the curriculum, placing the additional burden of teaching them on poorly trained and equipped teachers.

Given the government's prioritization of civic engagement by youth, it is clear that the national curriculum needs to address civics explicitly in order to achieve the objectives of the proposed youth policy.

### **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. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

Afrobarometer teams in South Africa interviewed 2,200 adult South Africans in 2000 and 2,400 adults in 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011. Samples of 2,400 yield results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level.

While the official definition of “youth” in South Africa is ages 15-35 years, Afrobarometer samples include only adult citizens. As a result, this analysis focuses on those ages 18-35.

## Key findings

- Young South Africans are highly supportive of a cohesive South African nation. Across all Afrobarometer surveys since 2000, on average about eight in 10 have agreed that citizens should think of themselves as “South Africans first” (83%) and that national unity is both desirable (82%) and possible (77%).
- Young South Africans express high levels of patriotism across all race groups. In all Afrobarometer surveys since 2000, on average almost nine in 10 (86%) have said that being South African is an important part of their identity, while 87% are proud to be called South African and 87% would want their children to think of themselves as South African.
- Increasing youth civic engagement is likely to be the most significant challenge in implementing the national youth policy. Most young South Africans are not active members of civic organisations, and most do not participate in raising issues or demonstrations. However, youth participation in community meetings has increased since 2000.

## Support for a united South Africa

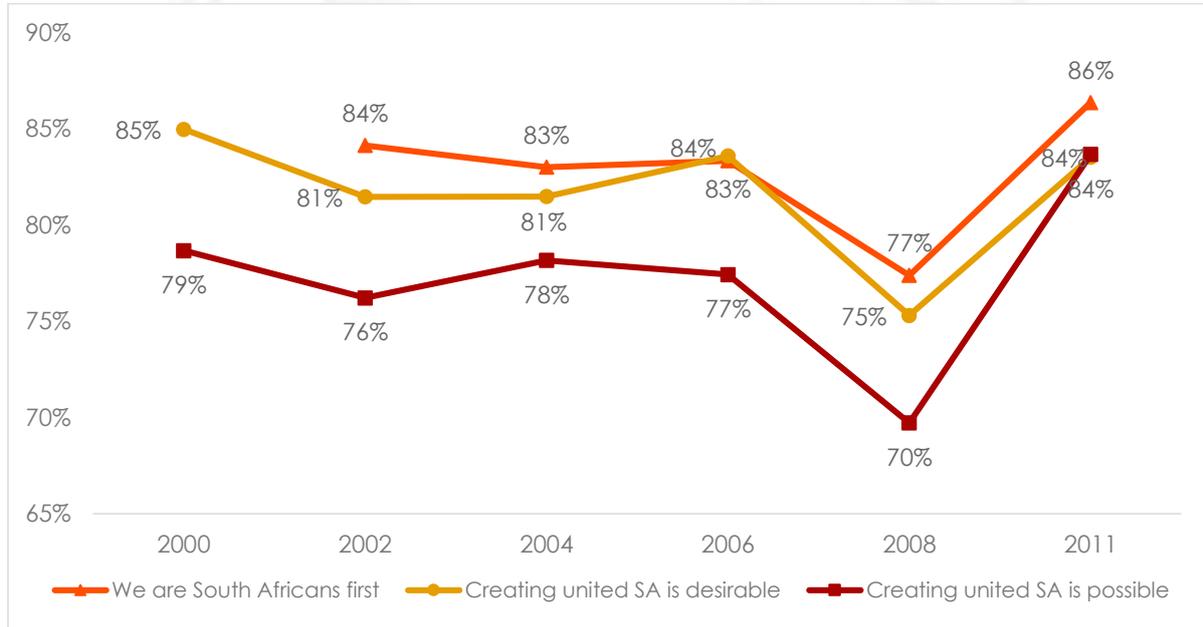
Given South Africa's cultural diversity and the socioeconomic legacy of apartheid, the proposed youth policy seeks a balance between the quest for national unity and the need to respect differences across various dimensions (Presidency, 2014).

Young South Africans have consistently affirmed the need for national cohesion. In 2011, more than eight in 10 young people said that citizens should prioritise their national identity above that of their ethnic group (86%) and that it is desirable to create a united country (84%). Furthermore, South African youth were optimistic about prospects for national cohesion: 84% believed that it is possible to create a united country (Figure 1).

These attitudes have been fairly steady since 2000 except for a dip in 2008, a politically turbulent year that included a power struggle within the ruling African National Congress and the resignation of President Thabo Mbeki.

In 2011, young citizens of all race groups were highly supportive of prioritising their national identity over group identities, but young white respondents were less likely than other groups to agree that it is desirable (74%) and possible (67%) to create one united South African nation (Figure 2).

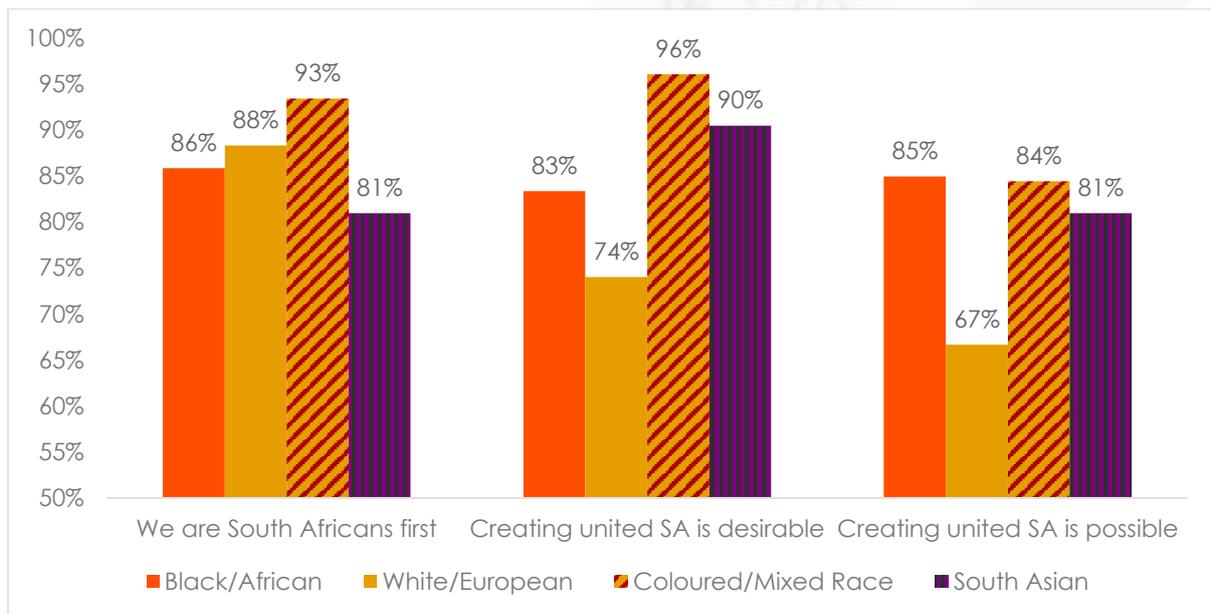
**Figure 1: Attitudes toward national cohesion | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011**



**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree, neither disagree nor agree, or agree with these statements:

1. People should realise we are South Africans first, and stop thinking of themselves in terms of the group they belong to.
  2. It is desirable to create one united South African nation out of all the different groups who live in this country.
  3. It is possible to create such a united South African nation.
- (% who said "strongly agree" or "agree")

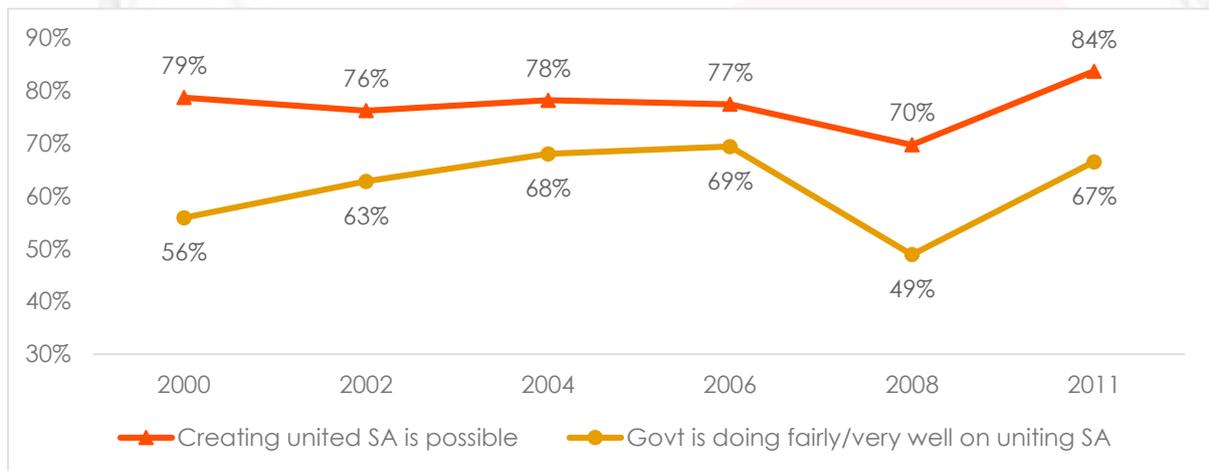
**Figure 2: Attitudes toward national cohesion | by race group | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2011**



Young people's evaluation of the government's efforts to promote national cohesion improved steadily between 2000 (when 56% said the government was doing "fairly well" or "very well" at uniting the country) and 2006 (69%). As with attitudes toward cohesion, approval ratings dipped in 2008 before recovering in 2011. Although fairly large, the proportion of young people who approve of these efforts (62% on average) has consistently been lower than the proportion of those who believe that it is possible to create a united South African nation (77% on average) (Figure 3).

Young Coloured citizens were the most critical of the government's performance: A majority (52%) said the government was doing "very badly" or "badly," compared to 30% of young Black South Africans who disapproved (Figure 4).

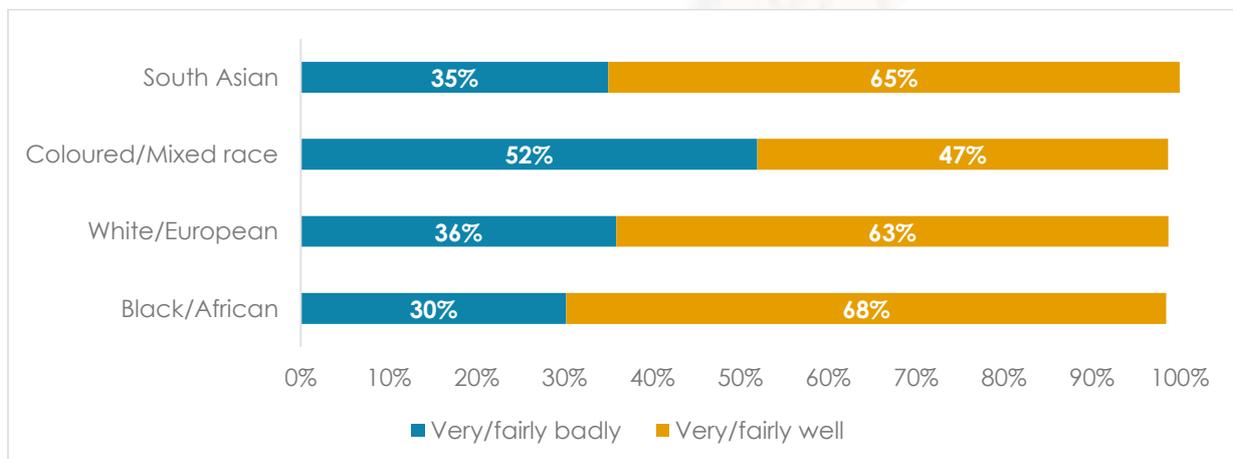
**Figure 3: Evaluations of national cohesion: Feasibility vs. government performance**  
 | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011



**Respondents were asked:**

1. Please tell me whether you disagree, neither disagree nor agree, or agree with these statements: It is possible to create such a united South African nation? (% who said "Strongly agree" or "Agree")
2. How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Uniting all South Africans into one nation? (% who said "very well" or "fairly well")

**Figure 4: Evaluations of government national cohesion efforts** | by race group  
 | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2011



**Respondents were asked:** How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Uniting all South Africans into one nation?

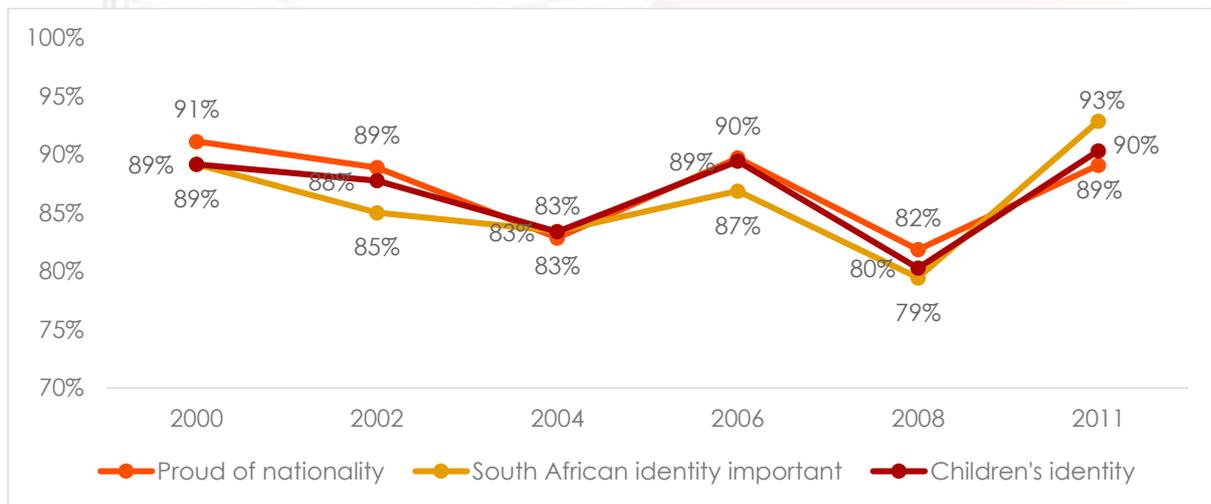
### National pride and ethnic identity

One of the components of political culture is the acceptance of the officially defined national political community. Afrobarometer findings have consistently shown that South Africans identify with and are proud of their national identity (Mattes & Richmond, 2015).

Young South Africans are no exception, expressing high levels of pride in their nationality: On average since 2000, nine in 10 say that they are proud to be called South African, that being South African is a very important part of how they see themselves, and that they would want their children to think of themselves as South African (Figure 5).

Patriotic attitudes are prevalent across racial lines. Although young South Asians were slightly less likely than other groups in 2011 to express pride in their nationality (80%) and to say that being South African was an important part of their identity (86%), almost all (95%) said that they would want their children to think of themselves as South African (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Patriotism among South African youth | 18- to 35-year-olds | 2000-2011**

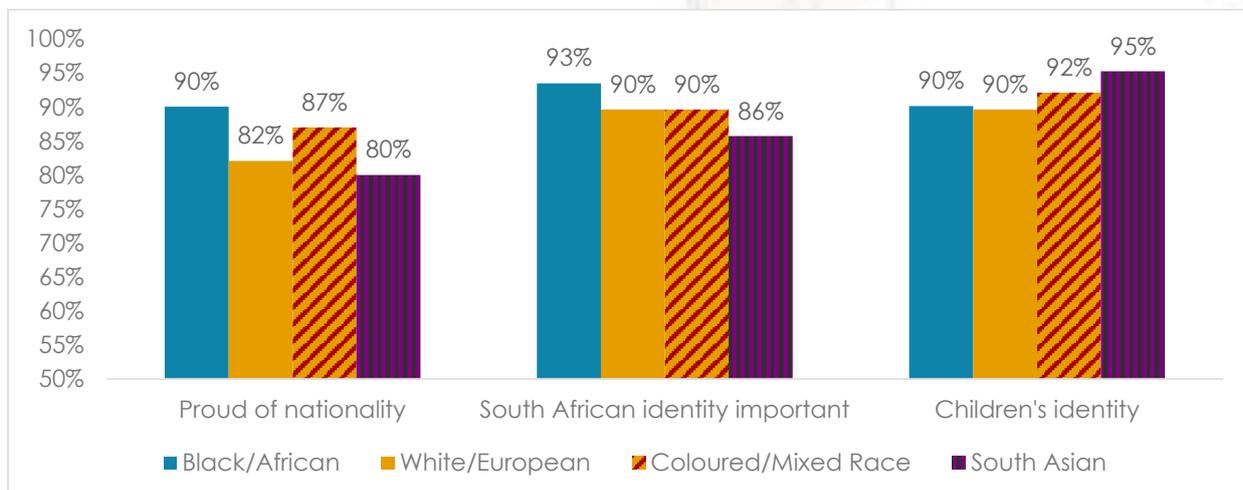


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:

1. It makes you proud to be called a South African.
2. Being South African is a very important part of how you see yourself.
3. You would want your children to think of themselves as South African.

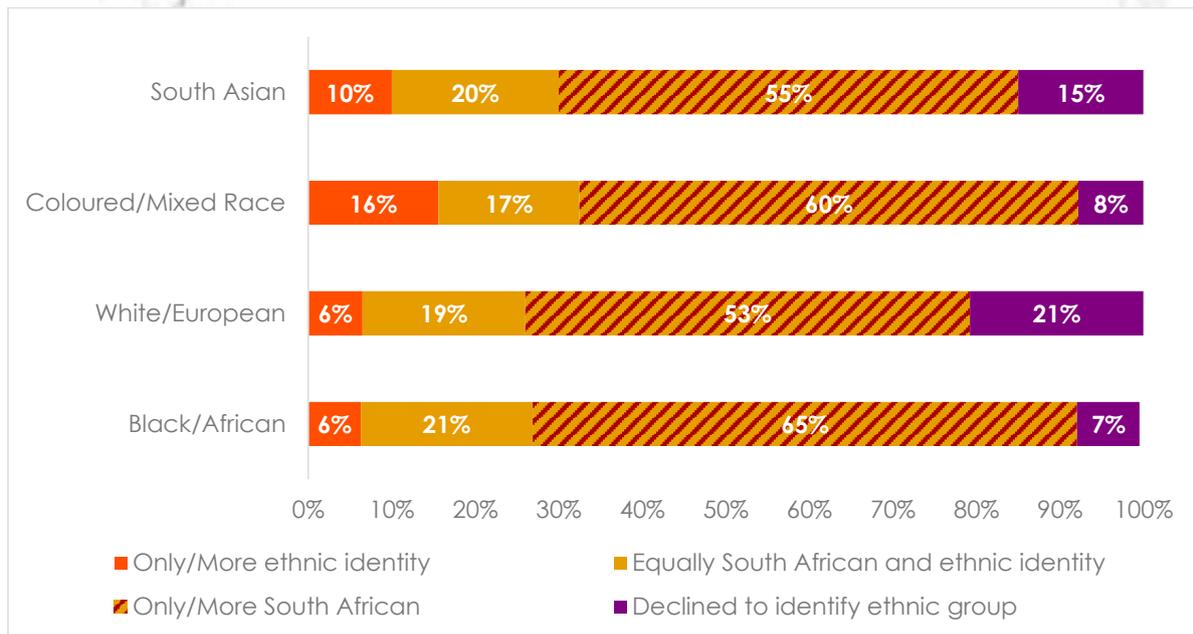
(% who said "strongly agree" or "agree")

**Figure 6: Patriotism among South African youth | by race group | 2011**



Despite broad support for prioritising national identity, only two-thirds of young South Africans said that they feel “only South African” or “more South African” than their ethnic or group identity. In Afrobarometer surveys, interviewers identify respondents’ race, while respondents are asked to identify their ethnic or group identity. Interestingly, 21% of white respondents and 15% of South Asians declined to identify an ethnic or group identity at all, suggesting that these young citizens are the most supportive of prioritising national identity (Figure 7). Only 7% of Black and 8% of Coloured respondents declined to identify an ethnic or group identity.

**Figure 7: Attachment to national vs. ethnic identity | 18- to 35-year-olds | by race group | South Africa | 2011**



**Respondents were asked:** Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a South African and being a \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

- I feel only South African
- I feel more South African than \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s ethnic group]
- I feel equally South African and \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s ethnic group]
- I feel more \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s ethnic group] than South African
- I feel only \_\_\_\_\_ [respondent’s ethnic group]

### Low levels of civic engagement

The National Youth Policy aims to empower young citizens to take a leading role in South African society. It notes the country’s relatively low levels of youth electoral activity and volunteerism but provides few concrete proposals on how to address this issue. It does, however, acknowledge that the education system needs to create greater awareness of the national Constitution and the Bill of Responsibilities, a document based on the Constitution’s Bill of Rights and intended as a guide for young people to active and “responsible” citizenship (Presidency, 2014, page 43).

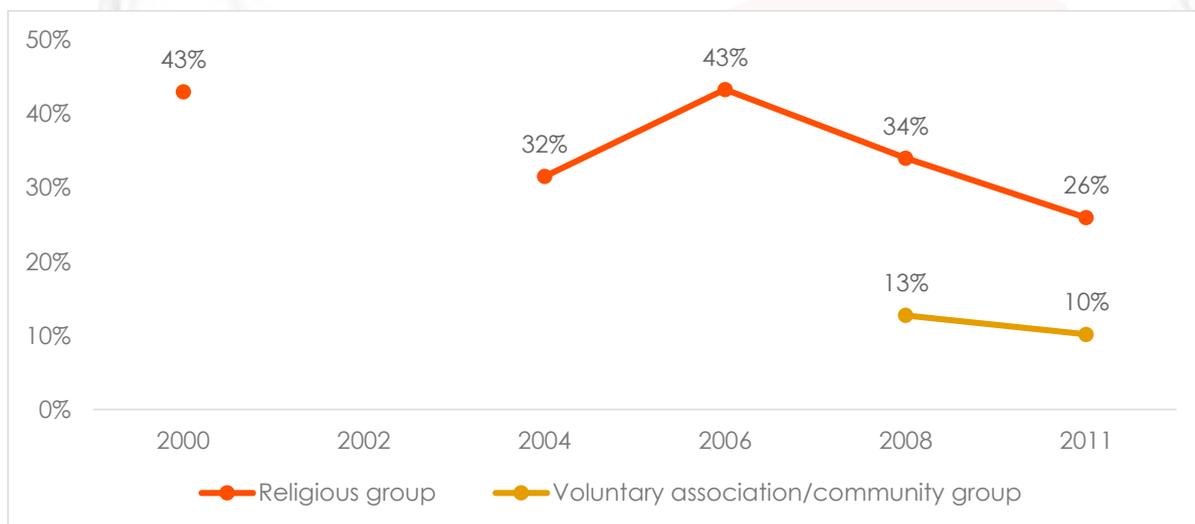
Afrobarometer findings show that a majority of young South Africans are not active members of civic organisations. On average since 2000, fewer than four in 10 young citizens (36%) are active members of religious groups, and that proportion declined between 2006 (43%) and

2011 (28%). The proportion who actively participated in other types of civic organisations was 13% in 2008 and declined to 10% in 2011 (Figure 8).

Other forms of civic engagement among youth are also fairly low. In 2011, one in 10 young South Africans (11%) had attended a demonstration or protest march in the previous year, a continued decline in this type of engagement. Conversely, youth participation in community meetings and in raising important issues increased somewhat between 2000 and 2011 (Figure 9).

In South Africa, low levels of engagement are not peculiar to youth. Citizens aged 36 or older are slightly more active than youth across all measures except participation in demonstrations or protests (Figure 10).

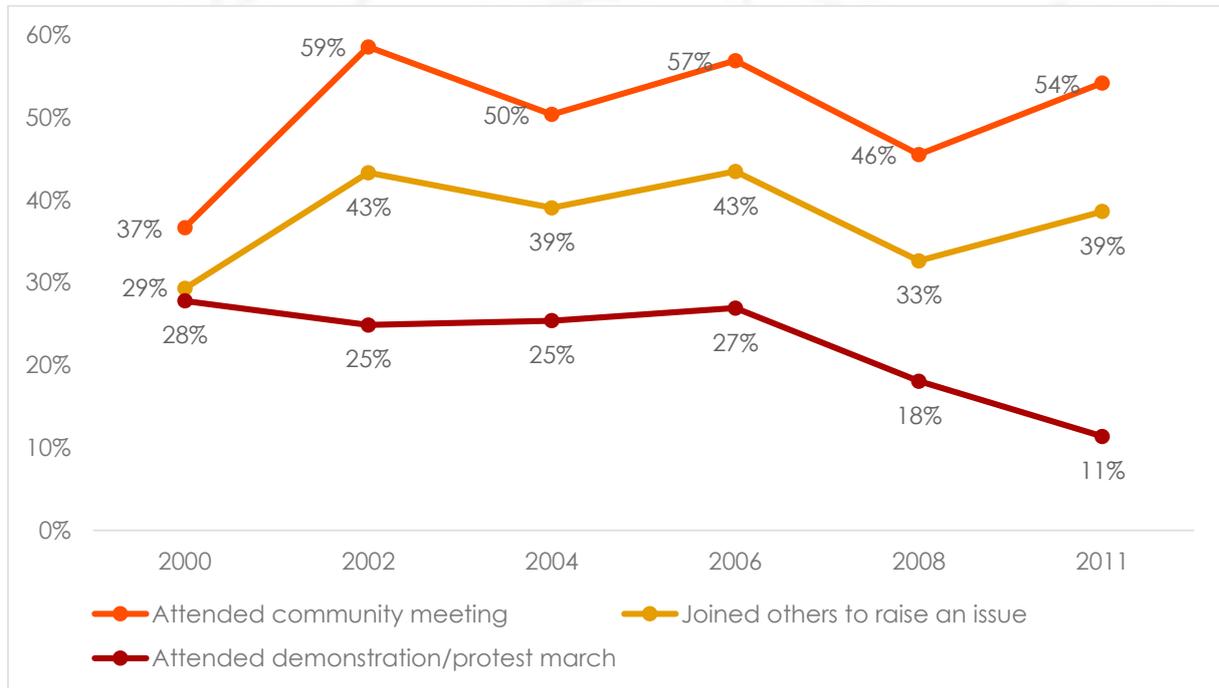
**Figure 8: Active membership in civic organisations | 18- 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011**



**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member:

1. A religious group that meets outside of regular worship services? (In 2000, the question was: Over the past year, how often have you attended meetings of a church group (other than religious services))?
2. Some other voluntary association or community group? (% who said "active member" or "official leader")

**Figure 9: Civic engagement** | 18- to 35-year-olds | South Africa | 2000-2011

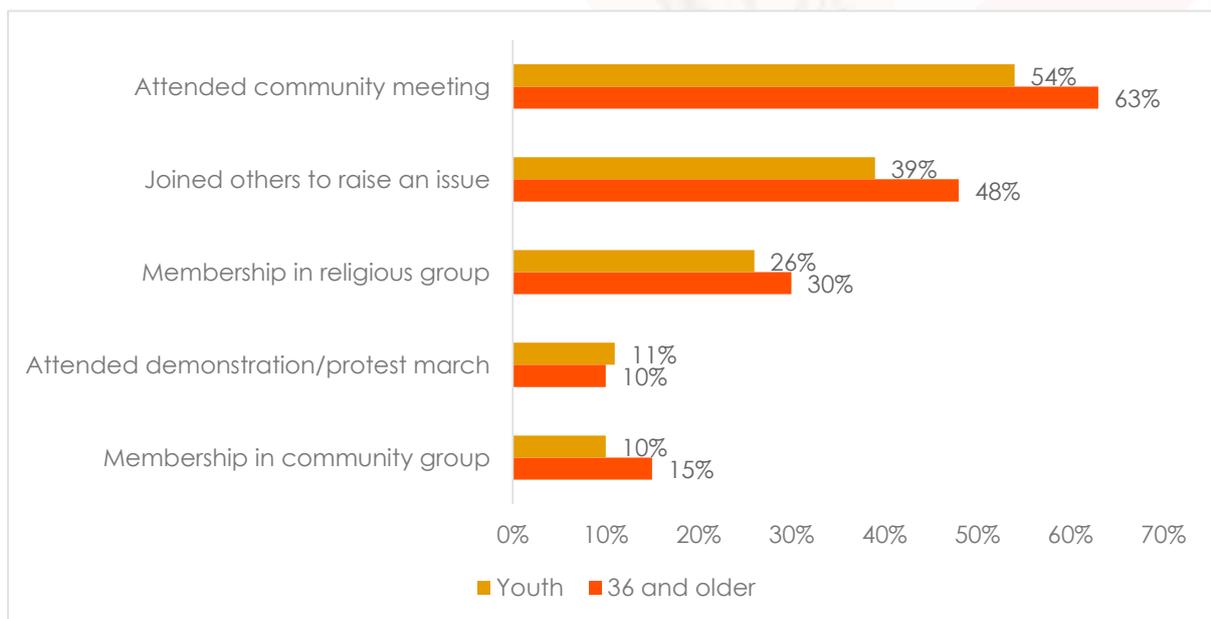


**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year:

1. Attended a community meeting?
2. Got together with others to raise an issue?
3. Attended a demonstration or protest march?

(% who said "yes")

**Figure 10: Active membership and civic engagement** | by age group | South Africa | 2011



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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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