

ENGENDERING CHANGE: ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN IN POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA

A United Nations Millennium Project report in 2005 argued that women in office were more likely to advocate for legislation and policy that would improve gender equality and benefit children and families. So, how do South Africans feel about women in politics? *Jaré Struwig, Steven Gordon and Benjamin Roberts* explore public perceptions on the increase in women's political representation in South Africa.

There is academic evidence to suggest that female participation in political formation also reduces corruption and increases the transparency of decision-making bodies. International studies indicate that the introduction of legislation or political party rules that specify the use of quotas for female candidates is an effective means by which to increase women's political representation and promote gender equality.

The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) is the HSRC's nationally representative survey that has taken place annually since 2003 among, on average, 3 000 adult respondents aged 16 years and older, living in private households in all nine provinces of South Africa. A detailed set of questions on democratic attitudes was fielded during the 2010 and 2013 rounds of the survey to ascertain public attitude towards women in politics.

The researchers found that since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, South Africa had made impressive gains in relation to women in political life and was one of only a few countries to have surpassed the target of women holding 30% of seats in national parliament.

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Overall support for female political participation

A set of nine statements relating to the role of women in the political system was read out to respondents who were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement using a five-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. As illustrated in Figure 1 on page 17, the South African public appeared to agree women should have a greater place in politics in the country. A majority of adult citizens acknowledged the need for greater involvement of

women in politics, would vote for female candidates, and favoured increased quotas for women in political parties and legislation that binds political parties to having women candidates on their lists.

A progressive turn

The researchers found that between 2010 and 2013, there were general improvements in attitudes towards women in politics. For instance, a majority of respondents believed women needed to get more involved in politics (78%), which represented a significant increase since 2010 when 69% of the adult public shared this view.

The proportion of adult citizens who believed men were better politicians than women declined from 43% in 2010 to 33% in 2013. The share of respondents who felt their needs would be better addressed if more women were in politics grew from 40% in 2010 to 46% in 2013. Other attitudes remained more static, particularly whether there should be legislation or quotas that would force parties to have more women on their candidate lists.

Do men and women share similar views?

While gender-based differences in opinion were found in relation to female political participation, the level of support voiced by men was appreciably higher than one might typically assume. This is an encouraging sign for ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in the country. The results, disaggregated by gender, were as follows:

- There was a resolute aversion by men and women alike to attempts to influence voting decisions, with sizable shares believing it was unacceptable for men and women to influence the electoral choices of members of the opposite sex. More than half (51%) of men agreed that men had no right to tell women which party to vote for, compared to 69% of women.
- Almost three quarters (73%) of men thought if there were more women in politics their needs would be better addressed, compared to 77% of women.
- More than a third (35%) of men thought legislation should force parties to have women on their lists, compared to 55% of women.

- A little more than half (51%) of men thought that quotas for women in political parties should be increased, compared to 69% of women.
- Less than half (47%) of men thought women needed to get more involved in politics to solve problems that concerned them, compared to 59% of women.
- More than two fifths (42%) of men disagreed with the statement, 'men are generally better politicians than women', compared to 58% of women.
- Less than a fifth (22%) of men agreed with the statement, 'I will never vote for a woman', compared to 16% of women.

A class divide

Significant population group differences were found across all nine questions. On average, Indian respondents tended to express higher support for women in politics than other population groups. Better educated South Africans were found to be more supportive of women in politics, with a lower likelihood of believing that men were better politicians than women and a greater willingness to vote for a female politician. Those living in rural areas were found to have more conservative attitudes towards women in politics, and were more inclined to agree that male politicians better protected their interests than female politicians.

The South African public appeared to agree women should have a greater place in politics.

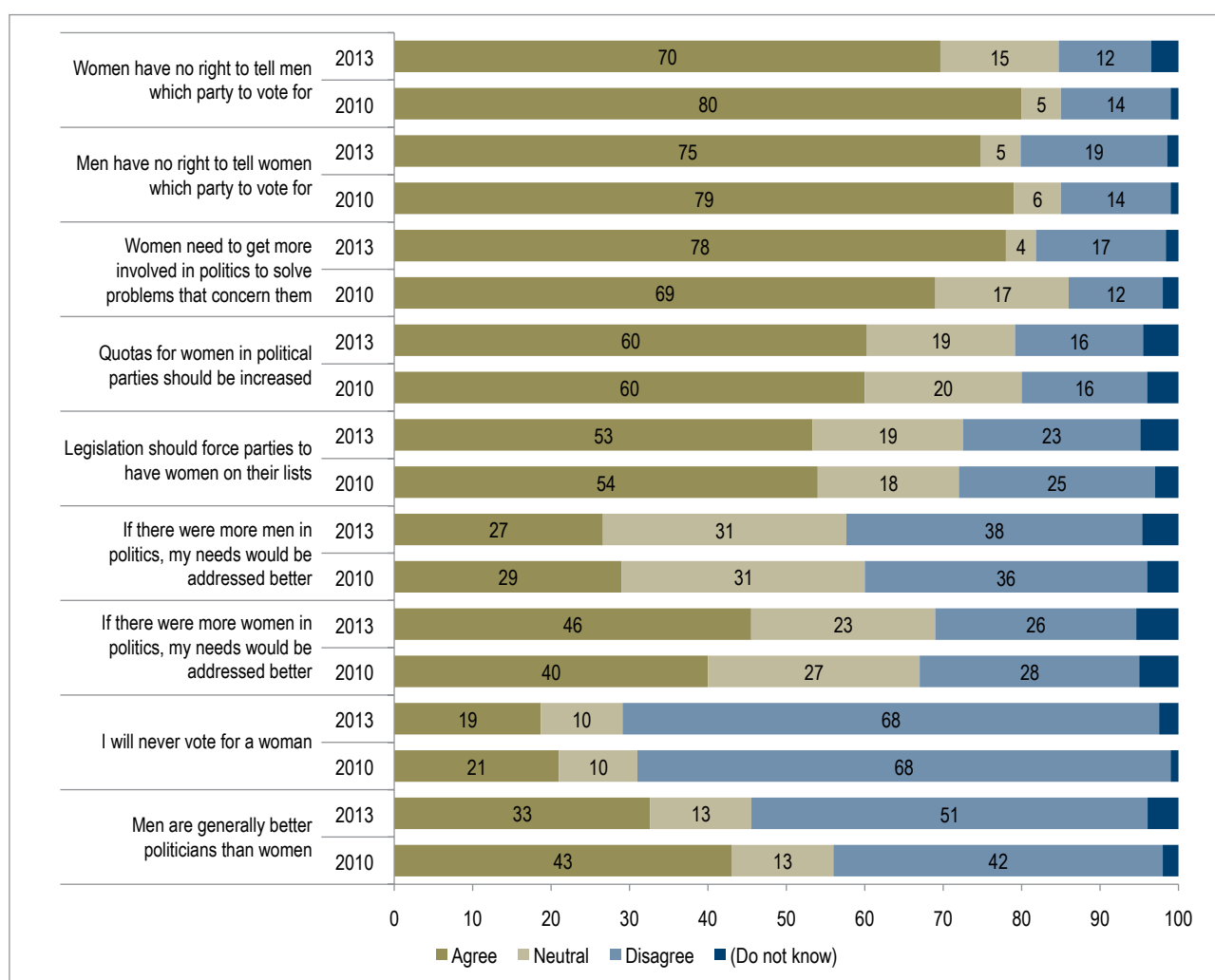


Conclusion

These results are positive, and suggest that alongside the significant progress South Africa has made in opening up national politics to women, public attitudes towards women in politics are supportive and increasingly favourable. However, it was also evident that a significant minority of men continued to retain patriarchal views concerning women in politics. More needs to be done to address such patriarchy and promote greater acceptance of female participation in the political arena. ■

Authors: Jaré Struvig and Benjamin Roberts, co-ordinators of SASAS, Democracy, Governance and Service Delivery (DGSD) programme, HSRC; Steven Gordon, PhD research trainee, DGSD, HSRC.

Figure 1: Politics and gender role attitudes, 2010 and 2013 (row percentages)



Source: IEC Voter Participation Survey (VPS) 2010, 2013. Note: Due to rounding off percentages may not add up to exactly 100%.