



South Africans' social views: 'the real state-of-the-nation indicators'

*Since 2003, the political, social and sociocultural views of people living in South Africa have undergone significant shifts. The biggest change has been a negative shift in political attitudes, while progress in relation to interpersonal attitudes is mixed. Indicators on LGBTQI views, for example, have become more progressive, but the same is not true for attitudes towards foreign nationals, suggesting different underlying factors. Ben Roberts spoke to **Andrea Teagle** about the HSRC's South African Social Attitudes Survey series, and what these trends mean for the state of the country.*

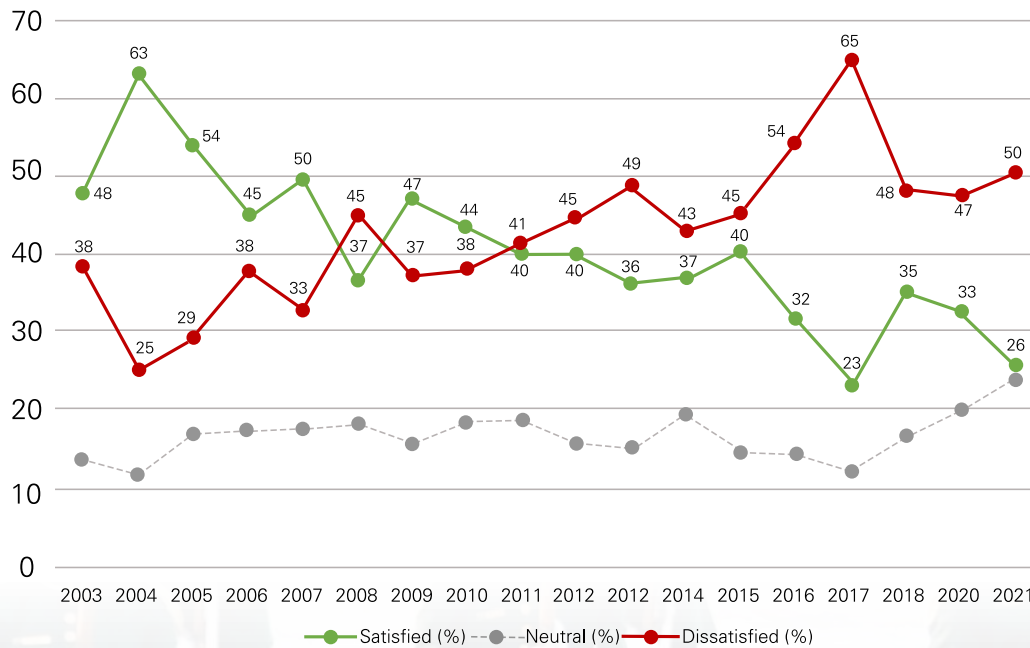
President Cyril Ramaphosa at the statue of former President Nelson Mandela, observing the National Guard of Honour, the fly-pass of the SANDF's Hawk Mk 120 jets and the 21 Gun Salute as part of ceremonial proceedings for the 2022 State of the Nation Address in February
Photo: GCS, Flickr

Two decades ago, a group of HSRC researchers sat down with international advisors to conceptualise what would become one of South Africa's broadest national surveys. The annual South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) is designed to monitor and understand value change among the public. Questions capture changing views on democracy and governance, identity, and interpersonal relations, among other topics.

"I like to think of the findings as our real state-of-the-nation indicators," said the HSRC's Dr Ben Roberts, research director and coordinator of the survey. The results from the past decade paint a sobering picture.

The survey has revealed a profound negative shift in political attitudes since the mid-2000s. Satisfaction in democracy is erratic and shows a clear downward trend, collapsing from 54% in 2005 to 26% in late 2021 (Figure 1). Trust in government saw an even greater decline, from 64% to 26%. And, as of 2021, 70% of participants indicated that the country is going in the wrong direction, up from 49% in 2010.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with democracy, 2003–2021



Source: SASAS, HSRC

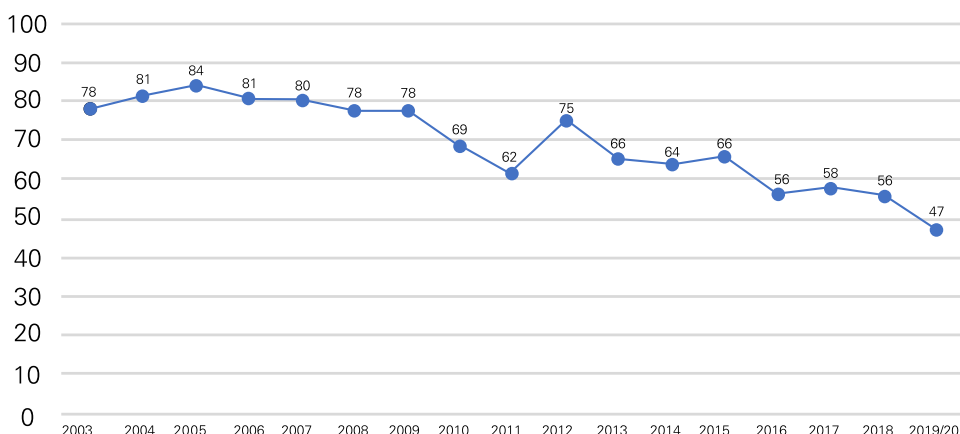


Photo: GCIS, Flickr

A degree of disillusionment is expected as a democracy matures and the initial optimism of the early years of democratic experience begins to decline. However, the disconcerting outlook captured in the SASAS results also speak to the inertia and downturn that followed the relative economic growth of the first democratic decade, Roberts says, together with mounting frustrations over unemployment, crime and corruption, service delivery, and the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. "I interpret these trends as a resolute appeal for greater accountability and responsiveness for the social needs of the public."

Shifts in opinion of this magnitude illustrate why it is important to monitor social attitudes over time, and to use evidence of underlying value change in society to inform policy discussion, he adds.

Figure 2: Percentage (%) saying that two adults of the same sex having sexual relations is 'always wrong' (2003–2020)

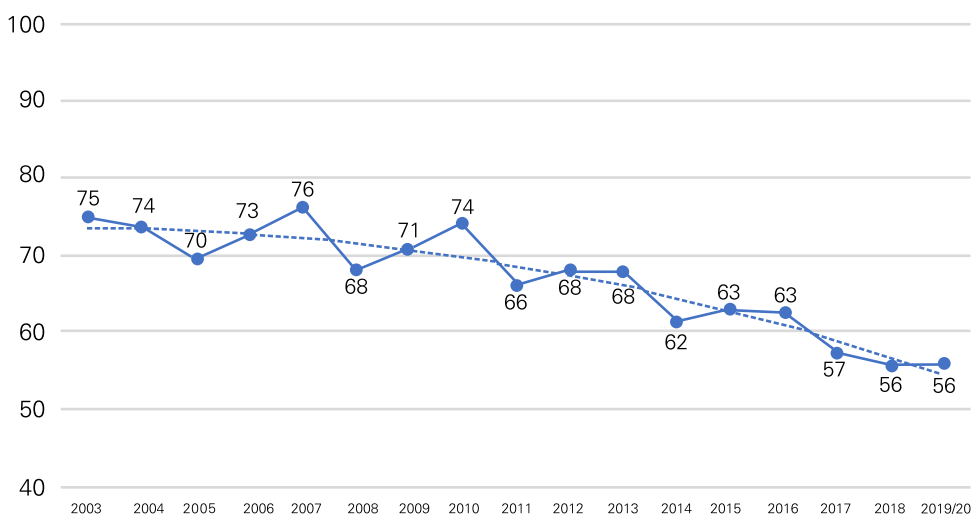


Source: SASAS, HSRC

Interpersonal relations

Another set of core indicators tracked by the social attitudes survey looks at interpersonal relations, including race relations, attitudes towards foreign nationals, and beliefs around LGBTQI. With regard to attitudes towards homosexuality, South Africans have shown a small but [significant shift towards greater tolerance](#), albeit from a low base (Figure 2). "We initially thought that this value change was primarily a reflection of generational change on social values, driven especially by the born-free generation," Roberts recalls.

Figure 3: Percentage (%) supporting the death penalty for those convicted of murder, 2003–2020 (%)



Source: SASAS, HSRC.

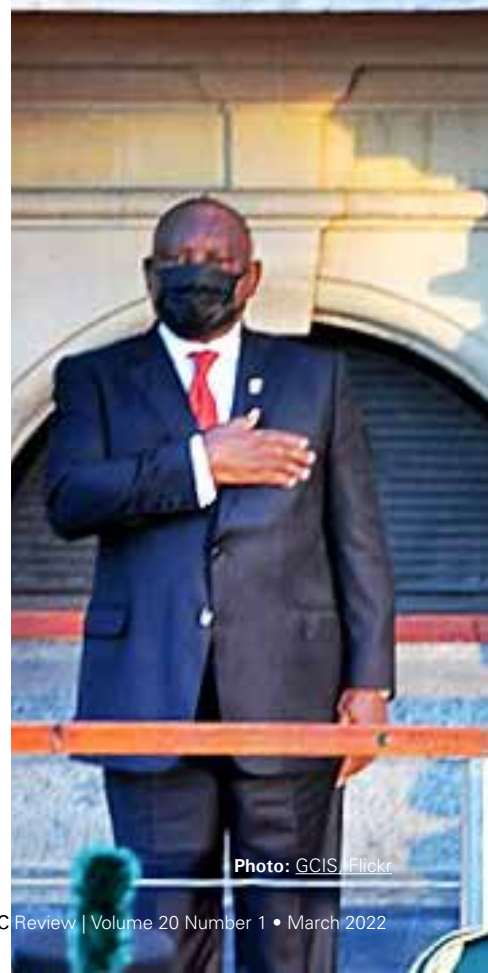


Photo: GCIS, Flickr

“When we actually looked at the trends in more detail, it emerged that there appears to have been what we call a ‘period effect’. This implies that, across all generations, there are signs of progressive change in attitude towards LGBTQI.” The influence of South Africa’s progressive policy agenda may [partly explain](#) this softening of negative attitudes.

In 2015, Roberts and the rest of the SASAS team undertook a study for the Other Foundation to explore contextual nuances in attitudes towards homosexuality and gender nonconformity.

The [nationally representative survey](#) found that even though 72% of the SASAS respondents thought that homosexuality was morally wrong, just over half (51%) thought that gay people should have the same human rights as all South Africans. Additionally, 56% indicated that they would accept a gay family member.

Other cultural-social indicators show signs of change, too. For example, support for the death penalty has started to dip in recent years. In 2010, 15 years after it had been

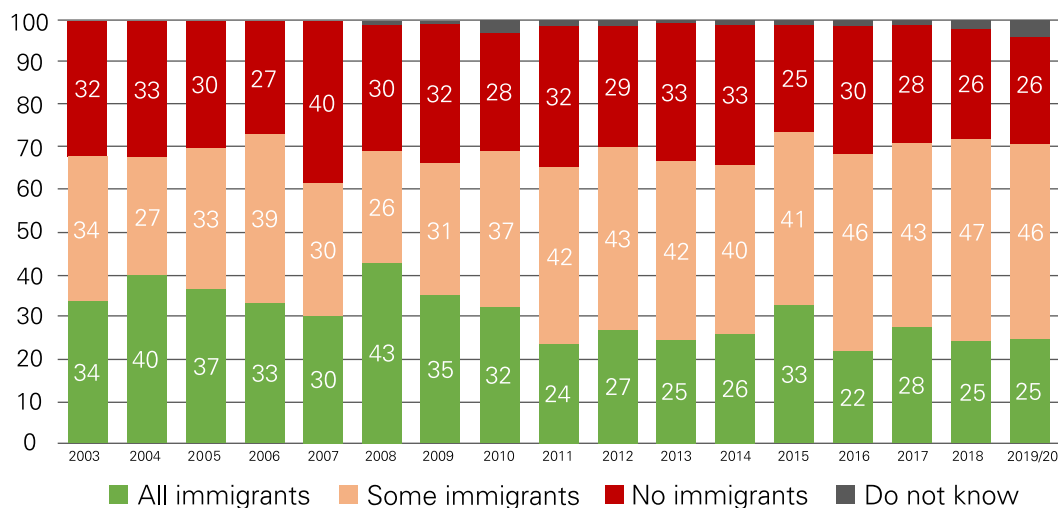
abolished, almost three-quarters (74%) of people in South Africa were still in favour of the death penalty for murder – even though evidence shows that it [does not act as a deterrent](#) for crime. In 2015, this figure was 63%, and by late 2020 it had dropped further to 56% (Figure 3). This decline again likely reflects increasing numbers of born-frees in the sample as well as a change in normative values, Roberts says.

Conversely, attitudes towards foreign nationals have proved much ‘stickier’, remaining predominantly negative over the past past 20 years (Figure 4).

“You would think that with increasingly progressive views on attitudes towards the death penalty and on LGBTQI, our views towards our neighbours might show some sign of moving in a similarly progressive direction,” says Roberts. “This proves not to be the case, which raises the question ‘Why?’”

HSRC research led by Dr Steven Gordon suggests that these negative attitudes are driven to some degree by [false beliefs about the economic impact of immigration](#).

Figure 4: Percentage (%) that would welcome all, some or no immigrants (2003–2020)



Source: SASAS, HSRC

Untapped data

Although the political indicators reflect growing frustration among the public, the positive aspect is that South Africans are attuned to the state of affairs.

President Cyril Ramaphosa’s appeal to the public to form a social compact reflects a response to the widespread and growing democratic discontent, Roberts says. However, greater accountability – even in the best-case scenario – will take time, and the July 2021 unrest suggests that South Africans are running out of patience. Similarly, addressing xenophobia will require addressing the long-term lack of economic opportunity in addition to combating false beliefs about economic threats. Meanwhile, the narrowing of the gap between constitutional values and views on homosexuality might present more opportunities for promoting productive dialogue in this area.

While the SASAS data has been instrumental for capturing the views of South Africans, no amount of research can do justice to the almost 20 years of collected data, Roberts says, appealing to the academic community and media houses to download the data and communicate the information it contains.

The database also routinely includes a rotating component that includes themes and items that change more slowly, but that need to be monitored from time to time, as well as new or experimental topics, such as attitudes towards decolonisation, collective memory and the public relationship with science.

Importantly, because it was designed with international collaboration in mind, the SASAS series allows for international comparison. The International Social Survey Programme module, which is fielded annually in over 40 countries worldwide, allows us to understand our society through the lens of other societies, Roberts says. Topics are designed to be of global relevance and include attitudes to inequality, views on the role of government, issues around religion and, most recently, health. The SASAS also supports dedicated commissioned surveys, such as the Electoral Commission of South Africa’s Voter Participation Surveys that capture the changing electoral views of the voting age public.

“By collecting these voices, there’s a real obligation and responsibility to make sure those voices are conveyed to the policymakers,” says Roberts.



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Shacks built against an old railway line in Siyahlala informal settlement in Langa, Cape Town (1 October 2020).
Photo: [Tariro Washinyira](#), GroundUp (CC BY-ND 4.0)