



PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: TRENDS IN SOUTH AFRICAN NATIONAL PRIDE

The recent commemoration of Heritage Day and Heritage Month raised questions about the state of social cohesion and national identity in the country after 20 years of democracy. Are we proudly South African? What are we most proud of and what shames us about our country? *Benjamin Roberts, Steven Gordon, Jarè Struwig* and *Greg Houston* examine trends in national pride since 2003.

To assess levels of national pride, we analysed data from the SA Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), a national survey series that has been conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. Each SASAS round consists of a representative sample of South Africans aged 16 years and older living in private homes, with interviewing conducted in the last quarter of each year.

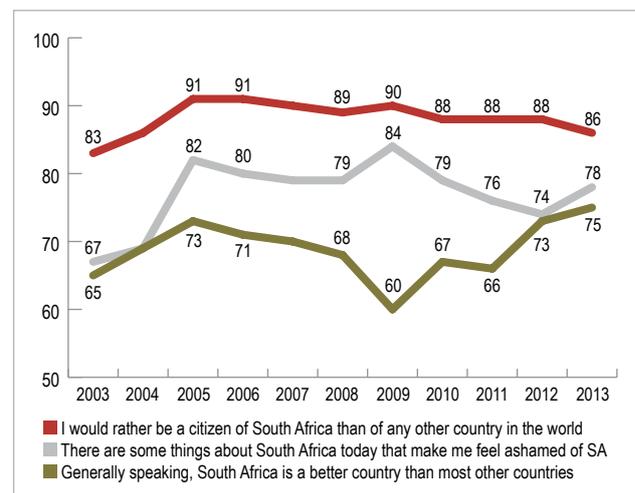
Measures of general national pride have been included in every round of the survey, while indicators examining different dimensions of pride were fielded exclusively in 2003 and 2013. The availability of such data allowed us to examine the extent and changing nature of pride over the last decade.

A proud nation

South Africans voiced resolute and fairly consistent positive views in relation to the country on measures of general pride in the 10 years between 2003 and 2013 (Figure 1). In particular, the share that agreed with the statement, 'I would rather be a citizen of South Africa than of any other country in the world', remained high and showed limited variation (83%–91%).

Similarly, there was broad agreement that 'South Africa is a better country than most other countries', supported by 73% to 84% of respondents since 2005. A discernible upswing on both measures was apparent in 2009, which was probably due to the euphoria leading up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup, though this effect was short-lived.

Figure 1: Trends in national pride in South Africa, 2003–2013



Source: HSRC SASAS 2003–2013

Such expressions of pride were not blindly uncritical, with a significant proportion in each round of interviewing admitting there were 'some things about South Africa today that make me feel ashamed'. The share reporting a sense of shame rose between 2003 and 2005 then fell more appreciably from 73% to 60% between 2005 and 2009. Over the last four years, a reversal has again occurred, with concern rising to 75% by 2013.

Interviews conducted in late 2012 by the SASAS team as part of an IEC-commissioned study examined factors underlying feelings of national shame.

Some of the commonly cited reasons included economic inequalities, poor educational standards, unemployment and deprivation, crime and corruption, and state inefficiency.

Sports was the most frequently mentioned source of national pride. ➔

Aspects of pride

To better understand national pride in the country, we looked at pride in specific achievements, based on questions evaluating 10 different dimensions in 2003 and 2013 (Figure 2). In 2013, sports was the most frequently mentioned source of national pride, with 83% reporting that it made them proud of their country. This was followed by pride in the country’s history, and arts and literary achievements (both 77%), as well as scientific achievements (74%).

By comparison, distinctly lower pride ratings were provided for those dimensions that related more to politics and governance. These included fair and equal treatment (58%), economic achievements (53%), the social security system (52%), the way democracy works (50%), and global political influence (47%).

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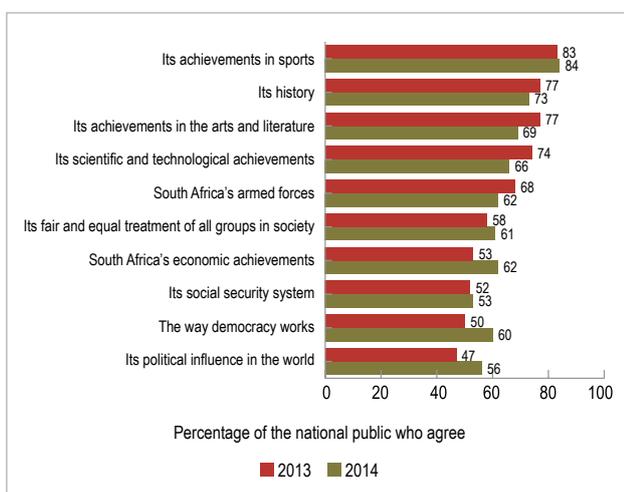


Differences (in national pride) between population groups were more prominent. ➔

In terms of change over time, the ranking of the top five items was the same in both 2003 and 2013, with sports achievements remaining stable and increased percentages of the population declaring pride in arts and literature, science and technology, and the defence force.

Other notable changes in ranking were attributable to percentage-point declines in pride in three specific areas: the functioning of democracy, influence in the world, and performance of the economy.

Figure 2: National pride dimensions, 2003 and 2013 (ranked in descending order on 2013 results)



Source: HSRC SASAS 2003 and 2013

Who is proud of the country’s achievements?

Only minor variations in national pride were evident on the basis of age and gender. Differences between population groups were more prominent. White and Indian adults were found to be considerably less proud than other South Africans on the following domains: fair and equal treatment, the social security system and the political influence of South Africa in the world. No difference could be discerned with regard to the literature, science and sport dimensions, suggesting similar levels of cultural pride.

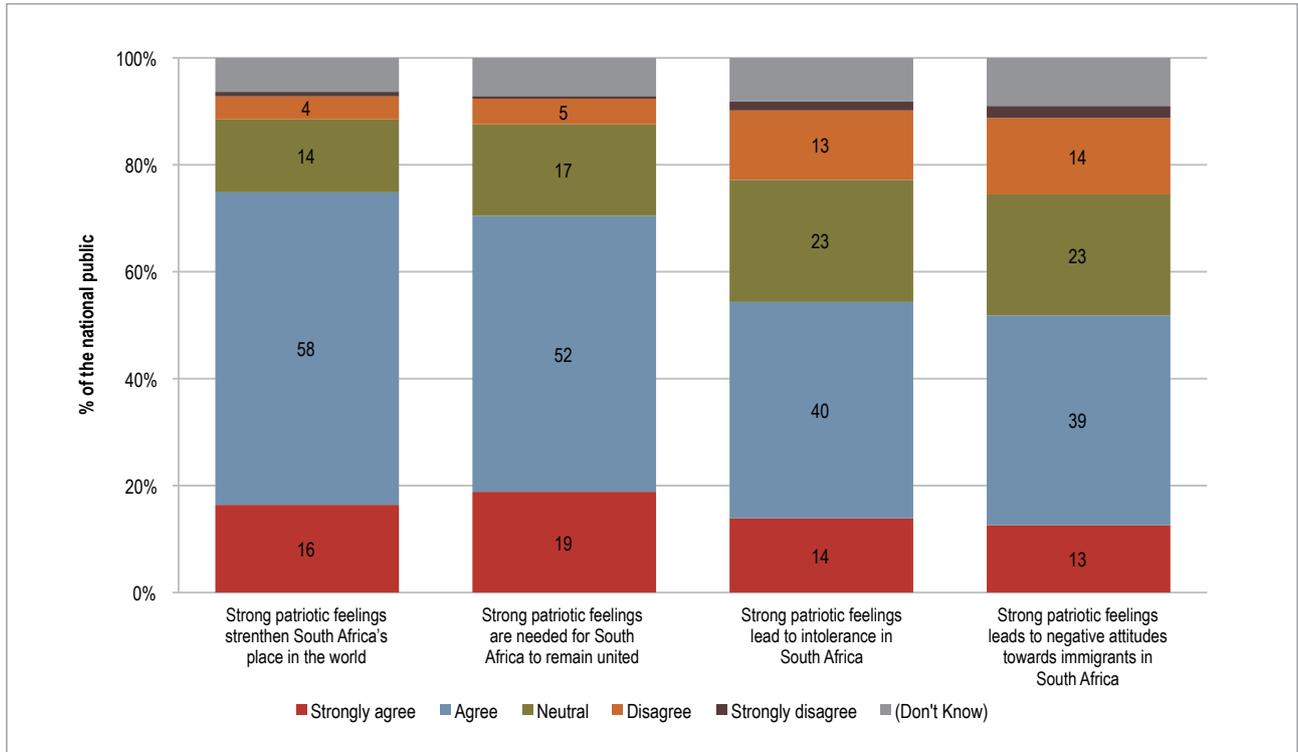
Low levels of pride on certain dimensions observed in Figure 2 seemed to be related to public dissatisfaction with political elites and political institutions in the country. Those South Africans who were dissatisfied with the current political leadership in the country, and who distrusted their national and local governments, were found to be less proud of South Africa’s democracy, influence in the world, and economic achievements.

Perceived political effects of national pride

The 2013 survey round also included items designed to better understand the perceived positive and negative impacts of strong feelings of national pride in the country.

As Figure 3 shows, almost three-quarters of South Africans believed that strong patriotic feelings served to strengthen the country’s place in the world and help maintain unity among its people.

Figure 3: The effects of nationalism, 2013



Source: HSRC SASAS 2013

Yet, more than half of adult South Africans also believed that such feelings promoted greater intolerance in South Africa, particularly towards immigrants. Therefore, while the public was more inclined to feel that the positive effects of strong national pride outweighed the negative, concerns about the detrimental effects that such pride could have on the country were voiced by a sizable share of the population.

South Africans remained resolutely proud of their country.

Conclusion

Since 1994 the South African government has initiated a nation-building programme to promote pride in a common national identity to build greater social cohesion in the country. The survey results suggested South Africans remained resolutely proud of their country in general, while cultural pride more explicitly has remained broad-based and relatively stable over the decade between 2003 and 2013. In this respect, South Africans continued to exhibit levels of national pride that placed it alongside mature democracies such as the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

Pride in political dimensions showed some signs of reversal.

However, it was disconcerting that pride in political dimensions showed some signs of reversal over the period, and that fairly large shares expressed shame about certain developments in the country as well as concerns about the possible political consequences of too much pride in our society.

From an accountability perspective, these increases in political (and economic) disillusionment over the decade could be interpreted as a growing distance between public expectations and reality concerning democracy performance, the degree of state responsiveness, and the nature and pace of change and progress. Addressing such discontentment should be seen as central to ongoing efforts to promote social cohesion as well as restoring and building a sense of civic pride and legitimacy. ■

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