



DEMOCRACY'S DIVIDEND: DOES DEMOCRACY WORK FOR SOUTH AFRICANS?

Satisfaction with democracy is one of the most common measures of political support for democracy employed in survey research, serving as an effective barometer of general democratic functioning in any society. *Benjamin Roberts et al*, examined trends in democratic satisfaction over the course of the last decade and found strong discontent.

Since its inception in 2003, the SASAS series has asked nationally representative samples of adults aged 16 years and older a range of questions designed to understand underlying values concerning citizenship, democracy and governance. Satisfaction with democracy is a global measure of the performance of a government.

The number of respondents in each survey from 2003 to 2013 ranged between 2 500 and 3 300. The latest survey round, which was conducted between October and December 2013, consisted of a representative sample of 2 885 respondents living in private residence.

The specific question asked of respondents was: 'How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy is working in South Africa?', with responses captured on a five-point scale ranging from 'very satisfied' to 'very dissatisfied'.

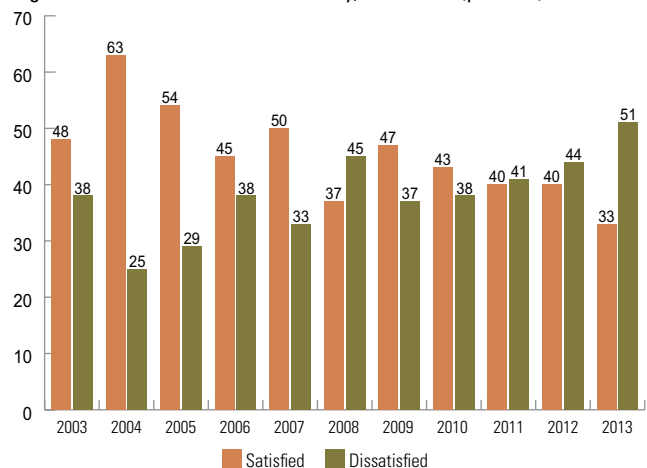
National trends in democratic satisfaction, 2003–2013

Figure 1 provides trends in the adult population who expressed satisfaction and dissatisfaction in each round of interviewing over the last decade.¹

In examining the 2003 survey results, we found that before the 2004 national and provincial elections, 48% of the adult population were satisfied with democracy and 38% were discontent. Between 2003 and 2008, a slight reversal in trends was apparent. The 2008 SASAS results showed that, for the first time, a greater share of people were dissatisfied than satisfied (45% versus 37%).

¹ Neutral responses to this question are not included in the graph and as a result the percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with democracy, 2003–2012 (percent)



Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2003–2013.

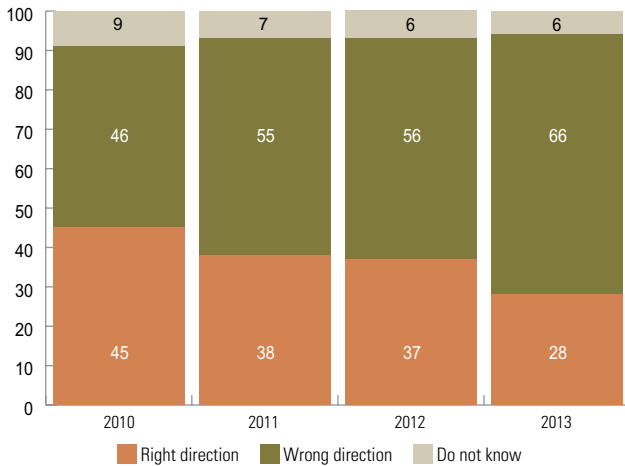
Note: The neutral category is not presented in the graph, but accounts for between 12–18% in each year of interviewing.

At the time of the SASAS round in late 2013, 51% of the participants expressed their discontent, while only 33% were satisfied with the way democracy is working. This reflected a complete reversal of the 2003 results, and was the lowest recorded level of satisfaction with democracy since the establishment of the SASAS series.

To further assess the public's view of democratic performance in general, survey respondents were required to evaluate whether they felt that things in South Africa were going in the right or in the wrong direction.

In late 2013, less than a third (28%) indicated that the nation was heading in the right direction while a majority (66%) reported believing that the country was heading in the wrong direction (Figure 2). The share believing that the country was going in the right direction fell from 45% in 2010 to around 38% in 2011 and 2012 and to barely more than a quarter in 2013.²

Figure 2: Views of the direction the country is going, 2010–2013 (percent)

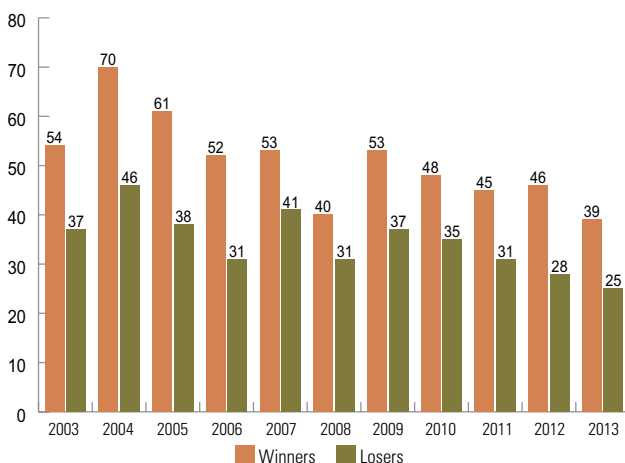


Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2010–2013.

Does it matter whether a party is big or small?

From the patterns and trends presented in Figure 3, we found that those who have vested interest in, and who voted for, the ANC were more satisfied with the way democracy was working. In each round of interviewing since 2003, satisfaction with democracy was consistently higher among the winners of democratic elections than those on the losing side. These differences were all statistically significant.

Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy among winners and losers, 2003–2013



Source: HSRC South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS) 2003–2013.

Note: The values presented in the graph combine the percentage of respondents who said they were 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied'. 'Winners' and 'losers' are based on those who voted for the governing party in the last general election or feel closest to the ruling party. This effectively translates into ANC versus other party supporters given that the ANC has won each successive national election since the transition to democracy.

However, it was also apparent that satisfaction with democracy has declined for winners and losers alike. In the case of those supporting the ruling party, satisfaction levels have fallen 15 percentage points over the decade, from 54% to 39%, while satisfaction declined by 12 percentage points for those supporting opposition parties.

This is an important finding as it suggests that citizen satisfaction with the performance of democracy has begun to diminish even for those identifying with the ruling party. This implies that there are mounting concerns about aspects of how the democratic system is working, irrespective of political persuasion.

Satisfaction with economic performance

There is international evidence lending credence to the importance of economic satisfaction in shaping views on the performance of democracy in general, specifically in terms of unemployment, inflationary pressure and making ends meet.

Barely a fifth of those who were unhappy with the state of the economy voiced satisfaction with democracy, compared to between 70–80% of those who had a more sanguine economic outlook. This pattern has remained relatively stable over the last seven years.

Personal living standards also appear to matter for evaluations of democratic performance. For instance, people indicating that life has improved personally in the last five years offered more positive evaluations of democratic performance than those saying personal living standards had remained unchanged or worsened. Nonetheless, there was a downturn in satisfaction with democracy among those who reported upward social mobility, with satisfaction levels falling from 66% in 2010 to 49% in 2013.

Conclusion

The rise in democratic discontent has been accompanied by diminishing confidence in core political institutions and lingering disappointment in relation to issues such as job creation, the reduction of crime and corruption, as well as the provision of low cost housing.

Views on national and personal economic performance appear to partly explain the reason for this growing discontent with the performance of democracy, with those generally unhappy with the state of the economy or feeling that their lives have not been materially improving generally offering more negative assessments.

These increasingly unfavourable views of democratic performance could be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of a more critical citizen who is concerned with the accountability of institutions and office-bearers. This, in turn, could be a positive development for South African democracy and civic culture. ■

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² The remaining 6 percent provided 'do not know' responses.