

SOUTH AFRICANS ARE PROUD, CONSERVATIVE AND UNEQUAL

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South Africans identify by race, language group and nation, and are fundamentally conservative and traditional. At least that's what public opinion showed six years ago. What might a more recent survey reveal?

How do opinions matter to politics? According to a public opinion survey published by the South African Human Sciences Research Council in 2006 (*South African Social Attitudes: Changing Times, Diverse Voices*) they matter because elites are most likely to influence public policy through formal mechanisms of public participation. The editors argue that opinion surveys such as this can give voice to a broader range of people, overcoming the shortfalls of participatory democracy.

This entire volume, with its thirteen quite different chapters, debates the prospects for consolidating democracy in South Africa. According to Editor Udesch Pillay, this depends on government's ability to make good decisions, the determination of the 'stakeholder community' (everyone other than government in other words) to provide checks and bal-

ances, and the capacity of the 'research community' to provide an account of society.

The questions in this inaugural South African Social Attitudes survey were asked of its 4980 participants in 2003. This 2006 publication gives various analyses of this material and promised to be the first of a series of annual surveys. Only findings on attitudes to work and social security have been published from the subsequent 2006 survey.

The chapters chart a fascinating tour through South African opinions about race, class and politics (democracy, voting, and the determinants of party political support), poverty, inequality and service delivery (with discussions on the digital divide, water services, health and education) and societal values (including questions on capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality and premarital sex).

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A few snippets: national identity was found to be strong in South Africa, and co-exists with other identities based on race and language. In 2003, there was growing trust in public institutions including courts, the Independent Electoral Commission, South African Broadcasting Corporation, national government and Parliament. Local Government and police are significantly less trusted, and there was broad dissatisfaction with crime prevention and job creation. Nearly 45% of adults considered their income insufficient to meet basic household needs, and 87% thought incomes too unequal in South Africa. But there were low levels of support for practical policies of redress such as Black Economic Empowerment, land reform, and affirmative action, particularly

amongst the wealthy and white.

On what the authors called the "moral questions", "South Africans are 'still' deeply conservative – racist, homophobic, sexist, xenophobic and hypocritical." The rather strange 'morals index' shows South Africa to be 'traditional' in its orientation, condemning pre-marital sex, abortion, homosexuality and supporting the death penalty. This chapter exhorts policy-makers to "internalize the extent to which South Africans hold traditionalist views," although to what policy end it is not clear.

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There is a very good chapter by Benjamin Roberts on poverty and inequality, and an excellent one on interruptions and cut-offs in water services by David Hemson and Kwame Owusa-Ampomah. This attempts to quantify the extent of the problem of water cut-offs for non payment – nearly 1.2 million people over the course of the year preceding the survey. The domestic violence chapter by Andrew Dawes and colleagues includes a good review of evidence, and the first attempts to quantify the extent of domestic violence from a nationally representative sample in South Africa. They find that 10% of women in relationships are abused each year. Neither of these chapters is really about public opinion, except in their confirmation that the opinions about poor water services and high levels of domestic violence are entirely congruent with events.

Sometimes there are unlikely results. "Black African residents of the poorer provinces" recorded the highest levels of satisfaction with democracy, for example, and some 62% of adult South Africans report

never having an alcoholic drink. Some of the early chapters are overly-sympathetic of government – suggesting that government would be quite right to be disappointed with some public opinions given their impressive record of services for example.

It's a volume filled with sometimes intriguing insights into what South Africans think of themselves and others, and is a contribution to understanding some of the country's contradictions. It is weakened by regular comparisons with American public opinion data and small sample numbers for some of the modules. Published four years after the data was collected, six years from the present, and in light of the leadership race, attacks on public institutions, meltdown at the SABC, service delivery protests and public debates around crime, it would be very interesting to know how South African democracy is opinioned to be faring now.