

South Africa's role in the world: A public opinion survey

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Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, South African foreign policy has been subject to tumultuous twists and turns, as the immediate post-1994 'honeymoon period' with its remarkable enunciation of a human rights centred foreign policy increasingly gave way to processes reflecting greater complexity. South Africa emerged as a leading spokesperson for the global South and, at the same time, increasingly had to assert its African identity. These factors, as well as the usual rough-and-tumble of *realpolitik* in daily diplomacy, slowly eroded the premium placed on human rights under the vanguard of the Mandela presidency. In short, South African policymakers are often hard pressed and face trenchant critiques for failing to strike a balance between material demands and normative constraints. These material demands usually entail dealing with divergent constituencies clamouring for domestic expectations of redistribution on the one hand and market-led demands on the other; whilst normative constraints involve having to seek a compromise between cosmopolitanism and pan-Africanism on the other.

As a result, multiple contradictions clutter the policymaking domain: a widely pronounced commitment to an 'African Agenda' amongst the political elite, set against severe levels of xenophobia amongst the poor, in part because South Africa has had to deal with amongst the largest influx of refugees in the world; increasing trade and economic ties with China, including Chinese sponsorship of South African membership of BRICS, set against massive Chinese imports which have, for example, decimated the local textile industry; and enunciating a commitment towards 'democratizing' international institutions, yet having to tolerate one of the world's last absolute monarchies in its own backyard.

Given these contradictions, policy analysts and newspaper columnists have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse about what our foreign policy should be about. Yet, besides the occasional protest triggered by say, the denial of a visa to the Dalai Lama, much of the foreign policy debate involves trafficking between think tanks, media commentators and government spokespersons. Whilst foreign policy traditionally remains the domain of an elite group - in both the developed and developing world, occasional flare-ups, such as the Dalai Lama visa debacle, reveal the continued significance of what is widely known in the foreign policy analysis literature as 'the attentive public'.

What motivated this research project was the remarkable absence of scholarly analyses about 'the attentive public's' attitudes to key issues in our foreign policy. The only other comprehensive study of a representative sample of the South African population was conducted 15 years ago by Philip Nel.⁽¹⁾ We contend that since then, considerable shifts in attitudes are likely to have occurred, making another survey both necessary and very compelling. The survey - which was not designed to test the public's *knowledge* of international affairs but rather their *attitudes*, beliefs and values about our foreign policy - reveals considerable convergence across various societal divides in relation to major issues.

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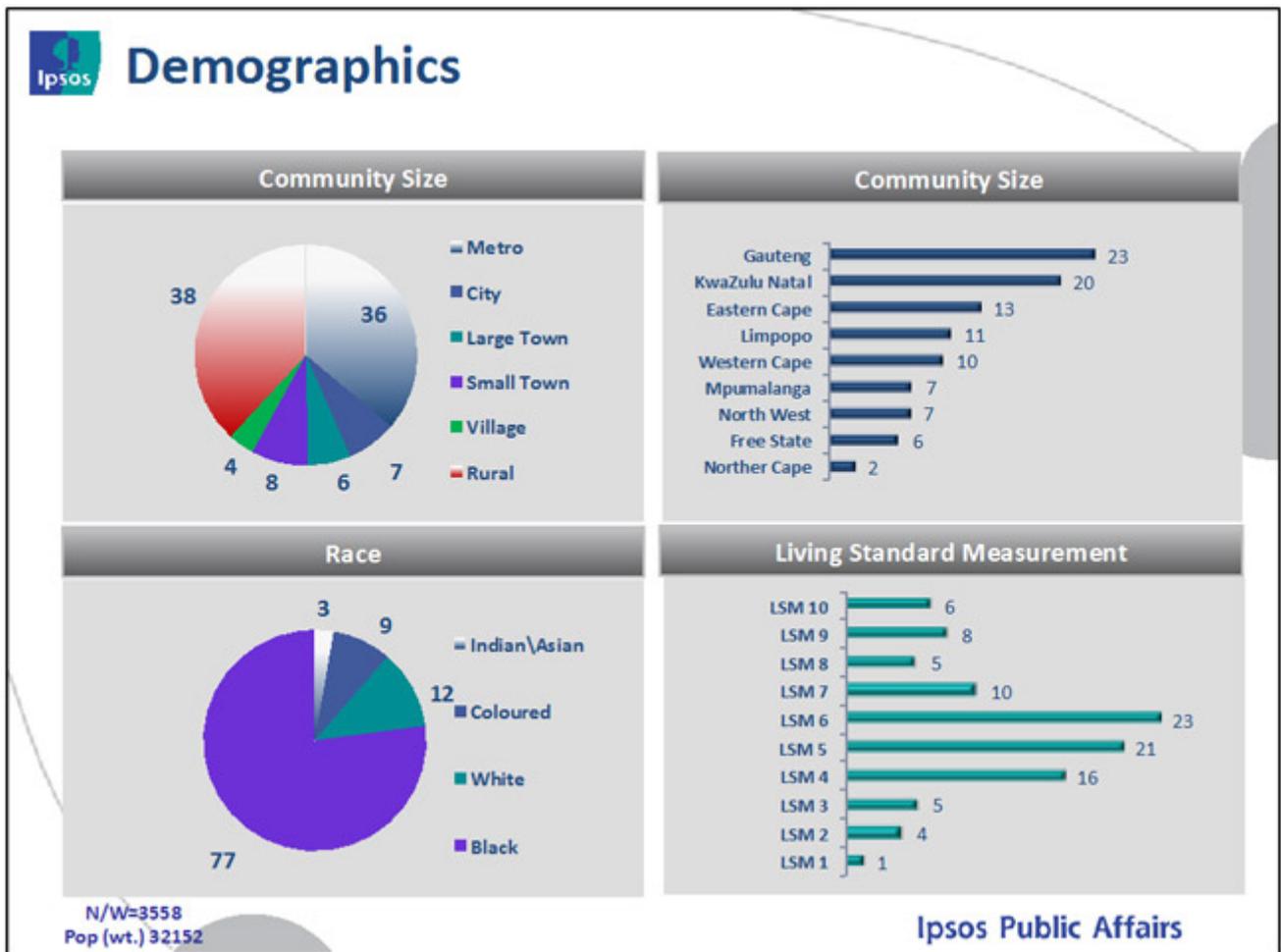
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This working paper provides a preliminary report of these findings. After contextualising the nature and methodological approach of the survey, four key themes illuminate ordinary South Africans' foreign policy beliefs, orientations and values and how South Africans view the country's international identity. These themes include, firstly, debates about what South Africans consider the country's national interest to be; secondly, the country's international role; third, human rights; and finally, South Africa's international identity.

1. Contextualising the survey

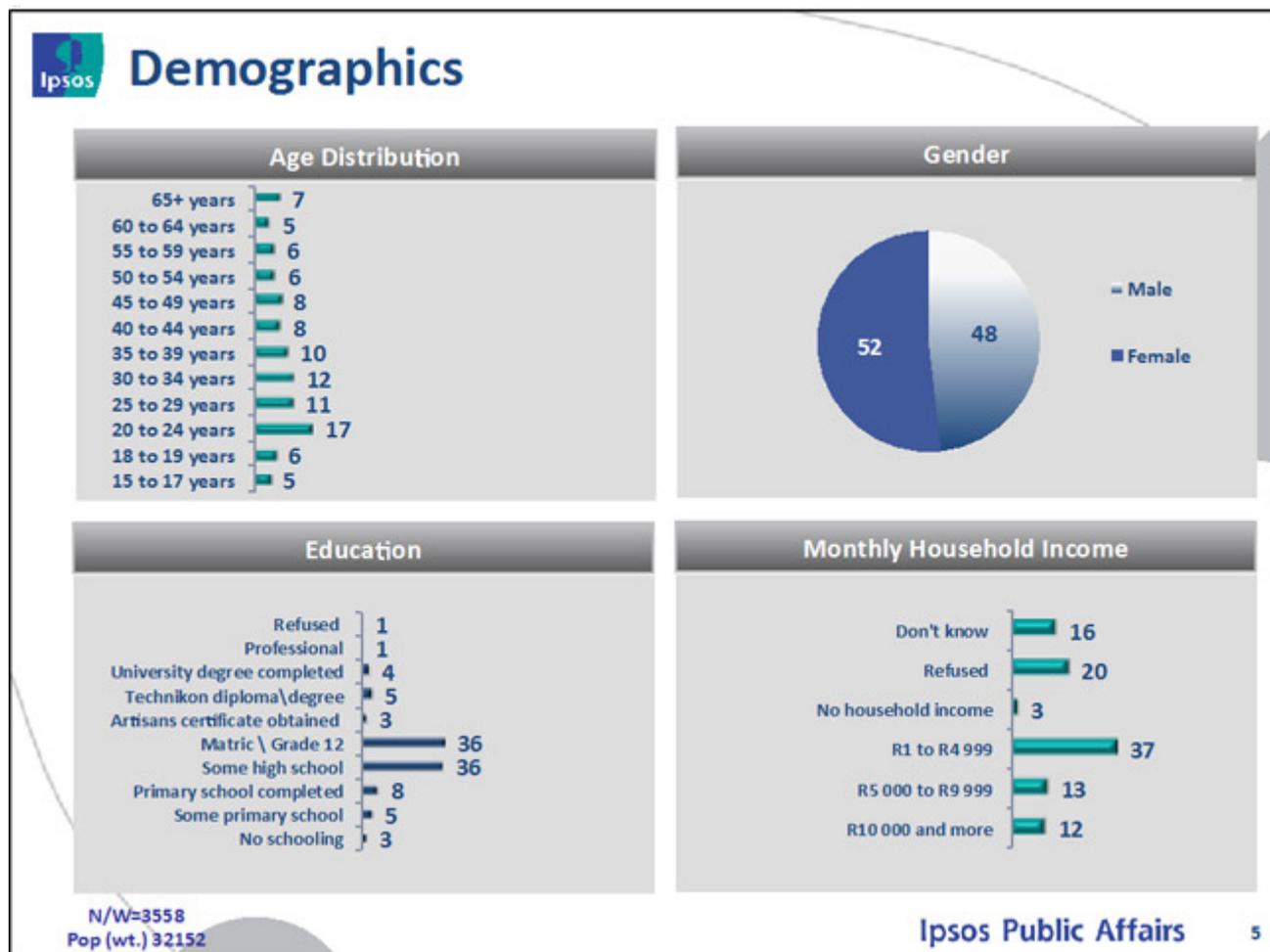
Figure 1



Funded by the South African Foreign Policy Initiative of the Open Society Foundation of South Africa, we commissioned IPSOS/Markinor to conduct a public opinion survey. Face-to-face computer assisted person interviews were conducted by trained and experienced interviewers with a representative sample of 3,500 South Africans during October and November 2012. Based on a random sampling of South Africans aged 15 years and older, the sample was stratified for race, geography, community size, age, religion, language, education, employment status, living standard measurement (LSM), monthly household income and gender on a nationwide basis (see figures 1 and 2). A sampling error of 1,8 per cent and a 95 per cent confidence interval were achieved. 2000 respondents were in metropolitan areas (Gauteng cities – East Rand, Vaal,

Pretoria, Johannesburg, including Soweto – Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Bloemfontein, Welkom, Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town) and 1,500 were in non-metropolitan areas (including deep rural areas). For the non-metro sample, the proportions were obtained from All Media Product Survey (AMPS) 2010B data. The interviews lasted approximately 57 minutes each, were conducted in respondents' own homes, and questionnaires were translated into local languages so respondents could conduct the interview in their language of choice. Back-checks were conducted by IPSOS on 20% of each interviewer's work.

Figure 2



2. What should the main goal of our foreign policy be?

The study shows that South Africans are unambiguous in their view of what the purpose of our foreign policy should be. Asked to rank four goals in order of importance to the purpose of our foreign policy, the promotion of economic growth emerges on top (at 44 per cent) (see figure 3). In addition, 16 per cent of respondents cite the attraction of foreign investment as the number one foreign policy priority. Promoting economic growth thus emerges as the single most important goal across all social groups regardless of income, age, race, or religion. Nearly 60 per cent of Indian, 55 per cent of white, 44 per cent of black and 34 per cent of coloured South Africans cite it as the number one priority. Interestingly, respondents give a

slightly higher order of priority to the promotion of a world with a more equal distribution of wealth and power than for human rights, with coloured respondents supporting this global redistributive role most explicitly (with 28 per cent).

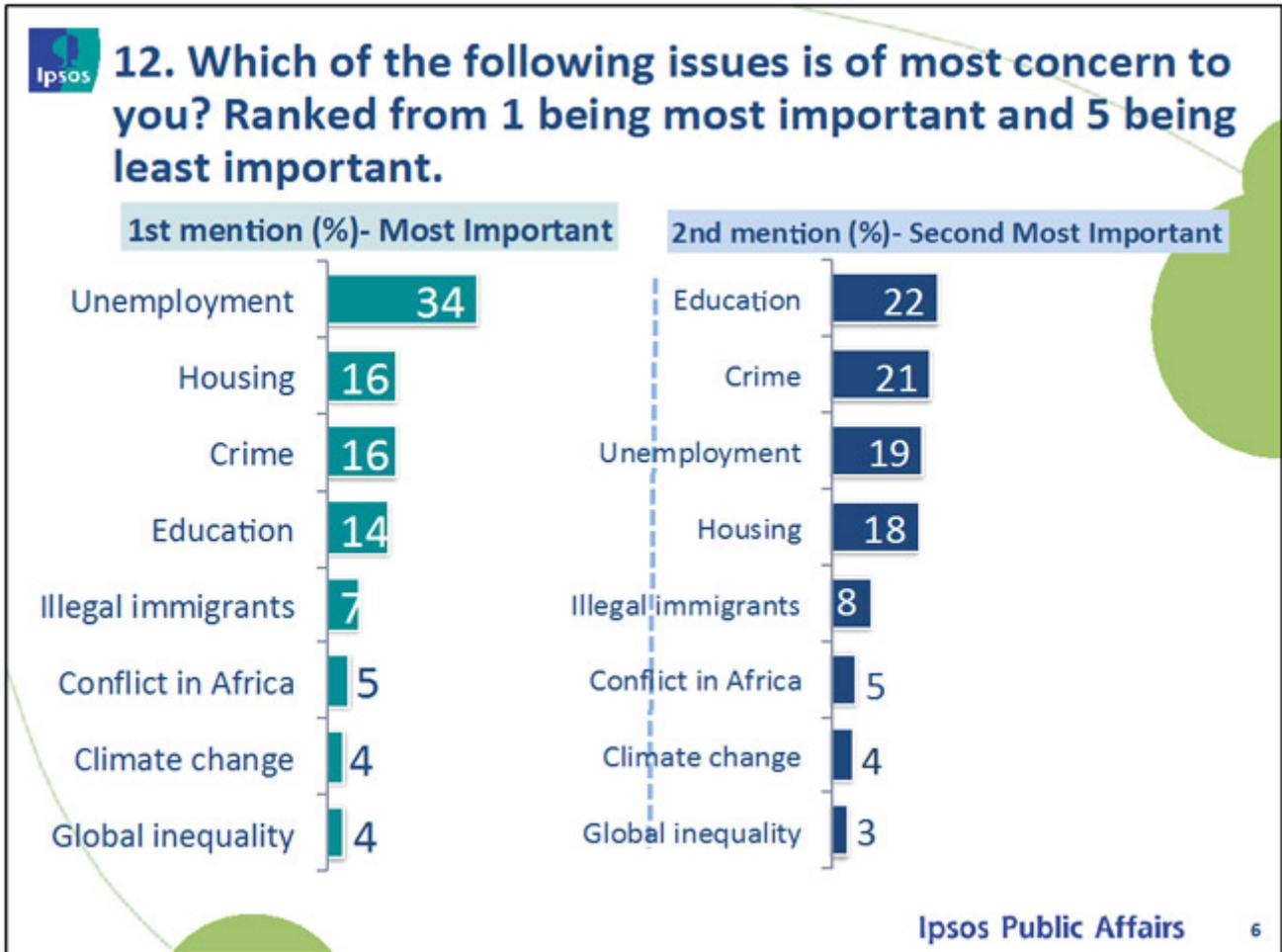
Figure 3



The extent to which unemployment and poverty weigh foremost on South Africans' minds – again regardless of income level or race – is clearly revealed when respondents are asked to rank a number of pressing domestic versus global issues (see figure 4).

Whilst unemployment is overwhelmingly identified as the primary concern, some respondents give slightly different degrees of emphasis. Whilst those with no and very little schooling cite unemployment, graduates cite both crime and unemployment as a major concern. Similarly, whereas black and coloured South Africans cite unemployment, for white and Indian respondents, crime and unemployment are of equal concern.

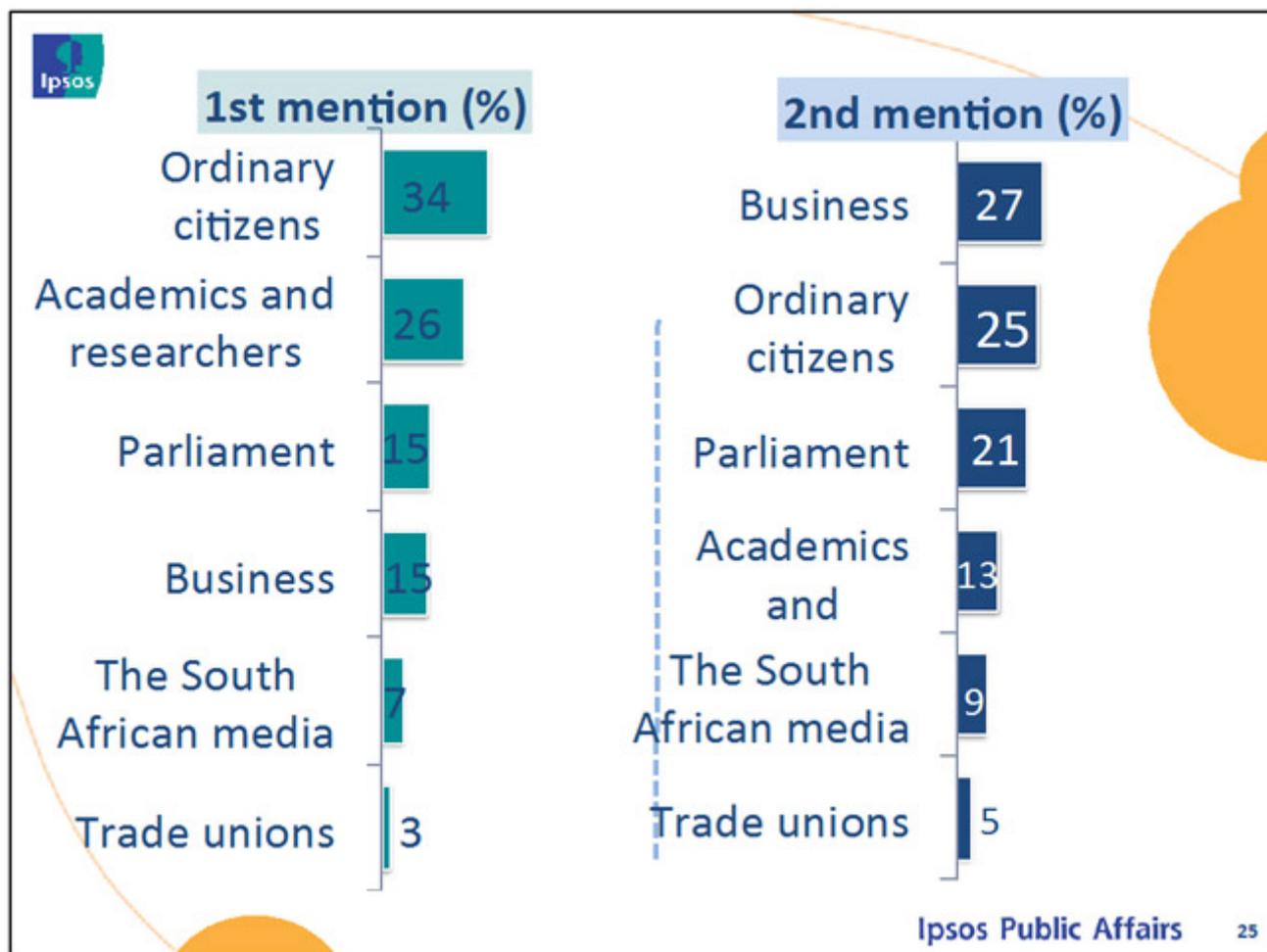
Figure 4



The national interest debate also bears some interesting outcomes in response to the question, ‘In the formulation of our foreign policy, who should government listen to? Strong support – again across the board – for ordinary citizens, reveals the very unambiguous democratic assertion that foreign policy should reflect the people’s views (see figure 5). Regardless of race or income level, most respondents indicate that government should listen to the public.

The rankings below arguably involve a number of possible explanations and/or questions for further research.

Figure 5



Firstly, does the high value placed on the role of citizens suggest a sense that government does not listen to the public sufficiently or simply serve as to underscore the need for foreign policy to reflect democratic values?

Secondly, despite the relatively marginal role played by Parliament in foreign policy, respondents list it as amongst the top three or four most important role players. One explanation may be that regardless of the marginal role played by Parliament, ordinary people view it as a platform for debate, including foreign policy. The same might also be said for the relatively high value placed on the role of academics and think tanks. Interestingly, Xhosa speakers and other Africans in particular identify academics and researchers as being important.

Finally, the public's view of the role of business and trade unions as stakeholders in the foreign policy making process is revealing. The public considers business to be a much more important constituency than the trade unions. The significance of the business sector in foreign policy is consistent with the overwhelming focus on economic growth, reduced unemployment and promotion of foreign investment citizens identify as the primary purpose of our foreign policy.

3. Active internationalism?

While, overall, South Africans remain predominantly concerned with domestic issues, they are not entirely inward-looking. The survey results show that South Africans are in favour of South Africa playing an active role on the continent as well as globally – as long as it does not undermine the pursuit of what they regard as important domestic priorities. Overall, 63 per cent of respondents agree (42 per cent) or strongly agree (21 per cent) that South Africa should be *more* involved in global affairs. While there is very little significant variation across either age or race, a difference is observed between those with no schooling (with 46 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing) and those with university degrees (with 73 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing). Interestingly, with regard to work status, despite overriding concerns with domestic issues, a more internationalist foreign policy is supported across the board, with the unemployed supporting the statement the most (at 66 per cent).

Similarly, 66 per cent of citizens want South Africa to be known as a country that helps to resolve conflicts in Africa (with 22 per cent strongly agreeing and 44 per cent agreeing). Remarkably there seems to be strong support for this view regardless of age, race, religion, income, geography or level of education. The question could possibly be regarded as problematic since, in principle, ending conflict is not something most people would oppose. However, if rephrased to include the potential costs of active involvement in peacekeeping, for example, on the national budget, answers may have been slightly different. Due to resource restrictions, it was not possible to ask follow-up questions to test initial responses.

Interestingly, despite the public's overwhelming concern with unemployment and poverty, 63 per cent of respondents contend that South Africa should give aid to other African countries (with 21 per cent strongly agreeing and 42 per cent agreeing). Support for South Africa's role as a donor country shows no significant difference across income levels, but there were some racial divergences (with black, coloured, Indian and white South Africans agreeing or strongly agreeing at 66, 60, 65 and 50 per cent respectively). In addition, those with full-time employment are slightly less inclined to give aid to Africa (at 54 per cent), while the unemployed show stronger support (at 63 per cent).

4. The African agenda

Even stronger support is given for South Africa's African leadership role, with 65 per cent of respondents agreeing (41 per cent) or strongly agreeing (24 per cent) that other African states should recognise South Africa as the leader of the continent. Whilst the majority, across and within all racial groups agree, Indian respondents support the idea most (at 77 per cent), while white respondents support it the least (at 56 per cent). Black and coloured respondents support it at 65 and 66 per cent, respectively.

Support for the African agenda is also reflected in the support (58 per cent) shown for the African Union (AU) as being a more important international organisation than the United Nations. Strongest support for the AU can be seen amongst black South Africans (at 61 per cent) compared to the 47 per cent coloured, 53 per cent Indian and 44 per cent white South Africans supporting the idea. There is a higher level of agreement amongst those with tertiary education, while in terms of income levels, the middle class shows the highest support.

The public also shows some awareness of the interdependence between South Africa and Southern Africa, with 59 per cent agreeing (40 per cent) or strongly agreeing (19 per cent) that South Africa's growth and development is closely tied to that of our neighbouring countries. There is some racial divergence, with black and Indian South Africans agreeing or strongly agreeing most with the statement (at 61 and 63 per cent, respectively) and coloured and white respondents showing least agreement (at 50 and 47 per cent, respectively). Interestingly, there is not a significant difference in opinion between the unemployed and those working full-time. This raises questions about how these results can be reconciled with high levels of xenophobia in South Africa.

Finally, a sense of solidarity with other African states can also be read into responses to the statement 'If an African government violates the human rights of its citizens, other African governments should not openly criticise that government'. Overall, 53 per cent of respondents agree (32 per cent) or strongly agree (21 per cent) with the statement. There is no significant difference between those with no schooling and those with a university degree, between the unemployed and full-time employed or across income levels. A slight generational gap can be identified, with those in the 65+ group disagreeing most strongly. Some racial divergence is again evident, with black South Africans agreeing or strongly agreeing most (at 56 per cent), followed by Indian (at 50 per cent), coloured (at 41 per cent) and white (at 38 per cent) South Africans. This suggests that the South African government's quiet diplomacy response to human rights violations in Zimbabwe, for example, was perhaps not entirely unsupported by ordinary South Africans.

This question also leads us into debates around the role of human rights in foreign policy.

5. Human rights as a foreign policy priority

In the question mentioned earlier about what the main aim of South Africa's foreign policy should be, only 16 per cent of respondents chose 'promoting human rights' (as opposed to 44 per cent choosing 'promoting economic growth in South Africa').

Respondents were also asked to agree or disagree with the statement "*South Africa should trade with all countries, even those known to abuse the human rights of their citizens.*" This question arguably asked respondents to judge the potential benefits of trade versus promoting human rights – the latter being what Nelson Mandela had called "the guiding light of South Africa's foreign policy" - trade wins hands down.

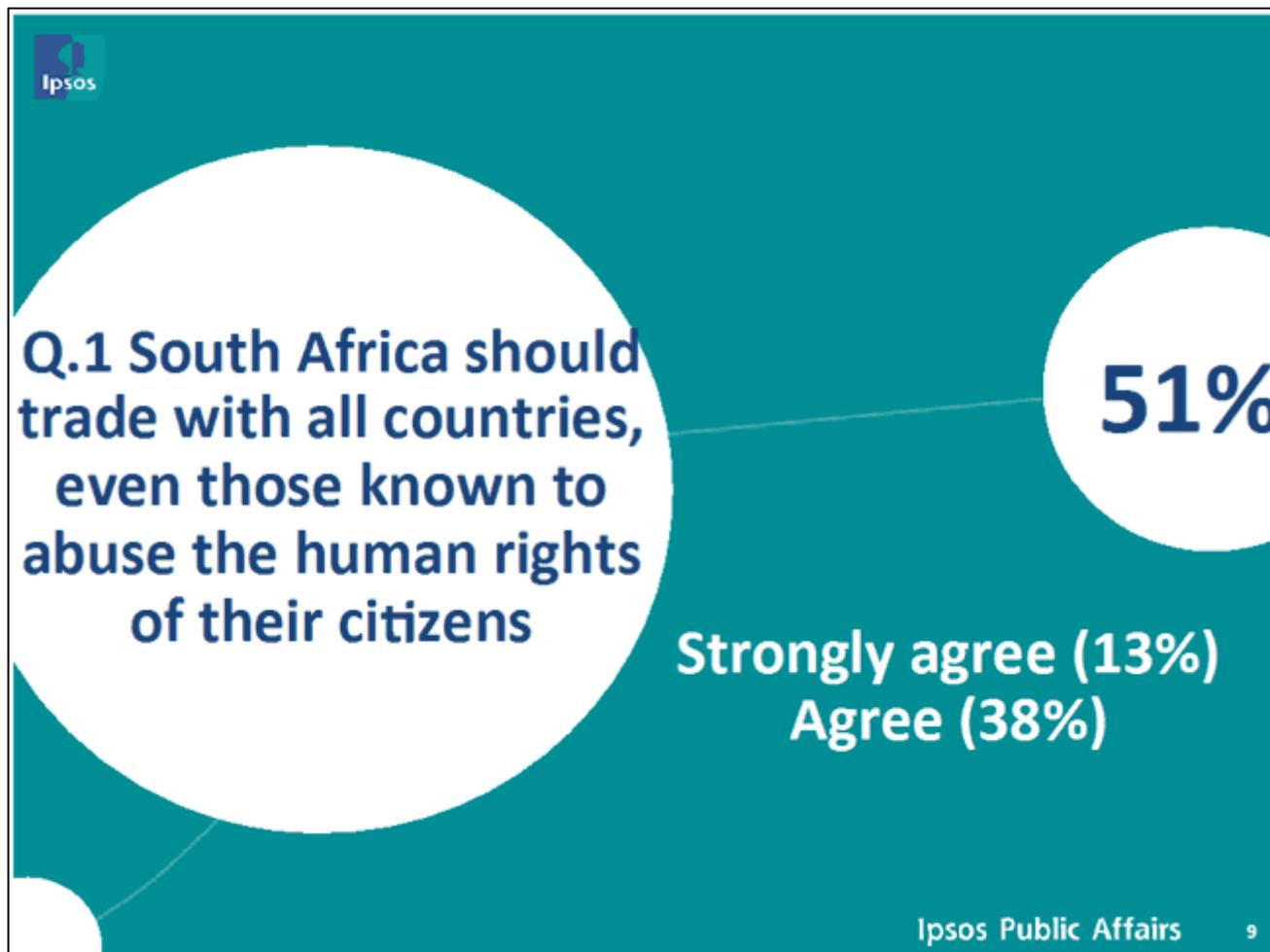
Table 6, below, shows that 51 per cent of respondents agree that trade should not be hampered by human rights considerations (38 per cent agree, while 13 per cent strongly agree).

While there are no notable variations across gender or age, there is some racial divergence – with black South Africans showing the strongest support for the statement (with 55 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing), followed by Indian (at 49 per cent), coloured and white (both at 34 per cent) South Africans. In addition, those with no schooling are most strongly in favour, and those in higher income brackets (LSM 8-10) least in favour.

However, on the other hand, when there is no direct trade-off between human rights and material benefits, 50 per cent of South Africans agree (34 per cent) or strongly agree (16 per cent) that government should

promote international efforts to promote gay rights in Africa. While there is no significant difference across race, those with no schooling show the least support (at 24 per cent) and disagree most strongly (at 22 per cent). With regard to age, only the 65+ show significantly less support. Human rights seem to remain an important aspiration of our foreign policy but is often simply overwhelmed by the extent of unemployment and need for economic growth.

Figure 6



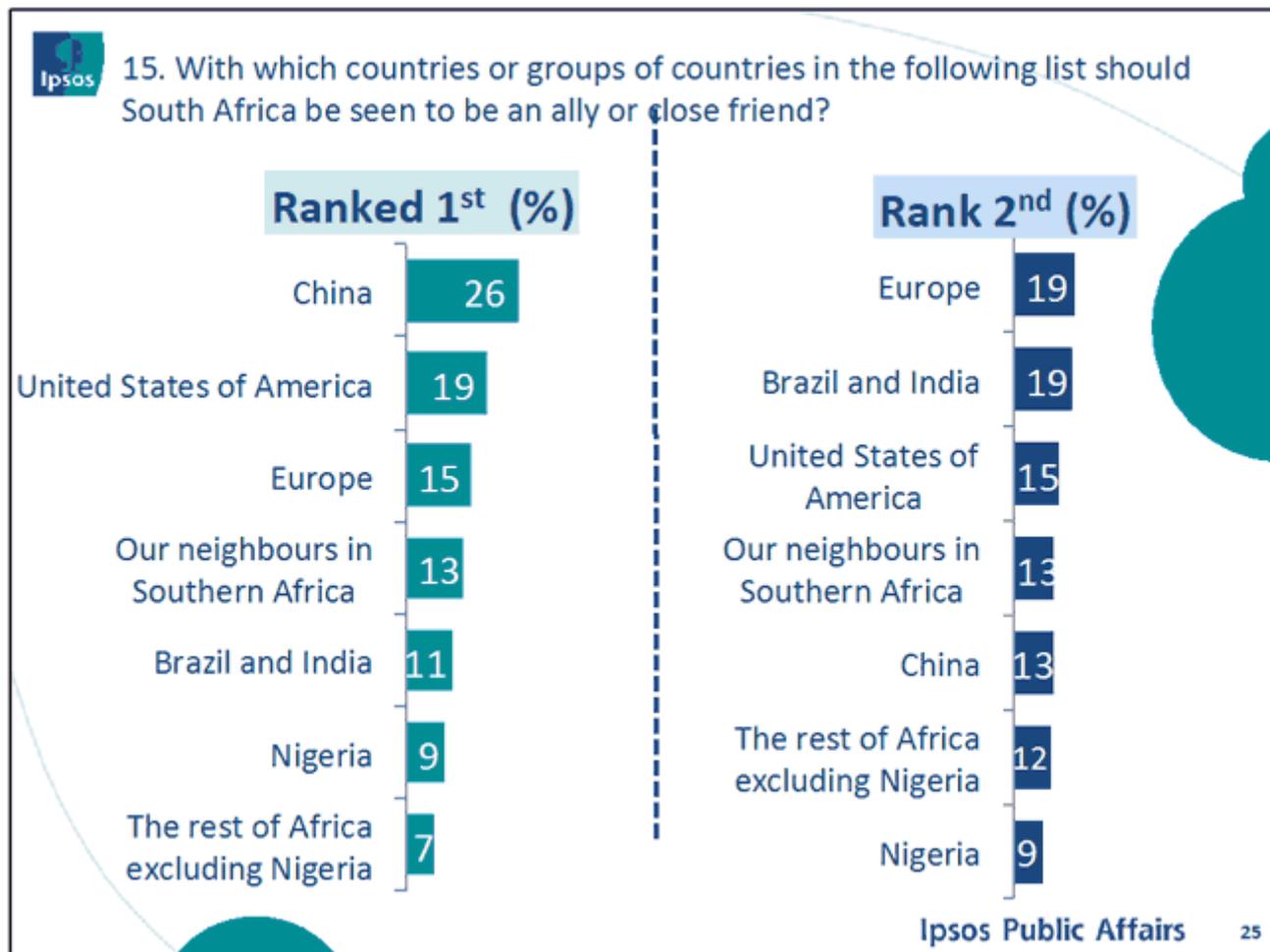
6. Who are our friends and role models?

One of the most interesting dichotomies about South Africans' international orientation – in the sense of who they most readily identify with – is that despite the fact that South Africans think the rest of the continent should consider them as the leader of the continent, ordinary South Africans do not associate with the continent (beyond the Southern African region). When asked to rank which countries they consider to be our friends or allies, the rest of Africa emerges as the least important region (see figure 7). Despite the growing economic and political significance of Nigeria, it is ranked equally low.

China scores the highest, followed by the United States and Europe, and neighbouring countries in Southern Africa, followed by India and Brazil. These patterns seem to persist regardless of race, with only

small shifts in emphasis. Whites for example, also cite China as our most important ally (27 per cent), followed by Europe (25 per cent). Interestingly, Xhosa speakers are much more pro-China (41 per cent) than Zulu speakers (19 per cent); whilst the poor and least educated identify the USA as South Africa's most important ally.

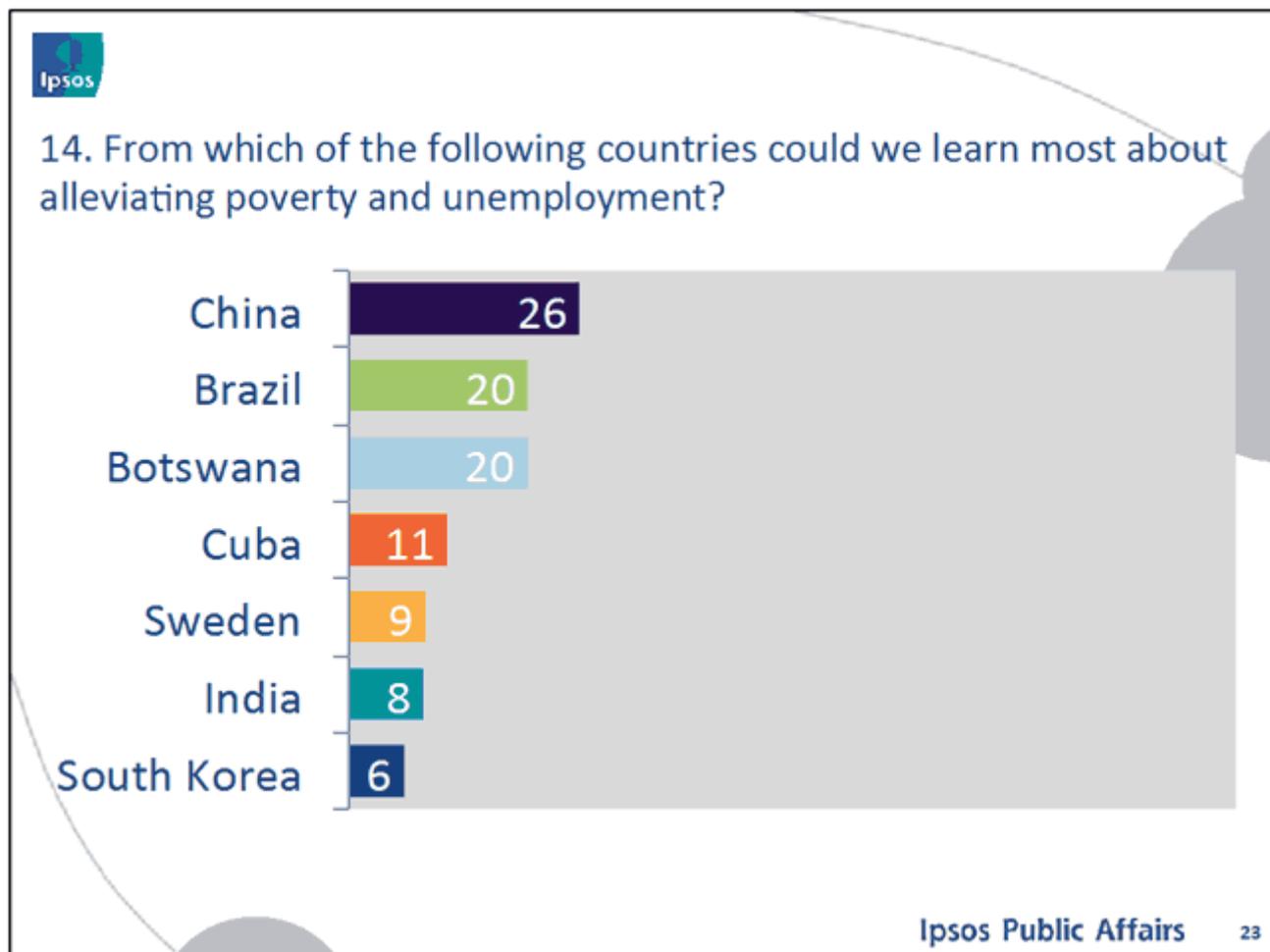
Figure 7



These patterns also converge in terms of which countries South Africa can learn from most about reducing poverty and unemployment. Again, China emerges as the number one choice amongst most respondents (26 per cent), followed by Brazil and Botswana (both at 20 per cent) (see figure 8).

These patterns emerge regardless of significant demographic variation, although people under 25 are more likely to identify Brazil and those over 45 Botswana as the countries we can learn most from. Whites and Afrikaners in particular are fond of citing Botswana as their country of choice, possibly both because of Botswana's close proximity (as a possible country of emigration?), familiarity and perceptions of stability, order and low crime rates. Interestingly, countries that played a leading role during the anti-apartheid struggle and/or represented different models of economic development like Cuba (state-run); Sweden (social democratic), India and South Korea (classic developmental state) garner significantly less support.

Figure 8



China’s significance recedes when South Africans are asked in which country or region other than South Africa they would prefer to live. This question was used as a proxy for the estimation of people’s sense of ‘emotional identification’. Once again, China’s relatively marginal position in terms of an issue that is not related to economic well-being or trade, underscores the extent to which South Africans see the fundamental role of their foreign policy to create jobs at home and foster economic growth.

South Africans do not seem to be very adventurous in terms of where they would rather live, with the vast majority preferring to remain in the Southern African region. The ‘disconnect’ with the rest of Africa remains, with the rest of the continent being the part of the world South Africans would least want to live in. After Southern Africa, the preferred region is the United States and Europe.

Once again, there is very little racial or even income variations, although the overwhelming majority of whites cite Europe as the region they would most like to live in, followed in equal measure by the Southern African region, the USA and South America. Otherwise, those with the least education tend to rank the Southern African region first, whilst the highest educated tend to cite Europe as their region of choice.

Figure 9



Conclusion

These findings suggest that South Africans are pragmatic internationalists – committed to improving the world, if that means improving the quality of life for all at home. The results also suggest that the kind of internationalism underlying South Africans' sense of their place in the world is fundamentally driven by the extent to which international and regional engagement results in economic growth and jobs at home. South Africans' orientation as pragmatic internationalists may reflect the mentality of a 'trading state'. Unlike all its other BRICS partners, South Africa cannot rely on a domestic economy of scale to fuel growth.

South Africans also seem to support the idea that their country plays the role of being a middle power in world politics. Whilst material capabilities (geographic and population size, per capita GDP) may determine whether a country can play a middle power role, what is key is the extent of its *diplomatic activism*, which is usually centred on its immediate region, but not exclusively so.

Middle powers typically rely on their soft power to project themselves globally. Typical middle power activities include a consistent interest in the resolution of conflicts (more often in their immediate region, but also on occasion beyond), and strengthening international law and the multilateral system (because they do

not have preponderant military power). Whilst middle powers are often caricatured as the diplomatic equivalent of a 'global boy scout' – motivated by normative concerns – the middle power role is also driven by considerable self-interest. South Africans' ambiguous orientation towards both China and 'the West' may be also be symptomatic of a middle power orientation that appreciates the strategic value of not being explicitly aligned with any specific power block in international politics.

Footnotes

1. Philip Nel (1999) 'The foreign policy beliefs of South Africans: A first cut', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 17 (1): 123-146.

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