

# Chapter 8

## Perceptions about democracy

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### 8.1 Preferences with regard to political system

South Africa's democracy was born in 1994. It is therefore essential that the government and its institutions be informed of the views and needs of the citizenry. National surveys are a means to reveal these needs and views. This section presents a discussion of responses to a set of statements on democracy as a system of government that was included in the HSRC public opinion survey of November 1999. The respondents were requested to indicate to which of the following statements they agree most strongly:

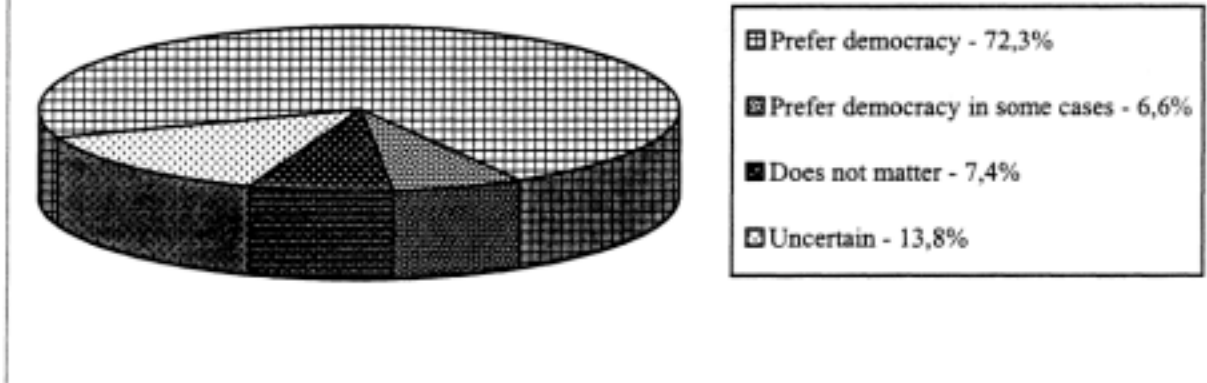
- Democracy is always preferable to any other system of government;
- In some cases an authoritarian government or a dictatorship is preferable to democracy;
- For people like me it does not matter whether there is a democracy or not;
- Uncertain/Do not know.

The national average for responses in favour of a democracy was (72%). Provinces that registered an above-average score for preferring democracy to other systems of government were Mpumalanga (91%), the Eastern Cape (80%), the Free State (77%) and the Western Cape (75%). Provinces that registered a below-average score were Gauteng (71%), KwaZulu Natal (67%), North West (66%) and the Northern Cape (64%).

The greatest agreement with an authoritarian government was registered in North West (12%), the national average being a low (7%). The Western Cape and the Northern Cape registered the lowest agreement with an authoritarian system (respectively 3% and 4%). For the "Uncertain/Do not know" category the national average was 14%, but the figures for the Northern Province (20%) and KwaZulu-Natal (17%) were higher. The lowest "Uncertain/Do not know" score was registered in Mpumalanga (3%).

Given South Africa's history of racial oppression, the different population groups may differ greatly in respect of their views on democracy vis-à-vis other systems of government and in respect of their interest in the issue. The responses to the set of statements cited above revealed that 72% of blacks, 75% of coloureds and 74% of whites preferred democracy. Indians registered a somewhat lower figure (64%). Whites had the lowest preference for an authoritarian system (3%), followed by coloureds (5%). Blacks and Indians registered a slightly higher preference (7% and 10% respectively).

**Figure 7: Preferences for democracy - national**



When comparing South Africa with other “new” democracies, the preference figure for democracy in South Africa (72%) is similar to that in Spain (70%), higher than that in Chile (52%) and lower than that in Argentina (77%) and Greece (87%).<sup>1</sup>

## 8.2 Views on liberal democracy

There are many forms of democracy, such as *representative democracy*, *popular or direct democracy*, *participatory democracy*, *social democracy*, *democratic socialism* and *liberal democracy*.<sup>2</sup> This section deals with the opinions of South Africans with regard to *liberal democracy* as gleaned from the HSRC survey of November 1999. The primary focus is on national and regional (provincial) data.<sup>3</sup>

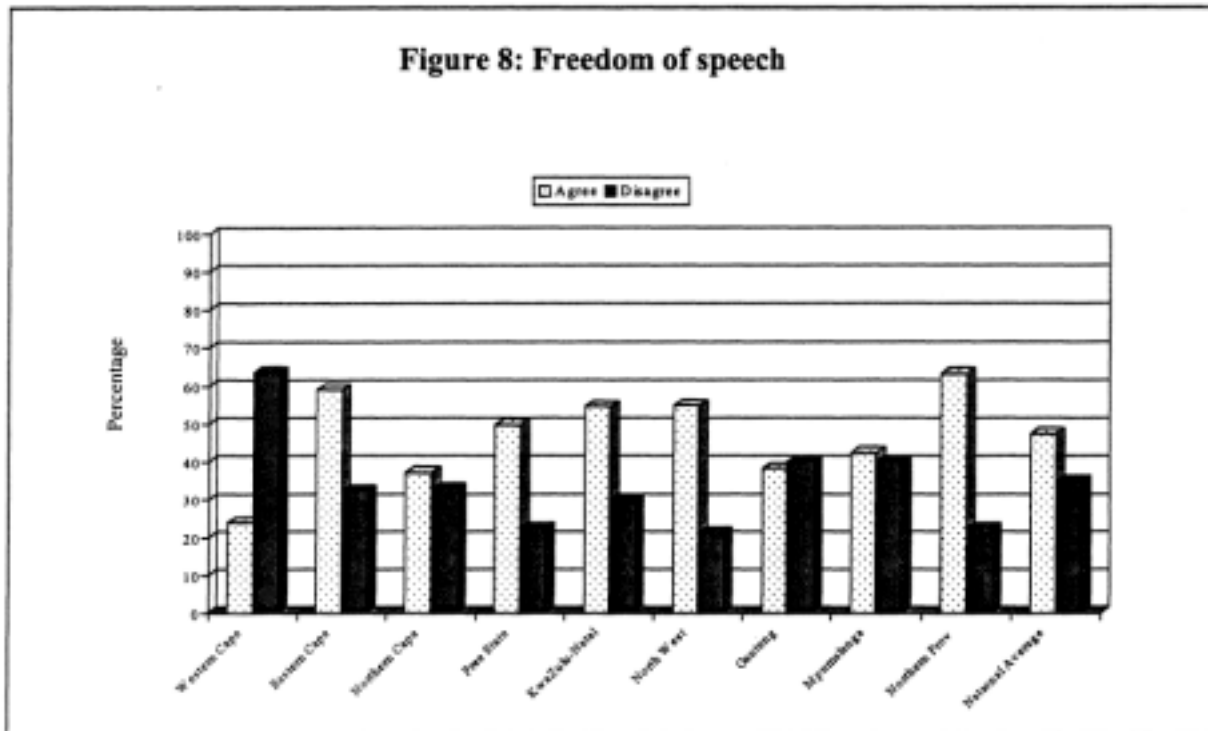
In order to investigate public opinion on the role of government and acceptable limits to state intervention, respondents were requested to indicate whether they strongly agree, agree, hold no opinion, strongly disagree, disagree or do not know how to respond in respect of six statements. Their responses are discussed per statement below:

<sup>1</sup> Linz, J.J. & Stepan, A: 1996. Toward consolidated democracies. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(2).

<sup>2</sup> See Dahl R. 1970. *After the Revolution? Authority in a good society*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Dahl, R. 1989. *Democracy and its critics*. Nev. Haven: Yale University Press; and Held, D. 1987. *Models of democracy Oxford: Polity Press*. For South African contextualisations, see Kotze, H.J. & Van Wyk, J.J. 1986. *Politieke konsepte*. Kaapstad: Perskor-Uitgewery, p. 30; Slabbert, F. 1992. *The quest for democracy: South Africa in transition*. London: Penguin Books, pp. 1-10; Bredenkamp, F. (red.) 1991. *Staatkundige en politieke begrippe*. Pretoria: RGN, pp. 6ff, 29ff.

<sup>3</sup> Population group or gender breakdowns of the data do not feature in the analysis of views on liberal democracy. This *modus operandi* is the result of earlier studies on political participation that illustrated that regional differences are more prevalent than population group or gender differences. See for example Roefs, M. & Liebenberg, I. 1999. Notes on public participation in South Africa HSRC Website: [hsrc.ac.za/delivered/mrjcr115.html](http://hsrc.ac.za/delivered/mrjcr115.html).

**Figure 8: Freedom of speech**



- *The government should have the authority to prevent citizens from expressing opinions that are negative and unpopular.* (Freedom of speech)

This statement was aimed at exploring public views on government curtailment of freedom of speech. Levels of disagreement differed clearly from one province to another. In the Western Cape, 63% of the respondents disagreed with the statement whereas 24% agreed with it. (Only 9% of the Western Cape respondents “strongly agreed” in contrast to 30% that “strongly agreed” in a province such as the Eastern Cape, for example.) The Northern Cape registered the highest score (22%) for “Don’t know” with regard to this statement.<sup>4</sup> Respondents in the Eastern Cape (an ANC stronghold) registered 59% agreement and 32% disagreement with the statement. Other provinces that registered a higher than 50% agreement were KwaZulu-Natal (55%) (adjacent to the Eastern Cape) and North West (52%). The Northern Province scored the highest in the “Strongly agree” and “Agree” categories combined (63%).<sup>5</sup>

- *Citizens should have the right to form or join organisations freely, such as political parties, business associations, trade unions and other interest groups.* (Freedom of association)

This statement relates to freedom of association and elicited strong agreement in all the provinces. The Eastern Cape registered 90% agreement and the Western Cape 86%, followed

<sup>4</sup> The “Don’t know” category in respect of the statement dealing with freedom of speech has long-term political implications. The high “Don’t know” percentage for the Northern Cape, for instance, provides leeway to politicians favouring authoritarian approaches to convince the “Don’t know” citizenry into support for an authoritarian system. On the other hand, it allows space for anti-authoritarians to convince the same group of the advantages of a democratic system.

<sup>5</sup> Although it is not the intention to entertain a debate on repressive inclinations, high scores for this statement may indicate lack of political tolerance.

by Mpumalanga with 82%, Gauteng with 76% and the Northern Province with 75%. Somewhat lower were KwaZulu-Natal, the Northern Cape and the Free State, with figures declining from 72% to 65%. The national average for agreement on this statement was 82%. The lower than average figure for Gauteng (76%) is interesting. As the economic hub of South Africa its economic advantage could have been expected to translate into more agreement with freedom of association. Less than 10% of respondents in each province and in some cases as low as 4% disagreed with the statement.

- *The government should be allowed to ignore the constitution if a majority of citizens clearly support their action.*

Linked to government's public commitment to the constitution and the association between constitutionality and democracy, the responses to this statement are of great importance. The statement elicited more "No opinion" and "Don't know" responses than "Strongly agree" and "Agree" responses. Disagreement (inclusive of "Strongly disagree" and "Disagree") per province was as follows: Gauteng (43%), Western Cape (41%), Northern Cape (37%), Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga (35% each), Northern Province (34%), Free State and North West (31% each), and KwaZulu-Natal (24%). Agreement with government disregard for the constitution if the majority of citizens support such disregard (with agreement implying the priority of majority opinion over constitutionality) was the highest in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape (49% each) and the Northern Province (41%). However, they all scored below 50%. The rather high percentages in the "Don't know" and "No opinion" categories in the Northern Cape (35%) and the Free State (34%) are disconcerting because they point to potential space for political manipulation of the citizenry by non-democratic power holders.

- *Elected officials should bear ultimate responsibility for government decisions.* (Accountability)

This statement dealt with government accountability. The combined "Strongly agree" and "Agree" responses to this statement were as follows: Eastern Cape (82%), Western Cape (69%), Mpumalanga (68%), Free State (67%), Northern Province (63%), Gauteng (62%), KwaZulu-Natal (58%), Northern Cape (57%) and North West (51%). Disagreement with the statement was low throughout, with the Eastern Cape and the Free State registering the lowest figure (5% each). North West had the highest disagreement score (19%).

- *There should be at least two well-established parties for voters to choose from in elections.* (Multi-partyism)

This statement relates to multi-partyism or free political competition. The responses were well clustered around "Strongly agree" and "Agree" in all the provinces. The Western Cape (70%) registered the highest agreement, closely followed by the Northern Cape (69%) and the Free State (66%). Other provinces above the 50% mark were the Eastern Cape and Gauteng. The remaining four provinces (which constituted half of the national sample) registered between 40% and 50% (43% in KwaZulu-Natal, a previous IFP-dominated constituency; 47% in Mpumalanga; and 49% in both North West and the Northern Province, the latter being an ANC stronghold since 1994). Somewhat disconcerting were the percentages of respondents who selected the "No opinion" and "Don't know" options, because they imply that nearly one-third of the respondents in these three provinces did not make up their mind about multi-partyism or did not understand the concept. Three provinces

are particularly noticeable in this regard: KwaZulu-Natal (33%), North West (30%) and the Northern Cape (25%).

- *The government should control the flow of information to the public about issues of major national importance. (Censorship)*

This statement, which points to a specific form of censorship,<sup>6</sup> elicited “Strongly agree” and “Agree” responses from the majority of respondents. The national average for the combined agreement categories was 52% and for the combined disagreement categories 23%. The “No opinion” and “Don’t know” categories accounted for 25% of the respondents nationally. The provinces where respondents registered the highest agreement were the Northern Province (60%) and the Eastern Cape (59%) (both ANC strongholds) and North West (56%). The Western Cape (43%), previously an NNP stronghold, registered the strongest disagreement.

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<sup>6</sup> This statement dealt with “issues of major national importance” and not issues of morality, such as religion, hate speech and/or pornography. It thus points to the right of government to control the flow of information on “sensitive” national issues — usually seen as issues within the security realm.