

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

# How South Africans Engage with Politics: Civic Duty, Disillusionment, and the Decision to Vote 2026



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On behalf of the HSRC Developmental, Capable  
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“Findings from IEC Election Research Surveys Ahead of 2026 Local Government Elections”  
Southern Sun Hotel, Rosebank, Johannesburg, 24 March 2026





# Voter Participation Survey

## Purpose of the series



### Objective

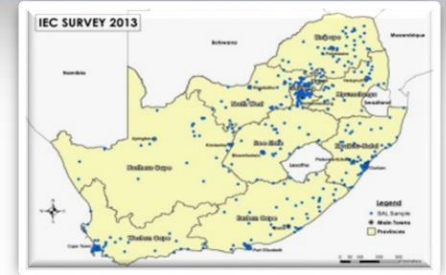
To provide information on the views and behavioural preferences of adult South Africans in order to (i) better participation in elections and (ii) inform the IEC in its management to encourage participation

### Primary aims

- **Assess civic engagement trends:** Track interest in local government elections, sense of civic duty (with provincial breakdowns), and self-reported election participation over time.
- **Evaluate public trust and efficacy:** Measure perceptions of political parties betraying voters, responses to political disappointment, and levels of internal and external political efficacy.
- **Analyze alternative political actions:** Examine political participation among young people, protesting as an alternative to voting, and public attitudes toward election violence.
- **Examine registration and voting intention:** Assess voter registration trends, ease of registration, voting intention in a hypothetical election (with provincial differences), and analytical predictors of voting behavior.
- **Identify drivers of participation:** Determine what factors would encourage citizens to vote and whether citizens believe local government elections matter.

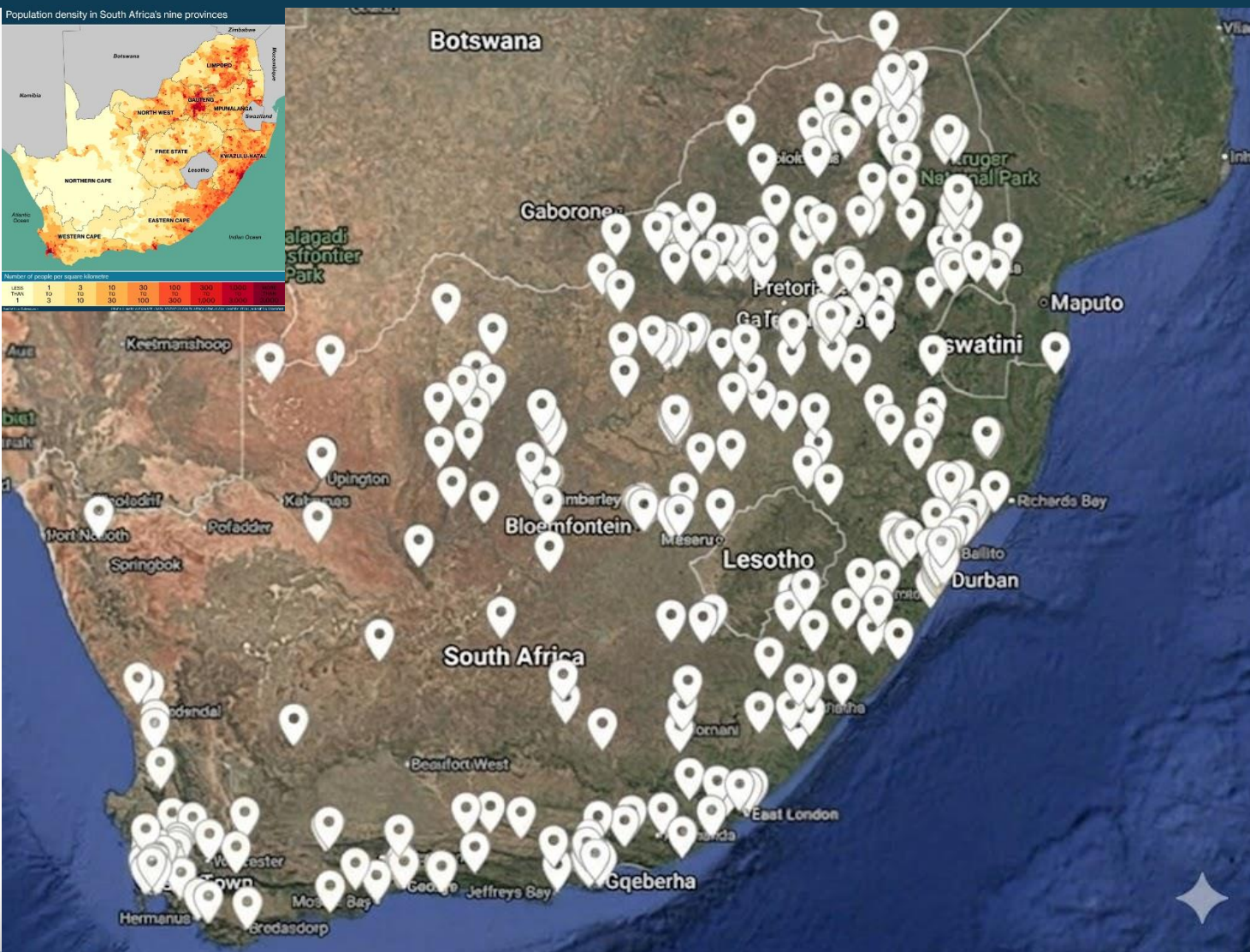
# VPS Methodology

- Survey was conducted by the **Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)**
- **Nationally representative** of citizens aged 16 years and older in private households across the 9 provinces
- **500 Small Area Layers (SALs)** were selected using StatsSA Census geography as a sampling framework
- **3,500** addresses issued
- Collected by **face-to-face interview using hand-held devices**
- Data collection timed to produce results 6 months ahead of election
- VPS 2025/26 data collection: **October 2025 – February 2026.**
- Data **weighted** to StatsSA's **mid-year population** estimates (those aged 16+ years)



# VPS Sample Mirrors the National Population Distribution

IEC VPS 2025/26 sampled Small Area Layers (SALs)



- 382 SALs were urban → **69% of adults interviewed** were urban residents
- 86 SALs were traditional authority areas → **28% of adults interviewed** were residents from these areas
- 32 SALs were commercial farms → **3% of adults interviewed** residents from rural, commercial farms

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# Attitudes towards Voting in Elections

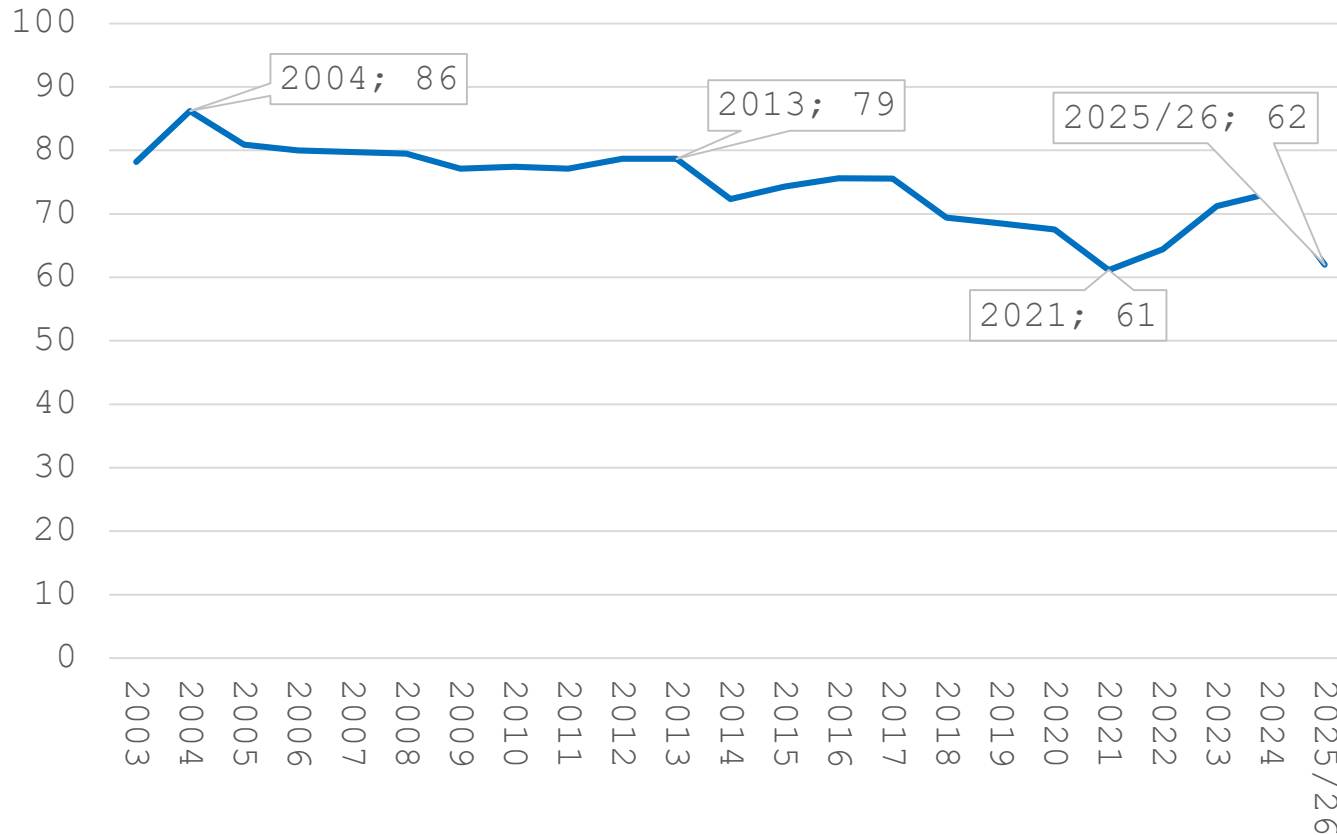
# MYTH!

**MY VOTE DOESN'T MATTER IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**



# Sense of Responsibility: Civic Duty (2003-2025)

Percentage of adults that agree with the statement: “It is the duty of all citizens to vote” (%)



Between 2004-2025, declines in a sense of duty was found to be highest in **Gauteng, Limpopo and the Eastern Cape.**



Of the nine provinces, a sense of a duty was weakest in Gauteng; **20 percentage points** below adults outside Gauteng.



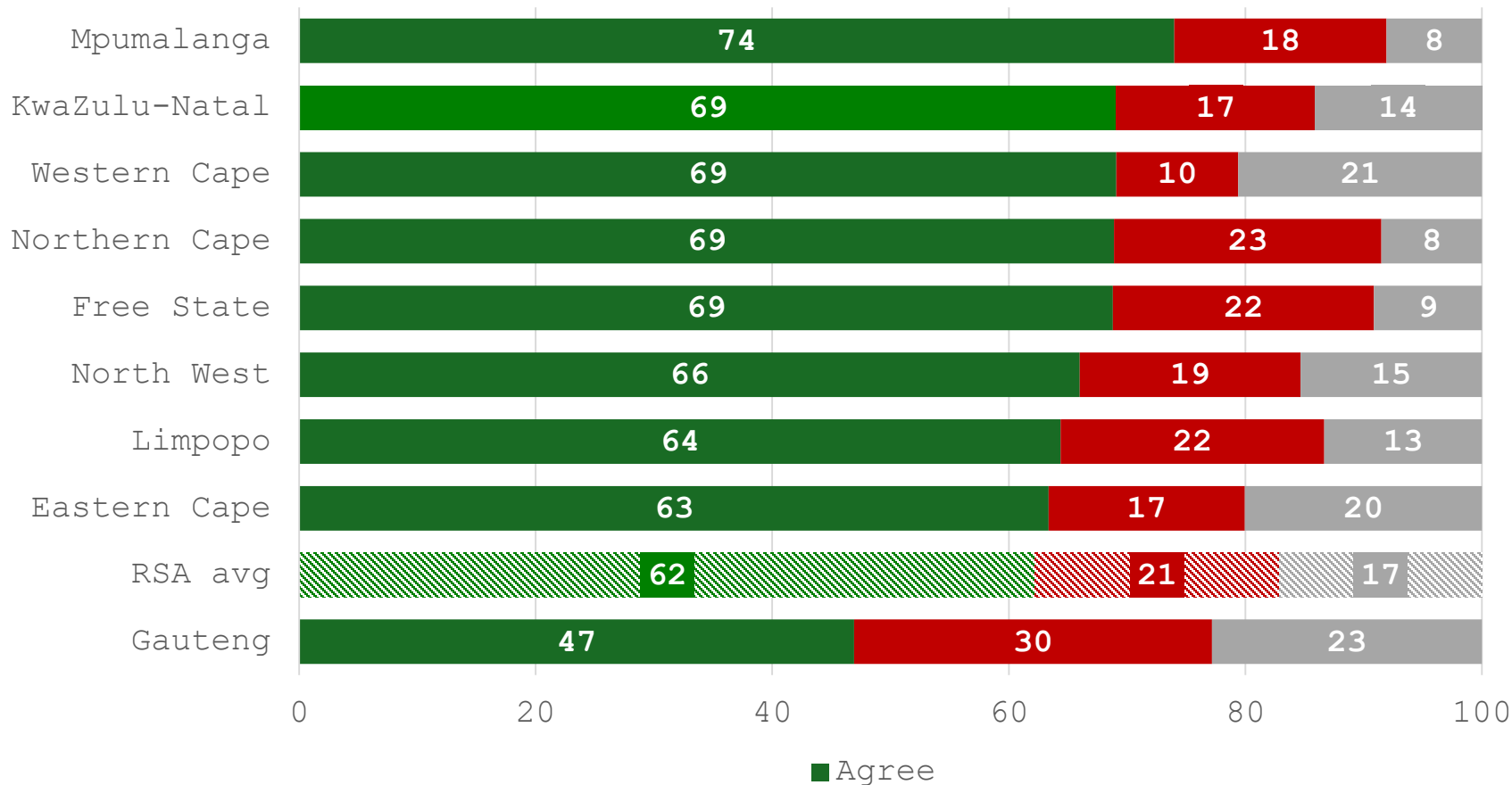
Those who don't vote have a low sense of duty; **24 percentage points** below regular voters.

# Civic duty to vote, by province (% , 2025)



Do you agree or disagree that: “It is the duty of all citizens to vote”

Duty to vote, by province, 2025/26 (%)

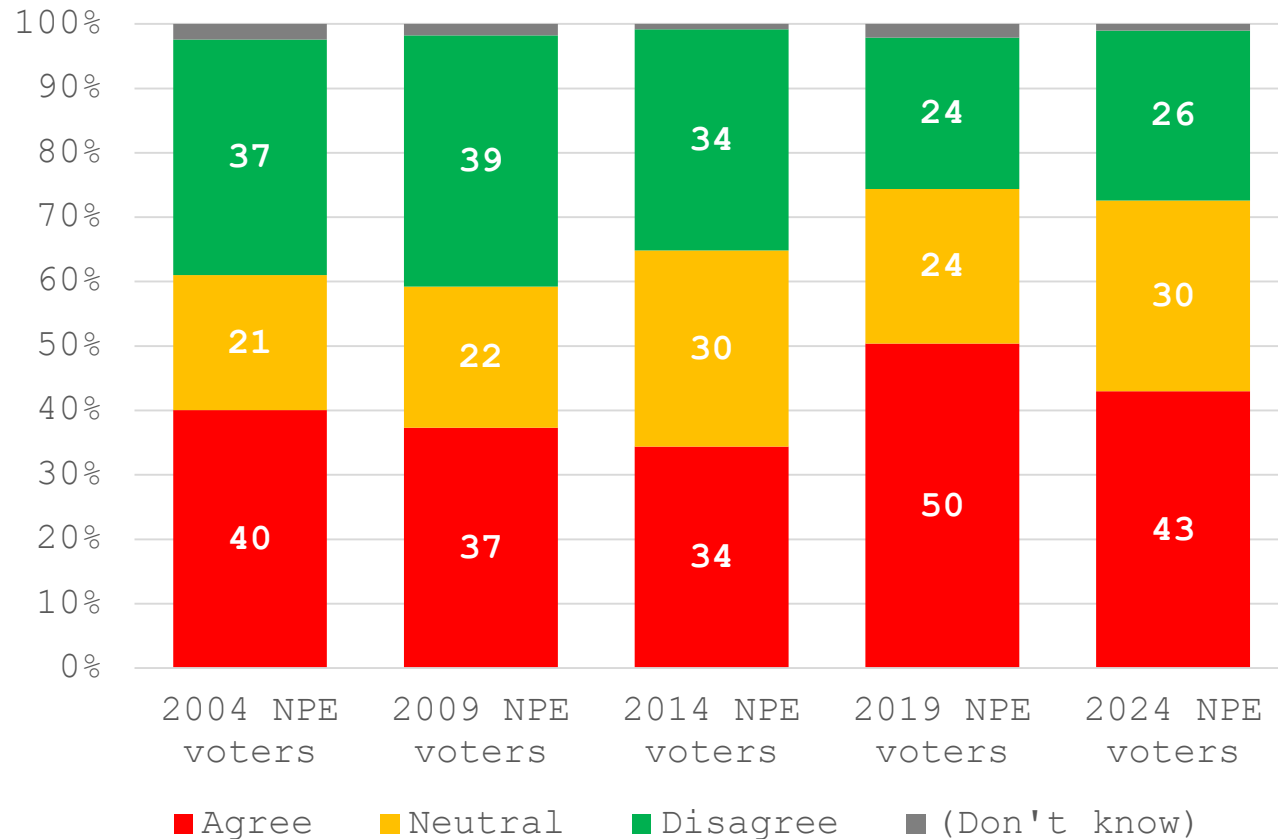


- Agreement **highest** in Mpumalanga; **12 percentage points** higher than national average.
- **Lower agreement in Gauteng (47%)** with highest levels of disagreement, suggesting weaker civic duty norms in the province.
- Agreement in **Gauteng has fell from 61% in 2021**; 14 percentage point decline.

# Feeling that political parties let voters down (2004-2025)



*VOTERS: Do you agree or disagree that the party that I voted for did not protect my interests?*



Of the nine provinces, agreement was found to be highest in **Free State** and the **Eastern Cape** in the 2024 NPE.



**Regular voters** were more likely to agree with the statement in the 2024 NPE than irregular voters.

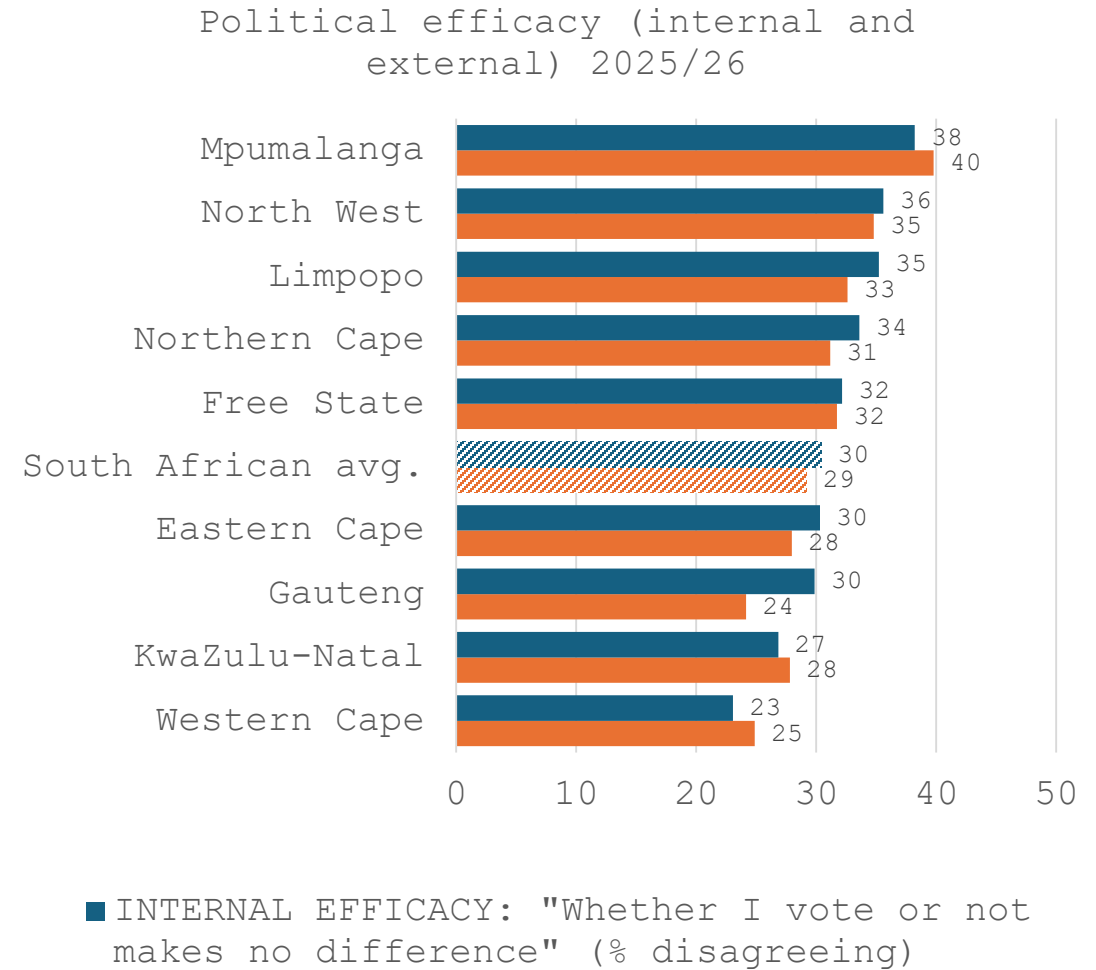
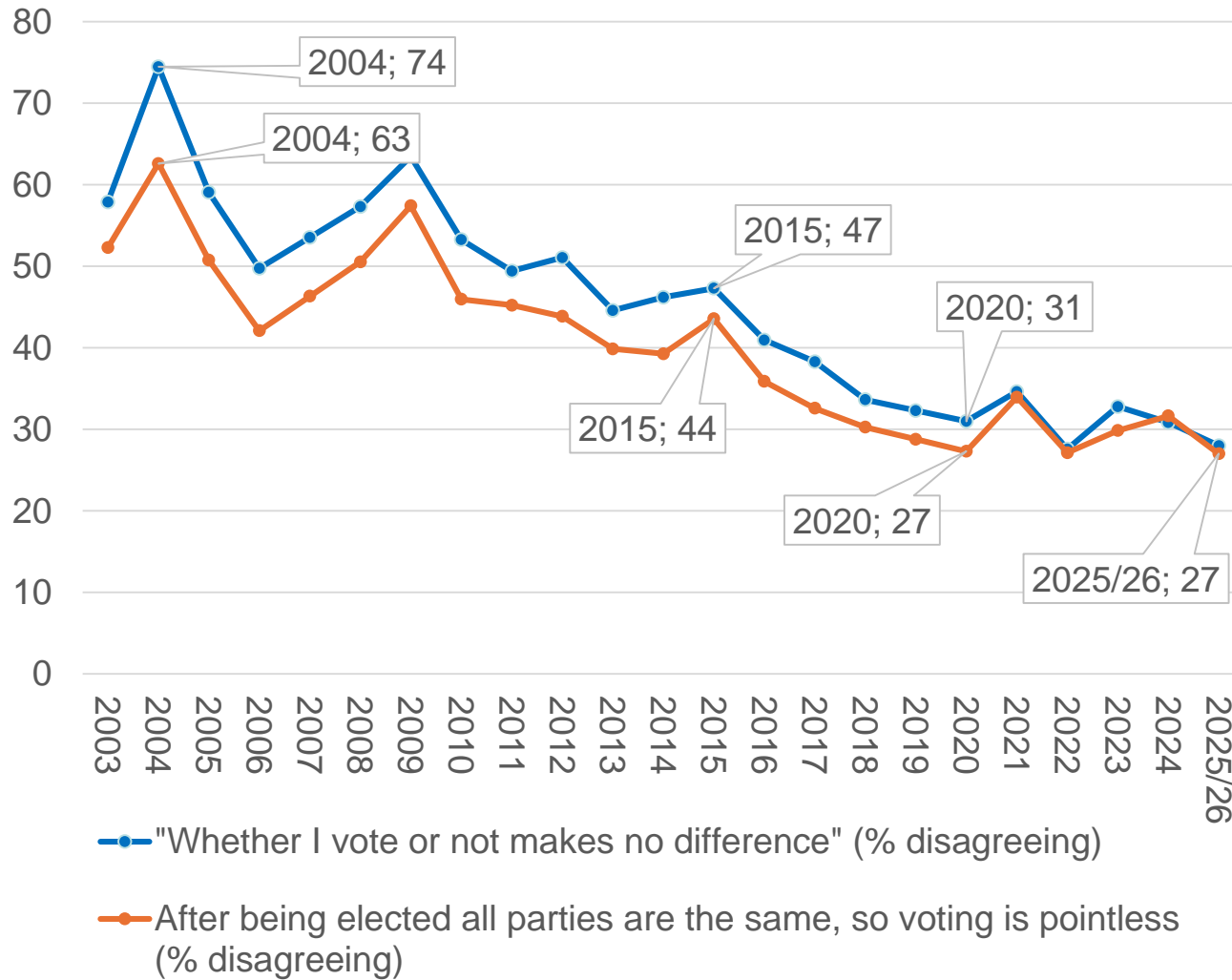


Voters unhappy with the **status quo** tend to be more likely to agree with the statement in the 2024 NPE.



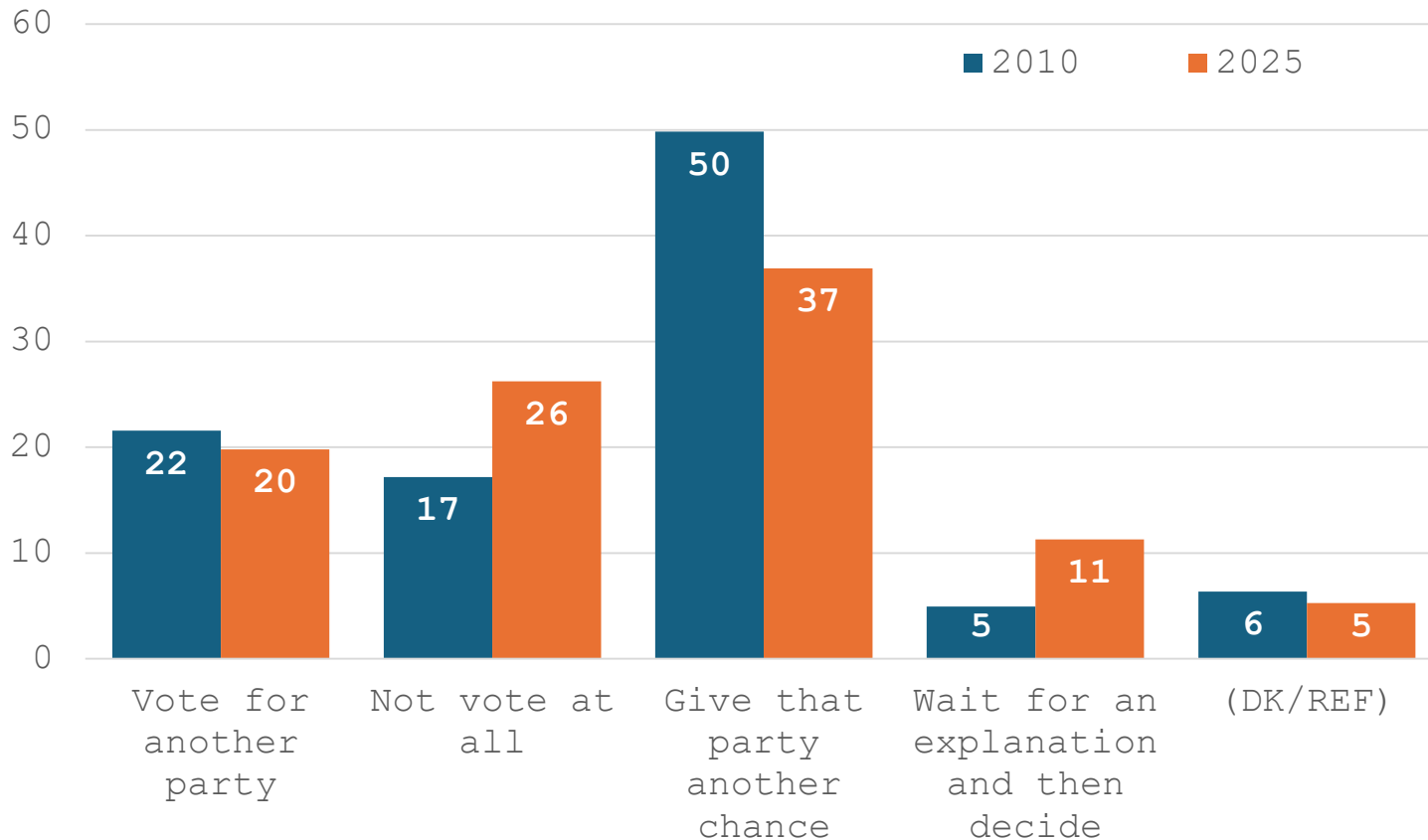
# Internal and External Political Efficacy

Do you agree or disagree that: "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements"



# How the Public Responses to Political Disappointment (2010/2025)

*If the party you voted for did not meet your expectations, the next time there is an election would you....?*



Gauteng residents are the **most likely** to state they would **abstain** if they felt disappointed in their party in VPS 2025.



Regular voters were **more likely** than irregular voters to **remain loyal** if they were disappointed by their party in VPS 2025.



Adults not interested in politics tend to be **less loyal** and **more likely to abstain** in VPS 2025.

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# Interest in Elections and Voting

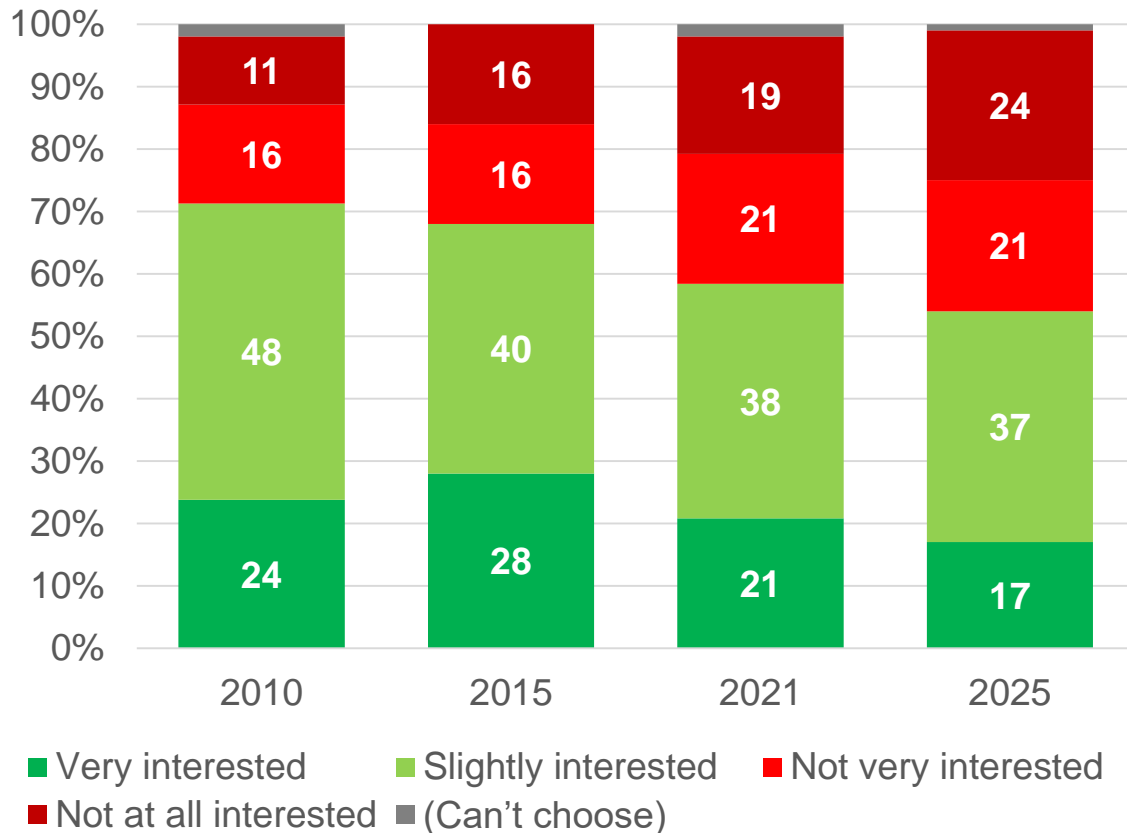
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# Interest in Local Government Elections in South Africa (2010 - 2025/26)

*In general, how interested are you in South African local government elections?*



Regular voters did not display a significantly higher level of **interest in politics** than irregular voters or non-voters in VPS 2025.



32% of adults reported either **often or sometimes discussing politics** when getting together with friends, relatives and/or fellow workers in VPS 2025.

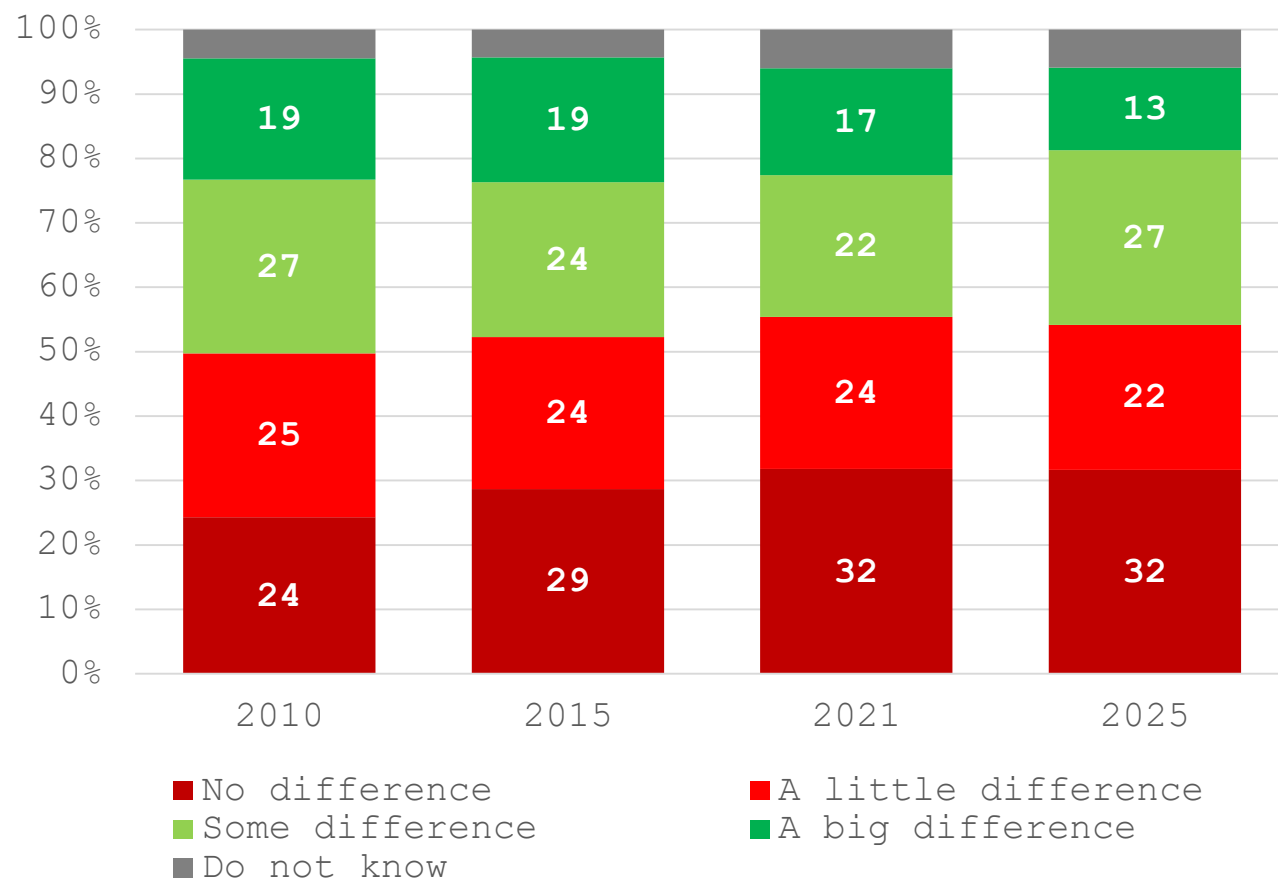


People unhappy with the status quo are **less likely to discuss** politics with others and **less interested** in politics.

# Do Local Government Elections Matter? (2010-2025)



*How much of a difference do you think it makes which political party wins the local government elections in this area?*



Of the nine provinces, **KwaZulu-Natal residents** are the most likely to think it matters who wins the **local government election** in their area in VPS 2025.



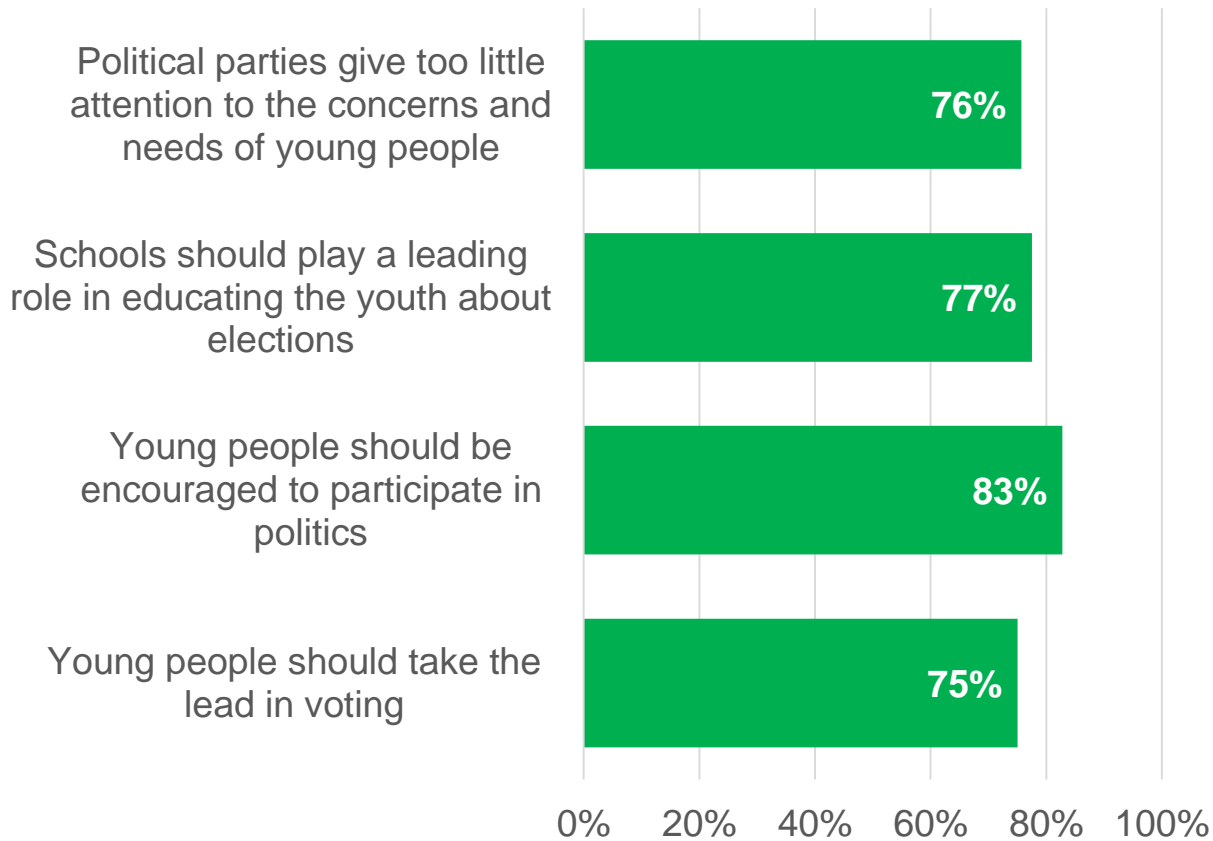
Regular voters are **more likely** than irregular voters and non-voters to think that it makes a **big difference** who wins the **local government election** in their area.



People unhappy with the **status quo** tend to think it makes little difference who wins the **local government election** in their area.

# Political Participation Amongst Young People (2025)

Percentage of 16-24 year-old adults who agreed with the following..



Young South Africans (16-24 years) were also **divided on whether young people are interested in elections**; 40% agreed that young people were interested in elections.



75% of youth said that they were **not very or not all** interested in politics and 77% **rarely or never discussed politics**.



67% of youth stated that the voting **procedures or processes take into consideration** the needs of young people.

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# Taking Part in Politics

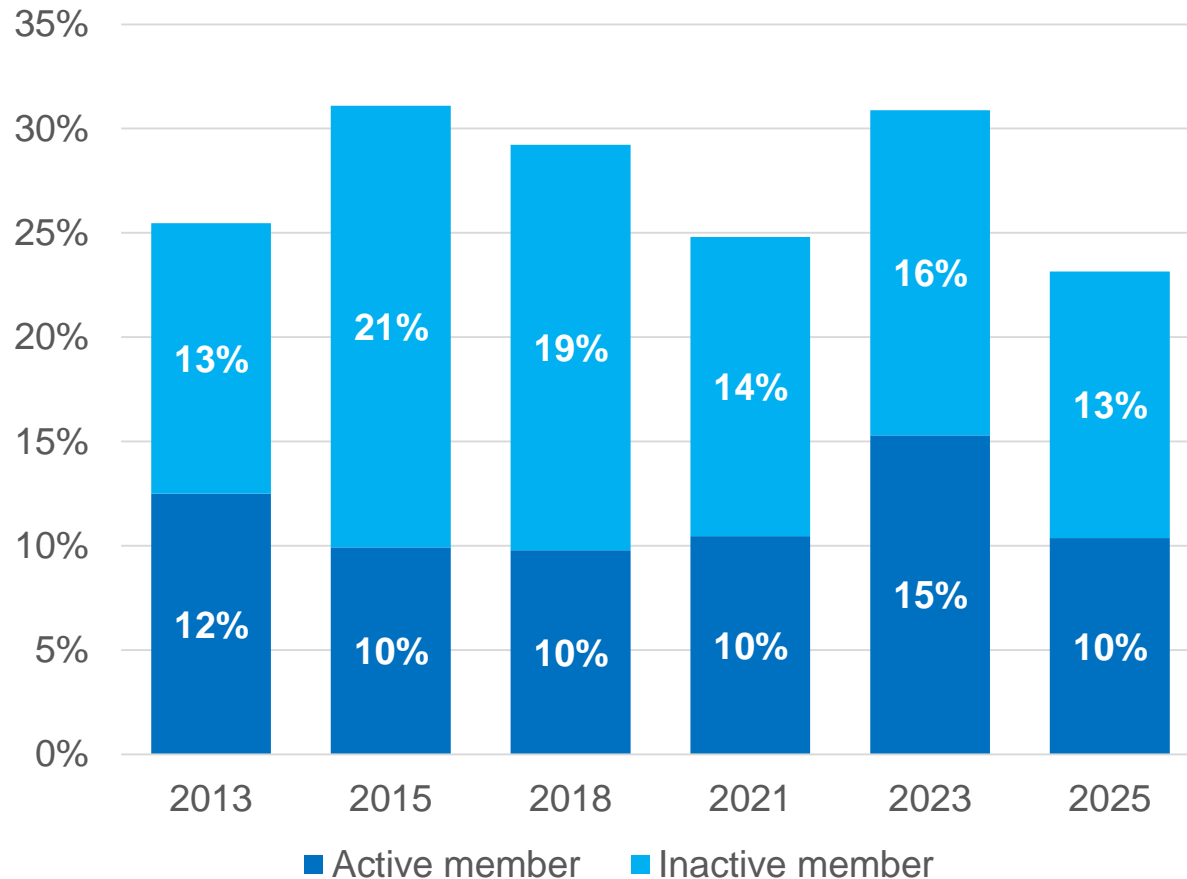
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# Public Participation in Political Party Organisations (2013-2025)

Are you an active or inactive member of a political party?



Regular voters are **more likely to be** political party members.



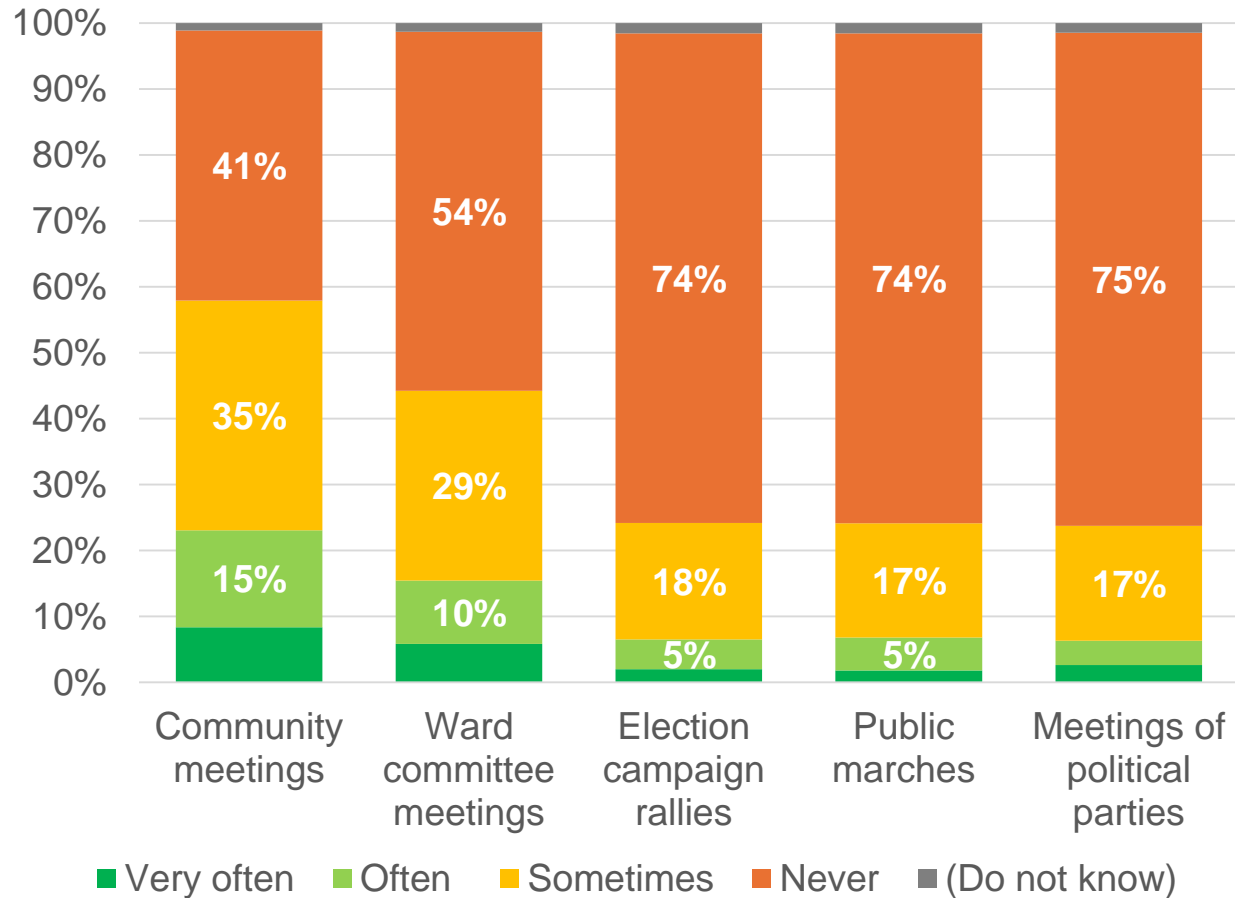
61% of adult citizens said that they have **not attend** a political meeting and would **never do so**.



Disinterest in organised political gatherings was found to be highest in **KwaZulu-Natal, Free State and Northern Cape**.

# Public Participation in Collective Gatherings (2025)

How often, if ever, do you attend any of the following?



Regular voters are **more likely to attend** community meetings and ward committee meetings.



A small minority (7%) have **donated money or raised funds** for a social or political activity.

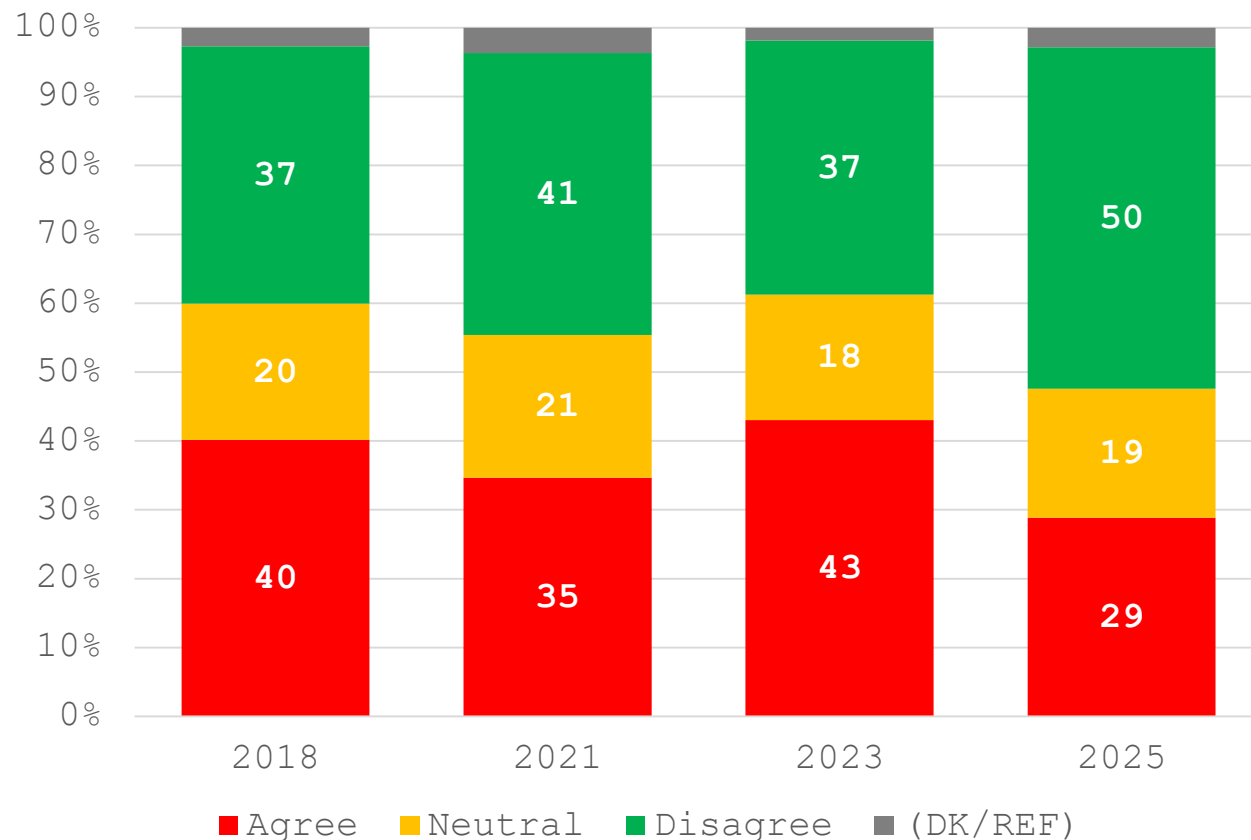


24% of adult citizens **often or sometimes** contact their ward councilors.

# Protesting as an Alternative to Electoral Participation (2018-2025)



Do you agree or disagree that "protesting in the street is more effective than voting?"



Regular voters are **more likely to disagree** with the statement than irregular voters or non-voters.



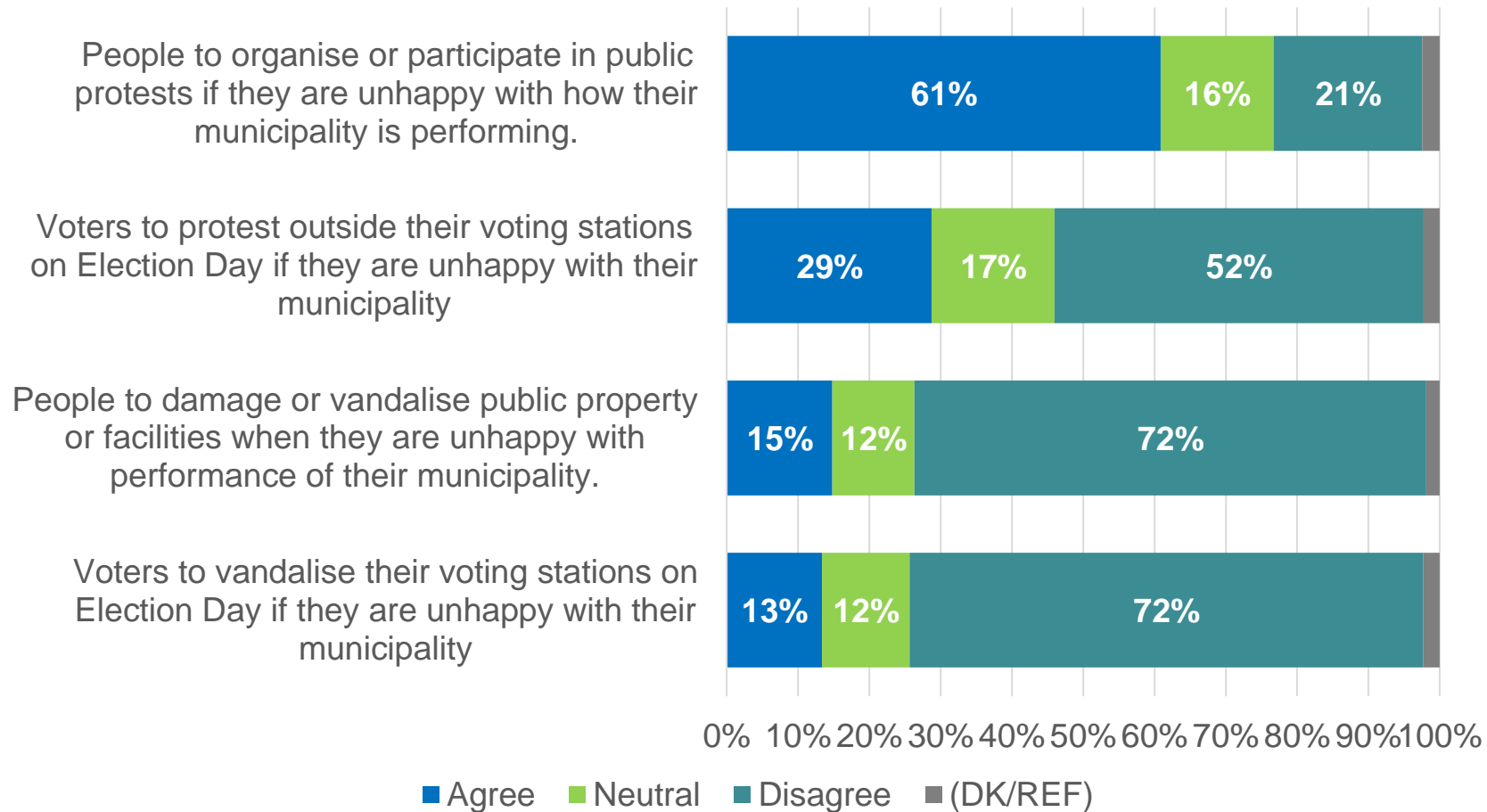
Largest declines in agreement with the statement were seen in **KwaZulu-Natal, Northern Cape** and **Western Cape**.



Agreement with the statement is highest amongst **Gauteng** residents in VPS 2025; **11 percentage points greater** than residents outside Gauteng.

# Public Attitudes towards the Acceptability of Election Violence (2025)

Do you agree or disagree that it is acceptable for...



Perceived **acceptability of electoral violence** was found to be **highest** amongst Gauteng residents.



People who are **dissatisfied with life** tend to be view **electoral violence** as acceptable.

04

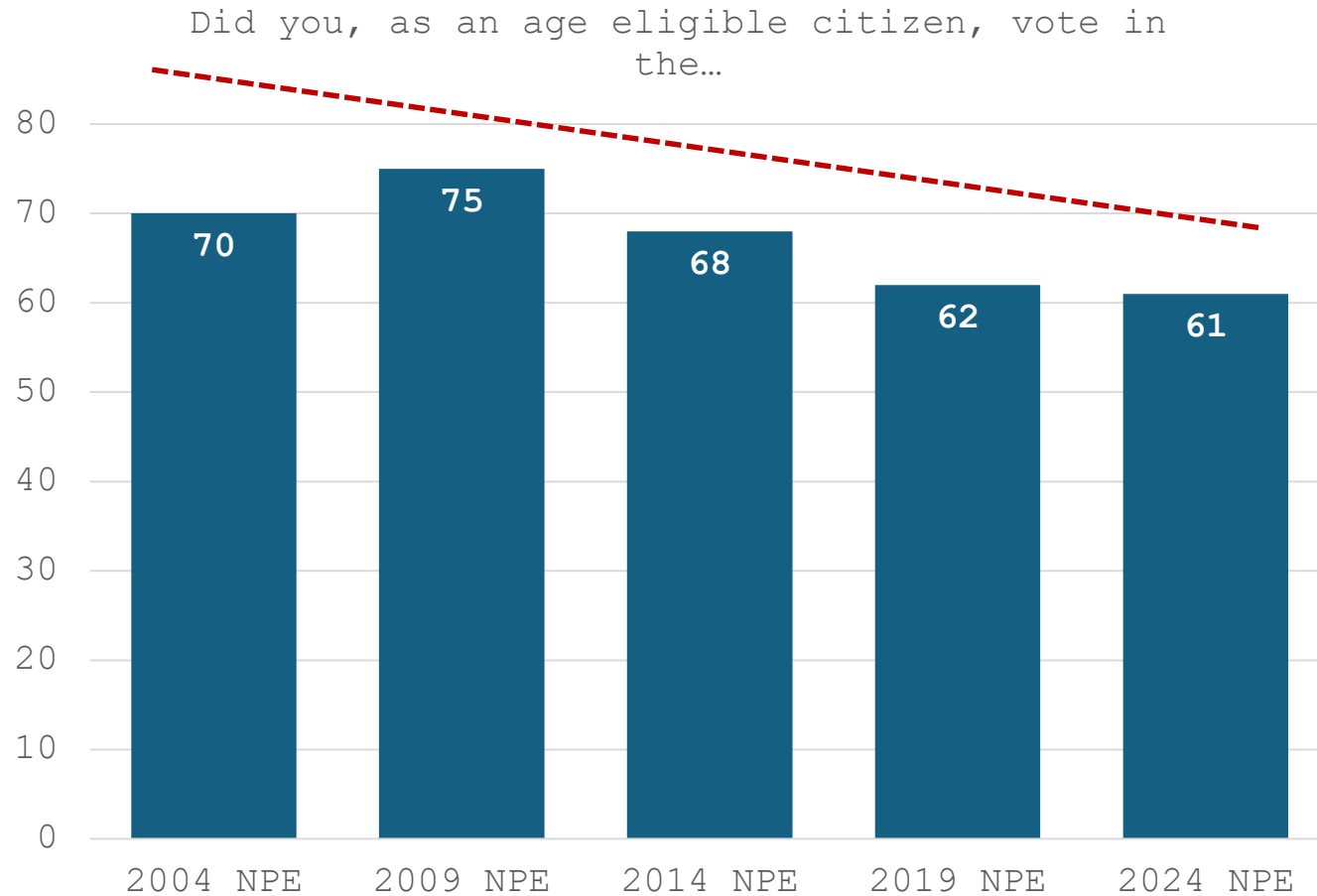
# Electoral Participation

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# Self-Reported Election Participation (2004-2025)



About two-thirds (64%) of those who did not vote in 2024 NPE had never voted in an election before.



Roughly half of those who did not vote in 2024 NPE said that lack of interest or disillusionment in politics and political parties was the main reason.

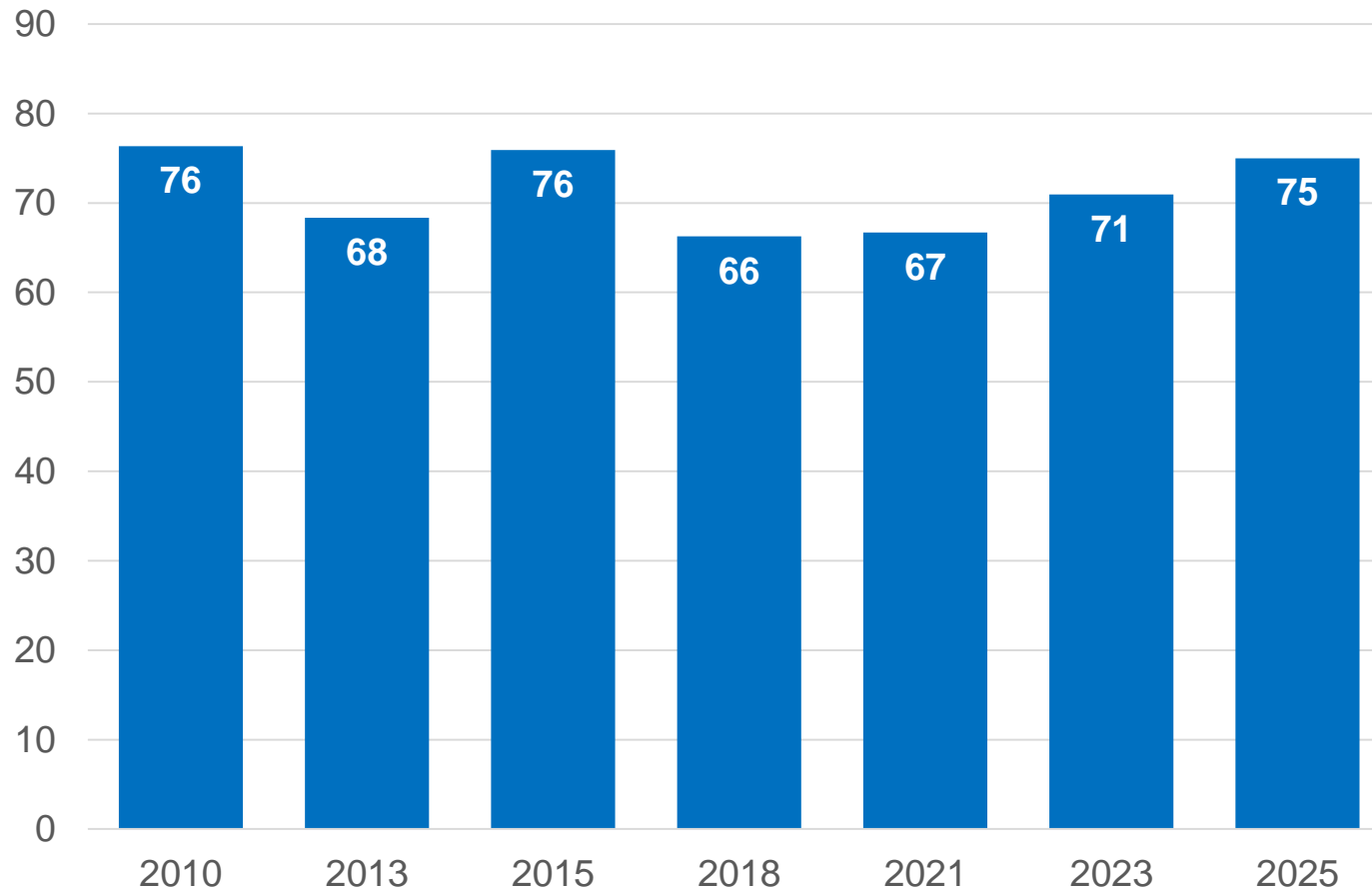


Almost a tenth of those who did not vote in 2024 NPE said that administrative issues were a barrier to their participation.

# Self-Reported Registration Amongst Public (2010-2025)



*% who claimed to be registered voters*



## Planned registration and reasons provided by those not intending to register



About a third (35%) of the unregistered said that they **intended to register soon.**



67% of those who don't want to register said that the main reason was a **lack of interest** in politics



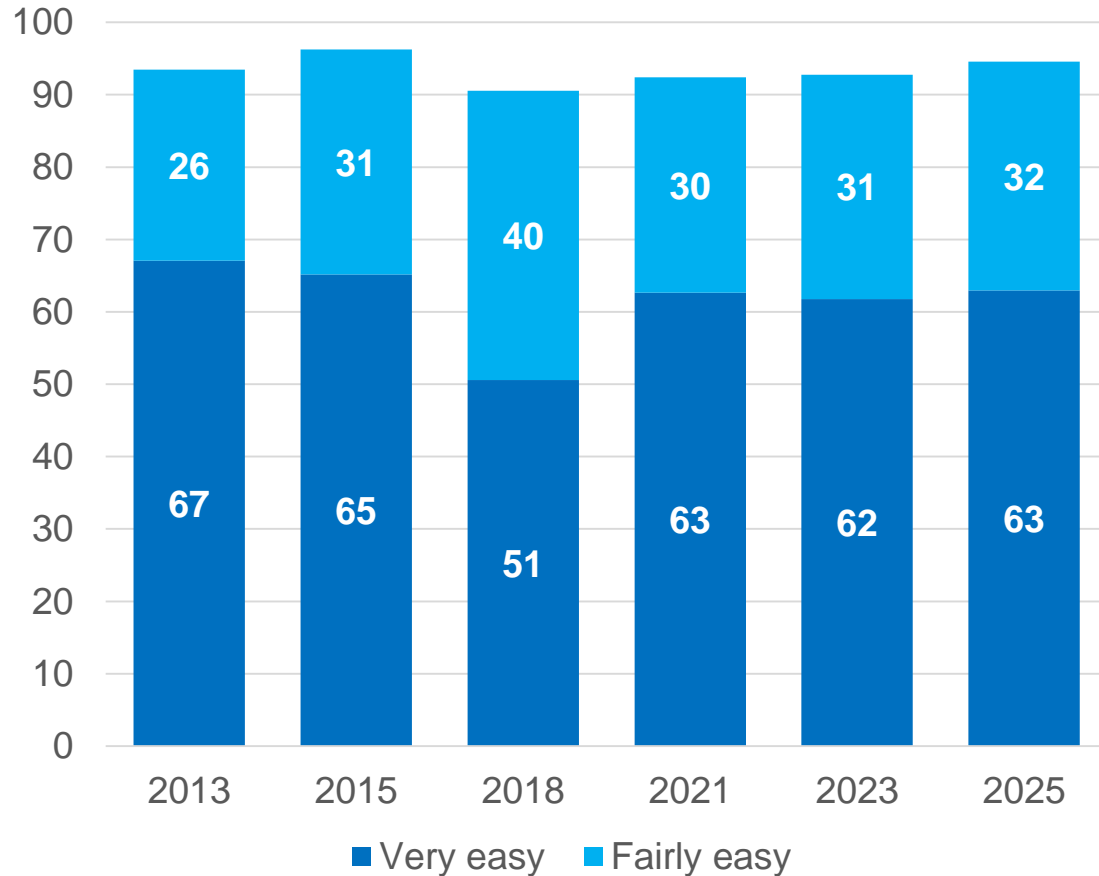
A tenth of those who don't want to register gave **administrative issues** as the main reason.



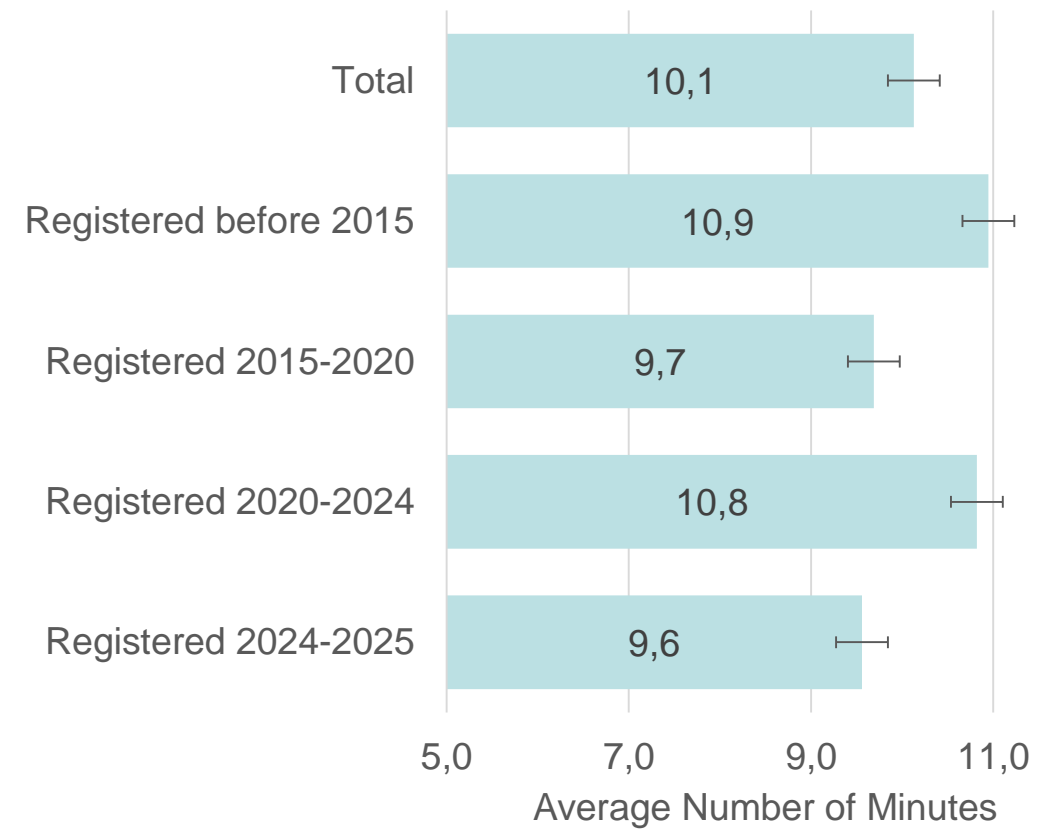
# Self-Reported Ease of Registering to Vote (2013-2025)



“How easy or difficult did you find it to register as a voter?” (%)



How long did it take you to register? 2025/2026  
(Average number of minutes)



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Intention to  
Vote

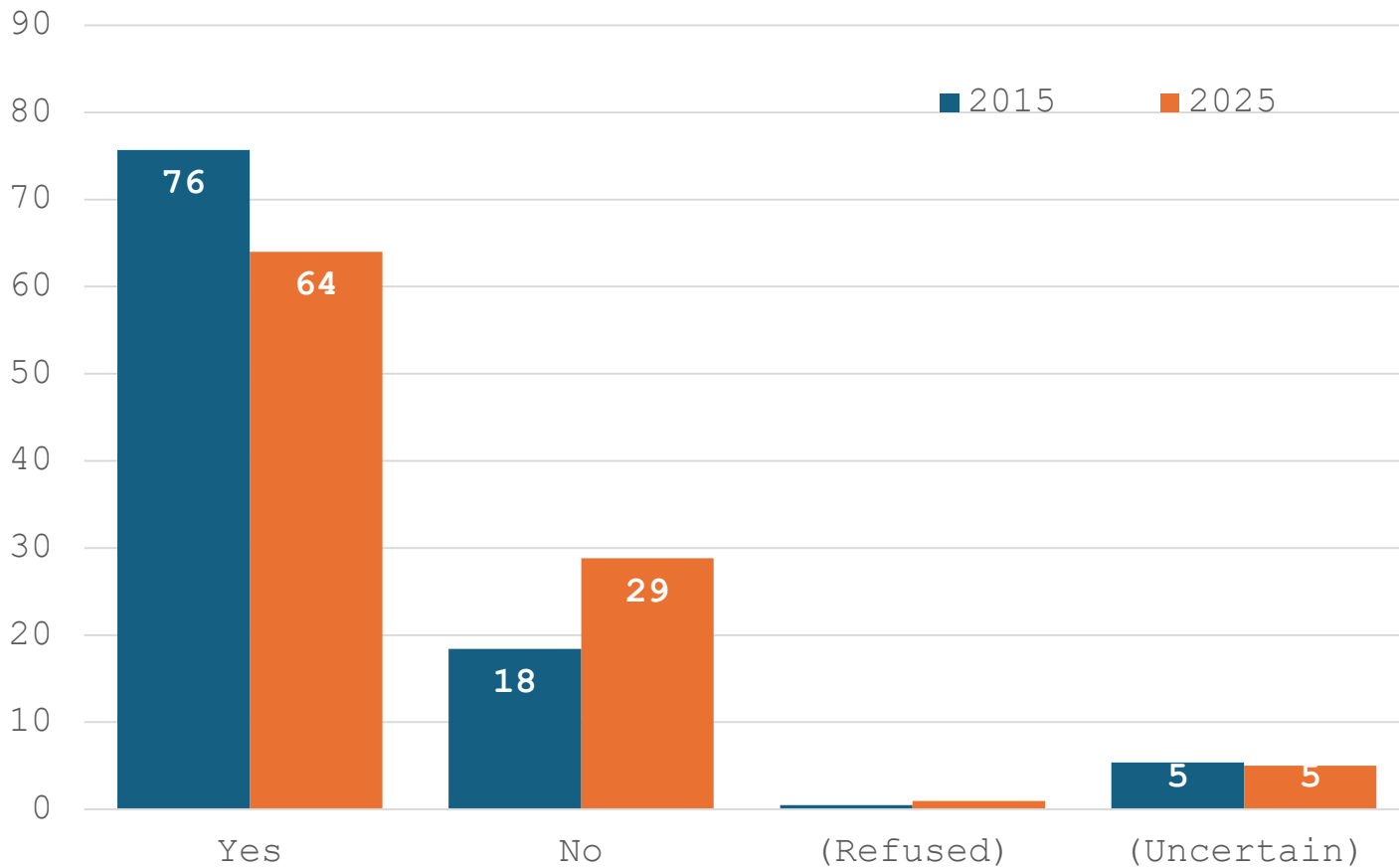
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# Voting Intention (2015 and 2025)

*If local government elections were to be held tomorrow, would you vote?*



## MAIN REASON for may not vote if local government elections were to be held tomorrow



81% of those who did not intend to vote said that the main reason was **political disinterest** and **disillusionment**.



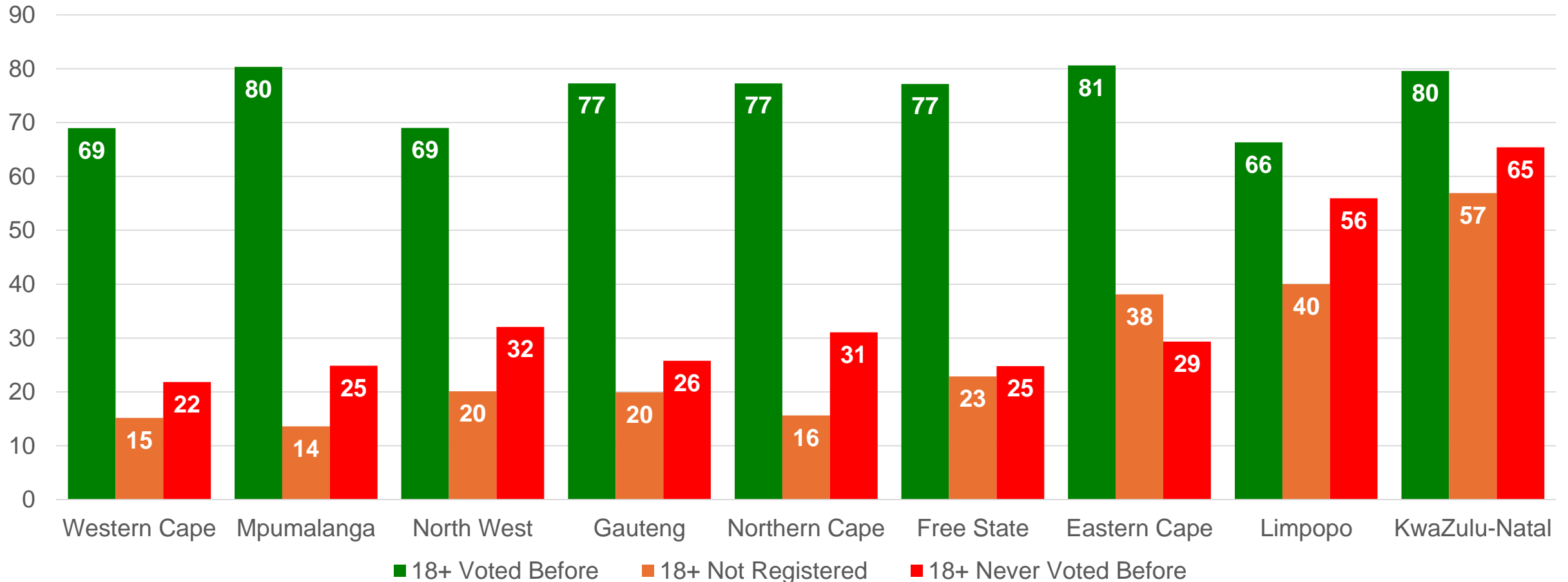
4% of those who did not intend to vote said that the main reason was **election management**.



7% of those who did not intend to vote said that **voter registration** was the main reason.

# Intention to Vote, by Province (2025)

*If local government elections were to be held tomorrow, would you vote?*



# Predictors of Voting Intention



**Age** is an important predictor of intention; older people are more willing to vote.



A **belief in the duty to vote**; persons with a sense of duty are more likely they are to vote.



**Registration** is a key correlate; persons are more likely to vote if they are registered.



A **belief in the efficacy of voting**; the more effective voting is seen, the more likely they are to vote.



Having **voted before** is important; if a person has voted regularly, they are likely to vote in the future.

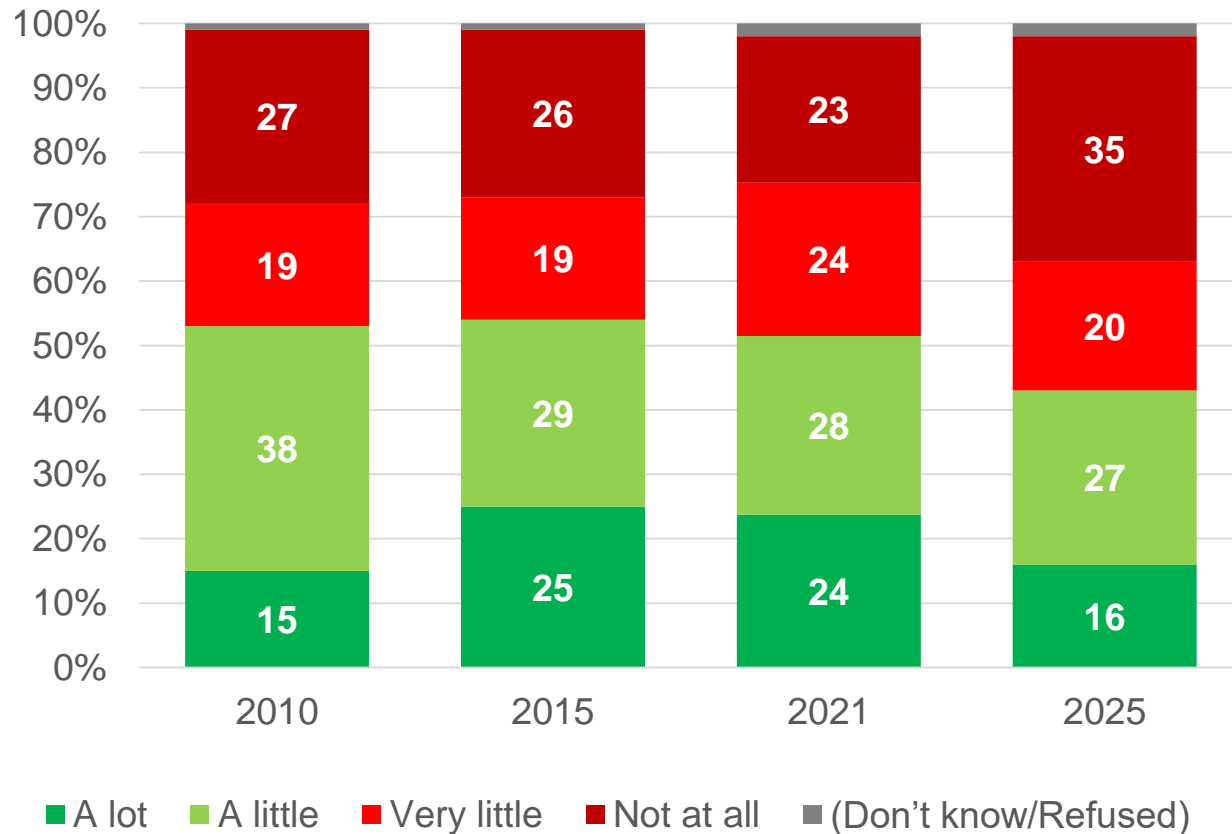


A **belief in democratic principles**; the more pro-democratic a person is, the more likely they are to vote.

# Interest in the Local Government Elections (2010-2025)



How much have you thought about the upcoming Local Government Elections?



Between 2010-2025 the **largest declines** in interest in local government elections were in the **Free State** and **KwaZulu-Natal**.



Regular voters have **thought a lot more about the upcoming elections** than irregular voters or non-voters.



People unhappy with the status quo are **less likely to have thought** about the upcoming elections..

# What Would Encourage Citizens to Vote? (coded open-ended data) (2025)



**19%** of those who did not tend to vote said that **improvements in the economic situation** would encourage them.



**8%** of those who did not tend to vote said that **societal change** and **renewed hope** would encourage them.



**14%** of those who did not tend to vote said that **greater accountability** among politicians would encourage them.



**7%** of those who did not tend to vote said that **better political candidates and politics** would encourage them.



**14%** of those who did not tend to vote said that the **service delivery improvements** would encourage them.



**54%** of those who did not tend to vote said that **nothing would encourage them**.

# COUNTDOWN TO THE 2026/27 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

## Takeaway messages for LGE 2026 planning





# CONCLUSIONS

## How Can We Increase Participation?



- **Data suggest that voter turnout will be low** unless interventions are implemented to address public concerns.
- **Strengthen civic duty messaging** particularly in Gauteng, where agreement with civic duty has declined significantly and remains below the national average.
- **Enhance political efficacy** by strengthening citizens' belief that their vote matters and that government responds to their concerns.
- **Increase focus on local government election relevance** by communicating how local elections directly impact community services and daily life.
- **Engage disaffected citizens directly** with targeted outreach that acknowledges their frustrations while highlighting the value of participation.
- **Address political disillusionment** by tackling perceptions that political parties betray voters and by rebuilding trust in the political system.



# CONCLUSIONS

## What Interventions Would be Most Effective?



- **Recognize that the 2026 Local Government Elections** will be highly contested and this will present potential challenges for voter education campaigns.
- **Apparent recognition that protests** are poor alternative to electoral participation; offers important opportunities.
- **Engage protest-prone communities**, particularly in Gauteng, through targeted outreach that acknowledges grievances while promoting electoral participation.
- **Use community-based platforms** such as ward committees, local events, and neighborhood networks to generate interest in municipal elections.
- **Target youth engagement strategies** to address lower political participation among young people and encourage early civic involvement.
- **Tailor interventions by province** given significant provincial variations in civic duty, voting intention, and registration trends.



# thank you

English  
 Afrikaans  
 Ndebele  
 Xhosa  
 Zulu  
 Sepedi  
 Sesotho  
 Setswana  
 Xitsonga  
 SiSwati  
 Tshivenda  
 Nama  
 SA sign language

Thank you  
 Dankie  
 Ngiyathokoza  
 Enkosi  
 Ngiyabonga  
 Ke a leboga  
 Ke a leboha  
 Ke a leboga  
 Ndzi khense ngopfu  
 Ngiyabonga  
 Ndi a livhuwa  
 Ganyane



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