



Exclusive: information embargoed until Thursday December 6th, 2012, 9h00am

YOUTH FOLLOW POLITICS, SHUN PARTIES

Young South Africans want to participate in politics, but on their own terms. With two-thirds of the population under 35 years, parties should take note that conventional politicking doesn't guarantee votes from the 'Facebook generation'.

This is the finding of the latest round of the SA Reconciliation Barometer (SARB) survey, conducted annually by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) since 2003.

With the ANC's national conference in Mangaung just days away, much more than leadership and policy is at stake. In the run-up to the 2014 general elections, party leadership will have to consider how to appeal to a generation of 'born frees', who may be beyond the range of traditional recruiting strategies.

The results of the SARB show that young South Africans have different ideas about political engagement, than older generations who lived through the democratic transition. 'We have grown up in a digital age,' explained a student at a recent IJR event in the Eastern Cape, 'we don't read a lot, we Google and we Facebook a lot, and watch TV.'

Barometer results this year show that 40% of black under-35's have little or no confidence in political parties, and the same is true of more than two-thirds of young people of other races. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of young South Africans say that they would consider supporting a political party different to the one preferred by most of their friends and family. The same student commented, 'what's this trend about voting and regurgitating my vote with the same vote for the same party, there is a new trend now.'

Young and older South Africans alike (49% overall) also doubt that national leaders are concerned with the views of ordinary people. Large numbers (44%) believe they have witnessed corruption in their own communities, and more than one in three believe government is not doing enough to combat it.

Some young South Africans, however, are more optimistic than adults that they can make a difference, and get disinterested government officials to listen to their views.

The survey also raises some disconcerting findings about political activity in this demographic. Thirty-five percent (35%) of youth think it's better to ignore the law and solve problems immediately, and a quarter (24%) that it is not necessary to follow the laws of a government they didn't vote for.

For some, mistrust of political parties and leaders, the desire to effect change and the view that the law can be bent or broken, may bring about consequences for the country: one in five under-35's say they have been part of a violent or destructive protest in the past year.

Without addressing the complex challenges young South Africans face – access to quality education, finding jobs, and ensuring their views are heard – they may increasingly turn to unconventional and unexpected channels to express their frustration.

The SA Reconciliation Barometer is a nationally-representative public opinion poll conducted annually across the country. More information is available at www.reconciliationbarometer.org or www.ijr.org.za. You can follow the Reconciliation Barometer on Twitter at @SABarometer.

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