APRIL
2026

IRR
Live free. Prosper.

IRR POLLING 2026:

RACE AND RACE RELATIONS IN SOUTH AFRICA

HERMANN PRETORIUS

Table of Contents

April 2026
Published by the South African Institute of Race Relations

222 Smit Street (Virtual office),
Braamfontein Johannesburg, 2000, South Africa
PO Box 291722, Melville, Johannesburg, 2109, South Africa
Telephone: (011) 482–7221

Author: **Hermann Pretorius**

Editor: **John Endres**

Typesetting: **Mbali Mayisela**

Cover design: **Bonginkosi Tekane**

Executive summary

Polling by the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR), conducted in March 2026, shows that while racism remains part of many South Africans' lived experience, the electorate's deeper instincts remain markedly more non-racial, cooperative, and upliftment-focused than much political rhetoric suggests. Across the core race-relations questions, South Africans consistently lean towards coexistence over conflict, opportunity over permanent racial management, and performance over excuse-making.

Key findings

1. **Most South Africans reject continued race-based allocation by the state.** 70% say government should not continue using apartheid-era race categories to decide who qualifies for business and job opportunities, while 27% say it should. This includes 64% of black respondents, 85% of coloured respondents, 74% of Indians, and 97% of whites.
2. **The public remains strongly committed to interracial cooperation.** 89% agree that the different races need each other for progress and that there should be full opportunity for people of all colours, up from 84% in 2025.
3. **Economic upliftment is seen as the route beyond racial inequality.** 76% agree that better education and more jobs will steadily reduce inequality between the races, up from 73% in 2025. Agreement stands at 75% among black respondents, 76% among coloured respondents, 80% among Indians, and 87% among whites.
4. **Perceptions of social expectations about the presidency are more racial than personal preferences.** 47% think most other South Africans believe the President must be black, but only 34% themselves say they would only or preferably support a black President. Fully 66% say they would support the best person regardless of race.
5. **Racism remains real, but it is not most heavily reported by the poorest.** Overall, 44% report personal experience of racism, down from 48% in 2025. Yet only 30% of households under R2,000 report it, compared with 54% of those earning R20,000 or more.
6. **Racial grievance clusters around grievance-oriented parties.** Reported personal experience of racism stands at 64% among FF+ voters, 63% among MK voters, 56% among PA voters, and 50% among EFF voters. This points to a mutually reinforcing relationship between grievance-sensitive voters and grievance-based party rhetoric.
7. **South Africans reject extreme racial-threat narratives.** Trump's "white genocide" claim is rejected by 72% and accepted by only 19%. Even among whites, 50% disagree and 37% agree.
8. **The public remains deeply sceptical of elite race rhetoric.** 70% agree that politicians use racism and colonialism to excuse their failures, including 67% of black respondents, 73% of ANC supporters, and 71% of DA supporters.

Introduction

This report is the first instalment in the IRR's 2026 opinion-survey research on South Africa's political and social condition. The IRR's 2025 report on race and race relations showed that South Africans were far less racially polarised in their priorities and values than political rhetoric implied, the 2026 data make it possible to test whether that pattern has persisted, deepened, or weakened.

The central purpose of this report is to examine race as a social, political, and policy factor in South Africa today. It does so through a focused battery of core questions on the use of race in policy, the race of the President, lived experience of racism, beliefs about progress through jobs and education, the perceived need for interracial cooperation, and the extent to which racial rhetoric is seen as political excuse-making. These questions are then contextualised by the wider survey, particularly where those wider findings help explain what the race-relations questions likely mean in practice.

Where the numbers presented visually in this report fail to add up to 100, it is the result of exclusion of response categories such as "Undecided", "Unsure" or "Don't know".

Survey objectives

This report seeks to answer several questions related to race and race relations in South Africa. These include:

- How do South Africans understand the legitimacy of using race in the allocation of opportunity?
- To what extent do they believe race still matters in the symbolic legitimacy of the presidency?
- How much racism do people report experiencing directly, and how is that experience distributed across income, employment, party support, and race?
- Do South Africans believe racial inequality can be reduced through upliftment, and do they still believe the races need each other for progress?
- How do they distinguish between racism as lived experience and racism as political rhetoric?

Methodology*

The IRR fieldwork was conducted from 9 to 20 March 2026 and a sample size of 1,038 respondents. All respondents are registered voters. The survey has a design effect of 2.4018. On a simple-random-sample basis, a poll of this size carries a conventional margin of error of approximately plus or minus 3% points at a 95% confidence level.

The analysis below relies primarily on overall figures and on larger, more stable subgroup patterns: race, age, income, work status, likely voter status, and the major party blocs. Comparisons with the IRR's 2025 race-relations report are made where the underlying questions are clearly comparable. Where no like-for-like 2025 question is available, no year-on-year comparison is attempted.

**For further methodological and interpretive notes, see Addendum A*

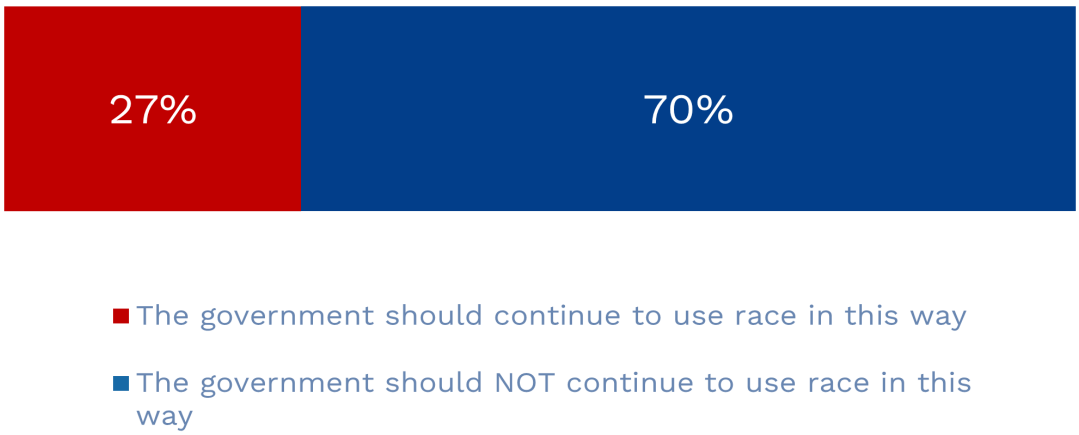
Analysis and findings

Race, political legitimacy, and the presidency

A useful starting point in assessing the state of race relations in South Africa in 2026 is to ask not only whether race still matters socially, but where the public believes it should and should not matter.

The first relevant question in the survey therefore concerns the use of apartheid-era racial categories in present-day economic life. Respondents were asked whether government should continue using the categories white, black, coloured, and Indian to decide who qualifies for business and job opportunities. The answer is clear with seven in ten respondents, 70%, saying government should not continue using race in this way, while 27% say it should. This is one of the clearest policy signals in the entire race-relations battery. It suggests that, whatever South Africans may think about race as a social reality, a strong majority is now uncomfortable with race remaining the baseline routine administrative logic by which economic opportunity is allocated or policy applied.

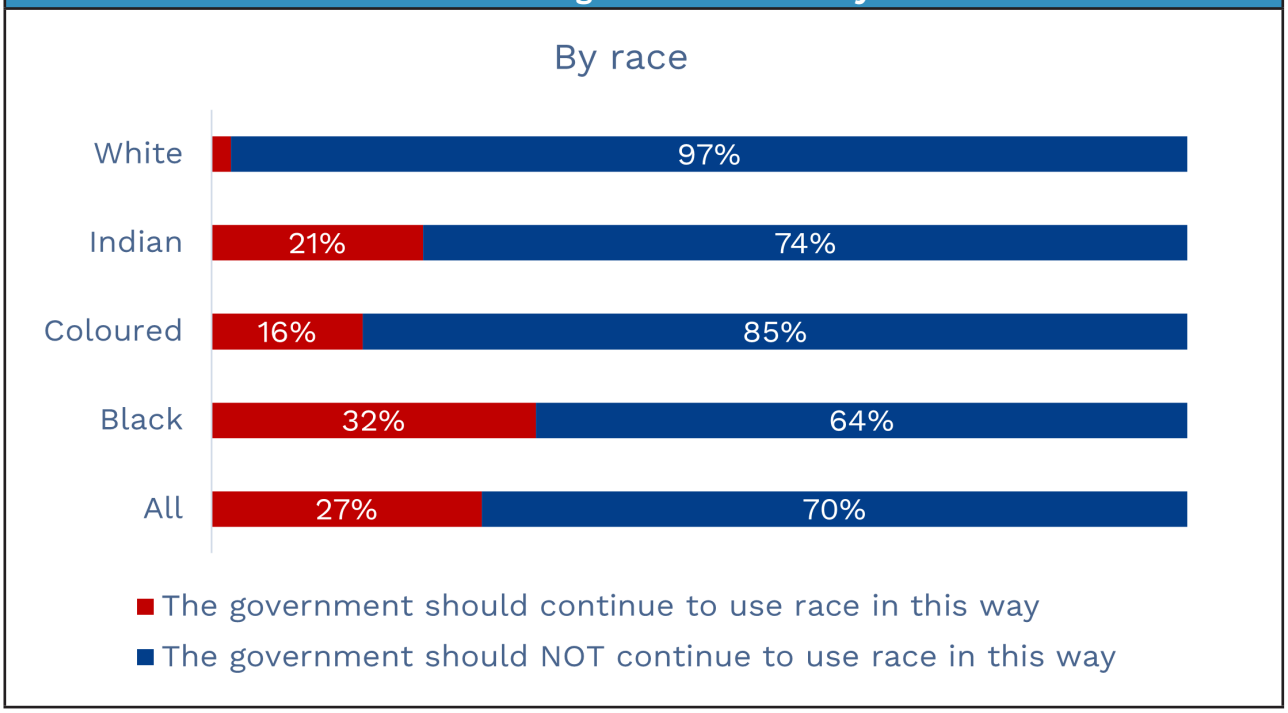
During apartheid the government categorised every South African as white, black, coloured or Indian. Today the government sometimes uses those same race categories to decide who should qualify for business and job opportunities and who should not. Which of the following comes closest to your view on this issue:



That opposition is not confined to minorities or to any one ideological bloc. Among black respondents, 64% say government should not continue using race in this way, while 32% say it should. Among coloured respondents, opposition rises to 85%. Among Indians, it stands at 74%, and among whites at 97%. The same pattern is even stronger among likely voters, where 72% oppose the continued use of race, compared to 61% among those not likely to vote.

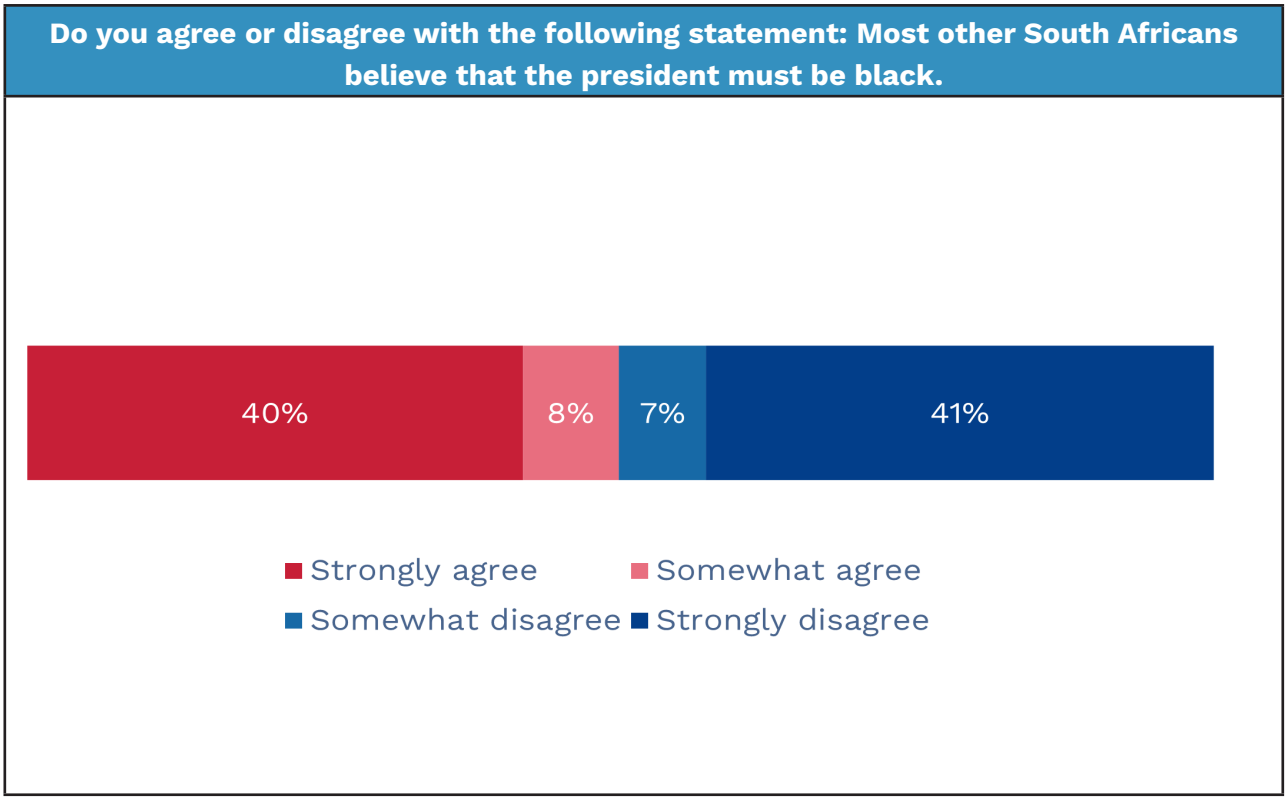
This matters because it shows that resistance to ongoing racial allocation is not simply the posture of those historically outside the governing consensus. It extends into the black majority and becomes more pronounced among the more politically engaged.

During apartheid the government categorised every South African as white, black, coloured or Indian. Today the government sometimes uses those same race categories to decide who should qualify for business and job opportunities and who should not. Which of the following comes closest to your view on this issue:



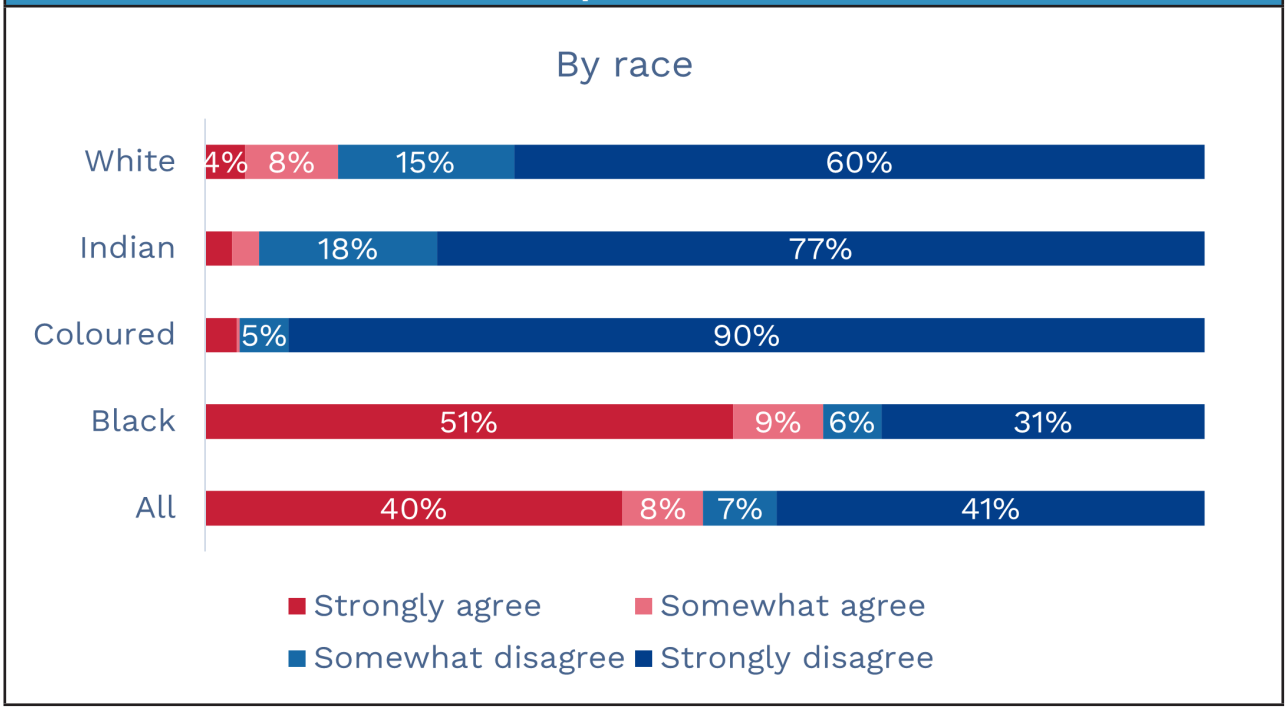
This question is particularly significant because it is the first time the IRR has tested it in a survey to a representative sample. South Africans do not appear to deny that race remains socially real. What they do appear increasingly to doubt is that race should continue to function as the ordinary governing logic of access to economic opportunity.

Two questions related to the race of the South African President add an important layer to understanding where race ought or ought not to feature in the public's conceptualisation of the state. Where the question of racial classification boils down to whether race should continue to structure access to opportunity, the presidency-related questions ask whether race structures perceptions of political legitimacy itself. The first of these asks respondents whether they agree that most other South Africans believe the President must be black. Here the electorate is almost evenly split. 47% agree, while 48% disagree. At a topline level, that suggests that race remains deeply present in the public imagination of presidential legitimacy, even if the country is not of one mind about it.



Once broken down, however, the pattern becomes more revealing. Among black respondents, 59% agree that most other South Africans believe the President must be black, while 37% disagree. Among coloured respondents, only 3% agree and 95% disagree. Among Indians, 5% agree and 95% disagree. Among whites, 12% agree and 76% disagree. The perceived norm is also strongest among the young and the poor. Among 18-to-24-year-olds, 68% agree that most South Africans think the President must be black. Among households earning under R2,000 a month, 61% agree. That perception weakens steadily as income rises, falling to 23% among households earning R20,000 or more. It is likely that this correlation relies on both a greater level of societal integration and more moderate, non-racial views typically associated with higher levels of socio-economic standing.

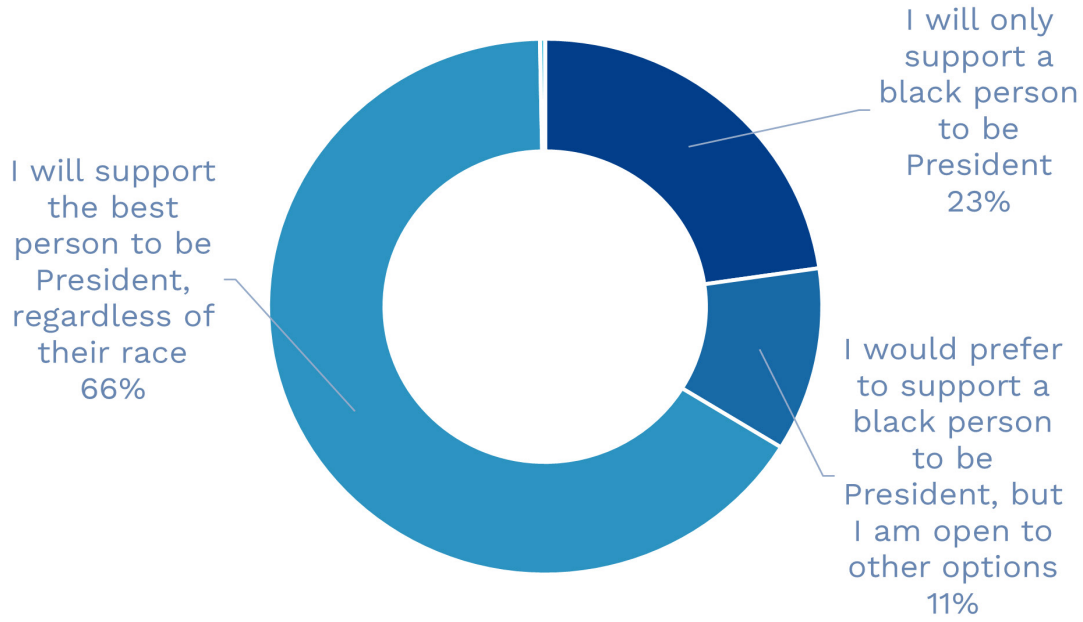
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Most other South Africans believe that the president must be black.



However, a crucial contextualisation comes with the other question related to the race of the South African head of state, which moves from perceived social expectation to personal preference. Respondents were asked what kind of person they themselves would support to become the next President of South Africa.

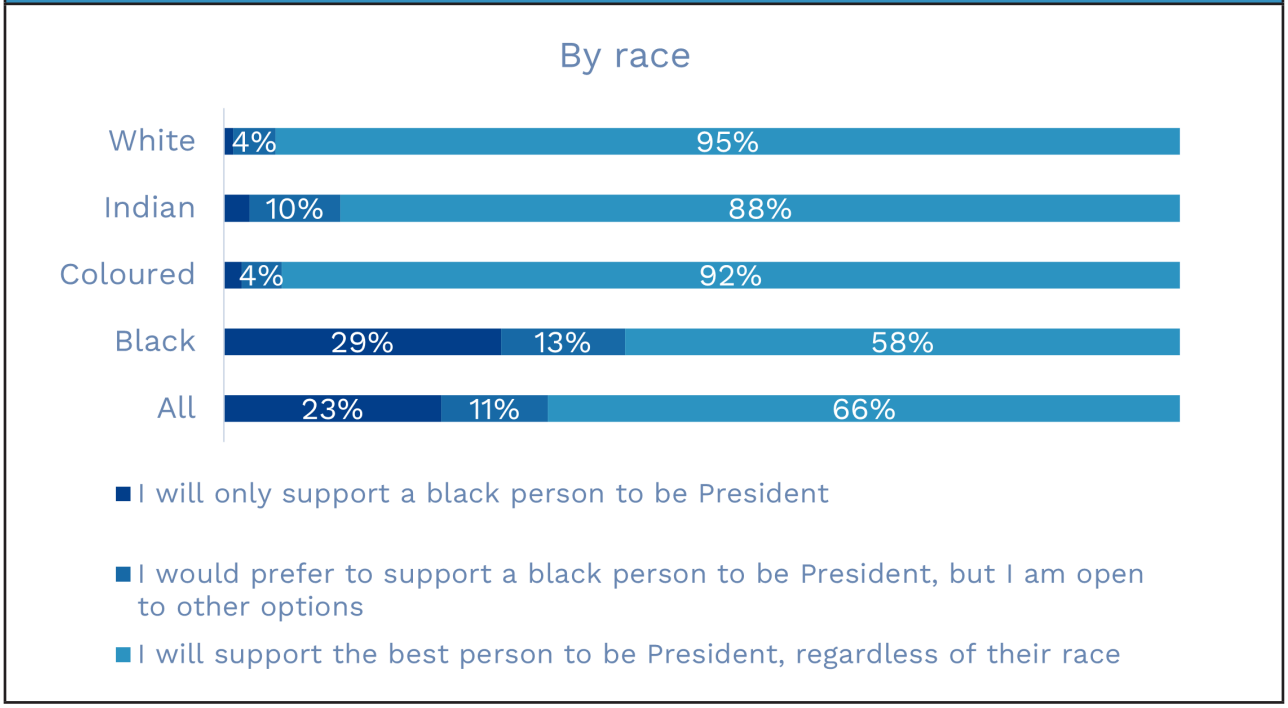
Here the picture changes significantly, and surprisingly. Only 23% say they would support only a black President. A further 11% say they would prefer a black President but remain open to others. By contrast, fully 66% say they would support the best person regardless of race. This is one of the most important findings in the survey, because it shows that individual attitudes are materially less racial than the social expectations people believe surround them.

Think about the kind of person you would support to become the next President of South Africa. Which one of the following three options best describes your position?



That pattern holds across the demographic breakdowns. Even among black respondents, 58% say they would support the best person regardless of race, while 42% say they would only or preferably support a black President. Among coloured respondents, 92% choose the best person regardless of race. Among Indians the figure is 88%, and among whites 95%. Among households earning under R2,000 a month, the electorate is nearly split, with 48% backing the best person regardless of race. Among households earning R20,000 or more, that figure rises to 90%. In other words, race remains symbolically present in the country's understanding of the presidency, but once voters are asked about their own choice rather than their perception of others, a much stronger non-racial instinct comes through.

Think about the kind of person you would support to become the next President of South Africa. Which one of the following three options best describes your position?



Years of IRR polling have continuously affirmed the moderate racial views of ordinary South Africans. From teachers, to doctors, and now to the president of the country, a consistent and formidable majority of people are not fixated on race, but on merit. It is rational to interpret from this stark finding that racial representativity in political understanding of South Africa's challenges and in corresponding policy solutions is a vastly overblown notion. It is, from the data and general context of South African political discourse, rational to conclude that race matters as a factor in political identification and association, though not in political legitimacy.

Yet, the finding that 66% of South Africans, a two-thirds majority, consider the race of the head of state and of government essentially irrelevant, goes beyond the consistent moderate meritocratic preference of ordinary people. The President is not merely a valued service provider, but in their own right a national symbol – the country's most important representative to the world. That is the function of a head of state. That the race of this office holder is of markedly less importance than their competence reveals how fundamentally out of touch not merely race-based politics is, but the very idea that South Africans view the country's identity through a racial lens.

Apartheid and anti-apartheid opinion and forces shaped, and through the politics of particularly the ANC's messaging continue to shape South Africa's national character to the outside world. Those looking at the country from outside see South African identity as primarily race-based. Yet, the finding that ordinary South Africans reject the idea of a race-determined head of state, shows that we do not view our national identity through a simplistic and reductionist racial lens. This is an important finding.

Yet, the divergence in answers between these two presidency questions is perhaps the most analytically valuable part of the survey's data with regards to understanding questions of high-level attitudes and beliefs on a racial or non-racial statal and governmental framework. Many South Africans appear to think the wider social norm is more racially exclusive than they themselves are. Among black respondents, 59% think most others believe the President must be black, but only 42% themselves say they would only or preferably support a black President. Among the youngest cohort, 68% perceive such a norm, but only 43% personally take that position. Even among ANC supporters, 65% think most South Africans believe the President must be black, yet only 40% say they themselves would only or preferably support a black President. The implication is that race still carries symbolic weight in perceptions of political legitimacy, but that personal voter preference has moved further in a non-racial direction than many respondents appear to realise.

Implications

Taken together, these findings point to a more nuanced reality than either crude non-racial optimism or racial pessimism would allow. On the one hand, South Africans are increasingly uneasy with the state's continued use of racial categories in allocating opportunity. On the other hand, race still retains symbolic significance in how the presidency is perceived to be imagined at a national level.

This disconnect between the reality of a broad non-racial majority on an issue of such importance as the race of the South African head of state, indicates a lack of societal trust at a horizontal level. The assumption of racially motivated thinking is significantly more prevalent than the thinking itself. South Africans seem unaware that their own non-racial preferences are more widely held than they believe. This likely increases social friction entirely unnecessarily.

Personal attitudes are more open and less racially restrictive than perceived social expectations. The broad implication is that the electorate's deeper instincts are less racial than the political culture it believes surrounds it. That is an important finding. It suggests that the foundations of non-racialism in South Africa may be stronger at the level of individual conviction than at the level of perceived public norm.
What South Africa therefore faces is what could be considered a problem of "common knowledge", where social tension flows not from lacking consensus on such loaded issues of race, but lacking broad-scale acknowledgement of that consensus. The consequence of such an arrangement is often avoidable.

Race relations, inequality, and the route beyond racial division

From political legitimacy and questions of the state's leeway to use race as a premise for policy favouritism, it is useful to move to the question of what South Africans believe can actually reduce division and inequality, much of which combines, at least in public discourse, matters of socio-economic standing and historical or more recent racial bias. Specifically, the survey questions and responses allow investigation of two related ideas: whether the various race groups in South Africa still need one another for progress, and whether better education and more jobs are seen as the main route to narrowing historical inequality between the races.

Respondents were asked whether they agree that the different races in South Africa need each other for progress and that there should be full opportunity for people of all colours. The result is emphatic. Fully 89% agree, while only 10% disagree. This is not only a very high level of agreement in absolute terms; it is also higher than in the IRR's 2025 polling, when the comparable figure stood at 84%. The shift from 84% to 89% is somewhat notable. It suggests that public commitment to interracial cooperation has, if anything, strengthened over the past year.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The different races need each other for progress and there should be full opportunity for people of all colours.

This is not a sentiment confined to one part of the electorate. Agreement stands at 85% among black respondents and reaches or approaches universality among some of the smaller minority groups in the sample. Even where the sentiment is weaker than the national average, it remains clearly dominant rather than marginal.

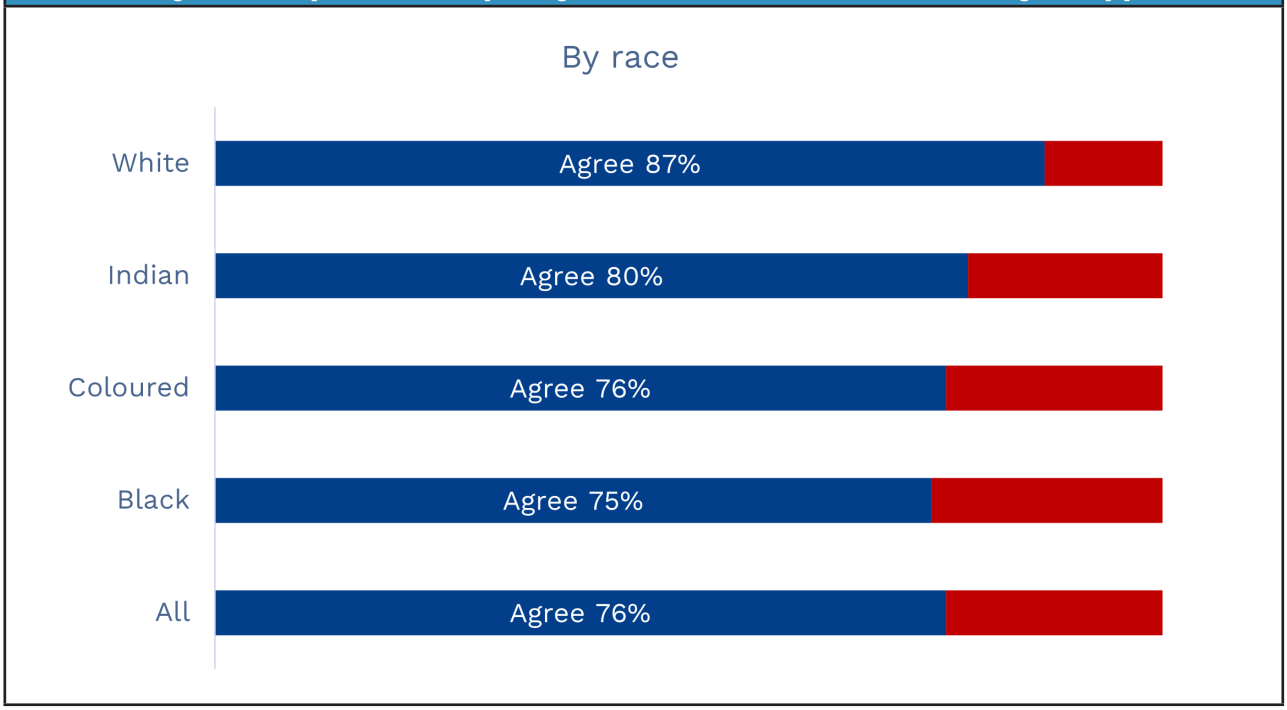
In terms of political association, among ANC supporters, 82% agree. Among MK supporters, where the broader mood of the data is more sceptical and grievance-oriented than elsewhere, 71% still agree. The significance of this should not be understated. It means that even in constituencies where social confidence is more brittle, and even racial grievance more pronounced, as is the case with MK, the prevailing majority view is that South Africa's future depends on racial cooperation rather than separation. This, perhaps, explains the unpopularity of racialised policy as expressed through opposition to crude racial categorisation.

The second question touching directly on race in the sense of national progress asks whether respondents believe that, with better education and more jobs, present inequality between the races will steadily disappear. Here too the result is clear. 76% agree, while 23% disagree. Compared with the 2025 IRR polling, where 73% agreed, this is a modest but generally positive increase. The change from 73% to 76% is not dramatic, but it is directionally important. It indicates that the public's confidence in upliftment as the route beyond racial inequality has held as a common ground for policy discourse and action.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: With better education and more jobs, the present inequality between the races will steadily disappear.

The pattern of consensus is, once again, broad-based. 75% of black respondents agree with the statement, as do 76% of coloured respondents, 80% of Indians, and 87% of whites. The same tendency becomes stronger with rising income and education. Among households earning under R2,000 a month, 68% agree. Among households earning R20,000 or more, that rises to 87%. Among the least educated respondents, 66% agree, while among university graduates the figure rises to 86%. These gradients matter because they show that confidence in jobs and education as the route beyond inequality is not just a slogan or an abstract preference. It becomes stronger in the very segments most exposed to economic competition, institutional life, and the practical workings of opportunity.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: With better education and more jobs, the present inequality between the races will steadily disappear.



South Africans do not believe that racial inequality is a fixed condition that can only be managed through permanent racial engineering. They are more likely to believe that it can be reduced through ordinary socio-economic progress: better schools, more work, and wider access to opportunity. The message from the South African people to policy makers is, therefore, very clear: the preferred route beyond current and even inherited socio-economic injustice is firmly progressive developmental rather than permanently race-administrative.

This understanding is strengthened by the wider survey and full findings to be published in upcoming reports. Elsewhere in the survey, without getting too deep into the issue of policy preferences to be presented and analysed in a subsequent IRR report, 83% of South Africans say government should focus more on job creation than on grants. That is not a race-relations question in itself, but it is highly relevant to how the public appears to think about a less divided society. South Africans seem to locate the answer to division not in the indefinite extension of racial management, but in upliftment through growth, education, and work – crucially, lacking a racial character. The public's hope of what a more prosperous and equal South African can be is therefore overwhelmingly socio-economic rather than based on race as a proxy for socio-economic standing.

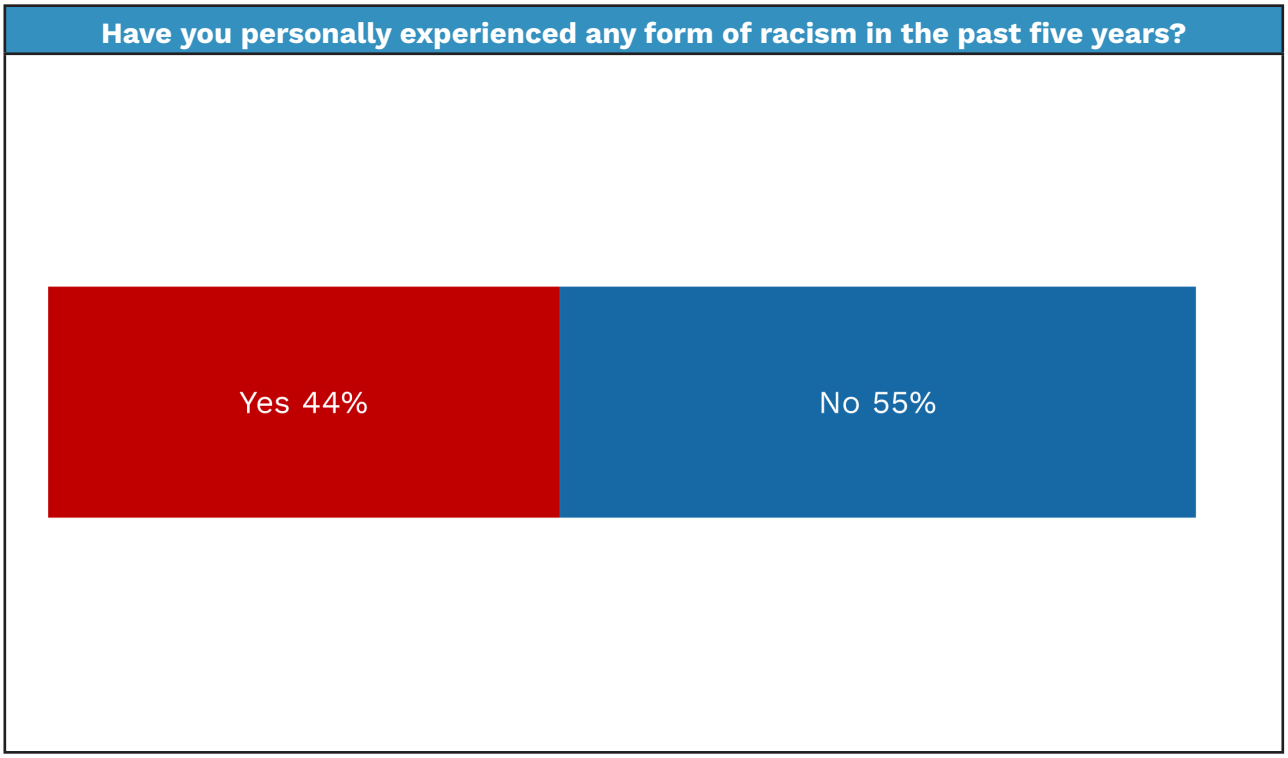
Implications

The IRR's 2026 polling reinforces and sharpens one of the central lessons already visible in prior IRR polling. South Africans remain more united in their socio-economic aspirations than divided by racial grievance. Where the public sees a credible route beyond inequality, it sees that route in schools, jobs, growth, and shared opportunity. That is one of the clearest signs in the data of a pragmatic non-racial majority in favour of upliftment rather than permanent race-based redress.

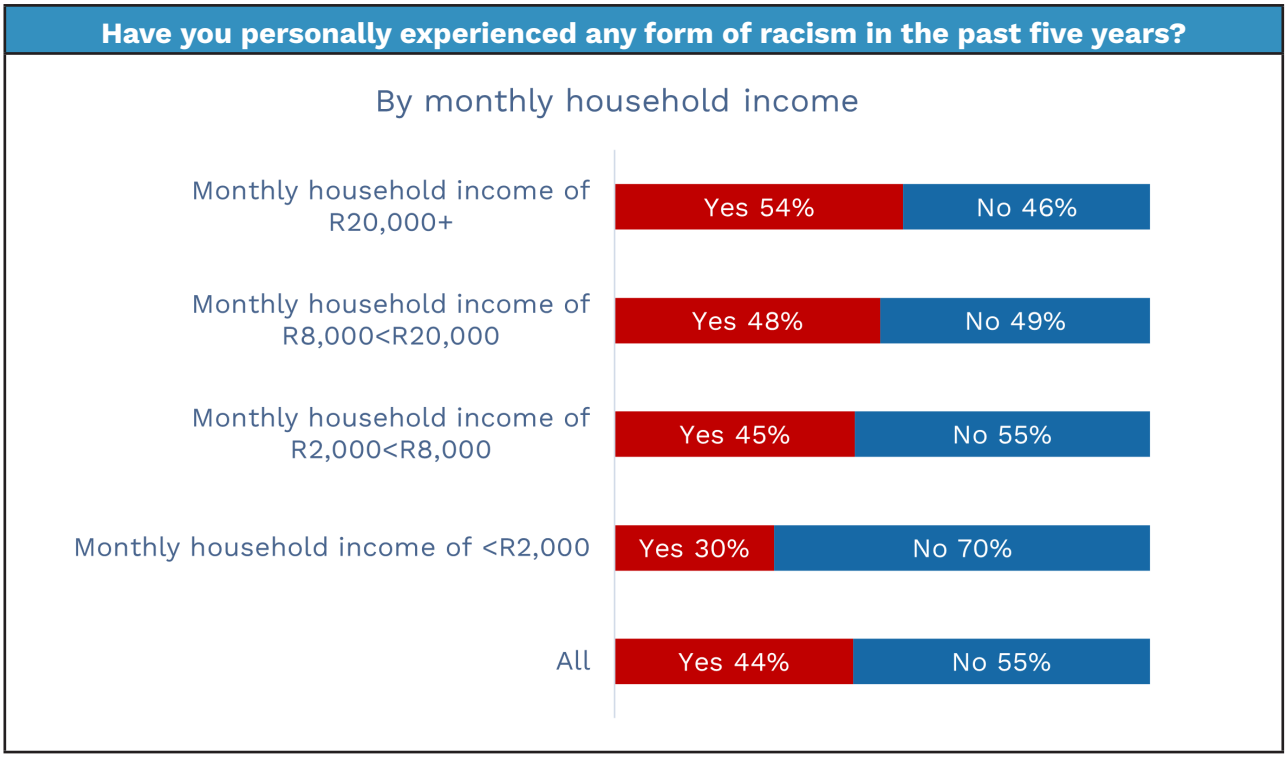
Racism as lived reality and as political rhetoric

Yet, although a significant majority of South Africans still believe the races need one another and that inequality can be reduced through jobs and education, that does not in itself tell us whether race still intrudes into daily life in abrasive ways. The survey therefore once again asks two closely connected questions. The first is whether respondents have personally experienced racism in recent years. The second is whether they believe politicians use talk of racism and colonialism to excuse their failures. Taken together, these questions help distinguish between racism as a social reality and racism as a political tool.

Asked whether they have personally experienced any form of racism in the past five years, 44% say yes and 55% say no. Compared with the IRR's 2025 polling, when 48% said yes, this points to a modest decline in reported personal experience of racism. Even so, the figure remains substantial. Any serious account of race relations in South Africa must therefore begin from the fact that racism continues to be part of ordinary life for a large minority of the population.



The headline figure, however, is less revealing than the pattern beneath it. The single most striking relationship in the data is between reported racism and income. Experience of racism rises rather than falls as respondents move up the income ladder. Among households earning under R2,000 a month, only 30% report personal experience of racism. That rises to 45% in the R2,000 to R8,000 band, to 48% in the R8,000 to R20,000 band, and to 54% among households earning R20,000 or more.



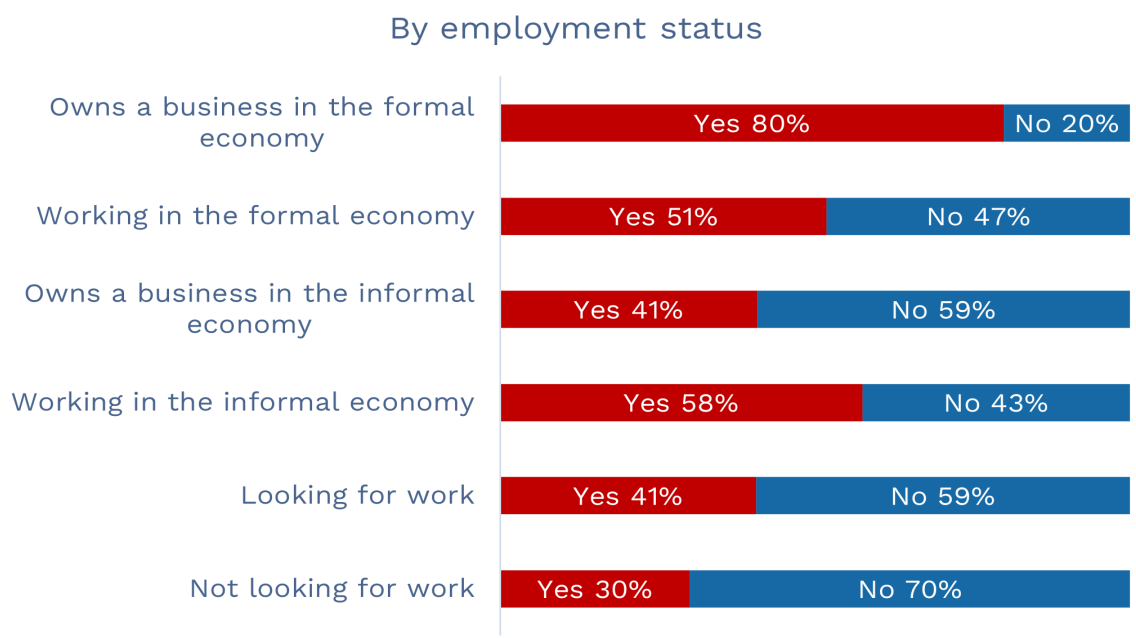
This is a finding of crucial relevance to especially such policies as BEE which assume economic exclusion remains, even after thirty years of a post-apartheid democratic dispensation, racially caused.

If those most people trapped in poverty and material exclusion chiefly understood their condition as racial exclusion, one would expect the poorest respondents to report the highest levels of racism. The data show the exact reverse. Those most economically marginal are the least likely to say they have experienced racism, while those more economically included are significantly more likely to say so. That does not mean race is irrelevant to exclusion, but it does mean that the lived experience of the poor does not appear to map neatly onto the assumption that present-day deprivation is primarily experienced as racially imposed.

The oft-heard economic argument of an exclusionary racial concentration of capital is simply not evident in the opinions of those worse off in society. Their condition seems, especially given findings on policy preferences to be published in a future polling report, more likely to be experienced through upliftment obstacles: joblessness, poor education, crippling cost-of-living pressures, insecure personal wealth, and limited upward mobility. This is one of the clearest ways in which the data complicate the standard logic behind BEE-style redress. The argument of race as a proxy for disadvantage suffers a fatal blow.

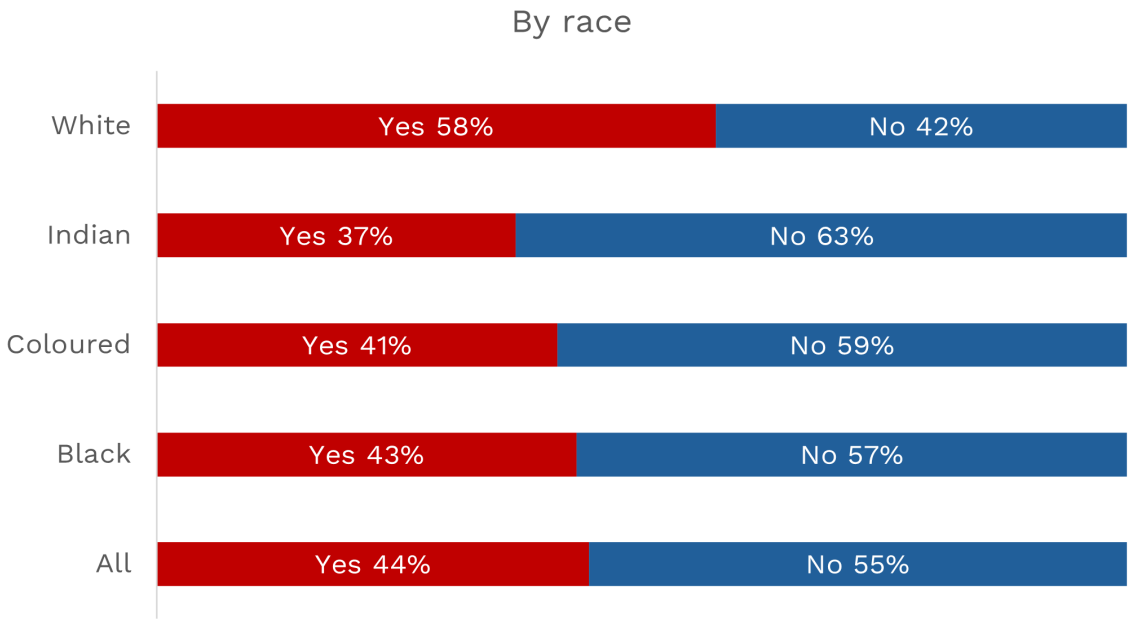
The same basic pattern appears when the data are broken down by work status and residential exposure. Among those looking for work, 41% say they have experienced racism. Among formal workers, the figure rises to 51%, and among informal workers it rises further to 58%. By residential area, 50% of suburban respondents report racism, 48% of township respondents do so, and only 35% of those in tribal areas say the same. These are not random differences. They suggest that racism is more commonly reported in the spaces where people are more exposed to work, competition, institutional treatment, cross-group interaction, and, crucially, government policy interventions.

Have you personally experienced any form of racism in the past five years?



A racial breakdown of respondents adds a further layer of complexity, casting doubt on simplistic arguments of one-way racial intolerance and victimhood. Whites are the most likely racial group to report having experienced racism, at 58%, followed by black respondents at 43%, coloured respondents at 41%, and Indians at 37%. This does not overturn South Africa's history, nor does it suggest that all forms of racial grievance are equivalent. It does, however, show that contemporary racial grievance is not a one-directional phenomenon in either the guise of such frivolous labels or ideas as white supremacy or white victimhood.

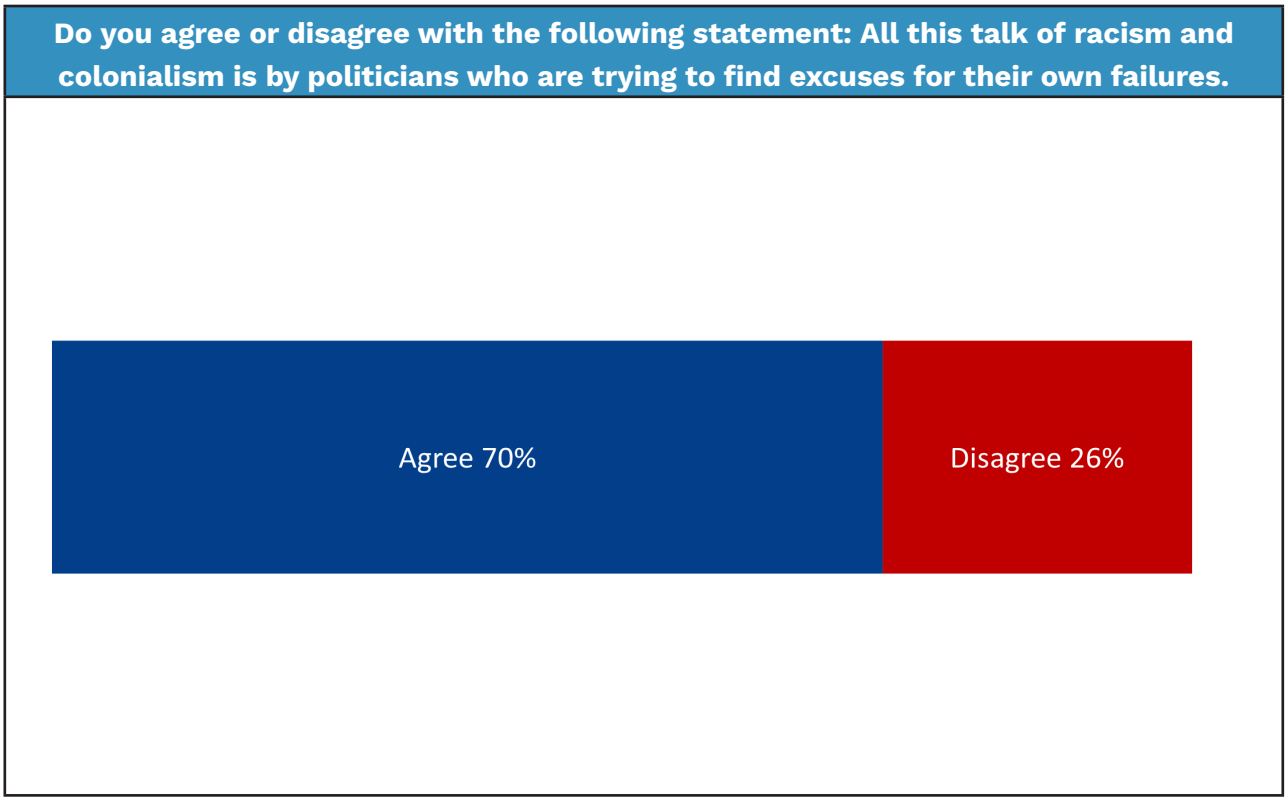
Have you personally experienced any form of racism in the past five years?



A party breakdown is especially revealing because it points to a link between racial grievance and grievance-oriented political identities. FF+ voters, almost exclusively white and Afrikaans-speaking, are the most likely notable party bloc to report personal experience of racism, at 64%. MK voters, essentially exclusively black and isiZulu-speaking, are next, at 63%. PA voters stand at 56%, and EFF voters at 50%. These are among the parties most inclined, in different ways, to mobilise group injury, threat, displacement, or exclusion. The data alone cannot answer the chicken-and-egg question of cause and effect here: it may be that more racially grievance-sensitive voters are drawn to these parties, yet, it may also be that such parties intensify grievance sensitivity by persistently framing politics through racial or group-based injury. The most plausible interpretation is that both dynamics are at work.

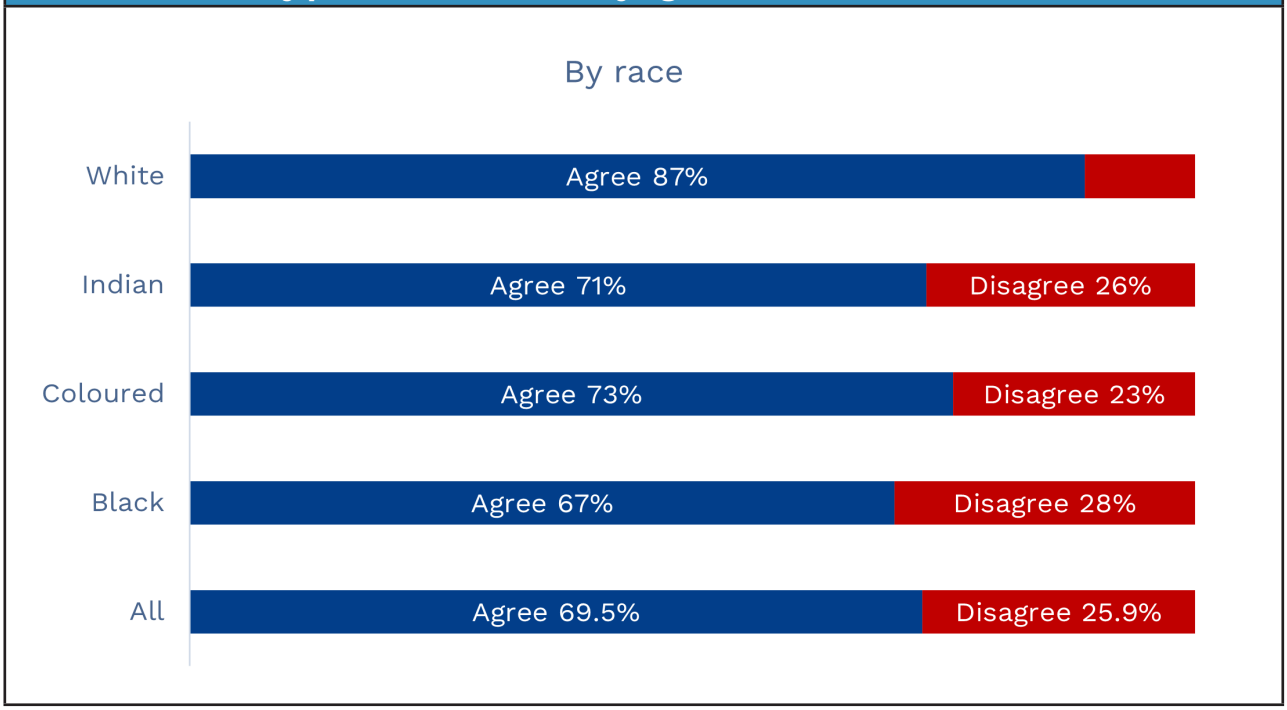
What is clear, however, is that no singular source of racial grievance emerges. It is hardly conceivable that FF+ voters and MK voters are suffering the same sort of racism, given their very different identities. Hence, it is clear that any simplistic explanations of racial supremacy or racial victimhood carry almost no explanatory power in the context of South African society.

The second question in this cluster of the societal presence of racism then introduces an important distinction. Respondents were asked whether they agree that “all this talk of racism and colonialism” is by politicians trying to excuse their failures. Again, the result is striking: 70% agree, while 26% disagree.



This healthy and hopeful scepticism of racially charged politicking is also broad-based. 67% of black respondents agree with the statement, as do 73% of ANC supporters, 71% of DA supporters, and 87% of whites. Even among MK supporters, who stand out elsewhere in the data as more grievance-oriented than the electorate overall, 53% still agree.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: All this talk of racism and colonialism is by politicians who are trying to find excuses for their own failures.



These two questions present a dual reality regarding racism in South Africa today: it remains part of ordinary life, unfortunately stoked by complex socio-economic realities unnecessary state interventions, but its political weaponisation is widely distrusted and disowned. South Africans appear able to say, at the same time, that race still intrudes into their lived experience to a not insignificant extent, and that politicians too often use race talk to explain away unemployment, weak growth, poor services, corruption, and low delivery. That distinction is one of the most important signs of public seriousness in this report. The electorate is not denying racism. It is refusing to treat racial rhetoric as a sufficient substitute for accountable government. This highlights the importance of the finding discussed earlier that shows a 3:1 majority agreeing on the issue of socio-economic through jobs and skills development being the solution to inequalities, as opposed to continued racialised policy and the indignity of racial bean counting.

Implications

The implications of this section are considerable for the political discourse ahead in electoral terms, but also the broader grasping of societal pressures.

Racism remains a social fact and cannot be dismissed. The internal distribution of reported racism strongly suggests that present-day racial friction is concentrated not at the very bottom of deprivation, but in the more economically and institutionally competitive parts of society. However, the data findings are consistent with the argument that current forms of race-based inclusion may themselves be helping to stoke racial tension by keeping race continuously visible in precisely those spaces where people compete for work, contracts, mobility, and recognition. Finally, South Africans appear increasingly unwilling to accept race rhetoric as a general political explanation for national failure. The country is not in denial about racism. It is increasingly resistant to being governed rhetorically through it.

The interaction between lived racism, rising income, employment, party grievance, and the wider upliftment questions is one of the most important realities in the 2026 data. The survey does not point to a single, neat explanation. It points instead to several overlapping dynamics that likely reinforce one another.

The first is that current methods of inclusion, especially those operating in the world of work, procurement, promotion, and formal economic participation, are likely themselves contributing to racial tension. If policies such as BEE and employment-equity rules keep race continuously visible in decisions about opportunity and advancement, then it is entirely plausible that they increase racial friction among precisely those groups most exposed to those decisions, whether beneficially or detrimentally. The fact that reported racism rises rather than falls with economic inclusion is strongly consistent with that explanation.

A second explanation is that more integrated and competitive environments are naturally more likely to generate identity-based tension, especially in a country with as much identity-based diversity as South Africa. Professional, commercial, and institutional settings bring groups into closer contact and sharper contestation than the zones of sheer deprivation and economic exclusion. These are environments in which promotion, recognition, allocation, and status are more immediately visible. Such spaces can widen opportunity, but they can also heighten sensitivity to differential treatment. In that sense, the same conditions that make integration possible may also make racial friction more noticeable. However, to see in this the need for racialised state or policy involvement is to misread the underlying goodwill of a collaborative posture that holds such natural and even unavoidable tensions in check.

A third explanation is psychological as much as social. As socio-economic standing rises, people may become more likely to interpret slights, exclusion, policy treatment, and social signals through a racial lens, because concerns of esteem, dignity, fairness, and recognition become more salient once immediate survival is less all-consuming. The poorest are often preoccupied with first-order material pressures. Those higher up may be more attentive to symbolic and institutional questions of how they are seen and treated. This does not make the grievance unreal. It does, however, suggest that the social meaning of racism may vary significantly across the income scale.

A fourth explanation lies in the relationship between party rhetoric and voter sensitivity. Parties such as the FF+, MK, EFF, and PA all draw, in different ways, on narratives of group grievance, threat, exclusion, or displacement. Their supporters may therefore be more likely to notice racial grievance in the first place. But those same parties may also teach their supporters how to narrate and interpret social experience through racial grievance. Here again, the evidence points less to a single cause than to a reinforcing loop.

None of these explanations cancels the others out. The strongest reading of the 2026 data is that South Africa's racial friction, to the extent that it is experienced, is being produced by several interacting forces at once: the continued salience of race through race-based policy, the increased competition of more integrated social spaces from diverse groups, the symbolic concerns of higher-order sociological status that rise with socio-economic participation, and the political incentives of grievance-oriented parties.

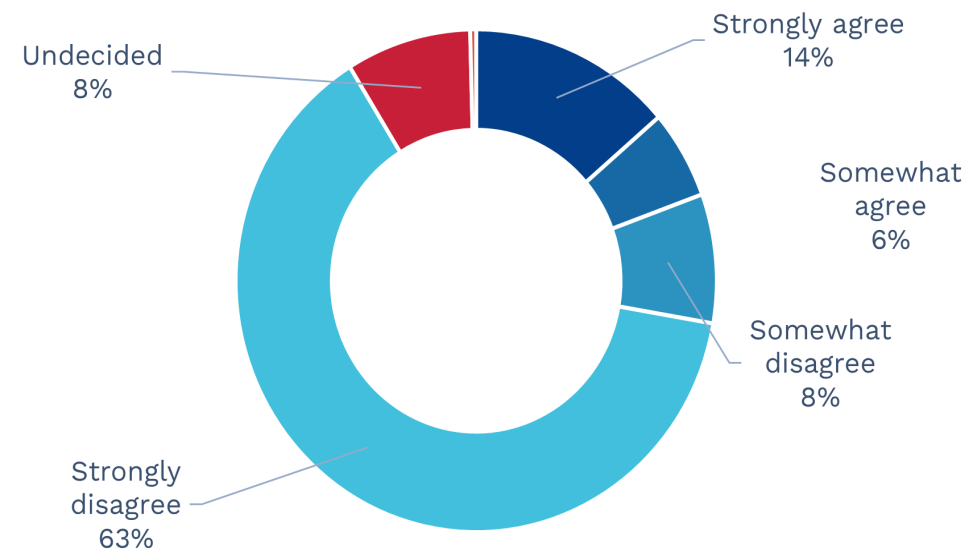
What the data entirely disallow is the simplest version of the case for race-based redress: that the excluded poor most strongly experience their exclusion as racial, and that this therefore makes racial administration the obvious or natural remedy. The pattern runs the other way.

This dual reality, race as lived reality and race as dismissed tool of cynical politics, carries an important warning as well as an opportunity. The warning is that present-day racial tension may be more closely bound up with the way opportunity is currently managed than many policymakers are willing to admit. The opportunity is that the same numbers show a public that still strongly believes in interracial cooperation and in upliftment through jobs and education. In other words, South Africa's race problem does not appear to stem from an absence of public goodwill. It appears increasingly to stem from the way competition, policy, and grievance interact in everyday life.

The "white genocide" claim and the extent of racial panic

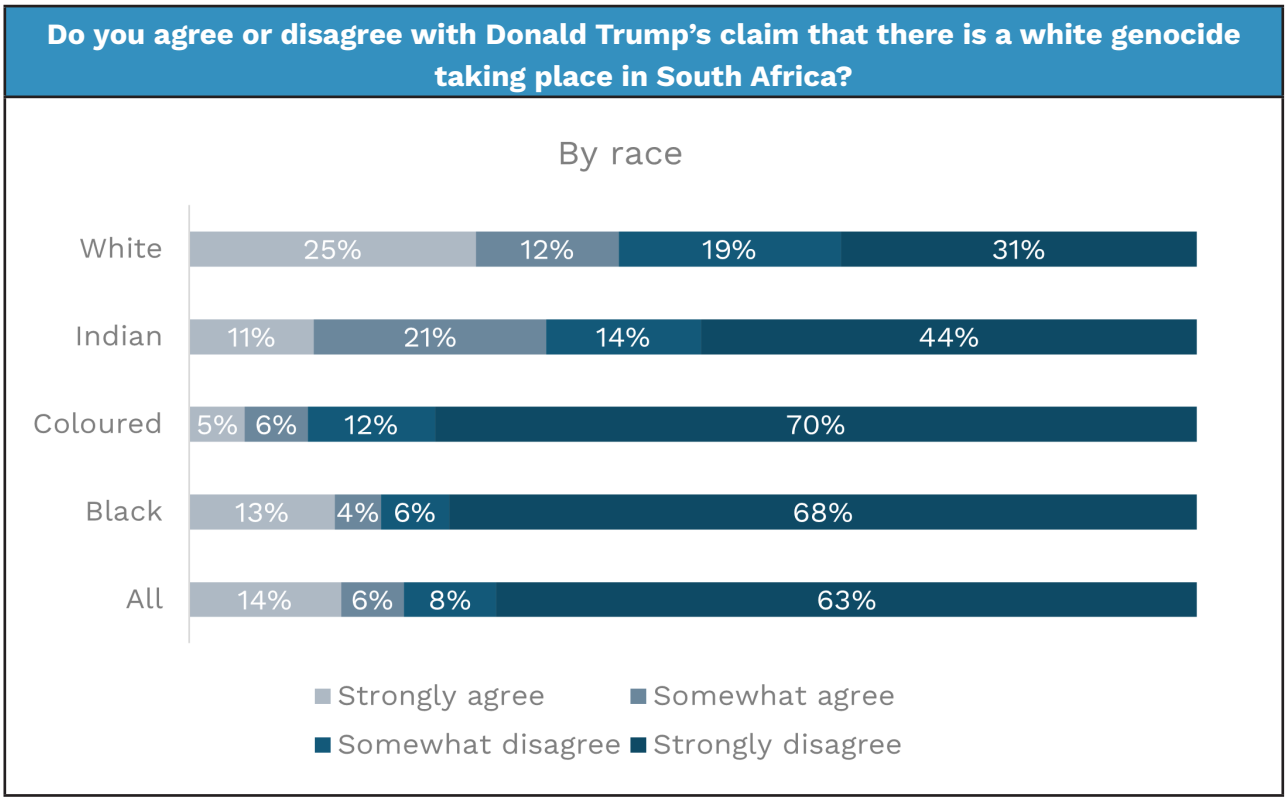
If the above shows that racism remains part of many South Africans' lived experience, but that its political weaponisation is widely distrusted, the next question tests something more specific and more volatile: how far an extreme racial-threat narrative has penetrated the public mind. Respondents were therefore asked whether they agree or disagree with Donald Trump's claim that there is a white genocide taking place in South Africa. 19% agree, while 72% disagree. In a country where race remains socially salient and where racial grievance is by no means absent, this is an important finding. It shows that while racial friction exists, it has not translated into mass acceptance of an apocalyptic racial narrative.

Do you agree or disagree with Donald Trump's claim that there is a white genocide taking place in South Africa?



Among black respondents, 17% agree with the claim and 74% disagree. Among coloured respondents, 11% agree and 82% disagree. Among whites, who are the group most directly addressed by the language of the claim, 37% agree and 50% disagree. This is an important result. Whites are clearly more receptive to the claim than the electorate overall, but even among whites it does not command majority assent. That means the claim cannot credibly be treated as an accurate reflection of white public opinion in South Africa, still less of the national mood.

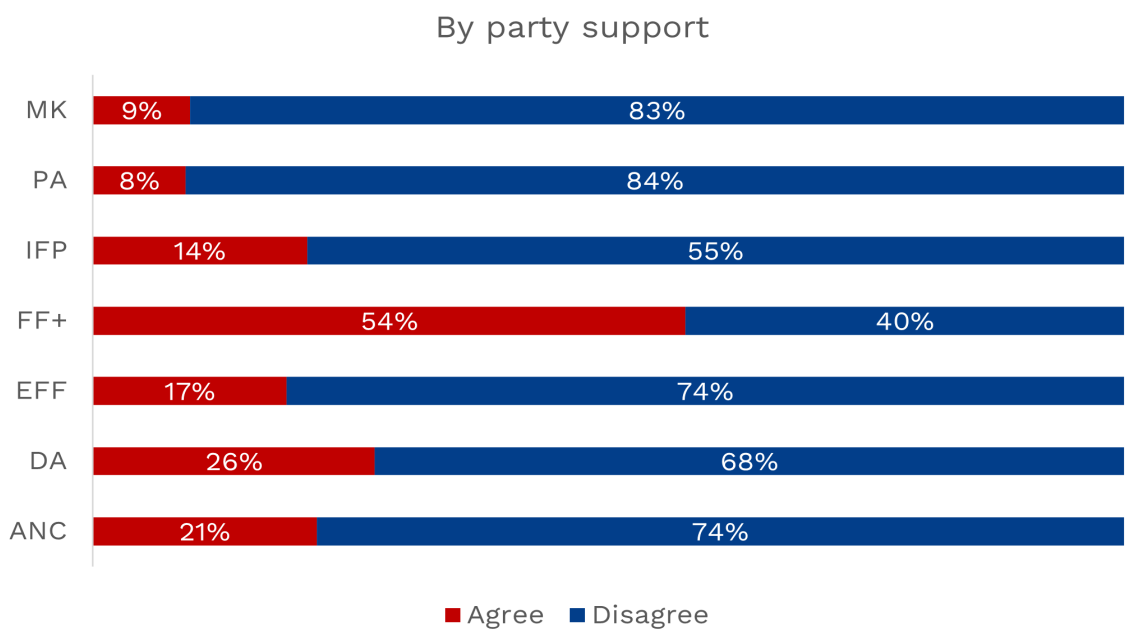
Do you agree or disagree with Donald Trump's claim that there is a white genocide taking place in South Africa?



This matters not only because of the claim itself, but because of what it reveals about the outer limits of racial grievance in South Africa. Elsewhere in this report, whites emerge as the racial group most likely to say they have personally experienced racism, at 58%. Yet even within that group, a plurality rejects the claim of white genocide. Lived racial grievance, even when substantial, does not automatically produce belief in existential racial panic. That distinction is one of the strongest indications in the data that public sentiment remains more restrained and more reality-bound than the rhetoric surrounding the issue often implies.

The party breakdown reinforces the same conclusion, while also showing where this kind of narrative has its strongest resonance. Among ANC supporters, 21% agree with the claim and 76% disagree. Among DA supporters, 25% agree and 65% disagree. Among EFF supporters, 17% agree and 74% disagree. Among MK supporters, only 8% agree while 83% disagree. The one clearly exceptional bloc is the FF+, where 54% agree and 40% disagree. The FF+ is therefore the only notable party constituency in which the claim commands more support than opposition. This is politically important, but it should also be kept in proportion. It shows that racial panic exists as a concentrated current within South African politics, not as a broad national disposition.

Do you agree or disagree with Donald Trump's claim that there is a white genocide taking place in South Africa?



The contrast between MK and the FF+ is especially revealing. Both support blocs score very highly on reported personal experience of racism, with MK supporters at 63% and FF+ supporters at 64%. Yet their responses to the Trump claim are radically different. MK supporters overwhelmingly reject it, while FF+ supporters narrowly accept it. This affirms the finding that racial grievance in South Africa does not have a single political meaning. Different constituencies may feel racially aggrieved for very different reasons, and they do not all convert that grievance into the same broader worldview. In other words, racial grievance is real, but racial panic is not its inevitable or universal outcome.

The significance of this question becomes even clearer when read alongside the broader findings of the report. 89% of respondents agree that the different races need each other for progress and that there should be full opportunity for people of all colours. 76% percent agree that better education and more jobs can steadily reduce inequality between the races. 70% say government should not continue using apartheid-era race categories to allocate opportunity. And 66% say they would support the best person for President regardless of race. Taken together, these findings describe a public whose dominant instinct is still towards coexistence, upliftment, and practical non-racialism. Against that background, the rejection of the white-genocide claim is not an isolated result. It is part of a broader pattern showing that South Africans remain far less committed to racial absolutism than much rhetoric at home and abroad suggests.

This question also matters because it speaks directly to the international projection of South African race politics. In recent years, and especially through interventions by Donald Trump and his allies, an image has circulated internationally of South Africa as a society on the brink of organised anti-white racial violence. The polling does not support that image. It shows instead a country in which racial tension remains real, but where the overwhelming majority of citizens, including most whites, do not accept the language of white genocide as an accurate description of their society. That is a finding of both domestic and international significance.

Implications

First, the public's rejection of the white-genocide claim places a clear limit on how far racial grievance has hardened into racial panic in South Africa. Second, the fact that even whites reject the claim by a plurality shows that the most extreme international narratives about race in South Africa are not well grounded in the attitudes of those they purport to defend. Third, the concentration of support for the claim in a smaller grievance-oriented party bloc such as the FF+ suggests that this kind of narrative operates more as a political niche than as a mass social reality.

South Africa is not free of racial tension. But nor is it a country whose public has surrendered to apocalyptic racial thinking. The broader electorate remains far more inclined towards coexistence than catastrophe, and towards upliftment rather than panic. That is why this question matters. It helps distinguish between a society under strain and a society in racial freefall, and the data strongly support the former rather than the latter.

Race and party politics

The party dimension of attitudes, beliefs, and reported experiences of race matters because in South Africa it is still often interpreted, by local and foreign commentators and political actors alike, through the overly simplistic lens of party competition and broad-based identity politics. If race were in fact the superior issue of political salient, one would expect that salience to appear clearly in the attitudes of especially major party supporters. In this regard, the data do show meaningful differences between party blocs, but they also show where the electorate's deeper instincts are often less racial, less polarised, and more convergent than the rhetoric through which parties commonly present themselves and one another.

There should be no naïve conviction that race has or even can fully disappear from South African politics. Party support still reflects, to some extent, older racial alignments and even newer forms of identity-based grievance. Yet the broader lesson of the data presented in this report is that voters' policy instincts are less racially absolutist than much rhetoric suggests. South Africans may still differ on which party they trust, but on several of the underlying questions about coexistence, fairness, upliftment, and the limits of racial rhetoric, there is more common ground than the political class often acknowledges.

This is notable among ANC supporters, the single party responsible for the extensive network of systemic race-based policy interventions. Despite the ANC's long-standing post-1994 commitment and investment of political capital into racial favouritism in politics and policy, 60% of ANC supporters oppose continued use of apartheid-era race categories in allocating opportunity. 60% say they would support the best person for President regardless of race. 76% believe jobs and education can reduce racial inequality. 82% say the races need each other for progress. 73% say politicians use race and colonialism as excuses.

DA supporters are more emphatically non-racial, but the difference is one of degree rather than kind. 84% of DA supporters say they would support the best person for President regardless of race. 82% think jobs and education can reduce racial inequality. 95% say the races need each other. 71% think politicians use racism and colonialism as excuses.

MK supporters are more grievance-oriented and less warm on interracial progress than the national average, but even there the picture is not simply racial closure. 44% say they would support the best person for President regardless of race. 64% think jobs and education can reduce inequality. 71% say the races need each other. Yet MK supporters are also among the most likely to report personal experience of racism, at 63%, and among the most likely to think others believe the President must be black, at 70%.

The most racially anxious political grouping remains the FF+, where Trump's "white genocide" claim is accepted by 54% and rejected by 40%. Yet this is a smaller constituency and does not alter the national picture. However, despite the majority view of a "white genocide" present amongst the voters most likely to consider it so, the substantial minority of FF+ voters who do not share this controversial view is notable.

The broader reality seems to clearly be that politics in South Africa is, despite enormous and often propagandistic pressure, taking place inside a public mood that is less racially absolutist than often assumed. Voters may still cluster by race in their party choices, but on the deeper questions of coexistence, fairness, upliftment, and the limits of race rhetoric, there is markedly more convergence than the political class often acknowledges.

Conclusion

The 2026 IRR polling presents a portrait of South Africa that is far from comfortable, but ultimately more hopeful than rhetoric or superficial analysis allow. Race relations are under pressure and racism remains real. There is a suspicion that 'other' people hold political power and office to be racially coded and therefore divisive. Several parties clearly earn or capitalise on racial grievance. Yet the deeper direction of opinion is not towards racial collapse, but towards a stable and formidable national preference for coexistence, upliftment, and a more non-racial than racial future.

Most South Africans do not want the state to keep allocating opportunity through apartheid-era racial categories. Most think the races need each other. Most think better education and more jobs can reduce racial inequality. Most reject extreme racial-threat narratives. Most say politicians overuse race and colonialism as excuses. Most also say they themselves would support the best person for President regardless of race, even while suspecting that the wider political culture is more racially restrictive than they are.
The most important reality the 2026 survey captures is therefore this: South Africa still contains a broad, pragmatic, non-racial majority whose preferred route to better race relations is socio-economic upliftment rather than deeper race-based redress. The country's race problem is not that ordinary South Africans are committed to permanent racial sorting. It is that too much of the political and policy order still behaves as if they are.

The task ahead is not to manufacture a desire for coexistence that does not yet exist. That desire is already visible in the data. The task is to align policy and leadership with a public that appears more ready for a less racialised, more opportunity-driven, and more competence-focused future than much of its political rhetoric and governance offerings admit.

Addendum A

Sampling method

The survey employed a random digit-dialling (RDD) method, targeting mobile phone users. The sampling frame included all possible mobile numbers in South Africa, ensuring that every registered voter had an equal probability of selection. This approach is critical for generalisability and reduces potential biases associated with predefined lists.

Sample size and screening

A total of 1,038 respondents participated in the survey, comprising a diverse demographic cross-section. The design effect (DEFF) of 2.4018 was applied to the analysis, accounting for sample design complexities.

The survey was limited to registered voters, ensuring the data reflected the electorate's views. It is important to note that no turnout scenario is applied.

Data Collection

Data was collected using Computer-Assisted Telephonic Interviews (CATI), a reliable method that ensures consistency in questionnaire administration and minimises interviewer bias.

Margin of error and confidence level

The results have a margin of error of ±3% at a 95% confidence level, indicating that the findings are highly reliable and represent public opinion within this range.

Questionnaire design

The survey questionnaire was carefully structured to ensure clarity, relevance, and balance. Key design features included:

1. **Structure:** Questions were grouped thematically, covering governance, economic priorities, race relations, and quality of life.
2. **Neutral language:** Wording was neutral to avoid influencing respondents' answers.
3. **Follow-up questions:** Where necessary, follow-ups addressed uncertainty (e.g., "If you had to choose, which party would you support?" for undecided voters).

Data weighting

To ensure the sample accurately reflected the national population, the data were weighted according to key demographic factors, including:

- Age
- Gender
- Province
- Urban *versus* rural residency

This weighting process ensures that findings are representative of South Africa's multifaceted and demographically complex electorate.

Respondent demographics

The survey sample of registered voters represents a diverse cross-section of South African society, ensuring the findings reflect the nation's socio-economic, geographic, and cultural diversity. Below is a detailed overview of the demographic distribution. To the extent that racial categories are used, these have been done purely on the basis of respondents' own racial self-classification.

Geographic distribution

Respondents were drawn from all nine provinces, with the highest representation from Gauteng (23.8%) and KwaZulu-Natal (21.2%). Smaller contributions came from the Northern Cape (2.1%) and Free State (4.2%).

Province	% of Respondents
Gauteng	23.8%
KwaZulu-Natal	21.2%
Eastern Cape	12.3%
Western Cape	11.7%
Limpopo	9.6%
North West	7.8%
Mpumalanga	7.2%
Free State	4.2%
Northern Cape	2.1%

Respondents were drawn from the full range of residential area types, with the highest coming from township and tribal areas, 34.7% and 33% respectively.

Residential area type	% of Respondents
Township	34.7%
Tribal land	33%
Suburb	16.8%
Central Business District (CBD)	6.7%
Informal	6.2%
Smallholding	1.7%
Commercial farm	0.9%

Age and gender

The survey skewed toward older respondents, with 33.4% aged between 45 and 64, and 17.7% aged 65 or older. This focus reflects the predominance of older and therefore registered voters.

Age Group	% of Respondents
18-24	8.6%
25-34	19.6%
35-44	20.7%
45-64	33.4%
65+	17.7%

Language

isiZulu speakers formed the largest language group (24.8%), followed by isiXhosa (18.8%) and Afrikaans (11.3%).

Home Language	% of Respondents
isiZulu	24.8%
isiXhosa	18.8%
Afrikaans	11.3%
English	11.4%
Sesotho	6.4%
Other languages	27.3%

Employment and income

Employment data revealed that 40% of respondents were seeking work, while 18.3% were retired and 16.9% were employed in the formal sector. Income levels varied, with the largest group earning between R2,000 and R8,000 per month (53.6%).

Income Level	% of Respondents
<R2 000	15.1%
R2 000<R8 000	53.6%
R8 000<R20 000	10.2%
R20 000+	12%
Did not disclose	9.1%

The socio-economically diverse respondent pool set out above ensures a robust and representative dataset, allowing for nuanced analysis of South Africans' perceptions across regions, age groups, and socio-economic statuses.

IRR

South African Institute of Race Relations

www.irr.org.za

info@irr.org.za

(011) 482 7221