

HOPE, OPPORTUNITY, UNITY AND NEW COMMON GROUND:

FINDINGS OF IRR POLLING 2024

2024



HERMANN PRETORIUS

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Executive summary

Polling commissioned by the South African Institute of Race Relations (IRR) paints a picture of a nation cautiously optimistic about its future. The 2024 IRR opinion polling, a continuation of the IRR's annual polling of the socio-economic and political realities in South Africa, provides a comprehensive overview of public sentiment following the transformative 2024 elections and the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU).

Key findings

- 1. Cautious optimism about the future:** The percentage of respondents believing life has worsened over the past five years has declined consistently, from 54% in 2022 to 43% in 2024. Similarly, the number of people expecting life to improve in the next five years has risen to 48%, compared to 36% in 2023 and 34% in 2022.
- 2. Support for the GNU:** 63% of respondents prefer the GNU to the previous ANC-only government. The inclusion of the DA (64% approval) and IFP (58% approval) has bolstered public confidence in the coalition, signalling goodwill toward multi-party governance.
- 3. Overlapping economic aspirations:** A decisive majority (83%) favour job creation over social grants, with 63% advocating for policies that enable business-led economic growth. These priorities align across demographic groups, reflecting consensus on economic empowerment.
- 4. Positive race relations:** More than half (53%) believe race relations have improved since 1994, and 87% agree that collaboration among racial groups is critical for national progress. 67% of South Africans report not to have experienced racism personally in the last five years, compared to 34% reporting the opposite. These numbers underscore a strong foundation for unity and socio-economic cohesion, despite South Africa's racially divided past.
- 5. Challenges of uncertainty:** Despite optimism, the rising percentage of respondents who are unsure about the future (20% in 2024, up from 13% in 2022) reflects socio-economic apprehension and illustrates the political risks should the GNU fail to deliver the hoped-for change.

Introduction

The 2024 annual IRR opinion survey was conducted from 25 September 2024 to 9 October 2024 to gauge the public's evolving views on South Africa's socio-political and economic landscape following the significant political shifts brought about by the elections of 29 May 2024. The national results led to the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU), an unprecedented coalition of ten political parties tasked with navigating the country through a period of uncertainty and opportunity.

This opinion survey's context lies in a society grappling with challenges ranging from economic stagnation to inequality to service delivery concerns – concerns that eroded the once-formidable majority rule of the African National Congress (ANC). However, the South African electorate did not endorse a specific party to achieve a new majority and succeed the ANC, leading to the creation of the GNU under President Cyril Ramaphosa.



As the data contained in this report show, the GNU has managed to secure what could be considered the benefit of the public doubt – with support for members of the GNU rising since May this year, and overall approval being shown for the major participants like the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) alongside the ANC in the multi-party government. This new political reality raises questions about the public’s trust in the GNU, its priorities for governance, and its expectations for the future.

Objectives

The survey sought to answer critical questions, including:

- How do South Africans perceive their current quality of life compared to five years ago, and how do they view their prospects for the next five years?
- What are the public’s views on the GNU, and how does it compare to the previous ANC-only government in terms of trust and support?
- Which socio-economic issues do citizens believe require the most urgent government attention?
- What are the prevailing attitudes toward race relations and inter-group cooperation?
- How do South Africans balance preferences for business-driven economic growth versus state-led interventions?

By exploring these areas, the survey aimed to provide evidence-based insights into public sentiment, guiding the public, including the GNU and its constituent parties, toward governance that reflects the priorities and aspirations of the electorate.

Methodology

The IRR’s 2024 opinion poll was designed to ensure accurate, representative, and reliable insights into the views of South Africans. This section outlines the methodological framework used to achieve these objectives.

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 604 respondents participated in the poll, comprising a diverse demographic cross-section. The design effect (DEFF) of 1.6831 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.

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 $\pm 5\%$ 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.

Geographic distribution

Respondents were drawn from all nine provinces, with the highest representation from Gauteng (23.1%) and KwaZulu-Natal (20.3%). Smaller contributions came from the Northern Cape (2.6%) and Free State (4.5%). Tribal areas and townships also featured prominently, comprising 38.4% and 34.6% of respondents, respectively.



| Province | % of Respondents |
|---------------|------------------|
| Gauteng | 23.1% |
| KwaZulu-Natal | 20.3% |
| Eastern Cape | 15.3% |
| Western Cape | 12.5% |
| Limpopo | 9.7% |
| Free State | 4.5% |
| Mpumalanga | 5.0% |
| North West | 7.0% |
| Northern Cape | 2.6% |

Age and gender

The survey skewed toward older respondents, with 37.5% aged between 45 and 64, and 19.6% aged 65 or older. This focus reflects the predominance of older, registered voters. Women were slightly more represented than men, comprising 53.2% of the sample.

| Age Group | % of Respondents |
|-----------|------------------|
| 18–24 | 6.8% |
| 25–34 | 18.6% |
| 35–44 | 17.5% |
| 45–64 | 37.5% |
| 65+ | 19.6% |

Language and education

isiZulu speakers formed the largest language group (24.5%), followed by isiXhosa (18.8%) and Afrikaans (12.4%). Education levels showed that a significant proportion (31.3%) had completed matric, while 11.5% had tertiary qualifications.

| Home Language | % of Respondents |
|-----------------|------------------|
| isiZulu | 24.5% |
| isiXhosa | 18.8% |
| Afrikaans | 12.4% |
| English | 10.4% |
| Other Languages | 33.9% |



Employment and income

Employment data revealed that 38.5% of respondents were seeking work, while 20.4% were employed in the formal sector. Income levels varied, with the largest group earning between R2 000 and R3 000 per month (22.2%).

| Income Level | % of Respondents |
|------------------|------------------|
| <R2 000 | 13.7% |
| R2 000<R3 000 | 22.2% |
| R3 000<R5 000 | 17.7% |
| R5 000<R8 000 | 9.5% |
| R8 000<R12 000 | 3.9% |
| R12 000<R20 000 | 4.0% |
| R20 000+ | 11.3% |
| Did not disclose | 17.6% |

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

Analysis and findings

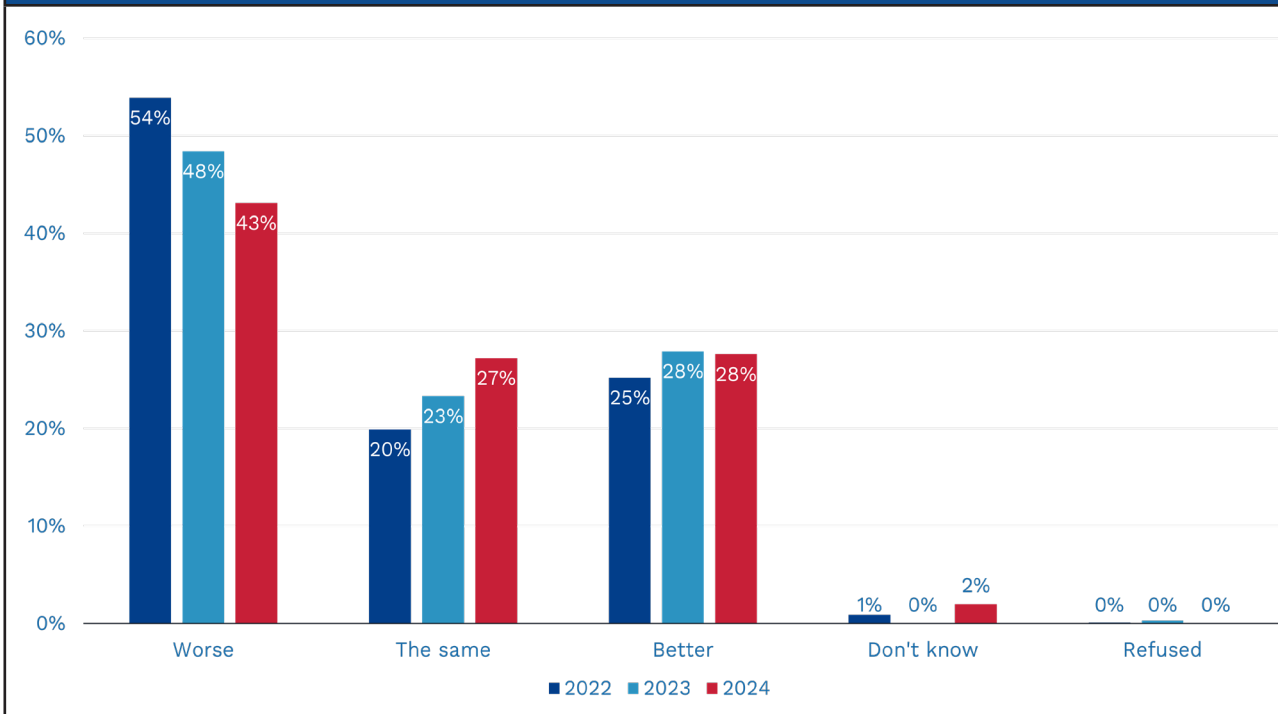
The 2024 IRR opinion poll provides a comprehensive snapshot of South African public sentiment during a transformative political period. The findings highlight both optimism and scepticism, with public perceptions shaped by a mix of cautious hope, entrenched socio-economic challenges, and evolving attitudes toward governance and policy priorities.

Fragile hope amid shifting politics

One of the clearest trends emerging from the survey is the decline in negative assessments of personal quality of life over the past five years. The percentage of respondents who believe their lives have worsened has fallen from 54% in 2022 to 43% in 2024. This shift suggests a gradual sense of retrospective improvement, most likely tied to the political changes brought about by the GNU's establishment. 28% of respondents in 2024 considered their lives to have improved over the last five years, compared to 20% in 2022.

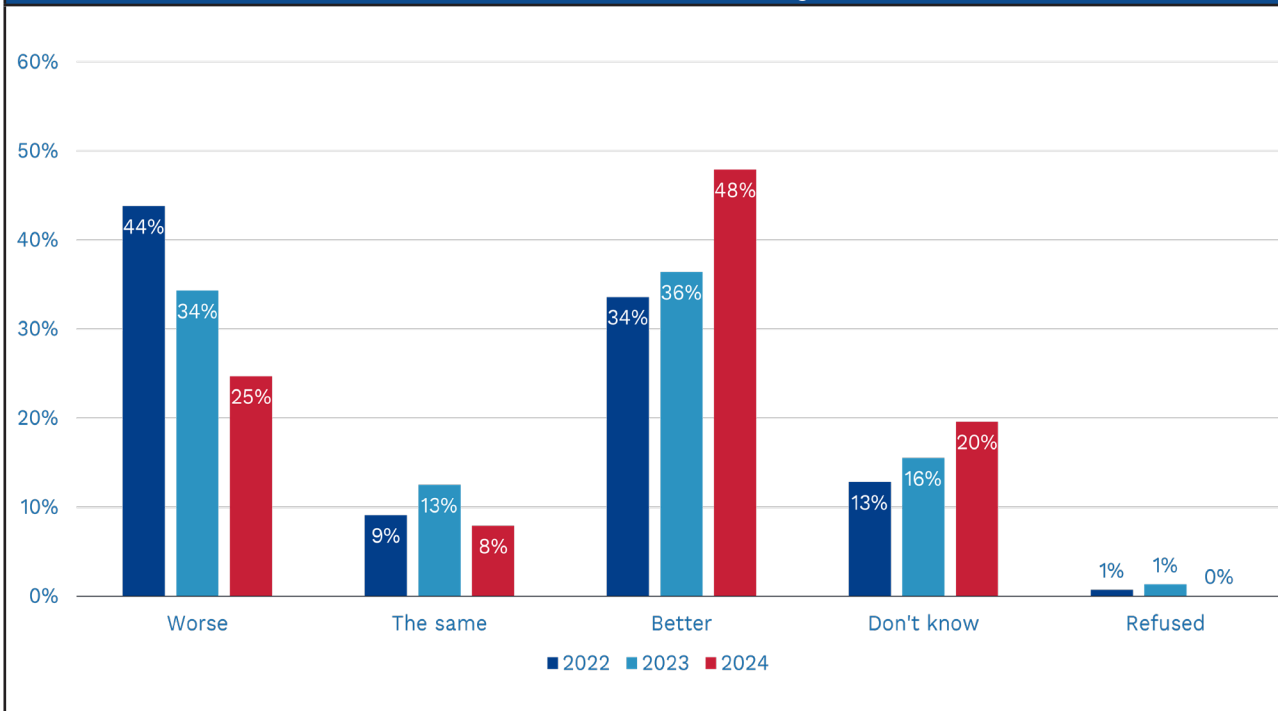


Is your life better than, the same as or worse than five years ago?



However, the most telling indicator of optimism is in the increase in the number of South Africans believing life will improve over the coming five years – from 34% in 2022 to 48% in 2024.

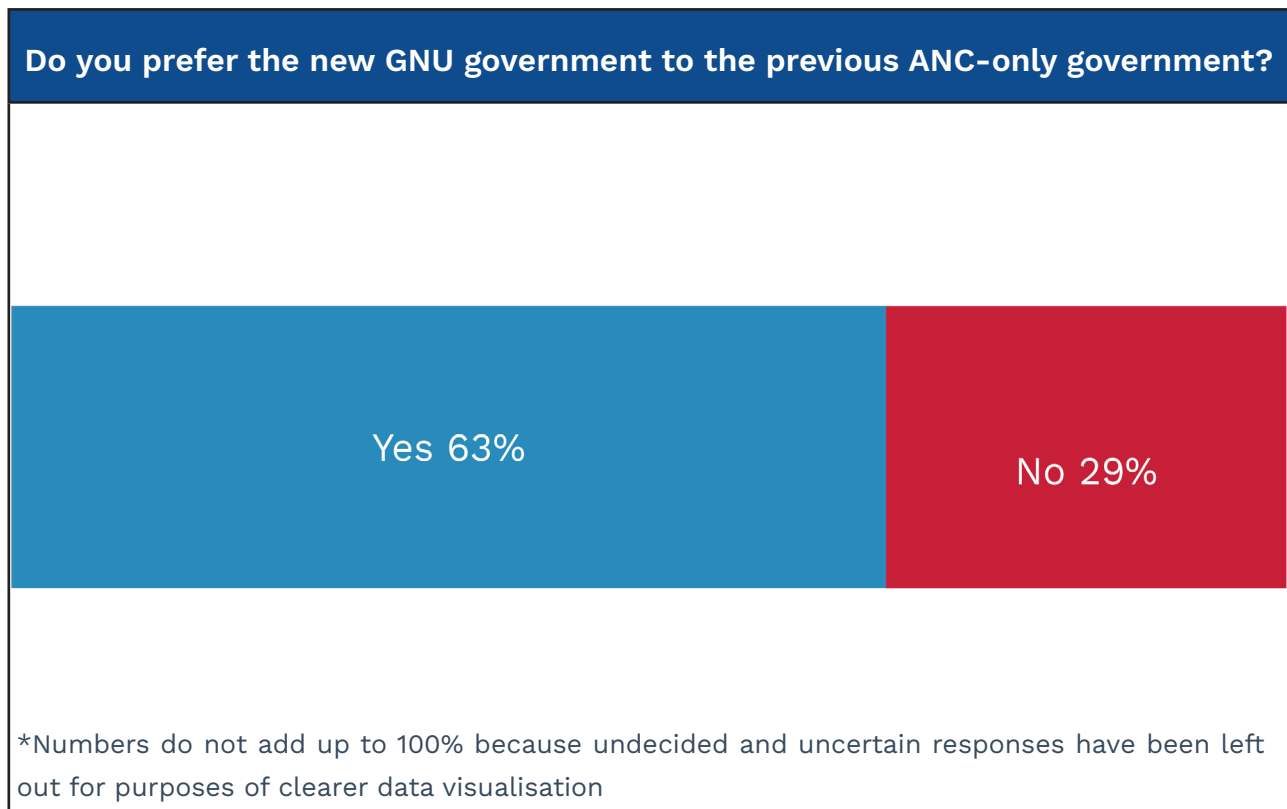
Do you think life five years from now will be better than, the same as or worse than today?



However, this optimism is tempered by a significant degree of uncertainty, with 20% of respondents expressing no clear expectation about the future – up from 13% in 2022, and 25% believing life will worsen, though markedly down from 44% in 2022. These findings reveal an electorate cautiously expecting positive socio-economic change.

Goodwill toward the GNU: a tentative mandate

Public sentiment toward the GNU, at the time of the survey, roughly 100 days into the governmental period of office, reflects a notable level of goodwill, with 63% of respondents preferring the coalition government to the previous ANC-only administration. Approval ratings for key coalition partners reinforce this positive perception: 64% of respondents support the DA's role in the GNU, and 58% endorse the inclusion of the IFP. This public confidence in the GNU's multi-party structure marks a significant shift toward embracing collaborative governance.



Do you like it that the DA is part of the GNU?

Yes 64%

No 28%

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

Do you like it that the IFP is part of the GNU?

Yes 58%

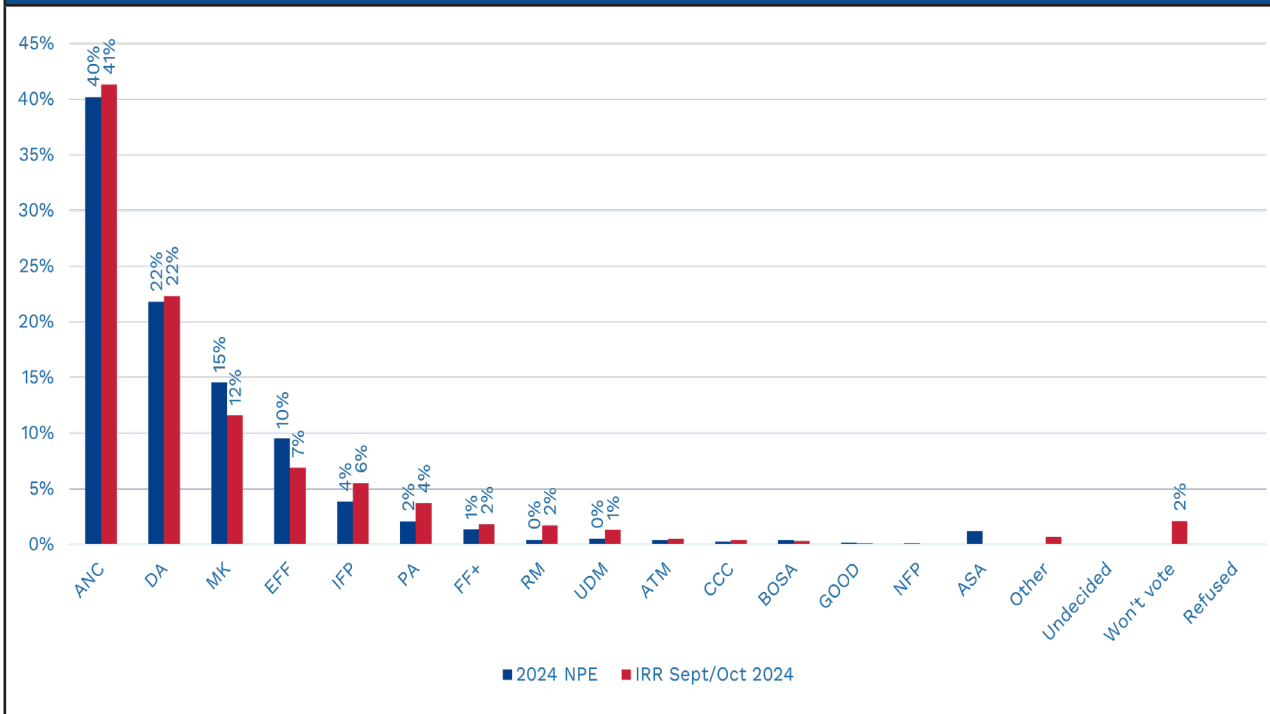
No 31%

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

Also notable is the across-the-board improvement in support for GNU parties since the May elections, compared to declines in support for non-GNU parties like uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF). Particularly of note in this regard is the DA's support that has remained stable, despite fears within the party that up to a quarter of DA voters were opposed to the party entering a coalition arrangement with the ANC.

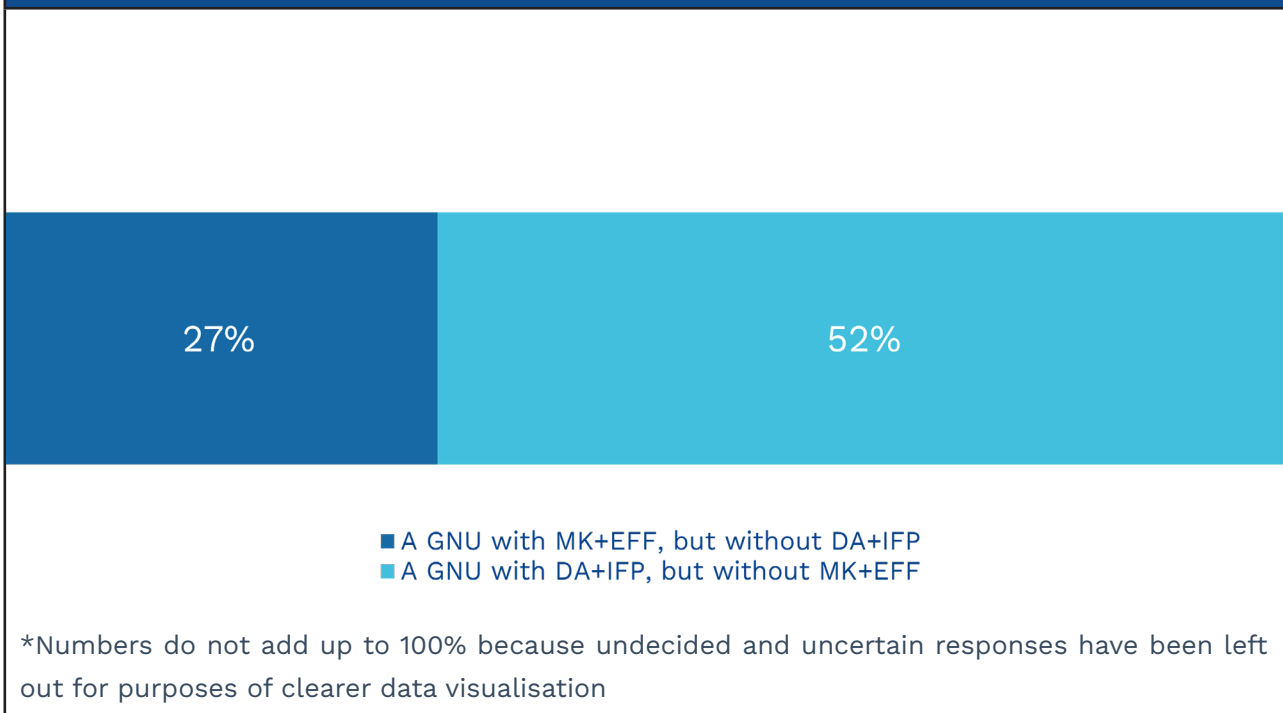


If a national election was held today, which party would you vote for?

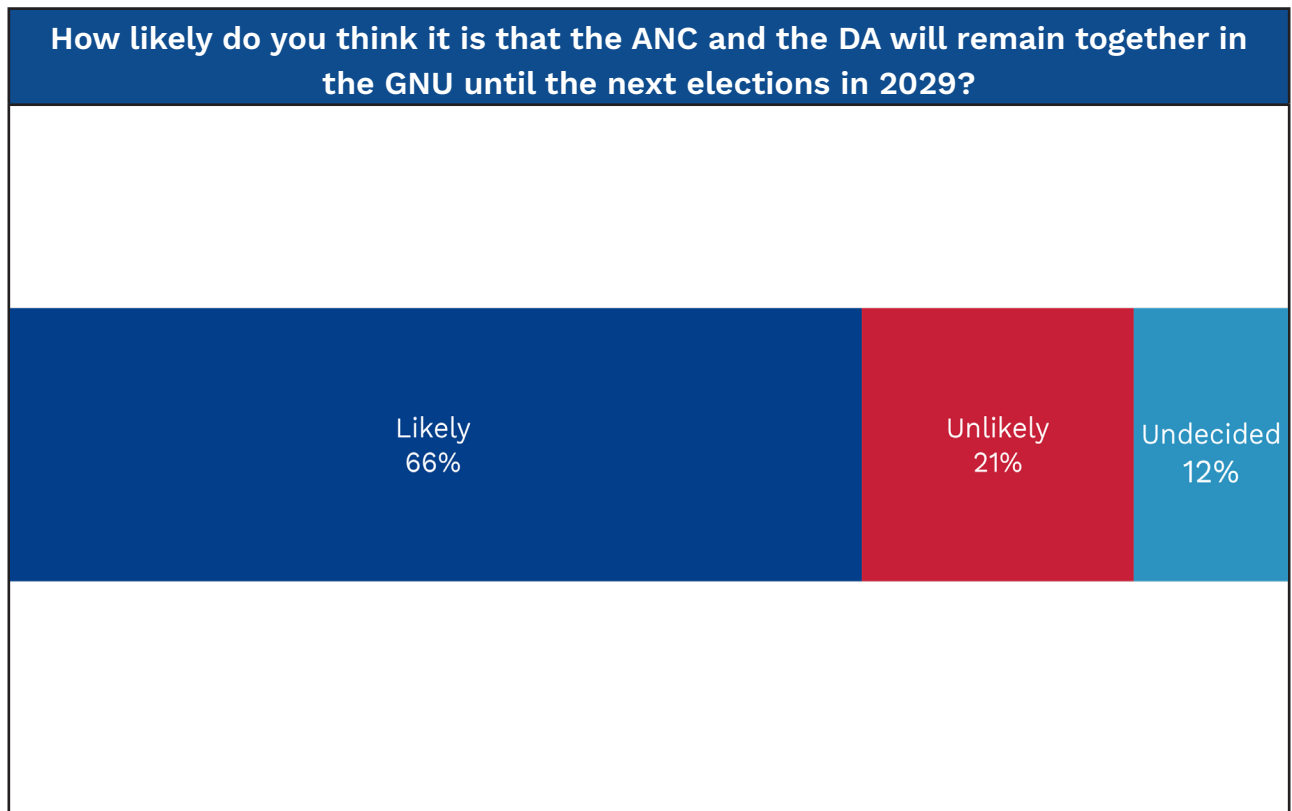


When asked about alternative coalition configurations, a striking preference emerged: 52% of respondents favoured a GNU featuring the DA and IFP, while only 27% preferred one including the EFF and MK. These data underscore a public inclination toward constitutionally moderate and pragmatic alliances over ideologically radical partnerships.

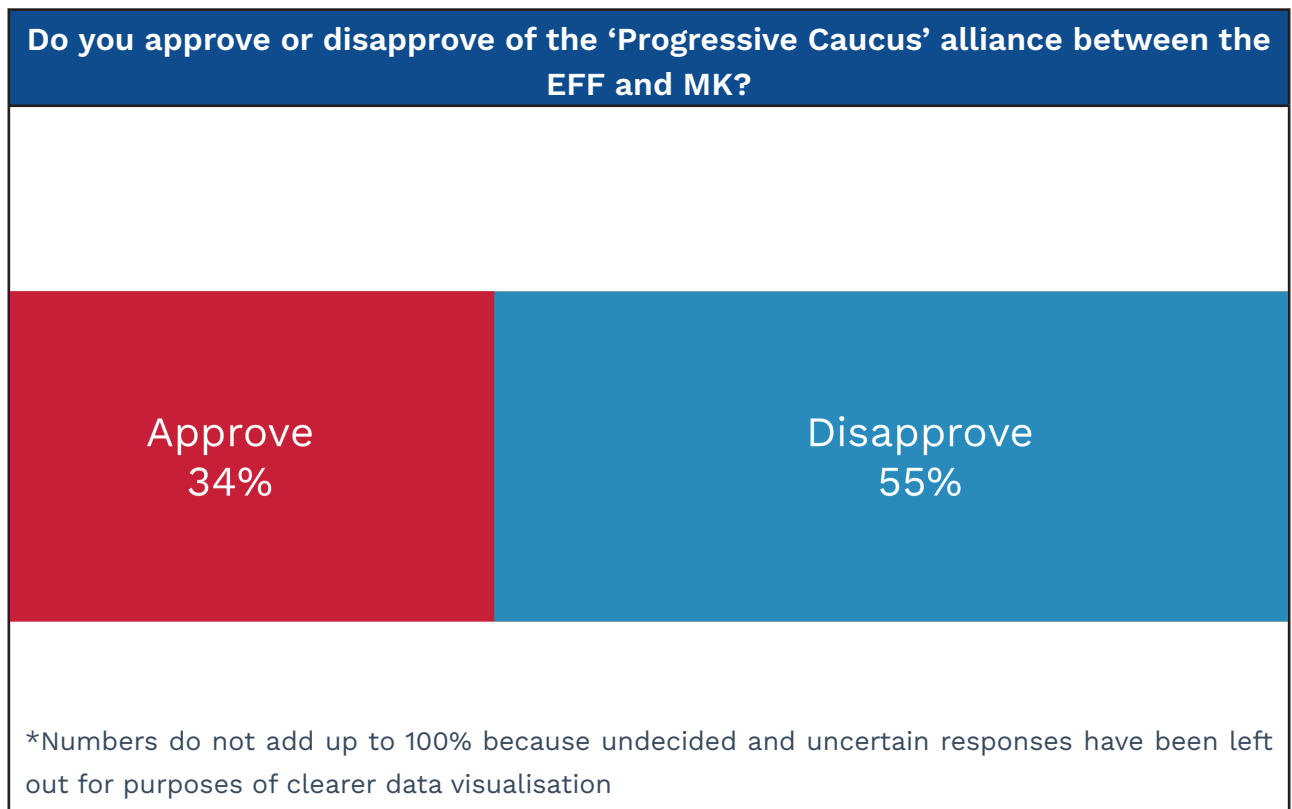
Which of the following government coalitions would you prefer?



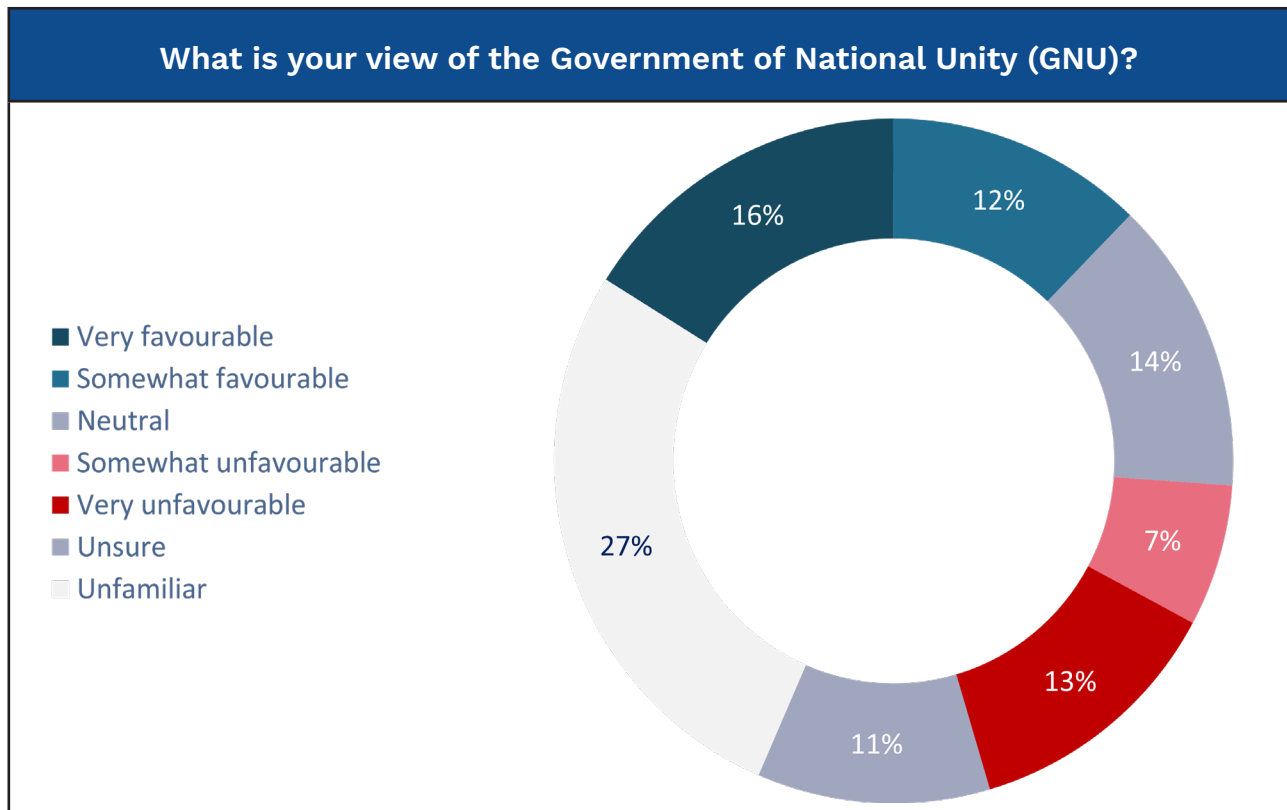
The belief that the ANC-DA partnership will endure until 2029, held by 66% of respondents, suggests further optimism about the coalition's stability, however, it likely also contains an element of moral expectation – that the ANC-DA collaboration is not only expected to work, but that it *ought* to do so and that the parties *ought* to make it work.



Yet, the Progressive Caucus alliance between the EFF and MK, disapproved of by 55%, demonstrates resistance to radical alignments, signalling potential risks for the GNU if it fails to meet public expectations.



Finally, the GNU's public overall approval stands at a total 28%, with 20% of South Africans disapproving. However, a majority of South Africans, a collective 52%, are either neutral about the GNU, unsure about it, or unfamiliar with it. This represents the growth space into which the GNU could govern itself into a stronger position – or into which negative perception of the GNU will grow at the advantage of the MK-led opposition.

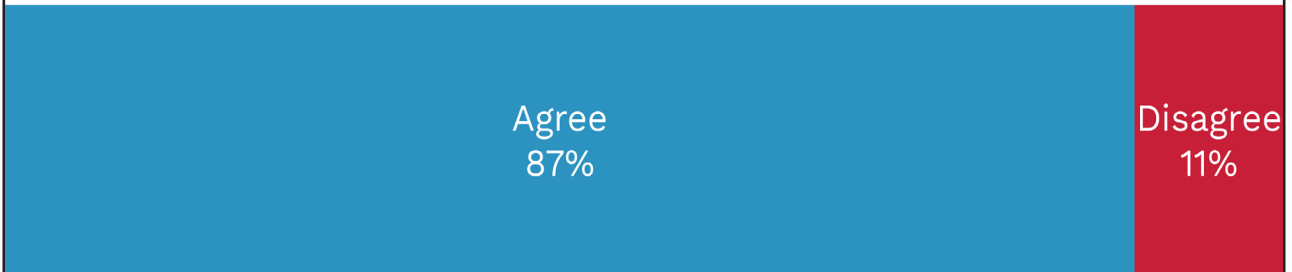


Historic instances abound, perhaps most notably the Weimar Republic, of moderate governments falling short of socio-economic expectations, with radical populists the ultimate electoral beneficiaries of the public's frustration.

Race relations: positive sentiment coupled with disillusionment

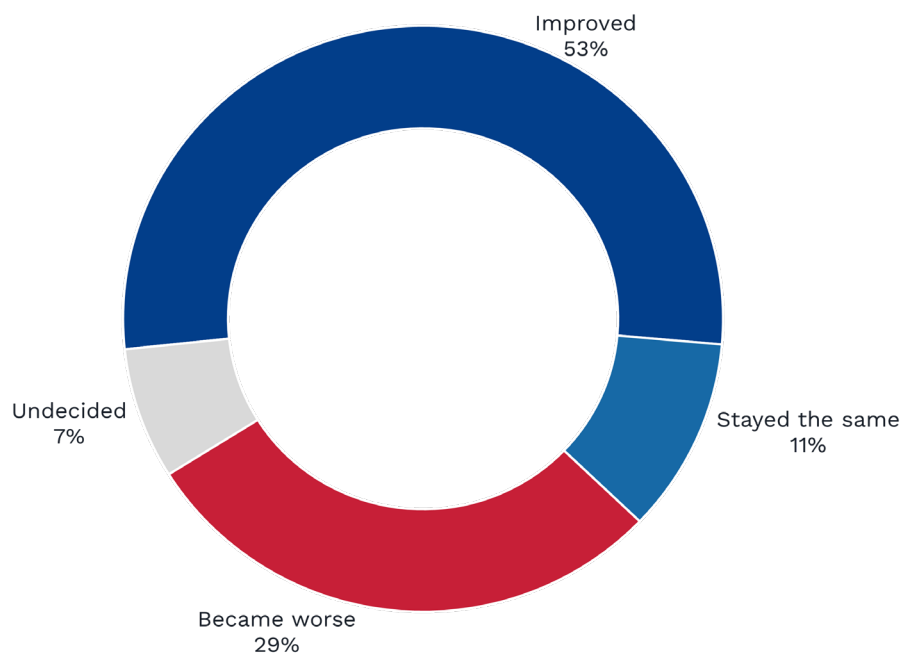
Race relations continue to be a relatively robust element of South African public sentiment. Over half of respondents (53%) believe that race relations have improved since 1994, while 87% agree that collaboration across racial groups is essential for progress. In addition to respondents providing their perspective on race relations holistically, the survey sought to investigate the personal experience of racism by South Africans. On this too, the numbers are positive with a 2:1 ratio emerging of people who have not been the victim of racism over the preceding five years (63%) and those who have (34%).

Do the different races need each other for progress and should there be full opportunity for all?



*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

Since 1994, have relations between people of different races in South Africa improved, stayed the same or become worse?



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

Yes
34%

No
63%

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

These findings reflect a shared recognition of inter-group cooperation as a cornerstone for socio-economic development.

Nevertheless, growing disillusionment with how racial discourse is framed in political debates is evident. Sixty-seven percent of respondents agree with the statement that “talk of racism and colonialism is by politicians trying to find excuses for their own failures.” This perception, alongside the widespread agreement (75%) that better education and job creation would reduce inequality, highlights a public preference for action-oriented solutions over divisive rhetoric.

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

Agree
67%

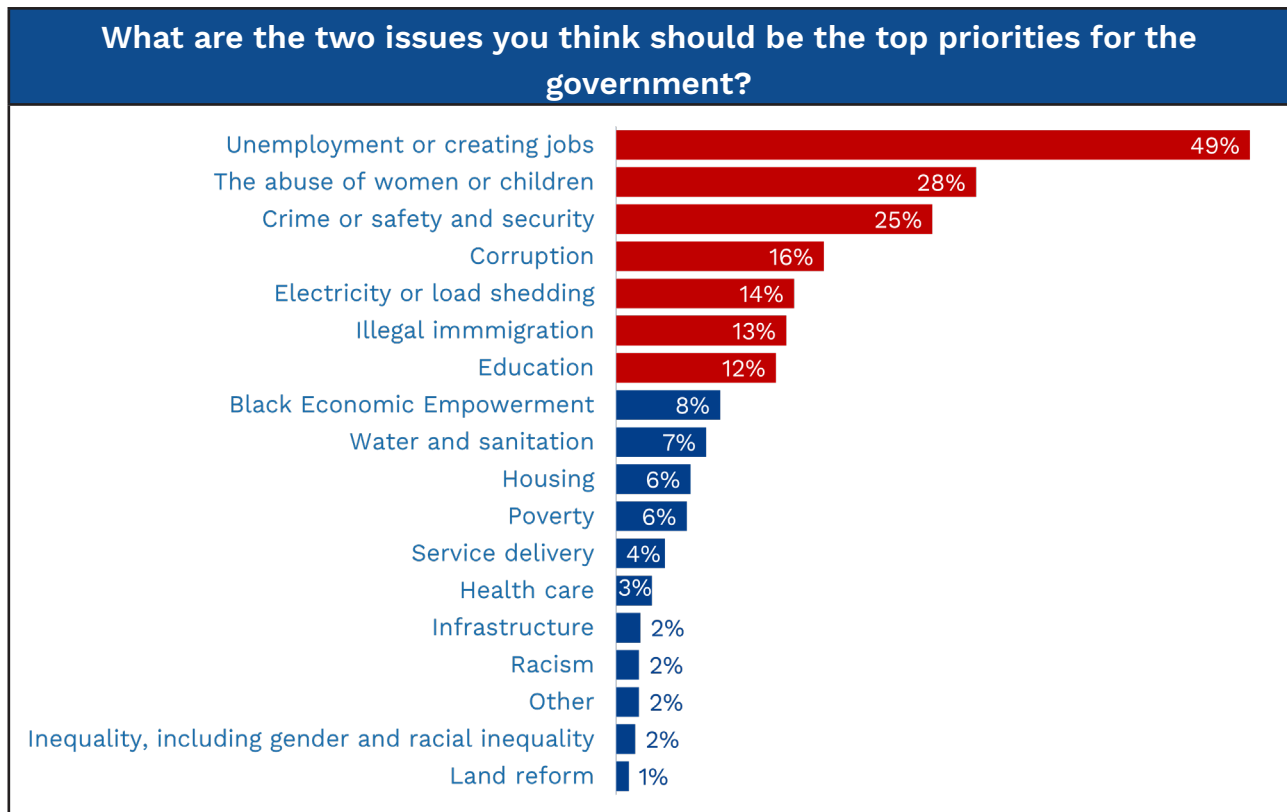
Disagree
26%

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation



Economic priorities: a strong mandate for growth-based empowerment

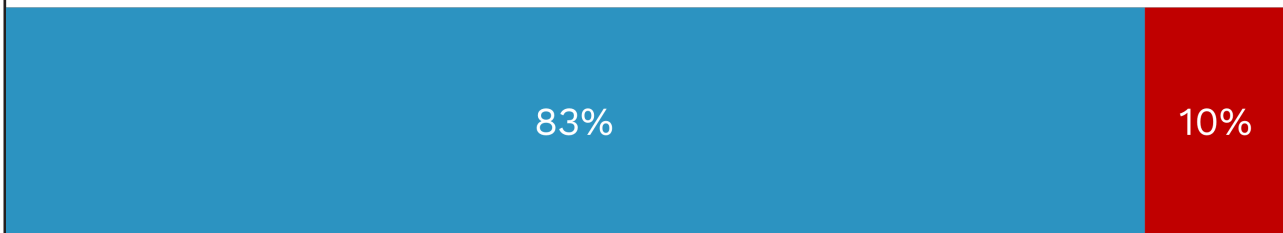
On economic matters, a fundamental attitudinal throughline emerges, particularly on the issue of job creation – the issue that ranks highest as a national priority (49%).



Given the primacy of job creation as economic imperative, a consensus emerges on both how jobs should be created and who should be the beneficiaries of job creation.

The data reveal overwhelming public alignment on economic priorities, with 83% of respondents favouring job creation over social grants. This preference underscores a widespread belief in empowerment through employment rather than dependency.

Should the government focus on more social grants or more on job creation?

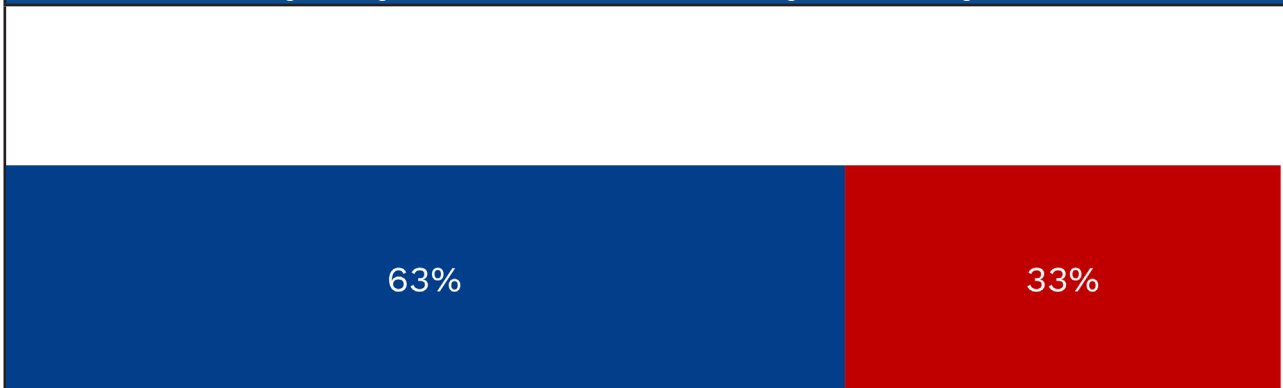


- The government should focus more on job creation
- The government should focus more on social grants

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

Furthermore, 63% support policies that enable business-led economic growth, compared to 37% who favour state-driven job creation funded by higher taxes.

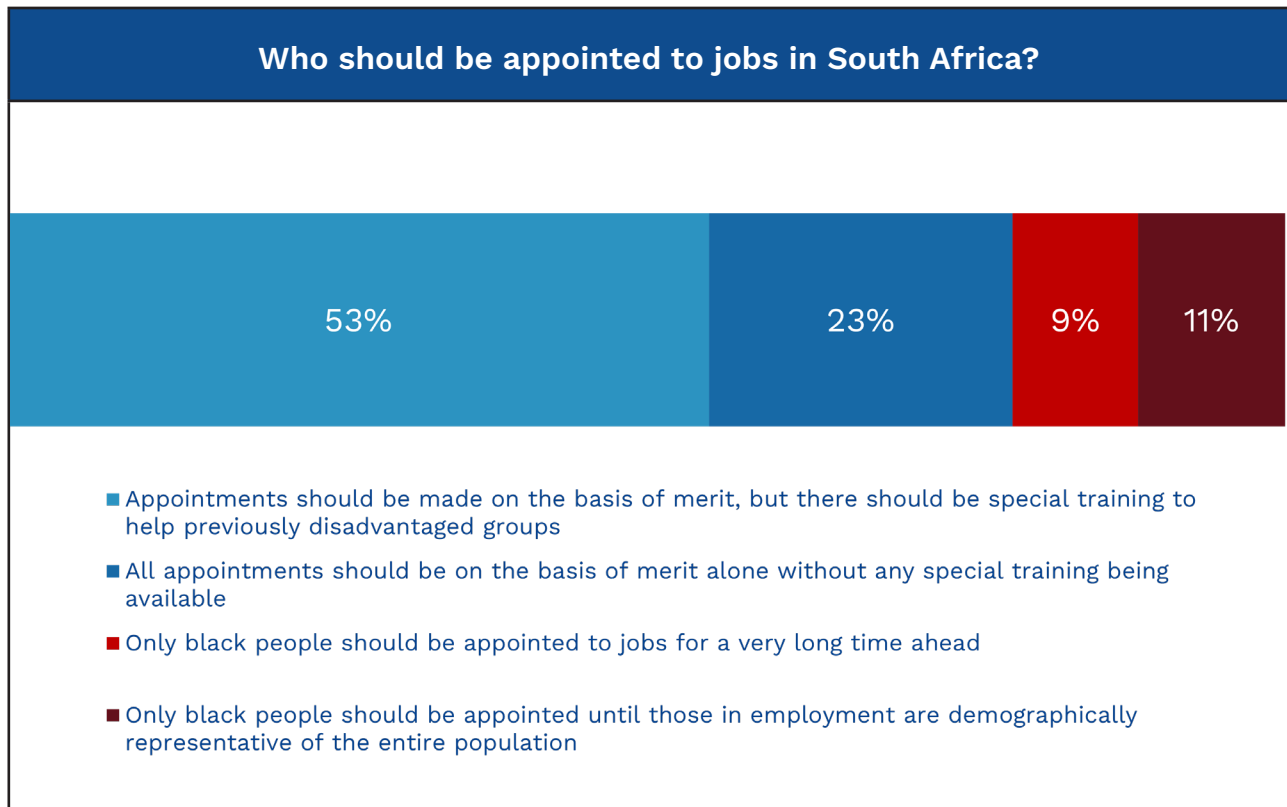
Many people in South Africa are without work. Which one of the following two ways do you believe is the best way to create jobs?



- The government must remove barriers to economic growth and allow businesses to create jobs
- The government must create more public sector jobs paid for through higher taxes

*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

With clear endorsement of growth-driven, primarily private-sector job creation considered optimal, respondents endorse merit-based appointments to jobs – direct repudiation of the race-based policies that have dominated labour legislation and regulations. 53% of South Africans support merit as the primary basis for employment, yet supported by special opportunities for skills development for previously disadvantaged people. 23% support a purely merit-based approach. A combined 20% support job reservation for black people.



The foolishness of decades of race-based employment policies and perversions is laid bare by the common sense of ordinary South Africans – an urgent lesson to learn, particularly for GNU parties tasked with the implementation of socio-economic policy to satisfy current raised expectations.

This appetite for non-racial, merit-based, growth-driven economic reform is further reflected in strong support for tax-funded vouchers that maximise choice as the core of empowerment, instead of paternalistic government handouts. In a reprimand to the forces within government pushing for educational centralisation through the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act, 92% of South Africans favour education vouchers to send children to schools of parental preference. 83% of South Africans support healthcare vouchers – a critical rebuke of the centralisation obsession of the National Health Insurance scheme that seeks to vastly limit the scope of choice available in terms of health care. 80% of South Africans endorse housing vouchers.

In your opinion, would tax-funded vouchers for schooling, health care, and housing be more effective in helping you to get ahead than current AA and BEE policies, which focus on management posts, ownership deals, and preferential tenders?

Yes
81%

No
12%

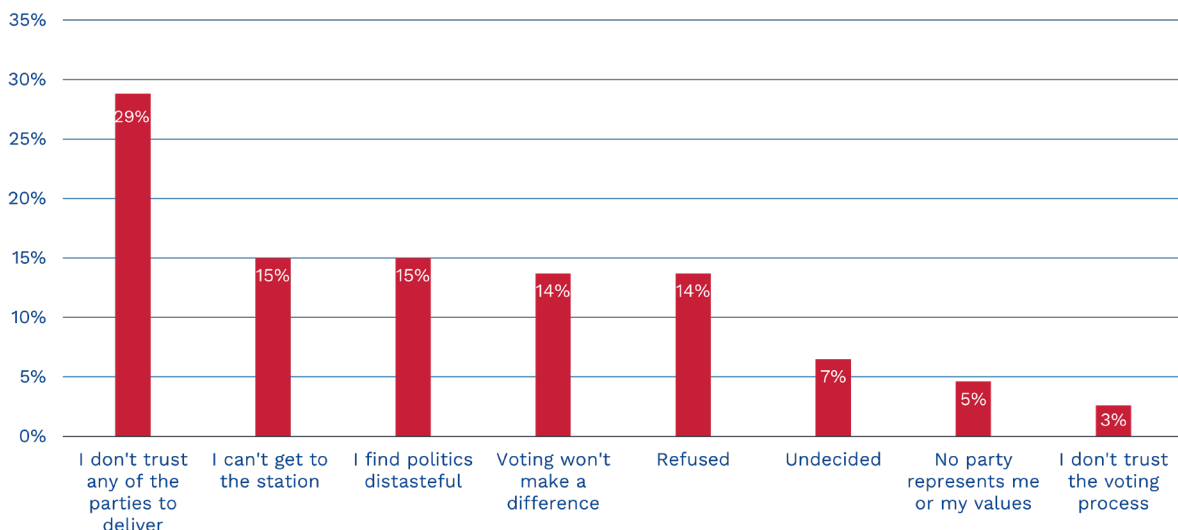
*Numbers do not add up to 100% because undecided and uncertain responses have been left out for purposes of clearer data visualisation

These findings suggest a strong public desire for policies that empower individuals while challenging the entrenched reliance on centralised mechanisms like affirmative action and Black Economic Empowerment (BEE).

Distrust and political apathy

Despite the goodwill toward the GNU, distrust in political parties and processes poses a significant challenge, particularly taking data on non-voting motivators from the IRR's 2023 survey into account. Among non-voters for the 2024 elections, 29% cited distrust in political parties as the primary reason for abstention. This lack of trust extends to the broader political system, with many respondents questioning the efficacy of voting itself.

Reasons for not voting in the 2024 general elections



Disengagement is compounded by scepticism about certain political alignments. While the Progressive Caucus alliance between the EFF and MK is viewed negatively by 55%, its support level of 30% signals a potentially growing base for revolutionary opposition parties. Failure by the GNU to deliver on key socio-economic priorities could shift political momentum toward more radical parties in future elections.

Opportunities and risks for the GNU

The survey findings underscore a critical juncture for the GNU:

- 1. Opportunities:** The strong alignment on job creation, support for pragmatic coalitions, and positive race relations provide fertile ground for evidence-based governance that addresses public priorities.
- 2. Risks:** Rising political apathy, distrust in leadership, and disillusionment with the pace of reform represent significant risks that could destabilise the GNU's mandate.

The path forward requires balancing goodwill with decisive reforms that address the broad public desire for the removal of socio-economic obstacles and the prioritisation of job creation through economic growth. The GNU must leverage its current support to enact tangible socio-economic pro-growth reforms, reestablish trust in democratic processes, and deliver on the shared aspirations of South Africans. Failure to do so could lead to a political realignment that favours more radical alternatives, undermining the coalition's stability and political viability.

Conclusion

The 2024 IRR opinion polling survey offers a penetrating and often counter-intuitive – at least in terms of public narratives – perspective on the evolving socio-economic and political sentiments of South Africans during a transformative period in the nation's democratic journey. Following the most fragmented election in the country's history, the establishment of the GNU has introduced both opportunities for progress and significant risks of political instability should those opportunities be wasted.

The findings contained in this report demonstrate a nation cautiously optimistic about its future. While fewer South Africans feel their lives have worsened over the past five years, and more are hopeful about the years ahead, a substantial proportion remains uncertain. This duality reflects both the fragile goodwill directed at the GNU and the electorate's apprehension regarding the coalition's ability to deliver tangible improvements in their daily lives.

The GNU enjoys notable public support, with its multi-party framework resonating as a viable alternative to the previous ANC-only government. However, this goodwill is conditional and could dissipate without meaningful progress on key issues. Economic growth and job creation emerged as the unifying aspirations of South Africans, with overwhelming support for policies that empower individuals and remove structural barriers to prosperity. At the same time, disillusionment with political processes and scepticism toward certain political alignments signal an urgent need for renewed public trust in governance.



Race relations remain a positive aspect of national sentiment, providing a foundation for unity and socio-economic cohesion. However, the electorate's preference for actionable solutions over divisive rhetoric highlights the necessity of focusing on practical reforms rather than symbolic debates.

For the GNU, the path forward is clear but challenging. It must seize the opportunity to implement evidence-based policies that reflect the priorities of the electorate. Failure to address public demands for economic reform, job creation, and political accountability risks a backlash that could empower more radical alternatives, fundamentally reshaping South Africa's political landscape.

This poll underscores a pivotal moment in South Africa's history, offering both a cautionary tale and a roadmap for progress. The onus is on the GNU and its constituent parties to act decisively, leveraging public goodwill to foster stability, growth, and unity in a nation seeking a brighter future. The stakes could not be higher, and the outcomes will determine South Africa's trajectory for years to come.



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