

Born Frees positive about SA despite socio-economic challenges

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A new generation of South African voters stepped into the spotlight in 2014. Known as the 'Born Frees', this generation, making up 40% of the current total population in South Africa, was born after the end of apartheid in 1994 and has only known life under a democratic ANC leadership. The 2014 presidential elections that took place earlier this year presented the first opportunity for a potential 1.9-million Born Frees to cast their vote, with 34% of these registering to vote. With various opinions existing around the importance of these young people's vote, market research company TNS's Metro OmniChek survey sought to shed some light on their socio-political behaviour and perceptions.

At the helm of this research was Senior Researcher at TNS, Kambe Mwaba. She explained that the large-scale Metro OmniChek survey, conducted between 7 and 20 February 2014, had a sample size of just under 2000 and was fully representative of South African adults in terms of race, gender and the seven major metropolitan areas.

The findings of the survey showed that three-quarters (75%) of Born Frees agreed that political issues have a direct impact on their lives - almost the same as the national average of 73%. Similarly, the majority (83%) claimed that it is important to be politically informed, again matching the national average (81%). Interestingly, the Born Frees, all of whom would have been first-time voters, were just as likely to vote based on loyalty (71%) and gratitude (67%) as older South Africans, perhaps alluding to the idea that young people tend to hold the same political views as their parents.

While little difference was seen in voting and political attitudes when comparing Born Frees and older people, differences were more strongly linked to race, followed by education level and region. For example, looking at voting based on loyalty on a national level, 75% of black respondents felt an obligation to vote for a particular party, compared to 61% of white respondents. Finally, from a regional perspective, those living in Cape Town (66%), East London (62%) and Port Elizabeth (58%) tended to have lower proportions indicating that they would vote based on loyalty. The figures in Durban (74%), Pretoria (73%) and the Greater Johannesburg area (73%) were similar to the national average of 71%; however, it is interesting to note that in Soweto the percentage rises to 85% claiming that they would vote based on loyalty.

The next part of the research measured whether people think Jacob Zuma is doing a good job as president of the country - something that TNS has been measuring since his inauguration in 2009. Overall, the number of people who agree President Zuma is doing a good job has been declining over time and is now at the lowest it has ever been, with just over one third (34%) agreeing with the statement, compared to almost 60% five years ago. The Born Frees showed a similar trend, with 40% agreeing that he is doing a good job compared to the national average of 34%. It is worth noting that as age increases, there was a decline in the proportion of respondents that agree that Jacob Zuma is doing a good job as president, particularly amongst those 50 years and older (29% compared to the national average of 34%).

When asked more specific questions around their feelings towards South Africa and their expectations for the future, the youth tended to be as, if not more, enthusiastic than older respondents. For example, the Born Frees were more likely to feel positive about the future of South Africa than older respondents (81% compared to 71%) and less likely than older respondents to agree that the country is headed for social and economic collapse (51% compared to 60%). This suggests that, in spite of socio-economic challenges such as service delivery and high youth unemployment, with more than half of South African youth unemployed according to the World Economic Forum Global Risk Report (the third highest in the world), Born Frees remain relatively upbeat about their futures, as well as the future of the country.

Mwaba commented, "It is encouraging to see this positivity and enthusiasm coming through in this generation." However, she added that, despite the expectations placed on the Born Frees in South Africa, given the fact that they are free from the restrictions of the past, the unfortunate reality is that many of the social and economic conditions for the majority of

people have not changed dramatically since 1994. The data also suggests that, while the youth may not have had the same experiences as their parents, they still listen to them, and the conditions and community around them have an effect on which party they vote for. In addition, despite both the IEC and political parties appealing to the Born Frees to vote, only a third (34%) of them actually registered to vote. This suggests that, while respondents in the research data claimed that political issues are important to them, still more work needs to be done to keep the youth engaged with these issues.

South Africa has one of the youngest populations in the world, with 40% of the current total population born post-1994. Of these, 1.9-million were eligible to vote, a relatively small proportion (around 6%) of the total voting population. However only 34% registered to vote, which meant that over a million born frees did not register to vote in this year's elections. In spite of this relatively small number, opposition parties emphasized the importance of the 'Born Free' vote ahead of the voter registration period in 2013, claiming it would significantly dent the ANC's performance at the polls. However, President Zuma responded that the term 'Born Frees' is an insult to the youth and that they know the struggle and that there is an organisation that fought for freedom.

Be that as it may, Mwaba notes, "While the Born Frees currently make up a relatively small part of the voting population, they will become increasingly important in the years to come. In fact, they are estimated to make up a third of the eligible voting population by the 2019 elections." With this in mind, it is essential to consider this generation's socio-political behaviour and thinking in order to encourage a population that is truly engaged with political issues, and not one that is apathetic to the voting process as a means of achieving change.

Technical note:

All the studies were conducted amongst 1996 adults (1288 black people, 355 white people, 244 coloured people and 109 Indians/Asians) in the seven major metropolitan areas: they have a margin of error of under 2.5% for the results found for the total sample. The studies use probability sampling techniques and are fully representative of the major metropolitan areas. The studies were conducted by TNS South Africa as part of their ongoing research into current social and political issues and were funded by TNS. For more details, please visit us at www.tnsglobal.co.za.

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