

Survey sheds light on who marched against President Zuma and why

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The face and character of protests in South Africa seems to be changing. Reuters/Marius Bosch

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South Africa has long been described as the “[protest capital of the world](#)”. But the protests have largely been confined to black townships and informal settlements.

The student protests of [2015-2016](#) suggested that this was beginning to change, with students of all races marching to places such as the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) headquarters Luthuli House, Parliament and Union Buildings. But the most recent marches were the first time in post-apartheid South Africa that such a united force was seen against a president and the governing party - [the ANC](#).

This followed growing discontent towards President Jacob Zuma and the ANC that was reflected in the loss of support in the 2016 [local government elections](#). The outcry following Zuma’s recent cabinet [reshuffle](#), widely seen as being influenced by the interests of the [Gupta family](#), culminated in nationwide protests on [7 April 2017](#).

Thousands of people marched across the country, notably in Pretoria, Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town, demanding that Zuma resign. These were followed by a march of the [combined main opposition parties](#) on Wednesday 12 April to the seat of government in Pretoria that attracted tens of thousands of protesters, making it possibly the largest march in post-apartheid history.

What might these marches tell us about the future direction of South Africa’s political landscape?

The 7 April march was largely organised under the banner of the [Save South Africa campaign](#), which is made up of a variety of civil society organisations and business leaders. The predominately middle class makeup of the campaign was widely debated [online](#). But who did attend and why? Was this a rebellion of the white middle class?

A research team from the University of Johannesburg decided to find out by conducting a short survey with 185 marchers. While a small sample, the research team felt that provided a fairly accurate sample and an indicative sense of who was involved and why.

Our findings were that the majority of those who marched were middle-class and mostly black. Most said they were there to protest against Zuma.

Who marched?

Of the 185 people surveyed, 56% were black African and 30% were white. The marchers were predominately middle class. Of those surveyed, 58% held what could be considered middle class occupations – either professional or managerial, technician and associated professions or clerks. Only 10% could be regarded as holding traditionally working class occupations – either skilled manual labour or trades work, domestic work or elementary. 13% were self-employed.

The middle class nature of the protest is reinforced when looking at the marchers’ place of residence and mode of transport to the march. Most of the marchers surveyed lived in a suburb (74%) and nearly half (42%) used a private car to travel to the march. The average age of the marcher surveyed was 41, again suggesting that the marchers were likely to be people somewhat established in their careers. Just under two thirds (61%) were men.

Why did people march?

The reasons that people gave for marching can be categorised into one of five themes: anti-Zuma, change, social justice, the economy and/or corruption and other. The anti-Zuma theme was the most popular, with 41% of marchers surveyed providing this as their reason for attending.



Protesters in Cape Town call on President Zuma to step down. Reuters/Sumaya Hisham

But identifying as anti-Zuma should not be equated with being anti-ANC. A number of respondents made clear that their opposition was to Zuma and not to the ANC. For instance, a retired 58 year old white man from Centurion said that he was at the march

to support all South Africans to get rid of the Zuptas (Zuma and the Guptas), not the ANC.

While a black African self-employed 42-year old women from Benoni said

Zuma must go! Leadership is not for the people... I'm an ANC person but we want our old ANC back.

Nearly half (48%) of black Africans responded with anti-Zuma sentiments. For white respondents, this was the second most common response, 26%. The second most common theme overall, and the most common theme for white respondents, was social justice. This encompassed a broad range of perspectives. For instance, one white 48-year-old housewife from Centurion said

tax money ... is not being used to help the poor. Zuma misuses our money, the poor get poorer. Struggle people didn't die for this!

Other respondents displayed their concern for social justice around a rights-based discourse. One 22-year-old black African student from the Pretoria suburb of Faerie Glen said he was at the march “in defence of the constitution”. While others framed their reason for being at the march around the future of their children.

The third most common theme was concerns for the economy and or corruption. For instance, a black 33-year-old operations manager from Randburg said,

My mom is a government employee – her pension fund will be looted and it’s not their money. Zero leadership in this country. State is corrupt. Junk status.

Women were slightly more likely than men to raise issues of the economy and or corruption. Lastly, need for change accounted for 11% of respondents. No significant difference in the reasons for marching by class could be determined, partly because the sample of working class people was too small to draw any conclusions.

Future prospects

Most of the respondents surveyed were not part of any political grouping, with most (57%) reporting that they had attended the march with family or friends, and nearly a quarter (23%) saying they had come alone. Time will tell whether this loose network of people will be able to build and sustain a collective movement. As other commentators have [highlighted](#), a movement that centres on removing Zuma alone is unlikely to bring the socio-economic change demanded by poor and working class protesters almost daily in the country’s mainly black townships and [informal settlements](#). Can concerns for the pensions of government employees be united with demands for service delivery from those very same government employees? It remains to be seen.

Molefe Pilane, an independent researcher, contributed to the survey.