Trends in attitudes toward foreigners in South Africa, 1997-2011

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 44 | Matthias Krönke

Summary

In public debate about the resurgence of xenophobic violence in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng provinces in March-April 2015, which killed at least seven people and displaced more than 5,000 (Smith, 2015), a considerable amount of ink has been spilled on trying to map out why the attacks took place. Broadly speaking, one can group the various explanations into three categories. The first is King Goodwill Zwelithini's inflammatory speech during a "moral regeneration event." The second is a structural argument pointing to the country's widespread poverty, inequality, and concomitant frustration at the non-delivery of basic services exacerbated by economic competition posed by foreigners. A third explanation invokes South Africa's supposed inherent violence and the opportunistic and sporadic actions of criminal elements.

Collectively these explanations fail to broaden the analytical scope beyond the areas and time period in which the violence occurred. By looking at longitudinal trends in South Africans' attitudes toward foreigners, we might be able to place xenophobic attacks that erupted dramatically in 2008 and 2015 – but have also occurred sporadically at other times – into a broader context of cross-cultural interactions, identity, and citizenship and move beyond simplistic explanations that equate poverty with xenophobia.

This dispatch presents an initial multidimensional analysis of citizens' attitudes toward foreigners in South Africa from 1997 to 2011, based on data from the 1997 Institute for Democracy in Africa (IDASA) Political Culture survey and Afrobarometer surveys in 2008 and 2011. Building on previous Afrobarometer analyses (Carter, 2010; Mataure, 2013), this dispatch disaggregates the data according to respondents' poverty levels, education levels, and racial groups. It also provides insight into over-time trends in tolerance toward foreigners according to geographic areas (provinces as well as urban/rural residence), revealing several drastic temporal shifts as well as continuities. This analysis focuses on South Africans' attitudes (rather than action taken against foreigners) as a useful point of departure to further disentangle the complexities of xenophobia.

Data sources

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by IDASA, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in 2008 and 2011. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Analysis of smaller subsamples results in wider margins of uncertainty surrounding numerical results.

Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, and 2006.

IDASA survey

Prior to cooperating with Afrobarometer, IDASA conducted the Political Culture survey in June-July 1997. The survey consisted of face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with a nationally representative sample of 3,500 adult South Africans, which provides national results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level, with larger margins around sub-national estimates.

Key findings

- More than one in five South Africans would like the government to deport all foreigners, irrespective of their legal status. Socioeconomic factors such as levels of education and poverty are only weakly associated with the most xenophobic attitudes.

- Between 1997 and 2011, more than one in 10 individuals indicated that they would be "very likely" to take action against foreigners who attempted to move into their neighbourhood or operate a business in their area, although there are noticeable changes over time when disaggregating the data according to education and poverty levels.

- In 2008 and 2011, one-third of South Africans thought that the government was handling immigration-related issues "very badly." Urban residents were more dissatisfied with the government's performance than rural respondents.

Trust in foreigners

To better understand variation in levels of tolerance for immigrants, this section contextualises attitudes toward foreigners by comparing them to South Africans' attitudes toward relatives and other people they know before disaggregating their views toward foreigners along several sub-dimensions.

Not surprisingly, South Africans' trust in their relatives is fairly stable and far higher than their trust in other people (Table 1). The difference in trust between "other people you know" and "foreigners in South Africa" is striking. In 2011, 23% of respondents indicated that they don't trust "at all" other people they know, an increase of 6 percentage points from 2008. There is a similar increase in distrust vis-à-vis foreigners, but the absolute numbers are twice as high (67% in 2011). Men and women are about equally likely to express distrust.

Table 1: South Africans' level of trust | 2008-2011

|	Not at all		Just a little		Somewhat		A lot	
	2008	2011	2008	2011	2008	2011	2008	2011
Relatives	6	6	13	15	28	28	53	50
Other people you know	13	23	34	38	38	30	13	8
Foreigners in South Africa	60	67	23	21	11	9	3	2

Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following types of people? (%)*

Disaggregating responses according to apartheid race categories shows small differences between groups and over time. In 2008, Coloureds were the most distrusting group (88%

trusted foreigners "just a little" or "not at all"), while whites were the least distrusting group (80%). Three years later, Afrobarometer found an across-the-board increase in distrust, with Indians/Asians now the most distrusting group (92%), followed by Coloured (90%), black (89%), and white South Africans (82%).

These high levels of distrust also prevail across different levels of education. Respondents with no formal education consistently trusted foreigners living in South Africa the least (88% in 2008 and 89% in 2011 who said "not at all" or "just a little"). Somewhat surprisingly, respondents whose highest level of education was primary school were the least distrustful group (79%) in 2008. This value rose to 88% in 2011, putting them on par with citizens who had attained higher levels of formal education (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: South Africans' trust in foreigners** | by level of education | 2008-2011
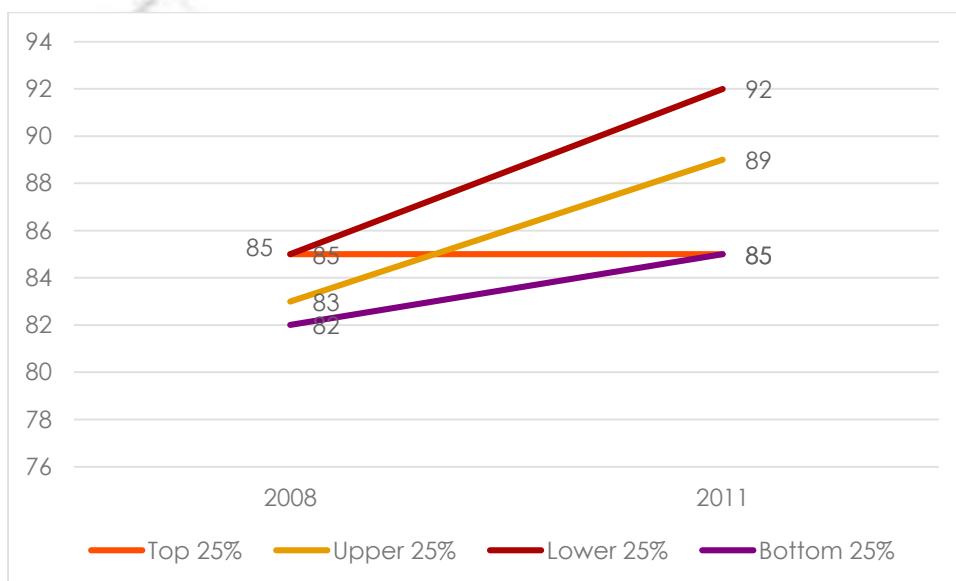
(% who said "not at all" or "just a little")

While available data do not allow us to test the popular theory that poverty caused the xenophobic attacks, it may be of interest to disaggregate respondents' level of trust according to their level of poverty. The Afrobarometer surveys asked respondents how often they had gone without food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and a cash income over the previous year. Using these responses and creating a common factor (the Lived Poverty Index), this analysis subdivides the factor into four groups (from Top 25% = Never experiencing shortages to Bottom 25% = frequently suffering from shortages).

Contrary to popular discourse, those who most frequently suffer from a shortage of basic necessities distrust foreigners less than the rest of society, though differences are small (Figure 2).

Figure 2: South Africans' level of trust in foreigners | by respondents' poverty level | 2008-2011
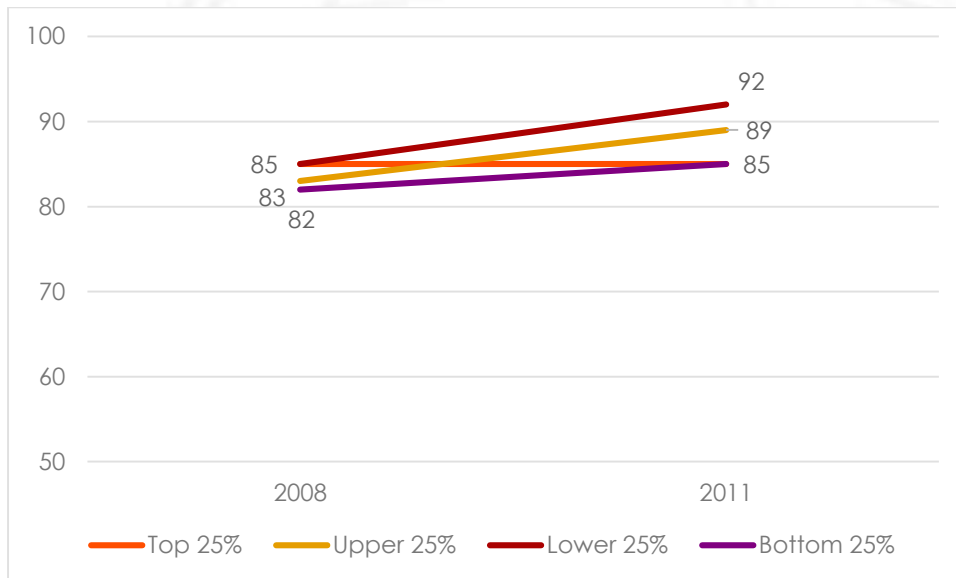
(% who said "not at all" or "just a little")

Overall, this first part of the analysis shows that South Africans' distrust of foreigners is not a fringe phenomenon but rather is prevalent across racial, educational, and poverty lines.

Tolerance of foreigners

Policy preferences

In the surveys in 1997 and 2008 (but not 2011), respondents were asked which of the foreigners living in South Africa should be sent back to their own countries. Figure 3 indicates only minor changes over time, the most significant being a 4-percentage-point increase in support for a skills-based approach, i.e. deporting foreigners who are not contributing to South Africa's economy. More than one in five South Africans preferred the deportation of all foreigners, irrespective of their potential to contribute to the economy or their legal status in the country.

Dividing respondents according to their racial groups uncovers some interesting changes. In 1997, 25% of black South Africans wanted the government to follow the most restrictive approach (i.e. to deport all foreigners), while white (17%), Indian (12%), and Coloured (9%) respondents were more tolerant. Eleven years later, however, the proportion of Coloureds in favour of this approach had tripled (to 27%), followed by white (25%), black (20%), and Indian (14%) South Africans.

In 1997, respondents who had received post-secondary education were almost four times as likely as respondents with no formal education to favour the skills-based approach (Figure 4). This gap decreased from 21 to 4 percentage points in 2008. By contrast, respondents with the least formal education consistently supported the most restrictive policy option in 1997 and 2008. The difference between respondents with no formal education and the other three groups increased slightly in 2008 (Figure 5).

**Figure 3: South Africans' policy preferences regarding foreigners living in the country | 1997-2008**
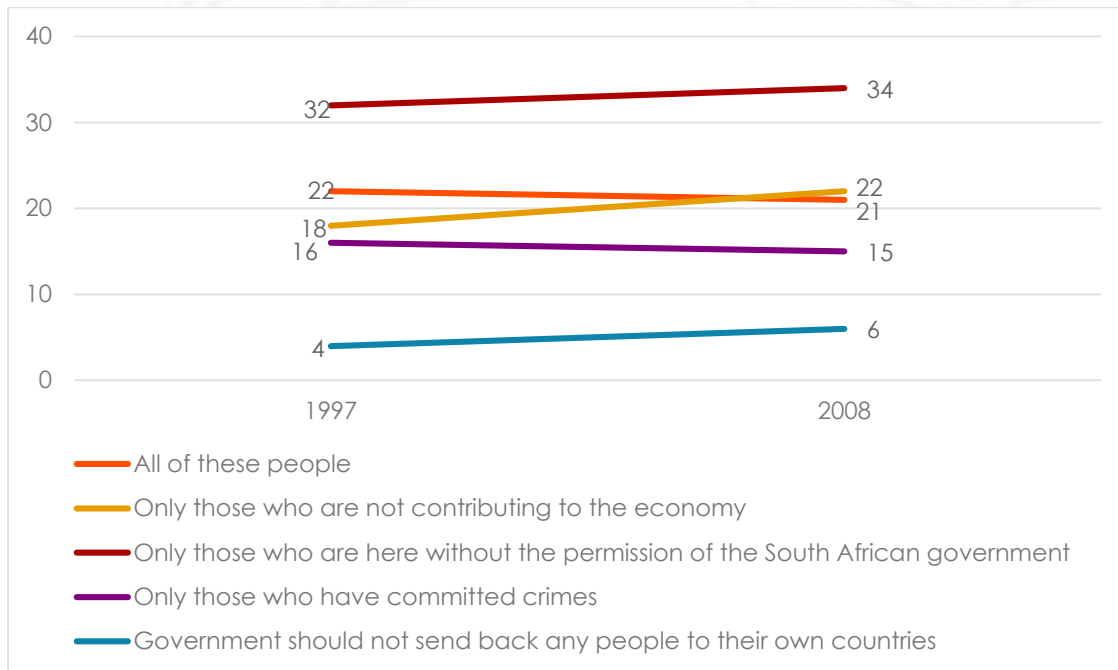
Respondents were asked: *How about people from other countries who are presently living in South Africa? Who do you think the government should send back to their own countries? (Note: In 2008, the question was phrased as: "Who, if anyone, do you think. …?") (%)*

Figure 4: Support for deporting only foreigners who are not contributing to the economy | by respondents' education level | 1997-2008
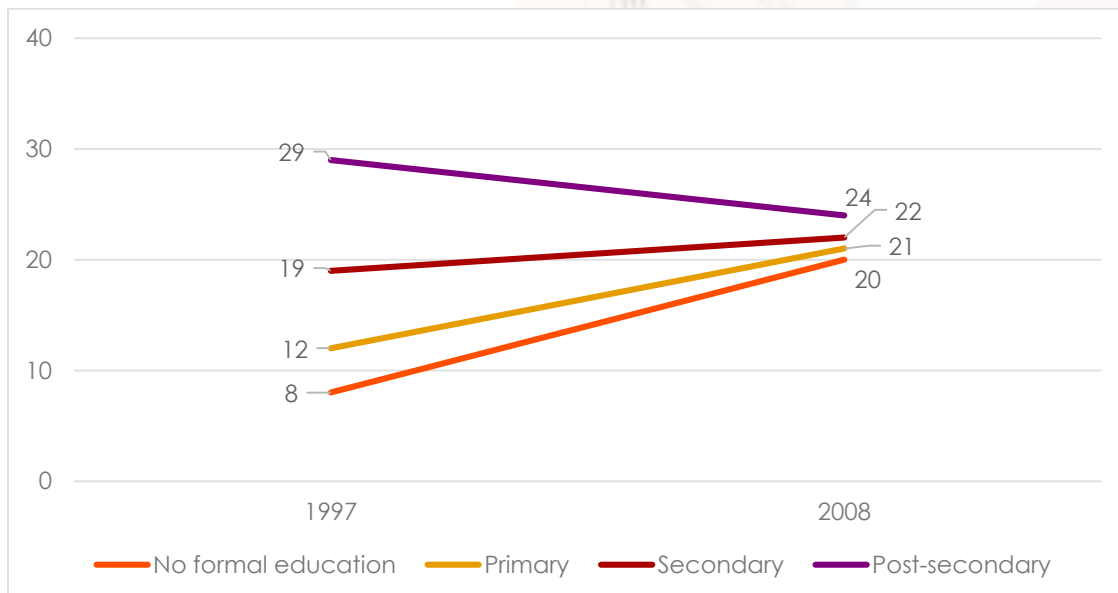
(% who said "Only those who are not contributing to the economy")

Figure 5: Support for deporting all foreigners | by respondents' education level | 1997-2008
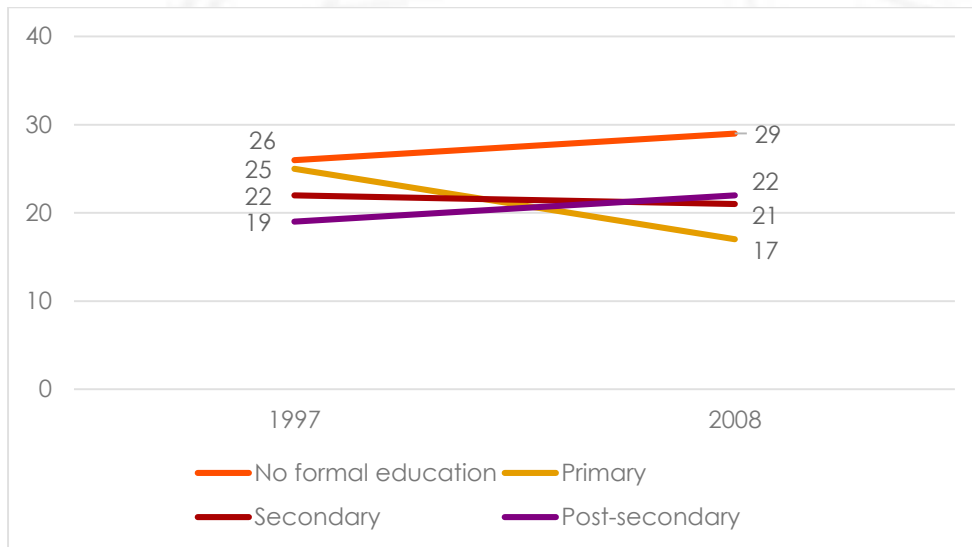
(% who said "All of these people")

Analysing respondents' policy preferences according to the province they live in reveals further differences. Focusing on the most restrictive option, it is possible to categorise the nine provinces into three clusters. The first group (Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and North West) shows a decrease of roughly 10 percentage points in support for this policy option between 1997 and 2008, while the second cluster (Free State, Gauteng, and KwaZulu-Natal) shows only minor changes and the third group (Northern Cape and Western Cape) shows substantial increases (Figure 6). While the Northern Cape also has the highest preference for this option in absolute terms, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal are the only other provinces that score 25% or higher for this option in 2008.

Figure 6: Support for deporting all foreigners | by respondents' province | 1997-2008
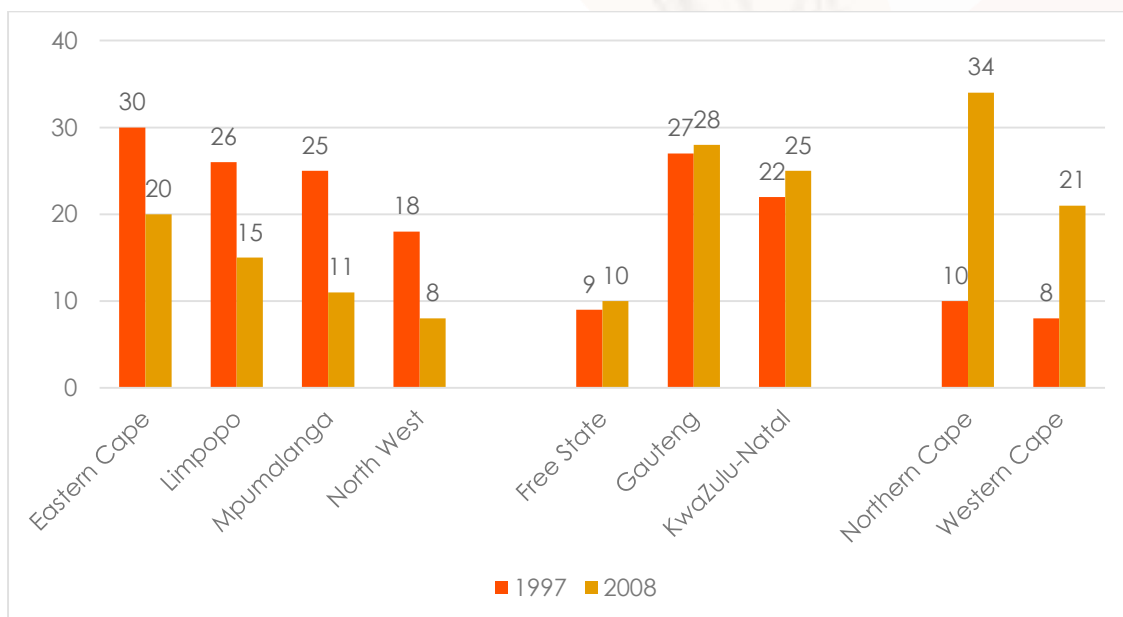
(% who said "All of these people")

In comparison, the skills-based policy preference (deporting those not contributing to the economy) shows a more stable pattern. Two provinces from the first cluster (Mpumalanga and North West) show changes of roughly 20 percentage points, whereas the other provinces display smaller changes (Figure 7). It is not possible to compare the data over time using the Lived Poverty Index, as this data was not collected in 1997.

Figure 7: Support for deporting only foreigners who are not contributing to the economy | by respondents' province | 1997-2008
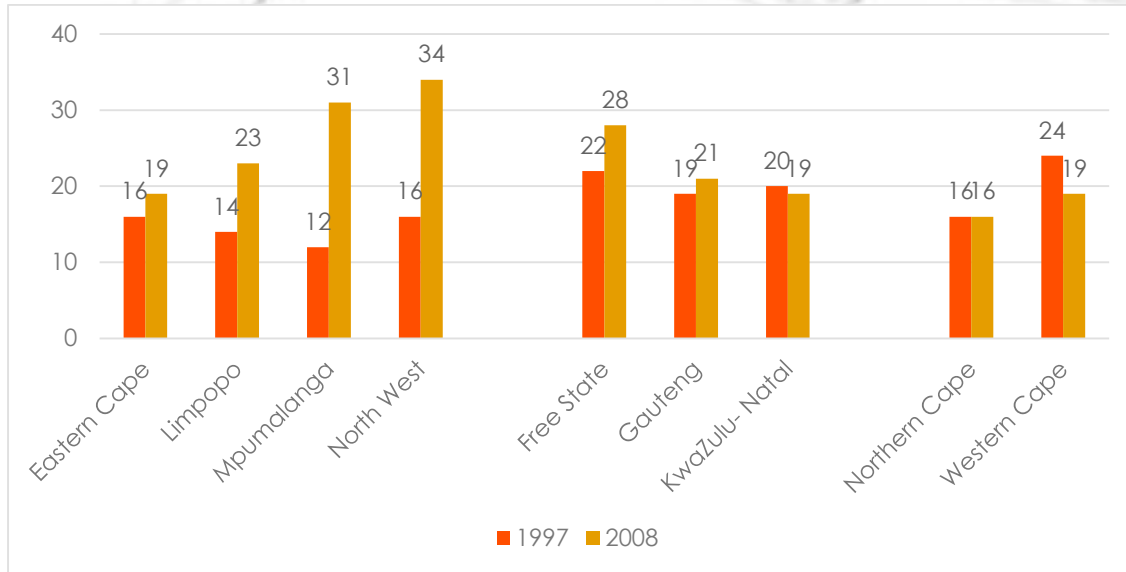
(% who said "Only those who are not contributing to the economy")

Likelihood of taking action against foreigners

To gain a fuller picture of the tolerance dimension, the above statistics can be complemented with data pertaining to attitudes toward immigrants who want to move into respondents' neighbourhoods or operate businesses in their areas.
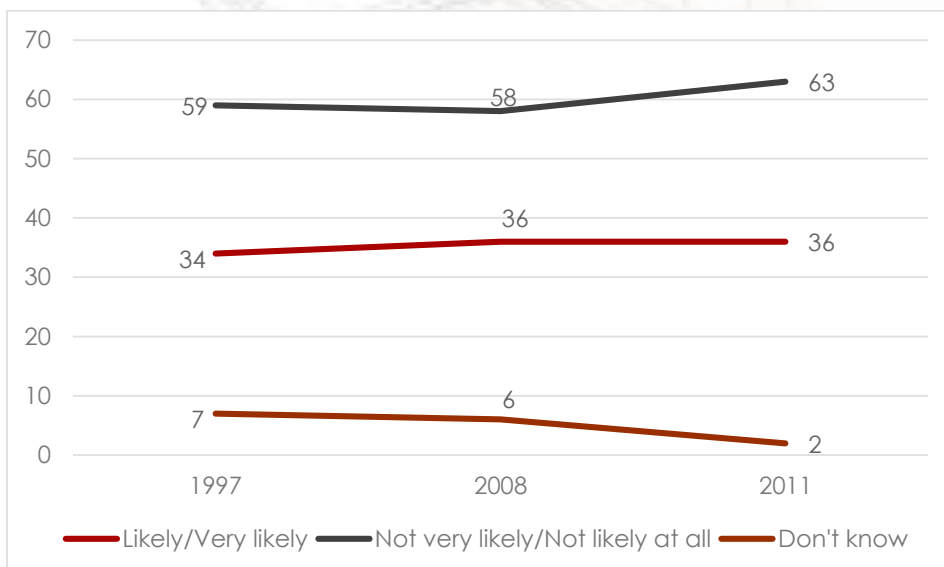
About one-third of respondents said they would be "likely" or "very likely" to take action against foreigners who attempted to move into (Figure 8) or operate a business in (Figure 9) the respondents' neighbourhood. Particularly worrying is that in each of the three surveys and on both questions, more than one in 10 individuals indicated that they would be "very likely" to take action. Since the surveys did not have follow-up questions asking respondents to specify their actions, it is unclear where on the spectrum of possible actions they might locate themselves. For example, do people primarily think of rallying their neighbours to try to influence the local councillor, or would they be willing to personally attack foreigners?

Figure 8: Likelihood of taking action to prevent immigrants from moving into respondents' neighbourhood | 1997-2011
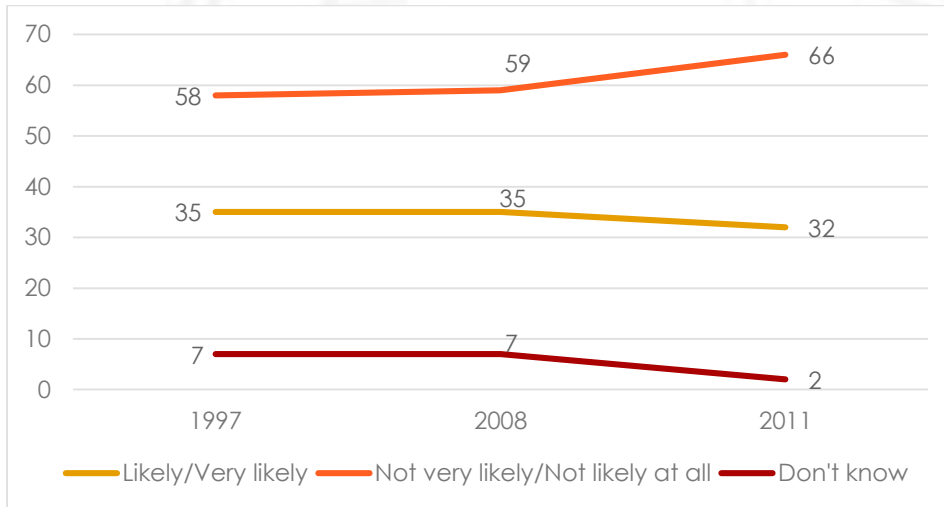

Respondents were asked: *How likely is it that you would take part in action to prevent people who have come to South Africa from other countries in southern Africa [in 2008 and 2011: who have come here from other countries in Africa] from moving into your neighbourhood? (%)*

Figure 9: Likelihood of taking action to prevent immigrants from operating a business in respondents' area | 1997-2011

Respondents were asked: *How likely is it that you would take part in action to prevent people who have come to South Africa from other countries in southern Africa [in 2008 and 2001: who have come here from other countries in Africa] from other countries in Africa from operating a business in your area? (%)*

Assuming that the respondents who said they are "very likely" to take action are also those who are most likely to partake in xenophobic attacks, the analysis focuses primarily on this group. (Additional analysis combining "very likely" and "likely" categories can be found in the Appendix.) As can be seen in the overall distribution of answers in Figure 8 and Figure 9, the response patterns for the two questions were similar. Examining responses by racial group, in 1997 Coloureds were the least likely group to take action, while other groups scored between 6 and 10 percentage points higher (Figure 10). In 2008, the distribution diverged

slightly, with white South Africans becoming the most likely to take action while Indian/Asians individuals scored lowest (11 to 14 percentage points difference). In 2011, the ranking order changed again. Although white and black South Africans remained fairly stable in second and third place, Indians scored much higher than any other group, while Coloureds recorded the smallest proportion in this category.

Figure 10: 'Very likely' to take action against immigrants | by respondents' racial groups | 1997-2011

A) Prevent moving into the neighbourhood

B) Prevent operating business in the area

(%)
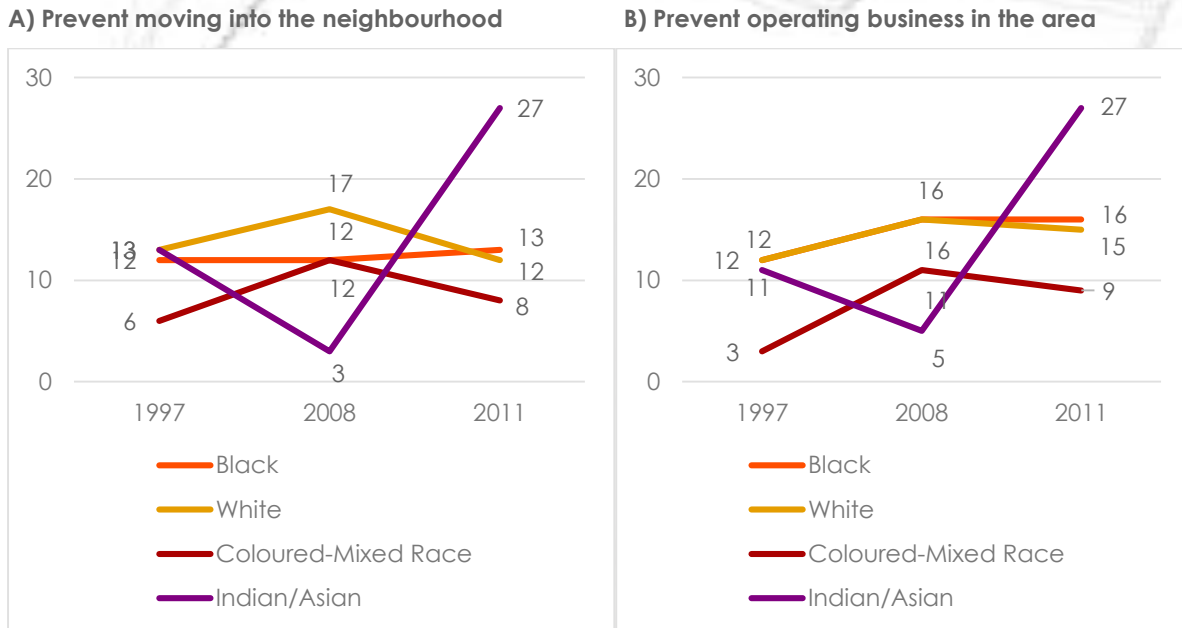
This raises the question whether people answer questions differently depending on whether the issue is fairly abstract (a policy preference) or "close to home" (immigrants moving into their own neighbourhood). To investigate this aspect further, it is worth interrogating additional sub-dimensions.

As shown above, data from 1997 suggested a reasonably clear association between respondents' level of formal education and their likelihood of choosing the most restrictive policy option – the more educated, the less likely respondents are to favour deporting all foreigners. This relationship is also partly borne out by the data on action against immigrants. In 1997, all four levels of educational attainment were within a 4-percentage-point range. This pattern remains fairly stable for those with primary, secondary, or post-secondary education, but respondents with no formal education scored higher than the other groups in 2008 and 2011 (Figure 11).

Figure 11: 'Very likely' to take action against immigrants | by respondents' education level | 1997-2011

A) Prevent moving into the neighbourhood   **B) Prevent operating business in the area**


(%)
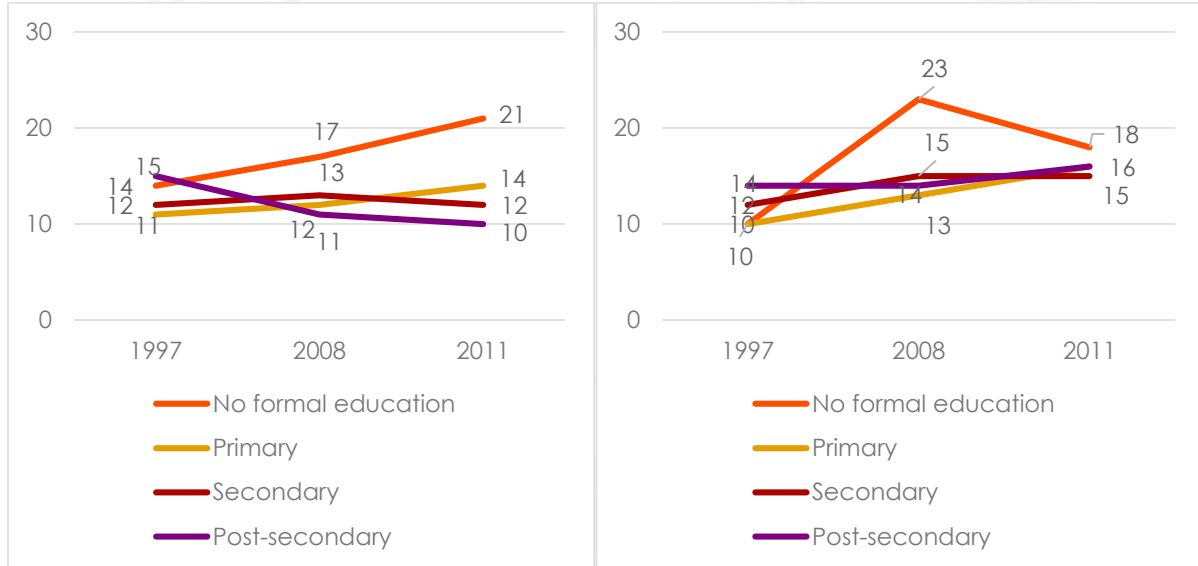
Regarding differences by province, we saw earlier that Gauteng was the only province that consistently scored above the national average in support for the most restrictive policy option ("all these people should go") in 1997 and 2008. On the question about immigrants moving into the respondents' neighbourhood, residents in the Free State, Gauteng, and North West Province consistently gave an above-national-average hostile answer ("very likely" to take action). On the question about immigrants operating a business, only Gauteng residents gave the most hostile answer consistently above the national average for all three survey rounds. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the particular results for Gauteng, it is important to explore these findings further; they cannot be explained by the province's comparatively large proportion of urban residents, since the surveys revealed only minor differences when data are disaggregated along the urban/rural dimension.

A longitudinal comparison along the lived poverty sub-dimension is hampered by the lack of data from the 1997 survey, allowing for a comparison of the 2008 and 2011 data only. Recalling the results regarding trust in foreigners, we found that the levels of distrust were lowest among the poorest 25% of South Africans, while the next 25% were the most distrustful. Similarly, there does not seem to be a clear trend when it comes to South Africans' hostility toward foreigners moving into their neighbourhoods. However, poorer citizens tended to feel more threatened by foreigners operating businesses in their area (Figure 12). Yet, once we include respondents who said they would be "likely" to take action against foreign business owners in their neighbourhood, this trend also becomes less clear (see Appendix).

Figure 12: 'Very likely' to take action against immigrants | by respondents' poverty level | 2008-2011

A) Prevent moving into the neighbourhood

B) Prevent operating business in the area
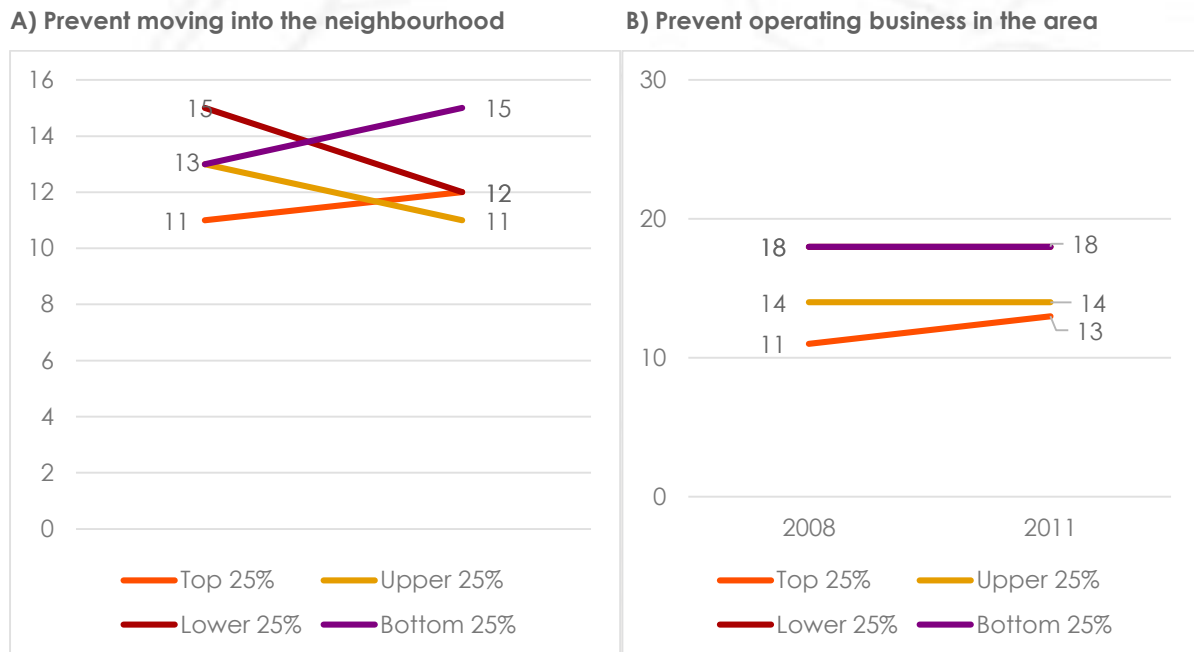
(%) Note: In slide at right, results for "Bottom 25%" and "Lower 25%" are identical (18% in 2008 and 2011).

Government performance on immigration

In October/November 2008, six months after an outbreak of xenophobic violence that killed dozens and displaced thousands, Afrobarometer asked South Africans how satisfied they were with the government's handling of immigration-related issues. About one-third of respondents said the government was performing "very badly," while an additional 27% said the government was managing the situation "fairly badly." Three years later, citizens' evaluation of the government's performance on this issue was virtually the same.

While the difference between male and female respondents was again negligible, urban residents were more dissatisfied with the government's performance than rural respondents. The 13-percentage-point difference in 2011 is by far the biggest urban/rural split in the data across all the questions discussed in this paper.

A second difference is black South Africans' less unfavourable evaluation of the government compared to other racial groups. In 2011, 60% of black South Africans said the government was performing fairly/very badly, compared to between 71% and 80% of white, Coloured, and Indian/Asian South Africans (Figure 13). This difference was not reflected in preferences regarding government policy on foreigners.

Figure 13: Government performance on immigration-related issues | by respondents' racial groups | 2008-2011
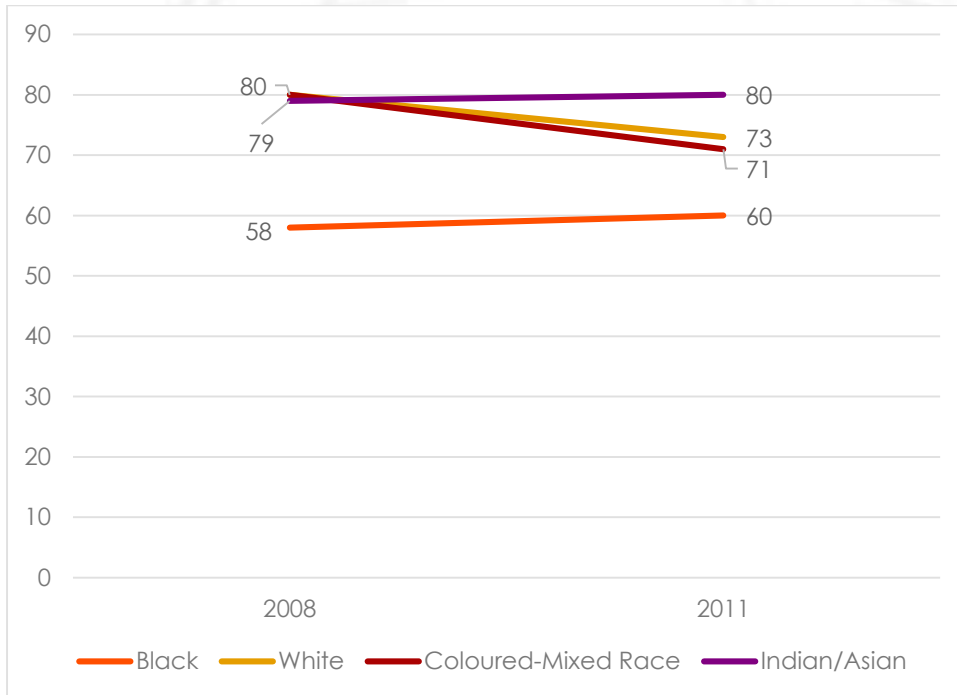

Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing immigration? (% who said "very badly" or "fairly badly")*

In 2008, citizens with post-secondary education were most dissatisfied with how government handled immigration (71% "fairly" or "very" badly), while those with only primary education held a less unfavourable view (52%). While this gap narrowed from 19 to 7 percentage points in 2011, the response pattern was similar to the one on questions about policy preferences. This seems to confirm that on these more abstract questions, education may be a slightly better discriminator than on questions about foreigners' potential impact in people's immediate physical surroundings.

As for poverty levels, 2008 data suggest that the top 25% were less satisfied with the way the government managed this issue than the rest of society (Figure 14). By 2011, however, the poorer half of society was the more critical of government performance. (This development is even more pronounced if one considers only the "very badly" response category, shown in the Appendix).

Figure 14: Government performance on immigration-related issues | by respondents' level of lived poverty | 2008-2011
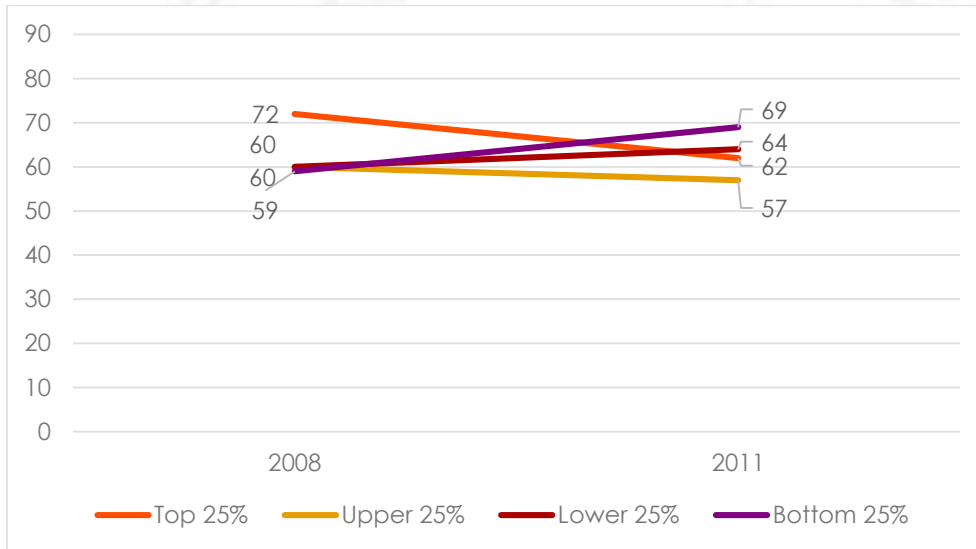
(% who said "very badly" or fairly badly")

Conclusion

This preliminary examination of attitudes toward foreigners confirms that most South Africans do not trust people from outside the country. The fact that more than one in five citizens would like the government to deport all foreigners, irrespective of their legal status, underlines the consistently high level of anti-foreigner sentiment in the country. What is more, socioeconomic factors such as levels of education and poverty are only weakly associated with the most xenophobic attitudes. While education may have some effect on abstract policy preferences, the picture becomes murkier when people are asked about foreigners being their neighbours or operating a business in their area. Except for the particularly high levels of anti-foreigner sentiment in Gauteng, which require further investigation, these attitudes are also only weakly related to geographic features (e.g. province, urban/rural residence).

More in-depth analyses would do well to study interaction effects of these structural aspects and complement findings with examinations of cross-cultural networks and government attempts to reduce the country's high levels of anti-foreigner attitudes.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Appendix

Likelihood of taking action against immigrants

Figure A.1: 'Likely' or 'very likely' to take action to prevent immigrants from moving into respondents' neighbourhood | by respondents' education level | 1997-2011

(%")
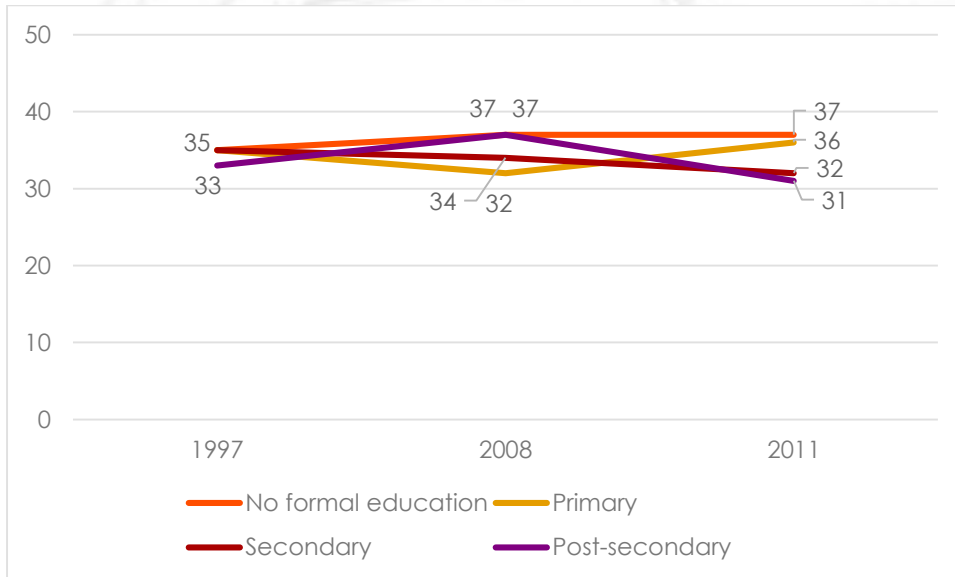
Figure A.2: 'Likely' or 'very likely' to take action to prevent immigrants from operating a business in respondents' neighbourhood | by respondents' levels of education | 2008-2011
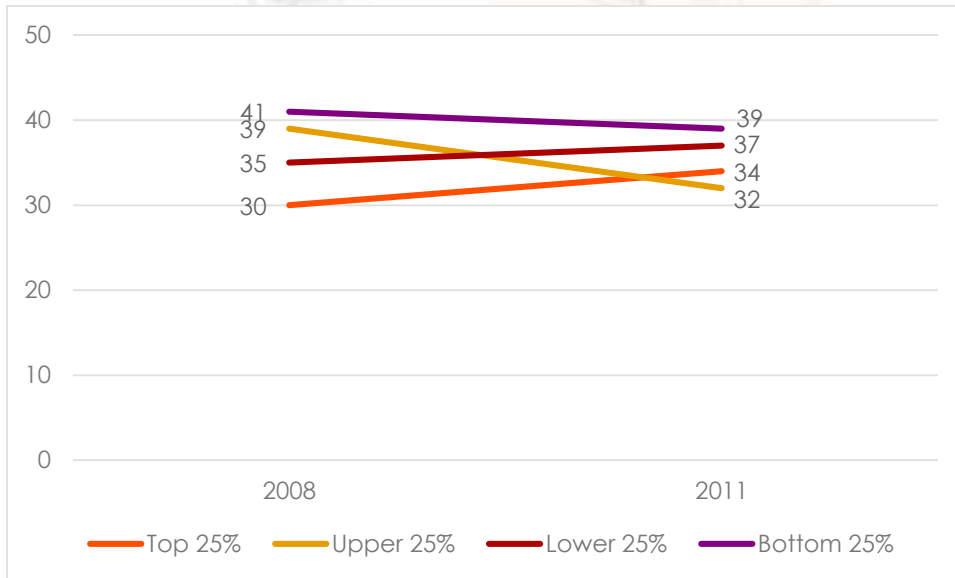

(%)
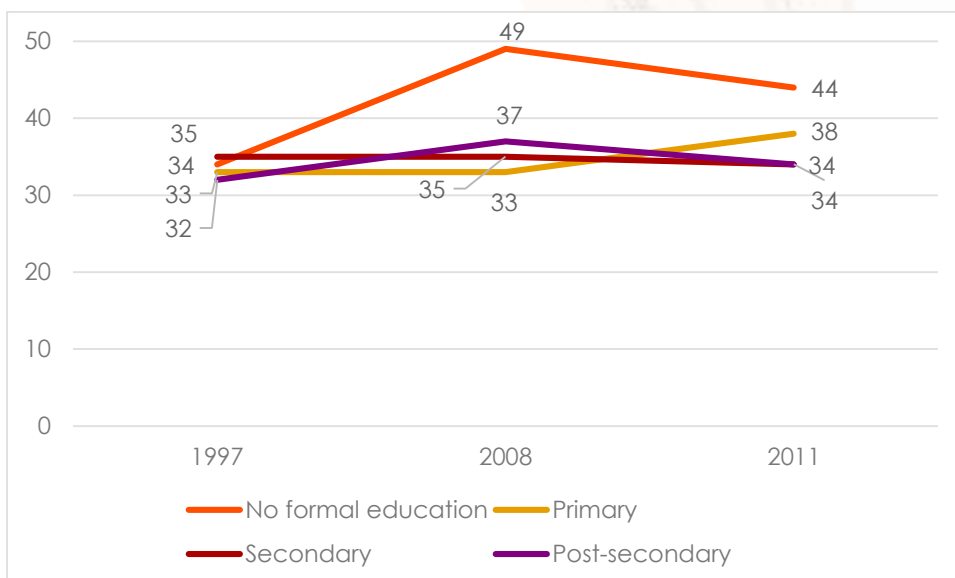
Figure A.3: 'Likely' or 'very likely' to take action to prevent immigrants from moving into respondents' neighbourhood | by respondents' levels of poverty | 2008-2011

(%)
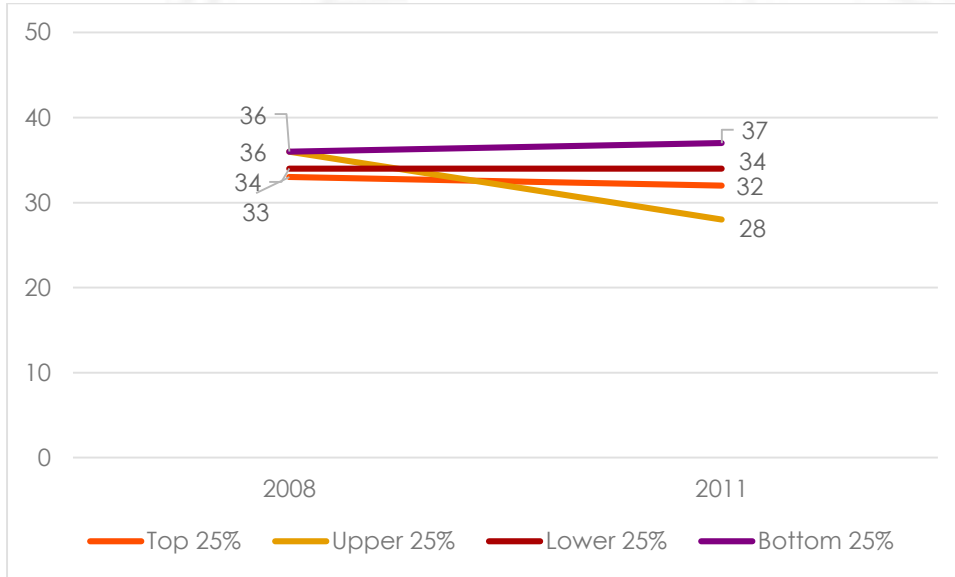
Figure A.4: 'Likely' or 'very likely' to take action to prevent immigrants from operating a business in respondents' neighbourhood | by respondents' levels of poverty | 2008-2011

(%)

Government performance on immigration

Figure A.5: Government performing 'very badly' on immigration-related issues
| by respondents' level of poverty | 2008-2011

(%)
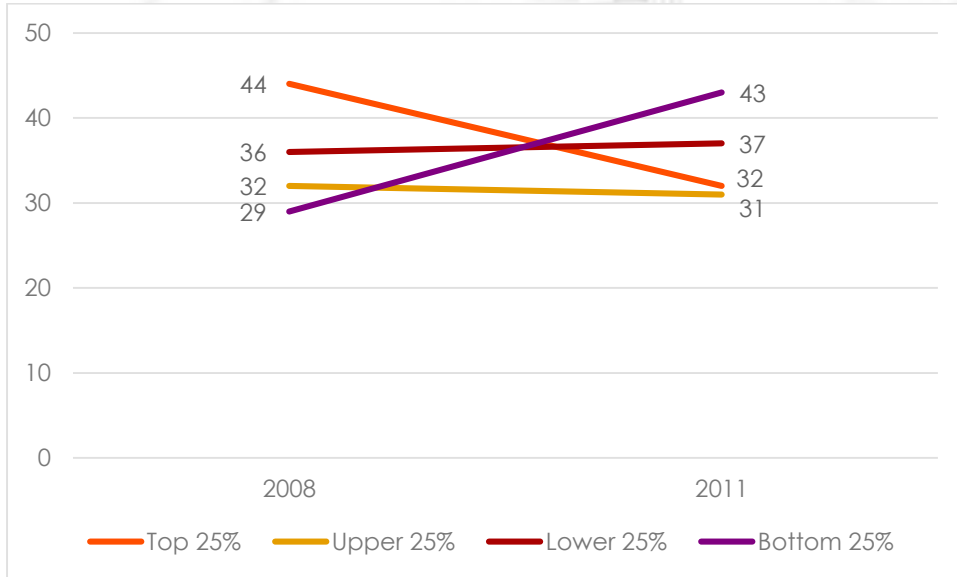
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