

## **Political Attitudes and Behaviour of University Students in a Post-apartheid South Africa**

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This paper is based on quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (focus group discussions) research on the political attitudes and behaviour of university students from two prominent universities in South Africa – the University of Pretoria and the University of Fort Hare. The University of Pretoria, one of the largest residential universities, is a formerly ‘white’ (city) university, while the University of Fort Hare at Alice in the Eastern Cape, is a rural and formerly disadvantaged black activist university.

Students in South Africa have long engaged in political activism responding to changing political, social and economic circumstances through protest that has at times exerted considerable influence on the national stage. There were those on the one hand, who vehemently opposed the policy of apartheid, while on the other, there was also a minority of white students who supported the National Party’s policy of racial separation.

The end of apartheid in the early 1990s resulted in mass political optimism and generated high expectations on the benefits of democracy. Now, more than 15 years since the first democratic elections have been held, how satisfied are these university students about the state of democracy? Do they trust the political institutions? How do they rate their performance? What are the major socio-economic problems? Do these incipient intellectual elite and future political leaders see a future for themselves in the country or are they considering leaving? Are they still engaged in political life? Do they, for example, vote in elections, read newspapers and participate in political protests? How politically informed are they? Who/what are their major sources of information? Are there differences in attitudes and behaviour between white and black students? These are some of the major issues that will be addressed in this paper.

A vibrant civil society is a vital requirement for sustaining democracy and attaining/ensuring good governance. Should one encounter large scale political apathy among those to be considered to be the future opinion formers, it may spell serious trouble for democratic consolidation and good governance in the country.