



# The Reasons Why The “So-Called Middle-Class People” In South Africa Are Not Interested In The South African Politics

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** This research delves into the apparent disinterest of the so-called middle-class people in South Africa towards politics. Despite the country's dynamic political landscape and historical significance, a notable segment of the middle class appears disengaged from political processes. This study aims to shed light on the underlying reasons for this disinterest and its potential implications for the broader political landscape.

**Purpose:** The primary purpose of this research is to identify and analyse the factors contributing to the lack of political engagement among the middle class in South Africa. By understanding the root causes, policymakers and scholars can develop targeted strategies to foster greater political participation, ensuring a more inclusive and representative democratic system. Objectives of this paper was to investigate the historical and socio-economic context shaping the political attitudes of the middle class in South Africa. To identify specific factors influencing the disinterest of the middle class in South African politics. To assess the potential consequences of political disengagement among the middle class. To propose recommendations for policymakers and civil society organizations to address these issues.

**Research Method:** This study employs a systematic literature review methodology to gather and analyse existing scholarly works on the subject. The review encompasses studies related to South African politics, historical analyses, and socio-economic factors influencing political engagement. The goal is to synthesize a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the political disinterest of the middle class.

**Findings:** The findings of the literature review reveal multifaceted reasons for the disengagement of the middle class in South African politics. These factors include historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, perceived inefficiencies in political institutions, and a sense of detachment from the political process. Additionally, cultural, and identity-related aspects contribute to shaping the middle class's political attitudes.

**Conclusion:** The research concludes that the disinterest of the so-called middle-class people in South African politics is a complex phenomenon rooted in historical, socio-economic, and cultural factors. To address this issue and promote political inclusivity, targeted interventions are necessary. Policymakers should focus on bridging socio-economic gaps, enhancing political education, and fostering a sense of civic responsibility among the middle class. By doing so, South Africa can work towards building a more participatory and representative democratic system.

**Keywords:** Apathy, Middle class, Political engagement, South Africa, Socio-economic factors

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.

A systematic literature review is a rigorous and structured methodology used to gather, evaluate, and synthesize existing research on a specific topic. In the context of understanding the reasons why the "so-called middle-class people" in South Africa are not interested in South African politics, the systematic literature review followed a well-defined process.

Information was identified and obtained from relevant databases (e.g., PubMed, JSTOR, Scopus) and search engines. The author used a combination of keywords such as "middle class," "politics," "political engagement," "South Africa," and "political disinterest." "Include peer-reviewed articles, books, reports, and conference papers. The author excluded irrelevant studies, duplicate publications, or studies with poor methodological quality. Key information was extracted from selected studies, such as research methodologies, key findings, and limitations (Torres-Carrión, González-González, Aciar and Rodríguez-Morales 2018).

The author evaluated the methodological quality of each study to ensure reliability and validity. Considered factors such as sample representativeness, data collection methods, and analytical rigor. Categorize the identified factors contributing to middle-class disinterest in South African politics. Analyse patterns, consistencies, and contradictions across studies. Analysis highlight areas where the literature is lacking or conflicting. Suggest potential areas for future research. By following these systematic steps, the literature review provides a comprehensive overview of existing knowledge on the reasons why the South African middle class may not be interested in politics. This approach ensures a thorough and evidence-based understanding of the research topic (Snyder 2019).

## MIDDLE CLASS ANALYSIS

Class analysis, in various forms, became the predominant framework for examining 'development' in Africa after the decline of modernization theory, which initially gained prominence alongside the excitement of political independence. Lentz (2016) illustrates this shift by revealing the transformation of the study of African elites, once viewed as progress agents in the 1950s and 1960s, into an examination of different forms of the African 'bourgeoisie' by the 1970s and 1980s, now perceived as oppressive. However, the prominence of class analysis waned after the Cold War, making way for other paradigms such as 'democratization.' Nevertheless, there has been a recent resurgence of interest in class analysis, particularly evident in the growing attention to the 'African middle class,' paralleling the broader acknowledgment of middle classes in the global south, notably in India and China (Marx and Engels 2023) *re-wired by Taylor and Francis publisher.*

Ironically, while the initial wave of class analysis drew heavily from Marxist thinking, the renewed interest in middle classes is now propelled by orthodox neo-classical economists aligned with international development agencies like the World Bank and associated continental bodies such as the African Development Bank. These economists now celebrate the urban-based, highly educated, future-oriented, aspirational, technologically savvy, and politically assertive nature of middle classes in 'emerging economies.'

This new orthodoxy, however, faces significant critique, with radical scholars accusing development economists of lacking grounding in social theory and relying on dubious empiricism, resulting in unrealistically inclusive definitions of the middle class (Iqani 2017). Despite this criticism, scholars themselves seem to acknowledge a significant shift, asserting that African middle classes are indeed 'rising.' Consequently, various analyses on middle classes in different African countries have emerged, each with distinct definitions, motivations, and conclusions. Notably, there is considerable divergence in assessments of the relationship between African middle classes and democracy, with development economists expressing optimism and scholars adopting a more sceptical stance regarding the potential political progressiveness of emerging middle-class groups.

In a recent book on "The new black middle class in South Africa" (Southall 2016), the author contributes to these debates by revisiting classic literature on the middle class. While acknowledging South Africa's exceptional circumstances, particularly the identification of the African middle class as 'black' in contrast to the substantial white middle class, the argument posits that to take the African middle class seriously, it is crucial to revisit the 'grand traditions' of sociology. The author contends that this perspective raises broader questions of significance extending beyond the specific merits or shortcomings of the book (Antonio 2011).

Exploring the emergence and criticisms of the new black middle class in South Africa. The discussion on the new black middle class (BMC) in South Africa commences with an examination of Karl Marx and Max Weber's perspectives on the middle class. Marx anticipated the middle class to face pressure between capitalists and the proletariat, predicting its growth and the subsequent blurring of societal class boundaries. In contrast, Weber asserted that the middle class in industrial society derived from market dynamics and political influence rather than property ownership (Burriss 1995).

The book delves into subsequent scholars' contributions to middle-class analysis, incorporating concepts like the 'service class,' 'deskilling' of labour, differentiation between 'new' and 'old' middle classes, and the exploration of 'contradictory class locations.' Noteworthy scholars such as Karl Renner, Harry Braverman, Nicos Poulantzas, Erik Olin Wright, John H. Goldthorpe, and Thomas Piketty are referenced. The narrative touches upon discussions by Milovan Djilas on the rise of the 'new class' in Soviet-style Communist societies,

Guy Standing's views on global middle-class precarity, and the inconclusive exploration of the middle class's political role by scholars like Barrington Moore, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer (Southall 2018).

Dick Sklar's approach identified political parties as instrumental in class formation in Africa, creating systems of patronage to promote indigenous private enterprise. The emergence of a ruling class or middle class was observed, but the distinction between the two remained ambiguous. As modernization theory gave way to underdevelopment theory, more sophisticated Marxist approaches sought to identify class foundations in Africa, considering the role of imperialism and the global expansion of capitalism (Sklar 2015).

Despite these developments, a significant gap remained in the discussion regarding the 'African middle class.' Questions arose about its relationship to the bourgeoisie and the meaning of 'middle.' The concept of 'middle' in the 'African middle class' was surrounded by confusion and diverse interpretations, leading to four major areas of debate.

Firstly, there is a debate around how global institutions and associated scholars defined the contemporary African middle class, often based on income levels or 'Living Standards Measure' (LMS). The appropriateness of such definitions and variations in the understanding of 'middle class' across different regions sparked extensive discussions.

Secondly, the debate explored why and how individuals identified as 'middle class,' even in contexts of widespread unemployment and poverty. This raised questions about the material basis of such aspirations and the historical determinants of middle-class identity.

Thirdly, some argued that the term 'middle class' oversimplified the complex social realities in many African countries, where middle-class individuals faced conflicting social forces pulling them in various directions.

Subsequently, the critiques presented by Neubert (2016), are particularly noteworthy due to their connection to the extensive historical debates on class analysis in Africa and the ongoing challenges in defining and understanding the 'African middle class.' Neubert's main argument revolves around the challenges of categorizing individuals as 'middle class' within traditional sociological terms, citing two primary reasons for the difficulty. Firstly, middle-income groups often engage in diverse modes of production, combining professional work with agricultural activities, small businesses, and salaried employment. This multifaceted approach leads to ambiguity in defining their class status. Secondly, the middle-income class experiences uncertainty and instability due to familial and economic pressures, varying political consciousness, and distinct forms of identity.

Neubert suggests that the concept of 'milieus' is more appropriate than traditional class terminology. Milieus represent social groups shaped by shared values and lifestyle choices, transcending strict socio-economic strata. Neubert identifies various milieus in Kenya, such as 'social climbers,' 'stability-oriented pragmatics,' religious groups, 'neo-traditionalists,' 'liberal cosmopolitans,' and 'young professionals.' The term 'glocal' is introduced to emphasize the global-local connections within these milieus.

However, Neubert acknowledges a notable omission in his work, specifically the absence of a discussion on power dynamics. This leads to a critical question about the relationship between the middle class and potential ruling or dominant classes, both nationally and globally. This article, therefore, raises concerns about the focus on the African middle class, urging a broader analysis that considers the existence of classes at the top and bottom of the social structure.

The article underscores the complexity of class analysis and its relevance in understanding contemporary African societies. It questions whether the current emphasis on the African middle class serves to legitimize changing inequalities rather than challenging them. Additionally, it highlights the importance of class analysis in addressing issues of global inequality, power distribution, and the intersectionality of factors like gender, ethnicity, and region. The author argues that radical class analysis poses vital questions that are crucial in the face of growing global inequality (Spronk 2016).

### **Who qualifies to be classified as middle class in South Africa?**

Defining the 'middle class' in South Africa poses a challenging task, as various researchers and economists offer different assessments due to the considerable wealth gap. At present, there is no officially established criterion for the middle class. The complexity of identifying this group is heightened by the need to contextualize the definition within the entire population. Given the 32.9% unemployment rate in the first quarter of the current year, individuals earning even R1 rand a month through employment are classified among the 16.2 million employed, underscoring the intricacy of the categorization process.

Looking at the average salary in South Africa within the formal sector as an indicator of the middle class, current Stats SA data reveals a monthly income of R25,304. According to the most recent statistics from the quarterly employment survey by the agency, there has been a 2.7% decrease from the last quarter of 2022, which was approximately R26,000. Nevertheless, the new average salary represents a 6.8% increase from the first quarter of 2022, when it was R23,697 (Bureau For Economic Research 2024).

Various sources consider an income slightly above R20,000 as indicative of the middle class. For instance, the University of Cape Town's Liberty Institute of Strategic Marketing suggests that a household earning around R22,000 is considered part of the middle class. Research and analytics firm Eighty20, in its most recent Credit Stress Report, has identified middle-class workers as households earning nearly R25,000 per month with a personal income of R15,000. This category encompasses 4.1 million income-active individuals with families,

mortgages, and frequent shopping habits. Similarly, the Bureau for Economic Research (BER) considers households with earnings ranging from R5,000 to R20,000 per month as middle-income, while those with monthly earnings exceeding R20,000 fall into the high-income category (Redda and Surujlal 2023).

Despite variations in the specific income thresholds, a common theme across these definitions of the middle class is their current financial strain. Factors such as high food inflation, electricity outages, and substantial interest rate hikes since November 2021 have placed significant pressure on this segment. Steep interest rate increases of 425 basis points since late 2021 have made it increasingly challenging for middle-class South Africans to manage loans tied to their major assets, such as mortgages and vehicle financing.

Eighty20 emphasizes that the financial challenges faced by the middle to lower-income groups underscore the importance of adopting frugal practices, changing consumer behaviour, and potentially limiting access to credit. An alternative approach to determining middle-class status involves considering factors beyond monthly income, such as assets and household composition. WhyFive Insight's recent study on mid to top-income consumers reveal that owning a pet, particularly a dog, can be an interesting indicator of wealth in South Africa. Brandon de Kock from WhyFive Insights notes that around 2 million middle-class South African homes have at least one dog. The study suggests a correlation between household wealth and pet ownership, with even mid-income earners demonstrating a willingness to stretch their budget to enjoy being dog owners. Rising food and healthcare costs for pets are acknowledged, highlighting that having more financial resources can be beneficial when caring for additional family members, including animals (Bhorat, Hirsch, Kanbur and Ncube 2014).

**Table: 1** Class categories

	INCOME CLASS	INCOME PER ANNUM (RANDS)
1	Poor	R0 – R54 344
2	Low Emerging Middle Class	R54 345 – R151 727
3	Emerging Middle Class	R151 728 – R363 930
4	Realised Middle Class	R363 931 – R631 120
5	Upper Middle Class	R631 121 – R863 906
6	Emerging Affluent	R863 907 – R1329 844
7	Affluent	R1329 845+

(Source: UNISA, 2016)

The above table,1 provides class categories in South Africa which can be broadly understood through the lens of historical racial divisions, but it's important to note that class distinctions also exist within racial groups. Historically, the majority of the black population faced systemic discrimination and economic marginalization under apartheid. Despite political changes, there are still significant socio-economic disparities within this group. White South Africans, particularly of European descent, historically held positions of privilege under apartheid. While racial barriers have been lifted, economic disparities persist, and some white South Africans continue to enjoy socio-economic advantages. The middle class in South Africa includes individuals from various racial backgrounds. It is a diverse group that encompasses professionals, managers, small business owners, and skilled workers. This group has grown since the end of apartheid, contributing to a more diverse middle class. The working class includes individuals engaged in manual or semi-skilled labour, often in sectors such as manufacturing, mining, and services. Economic challenges, such as unemployment and low wages, affect a significant portion of this class (Gumede 2014).

Many South Africans, particularly in urban areas, engage in informal economic activities such as street vending or small-scale entrepreneurship. These individuals often operate outside formal regulatory frameworks. Rural areas in South Africa often face distinct challenges, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Agriculture plays a significant role, and there are efforts to address rural development and land reform.

Regardless of race, there are significant disparities in wealth distribution. A small percentage of the population, often referred to as the elite or upper class, controls a substantial portion of the country's wealth. It's important to recognize that these categories are interconnected, and factors such as education, employment, and geographical location contribute to individuals' social and economic status (Von Fintel and Ott 2017).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In South Africa, the society remains marked by significant inequality, particularly when viewed through the lens of social class. Even authorities acknowledge the clear division into the rich, middle class, and the poor, reflecting varying purchasing power among these groups. This stark contrast manifests in economic advantages for the rich, high levels of debt for the middle class, and persistent poverty for the poor, highlighting the glaring disparities in the society.

The disparity is evident in the housing sector, where the affluent enjoy access to superior, luxurious homes providing both environmental freedom and psychological well-being. These residences offer recreational

amenities, a privilege unavailable to the poor and marginalized. The rich's purchasing power extends to private healthcare, providing them with high-quality services, while the majority of the lower-middle class and poor grapple with debts when accessing housing, education, and healthcare (Webster 2022). The study found that, for these reasons above, the middle class elect not to participate more on political activities because they are not directly affected by the hardships faced by the majority of the people particularly the poor.

The divide is further emphasized in the realm of education, where the poor and lower-middle class rely on public services, facing constraints in terms of quality due to overcrowding. The less fortunate also bear the burden of debt when entering university, relying on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). The lasting impact of the colonial and apartheid systems, which persisted for over 300 years, continues to afflict the communities with social ills. These systems, characterized by racial segregation, engendered unequal distribution among racial groups, perpetuating economic and political disparities. The majority black population, comprising Africans, Coloured's, and Indians, faces ongoing challenges while the white minority has historically enjoyed advantages (Dawood and Seedat-Khan 2023).

The white minority's dominance in business, ranging from small to large corporations, underscores the failure of the current government to fully address the economic conditions inherited from apartheid. This has resulted in a hierarchy where white individuals hold superior positions in various firms, leveraging their education and employability advantages. The quality of educational facilities accessible to whites surpasses that available to their black counterparts (M. Nkomo and Al Ariss 2014).

Healthcare facilities also reflect the racial divide, with public hospitals struggling with congestion as they primarily serve the economically disadvantaged black population. Meanwhile, private healthcare caters to a predominantly white, rich, and middle-class demographic. Geographical disparities persist, with whites residing in well-developed areas and blacks in underdeveloped townships lacking essential infrastructure.

While the government provides housing services, criticism arises over the limited capacity and design of these houses, leaving many without dignity. Transformative measures are crucial, and decisive actions are needed to allocate resources more equitably and uplift the livelihoods of all citizens, addressing the historical roots of inequality.

The ability to exert control over the actions of those who lack resources is what defines power. This power dynamic, present for centuries, has led to political inequality. Wealthy individuals employ their financial leverage to sway decisions within legislative bodies, non-governmental organizations, and civil society. This advantage extends to securing prominent political leadership positions, as exemplified by figures such as Mr. Cyril Ramaphosa in South Africa and the current Republican candidate, Mr. Trump, in the United States. While political parties are expected to advocate for the interests of the impoverished and the working class, the gap between the affluent and the disadvantaged continues to widen each day. This reality raises doubts about the sincerity of those who claim to champion the cause of the poor and working class (Ackerman 2019).

The society requires accountable political leadership that upholds moral values while representing the interests of the people. Addressing inequality in the community involves a fair distribution of resources, the development of entrepreneurial programs for job creation, and investments in educational infrastructure to equip individuals with skills. In an unequal society, where some enjoy a better life while others struggle, equal opportunities vary among different social classes.

Banks play a crucial role in driving the economy, but mistrust towards new business ideas from black South Africans poses a concern. The rich have a high credit record, the middle class is less risky, and the poor are often deemed not creditworthy, perpetuating inequality. This situation persists as long as banks remain conservative and resistant to transformation. In a market economy, nothing is free, and services come at a monetary price. Legal services, for instance, are a concern in the community, where those with high purchasing power receive quality representation, while the middle class faces monthly premiums for legal services. The poor often rely on assistance from organizations like Legal Aid, which may not be well-regarded in the community.

Gender equality remains a critical issue, with historical oppression of women based on skin colour and gender. The legacy of apartheid and colonial systems has deprived women of political, social, and economic rights. Women in the community often face economic challenges, being the majority of the poor and breadwinners. Efforts to address gender inequalities, such as appointing women to political positions, have been made, but gaps persist.

The government, banks, and civil society need to champion women's economic empowerment by addressing purchasing power disparities and promoting women's active participation in the economy. South African society remains highly unequal due to the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid. The current government's slow progress in transforming the economy perpetuates this inequality. To achieve a more equal society, there is a need for individuals, both male and female, capable of directing state resources and formulating policies that foster economic development and social progress. Ultimately, individual freedom is the key to achieving political, financial, and socio-economic freedom for all.

Mandela's post-1994 vision of a "rainbow nation" has aged, its once vibrant hues fading into societal divisions based on race, wealth, and economic status. However, one of the fading stripes in this rainbow is unrelated to colour; it is the middle class, gradually disappearing. Recently, Democratic Alliance member Mbali Ntuli pointed out on Twitter that many in the middle class seem to shield themselves from reality by relying on

money, expecting others to take on the responsibility. This suggests that those who have money are not interested in participating in the political matters. They are not willing to sacrifice their wealth for the poor. The 2021 local elections became a significant challenge for politicians, citizens voted for different political parties which led to most municipalities being led by a coalition council. While South Africa's voter turnout has declined, it's crucial not to solely blame citizens who often struggle in underpaid jobs, receiving little in return for their taxes. It's high time the government invests in interventions to support the middle class, a crucial contributor to the country's prosperity. Despite the ANC's statement that South Africa's black middle class almost tripled from 2.2 million to 6 million between 1993 and 2018, their standard of living, job availability, and economic influence have diminished. The South African black middle class, once a symbol of post-apartheid progress, is now facing increased poverty and debt due to factors like technology, globalization, higher costs for lifestyle goods and services, and overall inflation.

## CONCLUSION

Corruption is commonly defined as the misuse of entrusted power for personal gain, often associated with holders of public office. However, corruption can involve a third party incentivizing the abuse of power, providing private gains like bribes. While not essential, this "corrupting influence" is a frequent source of motivation for officeholders to deviate from their public responsibilities. In some cases, officeholders may initiate corrupt transactions, pressuring a third party to pay a bribe for expedited services. Therefore, the middle-class view politicians as corrupt individuals. In contrast, state capture places more emphasis on the third party's role. State capture, a subset of corruption, involves improper influence over law and policy formation, where a captor group guides an officeholder to misuse their power. This concept highlights the specific way entrusted power is abused, shaping policies to favour a narrow interest group over the public. The captor group's benefit needs not be monetary, and in politically driven state capture, officeholders may be the direct beneficiaries.

State capture shares similarities with regulatory capture but extends beyond regulation to core state functions. It encompasses the shaping of rules, constitutional reforms, patronage-based appointments, allocation of state funds, and regulation of oversight bodies like the media. The captor group consistently abuses these powers to benefit narrow interests, requiring evidence of intent and action to distinguish it from incompetent governance. Intent often varies between economic and political elites driving state capture. Economic elites may seek self-enrichment, while political leaders aim to maintain power or secure impunity, termed kleptocracy. However, case studies reveal blurred lines between political and economic elites, indicating a collaborative process where elites establish connections for mutual gain.

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