A little over a year ago, the #RhodesMustFall campaign resulted in the removal of a statue of Cecil John Rhodes from the University of Cape Town campus. This action focused renewed attention on issues of race, redress, restitution, social cohesion and active citizenship in South Africa. But little is known of the views of the general public in relation to statues of apartheid and colonial leaders. The authors address the gap by examining data from the 2015 round of SASAS – Ben Roberts, Sharlene Swartz, Jarè Struwig and Steven Gordon
STATUES OF LIBERTY?
Attitudes towards apartheid and colonial statues

The South Africa Social Attitudes Survey series consists of nationally representative samples of adults aged 16 years and older living in private households. In the 2015 round, a random sample of 3115 participants were asked two experimental questions on the action participants would prefer to be taken regarding the statues of apartheid and colonial leaders.

What should be done with apartheid and colonial statues?
The first question asked was: 'In your opinion, what should be done with statues of South Africa’s apartheid and colonial leaders, such as Cecil John Rhodes, King George, Jan van Riebeeck? The responses reveal that close to half of the adult public (46%) believes that the statues should be removed (Figure 1).

Of this group of ‘removers’, the main preference was for the statues to be housed in a museum (27%); just over a tenth (12%) feel the statues should be destroyed; with limited support (7%) for the replacement of the apartheid and colonial statues with those of struggle heroes.

Among the balance of the respondents, there was only nominal support (4%) for what may be termed the ‘speaking back’ option, where new artwork is installed adjacent to existing statues; a third (34%) suggest that the statues should be left alone, while the balance (16%) expressed indifference or uncertainty.

How unified or polarised are South Africans in these perspectives? One of the most striking and interesting findings is the uniformity of opinion on the removal of the statues across generations. The percentage favouring the removal ranged between 43% and
50% across age groups. There were however, clear differences in response by race, education and political affiliation. Among black African adults the first choice was removal (52%), which was more than 20% higher than for other population groups. The ‘leave alone’ option was supported by 61% of white adults compared to 29% of black adults.

There were signs of an inverse association between education and removal of statues. Those with no schooling were more inclined to support the ‘removal’ option, as well as the ‘destroy’ option (20%). By contrast, those with a tertiary education were the only group where the ‘leave alone’ option was more supported than the ‘remove’ option (45% vs 39%).

With regard to political party identification, ANC supporters strongly believed in removal (53%), with the placement in museums the main choice. The ‘leave alone’ option was mentioned by slightly under a third (28%). EFF supporters voiced the strongest preference for removal (63%). Primary support was again reported for the ‘museum’ option, though EFF supporters did exhibit higher than average support for the ‘destroy’ option (21%).

The ‘leave alone’ was the dominant response among DA supporters (51%), with less than a third (29%) favouring removal. For those supporting other parties or not declaring their affiliation, there was a fairly even split between ‘leave alone’ and ‘removal’ (40% vs. 36%).

Examining the different socio-demographic attributes, the highest support for the removal of statues was evident among residents of informal settlements, EFF and ANC supporters, those with no formal education, and black African adults. Conversely, white, Indian and coloured adults, DA supporters, the tertiary educated and the non-poor are more likely to advocate for the statues to be left alone and are less favourable towards the removal option. Coloured adults were two to three times more likely to report indifference to the question of removal compared to others.

Who should decide about what should be done?

The second experimental question in SASAS 2015 asked respondents ‘Who should decide what happens to these statues of South Africa’s apartheid and colonial leaders?’ Most responded that government should decide (34%), while around a fifth (22%) favours a referendum on the matter to allow citizens to decide (Figure 2). There was surprisingly low support (10%) for the option of letting ‘those most hurt by the past’ decide, while one might similarly have expected a greater share to opt for the ‘academics and historians’ option (15%). Around a tenth (11%) said they would choose ‘none of the above’, but these consist largely of those preferring the ‘don’t care’ option in the preceding question.

The belief that government should decide on action regarding statues was the most common response for all age groups. It was interesting to note that twice as many 16-19 year-olds (33%) support the option of a referendum as the basis for deciding, compared to those of pensionable age (16%).

There was again distinct patterning based on race, class, geography and political orientation. As Table 1 shows, black African adults placed considerably higher authority in government than the rest to make the decision (39% vs. 16-19%). White adults were distinctly

The survey draws attention to fundamental differences in opinion between black and white South Africans, between those of different political affiliations, and among those with varying education and wealth levels.
more likely to want academics and historians to decide (30%). Coloured and Indian adults showed similar patterns to each other, with first priority being a referendum followed by government deciding.

As for class and education variation, there was an inverse association. Half of those with a low living standard chose the state option, compared with 40% of those with medium living standard and a quarter of those with a high living standard (Table 1). By contrast, support for a referendum was higher among those with a medium or high living standard. Educationally, those with primary or no formal schooling were more likely than those with a higher level of education to prefer state authority. Those with secondary education exhibited lower support for state decision-making and greater demand for a referendum. Those who chose ‘none of the above’ also tended to choose ‘leave alone’ in response to the first question.

Lastly, from a political affiliation standpoint, ANC supporters were considerably more inclined than other party supporters to say government must decide, while DA supporters gave first preference to academics and historians, and are least likely to opt for government. Interestingly, EFF supporters have a strong preference (32%) for deciding by means of a referendum or vote, though the ‘government should decide’ option ranks a close second (28%).

**Conclusion**

These results represent the first evidence concerning the predispositions of the South African adult public towards the symbolic representations of colonial and apartheid figures following the 2015 protests. While nearly half believed they need to be removed, the rest either want them left alone or simply do not care what happens to them. Views on who should decide on the action taken are also polarised, with ‘government’ the dominant response, followed by the public through a ‘referendum or vote’.

We could not find proof that there was a strong age effect underlying these preferences. Instead, the survey draws attention to fundamental differences in opinion between black and white South Africans, between those of different political affiliations, and among those with varying education and wealth levels. These divisions and contestations will make action difficult to take. Greater public dialogue and debate should take place to reach a shared understanding, rooted within a broader agenda of social restitution.

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There were signs of an inverse association between education and removal of statues...[with] those with no schooling...more inclined to support the ‘removal’ option, as well as the ‘destroy’ option.

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**Table 1: How should it be decided what is done with the statues of South Africa’s apartheid and colonial leaders, by race and class, 2015 (row %)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Government or vote</th>
<th>Referendum or vote</th>
<th>Academics and historians</th>
<th>Those most hurt by South Africa’s past</th>
<th>None of the above</th>
<th>(Do not know)</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black African</td>
<td>39*</td>
<td>23*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23*</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19*</td>
<td>20*</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indian/Asian</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>16*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26*</td>
<td>13*</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24*</td>
<td>10*</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Living standard level</strong></td>
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<td>17*</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>11*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>23*</td>
<td>18*</td>
<td>11*</td>
<td>15*</td>
<td>9*</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>