

In South Africa, citizens' trust in president, political institutions drops sharply

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 90 | Anyway Chingwete

Summary

In assessing the health of democracies, it is impossible to ignore the concept of citizen trust in public institutions. Trust is a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, triggering citizens' willingness to contribute to a strong and robust democracy: Citizens who trust their government are more willing to listen and render support to government policies aimed at improving the country (Government Communication and Information System, 2014).

Scholars have traced public trust in institutions to a number of factors, focusing variously on the structure and management of institutions, on public perceptions of officials who manage the institutions, and on institutional performance (Coleman, 1990; Dasgupta, 1988; Sall, 2015). Miller and Listhaug (1990) argue that poor economic performance can contribute to undermining trust in government. A related and important aspect of trust is the perception of official corruption, which can have a negative effect on the performance of political institutions and public confidence in them (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Della Porta, 2000).

In South Africa, where economic difficulties and the Nkandla corruption case were making headlines at the time of the latest Afrobarometer survey in August-September 2015, both performance and perceived corruption could be contributory factors to a dramatic drop in public trust. Survey findings show that citizens' trust in the president has dropped by almost half since 2011, from 62% to 34%, its second-lowest level since the first survey in 2000. Trust in members of Parliament (MPs), provincial premiers, local government councils, the ruling party, and opposition parties has also declined dramatically, making political leaders the least-trusted public officials in the country. Trust in the president is lowest of all 18 institutions and leaders that the survey asked about.

Among state institutions, the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the police, and courts of law lost trust over the past four years. Trust in the tax department (South African Revenue Services, or SARS), the Office of the Public Protector, and the National Prosecuting Authority remained stable. The broadcast media enjoys high public trust; the independent broadcasting service is the only one of the 18 institutions to enjoy a major increase in trust, climbing from 69% in 2011 to 79%.

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 results of Round 6 surveys (2014/2015) are currently being released. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in South Africa, led by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) and Plus 94 Research, interviewed 2,400 adult South Africans in August and September 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95%

confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in South Africa in 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2011.

Key findings

- Citizens' trust in the country's political leaders – the president, Parliament, premier, local government councils, ruling party, and opposition parties – has plunged dramatically since 2011. Political leaders are the least-trusted public officials in the country.
- The proportion of South Africans who say they trust the president “somewhat” or “a lot” dropped by almost half between 2011 and 2015, from 62% to 34%, reaching its second-lowest level since the first Afrobarometer survey in 2000.
- Among 11 countries surveyed in Southern Africa, Zuma has the second-lowest level of public trust, higher only than Malawi's ex-President Joyce Banda.
- Trust in elected political leaders (as an average across president, Parliament, local government councils, and provincial premiers) is particularly low among urban residents, youth, Indian citizens, and supporters of opposition political parties.
- Trust levels are also lower than in 2011 for two institutions mandated to protect security – the police and the courts. The independent broadcasting service is the only institution to realize a major gain in trust, from 69% in 2011 to 79% in 2015.
- Trust is inversely correlated with perceptions of corruption and positively associated with perceived performance of leaders and institutions. Among citizens who think that most or all government officials are corrupt, trust levels are low; among those who think that officials are performing well, trust levels are higher.

Declining trust in president and other political leaders

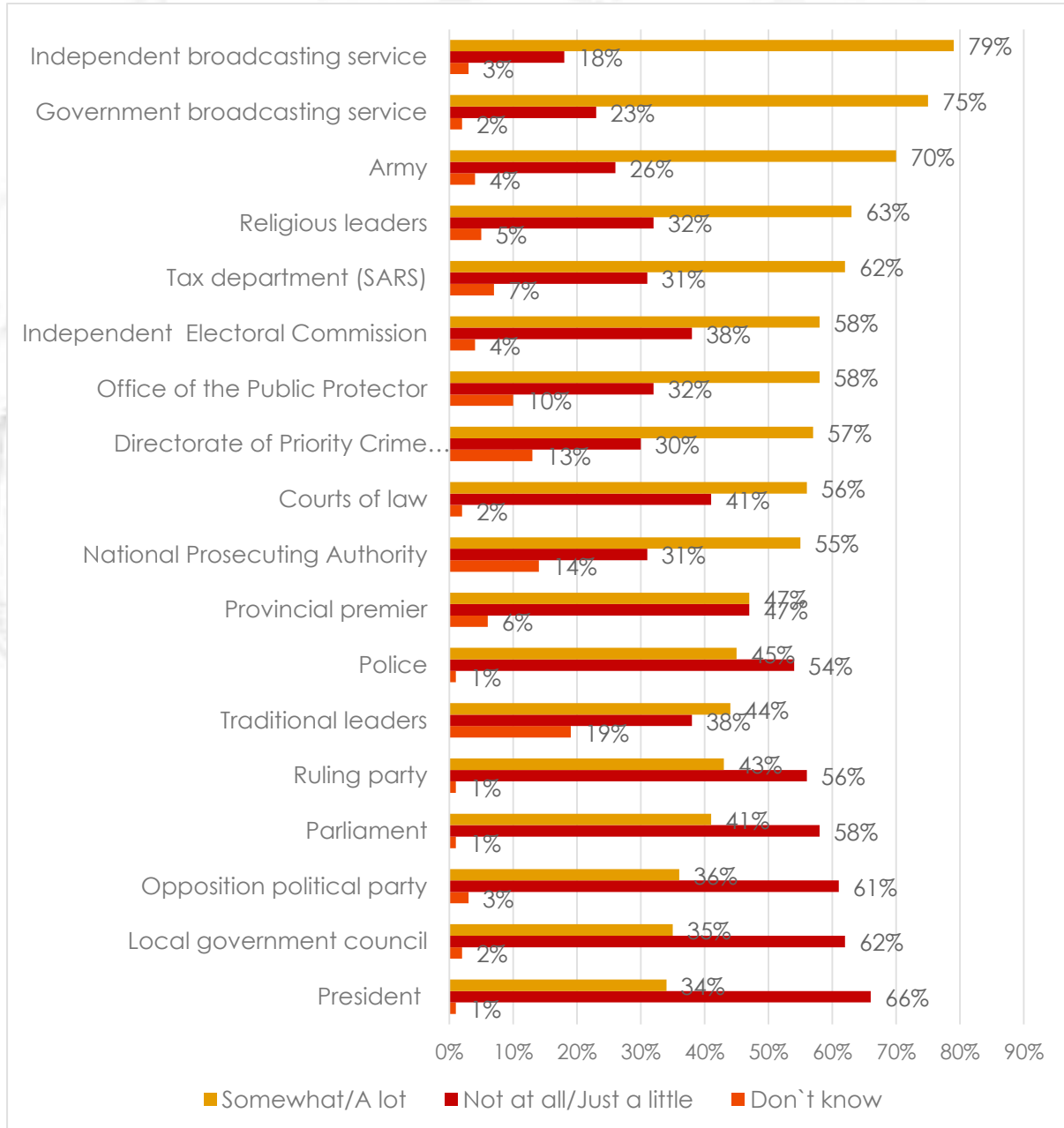
Among 18 institutions and leaders that the survey asked about, the president garners the least public trust: Only one-third (34%) of South Africans say they trust him “somewhat” or “a lot.” Further, five groups of political leaders (president, local government councils, opposition political parties, Parliament, and the ruling party) rank as the least-trusted public officials in the country (Figure 1).

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

The news media enjoys the highest levels of public trust – 79% for the independent broadcasting service and 75% for the government broadcasting service.

Interestingly, large proportions of citizens say they “don't know” how much they trust traditional leaders (19%), the National Prosecuting Authority (14%), the Directorate of Priority Crime Investigations (Hawks) (13%), and the Office of the Public Protector (10) – an average of one in seven citizens (14%) who fail to make a judgment on these Institutions occupying decisive positions as defenders of the law. On a positive note, these institutions enjoy the trust of a majority of citizens with the exception of traditional leaders, who are trusted by only 44% of South Africans.

Figure 1: Trust in public leaders and institutions | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Public trust in South Africa's presidents has fluctuated since Afrobarometer surveys began in 2000. Trust in President Thabo Mbeki was low in 2000-2002, then rose to an average of 68% in 2004-2006 (Table 1). The 2008 survey asked about trust in new President Kgalema Motlanthe, former President Mbeki, and then-ANC President Zuma. Motlanthe's low trust levels (31%) and high proportion of "don't know" responses (26%) likely reflect his brief time in office when the survey was conducted.

Zuma's trust levels ranged up to 62% in 2011 before dropping by 28 percentage points. At two-thirds of the citizenry, distrust of the president is currently at its highest level since Afrobarometer began surveys in South Africa (Lekalake, 2015).

Table 1: Trust in South Africa’s presidents | 2000-2015

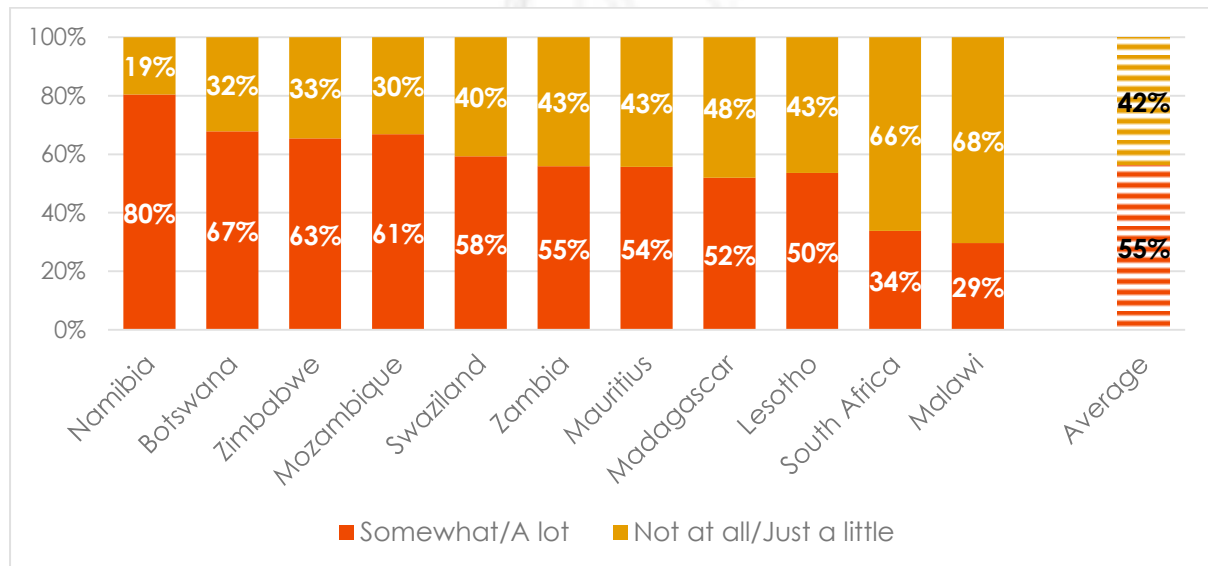
Survey	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008			2011	2015
					Trust new President Motlanthe	Trust ex-President Mbeki	Trust ANC President Zuma		
President	Mbeki: June 1999-Sept 2008				Motlanthe: Sept 2008-May 2009			Zuma: May 2009-present	
Trust “somewhat” or “a lot”	42%	37%	66%	69%	31%	50%	43%	62%	34%
Don’t know	7%	4%	3%	2%	26%	4%	5%	1%	1%

Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say: The president?

In 2008, the following questions were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say: The new President Kgalema Motlanthe? The former President Thabo Mbeki? The president of the ANC, Jacob Zuma?

Among 11 countries surveyed in Southern Africa, only one country reported trusting their president less than South Africa: Malawi, where then-President Banda went on to lose a bid for re-election¹ (Figure 2). Trust in Zuma is 21 percentage points lower than the regional average (55%). In the nine other countries in the region, at least half of all citizens say they trust their president “somewhat” or “a lot.” Trust was highest (80%) in Namibia’s then-President Hifikepunye Pohamba.² Despite their country’s rampant economic and political challenges, close to two-thirds of Zimbabweans said in November 2014 that they trust President Robert Mugabe “somewhat” or “a lot.”

Figure 2: Trust in presidents | 11 Southern African countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven’t you heard enough about them to say: The president?

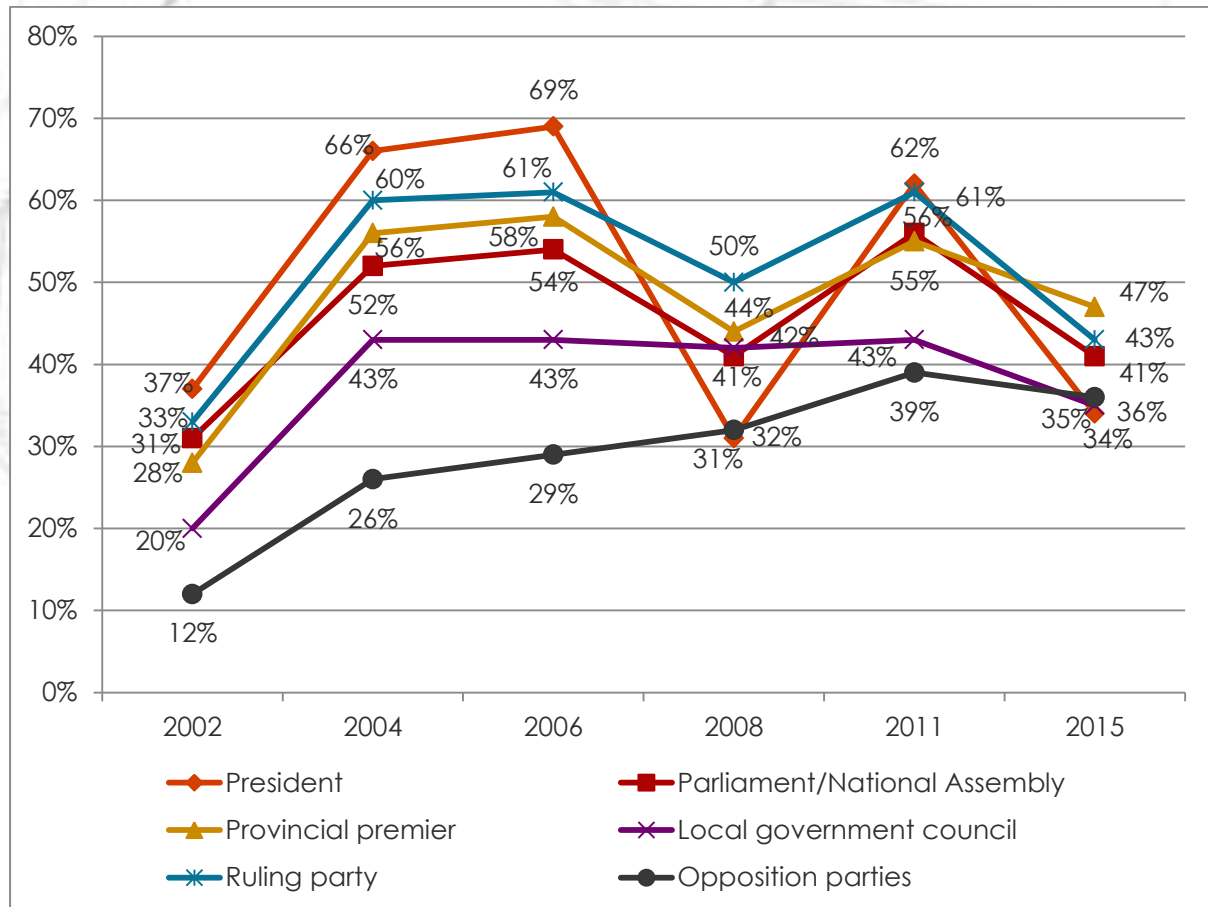
¹ The Afrobarometer Round 6 survey in Malawi was conducted in March 2014, before the May 2014 elections.

² The Namibia Round 6 survey was conducted in August-September 2014, before Pohamba’s presidential mandate ended due to term limits..

Trust in political institutions

Trust in various political institutions in South Africa generally follows a common trajectory, starting from low levels in 2002, climbing in 2004 and 2006, dipping in 2008, and recovering in 2011 before dropping again in 2015 (Figure 3). Trust in opposition political parties has been an exception, steadily gaining until a slight drop in 2015, overall enjoying a tripling of public trust between 2002 (12%) and 2015 (36%). Trust in the ruling party shows an 18-percentage-point decline in 2015.

Figure 3: Trust in political leaders and institutions | South Africa | 2000-2015



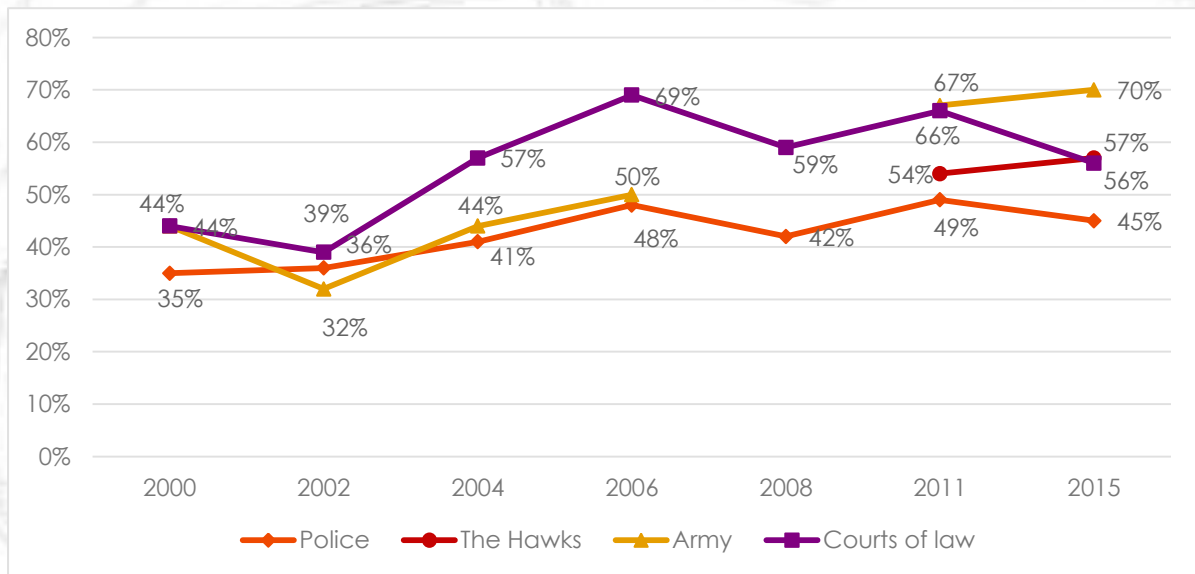
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Security and other institutions

For institutions responsible for security, trust levels follow a similar pattern as trust in political institutions, rising in 2004 and 2006, dipping in 2008, and rising again in 2011 (Figure 4). However, whilst trust in the Hawks and the army stabilized above half of survey respondents in 2015, trust in the police and the courts declined. Trust in the police decreased by just 4 percentage points in 2015 but still leaves the police as the least-trusted of the four security institutions (45%). Trust in the courts dropped by 10 percentage points, from 66% in 2011 to 56% in 2015. Possible contributing factors to a loss of trust in the courts might include a widespread perception (expressed by 54% of survey respondents) that the courts "always" or "often" treat people unequally based on race (Lekalake, 2016) and the high-profile Pistorius judgment, around the time of the survey, of culpable homicide rather than a widely expected harsher sentence.

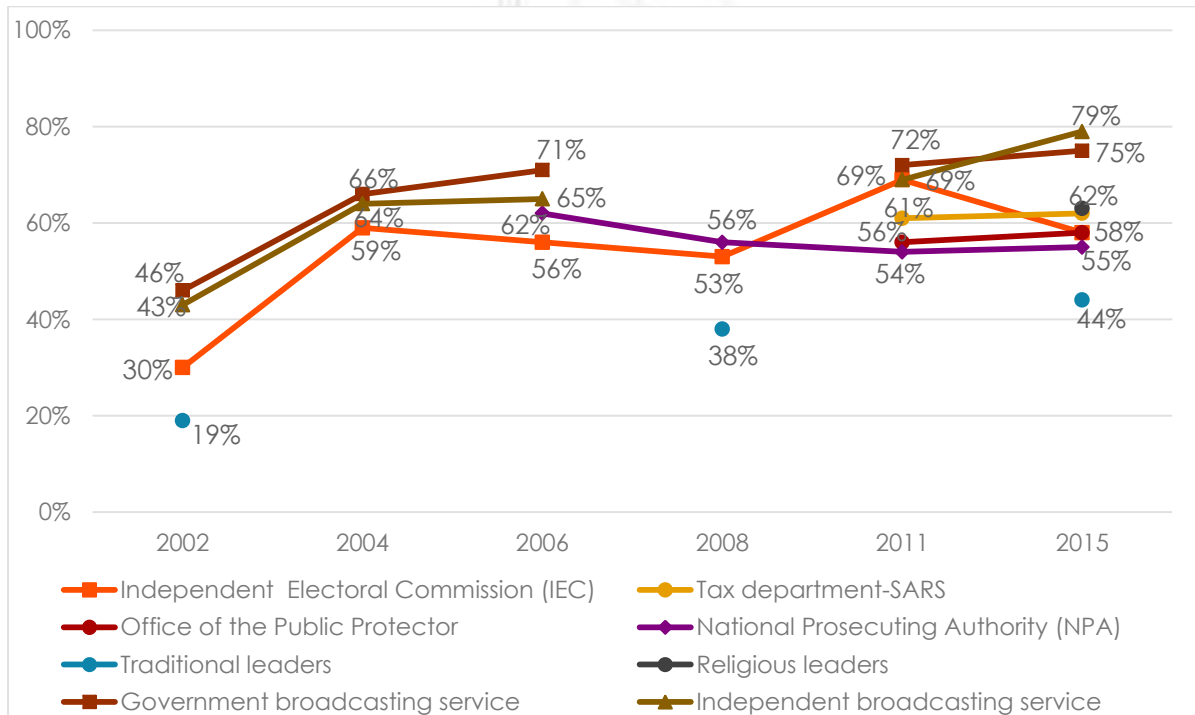
Trust in the tax department, Public Protector, and National Prosecuting Authority stabilized between 2011 and 2015 (Figure 5), in contrast to the IEC, whose trust level dropped by 11 percentage points, from 69% to 58%. The government broadcasting service gained 3 percentage points to reach 75%, whilst the independent broadcasting service gained 10 points, from 69% in 2011 to 79%.

Figure 4: Trust in institutions of security | South Africa | 2000-2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 5: Trust in other institutions | South Africa | 2000-2015

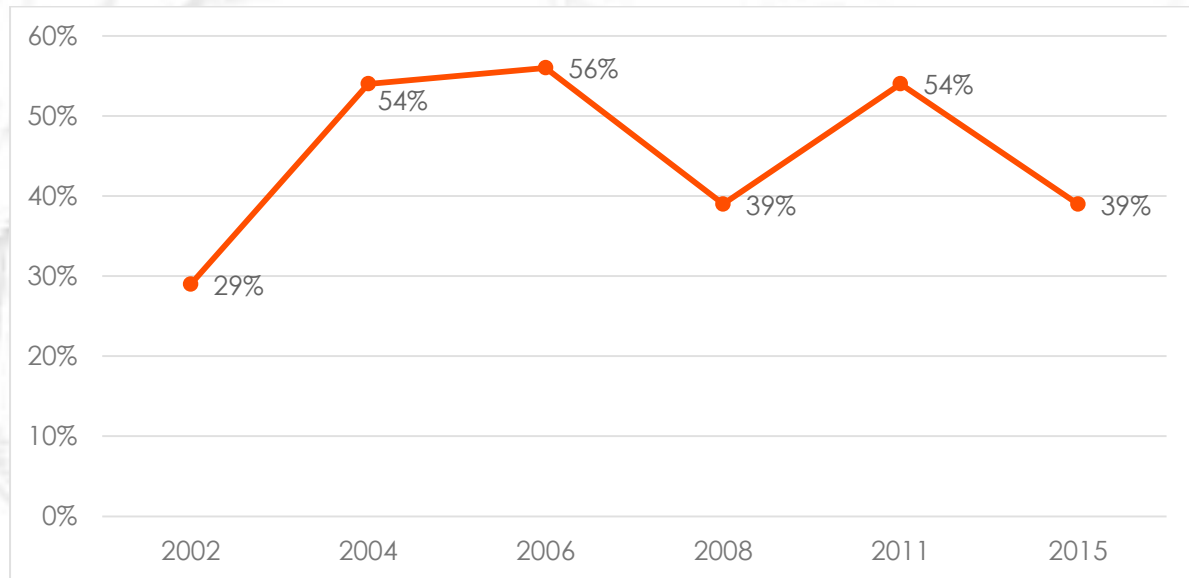


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Trust varies significantly by demographic and social factors

Trust levels show significant variation by demographic group. Looking at average levels of public trust in four elected political leaders – president, MPs, local government councillors, and provincial premiers – we see low trust levels in 2002 (29%) and 2008 (39%) and moderate trust levels in 2004 (54%), 2006 (56%), and 2011 (54%), followed by a sharp drop in 2015 (39%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Average trust in political institutions | South Africa | 2002-2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? The Parliament? Your local government council? The premier of this province?
 (Figure shows average % of respondents, across all four categories, who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

This average of trust ratings across four categories of political leaders varies significantly³ by party affiliation, province, level of education, place of residence (rural or urban), and race⁴ (Figure 7), whilst differences by age are smaller. The gender dimension shows no significant difference in this analysis.

Unsurprisingly, supporters of the ANC are nearly twice as likely to say they trust these political leaders "somewhat" or "a lot" (51% on average) as supporters of the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) (29%) and Economic Freedom Fights (EFF) (25%).

KwaZulu-Natal is the only province where a majority (54% on average across the four categories) express trust, while one-third or less of residents in Gauteng (28%), Northern Cape (32%), and Free State (33%) say the same.

Trust levels increase with age: Among citizens above age 50, 44% trust these political leaders, on average, compared to 36% of those aged 18-30. The pattern for education level is less

³ Since sample sizes for population subgroups are smaller than for the total population, margins of uncertainty surrounding generalizations about subgroups are wider than for country-level results, calling for caution in interpreting associated numerical results.

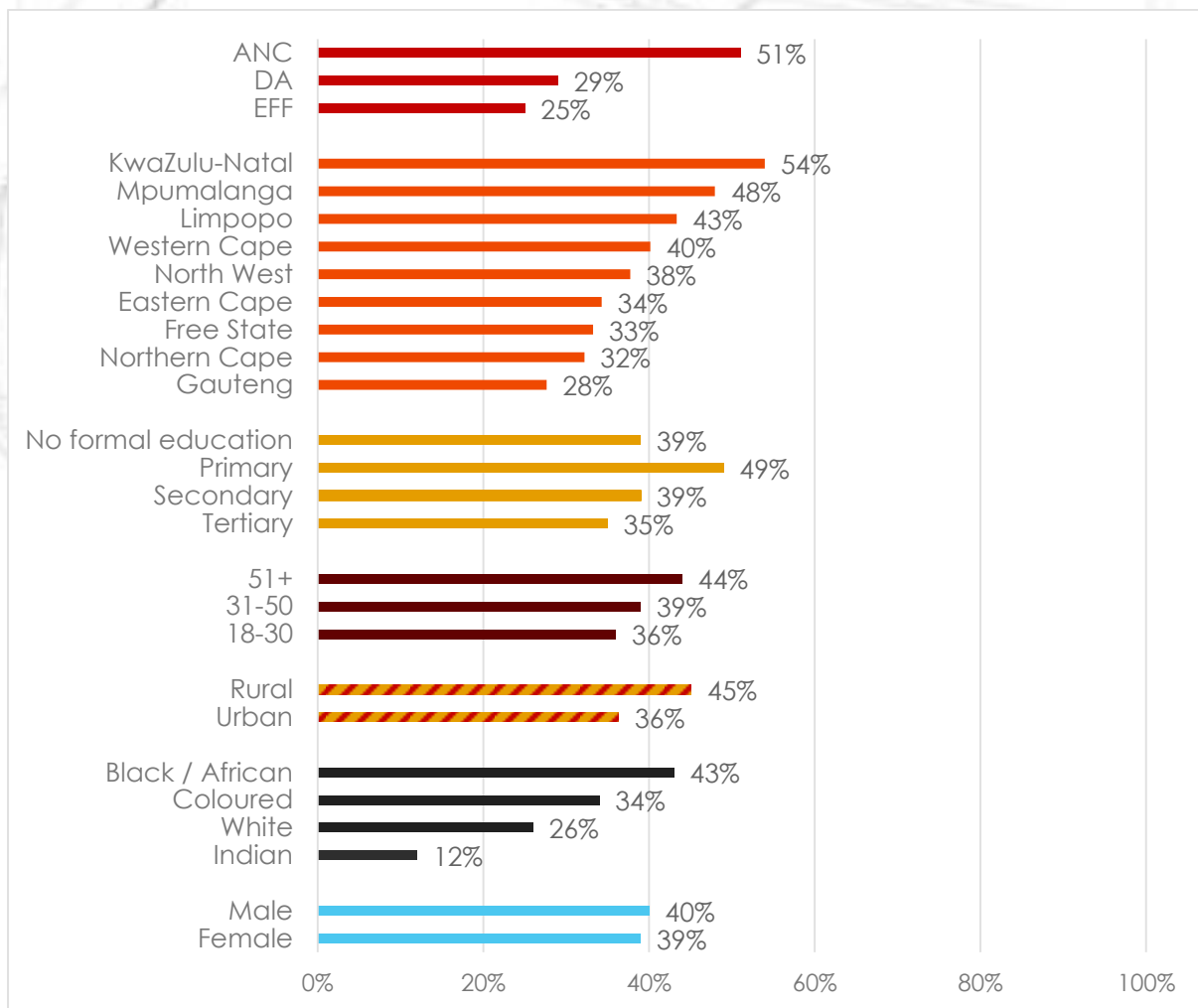
⁴ The racial breakdown of the South Africa survey sample is: 1,799 black/African (70% of the total), 327 Coloured (14%), 251 white (11%), 142 Indian (6%), and 5 "Other" (less than 1%). The sample is then weighted to reflect the country's population distribution.

clear: Those with a primary education are most likely to trust (49%), while both citizens with no formal education and those with secondary or higher education are less trusting.

Rural South Africans (45%) are more likely to trust these leaders than their urban cousins (36%).

Among racial groups, trust in political institutions is highest among black South Africans (43%), followed by Coloured (34%) and white (26%) citizens. Only 12% of Indian citizens trust these leaders “somewhat” or “a lot.”

Figure 7: Average trust in president, Parliament, premier, and local government council | by demographic and social indicators | South Africa | 2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Relationship between trust, perceived corruption, and performance

According to Anderson and Tverdova (2003), citizens of countries with high levels of corruption place less value on political institutions and are less confident in their political system. Afrobarometer findings are consistent with this argument, showing a negative correlation between perceptions of corruption and trust. On the other hand, trust shows a positive relationship with the perceived performance of elected leaders (Table 2).

For example, those who think that “none” or only “some” officials in the Presidency are corrupt are more than twice as likely to trust the president “somewhat” or “a lot” (46%) than

are those who think “most” or “all” officials in the Presidency are corrupt (19%). Similarly, citizens who “approve” or “strongly approve” of the president’s job performance are more than five times as likely to trust the president (69%) than are those who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of his job performance (13%). The same pattern holds true for MPs, local government councillors, and premiers.

Table 2: Trust, perceived corruption, and performance of elected leaders | South Africa | 2015

	Citizen assessment	Trust somewhat/ a lot	Trust not at all/ just a little
President and his office	None/some are corrupt	46%	53%
	Most/all are corrupt	19%	81%
	Approve/strongly approve of performance	69%	31%
	Disapprove/strongly disapprove of performance	13%	87%
Parliament	None/some are corrupt	53%	47%
	Most/all are corrupt	28%	71%
	Approve/strongly approve of performance	65%	35%
	Disapprove/strongly disapprove of performance	23%	77%
Local government council	None/some are corrupt	44%	54%
	Most/all are corrupt	26%	73%
	Approve/strongly approve of performance	62%	35%
	Disapprove/strongly disapprove of performance	20%	79%
Premier of province	None/some are corrupt	Corruption question was not asked about premiers.	
	Most/all are corrupt		
	Approve/strongly approve of performance	68%	31%
	Disapprove/strongly disapprove of performance	22%	75%

Respondents were asked:

1. How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? The Parliament? Your local government council?
2. How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president and officials in his office? Members of Parliament? Local government councillors?
3. Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President Jacob Zuma? Your member of Parliament? The premier of this province? Your elected local government councillor?

Conclusion

As South Africa prepares for local government elections in August, citizens' trust in political leaders and institutions has declined dramatically, particularly trust in the president and the ANC. The government faces a huge task in building public trust in all its institutions – a task of fundamental importance in a democratic society. Among possible strategies for resuscitating citizens' trust, South Africans appear to expect strong measures against corruption and improved government job performance.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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