

# Between TRUST and SCEPTICISM

## Public confidence in institutions

Internationally, measures of institutional trust are seen as a 'good thermometer of malaise' in a country. Since 2003, a set of questions included in the annual SASAS, asked a nationally representative sample of people older than 16 their views on their levels of trust in a series of important public and private institutions. BEN ROBERTS analyses the findings.

THE COMBINED RESULTS of the SASAS and that of the earlier HSRC national opinion (EPOP) surveys, conducted from 1998–2001, shows a demonstrable improvement in public confidence in institutions, rising from an average of 47% in 1998 across 12 institutions to above 60% in 2004 (Table 1).

Table 1: Trust in Institutions, \* 1998–2007 (ranked in descending order by levels of trust in 2006)

Trust in:	1998	1999	2000	2001	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Churches	82	81	74	81	84	81	81	82	82
The SABC	..	..	..	..	75	73	71	72	..
The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)	..	54	49	63	63	69	65	68	..
National government	47	60	43	52	57	69	64	59	52
Big business	56	55	39	43	57	55	53	56	..
Parliament	..	..	..	..	57	65	59	55	46
Your provincial government	41	50	34	..	52	63	59	54	..
Courts	42	45	37	45	50	58	56	52	49
Defence Force	48	..	45	49	62	56	59	49	..
Your local government	37	48	32	38	45	55	48	44	34
The police	42	47	39	40	42	46	45	39	39
Political parties	30	39	29	27	..	..	42	37	27
Average (all items)	47	53	42	49	59	63	59	56	47
Sample size	2 182	2 672	2 611	2 530	4 980	5 580	5 733	5 843	3 163

Sources: HSRC EPOP survey 1998–2001; HSRC SASAS 2003–2007

\*Percentage saying that they 'strongly trust' or 'trust' in each of the following institutions in South Africa at present. Figures shaded in green indicate year-on-year improvements in trust, while figures in orange represent year-on-year declines in trust.

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### MARKED DECLINE IN TRUST

But in contrast to the preceding years, the data from late 2005 show a worrisome reversal in trust in virtually all major public institutions, particularly local government and Parliament, but also the other two tiers of government. This downward trend continued into 2006 and 2007.

Over the three-year period between 2004 and 2007, trust in local and national government and in Parliament dropped by approximately 20 percentage points, and by 16 percentage points in relation to political parties (Table 2).

Table 2: Changes in institutional trust between 1998 and 2007 (percentage point differences)

Institution	Percentage point change		
	2004–2006	2004–2007	1998–2007
Your local government	-11	-20	-3
National government	-11	-18	+11
Parliament	-10	-19	n.a.
Political parties	-6**	-16**	-4
Courts	-6	-9	+10
Your provincial government	-9	n.a.	+14*
Defence Force	-8	n.a.	0*
The police	-7	-6	-3
The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)	-1	n.a.	+14
The SABC	-1	n.a.	n.a.
Churches	+1	+1	0
Big business	+2	n.a.	0*
Average (all items)	-5	-13	+4

Sources: HSRC EPOP survey 1998; HSRC SASAS 2006, 2007

Note: n.a. = not applicable, due to lack of available data

\* Reflects changes between 1998 and 2006

\*\* Reflects change since 2005

Modest but notable declines in trust (between 5 and 10%) were observed between 2004 and 2006 in relation to the courts of law, provincial government, the defence force and the police.

National and provincial governments, Parliament and the courts received slim majority support in 2006, though by the end of 2007, only national government retained the confidence of more than 50% of the public.

South Africans appear somewhat less likely to place confidence in their local government and the police (34% and 39% respectively in 2007), which are institutions at the forefront of government service. Political

parties have consistently received the lowest trust ratings (27% in 2007) of all the political and social institutions examined.

In spite of the declining confidence in government and other institutions of representative democracy over the past few years, it is equally important to bear in mind that in many instances the levels of trust still remain above those reported in the late 1990s. In the case of the IEC, provincial government, national government and the courts of law, levels of public trust in 2007 were more than 10% higher than in 1998. Exceptions include political parties, local government and the police, in which confidence remains marginally below 1998 levels.

### IN THOSE WE TRUST

Over the decade, the majority of citizens (81% on average) have consistently and resolutely shown that they are most likely to express greatest confidence in religious institutions, such as churches. This is a typical pattern across sub-Saharan Africa.

This is followed by trust in the national broadcaster, SABC, which exceeded 70% between 2003 and 2007. The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) has also received fairly healthy approval ratings, with majority support from about two-thirds of the adult population since 2001.

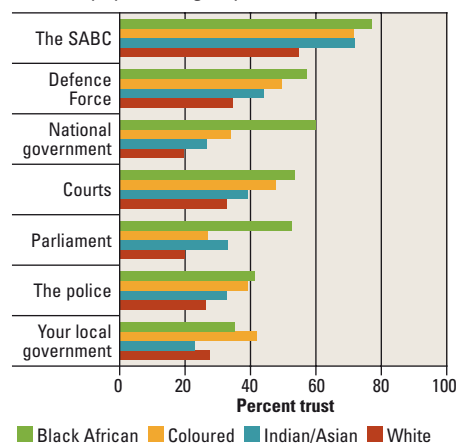
### TRUST BY RACE GROUP

Looking beyond national averages, levels of trust in institutions continue to exhibit important variations by race. There does appear to be broad agreement in the ranking among the different population groups with respect to the institutions they trust the most (religious organisations, media) and the least (political parties).

However, there remains a substantial difference in both ranking and actual levels of trust in institutions in-between the two extremes. For example, in 2006, trust in provincial government, national government and Parliament was more than three times higher for black South Africans compared to white South Africans, and four times as high in relation to political parties (Figure 1).

Support levels for the police and courts are low among both black and white citizens, which may reflect concern over crime and safety. Institutional trust among the coloured and Asian population is reported mainly at intermediate levels between those expressed by the black and white population.

**Figure 1: Trust in selected institutions by population group, 2007 (%)**



Note: The results for the SABC and Defence Force are for 2006, due to a lack of data for 2007.

Is there any evidence to suggest that gaps between population groups in institutional trust have begun to close over the last decade? The trends are rather mixed.

In many cases, there does not appear to be anything more than small reductions in the percentage point differences between different population groups, though there are some exceptions. Most notable is the significant convergence in attitudes towards local government. This is attributable to rising mistrust among the black population (falling from 46% in 1998 to 35% in 2007), compared with a small increase in trust among the white population.

Between 2004 and 2007, trust in local government fell by 25 percentage points for black citizens, a figure far exceeding any other population group. The result has been that a gap of 30 percentage points in 1998 between black and white adults had diminished to a mere 7 percentage points in 2007, with only around a third of both groups expressing trust in their local municipality.

### CAUSES OF MISTRUST

What could be driving the rising mistrust in the country's political institutions? On the basis of other studies, a number of plausible hypotheses emerge:

- political scandal;
- self-enrichment and conspicuous consumption among officials and leaders;
- critical media messages about politicians and the government;
- a public perception that societal problems such as poverty and crime are not being solved;
- perceived poor responsiveness of politicians to citizens' grievances; and

- ineffectiveness in delivering upon developmental promises.

Other factors to be considered include illiteracy, which constrains access to knowledge and information; and the lack of first hand knowledge of many institutions due to geographic isolation from many public institutions. In coming months we will examine the relative importance of competing explanations, and how these are evolving over time.

### NEED FOR ALARM?

Claims that such results constitute a 'crisis of democracy' would be misplaced. It is too early to determine whether the post-2004 trend represents a transitory downturn or the beginning of a gradual but sustained erosion of confidence, especially since trust in many political institutions remains higher than the late 1990s.

Also, there is an argument in the literature that a certain amount of wariness and scepticism is a healthy sign for a democracy, since it implies the emergence of 'critical citizens' that do not place blind faith in public institutions.

But there is still cause for concern, particularly for a fairly young democracy such as South Africa. The survey findings suggest that the professed 'Age of Hope' has lost some of its lustre over the last few years as the 'mood' of the nation has taken a negative turn in the face of uncertain times.

A continued steady decline in public confidence, especially in the principal institutions of representative democracy, could present a risk in that the healthy scepticism associated with critical citizenship is increasingly replaced with political disaffection and alienation. This in turn could begin to undermine the legitimacy of the state.

Of note is the fall in confidence in Parliament, given that the legislature constitutes the main representative institution that links citizens to the state, while the dwindling trust in local government speaks volumes on perceptions of government performance. And trust matters, because the extent to which citizens deem political institutions and leadership trustworthy may ultimately inform their political participation and voting behaviour, support for government policies or reforms, and interpersonal trust.

These findings clearly point to the need for the continuous monitoring of public confidence in our society's institutions, especially in a post-Polokwane context. ●