

Chapter 10

Institutional trust

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10.1 Trust in institutions

Several items were included in the survey questionnaire to establish the levels of trust that exist in various governmental or civil society institutions. The institutions investigated were the national government, the courts, labour unions, provincial governments, the media, the police, the defence force, political parties, local government, business, churches and the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Trust was measured by means of a six-point Likert-type scale with the following dimensions: Strongly trust, trust, neither trust nor distrust, distrust, strongly distrust and don't know. Non-governmental institutions such as the church, the media and — to a lesser extent — business were trusted more by the South African public than most governmental institutions. It is furthermore of interest that business, although often criticised by labour unions and other organisations that are said to represent “the people”, enjoyed relatively high trust among most sub-divisions of the population.

10.2 Trust in institutions by province

Levels of trust for each institution varied by province (Table 10.1). With regard to trust in the national government, the highest level was found for the Eastern Cape and the second highest in the Free State. People in the Western Cape indicated the lowest level of trust in the national government and those in Gauteng, the second lowest. The Free State population expressed the highest level of trust in courts and those in the Western Cape had the lowest. Labour unions enjoyed the highest trust in the Eastern Cape and the lowest in Gauteng. The population of the Free State voiced the highest trust in both their provincial and local government and those of the Eastern Cape the second highest. The lowest levels of trust for provincial and local government occurred in Gauteng and the Western Cape.

Trust in the media was the highest in the Eastern Cape and lowest in the Western Cape. The police enjoyed the highest trust in the Northern Cape and the Free State and the lowest in Gauteng. Trust in the defence force was highest for the Eastern Cape and the lowest in Gauteng. Political parties, the institution that enjoyed the lowest overall level of trust, were least trusted in the Western Cape and most trusted in the Eastern Cape.

The level of trust for business was the highest for the Eastern Cape and ironically, lowest for Gauteng, the commercial heart of the country. Trust in churches was highest in the Eastern, Western and Northern Cape and lowest in Gauteng. The IEC enjoyed the highest levels of trust in the Free State and the second highest in the Eastern Cape. Trust in the IEC was, however, the lowest in Gauteng. It is furthermore of interest that the population of Gauteng indicated the lowest levels or second lowest levels of trust for all the variables considered. Either the lowest or the second lowest mean scores were recorded for the Western Cape for the national government, courts labour unions, the media, the defence force, political parties, local government and the IEC. The population of the Free State (the national government, courts, the provincial government, the police, political parties, local

government, business and the IEC) and the Eastern Cape (the national government, labour unions, the provincial government, the media, political parties, business and the IEC), on the other hand, had either the highest or the second highest trust levels in the majority of institutions considered. The population of KwaZulu-Natal (courts, the media, local government and churches) and the Northern Cape (the police, the defence force, business and churches) each indicated the highest or second highest levels of trust for several institutions.

Table 10.1: Trust or distrust in institutions by province, November 1999

Institution	Level of trust	Province									Total
		EC	FS	GT	KN	MP	NC	NP	NW	WC	
National Government	Trust	79	70	49	61	69	59	63	61	41	60
	Distrust	13	17	32	22	16	20	21	20	32	23
Courts	Trust	50	55	32	55	57	50	40	48	40	44
	Distrust	33	23	42	24	26	26	34	33	43	33
Labour unions	Trust	56	37	28	39	36	32	37	34	37	38
	Distrust	17	24	39	24	22	25	22	23	37	27
Provincial government	Trust	62	66	38	51	57	49	47	53	41	50
	Distrust	25	14	31	25	29	20	37	25	32	28
Media	Trust	77	72	56	73	70	57	69	68	52	66
	Distrust	12	10	19	13	14	17	13	11	23	15
Police	Trust	55	64	30	55	41	62	50	49	43	47
	Distrust	36	22	46	28	40	23	35	39	40	37
Defence force	Trust	70	66	48	57	53	69	61	54	50	57
	Distrust	13	17	28	18	24	10	20	27	22	21
Political parties	Trust	61	53	26	32	48	38	45	49	22	39
	Distrust	23	27	43	31	29	30	31	31	53	34
Local government	Trust	58	63	34	52	52	48	51	51	39	48
	Distrust	32	20	39	25	36	27	37	31	35	32
Business	Trust	71	61	43	57	56	45	61	53	45	55
	Distrust	11	16	25	14	18	23	20	17	12	17
Churches	Trust	88	84	69	78	86	89	84	85	90	80
	Distrust	7	6	9	7	4	3	7	6	5	7
IEC	Trust	72	72	32	47	67	56	67	59	52	54
	Distrust	14	7	22	15	14	13	12	18	20	16

10.3 Demographic indicators of institutional trust

Table 10.2 lists the proportions of each population group who indicated trust or distrust in each institution. Population group was identified as the most important indicator of trust or distrust for all the institutions investigated, both governmental and non-governmental. Apart from population group and the province in which the population lived, income levels appeared to influence levels of trust, especially in respect of courts, labour unions, provincial governments, the media, the police, the defence force and local governments. Categories of age were significant in the case of labour unions, the defence force, business and the IEC, whereas gender was only significant with regard to trust in churches.

In terms of population group, black people indicated the highest level of trust in most institutions. Only in the case of the police and churches were the levels of trust amongst coloureds slightly higher than those amongst blacks. The black population as a group had the highest level of trust in churches, the media and the national government. They had the least trust in the police, political parties, courts and labour unions.

Trust levels for the coloured population were also higher than those of Indians and whites, for most of the institutions investigated. Only in the case of business were levels of

trust amongst whites higher than those amongst coloureds (but still lower than those for blacks). Similarly to black people and the total sample, coloured people had the highest trust in churches, but indicated the second and third highest levels of trust in the IEC and the defence force. It is furthermore of interest that they indicated the lowest level of trust in political parties, while their trust in provincial and local governments was also relatively low.

Apart from business for which trust amongst whites was the second highest, Indians and whites expressed the lowest levels of trust in all the institutions investigated. Indians had higher trust in the national government, courts, labour unions, the media, the police, political parties and the IEC than did white people. The opposite was true for provincial governments, the defence force, local governments, business and churches, in which whites had higher trust than Indians. The Indian population had the highest trust in churches, business and the defence force. On the other hand, there was an almost 5:1 ratio between those who distrusted and those who trusted political parties. The white population also had the highest trust in churches. The only other institution for which their trust was relatively high was business. They had the least trust in labour unions.

Table 10.2: Level of trust (%) in institutions by population group, Nov. 1999

Institution	Level of trust	Population group				Total
		Black	White	Coloured	Indian	
National government	Trust	71	19	42	32	60
	Distrust	15	59	28	51	23
Courts	Trust	50	22	38	30	44
	Distrust	29	58	33	45	33
Labour unions	Trust	42	10	39	36	38
	Distrust	20	67	26	45	27
Provincial government	Trust	56	25	38	25	50
	Distrust	22	49	31	55	28
Media	Trust	74	38	50	49	66
	Distrust	10	38	17	33	15
Police	Trust	49	37	51	45	47
	Distrust	36	43	31	42	37
Defence force	Trust	62	27	57	50	57
	Distrust	18	41	15	27	21
Political parties	Trust	48	22	24	15	39
	Distrust	16	70	45	69	34
Local government	Trust	55	21	38	25	48
	Distrust	28	51	34	59	32
Business	Trust	57	50	42	58	55
	Distrust-	17	20	15	27	17
Churches	Trust	81	81	81	66	80
	Distrust	7	8	2	12	7
IEC	Trust	60	24	52	46	54
	Distrust	10	48	13	34	16

10.4 Institutional trust by personal income level

A general trend that could be observed was that trust for the majority of institutions investigated was the highest for the lower income groups and that it declined steadily as income increased. This tendency was most conspicuous with regard to trust in the national government, but a similar trend can be observed for courts, labour unions, provincial governments, the police, political parties, local government and the IEC. It is furthermore noteworthy that the people who reported that they had no income revealed the highest levels of trust in almost all the institutions considered. The tendency of declining trust with increasing levels of income did not apply to the media, business and churches to the same extent, as was the case with other institutions.

Table 10.3: Level of trust (%) in institutions by income, November 1999

Institution	Level of trust	Income							Total
		None	R1-R579	R580-R2499	R2500-R5829	R5830-R12499	R12500-R24999	R25000 +	
National Government	Trust	63	70	59	29	29	38	23	60
	Distrust	24	11	23	48	48	50	57	23
Courts	Trust	47	50	41	21	25	35	23	44
	Distrust	32	25	36	56	56	52	77	33
Labour unions	Trust	40	35	45	35	28	14	0	38
	Distrust	25	17	29	48	51	83	100	27
Provincial government	Trust	52	57	49	21	32	32	23	50
	Distrust	28	19	26	56	45	56	77	28
Media	Trust	70	69	68	47	49	59	59	66
	Distrust	16	8	14	31	24	38	21	15
Police	Trust	47	52	47	38	40	40	2	47
	Distrust	37	30	38	44	40	26	98	37
Defence force	Trust	59	59	62	41	34	17	2	57
	Distrust	20	16	19	31	31	60	57	21
Political parties	Trust	41	46	38	16	13	29	21	39
	Distrust	35	22	34	64	67	59	77	34
Local government	Trust	50	57	44	24	27	43	25	48
	Distrust	33	21	33	57	54	51	75	32
Business	Trust	55	54	54	52	49	66	59	55
	Distrust	17	16	17	19	16	23	0	17
Churches	Trust	82	80	82	85	79	64	57	80
	Distrust	7	5	7	7	8	18	21	7
IEC	Trust	57	58	49	42	38	46	21	54
	Distrust	14	9	15	38	42	49	59	16

10.5 Summary

Of all governmental institutions, the national government enjoyed the highest levels of trust. However, whereas trust in churches was relatively unanimous, there was greater variation in opinion with regard and to support for the national government. This can be deduced from relatively large standard deviations, but also because the national government was not one of the three most trusted institutions for smaller groups such as whites and Indians. In fact, no governmental institution was among the most trusted institutions for whites, who gave preference to churches, business and the media. Indians listed only the defence force (as a governmental institution) among their three most trusted institutions. The conclusion can be drawn that levels of trust in governmental institutions — and especially in the various levels

of government — were fairly low among smaller groups within the population. Churches were identified in both surveys as the most trusted institution in South Africa. Whereas the IEC had the second highest mean score in March 1999, the media was rated the second most trusted institution in November 1999. The prominent role that the IEC played during the period prior to the general election probably enhanced its image among the South African public. However, after the election, awareness of the role of the IEC — and consequently also trust in the IEC as an institution — has dwindled. On the other hand, the role of the media in keeping the public informed has seemingly won them the trust of the South African public. The national government was identified as the third most trusted institution in both surveys. Other institutions that apparently enjoyed relatively high trust among South Africans were business and the defence force.

In March 1999 the lowest level of trust was found for labour unions and the second lowest for political parties. These two institutions changed places in the November 1999 survey, when the lowest level of trust was expressed for political parties and the second lowest level for labour unions. It can thus be deduced that trust in political parties had deteriorated in the aftermath of the 1999 general election. Political parties were not the only institution that lost a degree of esteem in the eyes of the South African public. Lower levels of trust were found in the November survey to exist for the national government, courts, the police, the defence force, local government, business, churches and — as already mentioned — the IEC. However, in the case of courts, the police, the defence force, political parties and local governments the proportional differences between the two surveys were too small for it to be concluded that trust in these institutions had indeed deteriorated. Labour unions, provincial governments and the media had, on the other hand, gained some esteem.

Of particular interest furthermore is the fact that, despite differences in trust in the institutions investigated, it appears as if most people tended to generalise attitudes about one institution to most other institutions. A sharp distinction is not even drawn between governmental and non-governmental institutions. This conclusion is based on the fact that groups or categories that indicated high trust in one institution also indicated relatively high levels of trust in most of the other institutions. The opposite was also true. Groups or categories that had low levels of trust in an institution such as the national government, also had relatively low levels of trust in other institutions. The only exception was churches, which appeared to enjoy high levels of trust among most groups and categories.