



THE IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND WHY WE SHOULD CARE?

One of the questions occupying the minds of people is – “who should I trust?” This should come as no surprise because of the divergent views emerging in society over a range of matters.

Why should the level of trust concern government? Trust is an important component of democratic legitimacy. If citizens trust their government, they will be more likely to contribute to a strong and robust democracy. This means that people will be more willing to listen to government and support its policies aimed at improving the country as a whole. When people support government policies they will be predisposed to want to help government implement such policies.

The issue of trust is a concern world-wide with a decline in the levels of trust observed internationally. Findings indicate that trust in all institutions world-wide is tapering off. Business scandals, government lack of transparency and media scandals are believed to have led to the declining levels of trust. This has left citizens lacking a clear sense of these institutions’ intentions or actions and it therefore makes them less receptive to messages from any of these institutions.

According to the results of the 13th annual Edelman Trust Barometer (Figure 1), which surveyed more than 31 000 respondents in 26 countries around the world, 16 of the countries surveyed in 2013 have trust scores lower than 50 percent in government compared to only 9 of the countries surveyed that have trust scores below 50 percent in business. The Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that there is a growing chasm in levels of trust between government and business globally.

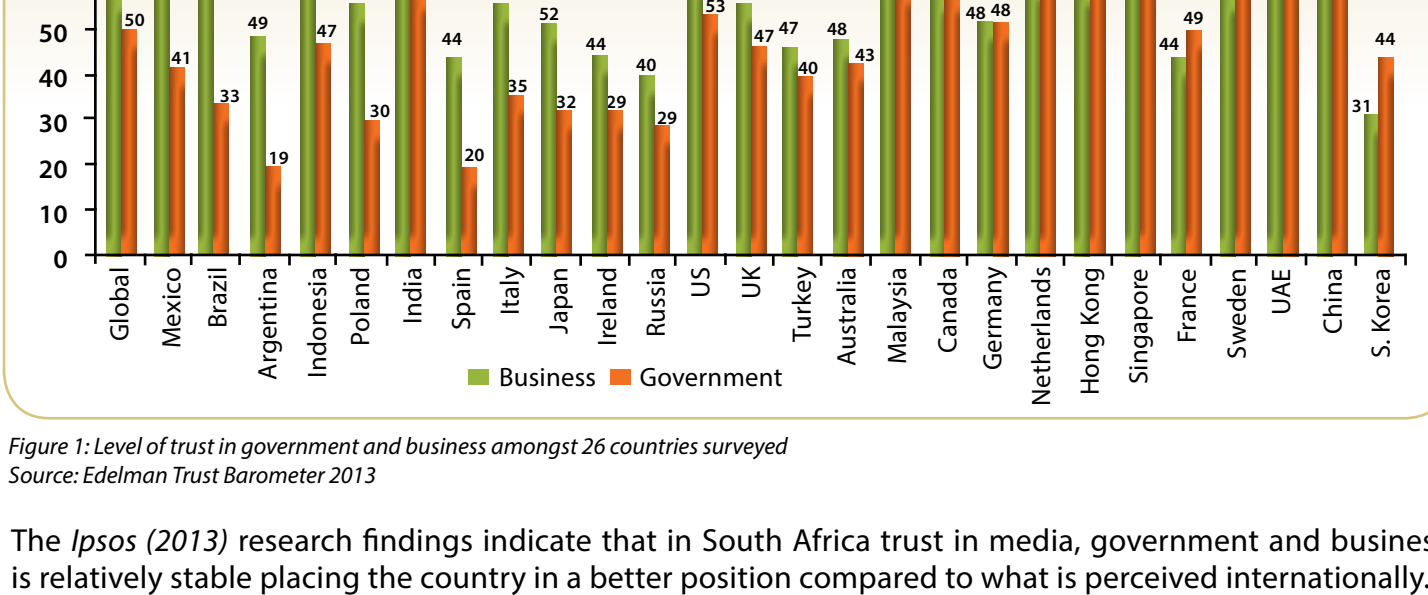


Figure 1: Level of trust in government and business amongst 26 countries surveyed
Source: Edelman Trust Barometer 2013

The Ipsos (2013) research findings indicate that in South Africa trust in media, government and business is relatively stable placing the country in a better position compared to what is perceived internationally.

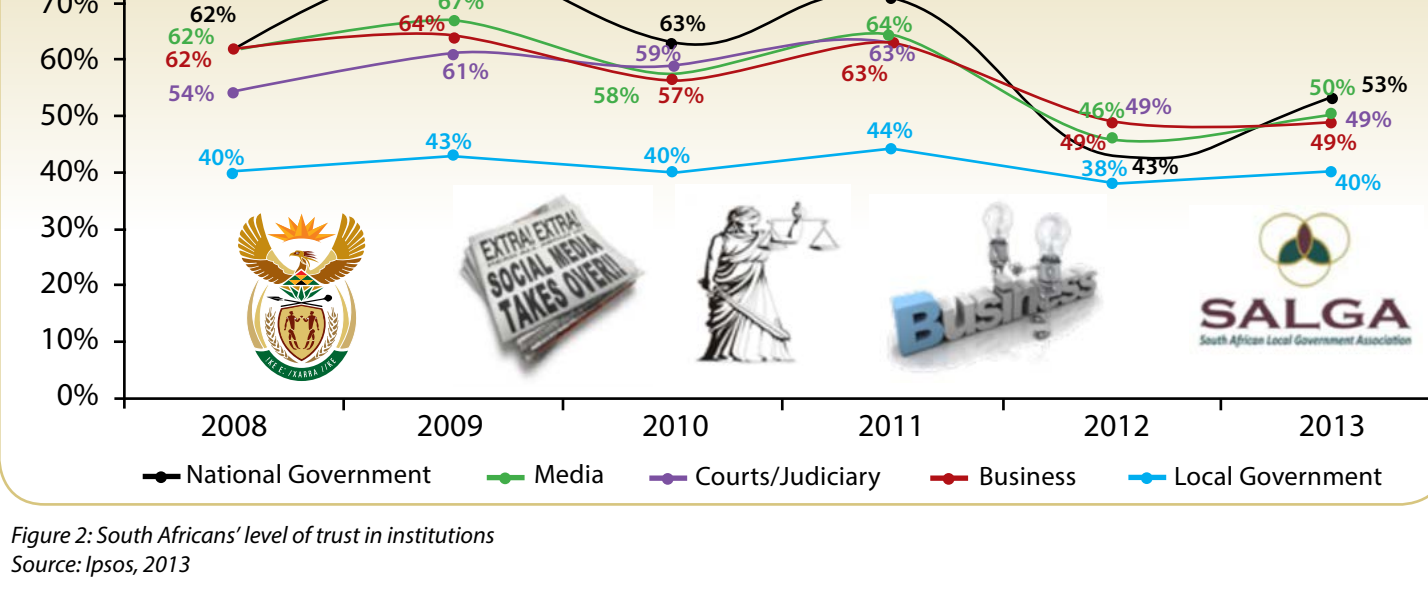


Figure 2: South Africa's level of trust in institutions
Source: Ipsos, 2013

Trust in the courts/judiciary is lower compared to trust in government, media and business. While trust in the courts/judiciary declined, an improvement in trust is observed in local government; with a general recovery observed in all institutions including national government in 2013.

South Africa presents a different and positive picture as a developing country. Contrary to trends in other developing countries, from 2009 to 2011 South Africans tended to trust national government more than business. Though the trend tapered off in 2012 it recovered to above the 50 percent mark in 2013 showing that government is slightly more trusted than business.

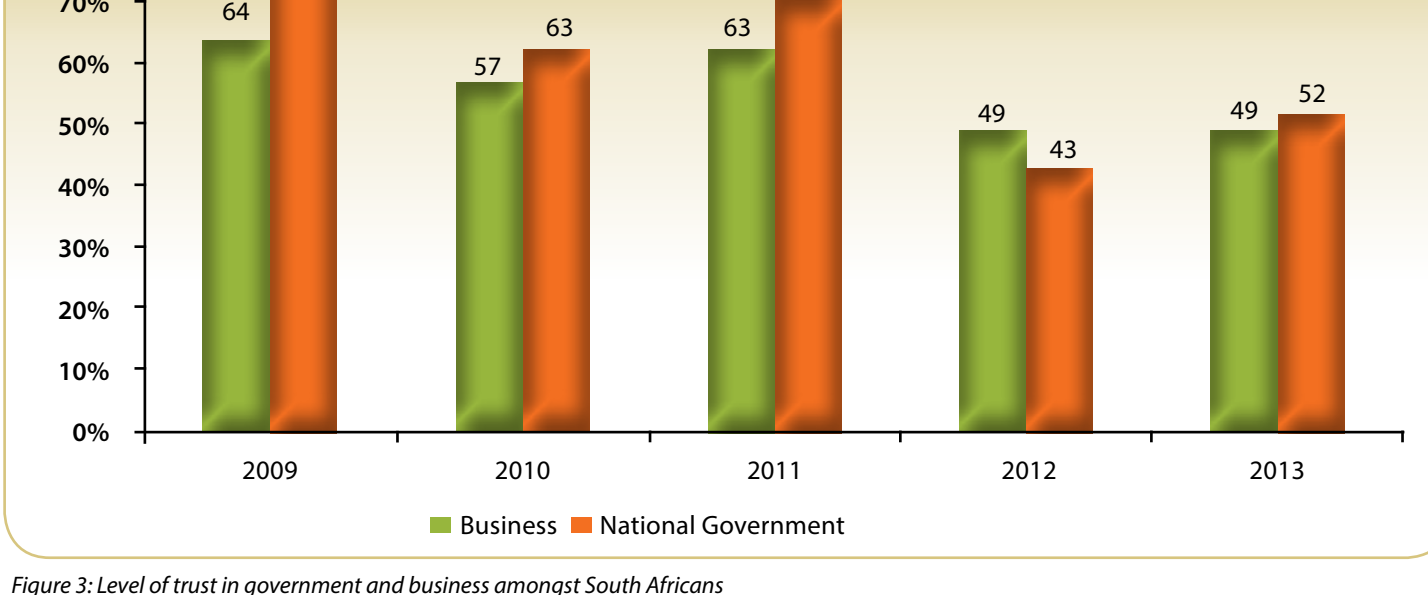


Figure 3: Level of trust in government and business amongst South Africans
Source: Ipsos, 2013

However, even though the picture still looks more positive in South Africa compared to other countries, over time trust for all institutions has declined – including government. This makes efforts to improve levels of trust imperative for the benefit of the country and its citizens. Areas to look into when nurturing public trust include the integrity of public officials, transparency and engagement. These were frequently mentioned in the National Qualitative Study that was conducted by GCIS in 2013.

REASONS AFFECTING PUBLIC TRUST

The 2013 Edelman Trust Barometer indicates that lack of trust is driven by perceptions regarding poor performance and unethical behaviour. An Ipsos study in 2012 indicated that 27 percent of respondents distrust government because they are of the opinion that it is corrupt; nepotism is prevalent and it lacks transparency at local authority or national government levels. In addition, 21 percent of the respondents mentioned officials not fulfilling their promises as the reason for their lack of trust. Other reasons mentioned included unemployment and lack of skills (14 percent), issues regarding the quality of housing (14 percent) and issues regarding water supply (9 percent). These findings indicate that if people feel that government is not delivering on its policies it may have a negative impact on their level of trust in government to act in their best interest.

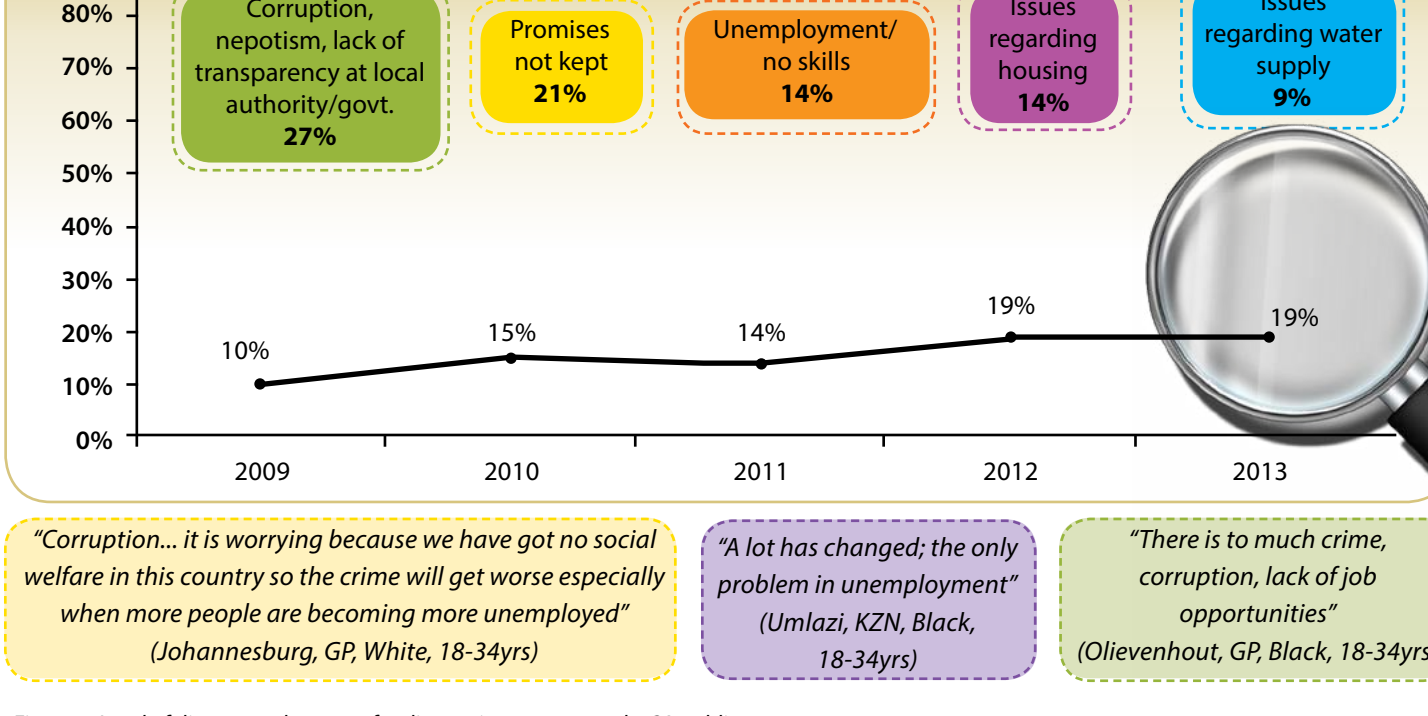


Figure 4: Level of distrust and reasons for distrust in government by SA public
Source: Ipsos, 2012

Cultivating a culture of transparency, accountability and honesty is important to eliminate negative, incorrect and misleading information that often negatively affects public perception. In working towards this goal, government has to be abreast of the information needs of the public and timeously provide information to correct any misconceptions or problematic media reporting on government delivery.

The 2013 GCIS Tracker results reveal that the five most important areas that people want information on are:

- How to find a job
- How to get job training
- How to protect their homes from crime
- How to report corruption and bad service from government officials.

Unemployment and lack of skills were also mentioned as some of the reasons for lack of trust.



Figure 5: Public information needs in SA
Source: GCIS Tracker, 2013

Apart from the public trust in government, an important aspect is trust in decision-making processes and the way in which decisions are implemented – especially insofar as good governance is concerned. This places the onus on governments and governing bodies to meet societal needs.

Establishing trust requires an open society where citizens are able to debate and question government policies, and can have a sense of making a difference in decision-making processes. Trust in government decision-making processes and implementation thereof transcend partisan and/or ideological attachments (Blind 2006 and Angel Gurria 2013).

Citizens who are not involved in civic activities tend to view government and its institutions in a more negative light as they tend to isolate themselves and view the world only from a narrow perspective.

When looking at those perceived to bolster public trust in government, the top two mentioned in the 2012 GCIS Tracker were “government that treats people fairly and with respect” (50 percent) and “government that follow the right procedures” (43 percent). Others mentioned within the top five included “government that listen and do what people want” (41 percent); “government that is effective and get things done” (38 percent) and “government that is honest and has moral virtue” (20 percent).



Figure 6: Qualities expected from government by the public
Source: GCIS Tracker, 2012

The aspects referred to above are some of the critical moral values that people look for when placing their trust in government.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO NURTURE PUBLIC TRUST?

The UN report (2006) “Building Trust in Government in the Twenty First Century” states that people trust governments more if they can bring about economic growth, create jobs, provide access to education and deliver services in an easy and transparent manner.

Important qualities that harness trust relate to honesty and moral virtues, as well as a government that is perceived to follow the correct procedures in fulfilling its duties and responsibilities. Establishing trust requires an open society where citizens are able to debate and question government policies. Citizens need to have a sense of making a difference in decision-making processes. Trust is an essential pre-condition for good governance. Good governance and trust are mutually inclusive: trust breeds good governance, and vice-versa. A high level of trust in government benefits all citizens, especially people who are relatively disadvantaged.

THE WAY FORWARD

Civil society partnerships will help strengthen communication messages and buy-in into government policies.

Government needs to communicate strongly on how it is addressing challenges in our society and within the system of governance, for example moves to strengthen the bid (tender) system.

All spheres of government should consistently and vigorously engage with communities through:

- Direct interaction – face-to-face;
- Public participation programmes by senior government officials;
- Regular meetings between communities and government representatives at local level; and
- Community consultation on policy issues.

Government must be more proactive in informing and where appropriate inviting the South African public to its various engagement platforms.

More communication on government achievements is necessary to showcase or demonstrate policy implementation and effectiveness.