

AN ENDURING VOTE OF CONFIDENCE: Public trust in the Electoral Commission



A voting station in Soweto in a school classroom.
Credit: Jonathan Katzenellenbogen – Africa Media Online.

The Electoral Commission of South Africa has overseen successful national and provincial elections and five municipal elections to date. Apart from administrative efficiency, the extent to which the public continues to express confidence in the Electoral Commission is instrumental to the overall credibility of elections and to democratic legitimacy more broadly and it is therefore important to constantly monitor the general population's attitudes towards the election management body. In this article, *Benjamin Roberts*, *Steven Gordon* and *Jaré Struwig* examine and discuss the views of South Africans towards the Commission and how this has changed over time.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of liberal democracies worldwide, and election management bodies by extension represent one of the most critical public institutions. To better understand how the public feels about the Electoral Commission in South Africa we rely on data from three principal sources:

- The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), a nationally representative survey series conducted annually by the HSRC since 2003. Each survey round consists of a representative sample of individuals older than 15 years, with a sample size for each round of interviewing ranging between 2 500 and 3 500. To extend the data series back to the 1999-2001 period, we also draw on the HSRC Evaluation of Public Opinion Programme (EPOP) series, which has a similar sample design.
- Afrobarometer data is included as a basis of comparison.
- The 2016 Election Satisfaction Survey (ESS), which was commissioned by the Electoral Commission, and consists of a representative sample of approximately 13 000 voters that were interviewed at 300 randomly selected voting stations during the course of election day.

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Changing patterns of trust over time

In late 2015, two-thirds (66%) of the adult public stated that they strongly trusted or trusted the Commission. By comparison, nearly one-fifth (17%) voiced distrust, with an equivalent share (17%) offering a neutral view. In Figure 1, patterns of trust in the election management body between 1999 and 2015 are presented. We also overlay the total level of public trust in the institution derived from Rounds 3-6 of Afrobarometer (Rounds 1 and 2 are excluded due to the use of different coding on response options). The results show that trust has fluctuated over time, ranging from a recorded low of 49% in 2000 to a high of 74% in 2010.

Following a dip and subsequent recovery in trust in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a progressive, upward trend in confidence between 2001 and 2010, rising from 63% to 74% over this period. A fairly steep decline then occurred between 2010 and 2014, with trust falling by 20 percentage points.

However, as can be seen from the graph, there was a significant upswing in trust in late 2015. The Afrobarometer trends portray a similar trajectory, with relatively similar levels of trust between Round 3 (2005/06) and Round 4 (2008/09), followed by a rise in confidence between Round 4 and Round 5 (2011/12), and a subsequent downturn between Round 5 and Round 6 (2014/15).

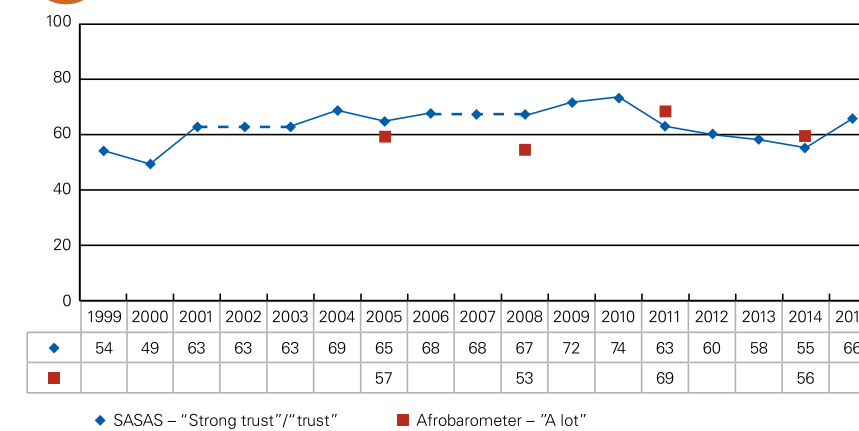
The only pattern that is not captured by the Afrobarometer data is the upswing in trust between 2014 and 2015. We have to wait for future rounds of both these data series to see whether or not this upswing is maintained.

Questioning the rumours of crisis

Following the conclusion of the 2016 election, there was debate on social media regarding the latest results of Afrobarometer (Round 6) on trust in the Electoral Commission, questioning why only slightly more than half the public (55%) trusts the institution. This prompted some discussion of a crisis of legitimacy. We maintain that such rumours of crisis are rather alarmist and ill-founded for a number of reasons.

The social media discussion focused on one round of data in isolation. Yet, the analysis of the graph in Figure 1 points clearly to the importance of examining data trends. There have been demonstrable ebbs and flows in trust in the Electoral Commission over time, and even though there was a downturn in trust between 2010 and 2015, levels of trust in 2015 were certainly not the lowest recorded since the late 1990s. The fieldwork period for the 2014/15 Afrobarometer round also predates the upswing detected in the SASAS round conducted in October through December 2015.

Fig 1 Trust in the Electoral Commission, 1999-2015 (%)



Source: Evaluation of Public Opinion Programme Survey 1999-2002; South African Social Survey (SASAS) 2003-2015; Afrobarometer Rounds 3-6, 2005/06-2014/15.

Note: The dashed line represents no data collected within that particular period.

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More importantly, we should be looking at patterns of trust not only over time, but also from a comparative perspective, taking into account the relative ratings of different institutions. From Figure 2, it is clear that confidence in the Electoral Commission in late 2015 stood at considerably higher levels than the three tiers of government, Parliament, political parties and politicians.

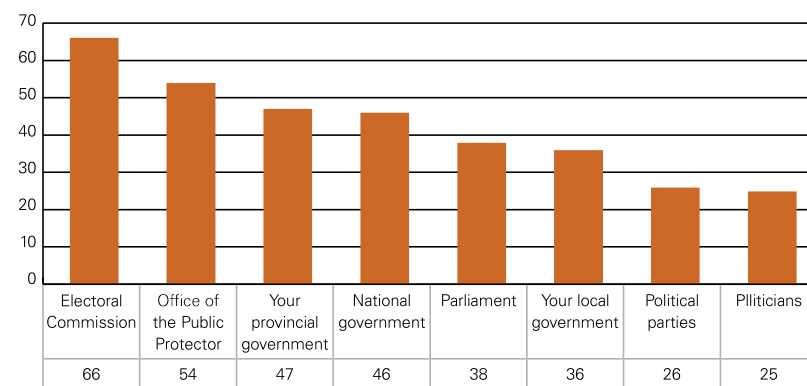
More specifically, trust in the Electoral Commission was 20 percentage points higher than that recorded for national and provincial government, 30 percentage points higher than local government, and 40 percentage points above that of political parties and politicians.

A matter of performance?

Although not shown in Figure 2, our research shows that the fluctuating pattern of confidence in the Electoral Commission is common to many other political and social institutions in the country over the same reference period. The years where trust in the Commission rose or fell over the last fifteen years are mirrored in evaluations of the various other institutions that we have been monitoring in our survey series.

This raises the question of what factors are driving such evaluations. A thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this short article, but our multivariate

Fig 2 Confidence in select institutions, 2015 (percent that trust or strongly trust)



Source: South African Social Survey (SASAS) 2015

analysis of trust in the Commission did point to the role of general political disillusionment. When there is growing negativity in the political mood in the country, including satisfaction with democracy, service delivery, institutions and leadership, then trust in the Commission falls in tandem, and vice versa. The implication is that public evaluations of the election management body are not informed exclusively by its actual performance, but additionally by general political disaffection or contentment among the public.

To put the issue of political disillusionment further into perspective, the Election Satisfaction Survey 2016 found that 91% of the voting public trusted the Electoral Commission. This is appreciably higher than the 66% trust level expressed by the adult public as a whole ten months earlier in the 2015 SASAS round. One might argue that these enthusiastic ratings might be buoyed somewhat by voters having just had a positive voting experience at the time of interview. Irrespective of this, it does suggest that low trust or even distrust in the Commission is likely to be significantly higher among those that did not participate in the election. This is reinforced by the SASAS 2015 finding that political disillusionment accounts for close to three-quarters (72%) of intended electoral abstention, with administrative factors playing a relatively nominal

role. Those who have voted before are generally positive in the assessment of a range of aspects of the Commission's electoral performance.

The final count

The results outlined in this article demonstrate that the Electoral Commission remains one of the most trusted institutions in the country. Variation in patterns of confidence over time is related to broader views about the performance of democracy and politics in the country. Consequently, when trust in the Commission declines, this does not necessarily reflect unhappiness with the conduct of this institution, and is more likely to signal mounting public disillusionment with democracy and governance at the time.

It is important that we continue to adopt a longer-term, comparative perspective in evaluating the state of public institutions such as the Electoral Commission and ensuring that unwarranted pronouncements of decline are not made. The real story for now lies in political disillusionment and how this is increasingly influencing electoral and other forms of political participation and expression in the country.

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FAMILIES AND CHILDREN: Promoting family wellbeing and cohesion

Apartheid policies had devastating effects on family life in South Africa; the creation of homelands, forced resettlement and migratory labour policies strained and disrupted family relations. *Ben Roberts, Jarè Struwig and Zitha Mokomane* draw on a recent study on family cohesion and values, and actions for promoting child wellbeing.

The family is critical to achieving a healthy, cohesive society. Stable, well-functioning families tend to exhibit higher levels of social capital and resilience which, in turn, contributes to greater social cohesion at the societal level. Conversely, the absence of a stable, nurturing family environment has been found to have a profoundly damaging impact on the individual, often leading to behaviour which is, in turn, profoundly damaging to society.

Recognising this, and the importance of families, the Programme to Support Pro-Poor Development (PSPPD) financially supported a project that focused on better understanding patterns of family cohesion and values in South Africa, using data from the 2012 round of the South African Social Attitude Survey (SASAS).

The intention of the project was to design evidence-based policies aimed at strengthening and promoting the wellbeing of South African families.

Children and alternative family forms

South Africans are still relatively prejudiced against certain alternative family forms. Small shares of South Africans believe that a lesbian (23%) or a gay (18%) couple can bring up a child as well as a heterosexual couple. Despite this, trends over the last decade show a

softening of negative attitudes toward homosexual marriages and parenting. Other alternative family forms, such as single parenting, are more readily embraced by South Africans, with 69% agreeing that a single parent can raise a child as well as two parents together.

There is also a strong recognition of the role of fathers in raising children, with 72% of adults saying that men

Fig 1 Level of agreement that lesbian/gay couples can raise a child as well as female-male couples

