

Approval of President Mbeki remains at its lowest in four years

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TNS Research Surveys, South Africa's leading marketing and social insights company, has conducted a series of surveys since 2000 that ascertain whether people feel the President is doing a good job. These surveys are conducted amongst a sample of 2 000 SA adults from the seven major metropolitan areas of South Africa, interviewing them face-to-face in their homes, with a margin of error of under 2.5%.

How does the President fare?

For three years - from 2000 to 2001 - the President's approval rating lay generally in the low 30s. But, from February 2003, the percentage of people who felt that President Mbeki is doing a good job as President began to rise. By the end of 2003, it was in the low 40s. 2004 saw a remarkable rise with the Ten Years of Democracy celebrations and the successful second democratic elections. 2005 scaled new heights for the President, during which his approval score averaged 61%, up three points from his 2004 average of 58%. In 2006, after the fourth consecutive fall (to 54% in February) from his high of 66% in April 2005, his approval rating staged a recovery back to 61% but had dropped to 54% by year end. After maintaining this level up until June 2007, the September reading showed a dramatic drop to 40%, the lowest since April 2003. The November reading shows a marginal shift upwards to 43%.



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How consistent is the rating?

%	Ave 2005	Ave 2006	Feb 2007	Apr 2007	June 2007	Sept 2007	Nov 2007	Ave 2007	All-time low	All-time high
Total metro SA	51	56	51	52	56	40	43	48	27	66
Blacks	74	74	64	62	65	53	53	62	70	85
Whites	37	33	31	23	34	14	25	26	10	47
Coloureds	40	38	28	30	33	16	28	27	10	50
Indian/Asians	47	38	25	30	43	24	30	31	13	52

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The scores for metro blacks were fairly consistent throughout 2005 but dropped notably in February 2006, recovering well in April. They ended 2006 at 69%. The score now at 53% is the lowest since 2003 and has been at this level since September. The scores amongst whites have been consistently in the mid 30s in recent years until the end of 2006 when they dropped to 26%. They have been more volatile this year dropping to a low of 14% (the lowest since 2002) before recovering in November to 25%. The coloured sample reached a new all-time low in September but has recovered somewhat to 28%. The Indian/Asian sample shows higher volatility but is still well above its all-time low. A consistent 10% to 12% of people give a "don't know" response across the whole sample (this is highest amongst whites at 23% on average) but, for the September reading, the "don't know" response rose to 17% (27% amongst whites), indicating a greater degree of uncertainty over how people feel about the President. This has now dropped back to 13% (22% amongst whites), suggesting that uncertainty has dropped.

Analysis by area shows that, in November 2007, support for the President was highest in East London (56% - down dramatically from the 84% figure at the end of 2006) and lowest in Durban, Cape Town and the West Rand (28%).

Total metro SA - 43% (54% end 2006) (40% in September)

- Gauteng - 50% approve (59% end 2006)(45% in September)
 - Johannesburg and environs - 51% (63% end 2006)(44% in September)
 - Johannesburg excluding Soweto - 50% (66% end 2006)(45% in September)
 - Soweto - 45% (64% end 2006) (43% in September)
 - East Rand - 51% (59% end 2006) (46% in September)
 - West Rand - 31% (53% end 2006)(28% in September)
 - Vaal Triangle and South Rand - 73% (70% end 2006)(53% in September) (**most positive**)
 - Pretoria - 48% (44% end 2006) (45% in September) (**most consistent**)
- Cape Town - 34% (39% end 2006)(28% in September)
- Durban - 22% (47% end 2006)(28% in September) (**least positive and declining**)
- Eastern Cape - 56% (68% end 2006) (55% in September)
 - Port Elizabeth - 55% (60% end 2006) (55% in September)
 - East London - 60% (84% end 2006) (55% in September)
- Bloemfontein - 50% (70% end 2006) (35% end September)

The President's approval rating showed some difference by black language groups:

- > Zulu speakers - 41% (64% end 2006) (down from 46% in September)
- > Sotho speakers - 61% (68% end 2006) (up from 55% in September)
- > Tswana speakers - 50% (69% end 2006) (down from 56% in September)
- > Xhosa speakers - 67% (79% end 2006) (about the same as the 64% in September)

This shows greater polarization between Zulu speakers and Sotho speakers particularly since September.

And what about non-metro areas?

Approval ratings are generally higher in non-metro areas. In a reading taken in late September, 53% of adults expressed approval with the way the President is doing his job. This takes his national score to 49% overall. Approval was highest amongst blacks at 56%, with whites at 16%, and coloured and Indians/Asians at 24%.

Total by Province

This gives the total approval ratings by province as

- >> Gauteng - 43%
- >> Limpopo - 74% (**most positive**)
- >> North West - 66%
- >> Mpumalanga - 48%
- >> Free State - 41%
- >> KwaZulu-Natal - 35%
- >> Northern Cape - 51%
- >> Eastern Cape - 60%
- >> Western Cape - 30% (**least positive**)

Our take-out

The President's approval rating has fallen in the last six months to levels not seen since 2003. The fall is evident across all race groups. Large drops occurred in Bloemfontein, Johannesburg and Soweto, the West Rand, Durban and East London. Only Pretoria did not show a decline in the approval rating whilst the Vaal Triangle/South Rand area, after a large drop, has recovered to its previous levels. Durban ratings are still falling and the polarization of opinion between Zulu speakers and Sotho speakers is growing.

Interviews for the November reading took place in the first two weeks of November. What might have taken place between the June study and the beginning of November?

Between the June and September readings, the single most newsworthy event in that period was the President's firing of the deputy health minister, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, on 8 August. The decision came after media reports that Madlala-Routledge went on an unauthorised trip to Madrid, with her son and a consultant, costing R160 000. Madlala-Routledge was best known for being the outspoken and fiercely independent deputy to South Africa's health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. She took a stronger line on the HIV/Aids pandemic than her minister and was widely praised by civil society. After a newspaper exposé on an Eastern Cape hospital, Madlala-Routledge visited the hospital and declared conditions a "national emergency". The President, however, backed the defense of conditions offered by his health minister.

The dismissal attracted considerable critical comment and media attention.

In addition, the Sunday Times ran several exposés of the Health Minister's Botswana criminal record and her activities whilst in hospital some years ago.

Since the September reading, the President dismissed NPA head Adv Pikoli and appointed Frenie Ginwala to head an enquiry into Adv Pikoli's fitness for office (early October), an enquiry required in terms of the Constitution and that has to report back to Parliament. The appointment of Ginwala also attracted critical comment and media attention.

Against that, we have the Springbok Rugby World Cup victory (20 October) and their unprecedented hoisting of the President on to their shoulders after their victory. This too received considerable media coverage as did his overall support of the team. Given then the Jake White controversy, all of this may have served to balance people's views about the President.

Of interest, too, is the rise and then the drop in those uncertain about the President. This suggests that previously uncertain people have begun to make up their minds again after a period of uncertainty. There is no doubt that, too, a more visible President reduces uncertainty.

At a national level, the President ends 2007 with an overall approval rating of 49%.

Technical note

The studies are conducted amongst a sample of 2 000 adults (1260 blacks, 385 whites, 240 coloureds and 115 Indians/Asians) in the seven major metropolitan areas: they have a margin of error of under 2.5% for the results found for the total sample. The studies were conducted by TNS Research Surveys (Pty) Ltd as part of their ongoing research into current social and political issues and were funded by TNS Research Surveys. For more details, please contact Neil Higgs on 011-778-7500 or 082-376-6312.

Website: www.tnsresearchsurveys.co.za.

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