

# Unpacking Public Trust in the President

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Trust in government is a critical part of democratic rule. Public trust grants legitimacy to the government to use its mandate, exercise its command and serve the interests of the citizenry. In presidential systems, public trust in the president is essential for the government to function properly. This is especially true in Georgia, which has a strongly presidential system of power, and a political culture where the public tends to identify political institutions with actors rather than systems: parliament and political parties are often associated with individual political leaders rather than with their ideologies.

In Georgia, public trust in the person and institution of the president is therefore particularly crucial. Any erosion of trust hinders implementation of reforms, increases governance costs, and compromises the government's ability to govern and make public policy. Widespread public distrust can cause a crisis of legitimacy, something that led to the previous Georgian president losing office in popular revolt.

In recent years, President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili has confronted a series of mass demonstrations demanding his resignation. During these opposition-led protests his political opponents would frequently claim that the president has "lost public trust" and therefore ought to go.<sup>2</sup> However, the results of the CRRC's 2010 Caucasus Barometer survey show that, contrary to the allegations of his critics, President Saakashvili continues to enjoy high levels of trust across a wide cross section of society, and may in fact be more widely trusted than he has been for several years.

### President and Government Institutions

Fifty-six percent of Georgians trust or somewhat trust Mikheil Saakashvili, compared to 14 percent who do not trust or somewhat distrust him, while a further 25 percent are neutral. Other CRRC data shows that President Saakashvili's trust is hitting a four-year high while the level of distrust is the lowest for four years: Mikhail Saakashvili's trust level rebounded by 8 percent from the previous year and reached 56 percent in 2010.

Table 1: trust level in the president according to the years<sup>3</sup>(%)

Year	Distrust	Neutral	Trust	DK
2007	37	22	32	9
2008	21	21	51	6

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Gorst, Isabel and Charles Clover. 2009. "Demonstrators add to pressure on Saakashvili." *Financial Times*, April 9. Retrieved April 9, 2010. (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/026af0b0-25f1-11de-be57-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1J4TuoZyy>).

<sup>3</sup> The data is based on the CRRC presentation paper for AmCham. Retrieved April 7, 2010 ([http://www.amcham.ge/photos/roundtb\\_2010-05-19/Caucasus\\_Update.pdf](http://www.amcham.ge/photos/roundtb_2010-05-19/Caucasus_Update.pdf)).

2009	18	27	48	4
2010	14	25	56	4

But while the president enjoys relatively high trust ratings, the public is less sure of many other state bodies, including the executive and legislative branches of the government and local self-governance bodies. He only lags behind the “power structures” like the police and army.

*Table 2: trust level according to political institutions (%)*

%	Distrust	Neutral	Trust	DK
Parliament	18	33	39	9
Executive Government	18	32	40	9
Local Government	17	30	45	7
Army	3	12	81	4
Court	18	30	29	22
Police	9	22	64	4
Ombudsman	8	27	41	23

### **Rural Vs. Urban, Capital**

However, the picture across the country is more complex. Significantly more Georgians living in rural areas trust the president (69 percent), than do Georgians living in the capital (39 percent), with 53 percent of Georgians living in other urban areas trusting him.

*Table 3: trust level in the president/ type of settlement (%)*

Type of Settlement	Distrust	Neutral	Trust	DK
Capital	22	32	39	7
Urban	12	28	53	5
Rural	10	18	69	2

Tbilisi has long been seen as a center of anti-government sentiment, and in the last presidential election Saakashvili garnered 33 percent of the vote here, losing to his opponent, while picking up much greater support elsewhere in the country.

### Ethnicity

There is significant variation in terms of the level of trust in the president displayed by different ethnic groups. Georgia's two largest ethnic minorities, Azerbaijanis and Armenians show lower levels of distrust in the president, at 5 percent and 7 percent respectively, then the dominant ethnic Georgian population, where 16 percent distrust the president. Moreover, ethnic Azerbaijanis show the highest trust level towards the president: massive 85 percent say they trust as compared to 52 percent of ethnic Armenians and 55 percent of ethnic Georgians.

*Table 4: trust level in the president/respondent's ethnicity (%)*

<b>Ethnicity</b>	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
Armenian	7	40	52	2
Azerbaijani	5	2	85	6
Georgian	16	25	55	4
Other Caucasian Ethnicity	0	0	41	59
Russian	20	29	39	12
Other ethnicity	11	49	38	3

### Education, gender, age

In contrast to factors such as ethnicity or settlement types, Georgians' levels of educational attainment do not have such a significant impact on levels of trust in the president, though Georgians who have some level of higher education are less likely to trust the president than those who only attended secondary school, and are slightly more likely to distrust him. Age and gender, meanwhile, do not significantly affect Georgians level of trust in the president.

*Table 5: trust level in the president /respondent's education level (%)*

<b>Respondent's Education</b>	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
Secondary or lower	12	24	60	2

Secondary technical	15	25	55	5
Higher than secondary	17	26	50	7

Table 6: trust level in the president/ respondent's age (%)

Respondent's age	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
18-35	14	24	58	4
36-55	16	27	51	6
56+	13	23	60	3

Table 7: trust level in the president/ respondent's gender (%)

Respondent's gender	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
male	15	23	57	3
female	13	26	54	5

### Employment, Money and Happiness

While 56 percent of the general population trusts the president, 62 percent of those working in state-funded organizations trust him. Similarly, while 14 percent of the general population distrusts the president, just 5 percent of those working in state-funded organizations distrust him. Employees in state organizations tend to show higher trust in other government institutions as well, including the executive government, parliament and local self-governance bodies.

Table 8: trust level in the president/ type of employment (%)

Type of employment	Distrust	Neutral	Trust	DK
Own business without employees	17	25	57	9
Own business with employees	10	29	53	8
Employee in small family business	28	35	36	0

Employee in a medium/big private organization	11	40	46	4
Employee in a state organization	5	28	62	3
Other	17	16	56	4

Economic well-being is another significant contributing factor to trust in the president. Those who are comparatively well off tend to be more trusting than those with limited incomes. Respondents who “have enough money for everything needed,” and earned USD 400 or more in the previous month are more trustful of the president.

*Table 9: trust level in the president/ HH economic situation (%)*

<b>Economic condition</b>	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
Not enough money for food	20	23	48	7
Enough money for food	14	25	56	4
Enough money for food & clothes	11	26	58	2
Enough money for some durables	9	19	65	7
Enough money for everything needed	0	2	98	0

*Table 10: trust level in the president/ respondent's personal income last month (%)*

<b>Economic condition</b>	distrust	Neutral	trust	DK
Up to 50 USD	14	23	59	3
USD 51-100	11	27	54	7
USD 101-250	16	26	53	5
USD 251-400	8	46	44	1
More than 400	5	17	78	0
None	16	20	59	4

Happiness and life satisfaction is another indicator of trust in the president, with Georgians who call themselves completely happy and satisfied with their lives more than twice as likely (71 percent) to trust him than those who say they are not satisfied at all (35 percent).

*Table 11: trust level in the president/ overall life satisfaction (%)*

	Distrust	Neutral	Trust
Not satisfied at all	31	22	35
1	17	28	52
3	12	25	58
4	10	25	63
Completely satisfied	6	17	71

Surprising as it is, employment does not seem to have an effect on trust towards the president. The employed and the unemployed place almost equal trust in the president – 54 percent and 57 percent respectively. However, the trust level drops significantly among those who say their family members lost a job in the past year: only 40 percent of these respondents trust the president.

*Table 12: trust level in the president/ whether respondent lost job (%)*

<b>Job loss</b>	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>DK</b>
Yes	25	25	40	9
No	12	25	58	3

### **Political Views**

Trust in the president most obviously reflects the political views of the respondents. Respondents who mistrust the president are, for example, notably skeptical about the fairness of elections. The president enjoys the trust of as many as 85 percent of the people who say the 2008 parliamentary elections were conducted completely fairly, but this level drops to 15 percent among those people who believe that the elections were not fair at all.

*Table 13: Trust level in s the president/ fairness of recent elections (%)*

	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>DK</b>
Not at all fairly	59	21	15	3
To some extent fairly	13	31	52	3
Completely fairly	2	11	85	2
DK	10	30	41	9

Those who mistrust the president are more inclined to approve of anti-government protest rallies. Twenty-five percent of those who support protest rallies “as this show the government that the people are in charge” distrust the president. Surprisingly, though, even among people who are supportive of protest rallies, the president enjoys a solid basis of trust: 46 percent. Trust levels are higher among people who believe that “people should not participate in protest actions against the government, as it threatens stability in our country”. Sixty-six percent of these people trust the president while 8 percent of the same group distrusts him.

*Table 14: trust level in the president/should people participate in protest rallies (%)*

	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>DK</b>
Yes	25	23	48	3
No	8	22	66	4
DK	9	31	53	7

Those who trust the president are also more likely to be more pro-Western and have faith in international community. For instance, 61 percent of those who are against Georgia’s membership into NATO mistrust the president. Only 14 percent of anti-NATO people place trust in the president. In contrast, 70 percent of those supportive of NATO integration place trust in the president. Moreover, those who mistrust the president are also more likely to mistrust the UN and the EU. Fifty-eight percent of those who fully distrust the UN also distrust the president. Eighty percent of those who say they fully trust the UN also trust the president. 70 percent of those who fully mistrust the EU, also mistrusts the president. Eighty-three percent of those who fully trust EU also trust the president. This indicates that the president does indeed enjoy support from what we might call the ‘pro Western’ part of the population, while he is significantly less trusted by those who are more skeptical of the international community.

Table 15: trust level in president/Georgia's membership in NATO (%)

	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>DK</b>
Don't support at all	61	21	14	4
2	24	42	30	2
3	24	33	51	2
4	11	26	59	4
Fully support	9	17	70	4
DK	12	30	43	12

Respondents who trust the president also tend to trust the media and vice versa: those trustful of media are more supportive of the president. A massive 95 percent of respondents who *fully* trust the media also trust the president. Lower trust in the media is reflected in lower trust in the president as well; 58 percent of the respondents showing *full* distrust in media also *fully* distrust the president.

Table 16: trust level in the president/trust in media (%)

	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>DK</b>
Fully distrust	64	19	13	2
2	40	31	25	1
3	14	37	45	3
4	3	17	78	1
Fully trust	1	3	95	0
DK	6	8	54	30

### **Rural Vs. Capital – Revisited**

As demonstrated above, the rural population is more supportive of the president than the capital and urban population. Besides, the data also showed a positive correlation between the respondent's economic welfare, happiness, life satisfaction and trust levels in the president. These statements run into complications given

that the rural population is obviously poorer and, as a consequence, less happy about their lives. Then why does the data suggest a connection between economic welfare and trust in the president in the first place, and why are the rural population is more trustful if they are poorer?

If we further break down the data according to settlements type, we will see that economic conditions do not significantly affect the trust level of the rural and urban population, but does have a significant impact on the levels of trust in the president among residents of Tbilisi. A striking example of this is the fact that rural people in all income brackets report a level of trust in their president hovering at approximately 70 percent.

*Table 17: trust level in the president/personal income last month (rural population) (%)*

<b>Personal income last month (rural)</b>	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>
Up to USD 50	10	18	70
USD 51 - 100	9	22	68
USD 101 - 250	13	19	66
USD 251 - 400	3	30	67
More than USD 400	0	34	76
None	10	15	73

A similar comparison of these two variables in the capital finds that the trust level is remarkably high among the respondents earning more than 400 USD, standing at 87 percent, while the mistrust level is the lowest – 4 percent. Somewhat middle-income individuals (with 250 - 400 USD) show also low mistrust level – 10 percent but they also accord only moderate trust to the president – 28 percent while as high as 60 percent are neutral about him.

*Table 18: trust level in the president according to personal income last month (capital population) (%)*

<b>Personal income last month (capital)</b>	<b>Distrust</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Trust</b>	<b>D/K</b>
Up to USD 50	26	36	36	2
USD 51 - 100	16	30	34	20
USD 101 - 250	25	31	33	10

USD 251 - 400	10	60	28	2
More than USD 400	4	16	80	0
None	34	21	39	8

Therefore economic welfare, or more accurately the lack of it, has little or no effect on the rural and urban population's level of trust in the president. Moreover, the president is trusted by particularly affluent people in the capital. Yet the people earning 400 USD and more do not form a big chunk of the capital's population<sup>4</sup>, and thus cannot balance the mistrust and neutral attitudes of the rest of Tbilisi. Thus, although the residents of Tbilisi enjoy higher incomes than the rest of the country, this does not engender higher trust in the president, suggesting some other considerations overweight personal economic well-being.

The puzzle remains, however, why the rural population is more supportive of the president while being obviously poorer and less happy about their lives. This could be explained by a higher margin of ethnic minorities—who display higher trust or lower distrust levels in the president—living in rural areas, some 15 percent of the population. Furthermore, the rural population is more trustful of the media, thus is more susceptible to *media bias* and less informed about the political situation. The rural population has access to a limited number of news sources and the broadcast media remains the primary source of information to them. The trust rate towards the media in rural areas is 43 percent while it stands at 27 percent in the capital. Thus, a sizeable portion of the rural population trusts the information they receive from the TV media – which are frequently held by many observers to be supportive of the government and president, and are more likely to entertain positive feelings about the incumbent leaders.

Thirdly, the rural population is less educated, and thus more prone to think positively about the country's democracy level and its leadership, as we have examined above. The data illustrates that 57 percent of the capital population has higher education, while only 16 percent of the rural population does. As mentioned above we could not identify any direct, significant correlation between education levels and trust in the president. However, the data shows that education level has an impact on the perceptions of democracy in the country. For instance, more educated people are (measured by the years of formal education), more likely to doubt the fairness of recent elections in Georgia,<sup>5</sup> while rural populations are more inclined to believe in the high democratic credentials of Georgia. This, as we have seen, has a significant impact on trust in the president.

<sup>4</sup> The data shows people with 400 USD and more make up only 8 percent of the capital population.

<sup>5</sup> Gubtrod, Hans and Koba Turmanidze. 2009. "Is Georgia a Democracy Now?" – Views of the Georgian Electorate." *The Foreign Policy Center*. Retrieved April 10, 2011 (<http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1079.pdf>).

**Conclusion**

In summary, the president continues to enjoy support from a broad cross section of society: those who live in rural areas, as well as high earners in the capital are more likely to trust the president. Members of the Azerbaijani ethnic minority are especially supportive, as are those who trust the media, and those who see Georgia as a place where fair elections are held. The president can also count on the trust of state sector employees, and those who are most positive about international institutions such as NATO and the UN.

Tbilisi, however, remains a place where distrust of the president is relatively entrenched, especially among those on lower incomes. Furthermore, people who have recently had family members who have lost jobs, are least satisfied with their own lives, who do not trust elections or the media or who are skeptical of the international community are not only less likely to trust the president, they are much more likely to distrust him. This suggests a significantly divided political landscape in Georgia, and while the president can continue to count on the trust of a majority of the population, there are many groups who appear to be firmly skeptical of him.