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# Who Do We trust?

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Institute for Governance  
and Policy Studies  
A research institute of the School of Government



**Colmar  
Brunton**  
A Millward Brown Company

# Foreword

We hear a lot about trust in New Zealand but we know comparatively little about it. Until now.

The Institute for Governance and Policy Studies (IGPS) has commissioned this survey to generate a snapshot of the current state of play and, more importantly, to kickstart a much needed conversation.

Our findings suggest that there are serious concerns with levels of public trust in the country. Not only is trust in our government, politicians and media low but it has declined over the last three years.

Specific areas such as political party funding are clearly viewed with great scepticism if not outright suspicion.

Our respondents indicate that levels of trust in people generally (i.e. our friends and neighbours) is high, and that we trust key institutions such as the medical profession and the police. But none of our findings are absolutely definitive.

Therefore we need to have a free and frank discussion about the causes and effects of our lack of trust in politics and media. Our survey is a start but we need to keep asking why people feel the way they do and what we need to change in the future.

We are very grateful for the work that Colmar Brunton has done. IGPS feels that this is an important piece of research. We hope that you do.

**Michael Macaulay**  
*Director, IGPS*

# Introduction

We often hear that New Zealand is a high-trust nation.<sup>1</sup> Transparency international NZ, for example, stated that “the [NZ] mechanisms that support a high integrity and high trust society, and that facilitate social and economic development, remain generally robust but are coming under increasing stress.”

A 2013 OECD report found that following the global financial crisis “the percentage of people in New Zealand reporting that they trust the government increased from 59% to 61% between 2007 and 2012”.<sup>2</sup> Similarly in 2015 Statistics New Zealand reported that 79% of New Zealanders had high trust in the public service, based on their own experiences and dealings with it.<sup>3</sup> Earlier this year, Colmar Brunton launched its first reputations survey, which assessed how the New Zealand public views thirty one public sector agencies, across a range of factors, including trust.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.transparency.org.nz/National-Integrity-System-Assessment>

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2013) How's Life? 2013 Measuring well Being Country Snapshot New Zealand <http://www.oecd.org/newzealand/HSL-Country-Note-New-Zealand.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/snapshots-of-nz/nz-social-indicators/Home/Trust%20and%20participation%20in%20gov-ernment/trust-govt-instit.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/snapshots-of-nz/nz-social-indicators/Home/Trust%20and%20participation%20in%20gov-ernment/trust-govt-instit.aspx)

A 2013 analysis of patterns of Māori trust in institutions found that Māori adults demonstrated the most trust in the police, the health system, and the courts, while the lowest trust was in the media.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even taken together these studies only offer a partial view of public trust in New Zealand. The Statistics New Zealand report only asked about trust in the public service. There is no guarantee that respondents had a clear idea of what was meant by that term and it does not, of course, equate with political trust. The Māori survey was very detailed but openly accepted that levels of trust could be much lower than recorded.

In short, therefore, we know comparatively little about levels of trust in New Zealand, and certainly less so in terms of political trust. The aim of this research, therefore, was simple: to provide a snapshot of what New Zealanders are thinking right now, and in so doing provide a platform for a conversation in the months to come.

Yet we know comparatively little about levels of trust in New Zealand more generally, and certainly less so in terms of political trust.

# Methodology

The survey is intended to provide a representative picture representative of the New Zealand public. The questions for the survey were designed by IGPS and were adapted from trust surveys run in the UK and the US. The research itself was conducted by Colmar Brunton. A total of 1,000 New Zealanders aged 18 years or over were interviewed online from 26 February to 3 March 2016, randomly selected from Colmar Brunton's online panel. Quotas were applied at the sampling and selection stage, and the final results were weighted to be representative of New Zealand by age, gender, ethnicity, and location.

Not all households have internet access in New Zealand (77% of households had internet access

as at the 2013 Census\*), and online panels do not include every New Zealand household, so the survey cannot be said to be truly representative of all groups. Having said this, we are confident that the results provide a reasonably good picture of the population and will allow us to see trends and changes over time. Weighted and unweighted respondent profiles can be found in the Appendix.

The maximum sampling error for a simple random sample of 1,000 is +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/people\\_and\\_communities/maori/te-kupenga/matter-of-trust.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/maori/te-kupenga/matter-of-trust.aspx)

# Summary

## Who are the most and least trusted groups?

**Medical practitioners** and **Police** are the most trusted groups with **56%** and **53%** of New Zealanders respectively trusting them lots or completely.

**Bloggers** are the least trusted with only **5%** saying they trust them lots or completely, and **MPs** and the **media** are not far behind at **8%** each.

## New Zealanders place the greatest trust in their neighbours.

**67%** of New Zealanders trust their **neighbours** at least a reasonable amount to make informed choices about the future of their local area.

## Which groups' levels of trust have declined the most?

Trust in **MPs** and **government ministers** appears to have fallen over the last three years, with **over half** of respondents saying they trust them a lot or a little less.

This is followed by **bloggers** and the **media**, with net losses of **43%** and **40%** respectively.

## New Zealanders express the least trust in the way political parties are funded.

New Zealanders have the least trust in the way in which political parties are funded, with **three quarters** of them expressing 'not much' to 'no trust' in it.

## Which groups' levels of trust have improved the most?

**Over a quarter** of respondents report trusting the **police** and **medical practitioners** a little or a lot more over the last three years.

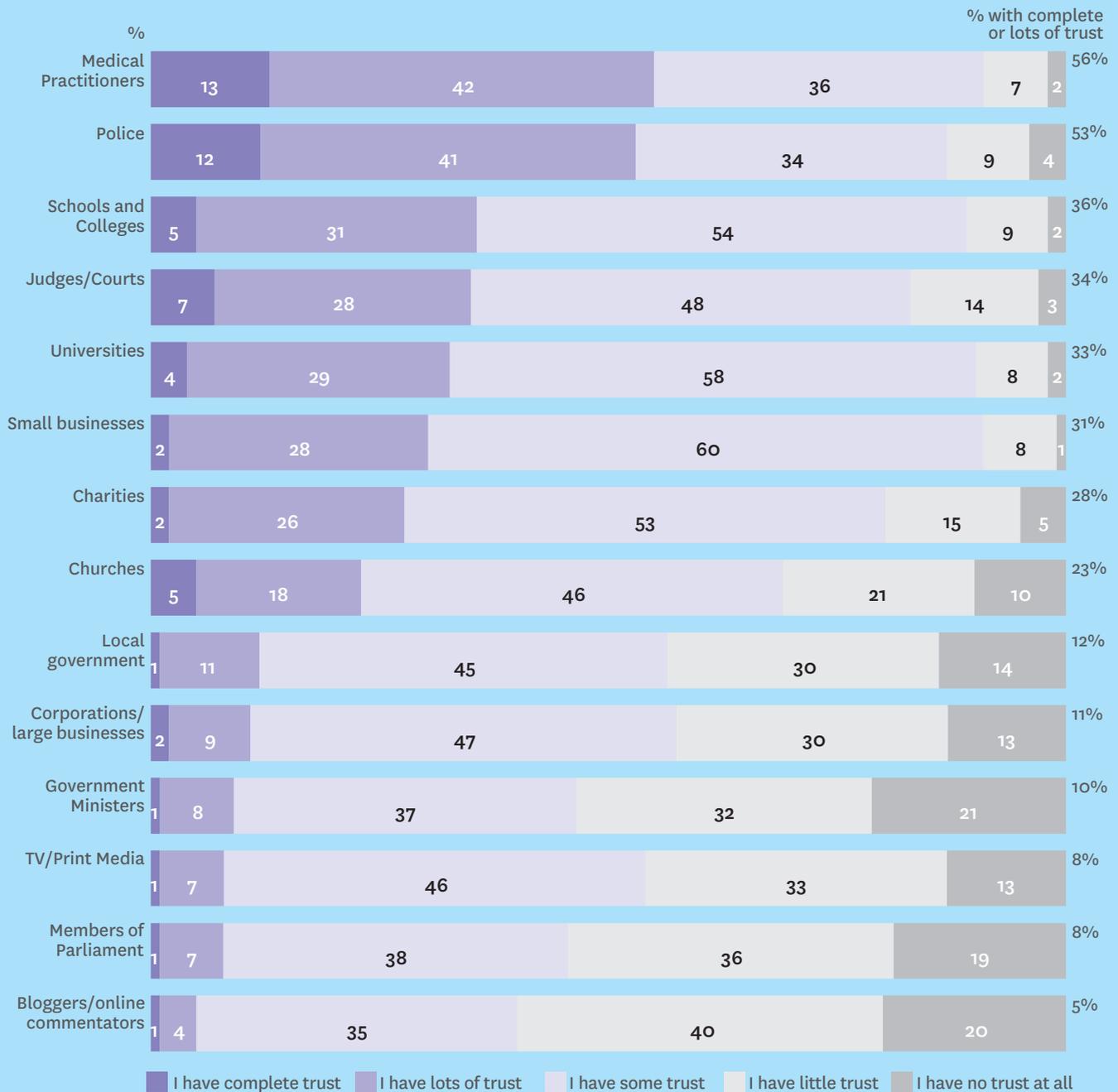
**Small businesses** have the most improved levels of trust overall, with a net gain of **16%**.

## How do citizens feel about how the government treats their interests?

Only **39%** of New Zealanders report having at least a reasonable amount of trust that the government considers all citizens' interests fairly and equally.

# Key Findings

1 We asked how much trust do you have in the following groups to do the right thing:

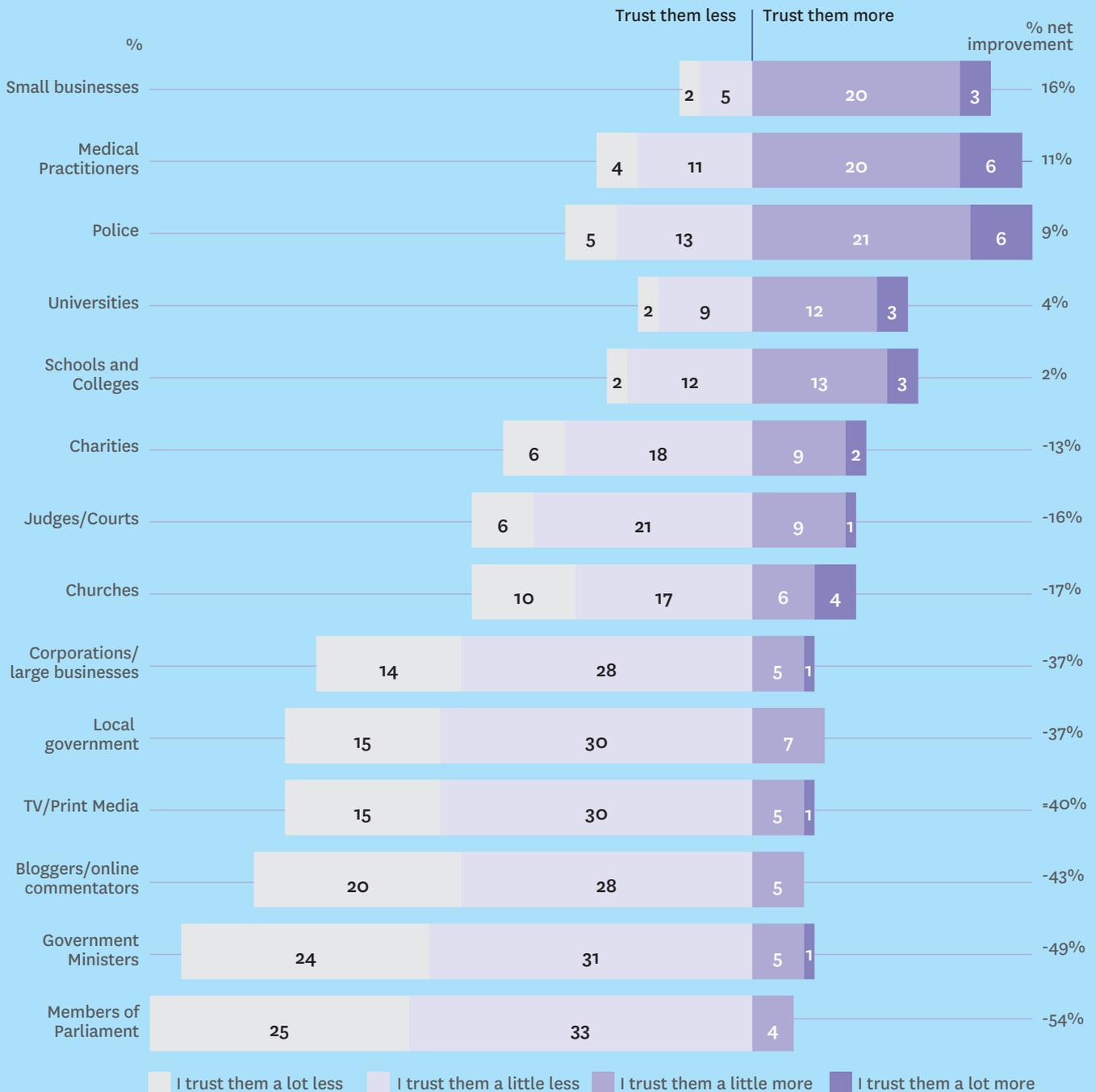


Source: Q1b  
Base: all respondents (n = 1000)

**Medical practitioners** and the **Police** are our most trusted groups. Our least trusted groups are **bloggers** and

**MPs**, with only **5%** and **8%** of New Zealanders expressing complete or lots of trust in them.

## 2 We asked to what extent your levels of trust had changed in the last three years:



\* Doesn't include those who say their trust hasn't changed, but they are included in the base

Source: Q1a  
Base: all respondents (n = 1000)

Over a quarter of respondents report trusting the **police** and **medical practitioners** a little or a lot more over the last three years. **Small businesses** have the most improved levels of trust overall, with a net gain of **16%**.

Trust in **MPs** and **government ministers** appears to have fallen over the last three years, with over half of respondents saying they trust them a lot or a little less. This is followed by **bloggers** and the **media**, with net losses of **43%** and **40%** respectively.

### 3 We asked about levels of trust in various formal and informal institutions:



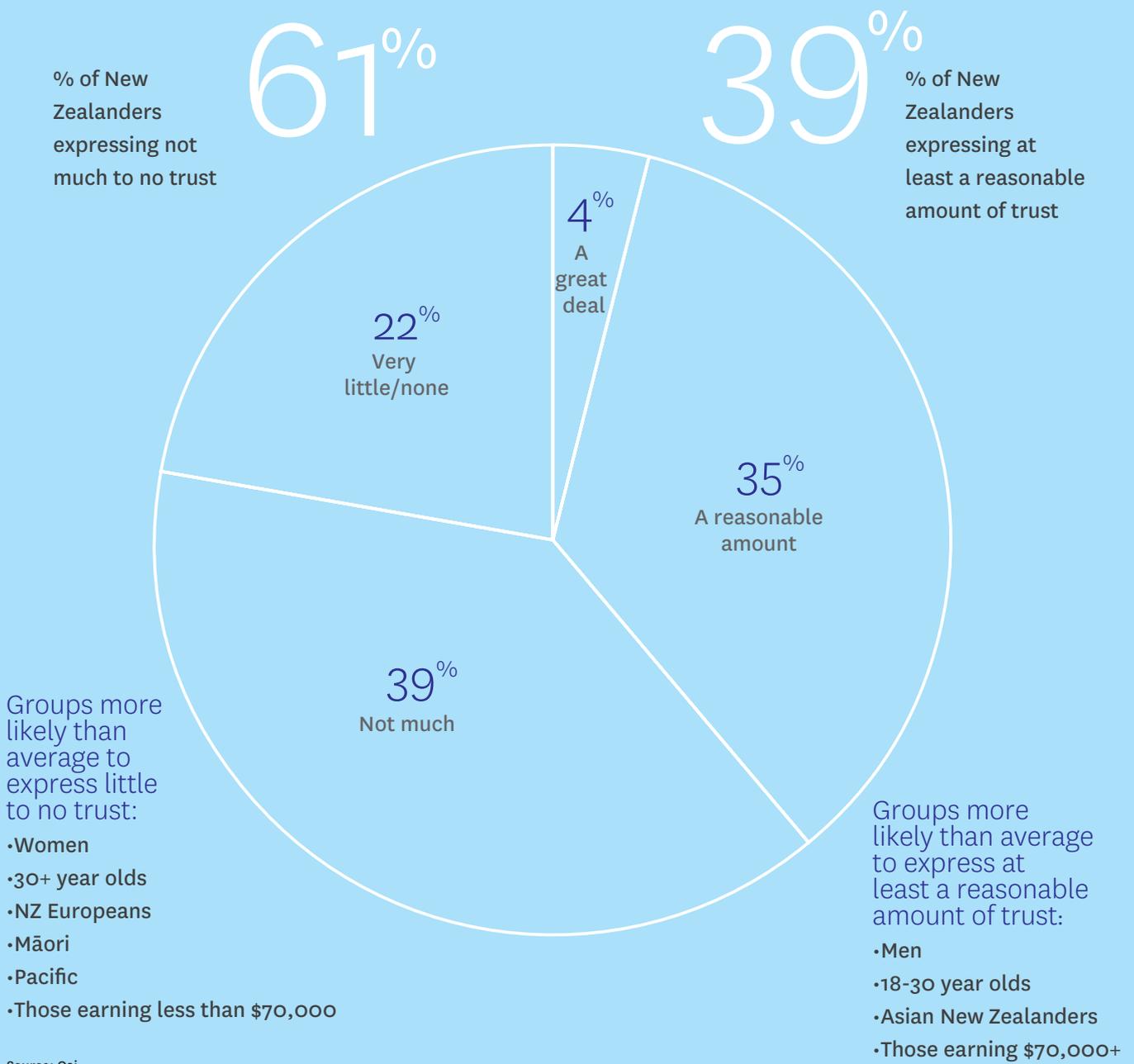
Source: Q2a-h  
Base: all respondents (n = 1000)

New Zealanders place the greatest trust in their neighbours: 67% of New Zealanders trust their neighbours at least a reasonable amount to make informed choices about the future of their local area. More women than men trust their fellow New Zealanders to make informed choices about the future of our country (56% compared to 50% of men).

Only 39% of New Zealanders report having at least a reasonable amount of trust that the government considers all citizens' interests fairly and equally.

New Zealanders have the least trust in the way in which political parties are funded, with three quarters of them expressing 'not much' to 'no trust' in it.

# 4 To what extent do you think New Zealand Citizens' Interests are equally and fairly considered by government?



Source: Q2i  
Base: all respondents (n = 1000)

# Conclusions

There are two key questions that our survey cannot answer here: first, what people mean when they interpret and use the word “trust”; second, why they feel the way that they do. This is the research agenda that the IGPS will follow in the months and years ahead.

As we have previously stated this report is intended to ask a question rather than posit an answer – what is the current state of play in New Zealand around public trust? To that end the research suggests some potentially serious issues.

Our research findings are a significant contrast to those of some previous reports. In stark contrast to the OECD, for example, our findings suggest that, politically, New Zealand is not a high-trust nation. Obviously we must be cautious here; the survey only presents a snapshot and is the baseline for which future studies can assess whether or not the situation is improving or deteriorating, but even with that caveat in mind our findings also suggest that trust in political institutions and the media has been lowered over the last three years.

Perhaps a more radical theme, even if it is again fairly tentative at this stage, is that New Zealand is a country divided over public trust. Relatively well-off

white men are more trusting of government than those with lower incomes, the Māori and Pasifika communities, and also women. Such a pattern is not to be taken lightly. It indicates that there are possible social ruptures about not only how government is perceived but who it is perceived to be serving. As such our findings also appear to confirm previous findings that levels of institutional trust among the Māori community may have been overestimated.

Of course, at a radical level, none of the above may be a problem and a lack of trust may be a sign of a healthy democracy. Some may ask, why should we trust those in power anyway? In order to better understand these arguments we will need to undertake a much deeper level of research needs because what may appear to be a trust issue may be something even more complex and fundamental about New Zealand society in the 21st century.

No matter what our perspectives, however, one thing is for certain – New Zealand needs to talk about trust. We hope that this report can kickstart an important national conversation that can be conducted in a constructive and respectful way. IGPS will work with anybody who is interested in pursuing this agenda further and we sincerely hope you find the research of interest.

# Moving Forward



The questions raised in this report will take a long time to answer and must involve a broad range of people. In terms of research IGPS will spend time looking at the drivers of trust in NZ, and what they mean to different groups of people.

In terms of outreach IGPS is already committed to a number of public events in support of the work but we would like to engage as many people as possible. If you would be interested in holding a public conversation on trust in your local area please contact Michael Macaulay via [igps@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:igps@vuw.ac.nz)

Similarly if you would like to be included in future research on trust in New Zealand please let us know. It is not an area that can be fully understood or tackled without a coalition of interested people. And we hope, therefore, that you'll join us and have your voice heard.

# Appendix

## Demographic Profile

		Weighted Sample (n=1,000)	Unweighted Sample (n=1,000)
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Gender	Male	48%	47%
	Female	52%	53%
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Age group	Aged 18 to 29 years	22%	21%
	Aged 30 to 59 years	53%	54%
	Aged 60 years and over	25%	25%
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Ethnicity	New Zealand European	72%	65%
	Māori	12%	12%
	Pacific	6%	8%
	Asian	12%	18%
	Other	7%	6%
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House- hold income	Up to \$30,000	23%	27%
	\$30,001 to \$70,000	38%	39%
	\$70,001 to \$100,000	17%	16%
	More than \$100,001	22%	19%
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A public trust survey  
undertaken for the  
Institute for Governance  
and Policy Studies by  
Colmar Brunton

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