Bateleur Brand Planning
Unlock Strategic Foresight
BBBEE: Level 2

Address:
565 Nupen Crescent
Midrand, 1685
Gauteng, South Africa
+27 12 659 0047
+27 21 558 4481
contactus@batbrand.co.za

RN 1993/007619/07
Directors:
Kim-Lee de Vries
Talya da Silva
Gordon Hooper

THE STATE OF THE NATION, AS SOUTH AFRICA SEES IT

A white paper on economic sentiment, institutional trust and the view of the Government of National Unity

Findings from the Bateleur Vantage Point 2026 Survey

Bateleur Vantage Point

Data Collection Period: October 2025 to January 2026
Methodology: Online via social media and Bateleur database
Sample: 1 240 middle-to-upper income South Africans

by Bateleur Brand Planning

Executive Summary

South Africa's business-active population is sober, sceptical and selectively hopeful. Those are the three words that best summarise the findings from the Bateleur Vantage Point 2026 Survey, conducted earlier this year among 1 240 working South Africans across all provinces, generations and walks of life.

This white paper draws on the voting-behaviour module of that survey to offer a reading of the country's mood as we enter the run-up to the 2026 Local Government Election. The findings matter to the business community because the attitudes measured here shape consumer confidence, investment climate, talent retention and the social licence to operate.

Six headline findings stand out:

1. Pessimism has the upper hand on the economic outlook. 56% of respondents expect economic decline over the next period, against 22% expecting improvement. The gap is wider still among unhappy, older, white and right-leaning segments, and narrower among Black and Gen Z respondents.
2. Corruption remains the single most blamed cause of stagnant growth. 83% of respondents name corruption and mismanagement in government as a factor holding back the economy, well ahead of crime, distrust in leadership and unemployment. Nothing else comes close.
3. The youth engagement problem is systemic, not singular. Respondents do not reduce youth disengagement to a single cause. They identify job opportunities, education quality, family discipline, mentorship and economic instability as co-equal drivers, with Gen Z themselves adding mental health and network access as priorities their elders underweight.
4. Trust in institutions is a graded affair. The South African national government sits at the bottom, with 49% expressing no trust whatsoever. The judiciary, police and local media sit in the middle. Large corporations and international news media, paradoxically, sit at the top. Business has more residual trust than the state.
5. The Government of National Unity has fallen short of its billing, but not catastrophically. 50% of respondents rate the GNU as not very successful or not

at all successful, against 49% who see some success. Complete disillusionment remains a minority view.

6. Performance credit is concentrated and partisan. When respondents are asked which GNU parties have delivered, the Democratic Alliance takes 64% of the credit, the Freedom Front Plus 29%, and the African National Congress only 12%. Ministers from smaller parties, particularly Leon Schreiber at Home Affairs and Pieter Groenewald at Correctional Services, take the top two positions in the ministerial performance league.

What business leaders should take from these findings is that the Vantage Point 2026 data neither endorses the doom-loop narrative nor the rainbow-nation-restored one. The country's working population sees real problems and gives a measured reading of who is helping to fix them. Business operates in that space, and this paper tries to draw out what the data implies for the twelve months ahead.

Introduction

This white paper draws on the voting-behaviour module of the 2026 survey, which covers twelve detailed question batteries ranging from economic outlook and factors holding back growth, through institutional trust, to views on the Government of National Unity and its individual ministers. The report is not an exhaustive treatment of every data point; readers wanting the full tables can request the technical report from Bateleur directly.

How to read this paper

Throughout the paper, figures are presented with their relevant segment breakdowns where these add insight. Where significance symbols appear in the source tables, we have translated these into plain-language observations rather than notation. Percentages will occasionally not sum to one hundred, either because questions were multi-select or because rounding has been applied.

The sample skews professional and business-engaged, which means the findings here are more representative of the consuming and producing middle of South Africa than of the population as a whole. That is deliberate. The business community is the primary audience for this work, and the attitudes of people who are working, earning and participating in the formal economy carry disproportionate weight in commercial decision-making.

The Mood of the Nation

57% of respondents expect economic decline. 22% expect improvement. The sober majority rules.

The survey opened with a straightforward question about the future of South Africa from an economic, business and financial point of view. The answers make uncomfortable reading for anyone hoping the GNU honeymoon had produced a lasting lift in sentiment.

Economic outlook for South Africa

Outlook	% of sample
Dramatic economic decline	39%
Small economic decline	18%
Continue as we are	21%
Small economic improvement	18%
Dramatic economic improvement	4%

Nearly two in five respondents brace themselves for a dramatic decline. That is the modal response. The most optimistic category, dramatic economic improvement, attracts only 4% of respondents. For every one person expecting a sharp upturn, ten expect a sharp downturn.

The picture is not uniform. Unhappy respondents are dramatically more pessimistic, with 49% expecting dramatic decline. White respondents run slightly above the mean on pessimism, Black respondents slightly below.

Gen Z respondents are less pessimistic than their elders, though still net-negative. Only 35% of Gen Z expect dramatic decline, and they register a higher share in the improvement categories. This may reflect the straightforward reality that younger people have seen less of the country's decline unfold and have longer time horizons to absorb short-term setbacks.

South Africa relative to the world

When respondents are asked to compare South Africa to other countries around the world, 61% say the country is worse off (28% much worse, 33% a little worse). Only 20% say South Africa is better off, and a meaningful 19% think the country is about the same.

Race is the most divisive split on this question. 32% of white respondents say South Africa is much worse off than comparable countries. Only 18% of Black respondents say the same, and 30% of Black respondents say the country is a little better off. Three and a half decades after democratic transition, the two groups look at the same country and see measurably different realities.

What Is Holding the Economy Back

Corruption at 83%. Nothing else comes close.

The survey asked respondents to select from a list of twenty-two factors which they thought were preventing the South African economy from growing. Because respondents could select as many as applied, the responses show where concern is widely shared rather than which single cause is considered primary. The ranking is revealing.

The top ten growth-preventing factors

Factor	% selecting
Corruption and mismanagement in government	83%
High crime rates	76%
Lack of trust in political leadership	71%
High unemployment	70%
Inefficient state-owned enterprises	65%
Ageing or failing infrastructure	65%
Policy uncertainty (land reform, BEE, mining, energy)	61%
Poor education outcomes	57%
Skills shortages	57%
Load shedding / unreliable electricity supply	55%

Five observations stand out from this data.

First, the top four factors cluster around one theme: the state is failing to do what it should. Corruption, crime, distrust in leadership, and unemployment are all, in different ways, symptoms of a state that has lost effective control of core functions. Respondents are not blaming global conditions or the private sector. They are blaming government.

Second, the finding that load shedding sits at number ten, with 55%, is in itself a story. A year ago, this item would almost certainly have been in the top three. South Africa has had an extended period without load shedding, and respondents have updated their concerns accordingly. This is an important reminder that national grievances are responsive to material change.

Third, water shortages, at 46%, sit below load shedding. This is almost certainly a lagging indicator. Water stress has been steadily worsening, with national disaster declarations in several provinces and repeated municipal failures. The ranking in this survey likely understates how quickly water will rise through the list over the coming eighteen months.

Fourth, the difference between the racial groups is instructive. Among white respondents, 90% flag corruption and mismanagement. Among Black respondents, 71% do. Both numbers are high, and both indicate a strong majority view. But the gap of 19% points shows that white respondents hold government culpability more singly responsible than Black respondents, who spread their concerns more evenly across multiple factors.

Fifth, labour unrest at 43% and low productivity at 39% are concerns held predominantly by white, older and right-leaning respondents. Black respondents place much less weight on these two items. This is a recurring pattern in the data: structural economic concerns read differently depending on whose interests they serve.

What this means for business

Business leaders reading this section face a choice about where to focus. The data suggests two priorities.

The first is that the corruption-and-governance narrative is no longer merely a business community preoccupation. It is a majority-view, cross-segment, cross-race concern. This aligns business with the broader voting public to a degree that was not evident five or ten years ago. Business advocacy that addresses governance and corruption directly will find a more receptive public audience than at any point in recent memory.

The second is that the factors that fall below the top ten, including policy uncertainty at 61%, still represent real and measurable concerns that directly affect investment decisions. Business has an interest in keeping these items on the public agenda rather than allowing the top-of-list items to crowd them out.

The Youth Question

Gen Z and Boomers agree the youth are disengaged. They disagree completely on why.

The survey asked respondents what factors prevent South Africa's youth from being fully engaged in work and society. Fifteen options were offered, from lack of job opportunities through to mental health challenges, and respondents could select as many as applied.

Top factors preventing youth engagement

Factor	% selecting
Lack of job opportunities	71%
Poor quality education	66%
Lack of discipline at home or school	56%
Economic instability	52%
Limited access to work experience	52%
Lack of mentorship or role models	51%
Disillusionment with politics or leadership	48%
Skills mismatch with available jobs	48%
A 'live for today' mentality / hedonism	45%
Unstable home life growing up	44%
Lack of direction from parents	43%
Unclear vision of the future	42%
Limited access to networks or connections	28%
Mental health challenges	26%

The totals tell one story. The segment breakdowns tell another. Where the survey really earns its keep is in revealing the generation gap in how different age groups explain youth disengagement.

Gen Z vs Boomers on youth disengagement

Factor	Gen Z %	Boomer %
Limited access to networks	51%	21%
Mental health challenges	40%	15%
Lack of discipline at home or school	42%	71%
Poor quality education	54%	81%
Lack of direction from parents	34%	52%
Lack of mentorship or role models	45%	58%

The pattern is striking. Boomers explain youth disengagement largely through the lens of what adults have failed to do for young people, or what young people have failed to learn. Gen Z explains it through the lens of structural barriers and mental load. Both are partly right. But they are talking past each other, and this disconnect almost certainly flows through into policy debates, workplace cultures and family conversations.

For employers, the implication is practical. Programmes designed by management committees of Gen X and Boomer leaders will tend to prioritise skills training, mentoring and discipline. Programmes designed to respond to what young people themselves say are the problems will prioritise networks, mental health support and work-experience pipelines. The data says both matter, but the weightings are dramatically different depending on who is at the table.

Mental health in particular deserves attention. 40% of Gen Z and 38% of Millennials identify mental health as a reason the youth are not engaged. Among Black respondents specifically, 39% identify mental health as a factor, rising to 41% among Coloured respondents. This is no longer a minority concern and no longer a white-collar concern. It is a significant driver of workforce participation difficulty.

The Trust Deficit

Big business is more trusted than the national government. The judiciary is more trusted than the police. International news media is more trusted than domestic media.

The survey measured trust across six institutions on a four-point scale (no trust, low trust, some trust, high trust). The results produce a rank order that ought to give South Africa's leadership class serious pause.

Institutional trust rankings, mean score on 1-4 scale

Institution	Mean trust
Large South African companies and corporations	2.5
Major international news media (BBC, CNN, Fox)	2.5
Major South African news media (SABC, eNCA)	2.3
The South African judiciary	2.2
The South African Police Service	1.8
The South African national government	1.7

Only two institutions achieve a mean score above two and a half. Both of them are non-state institutions: big business and international media. The state itself sits in last place, with the police just above it and the judiciary a further step up.

Reading this positively, the private sector starts with a trust advantage it should be slow to squander. Reading it negatively, the state sits dangerously close to what political scientists call institutional illegitimacy, where the gap between the governed and the governing becomes so wide that governance itself starts to fail. 49% of respondents express no trust whatsoever in the national government.

The judiciary's particular position

The judiciary is the highest-trusted state institution, but its position is ambiguous. 23% have no trust, 39% have low trust, 32% have some trust and only 7% have high trust. The mode is low trust.

Asian respondents (39% no trust) and unhappy respondents (39% no trust) are most sceptical. Happy respondents show a very different pattern, with 36% expressing some trust and 8% high trust.

For a country whose post-1994 constitutional settlement was anchored in judicial independence and the rule of law, these numbers are concerning. They suggest that the judiciary has absorbed some of the popular disenchantment directed at the broader state, despite its demonstrably independent performance in recent high-profile cases.

Implications for corporate communications

The fact that large corporations rank among the most trusted institutions has consequences for how business should speak to the public. Three implications follow.

First, business voice carries weight. When a major corporation speaks on a public issue, it does so from a position of relative trust. This is a resource that can be used well or used poorly, and in an environment where trust in institutions is generally depressed, it is a resource worth protecting.

Second, the media ecosystem is complex. South African media sits below international media on trust, but well above government. Communications strategies that rely on local media penetration need to be supplemented by direct-to-audience channels. The one-way flow through traditional media is no longer sufficient.

Third, businesses that operate in proximity to the state, whether through procurement relationships, regulatory exposure or public-private partnerships, inherit some of the state's trust deficit by association. Communications that visibly distinguish commercial performance from state performance can help mitigate this contamination effect.

The Government of National Unity

The GNU scorecard: 50% say it has been unsuccessful. 49% say it has been somewhat successful. Only 6% say it has been very or completely successful.

The Government of National Unity was formed in mid-2024 and has now had approximately eighteen months in office.

How successful has the GNU been in bringing positive change?

Rating	% of sample
Not at all successful	17%
Not very successful	33%
Somewhat successful	44%
Very successful	5%
Completely successful	1%

The country's dominant verdict is that the GNU has produced neither catastrophe nor renaissance, but something in between. 44% is the mode, and it sits squarely on the somewhat successful box.

At the start of the GNU, many commentators predicted it would collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions. Others predicted it would rejuvenate government and restore investor confidence within months. Neither has happened. Instead, the public has settled into a cautious, qualified acknowledgement of partial progress.

Which parties are contributing

When asked which GNU parties are bringing positive change, respondents produce a league table that looks very different to the vote share each party brought into the coalition.

GNU parties bringing positive change

Party	% of sample
Democratic Alliance (DA)	64%
Vryheidsfront / Freedom Front Plus (FF+)	29%
None of these	23%
Patriotic Alliance (PA)	17%
African National Congress (ANC)	12%
Rise Mzansi	11%
Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP)	11%
GOOD	8%
United Democratic Movement (UDM)	6%
Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC)	2%
Al Jama-ah	2%

Three observations are worth making here.

First, the DA's performance credit of 64% is remarkable for a party that holds approximately 22% of the parliamentary seats. On a credit-per-seat basis, the DA is significantly over-performing public expectation.

Second, the Freedom Front Plus achieves 29% credit from a seat share of just over 1% of the National Assembly. On that basis, FF+ is the most over-performing party in the coalition relative to its size. This is almost certainly being driven by the performance of Pieter Groenewald at Correctional Services, and is a data point that deserves strategic attention from both the party and its coalition partners.

Third, the African National Congress, the largest partner in the coalition with 40% of seats, attracts only 12% of credit. This is a dramatic mismatch between formal power and public perception of delivery. 23% of respondents selected none of these when asked which parties are contributing, which in itself is a cold read of the coalition.

The Ministerial Performance League

The top two ministries, by public acknowledgement of positive change, are held by the Democratic Alliance and the Freedom Front Plus.

The survey asked respondents which ministries have been successful in implementing positive change since the formation of the GNU. Respondents could select as many as applied from the full list of the Executive. The results produce the most direct measure of public credit available in the 2026 data.

Top fifteen ministries by positive-change credit

Ministry (Minister, Party)	% selected
Home Affairs (Dr Leon Schreiber, DA)	47%
Correctional Services (Dr Pieter Groenewald, FF+)	32%
Agriculture (John Steenhuisen, DA)	29%
Public Works and Infrastructure (Dean Macpherson, DA)	27%
Electricity and Energy (Dr Kgosientsho Ramokgopa, ANC)	23%
Sport, Arts & Culture (Gayton McKenzie, PA)	23%
Forestry, Fisheries & Environment (Dr Dion George, DA)	18%
Finance (Enoch Godongwana, ANC)	17%
Basic Education (Siviwe Gwarube, DA)	16%
Tourism (Patricia de Lille, GOOD)	14%
Communications (Solly Malatsi, DA)	13%
Transport (Barbara Creecy, ANC)	11%
Health (Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, ANC)	8%
International Relations (Ronald Lamola, ANC)	7%
Women, Youth & Persons with Disabilities (Sindisiwe Chikunga, ANC)	5%

The contrast with parties-in-coalition performance is stark. Of the top seven ministries, five are held by the DA, one by FF+ and only one by the ANC (Electricity and Energy, where Ramokgopa benefits from the practical end of sustained load shedding). Of the bottom ten ministries, eight are held by the ANC.

This is not merely a question of which minister gets headlines. It is a measurable, segment-consistent pattern. Among white respondents, 58% credit Home Affairs, 39% credit Correctional Services, and only 3% credit Defence, Social Development or Mineral Resources. Among Black respondents, the Home Affairs figure drops to 33% while Electricity and Energy rises to 27%, but the overall pattern holds.

The Home Affairs story

Dr Leon Schreiber's 47% on Home Affairs is, in some ways, the most commercially significant datapoint in the entire survey. Home Affairs is the ministry with which most South Africans interact at some point, and the ministry whose dysfunction has historically been most visible. The turnaround in public perception in barely two years is measurable, material, and should be a case study for the state's ability to improve performance when determination and competent leadership are applied.

The Schreiber effect is consistent across segments. It is stronger among men (61%) than women (35%), likely reflecting differential use of Home Affairs services, but it holds across race, generation and political orientation. It is one of the few ministries where white, black, coloured and Asian respondents all give credit at meaningful levels.

The Groenewald dividend

Dr Pieter Groenewald at Correctional Services holds the second position in the league table, with 32% credit. This is a remarkable result for a ministry that, traditionally, attracts public attention only when something goes wrong, and for a party, the Freedom Front Plus, whose overall GNU performance credit of 29% is powerfully concentrated in this single ministerial performance.

The result is not evenly distributed across segments. White respondents credit Groenewald at 39% and Black respondents at 20%. Men credit him at 43%, and women

at 22%. These differentials are larger than for Schreiber, suggesting the Groenewald story has landed less universally, though still strongly.

Voting Intentions for 2026

The survey captured both past voting behaviour and forward intent. The Vantage Point sample is a high-participation sample: 86% voted in the 2024 National Election and 22% voted in the 2021 Local Government Election. These figures are well above the official national turnout of approximately 58% for 2024, reflecting the survey's business-active sample profile.

Intention to vote in the 2026 Local Government Election

Intent	% of sample
Definitely would vote	67%
Probably would vote	14%
Unsure	10%
Probably would not vote	4%
Definitely would not vote	5%

Net intent to vote in the 2026 LGE sits at 81%. This is healthy, but notably lower than the 86% who voted in the 2024 National Election. Local elections consistently attract lower turnout than national elections in South Africa, and this sample's stated intent conforms to that pattern.

Intent to vote in 2026 LGE, by generation

Generation	% definitely voting
Boomers	77%
Gen X	66%
Millennials	59%
Gen Z	48%

Gen Z respondents are the most likely to say they are unsure about voting (25%) and are almost three times less certain to vote than Boomers. Given that Gen Z are now

fully enfranchised and will be the decisive voter bloc within two election cycles, this is a civic health warning worth sounding.

The race and province pattern

White respondents are significantly more certain to vote than Black respondents, 78% against 52% definitely voting. Coloured respondents sit at 56%, Asian respondents at 59%. Western Cape respondents are the most likely to vote definitely, at 72%, with KZN and Rest of SA slightly below the national average.

Implications for Business Leaders

The Vantage Point 2026 data delivers a measured, sober, segmented reading of a country that is neither collapsing nor blooming. For the business community, five conclusions follow.

1. The pessimism is real but not monolithic.

57% of respondents expect economic decline, but 22% expect improvement. A minority of the country remains net-positive on the future. Business communication that speaks only to the pessimistic majority will miss the energetic fifth that is willing to invest, expand and believe. Speaking to both audiences in the same breath is difficult but possible. Pretending the pessimists do not exist, or the optimists, is easier but weaker.

2. Corruption and governance are the consensus concerns.

The fact that 83% of respondents flag corruption and mismanagement as a factor holding back the economy is not surprising. What is surprising is the breadth. This is a top concern across every demographic segment measured, including groups that have historically held different views. Business advocacy that frames commercial and economic arguments through the corruption and governance lens is arguing with the grain of public opinion.

3. The trust advantage is real, but contingent.

Large South African companies sit at the top of the institutional trust league. This is a valuable position. It is also contingent on companies continuing to demonstrate performance, integrity and proximity to the real concerns of South Africans. Companies that lose touch with the public, or that are implicated in governance failures, can lose this trust quickly. The residual ubuntu toward business is a resource worth protecting deliberately, not one to be taken for granted.

4. The GNU scorecard is mixed but specific.

The overall judgement on the GNU is neither warm nor cold. Respondents see some progress and much still to do. But the specific credit they allocate to individual ministers shows they are capable of measuring performance when they see it. Schreiber at Home Affairs and Groenewald at Correctional Services have demonstrated that the business of government can be done, and the public has noticed. This matters for the political economy of the GNU going into 2029 and matters equally for business planning: performance is possible in places where it has previously been absent.

5. The generation gap in voter intent is a warning.

48% of Gen Z definitely will vote. That is not enough. If the 2026 LGE produces a ballot where the under-30 participation rate is half that of the over-60 participation rate, the country's municipalities will be governed by councils that reflect the preferences of one generation at the expense of another. Business has an interest in the health of municipal governance, and municipal governance is made stronger by broader civic participation. There is a constructive role here for employers, particularly large ones, in encouraging voter registration and turnout among younger employees without dictating political direction.

Closing

The Vantage Point 2026 data does not deliver a neat narrative. South Africa's working population looks at the country and sees difficulty, selective progress, deep distrust of the state, and a measured appreciation for what the GNU has achieved in its first two years. That is a more complicated picture than the stark collapse-or-renaissance framings that dominate commentary. It is also, in our experience, a more accurate one. For business leaders, the findings in this paper should be read as a set of operating conditions rather than a set of forecasts. The country's mood is what it is. The question is what business does inside that mood.

About Bateleur

Bateleur Brand Planning (Pty) Ltd is a South African market research company dedicated to tracking shifting consumer and employee sentiments. The **2025/26 Vantage Point Survey** is an annual, deep-dive study tracking matters of general interest to society, providing businesses with actionable, data-driven intelligence relevant to the local landscape.

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