



In Zimbabwe, opposition and uncommitted support grand opposition coalition idea

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 145 | Eldred. V. Masunungure

Summary

The widely-discussed idea of a grand coalition of Zimbabwe's opposition parties to improve their chances of defeating the long-ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in next year's elections has powerful support among partisans of the main opposition party, Afrobarometer's most recent survey shows. A slimmer majority of politically uncommitted citizens also favour such a coalition, while ZANU-PF supporters reject the idea by a 2-to-1 margin.

In post-independence Zimbabwe, the opposition has been marked by fragmentation – a fact that cost them the presidency in the March 2008 when the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) under Morgan Tsvangirai scored a plurality but fell short of a majority. The opposition has been at its feeblest since its heavy (albeit controversial) defeat in the 2013 elections, when the ZANU-PF achieved a more than two-thirds majority, which it has increased via by-elections boycotted by the MDC-T.

Since 2013, the number of opposition parties has grown rapidly; there are reportedly now more than four dozen, although fewer than half a dozen are considered "serious" national parties. The disorganized state of the opposition has prompted widespread talk in opposition and civil-society circles about the need for a pre-electoral "grand coalition" of opposition parties to challenge the ZANU-PF in the highly anticipated elections, expected around mid-2018.

Afrobarometer survey data show that Zimbabweans are sharply polarized along partisan lines on the issue. The findings also suggest that proponents of a grand coalition may need to do more in terms of marketing to convince uncommitted voters of a coalition's prospects, especially in light of the fact that popular trust in opposition parties continues to decline.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2017. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 1,200 adult Zimbabweans between 28 January and 10 February 2017. A sample of this size yields

country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

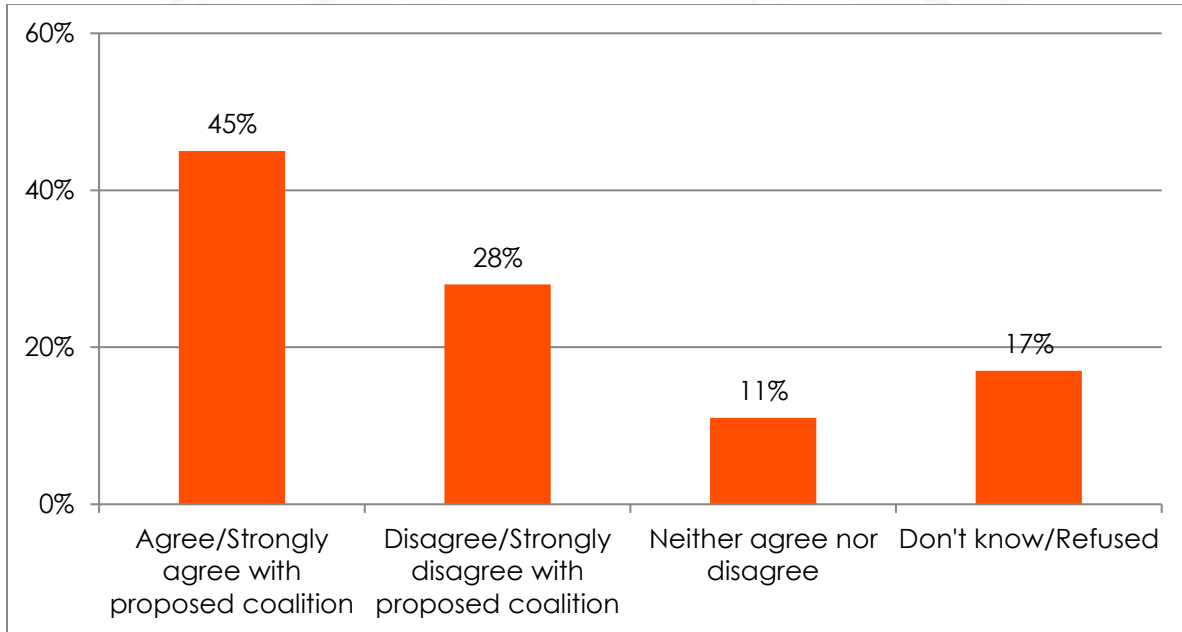
Key findings

- The prospect of a grand opposition coalition finds support among a plurality (45%) of Zimbabweans, including more than two-thirds (68%) of MDC-T partisans.
- Among citizens who do not align themselves with any political party – a group that makes up half of the adult population – a majority (54%) favour the idea of a grand opposition coalition. ZANU-PF supporters reject the idea, 41% to 23%.
- Support for the coalition proposal is stronger among urban residents, better-educated citizens, and men than among rural dwellers, less-educated respondents, and women. Majorities favour the idea in just three of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces – the traditional opposition strongholds of Bulawayo (64%), Harare (62%), and Matabeleland North (54%).
- Even a grand coalition might face an uphill struggle in the elections: Only 22% of respondents say they would vote for opposition candidates in a hypothetical election, and trust in opposition parties continues to decline, with just one-third (32%) of respondents saying they trust them “somewhat” or “a lot.”

Opposition supporters and uncommitted endorse grand coalition

The prospect of a grand coalition finds traction among a plurality (45%) of all adult Zimbabweans citizens, while 28% give it a thumbs-down. About one in four say they neither agree nor disagree with the idea (11%), don't know (15%), or refused to say (2%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Views on grand coalition | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In order to win the 2018 presidential election, opposition political parties should work together under a grand coalition.

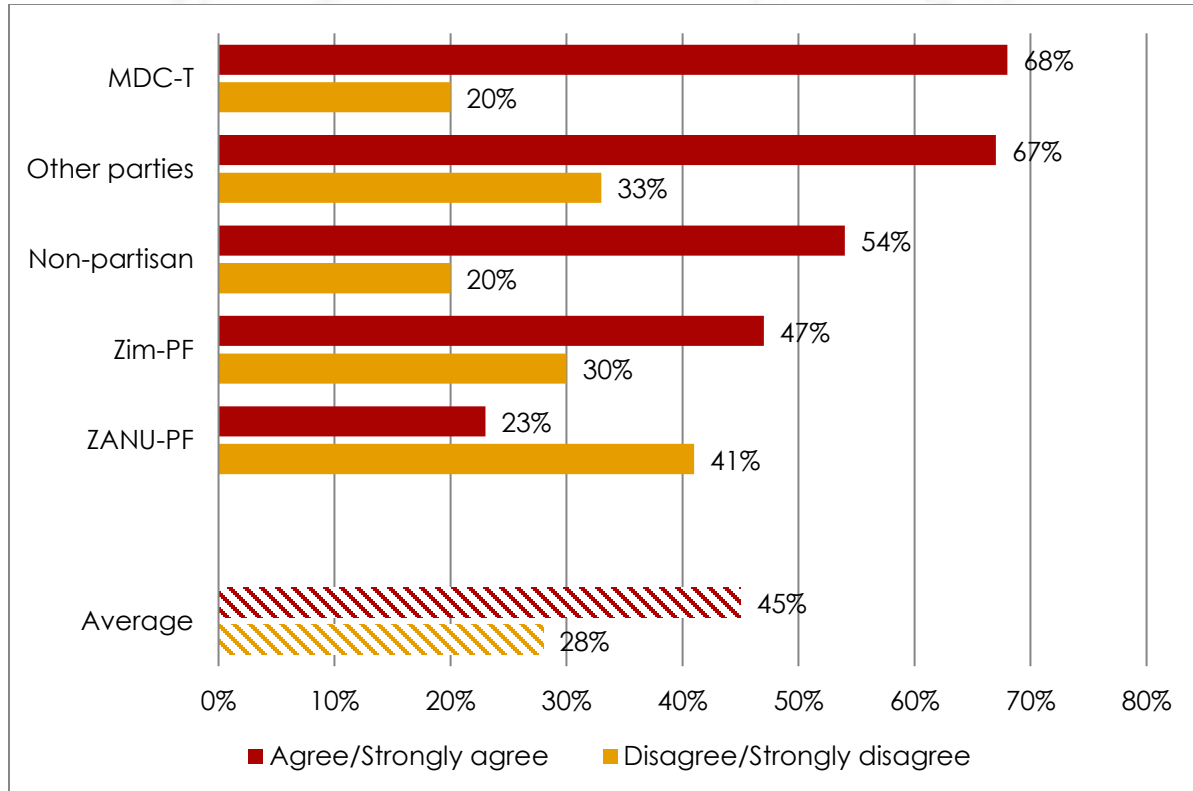
Opposition supporters and politically uncommitted citizens are stronger in their support for a grand coalition. Among respondents who say they "feel close to" an opposition party, 64% "agree" or "strongly agree" with the idea of a coalition. Among those who don't "feel close to" any political party or refused to say, 54% support the idea.

Among supporters of the MDC-T, the largest opposition party, more than two-thirds (68%) endorse the proposal of a coalition, including 43% who "strongly agree," while only 20% oppose the idea (Figure 2).

Support is less robust among adherents of what was the second-largest opposition party at the time of the survey¹: 47% of Zimbabwe People First (Zim-PF) supporters favour the coalition, while 30% disagree.

¹ Shortly after Afrobarometer's data collection, former Vice President Joice Mujuru split from Zim-PF to form the National People's Party (NPP).

Figure 2: Views on grand coalition | by political party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked:

- Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that?
- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In order to win the 2018 presidential election, opposition political parties should work together under a grand coalition.

(Figure shows %, disaggregated by party affiliation, who agree/strongly agree and disagree/strongly disagree with the idea of grand opposition coalition.)

In the vital group of politically uncommitted Zimbabweans, who make up 50% of the adult population, a majority (54%) “agree” or “strongly agree” with the proposition that opposition parties come together under a grand coalition. One in five (20%) do not endorse the idea, while another 14% express ignorance.

Unsurprisingly, supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party are far less supportive of the grand coalition idea: Fewer than one-fourth (23%) favour such a coalition, while a plurality (41%) are opposed. Notably, more than one in three (36%) say they neither agree nor disagree with the idea, don't know, or refused to respond – triple the proportion of non-committal responses among MDC-T supporters.

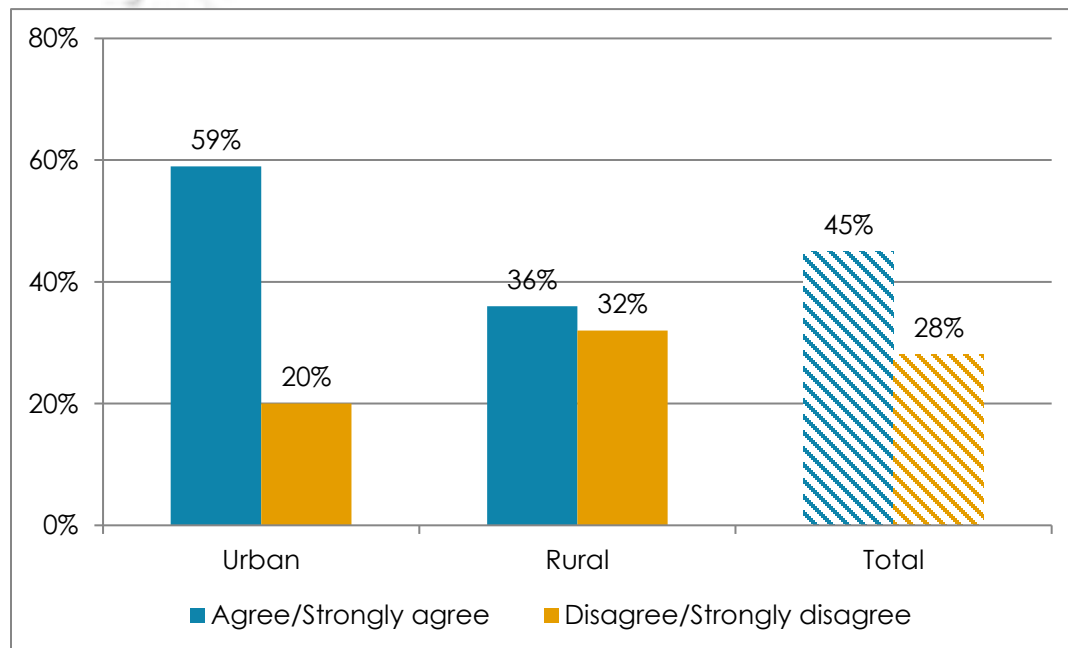
When views on the grand coalition are disaggregated by respondents' stated voting intentions in a hypothetical election (instead of by whether they “feel close to” a given political party), similar gaps are evident: Only 27% of prospective ZANU-PF voters favour the idea of a grand

opposition coalition, compared to 75% of prospective MDC-T voters and 47% of those who refused to answer, say they would not vote, or “don’t know.”

Rural and urban dwellers sharply divided

Mirroring political party affiliation, place of abode is another reliable predictor of who supports the creation of an opposition coalition. About six in 10 urban residents (59%) agree with the idea, including 31% who “strongly agree,” compared to only slightly more than one-third (36%) of rural dwellers (Figure 3). A substantial proportion of rural residents (17%) plead ignorance on the matter, compared to 11% of their peers in urban areas.

Figure 3: Views on grand coalition | by urban-rural location | Zimbabwe | 2017

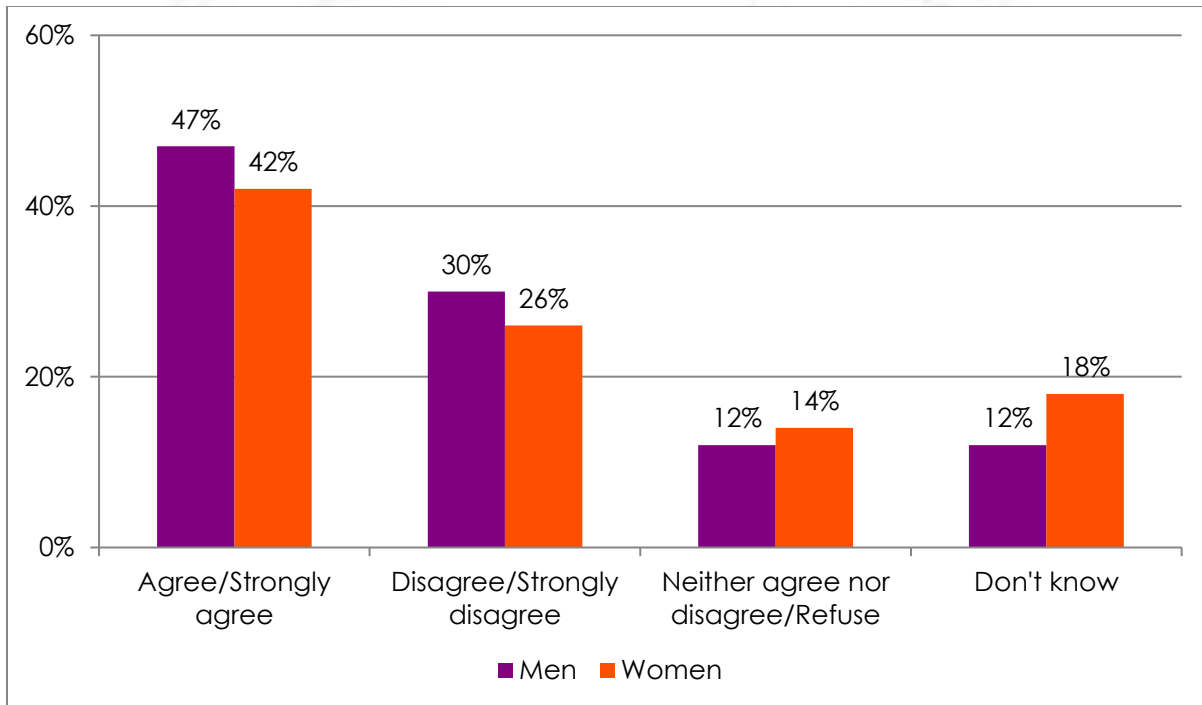


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In order to win the 2018 presidential election, opposition political parties should work together under a grand coalition.

Narrow gender gap on opposition coalition

Women in Zimbabwe express slightly lower levels of support for a grand coalition than men, but also slightly lower levels of opposition, while registering higher levels of professed ignorance (Figure 4). About four in 10 women (42%) say they support the idea, 5 percentage points below the level for men.

Figure 4: Views on grand coalition | by gender | Zimbabwe | 2017



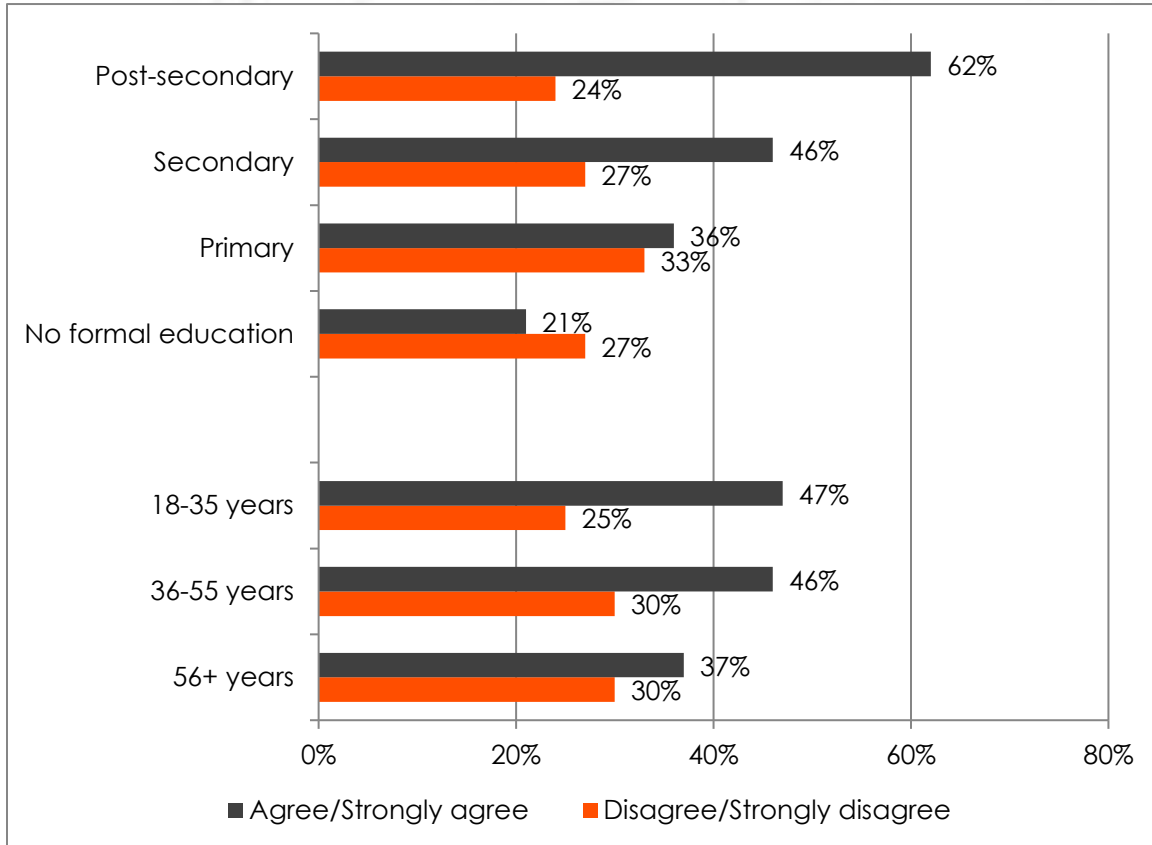
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Support for coalition higher among better-educated and younger citizens

Support for a coalition arrangement rises consistently with respondents' education level. While only one in five survey respondents with no formal education (21%) endorse the idea of a coalition of opposition parties, this proportion increases to 36% among those with primary education, 46% among those with secondary education, and 62% among those with post-secondary education (Figure 5). Notably, four in 10 respondents with no formal education (41%) give "don't know" responses to this question, compared to only 4% among those with post-secondary education.

Support for a coalition is stronger among youth (47% of those aged 18-35 years) and middle-aged citizens (46% of those aged 36-55 years) than among older respondents (37% of those aged 56 years or more). Nearly a quarter (24%) of the elderly say they "don't know."

Figure 5: Views on grand coalition | by education level and age | Zimbabwe | 2017



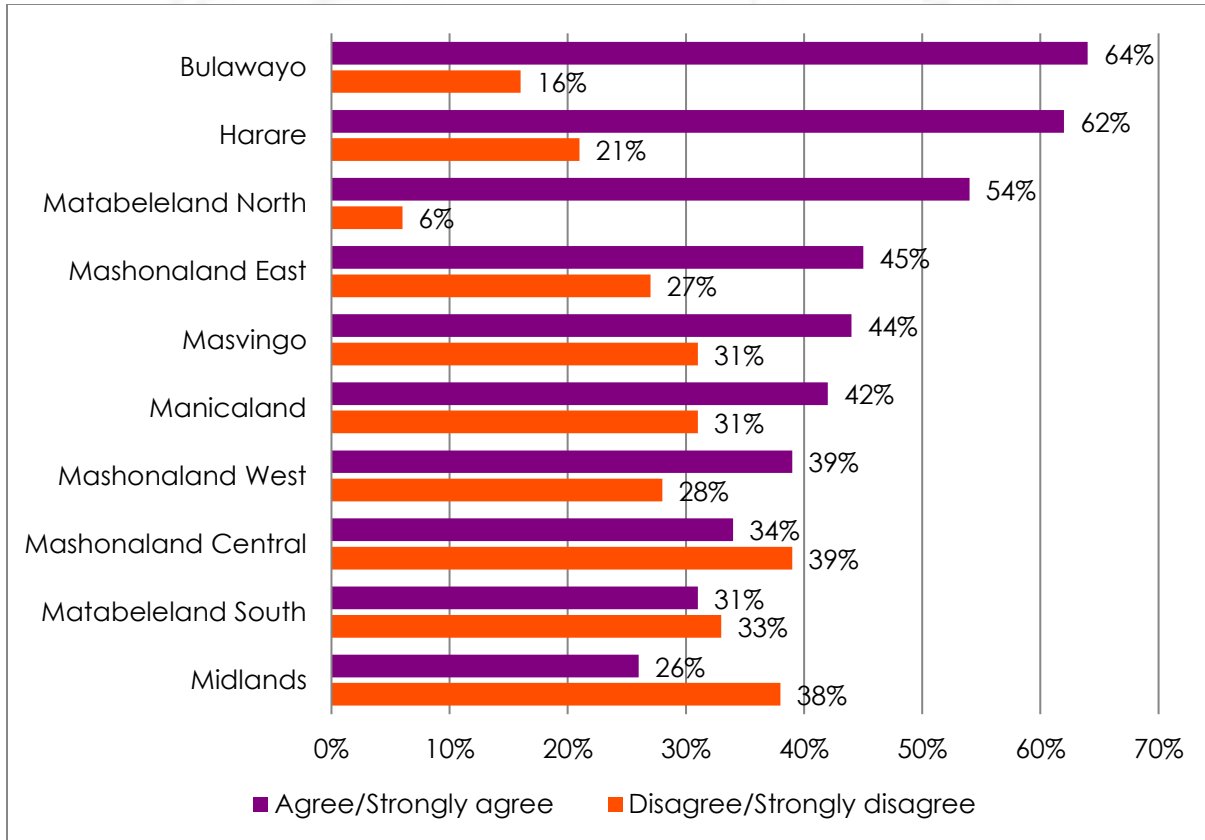
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Rural provinces show little support for opposition coalition

Of Zimbabwe's 10 provinces, only three – all traditionally opposition strongholds – register majority support for the idea of opposition parties coalescing to fight the ZANU-PF. Two of the three are urban/metropolitan provinces: Bulawayo (64% agree/agree very strongly) and Harare (62%). Matabeleland North is the only rural province that supports the idea (with 54% who agree/strongly agree and 34% who "don't know"). The other seven provinces show less support for the idea, ranging from 26% in Midlands to 45% in Mashonaland East (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Views on grand coalition | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or haven't you heard enough to say: In order to win the 2018 presidential election, opposition political parties should work together under a grand coalition.

Outlook for the opposition

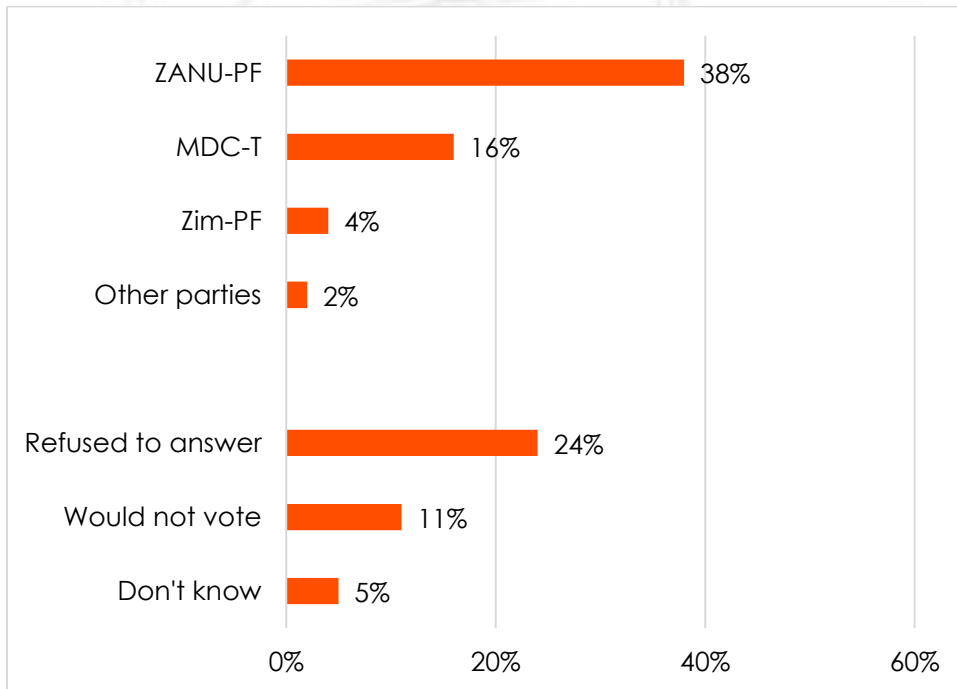
Even with a grand coalition, Zimbabwe's opposition might face an uphill path in the next elections.

Asked which party's candidate they would vote for in a hypothetical presidential election the day following the survey, 38% opt for the ZANU-PF, compared to 16% for the MDC-T, 4% for Zim-PF (see Footnote 1 above), and 2% for other opposition parties (Figure 7). Meanwhile, four in 10 refused to answer (24%), say they would not vote (11%), or say they don't know (5%).

Moreover, trust in opposition parties has declined drastically since the halcyon days of opposition glory around 2009, when almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens said they trusted them "somewhat" or "a lot." Popular trust decreased by almost half during and after the 2009-2013 Government of National Unity (GNU) (49% in 2012, 35% in 2014). In the most recent survey, just one-third (32%) of Zimbabweans say they trust opposition parties "somewhat" or "a lot," while 56% say they trust them "just a little" or "not at all" (Figure 8). Unsurprisingly, a large proportion

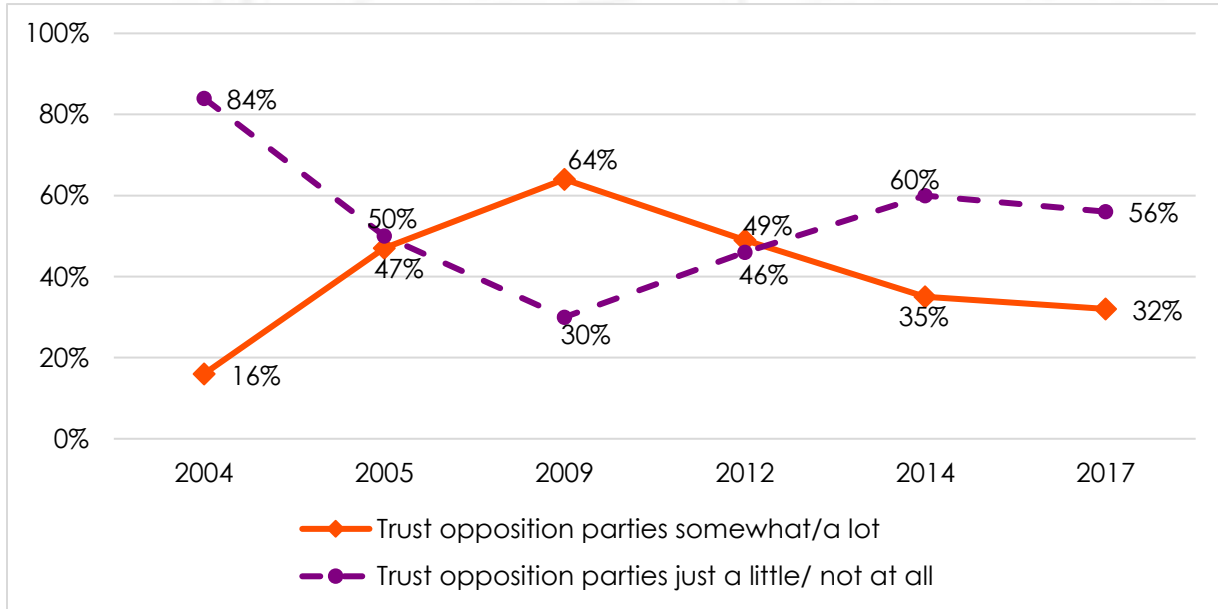
(72%) of those who disagree with the grand coalition idea do not trust the opposition even "somewhat."

Figure 7: Stated voting intentions in hypothetical elections | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Figure 8: Popular trust in opposition political parties | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Opposition political parties?

Conclusion

Public opinion on the idea of opposition parties working together in a coalition closely mirrors the configuration of partisan affiliations and past voting patterns. Demographic groups that normally support opposition parties are also those that are most enthusiastic about the proposed coalition. Conversely, rural areas still seem to be largely impregnable to opposition parties, which have their work cut out for them if they are to win back popular trust and a significant share of the vote – even in a grand coalition.

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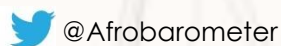
Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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