

## Batswana say traditional leaders strengthen democracy – but should stay out of politics

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 337 | Itumeleng Oageng, Batlang Seabo, Mpho G. Molomo, and Wilford Molefe**

### Summary

Botswana is the oldest multiparty democracy in sub-Saharan Africa, boasting 11 successful national elections since independence in 1966. The country's Constitution provides for a parliamentary system with two chambers: Parliament, which makes laws, and the House of Chiefs (*Ntlo ya Dikgosi*), which serves in an advisory capacity on matters of tradition and customs. Except for a few sub-districts where chiefs are elected, chieftainship is a hereditary institution based on tribal lineage.

Some observers have attributed Botswana's political stability to its judicious blending of republican and traditional institutions, crediting chieftainship (*bogosi*) with a critical role in Botswana's democratic development as well as its people's daily lives (Samatar, 1997; Mmegi, 2019; Moumakwa, 2010; Sharma, 2010). Among chiefs' contributions to democracy, they cite their frequent interaction with citizens and problem-solving role in their communities as well as their facilitation of *kgotla* meetings through which the government and elected leaders consult citizens.

In the run-up to the 2019 elections, the appeal of traditional institutions was used to gain political mileage. The falling-out between former President Ian Khama Seretse Khama and President Mokgweetsi Masisi took on a tribal tinge when Khama retreated to his tribal seat in the Central District to galvanize support for his new political home, the Botswana Patriotic Front. But while the opposition did well in some Central District constituencies previously regarded as strongholds of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party, it fell short of breaking the BDP's undefeated record at the polls.

Against this background, how do ordinary Batswana see the interface between republican and traditional institutions? Findings from the recent national Afrobarometer survey show that while most Batswana support democracy and reject non-democratic alternatives, they also hold positive views of traditional leaders' contributions and think that they strengthen, rather than weaken, democracy. In fact, a majority of citizens would prefer that chiefs play a greater role in governing local communities. But most would like traditional leaders to stay out of partisan politics.

### Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer national partner in Botswana, Star Awards Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Batswana in July-August

2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Botswana in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

## Key findings

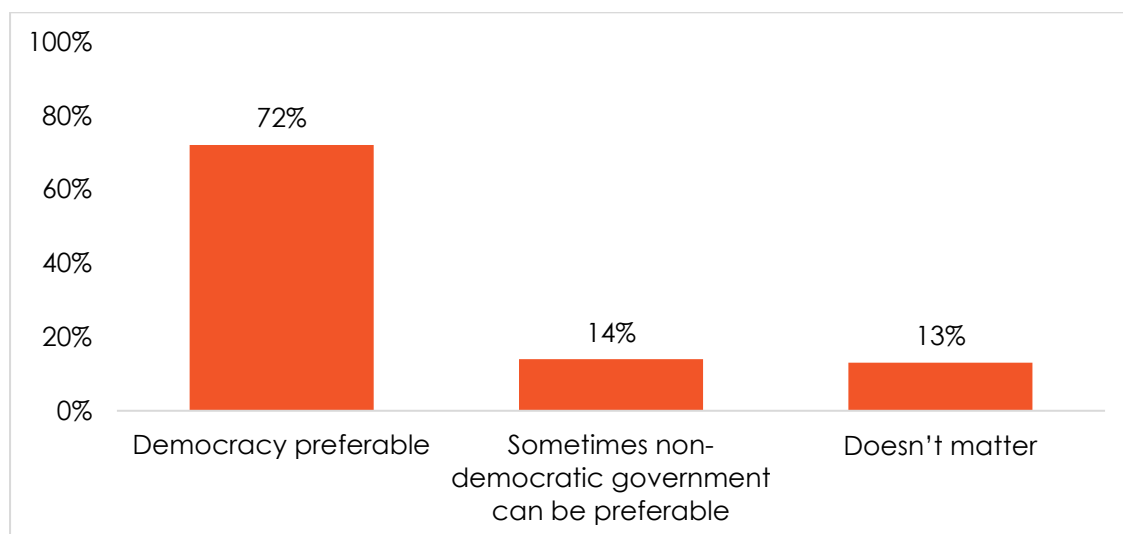
- Large majorities of Botswana prefer democracy to any other kind of government (72%) and reject authoritarian alternatives such as one-man rule (93%), military rule (89%), and one-party rule (84%).
- And three-fourths (75%) of citizens see their country as a functioning democracy (a “full democracy” or one with only minor problems).
- A majority of Botswana say traditional leaders have “some” or “a lot” of influence in resolving local disputes (77%) and governing local communities (64%), but few (21%) see them as influential in elections.
- Fully three-fourths of respondents say traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for their communities (76%) and cooperate with elected leaders to get things done (78%). A majority think traditional leaders are good for democracy (60%) and should have even more influence in governing local communities than they currently have (63%).
- But most Botswana (78%) want traditional leaders to stay out of politics.

## Views on democracy

In general, Botswana support democracy, reject authoritarian alternatives, and think their country is a functioning democracy.

More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say democracy is preferable to any other kind of government, while about one in four think that in some instances a non-democratic government can be preferable (14%) or that it does not matter what kind of government they have (13%) (Figure 1).

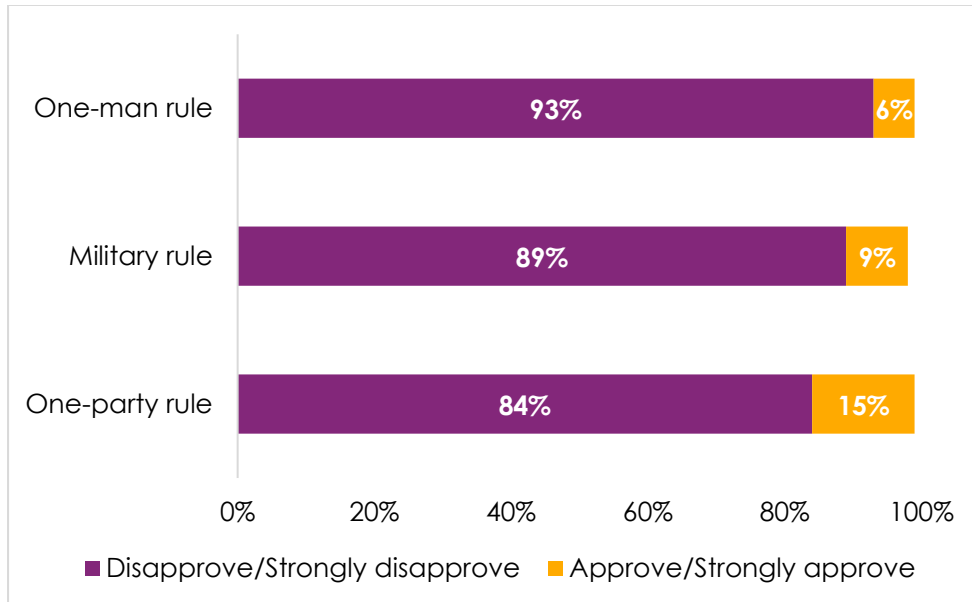
**Figure 1: Support for democracy | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?  
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.  
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.  
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Overwhelmingly, Batswana reject authoritarian alternatives to democracy, such as one-man rule (93% “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”), military rule (89%), and one-party rule (84%) (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Citizens’ views on non-democratic regimes | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives:*

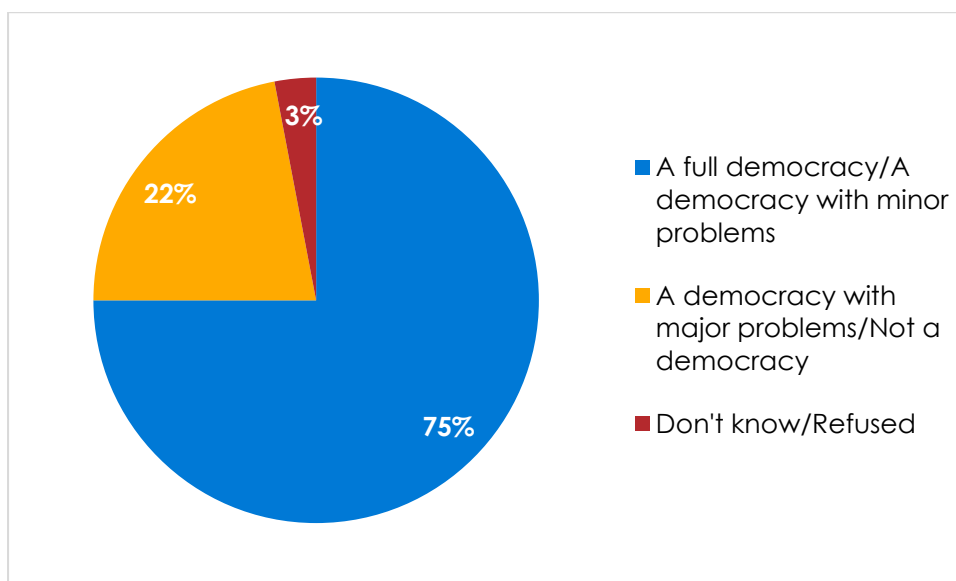
*Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?*

*The army comes in to govern the country?*

*Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything?*

And three-fourths (75%) of Batswana see their country as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems,” while about one in five (22%) describe it as “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy” (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: How democratic is Botswana? | Botswana | 2019**



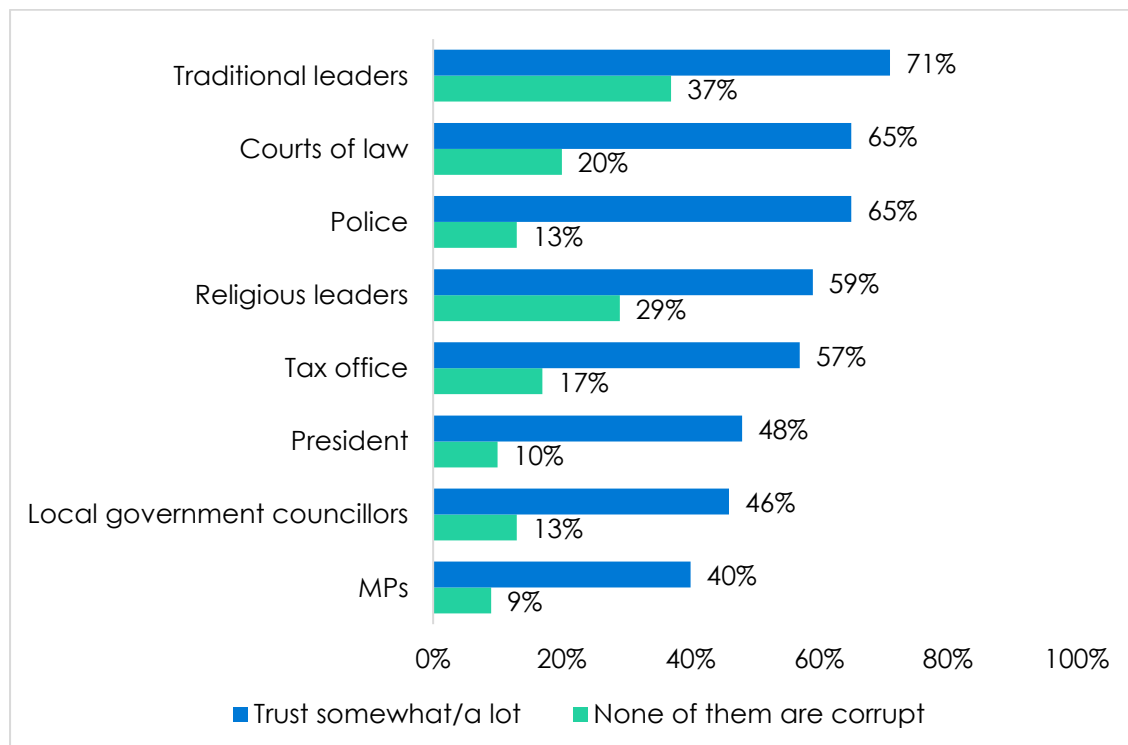
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Botswana today?*

## Perceptions and roles of traditional leaders

In Botswana, traditional leaders enjoy greater popular trust and are less widely seen as corrupt than other types of public officials (Figure 4). Seven in 10 Botswana (71%) say they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to 59% who say they trust religious leaders and fewer than half who trust the president (48%), local government councillors (46%), and members of Parliament (40%).

Similarly, when asked how many traditional leaders are involved in corruption, 37% of respondents say “none of them,” more than three times as many as see the presidency and Parliament as corruption-free.

**Figure 4: Popular trust and perceived corruption | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:**

*How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

*How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who say "none of them")*

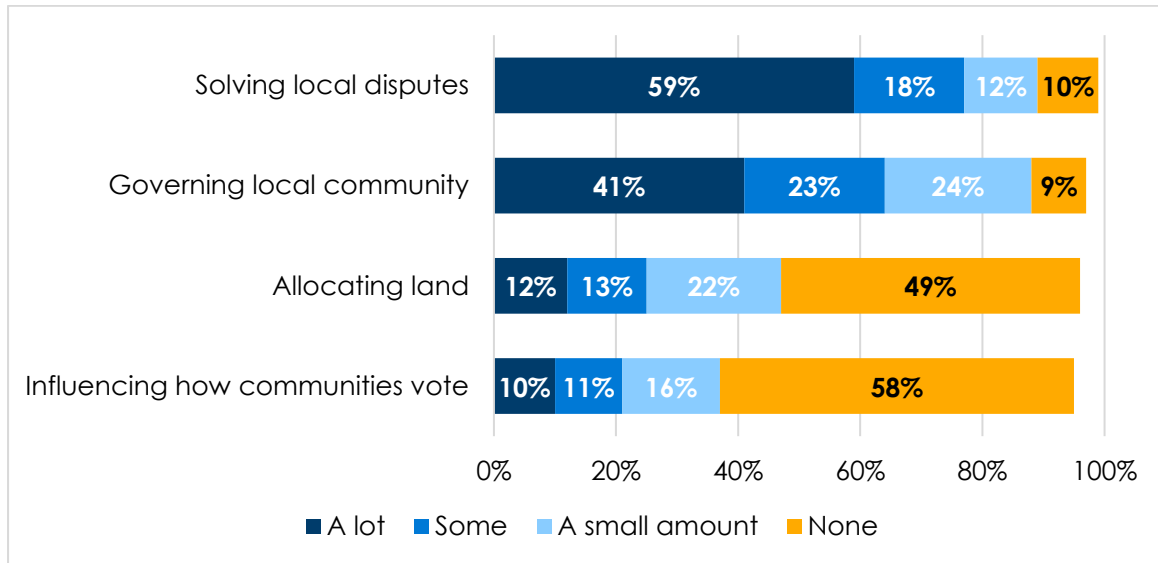
When asked about the role of traditional leaders, Botswana generally describe them as far more influential in resolving local disputes than in affecting how people vote (Figure 5).

More than three-fourths (77%) of respondents say traditional leaders have at least “some” influence in resolving local disputes, including a majority (59%) who say they have “a lot” of influence in this area.

In contrast, only one in five citizens say traditional leaders have “some” (11%) or “a lot” (10%) of influence on how people vote, while a majority (58%) say they have no influence at all on voting.

A majority (64%) also see “some” or “a lot” of influence by traditional leaders in governing local communities, while only about one in four (25%) say they are influential in allocating land.

**Figure 5: Influence of traditional leaders** | Botswana | 2019

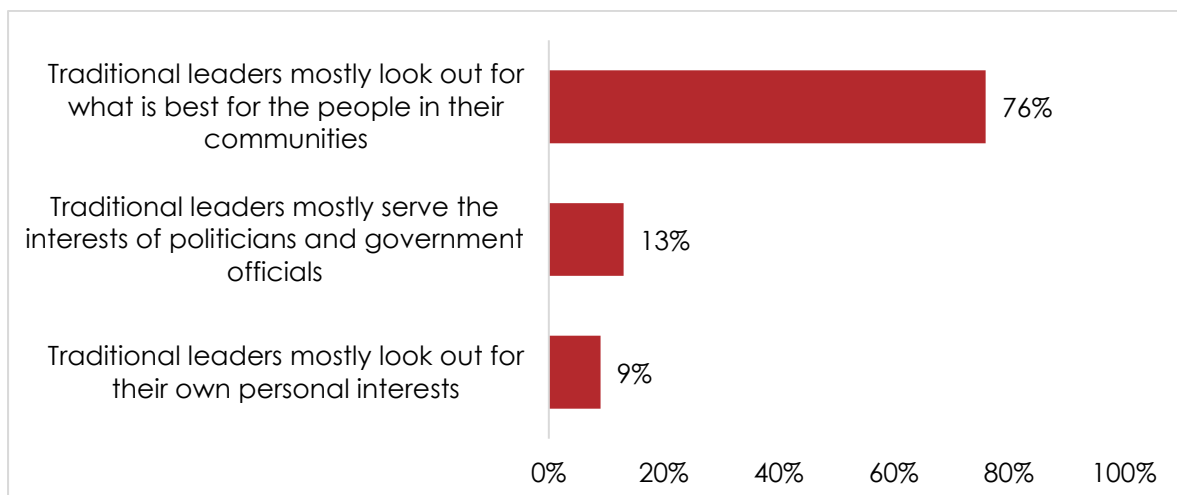


**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do traditional leaders currently have on:  
 Governing your local community?  
 Allocating land?  
 Influencing how people in their communities vote?  
 Solving local disputes?

Overall, Botswana see the influence of traditional leaders as positive and indeed want it to increase. But they would prefer that chiefs stay out of politics.

Fully three-fourths (76%) of respondents believe that traditional leaders “mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities,” while fewer than one in four say they mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials (13%) or their own personal interests (9%) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Interests served by traditional leaders** | Botswana | 2019

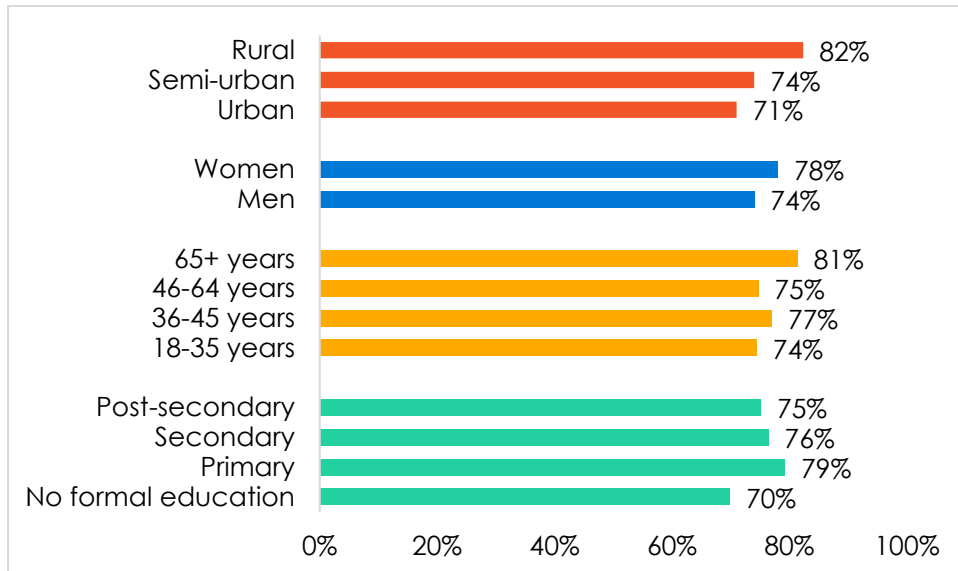


**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

The view that traditional leaders look out for their communities' interests is more common among rural residents (82%) than their urban counterparts (71%). Women (78%) and senior citizens (81%) are also more likely to see traditional leaders this way than men and younger

respondents. Respondents with no formal education (70%) are less likely than those with at least primary schooling to say traditional leaders look out for the people in their communities (Figure 7).

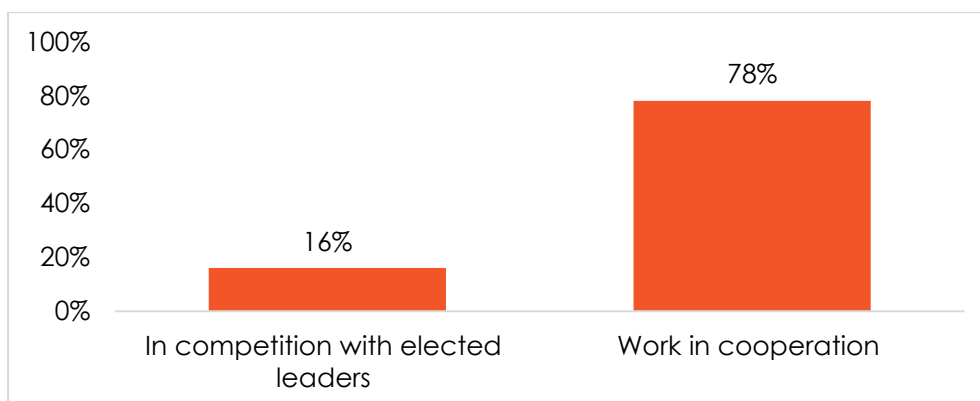
**Figure 7: Traditional leaders look out for their communities' interests** | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities.  
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials.  
 Statement 3: Traditional leaders mostly look out for their own personal interests.  
 (% who agree with Statement 1)

Similarly, fewer than one in five Botswana (16%) see traditional leaders as competing with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence. Instead, most (78%) say traditional leaders cooperate with elected leaders to get things done (Figure 8).

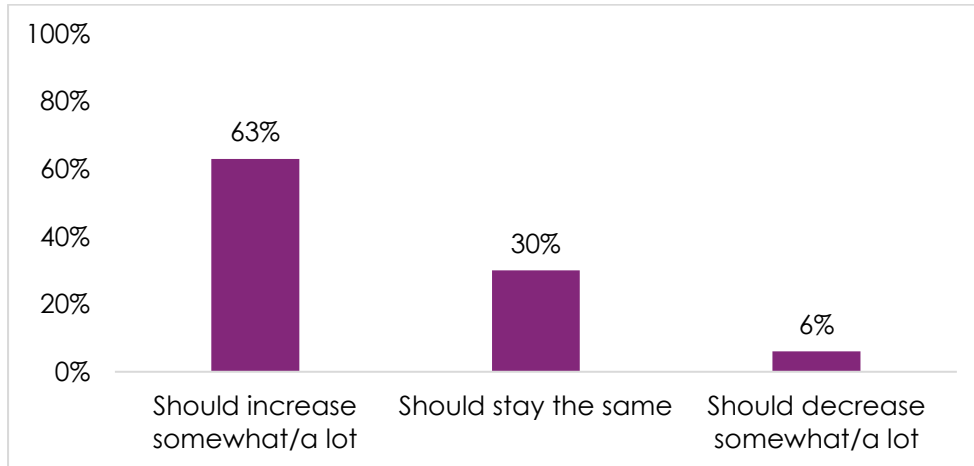
**Figure 8: Traditional and elected leaders: Cooperation or competition?** | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders are mostly in competition with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence.  
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly work in cooperation with elected leaders to get things done.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Indeed, almost two-thirds (63%) of Batswana would prefer that traditional leaders have more influence in governing local communities than they currently have. Only about one in 20 (6%) think they should have less influence, while 30% are happy with their current level of influence (Figure 9).

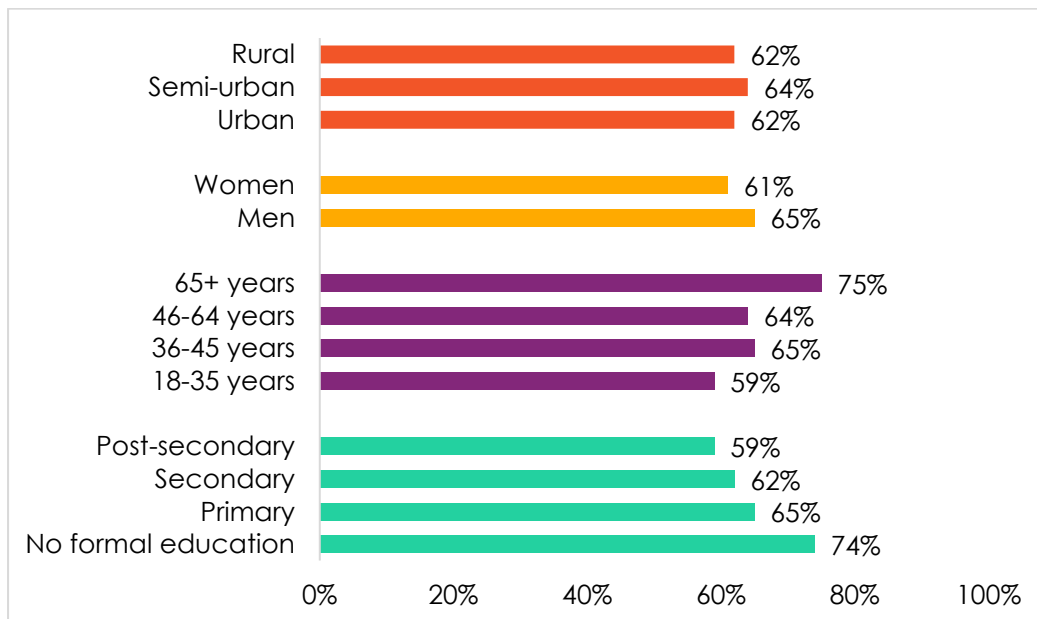
**Figure 9: Should traditional leaders have more or less influence?** | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local communities should increase, stay the same, or decrease?

The view that traditional leaders should have greater influence increases with respondents' age but decreases with their level of education (Figure 10). Among those aged 65 and older, 75% agree with this position, compared to just 59% of young respondents (aged 18-35). The range is almost identical with regard to education, from 59% of those with post-secondary qualifications to 74% of those with no formal education.

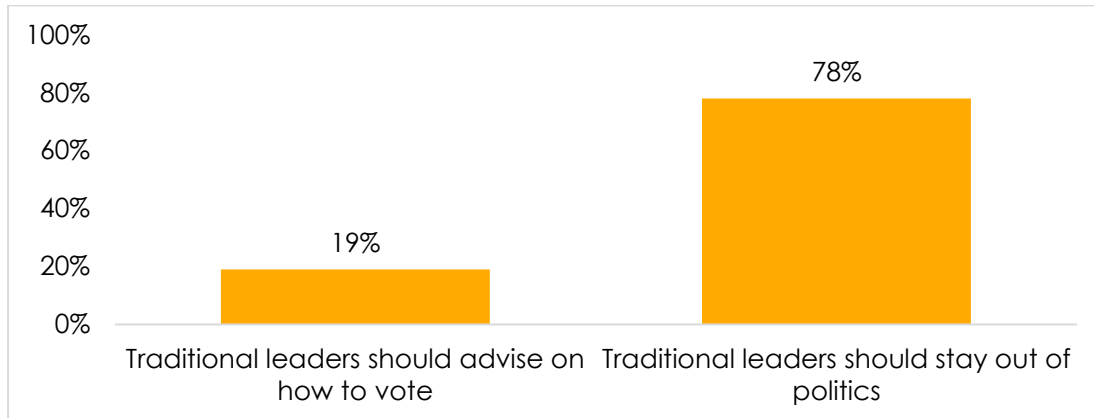
**Figure 10: Traditional leaders should have more influence** | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local communities should increase, stay the same, or decrease? (% who say "increase somewhat" or "increase a lot")

Despite these positive perceptions of traditional leaders and support for granting them greater influence, most Batswana would prefer that they stay out of politics. Almost eight in 10 citizens (78%) say traditional leaders should not seek to play a role in politics and should let people decide for themselves how to vote. Only about one in five (19%) think they should give their people advice on how to vote (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Should traditional leaders give advice on how to vote? | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

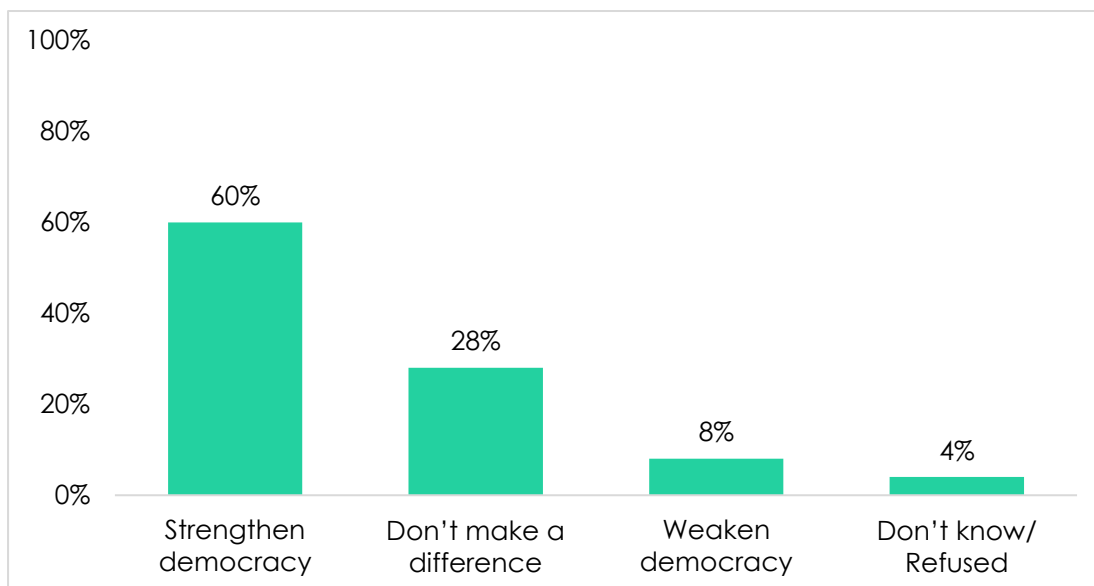
Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.

Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decision about how to vote.

(% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Overall, a majority (60%) of citizens think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy in Botswana, while fewer than one in 10 (8%) say they have a weakening effect on democracy (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Impact of traditional leaders on democracy | Botswana | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Some people think that because traditional leaders are not elected, they are bad for democracy, but other people think that traditional leaders can work together with elected leaders to make democracy work better. What about you? Do you think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy, weaken democracy, or don't make a difference?



## Conclusion

Batswana support both democracy *and* traditional leaders. In fact, they see chiefs as strengthening their democracy, looking out for the interests of the people in their communities, and cooperating with elected officials to get things done. Citizens would even give traditional leaders a greater role in governing local communities than they already have. But few people want chiefs telling them how they should vote.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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