

Batswana insist on presidential accountability

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 583 | Mogopodi Lekorwe and Wilford Molefe

Summary

Botswana is often described as an open and competitive democracy that over the years has unfailingly held transparent, credible, and peaceful elections (Sebudubudu, Osei-Hwedie, & Tsie, 2017). Its politics operate within the framework of a parliamentary representative democratic republic and multiparty system that provides space for citizen participation and consultation, an independent and pluralistic media, effective parliamentary engagement, and independent oversight bodies (Kebonang & Kaboyakgosi, 2017). This framework has enabled the sharing of power through checks and balances and considerable public control over the use of public resources, making accountability a central piece of governance and reducing the risk of power abuse and corruption (Botlhale & Lotshwao, 2015).

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, President Mokgweetsi Masisi declared a state of emergency (Dinokopila, 2020). In addition to the extensive powers bestowed on the executive by Section 47 of the Constitution, the state of emergency granted the president unfettered powers to rule by decree, bypass the usual processes for awarding public tenders, and curtail civil liberties. This was the second state of emergency in Botswana's history. The first, in September 1999, was declared by then-President Festus Mogae to correct an erroneous national voters roll that threatened to disenfranchise thousands of voters.

Botswana's 2020 state of emergency declaration, which lasted about 18 months, was not unique in the region; Lesotho and Namibia also declared states of emergency, while Malawi, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, and South Africa used existing laws on disaster management, civil protection, and public health to declare health emergencies (Gonese, Shivamba, & Meerkotter, 2020).

But opposition parties in Botswana vigorously opposed the emergency declaration, arguing that the Public Health Act was sufficient to deal with the situation and that the declaration – which they saw as an attempt by members of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party to enrich themselves through the award of tenders – would weaken accountability for the executive and curtail citizens' civil liberties.

More broadly, scholars such as Rapeli and Saikonen (2020) have raised concerns that emergency rule associated with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic may concentrate power in the executive in some democratic countries or exacerbate the autocratisation of countries where democracy is already eroding.

How do ordinary Batswana see the balance of power and accountability in their country?

Afrobarometer's Round 8 survey (2019) shows that citizens overwhelmingly endorse democracy and reject one-person rule without accountability. Most insist that their president be accountable to Parliament and obey the country's laws and courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations on democracy, governance, and quality of

life. Eight rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) covered 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Botswana, led by Star Awards, interviewed 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

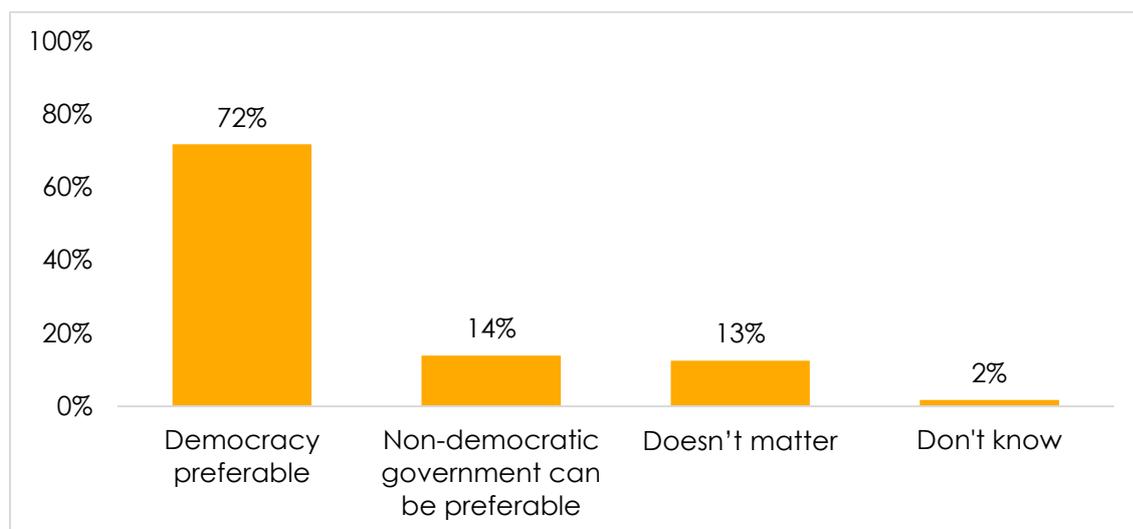
- More than seven in 10 Batswana prefer democracy over any other political system (72%) and say that in practice, the country is “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” (75%).
- Batswana overwhelmingly (93%) reject one-person rule without accountability through Parliament and elections.
- Three-fourths (76%) of citizens say the president should be accountable to Parliament for how his government spends taxpayers' money. An even greater majority (80%) say he must always obey the country's laws and courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
 - In practice, 55% of Batswana say their president “never” ignores Parliament or the laws and courts.

Views on democracy

Batswana overwhelmingly prefer democracy (72%) over any other form of government. Small minorities say a non-democratic government can be preferable (14%) or think it doesn't matter what type of government they have (13%) (Figure 1).

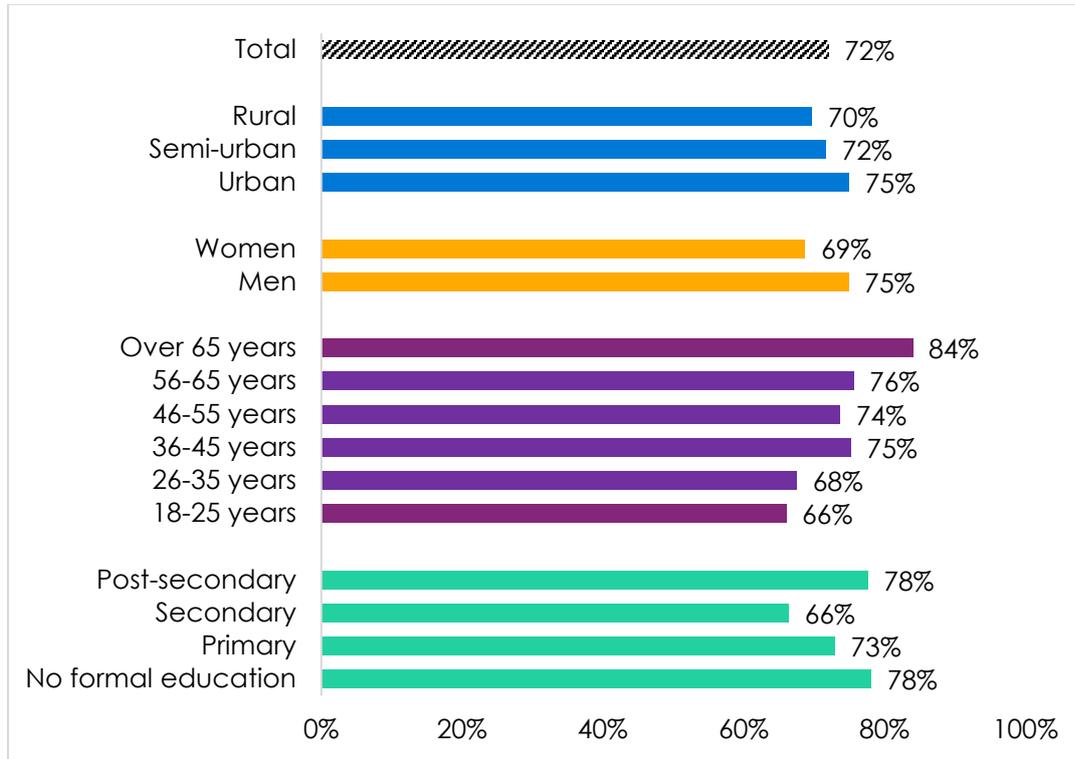
Support for democracy is stronger among men (75%) and urban residents (75%) than among women (69%) and rural dwellers (70%) (Figure 2). It increases with age, ranging from 66% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 84% among those over age 65.

Figure 1: Support for democracy | Botswana | 2019



Respondent 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.

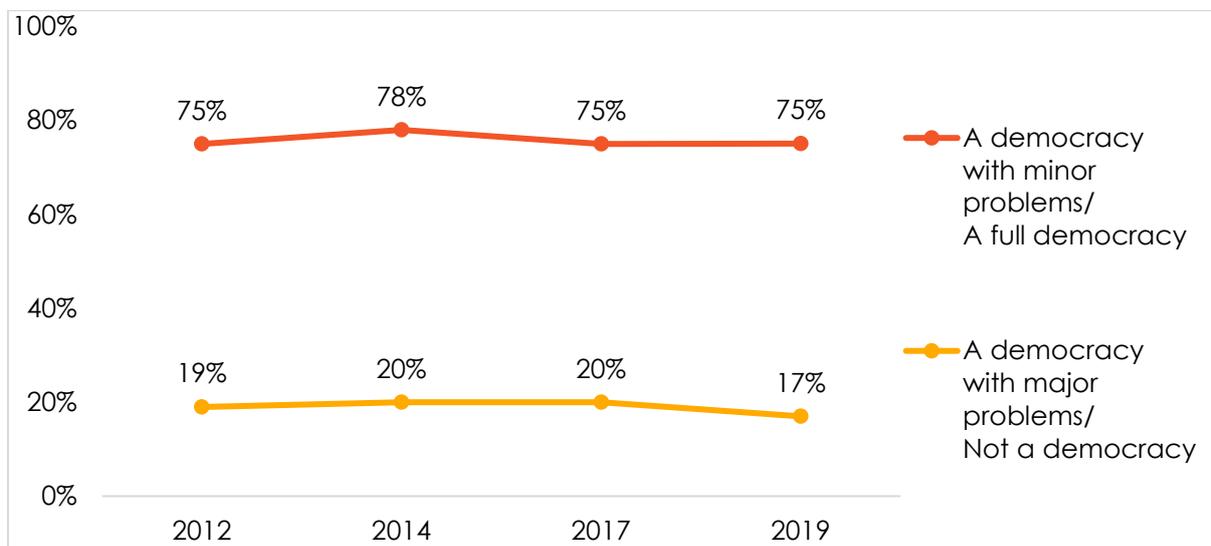
Figure 2: Support for democracy | by demographic group | Botswana | 2019



Respondent 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.
 (% who say "Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government")

In practice, three-fourths (75%) of citizens see their country as a well-functioning democracy ("a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems"). This perception has been fairly steady over time (Figure 3).

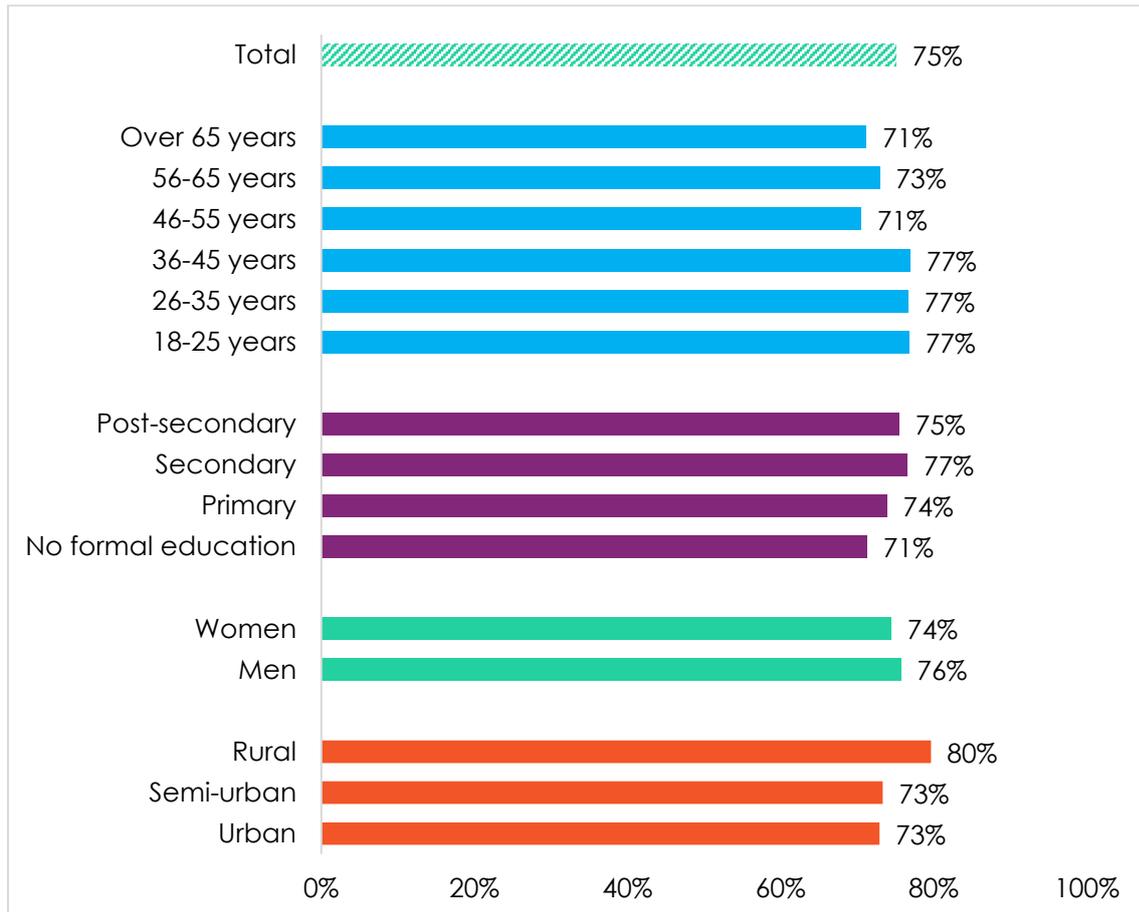
Figure 3: Extent of democracy | Botswana | 2019



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

Rural residents (80%) are more likely than urban or semi-urban residents (73%) to say Botswana is a well-functioning democracy. This assessment is also somewhat more common among younger respondents (77% of those aged 18-45 years) than among their elders (71% of those aged over 65 years) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Country is a functioning democracy | by demographic group | Botswana | 2019



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Botswana today? (% who say "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems")*

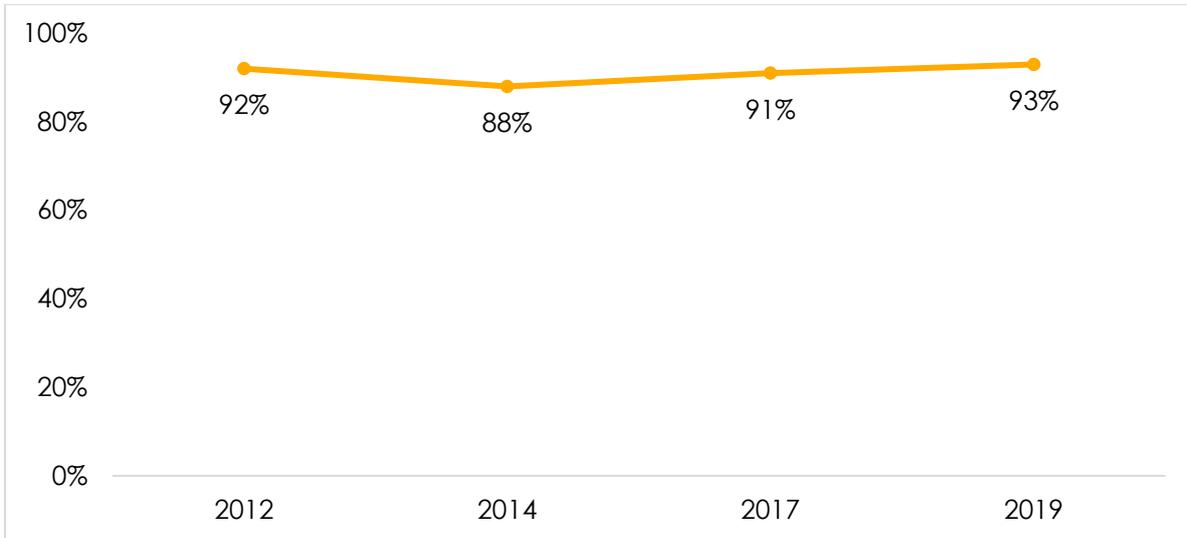
Checks and balances

In Botswana, primary accountability mechanisms include Parliament, which is designed to watch over government activities through parliamentary committees (Sebudubudu & Osei-Hwedie, 2006), and elections, through which voters can reward or penalise the president's performance.

Like their neighbours, Botswana overwhelmingly insist on elections and Parliament as checks on the executive. More than nine out of 10 citizens (93%) "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of the idea of abolishing elections and Parliament and letting the president decide everything. This view, too, has varied little over time (Figure 5), and is strong across all key demographic groups.

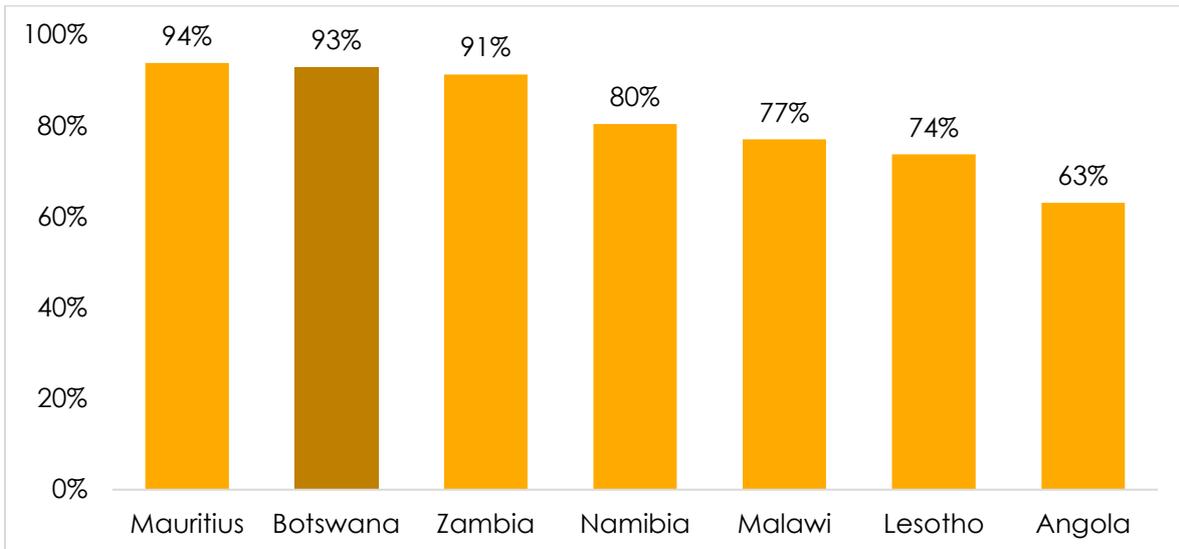
Among seven countries in the region, Botswana joins Mauritius (94%) and Zambia (91%) at the top in rejecting one-person rule, but strong majorities share the same view in all countries (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Reject one-person rule | Botswana | 2012-2019



Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything? (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)*

Figure 6: Reject one-person rule | 7 countries in Southern Africa | 2019

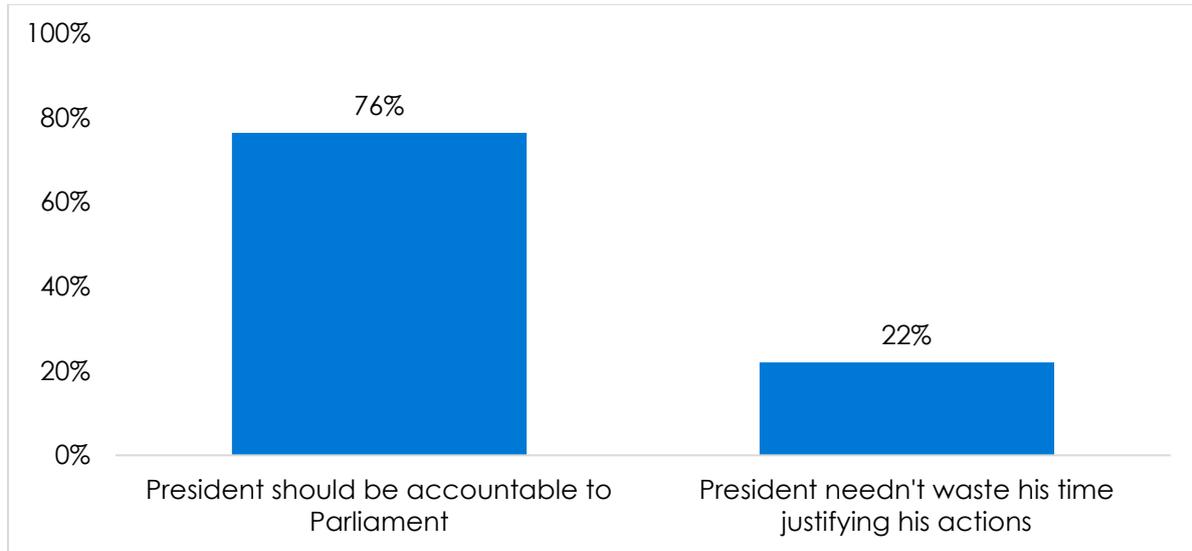


Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything? (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)*

Moreover, three-fourths (76%) of Botswana say Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money. Only about one in five (22%) agree that instead of wasting his time justifying his actions, the president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country (Figure 7).

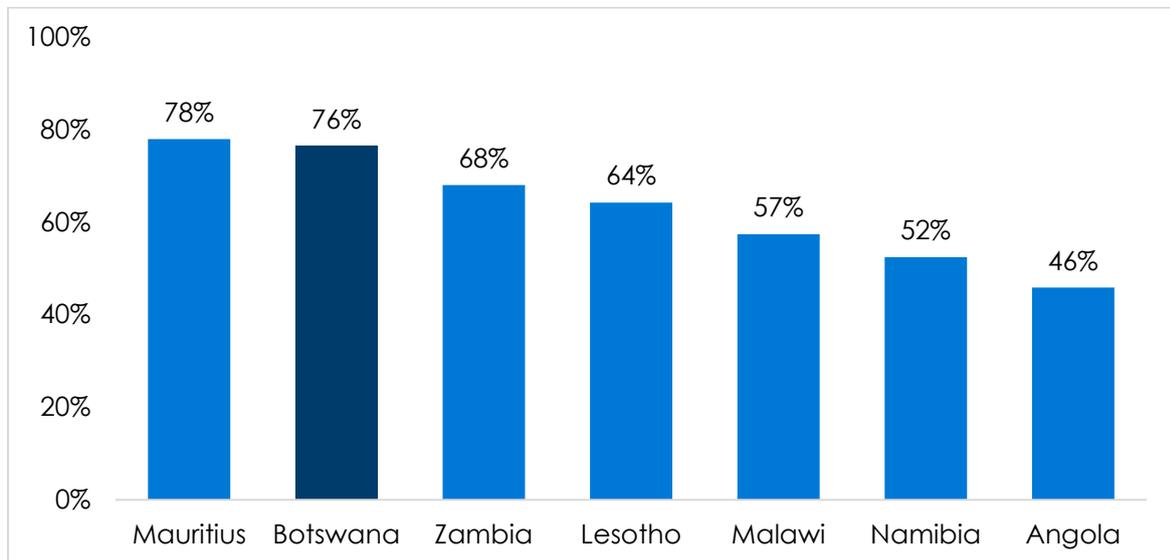
Again, Botswana ranks near the top among seven Southern African countries in insisting on presidential accountability to Parliament. Angola is the only country where fewer than half (46%) of citizens agree that Parliament should monitor the president's actions (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Should the president be accountable to Parliament? | Botswana | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 8: President should be accountable to Parliament | 7 countries in Southern Africa | 2019

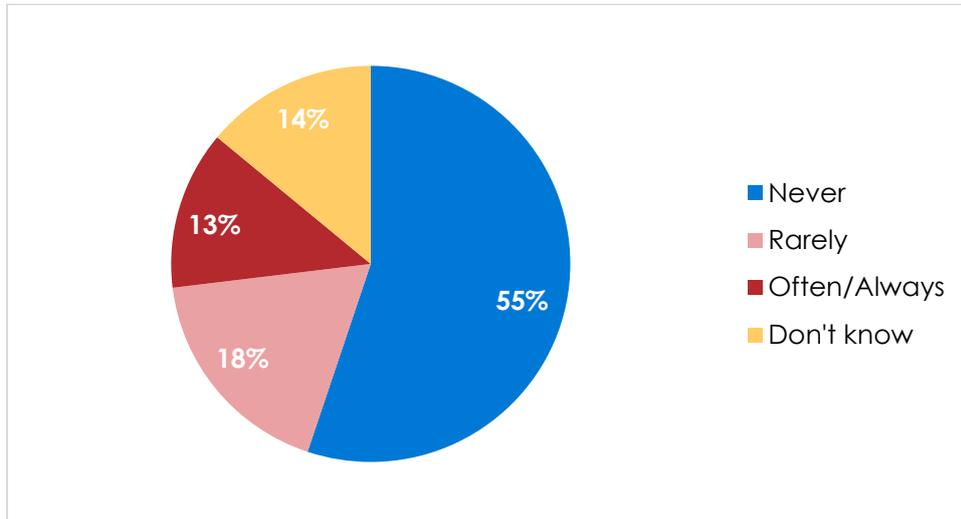


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.
 Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

In practice, most Botswana (73%) say their president "never" (55%) or "rarely" (18%) ignores Parliament and just does what he wants, though 13% say this happens "often" or "always" (Figure 9).

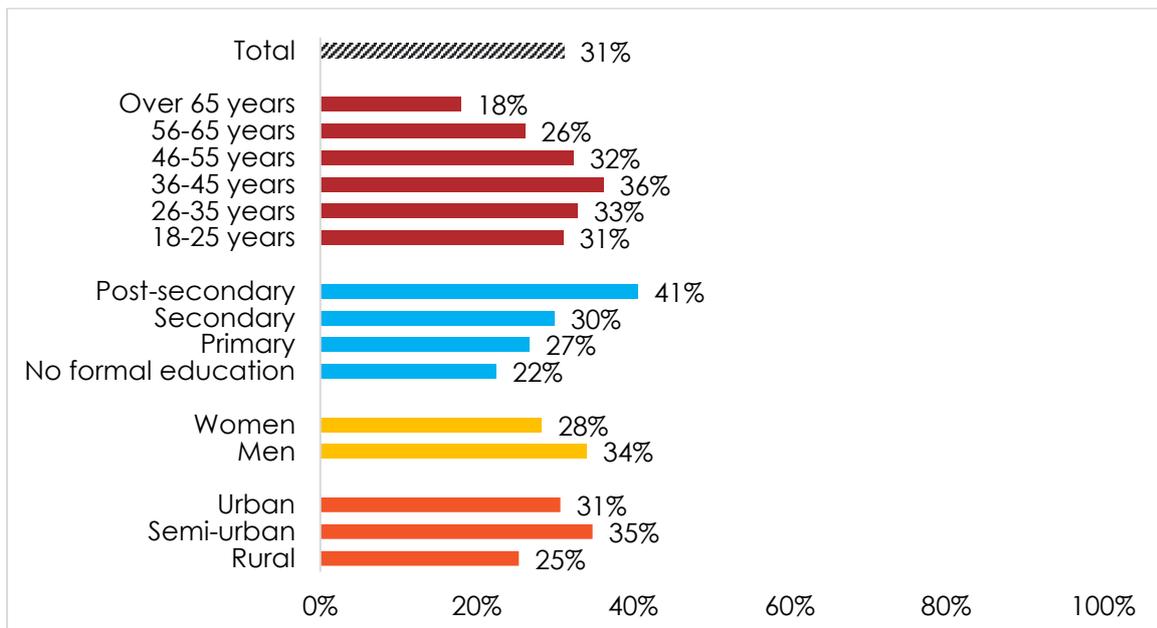
The view that the president ignores Parliament at least on occasion ("rarely," "often," or "always") is more widespread among the best-educated (41% of those with post-secondary qualifications) than their less-educated counterparts (22%-30%) (Figure 10). Men (34%) are more likely than women (28%) to report this perception, as are urban (31%) and semi-urban (35%) residents compared to rural dwellers (25%).

Figure 9: Does president ignore Parliament? | Botswana | 2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?

Figure 10: President ignores Parliament at least on occasion | by demographic group | Botswana | 2019



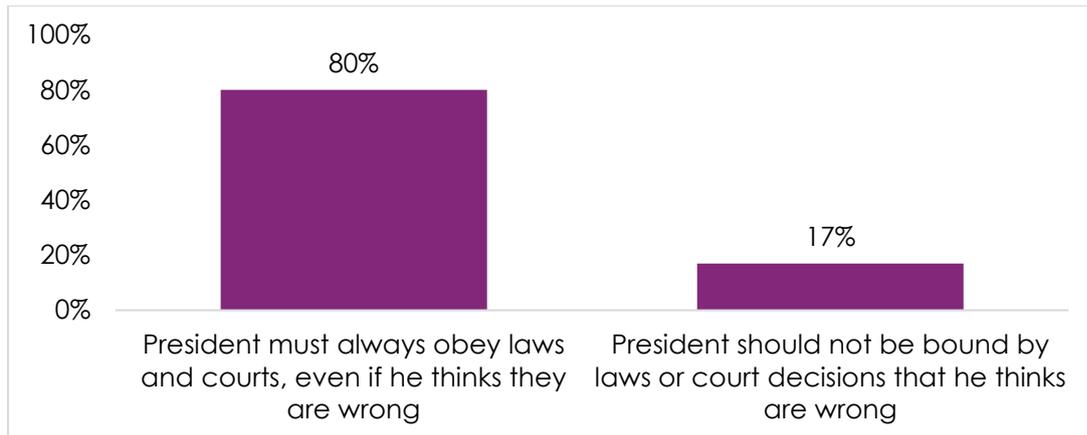
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants? (% who say "rarely," "often," or "always")

Botswana also overwhelmingly (80%) insist that their president must always obey the country's laws and courts, even if he disagrees with them (Figure 11). Only 17% of respondents believe

that since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

The view that the president should not be bound by laws and courts is especially unpopular among citizens with post-secondary education (only 9% “agree” or “strongly agree,” vs. 17%-24% of less educated respondents) and among urban residents (13%, vs. 18% of semi-urban and rural dwellers) (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Should president be bound by laws and court decisions? | Botswana | 2019

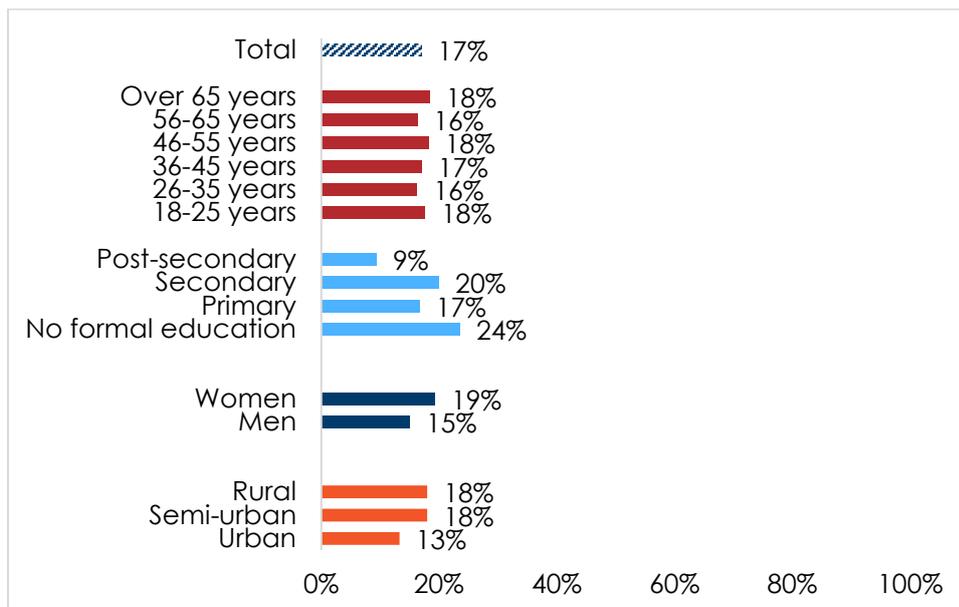


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Figure 12: President should not be bound by laws and courts | by demographic group | Botswana | 2019



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

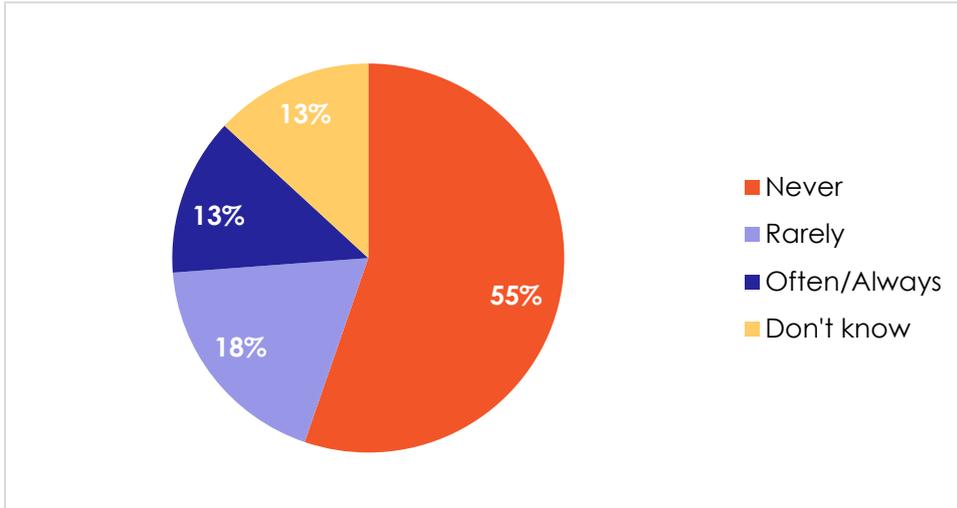
Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong. (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

In practice, a majority (55%) of Botswana say their president “never” ignores the laws and courts, while another 18% say he does so “rarely.” About one in eight (13%) say he “often” or “always” ignores the country’s laws and courts (Figure 13).

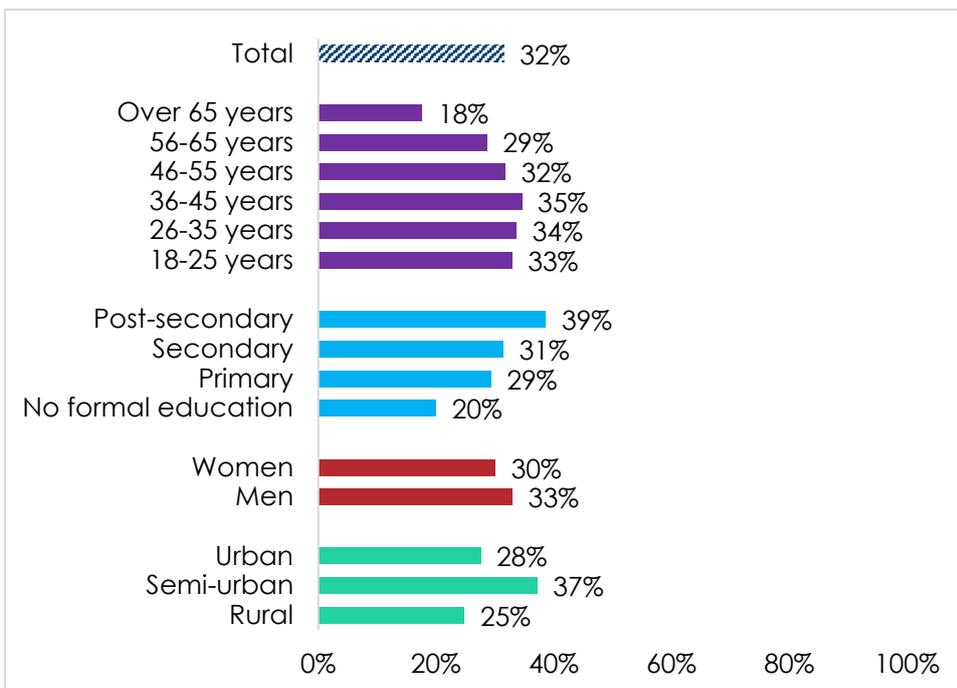
The perception that the president ignores the country’s laws and courts at least on occasion (“rarely,” “often,” or “always”) increases with respondents’ education level, ranging from 20% of those with no formal schooling to 39% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 14).

Figure 13: Does the president ignore laws and courts? | Botswana | 2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country?

Figure 14: President ignores laws and courts at least on occasion | by demographic group | Botswana | 2019



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country? (% who say “rarely,” “often,” or “always”)

Conclusion

Batswana strongly believe that their president should be accountable to Parliament and, via democratic elections, to voters. While these findings are based on data collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, they have been consistent over time and suggest that Batswana set the bar high for emergency executive powers, and that such powers must be used with care.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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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