

Majority of Ugandans want strong role for traditional leaders – but not in politics

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 602 | Makanga Ronald Kakumba

Summary

For centuries, Uganda's socioeconomic and political structure was anchored in the regional kingdoms of Buganda, Toro, Bunyoro, and Ankole (Johannessen, 2006).

In 1966, President Milton Obote abolished the institution of kingship (Monitor, 2012). In 1993, the National Resistance Movement administration restored the kingship, but a constitutional amendment limited traditional rulers to cultural functions (Johannessen, 2006). Specifically, Article 246 of the 1995 Constitution stipulates that traditional rulers “shall not take part in partisan politics, stand for election to a political office, overtly favour or campaign for a candidate running for a political office; and shall not have or exercise any administrative, legislative, executive or judicial powers of central or local government” (Parliament of Uganda, 2022).

Nevertheless, traditional leaders have continued to play a significant role in Ugandan society, including in land administration (World Bank Group, 2017). They have been instrumental in mobilising citizens to participate in certain development initiatives and government health programmes, including HIV/AIDS prevention and COVID-19 vaccination campaigns (Nile Post, 2022; Watchdog News, 2021).

While some critics see traditional leaders as archaic constructs that contribute to political unrest, others argue that they are an integral part of African history that should be respected. What do ordinary Ugandans think of their traditional or cultural leaders?

In Afrobarometer's 2019 survey, traditional leaders received higher citizen ratings on trustworthiness and responsiveness than elected leaders, and were seen as markedly less corrupt. A majority of citizens saw traditional leaders as influential in governing local communities, allocating land, and resolving local disputes.

In fact, a majority expressed support for an even stronger role for traditional leaders, who they said look out for the interests of their communities and work in cooperation with elected leaders rather than in competition. But only a minority wanted traditional leaders to offer advice on how people should vote.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight survey rounds in up to 39 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

This dispatch is based on findings from Afrobarometer Round 8, for which Hatchile Consult interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Ugandans between 31 September and 31 October 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 Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2017.

Key findings

- About seven in 10 Ugandans (69%) said they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” compared to 62% who expressed trust in the president, 48% in local government councillors, and 42% in members of Parliament (MPs).
 - Traditional leaders were also less commonly seen as corrupt than elected leaders; only 11% of respondents said “most” or “all” of them are corrupt.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens approved of the job their traditional leaders are doing – a better performance rating than those given local government councillors (57%) and MPs (44%).
- While fewer than half (43%) of Ugandans said traditional leaders “often” or “always” do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say, that qualifies as considerably more responsive than local government councillors (26%) and MPs (14%).
- A majority of citizens said traditional leaders wield “some influence” or “a lot of influence” in resolving local disputes (64%), governing local communities (57%), and allocating land (55%). However, fewer saw traditional leaders as influencing how people vote in elections (37%).
- About six in 10 (61%) Ugandans said traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities instead of serving their personal or politicians’ interests.
 - More than half (52%) of citizens would favour an increased level of influence by traditional leaders in governing local communities.
 - But a majority (55%) say traditional leaders should stay out of politics and let people decide for themselves how to vote.

Trust in traditional leaders

The 2019 Afrobarometer survey findings show that about seven in 10 Ugandans (69%) said they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot,” while about two in 10 (19%) trusted them “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 1). The proportion of Ugandans expressing trust in traditional leaders declined slightly between 2015 (72%) and 2019 (Figure 2).

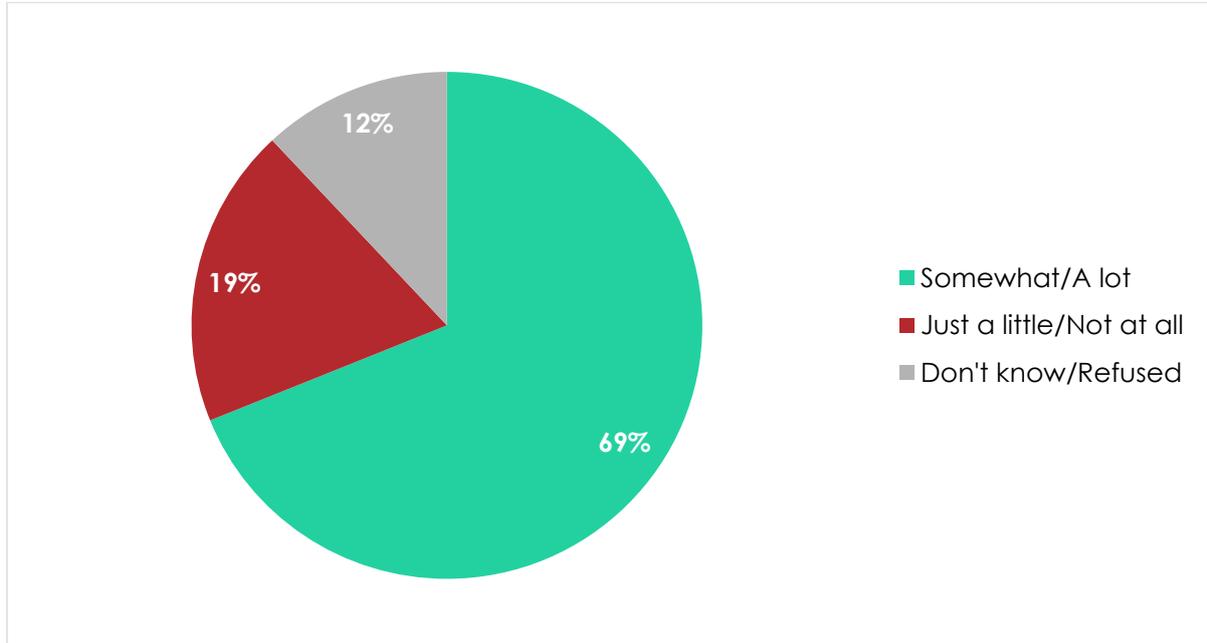
Traditional leaders were more trusted than elected leaders. President Yoweri Museveni trailed traditional leaders by 7 percentage points (62% vs. 69%) when it comes to popular trust, while the gaps were 21 and 23 points for local councillors (48%) and members of Parliament (46%) (Figure 3).

Trust was fairly consistent across key demographic groups (Figure 4). Across Ugandan subregions,¹ traditional leaders were most trusted in Eastern (79%) and Acholi/Lango (75%)

¹ Some subregions are not shown or are combined with other subregions because their small sample sizes produce results with very large margins of error.

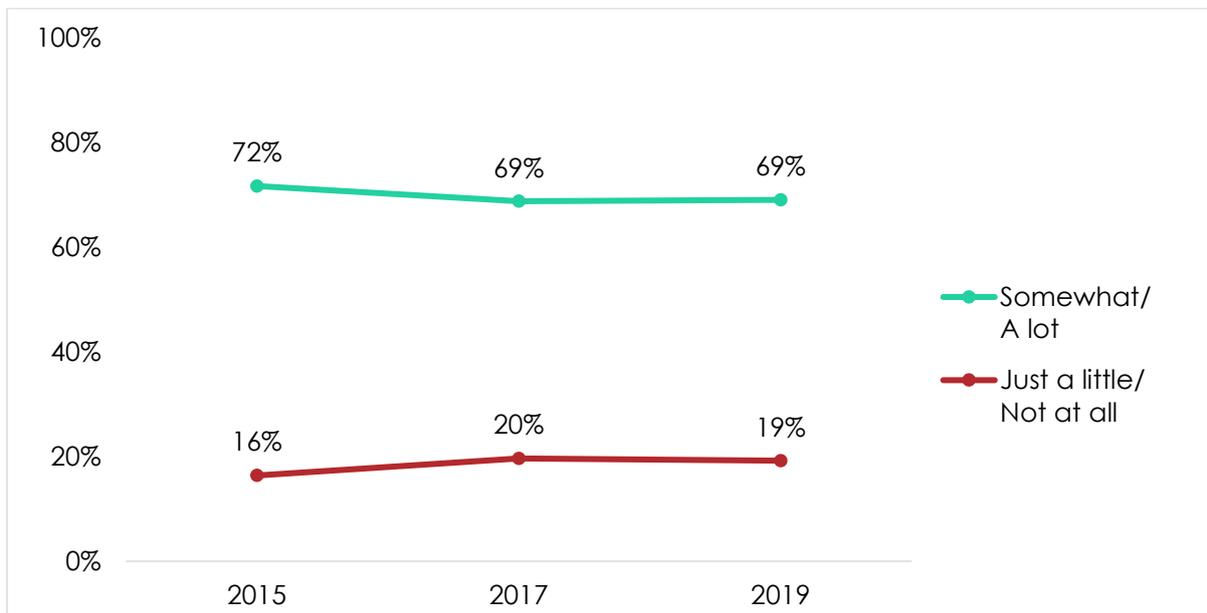
subregions. Trust was lowest in the Ankole/Kigezi (47%) subregions, which do not have the institutions of kingship or traditional leadership.

Figure 1: Trust traditional leaders | Uganda | 2019



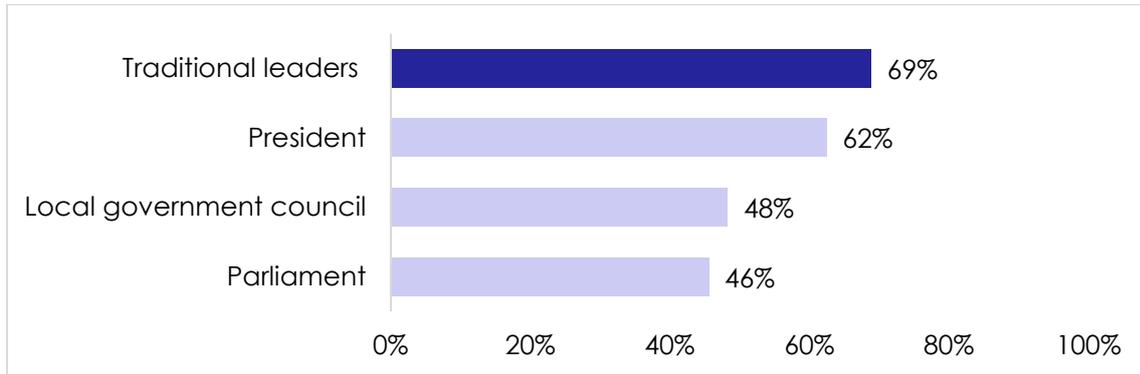
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Traditional leaders?

Figure 2: Trust traditional leaders | Uganda | 2015-2019



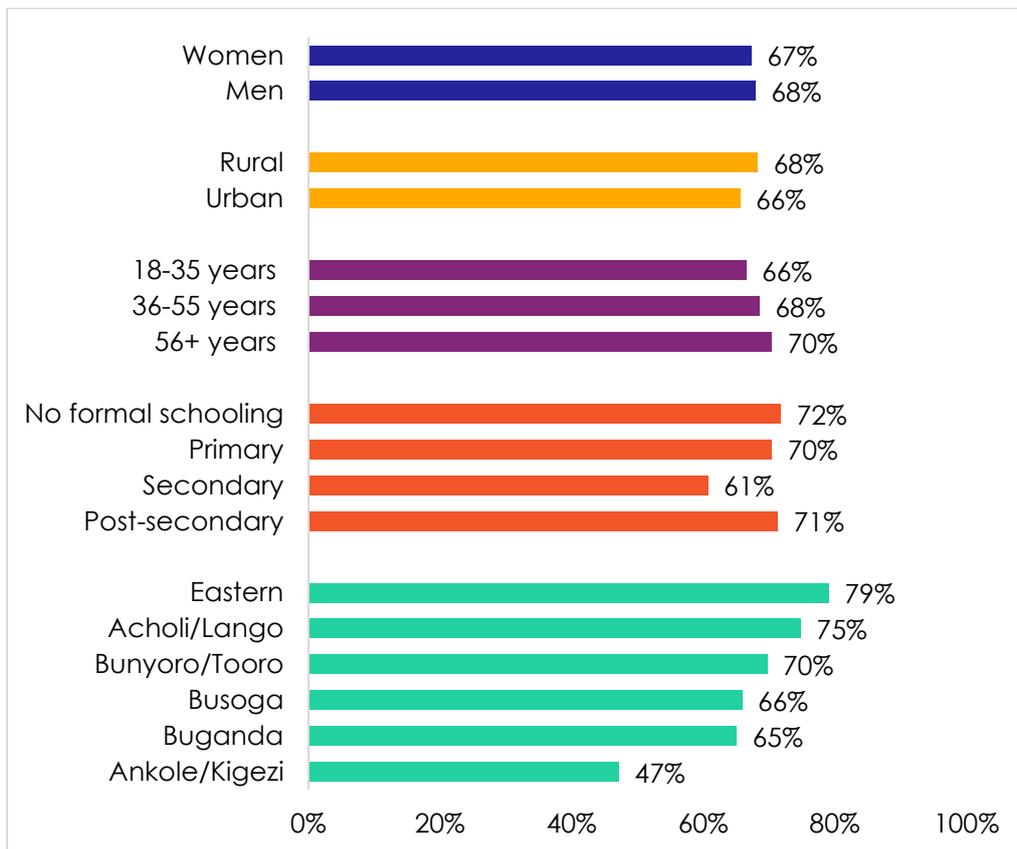
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Traditional leaders?

Figure 3: Trust traditional leaders vs. trust elected leaders | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 4: Trust traditional leaders | by demographic group | Uganda | 2019

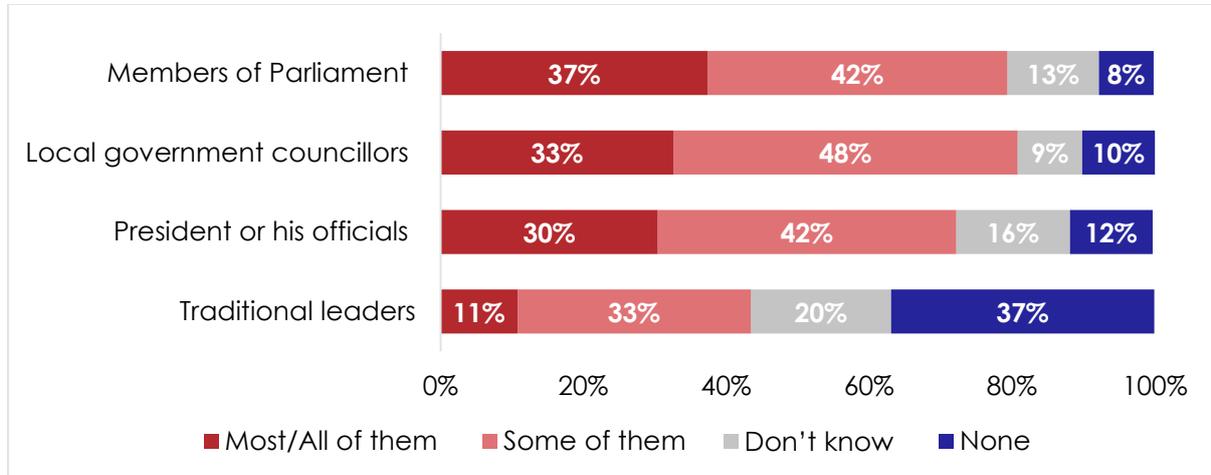


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough to say: Traditional leaders? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Perceived corruption

In a country where levels of corruption are seen as increasing, traditional leaders stand out: Only one in 10 Ugandans (11%) perceived "most" or "all" traditional leaders as corrupt. About three times as many reported widespread corruption among MPs (37%), local government councillors (33%), and the president and officials in the Presidency (30%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Perceived corruption among traditional vs. elected leaders | Uganda
 | 2019



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough to say: The president and officials in his/her office? Members of Parliament? Members of your local government council? Traditional leaders?

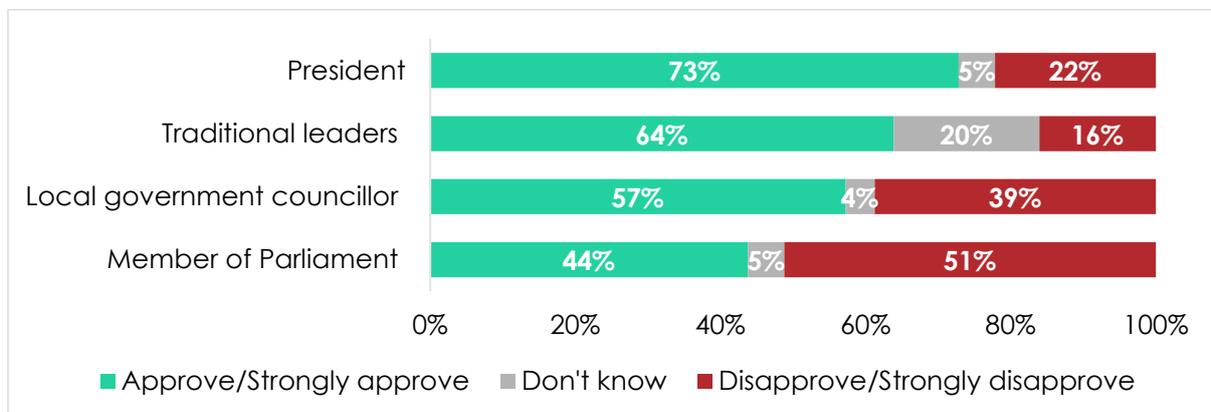
Performance ratings of traditional leaders

Traditional leaders play significant roles in the social, political, and economic lives of citizens in most African societies. According to the 2011 Institution of Traditional Leaders or Cultural Leaders Act 6, the role of traditional or cultural leader in Uganda shall be to "promote and preserve the cultural values, norms and practices which enhance the dignity and well-being of the people" and to "promote the development, preservation and enrichment of all the people in the community where he or she is recognized" (International Labour Organization, 2011).

Afrobarometer survey findings show that about two-thirds (64%) of Ugandans approved of the job performance of their traditional leaders, a better performance rating than those received by MPs (44%) and local government councillors (57%) (Figure 6). Almost three-fourths (73%) of respondents approved of President Museveni's job performance.

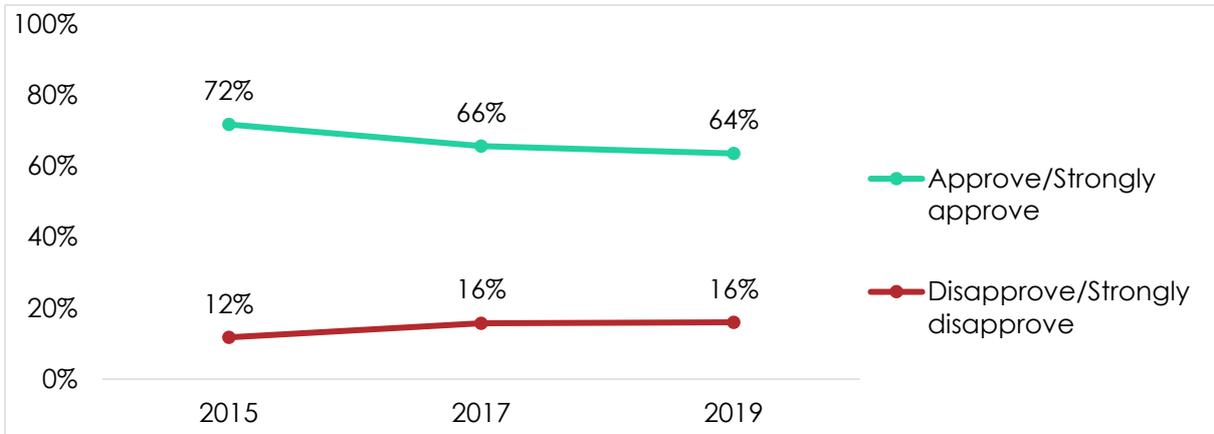
In 2019, approval ratings for traditional leaders decreased by 8 percentage points compared to 2015 (72%) (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Performance of traditional leaders vs. elected leaders | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 7: Trends in performance of traditional leaders | Uganda | 2015-2019

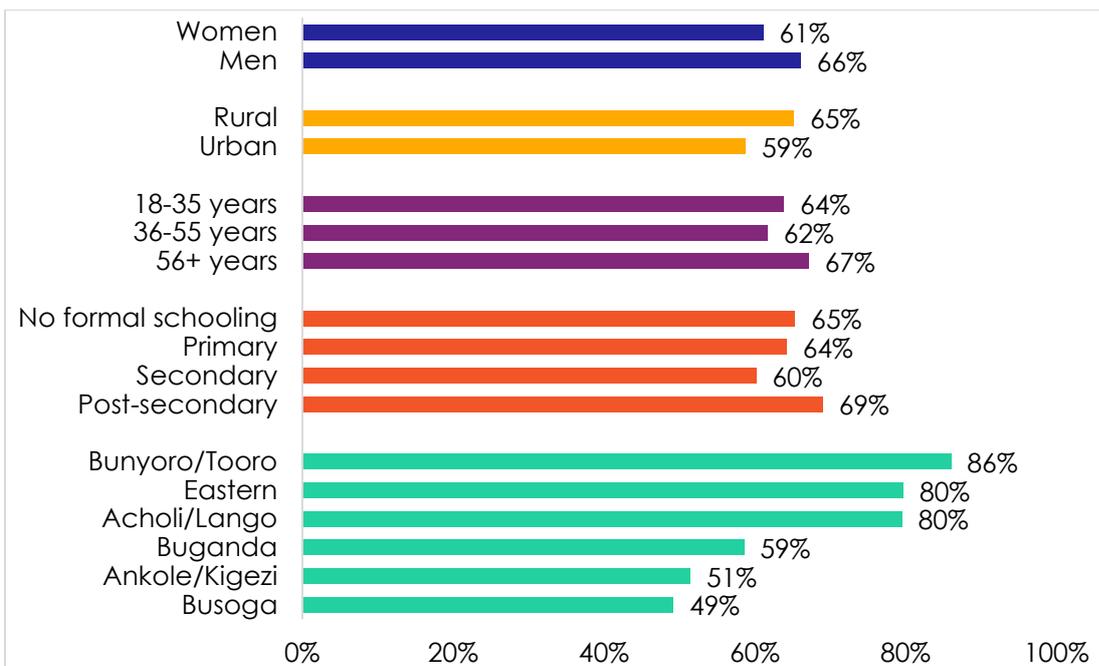


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your traditional leader?

Across key demographics, rural dwellers (65%), men (66%) and older citizens (67%) view the performance of their traditional leaders more favourably than urbanities (59%), women (61%), and younger citizens (62%-64%). Ratings are also higher among citizens with post-secondary education (69%) compared to those with less schooling (60%-65%) (Figure 8).

Solid majorities of citizens approve of the performance of their traditional leaders in Bunyoro/Tooro (86%), Eastern (80%), and Acholi/Lango subregions, whereas only about half do so in Busoga (49%).

Figure 8: Performance of traditional leaders | by demographic group | Uganda | 2019

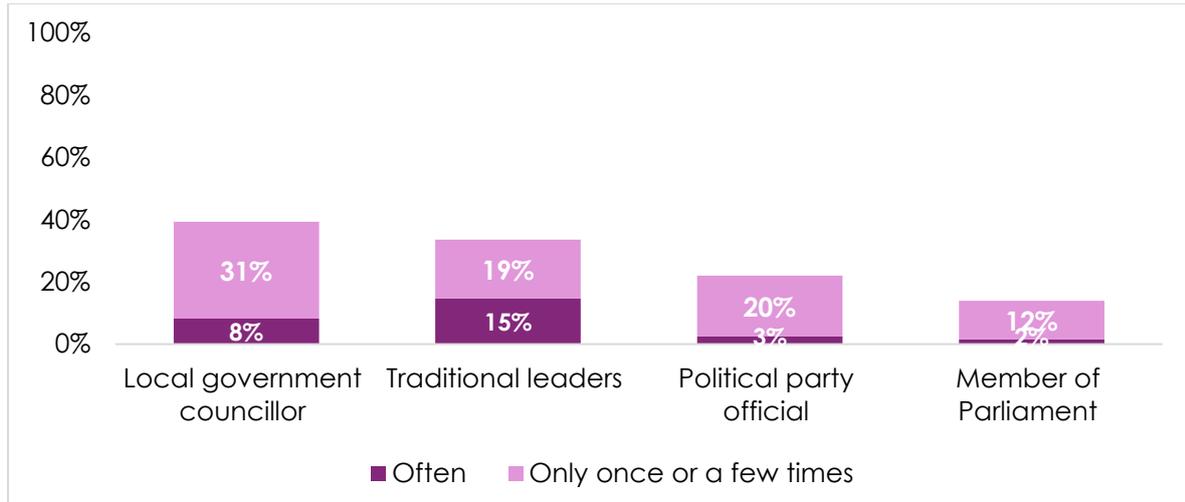


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your traditional leader? (% who "approved" or "strongly approved")

Contacted traditional leaders

One-third (34%) of Ugandans said they had contacted their traditional leaders at least once during the year preceding the survey to discuss an important problem or to share their views (Figure 9). That reflects more citizen contact than with MPs (14%) and political party officials (23%) but somewhat less than with local government councillors (39%).

Figure 9: Contact traditional leaders vs. elected leaders to raise issues | Uganda | 2019

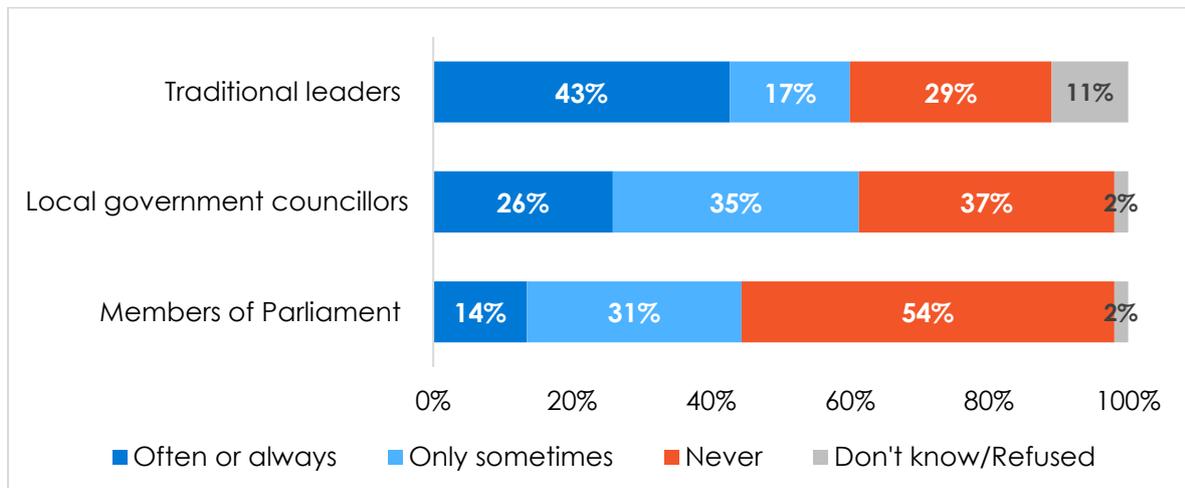


Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

Do traditional leaders listen?

When asked about the responsiveness of leaders, respondents indicated that traditional leaders are more likely than elected representatives to hear citizens' demands or needs. More than four in 10 Ugandans (43%) said traditional leaders "often" or "always" try their best to listen to citizens, compared to only 26% and 14%, respectively, who said the same about local government councillors and MPs (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Responsiveness of traditional vs. elected leaders | Uganda | 2019

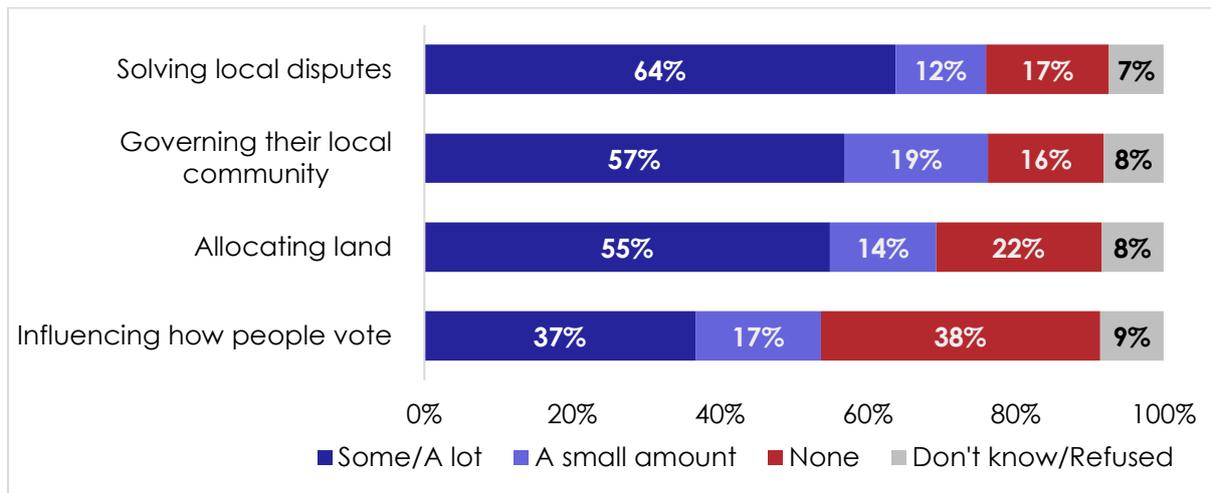


Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say?

Role and influence of traditional leaders

In Uganda, a majority of citizens regard traditional leaders as influential in resolving local disputes (64%), governing their local community (57%), and allocating land (55%), but fewer think they carry much weight in affecting how people vote in elections (Figure 11). While 37% of respondents said traditional leaders have “some influence” or “a lot of influence” on people’s Election Day decisions, an equal share (38%) saw them as wielding no influence at all on voting.

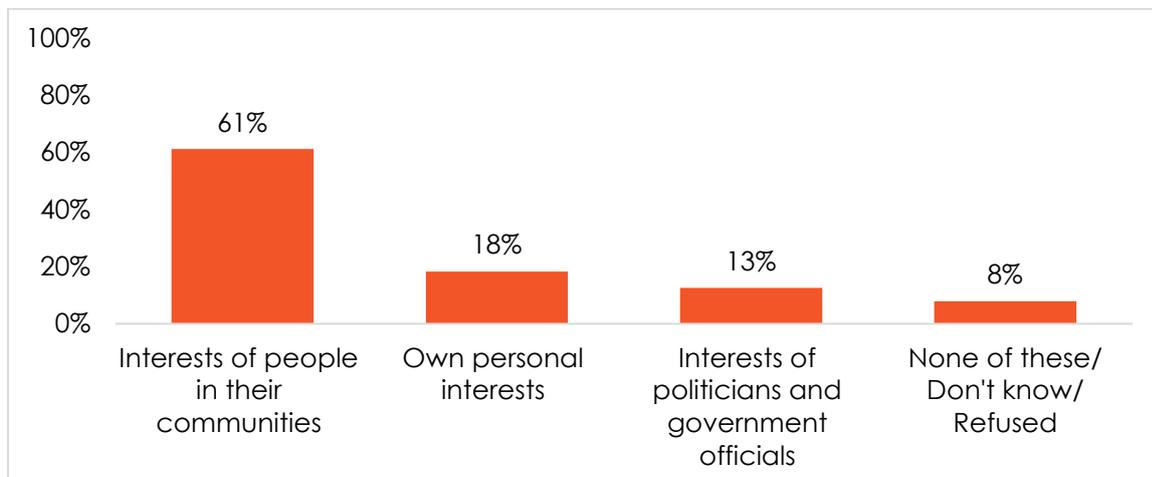
Figure 11: Influence of traditional leaders | Uganda | 2019



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

Six in 10 Ugandans (61%) said traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities instead of serving their personal interests (18%) or the interests of politicians and government officials (13%) (Figure 12).

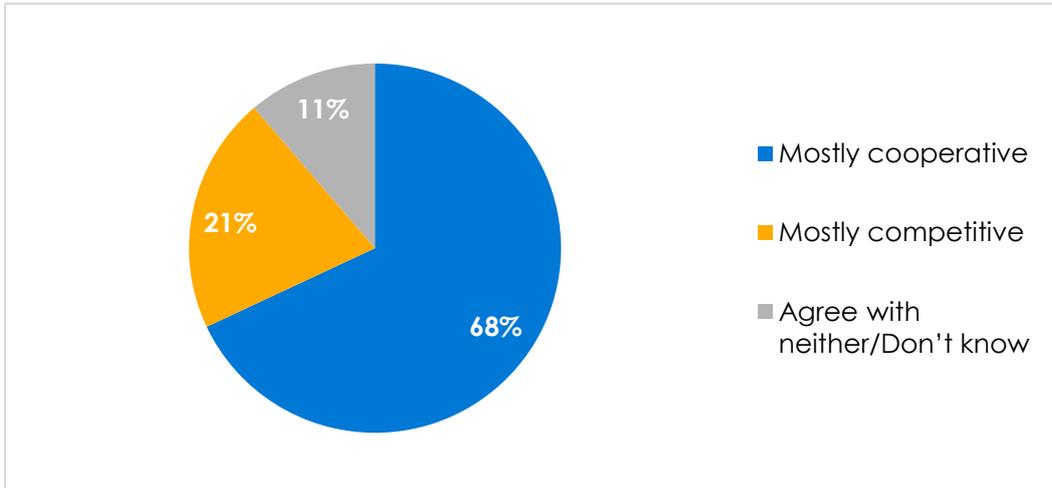
Figure 12: Whose interests do traditional leaders serve? | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 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.

More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens viewed traditional leaders as mostly cooperating with elected leaders to get things done. Only 21% said they were more likely to compete with elected representatives for resources, power, and influence (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Do traditional leaders cooperate or compete with elected leaders?
 | Uganda | 2019



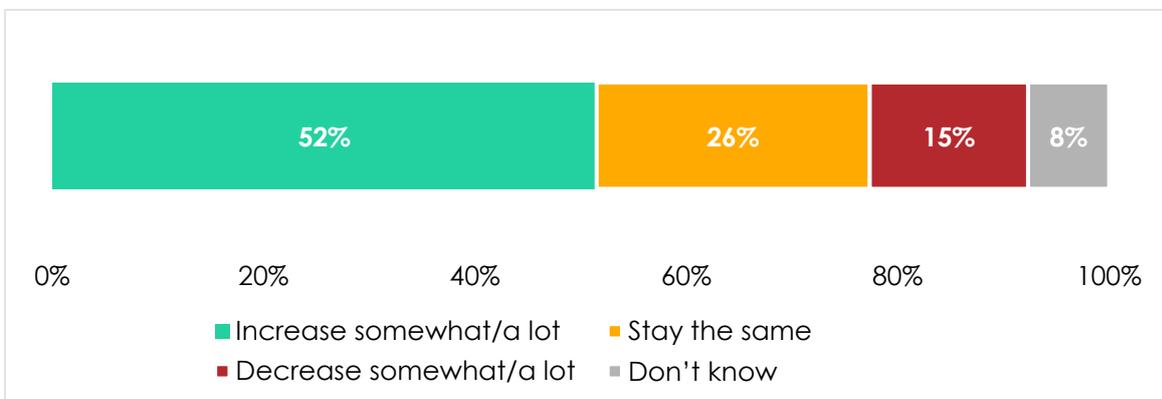
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders are mostly in competition with elected leaders for resources, power, and influence.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders mostly work in cooperation with elected leaders to get things done.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

Should traditional leaders' influence increase or decrease?

In line with positive performance ratings and high levels of trust, a slim majority (52%) of Ugandans said that traditional leaders' influence in governing local communities should increase "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 14). A quarter (26%) of respondents were satisfied with the level of influence their chiefs currently have, and only 15% thought traditional leaders' influence should decrease.

Rural residents were more likely than urbanites to want greater influence for traditional leaders (54% vs. 45%), while this idea was less popular among those with post-secondary qualifications (45%) than among their less educated counterparts (52%-53%) (Figure 15).

Figure 14: Should traditional leaders have more or less influence? | Uganda | 2019

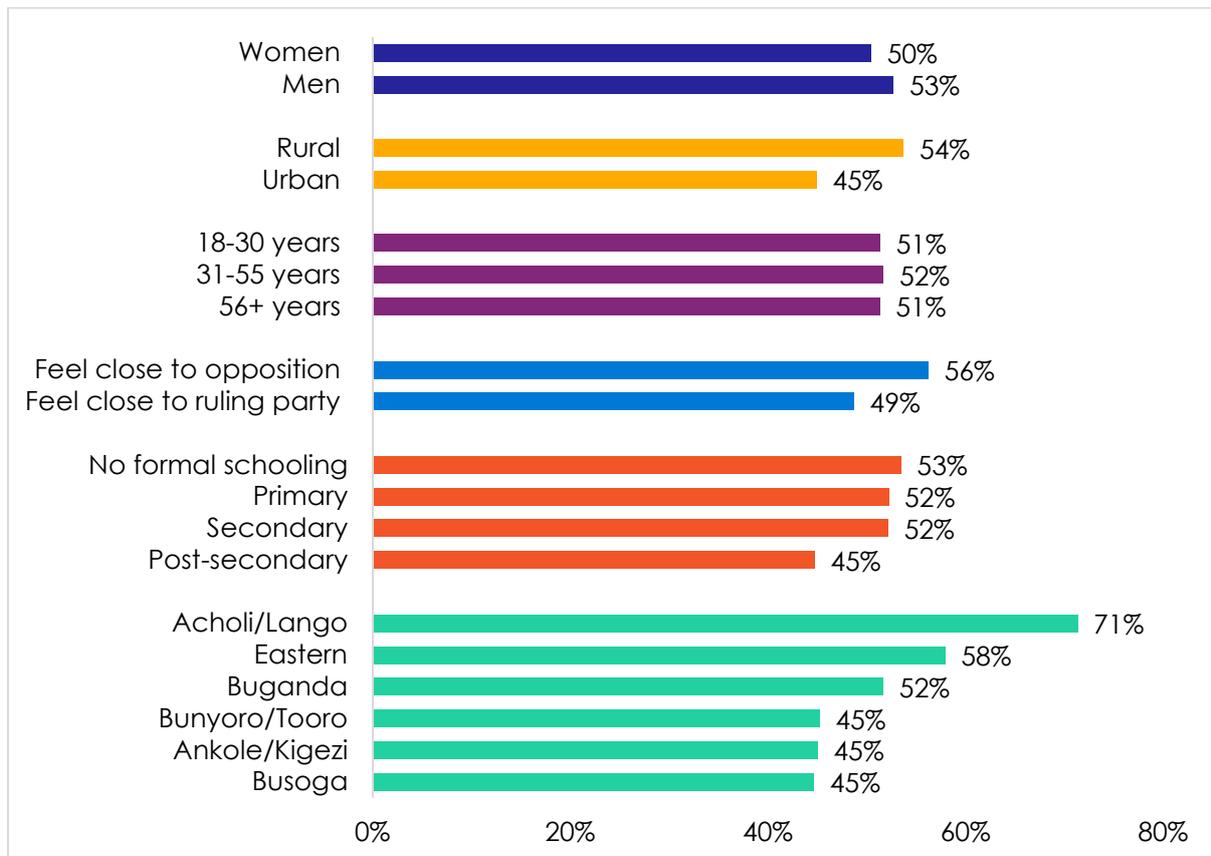


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?

Supporters of the ruling political party were less keen on more influential traditional leaders (49%) than opposition supporters (56%), who often tend to be more critical and less trusting of incumbent elected representatives.

To some extent, views on increasing traditional leaders' influence paralleled ratings of their job performance. For example, residents in Ankole/Kigezi and Busoga subregions, who tended to view their chiefs as non-performing, were less likely to support increased influence for traditional leaders, while support for greater influence was higher in Acholi/Lango and Eastern subregions, where approval ratings for traditional leaders were also high.

Figure 15: Influence of traditional leaders should increase | by demographic group | Uganda | 2019

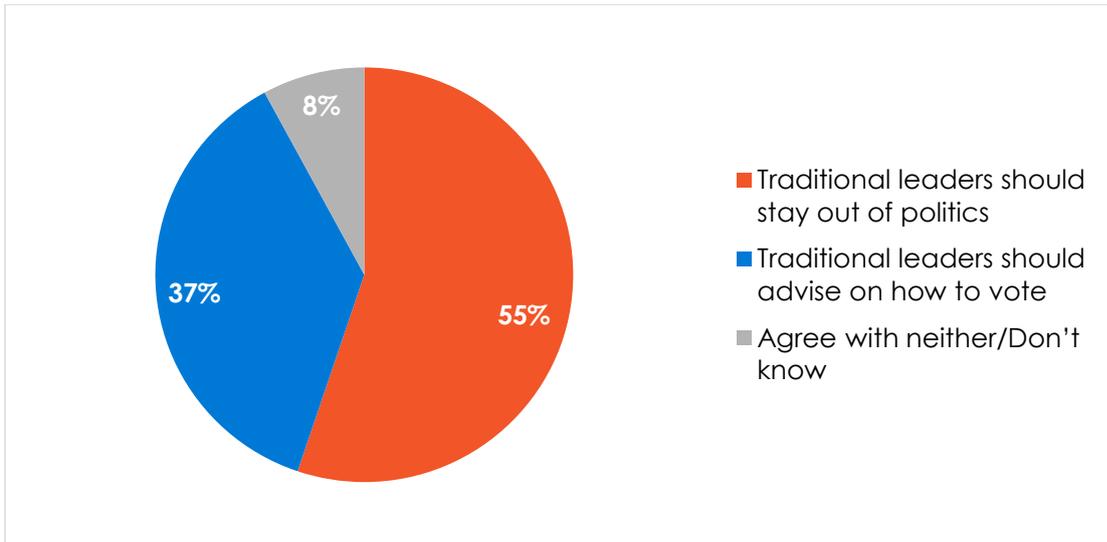


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease (% who say "increase a lot" or "increase somewhat")

Should traditional leaders be engaged in politics?

Despite their high regard for their chiefs, a majority (55%) of citizens said traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote (Figure 16). But close to four in 10 (37%) disagreed – the same proportion (37%) who said that traditional leaders have "some" or "a lot" of influence on voter choice. These results suggest that a sizeable minority of Ugandans may be open to voting advice by their chiefs.

Figure 16: Should traditional leaders give advice on how to vote? | Uganda | 2019

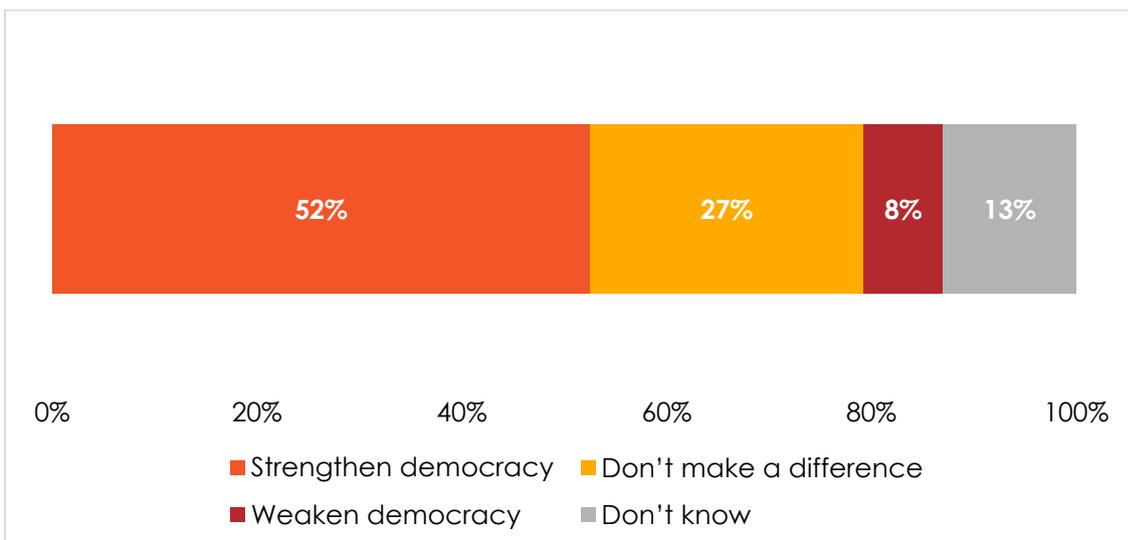


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.
 Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.
 (% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each statement)

Traditional leaders and democracy

Overall, a slim majority (52%) of Ugandans said they think that traditional leaders, though unelected, strengthen democracy, while only 8% said they weaken democracy. About one-fourth (27%) saw them as not affecting democracy one way or the other (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Are traditional leaders good or bad for democracy? | Uganda | 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

Survey findings show that even within their constitutional limitations, Uganda's traditional leaders enjoy legitimacy and popular support in wielding influence in local governance.

Compared to elected representatives, traditional leaders get higher marks on trustworthiness, integrity, and responsiveness, and a majority of citizens would even strengthen their roles – except in electoral politics.

These findings suggest that traditional leaders can act as catalysts for local development and highlight the potential of stronger engagement and cooperation between traditional leaders and elected government for the benefit of ordinary citizens.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs 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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