



Dispatch No. 630 | 11 April 2023

Zimbabweans support multiparty competition, say policy preferences inform voter decisions

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 630 | Asafika Mpako and Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

As Zimbabwe's highly anticipated 2023 general election beckons, rallies and other campaign activities are in full swing, all promising change to a citizenry in the throes of economic despair (Mahvunga, 2022; Zimbabwe Mail, 2022; Mukundu, 2022).

In a repeat of the 2018 race, the main contenders for president are incumbent Emmerson Mnangagwa of the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and challenger Nelson Chamisa of the newly formed Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) (Stratfor, 2023; Institute for Security Studies, 2022). Both parties have embarked on enormous voter-registration drives spanning urban and rural regions of the country (Dube, 2023). Civil society organisations and other political parties have added their voices to the call for voter participation (Channel Africa, 2023).

The competition promises to be stiff, if the 2018 poll is anything to go by. Although Mnangagwa was declared the winner by 50.8% to 44.3%, the country waited three days for the result to be announced, a delay that critics attributed to electoral fraud and voting malpractice (Africa News, 2023; Chitiyo, 2018; Dwyer, 2018). The elections were the first since the removal of Robert Mugabe from the presidential seat after 37 years in power, a watershed moment that was expected to set the country on a new course and bring renewed hope to the people of Zimbabwe (Mail & Guardian, 2018; Bearak, 2018).

As they ready to vote again five years later, how do ordinary Zimbabweans see their elections, multiparty competition, and the integrity of the balloting process?

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that majorities value elections and multiparty competition. Only a minority of citizens consider their 2018 elections to have been free and fair, and trust in the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission is generally weak. But most feel free to vote as they want and express confidence in ballot secrecy.

Among Zimbabweans who say they may or will vote in 2023, policy preferences emerge as the most important factor affecting voter decisions, although a majority of citizens also say they favour candidates from their own province.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe between 28 March and 10 April 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a

95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017, and 2021.

Key findings

- Most Zimbabweans (78%) support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- A similarly clear majority (73%) say Zimbabwe needs many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice.
- Majorities think their elections work well to enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want (59%) and to ensure that members of Parliament reflect voters' views (53%).
- More than eight in 10 citizens (81%) say that once an election is over, the losing side should accept defeat and cooperate with the government to help it develop the country, rather than focus on holding it accountable.
- Fewer than half (44%) of Zimbabweans say their 2018 election was largely free and fair. One in three (33%) say they feared intimidation or violence "somewhat" or "a lot" during the campaign.
- More than seven in 10 citizens (72%) say they feel "somewhat free" or "completely free" to vote for the candidates of their choice without feeling pressured, and three-fourths (76%) consider it unlikely that powerful people can find out how they vote.
 - But fewer than half (47%) say they trust the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission "somewhat" or "a lot."
- Two-thirds (67%) of Zimbabweans say they will "definitely" vote in the upcoming general election, in addition to 19% who say they will "probably" cast their ballots.
 - Excluding those who plan not to vote, a resounding majority (83%) say they will vote for candidates whose policies they agree with, rather than for candidates who give them gifts or belong to the same ethnic or religious group.
 - But more than half (54%) also say they will vote for candidates from their own province.

Views on elections

Almost eight in 10 Zimbabweans (78%) endorse elections as the best method for choosing leaders, while one-fifth (21%) say other methods for choosing the country's leaders should be adopted (Figure 1).

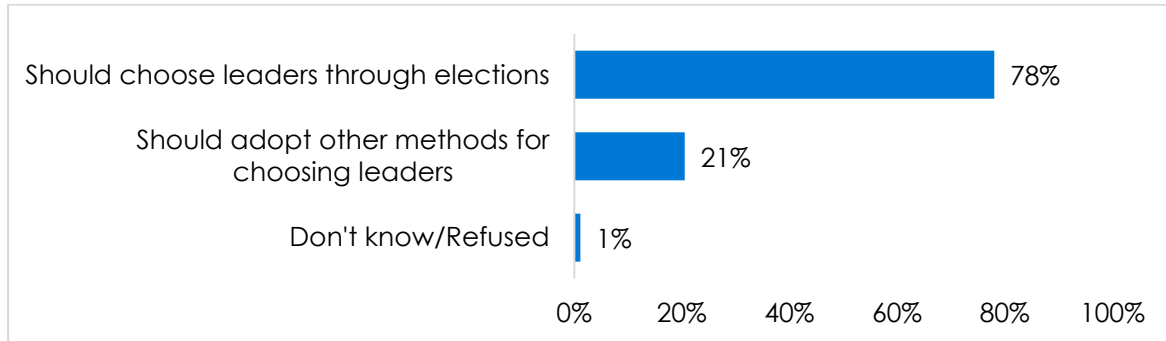
Support for elections is high across key demographic groups. It is particularly high among the most educated respondents (85%) and the middle-aged (84%) (Figure 2).

Similarly, most Zimbabweans believe in multiparty competition. Almost three in four citizens (73%) say many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them, while only one-quarter (25%) instead believe that political parties create division and the country would be better off not having many of them (Figure 3). Support for multiparty competition increased by 12 percentage points since 2017 (61%).

This position is more common among urban than rural residents (81% vs. 68%), and among the middle-aged (81% of those aged 36-55 years) than among older (65%) and younger (69%) respondents (Figure 4). Support for multiparty competition also increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 66% of those with primary schooling or less to 79%

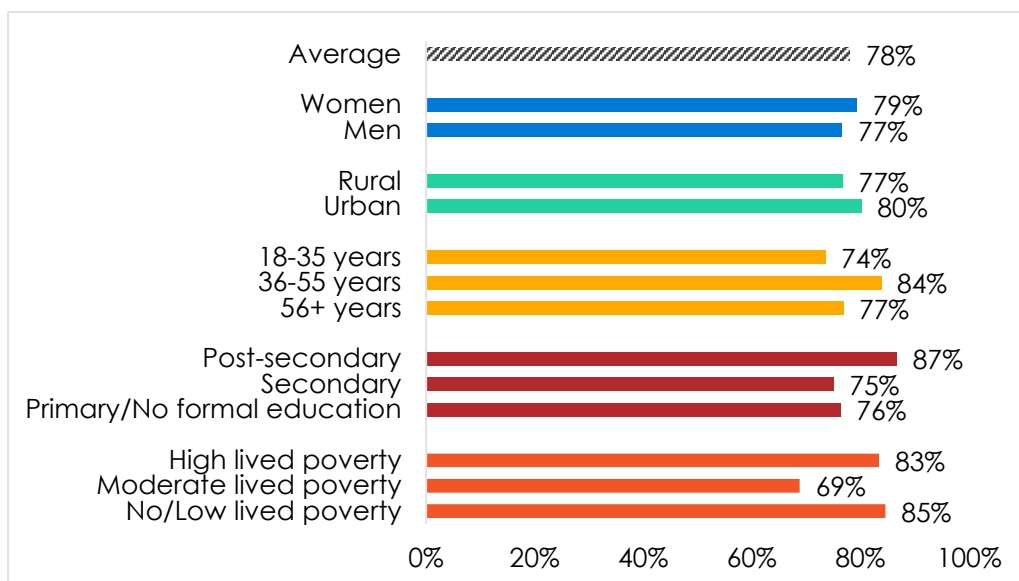
of those with post-secondary qualifications. But economically better-off citizens (63%) are less likely to agree than those experiencing moderate (74%) or high (81%) lived poverty.¹

Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

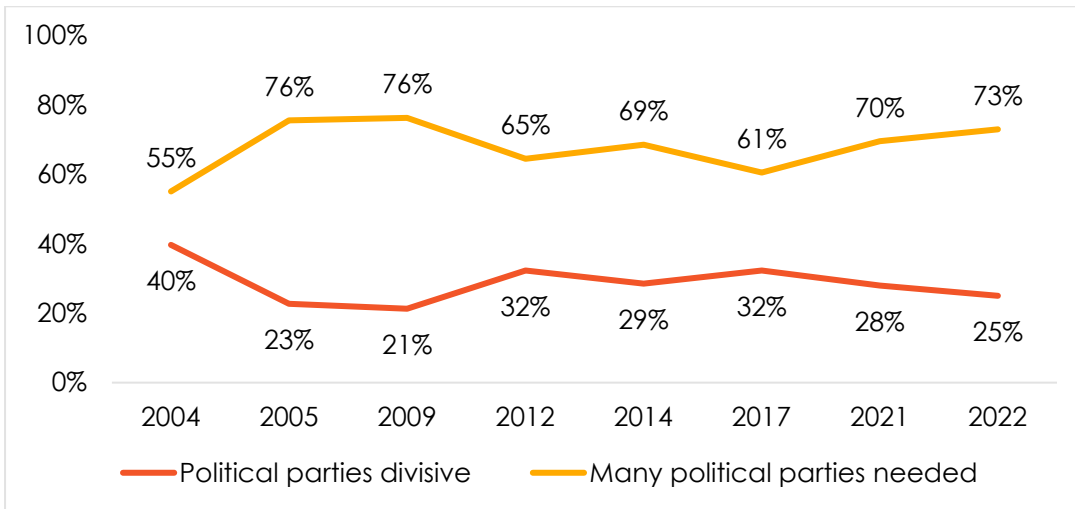
Figure 2: Support elections as the best way to choose leaders | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections)

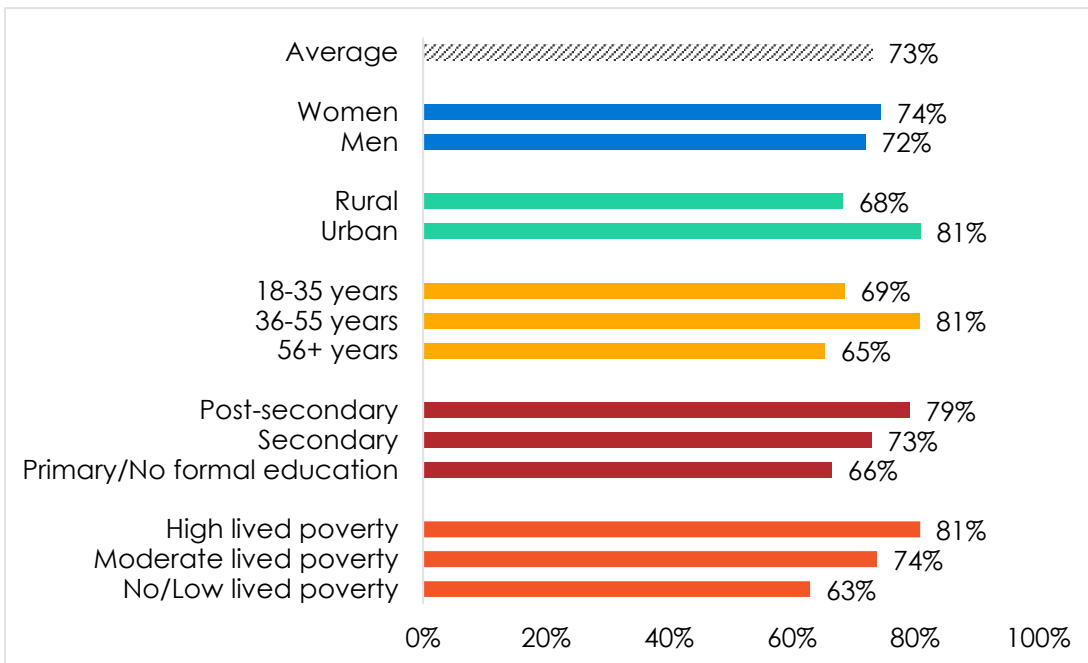
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

Figure 3: Support for multiparty competition | Zimbabwe | 2004-2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Zimbabwe.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Zimbabweans have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

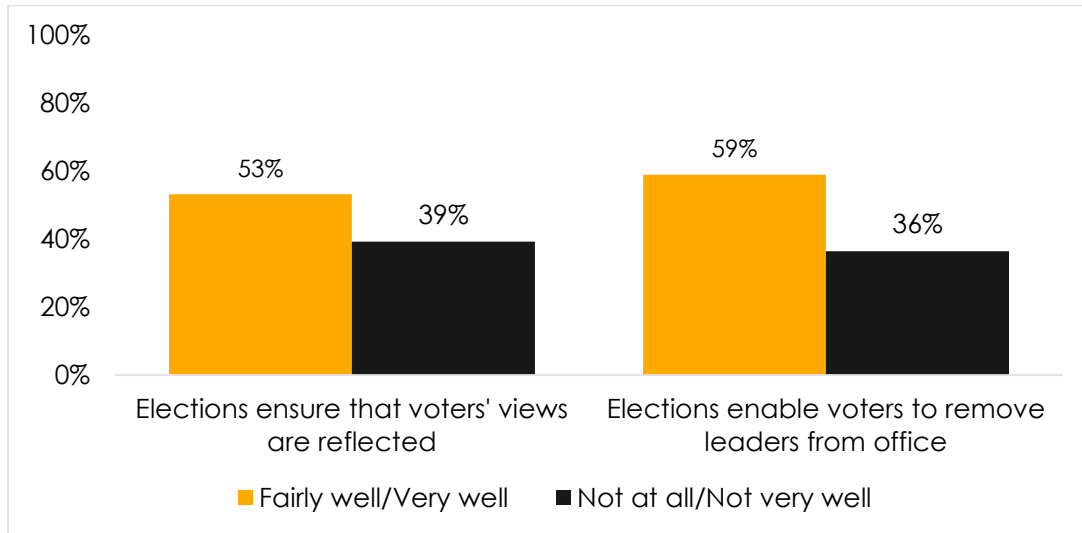
Figure 4: Support for multiparty competition | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Zimbabwe.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Zimbabweans have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 2)

A majority of Zimbabweans believe that elections work well to ensure that voters' views are reflected in Parliament (53%) and to enable voters to remove leaders from office who don't do what the people want (59%) (Figure 5).

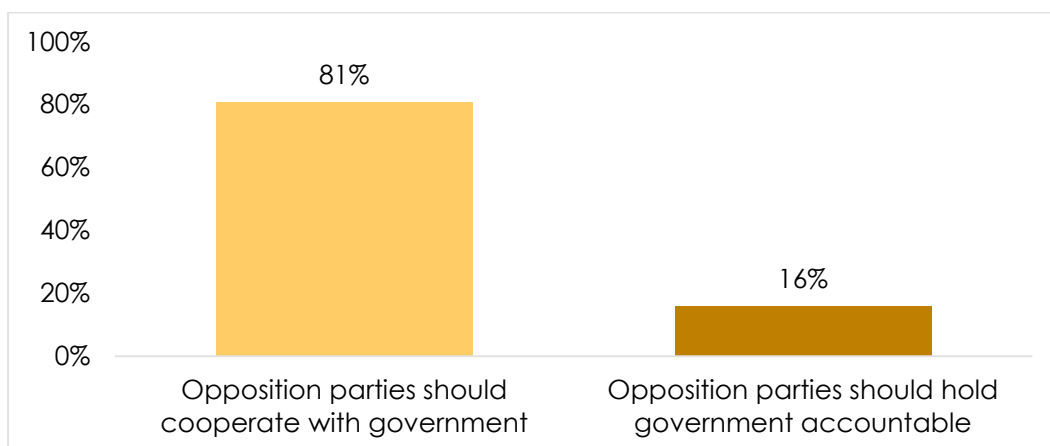
Figure 5: Efficacy of elections | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections: Ensure that representatives to the Parliament reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

And what is the role of the losing side in an election? About four-fifths (81%) of respondents say that after losing an election, opposition parties should cooperate with the government to help it develop the country. Only 16% want the opposition to focus instead on monitoring and criticising the government in order to hold it accountable (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Role of opposition parties after elections | Zimbabwe | 2022



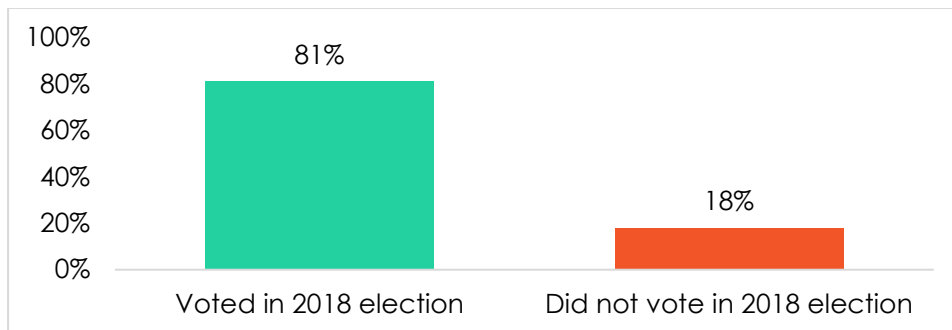
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.
 Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Participation in the 2018 election

In Zimbabwe, citizens who support elections also claim to vote in them. Excluding those who were too young to vote in 2018, eight out of 10 respondents (81%) say they voted in the most recent national election (Figure 7). While somewhat higher than official voter turnout reported by the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (75% of registered voters), both reflect citizens' widespread belief in the power of the vote (Mhetu, 2018; BBC; 2018).

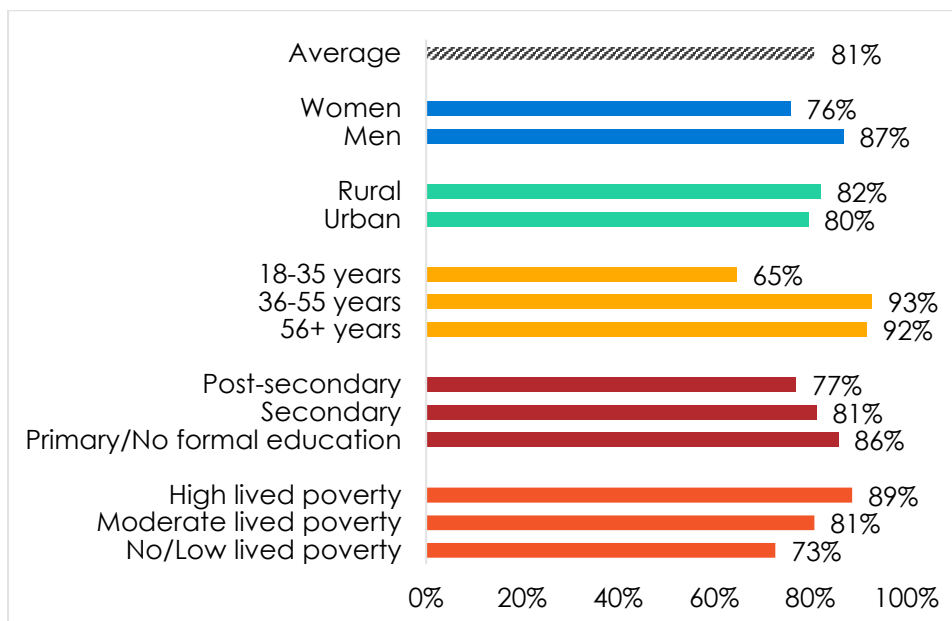
Self-reported voting rates are notably lower among young respondents (65% of those aged 18-35 years, compared to more than 90% among their elders) (Figure 8). They are higher among men than women (87% vs. 76%) and are above average among poor citizens (89%) and those with primary schooling or less (86%).

Figure 7: Participation in the 2018 election | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? In the last national election, held in 2018, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2018 are excluded.)

Figure 8: Voted in 2018 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2018, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2018 are excluded.)

Election quality

How good are Zimbabwe's elections? Do citizens consider them free and fair, and do they feel safe casting their ballots?

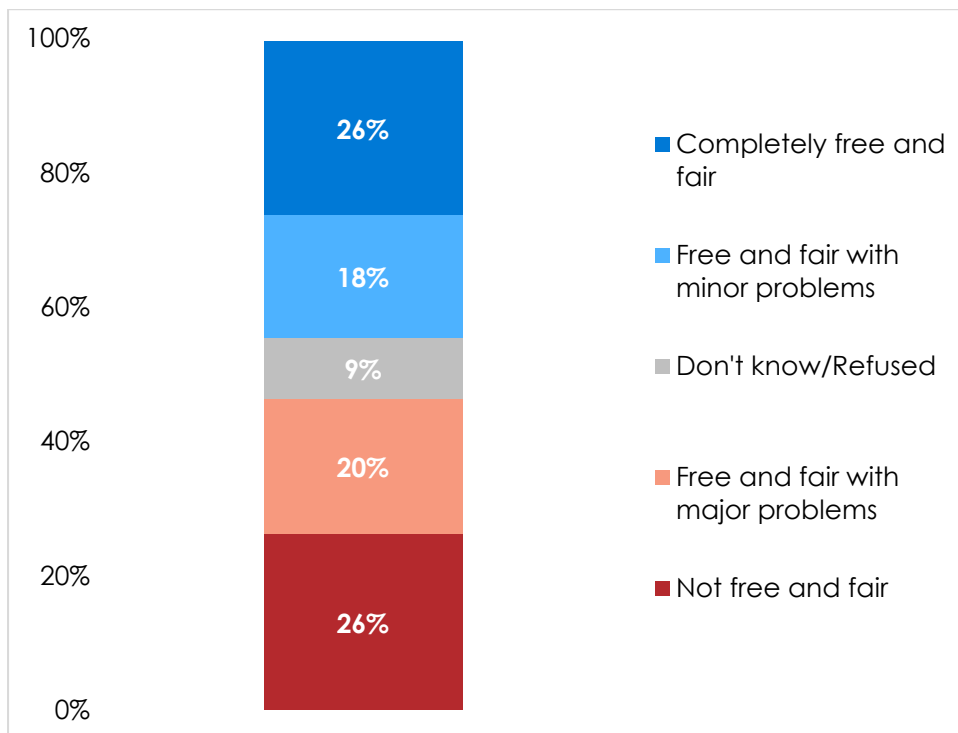
Fewer than half (44%) of Zimbabweans describe their 2018 election as having been largely free and fair: 26% say it was "completely free and fair," while 18% consider it "free and fair with minor problems." A similar proportion (46%) say it was either "free and fair with major problems" (20%) or "not free and fair" (26%) (Figure 9).

Among supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF party, seven in 10 (69%) say the election was generally free and fair, but among respondents who say they "feel close" to the opposition CCC, about three-quarters (73%) disagree (Figure 10).

In line with the ruling party's traditional strength in rural areas, rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to say the last election was free and fair (50% vs. 35%).

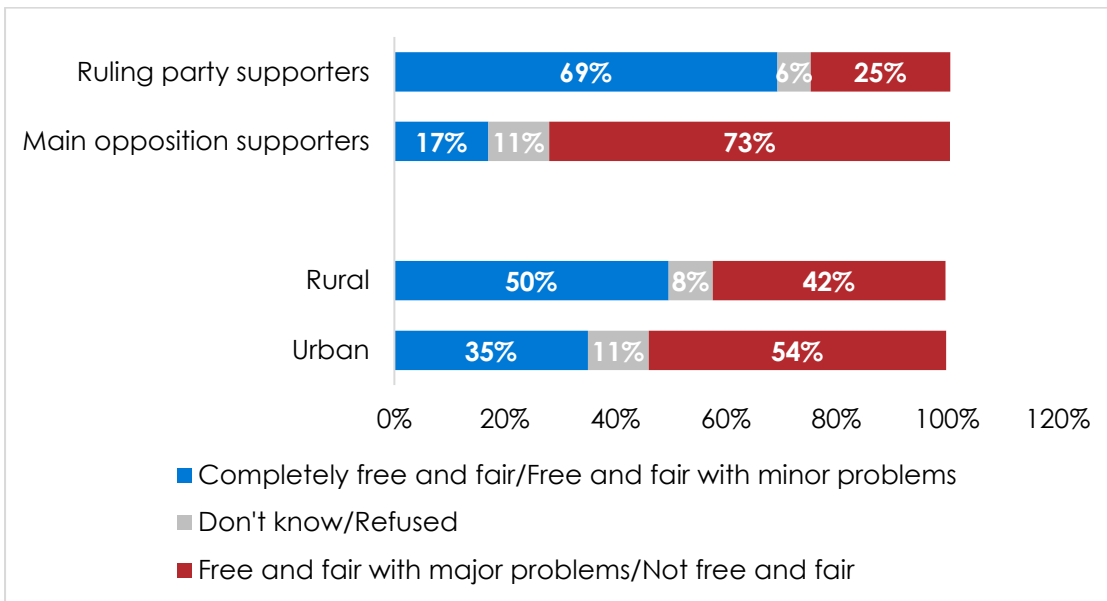
With regard to a safe election environment, one-third (33%) of respondents say they feared political intimidation or violence "a lot" (21%) or "somewhat" (12%) during the last national election, while 23% report "a little bit" of fear. More than four in 10 (43%) say they did not fear intimidation or violence "at all" (Figure 11).

Figure 9: Freeness and fairness of 2018 election | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2018?

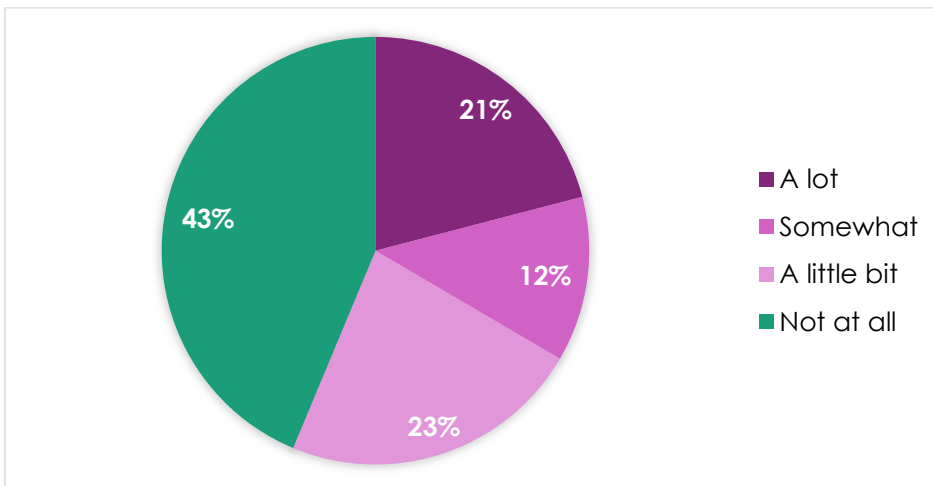
Figure 10: Freeness and fairness of 2018 election | by party affiliation and urban-rural location | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked:

Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?
 On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2018?

Figure 11: Fear of intimidation or violence in 2018 election | Zimbabwe | 2022

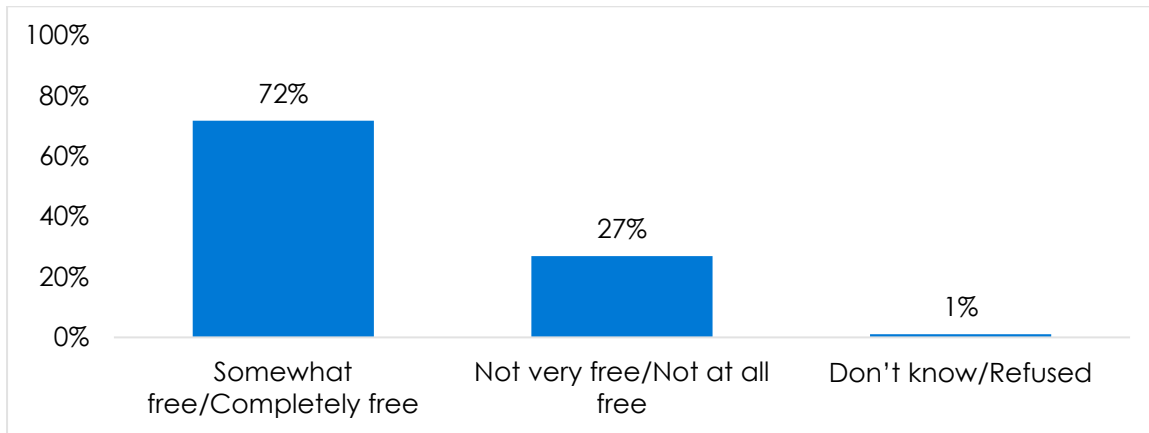


Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in 2018, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Despite these concerns, more than seven in 10 Zimbabweans (72%) say they feel “somewhat free” or “completely free” to vote as they please without feeling pressured, while 27% report feeling “not very free” or “not at all free” (Figure 12).

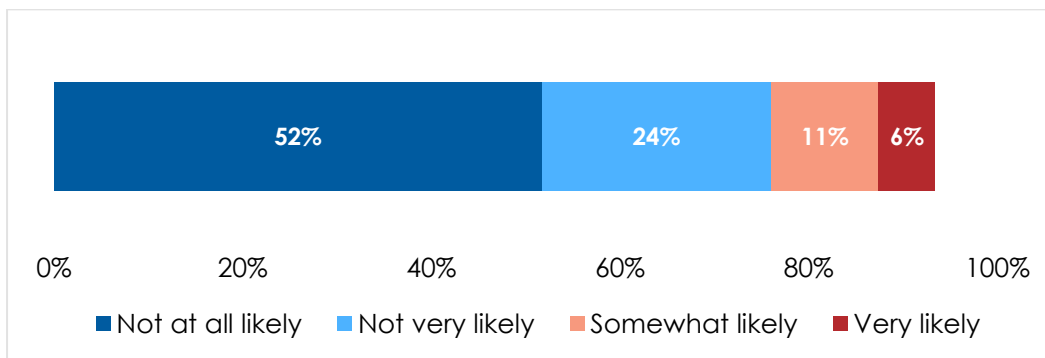
And three-fourths (76%) of citizens express confidence in ballot secrecy, saying it is “not very likely” (24%) or “not at all likely” (52%) that powerful people can find out how they voted. About one in six citizens (17%) consider it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that their ballots are not secret (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Freedom to choose whom to vote for | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?

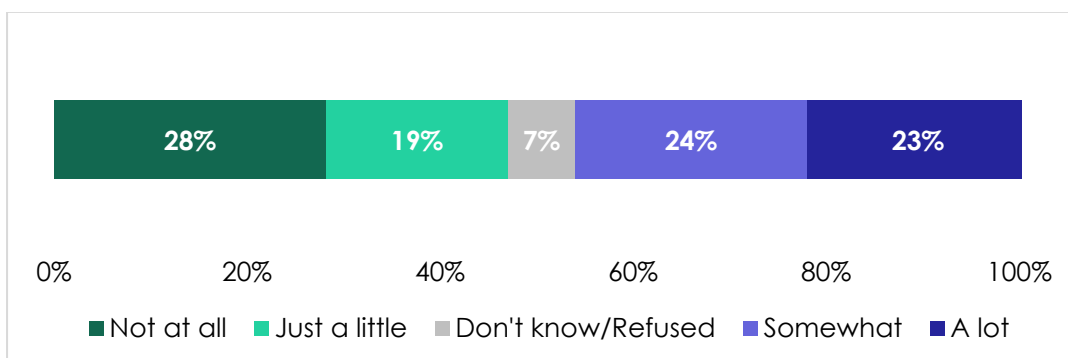
Figure 13: Can powerful people find out how you voted? | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country?

Public perceptions that an election is legitimate depend in part on trust in the electoral commission. Views on the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission are mixed: Close to half (47%) of citizens say they trust the institution “somewhat” (24%) or “a lot” (23%), while the same share trust it “just a little” (19%) or “not at all” (28%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust in Zimbabwe Electoral Commission | Zimbabwe | 2022



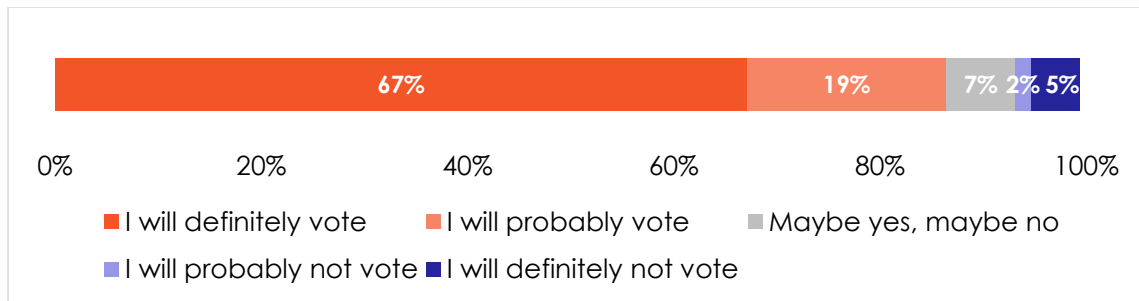
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (or ZEC), or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Likelihood of participation in the 2023 elections

Two-thirds (67%) of Zimbabweans say they will “definitely” vote in the 2023 harmonised elections. In addition, 19% say they will “probably” vote, 7% say they may or may not do so, and the rest say they will “probably” (2%) or “definitely” (5%) not vote (Figure 15).

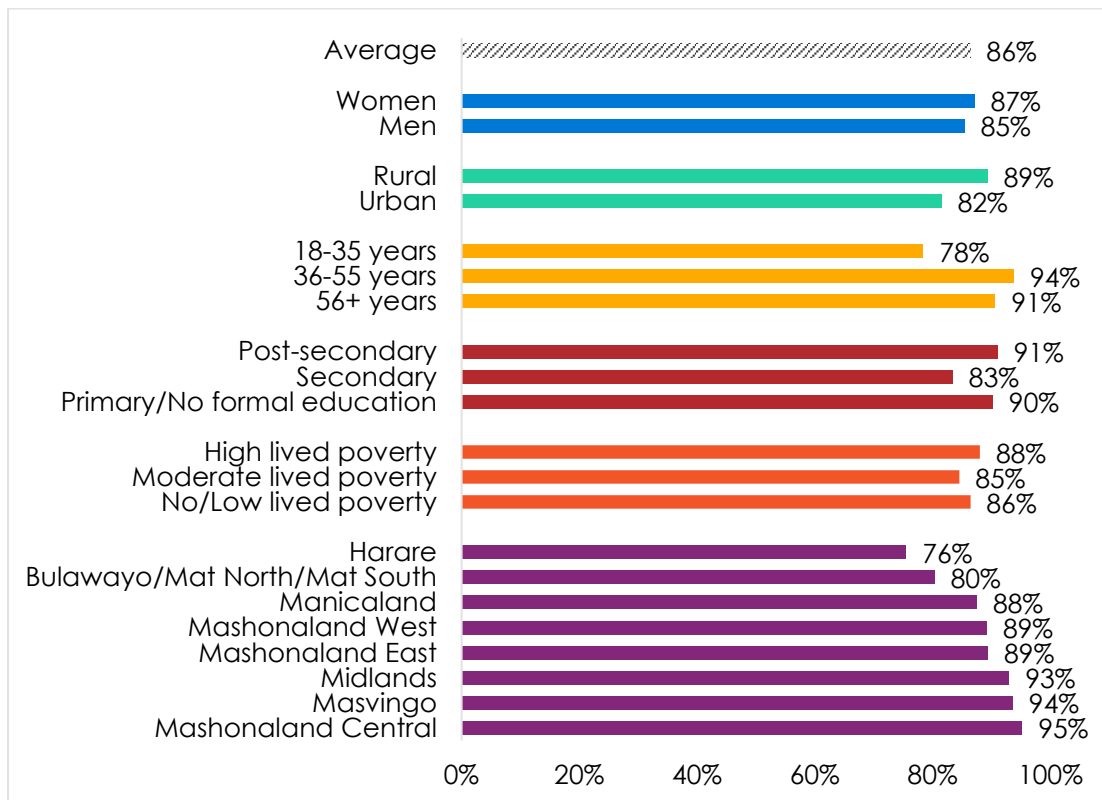
Men and women are about equally likely to say they will probably or definitely vote. Rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to say they will vote (89% vs. 82%), whereas young respondents (78% of those aged 18-35) are considerably less likely than their elders (91%-94%) to say so. Mashonaland Central (95%), Masvingo (94%), and Midlands (93%) have the largest shares of citizens who say they will “probably” or “definitely” vote, while the smallest proportion is recorded in Harare (76%) (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Likelihood of voting in 2023 | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How likely are you to vote in the 2023 harmonised elections?

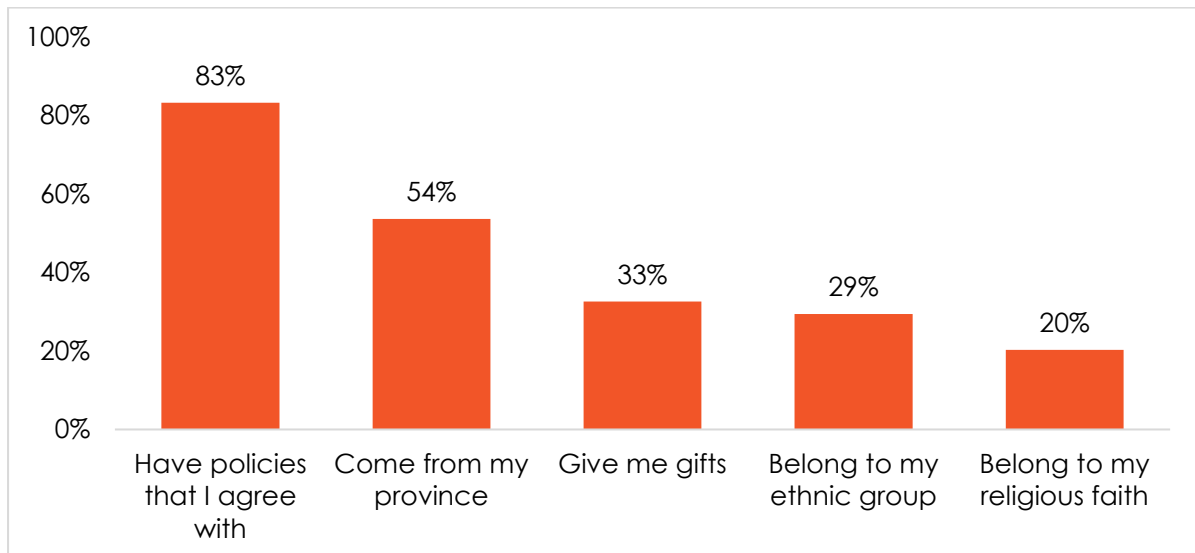
Figure 16: Likely to vote in 2023 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How likely are you to vote in the 2023 harmonised elections? (% who say “I will definitely vote” or “I will probably vote”)

When asked about factors that might influence their voting choices, policy issues emerge as the most important consideration. Excluding those who say will probably or definitely not vote in 2023, more than eight in 10 respondents (83%) say they will vote for candidates whose policies they agree with, while fewer indicate a preference for candidates who are from their own province (54%), who give them gifts or money (33%), or who belong to the same ethnic group (29%) or religious faith (20%) (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Factors affecting voting decision | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

I will vote for candidates who come from my province.

I will vote for candidates who belong to my religious faith.

I will vote for candidates who belong to my ethnic group.

I will vote for candidates who give me gifts and money or attend to my personal needs.

I will vote for candidates who have policies that I agree with.

(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement. Respondents who say they “probably” or “definitely” will not vote in the 2023 elections are excluded.)

Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Zimbabweans clearly stand behind elections as the best way to choose their leaders and want to see competition among multiple parties. Many have their doubts about the quality of their last election and mistrust the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, but most feel free to vote for the candidates of their choice, believe in the secrecy of their ballots, and plan to be at their polling stations on Election Day 2023.

Candidates' positions on policy issues are the determining factor for most likely voters, though many also indicate a preference for candidates from their own province.

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