



Dispatch No. 660 | 28 June 2023

# Most Zimbabweans want free media as watchdog over government

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 660 | Stephen Ndoma and Simangele Moyo-Nyede**

## Summary

While the World Press Freedom Index says media freedom in Zimbabwe has improved “slightly” since Robert Mugabe’s reign, a new government measure may call its progress into question. The so-called “Patriot Bill,” approved by Parliament in late May, calls for lengthy prison sentences – and in some cases the death penalty – for anyone who attends a meeting where sanctions, boycotts, anti-government subversion, or armed intervention are discussed. Critics say the bill promotes self-censorship by threatening journalists who cover meetings with dire consequences (Reporters Without Borders, 2023a, 2023b).

The Constitution protects freedom of the media and of expression, including citizens’ right to “seek, receive and communicate ideas and other information” (Dube, 2019; Mugari, 2020). The media landscape is still dominated by the state-owned Herald newspaper and Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, although fast-growing digital media provides platforms for citizens to exchange information and alternative narratives (Chirimambowa & Chimedza; 2022; Chimhangwa, 2022). Weekly media briefings after Cabinet meetings, instituted by President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s government, have greatly improved citizens’ access to official information on a regular basis, providing an opportunity for journalists from both private and public media houses to interact directly with government officials on matters of public concern.

But even without the “Patriot Bill,” the media space has been a hard-hat area for media practitioners. The Official Secrets Act and the Cyber Security and Data Protection Act are widely seen as impediments to the work of journalists (Matsengarwodzi, 2022). Journalists are also under pressure to align with either the ruling party or the opposition, a polarisation that does not promote freedom of expression. The Media Institute for Southern Africa (2022) notes that 2020 and 2021 saw 52 and 22 cases, respectively, of journalists being harassed or assaulted by the police or the army while performing their duties. Reporters Without Borders (2023) ranks Zimbabwe 126<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries in media freedom.

Afrobarometer survey findings show that most Zimbabweans want a media that is free from government interference and that serves as a watchdog over government, investigating and reporting on its mistakes and corruption. But only a minority think the country currently has a free media.

Majorities also endorse the right of ordinary citizens and the media to access various types of government information, including budgets and expenditures for local government, bids and contracts, and salary information for teachers and local government officials.

Radio is still king among sources of news in Zimbabwe, though social media is challenging its dominance among young, urban, and educated citizens.

## 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 are being completed in 2023. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct 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

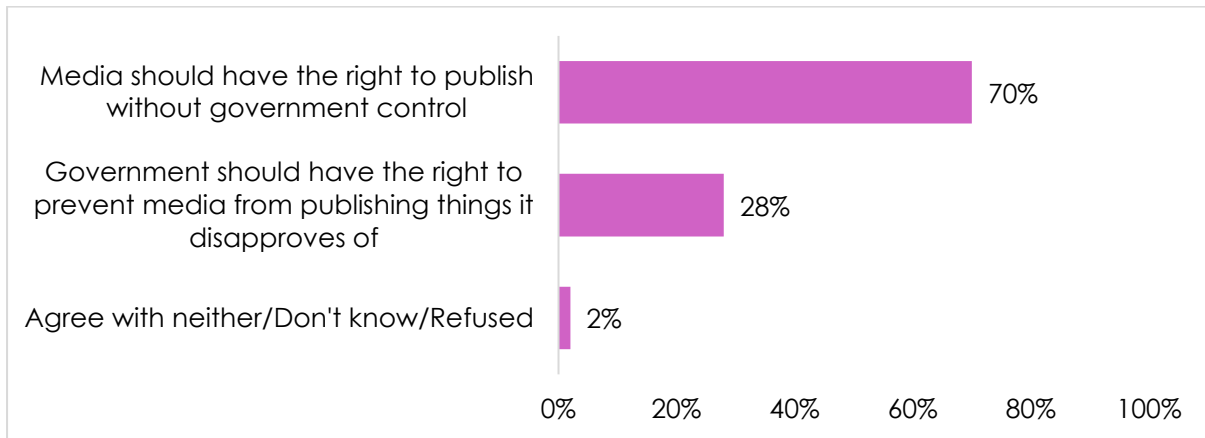
- Seven out of 10 Zimbabweans (70%) say the media should have the right to publish any ideas and views without government control.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of citizens believe that the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.
- A slim majority (53%) say the news media in Zimbabwe is "not very free" or "not at all free" to report and comment on news without censorship or interference by the government.
- Majorities endorse the right of ordinary citizens and the news media to access government information on budgets and expenditures for local government councils (79%), bids and contracts with companies competing for government-funded projects or purchases (71%), and salary information for teachers and local government officials (54%).
- Radio remains the top source of news for Zimbabweans: 65% say they tune in at least a few times a week. Social media occupies the second spot (41%), followed by television (28%), the Internet (25%), and newspapers (8%).

## Support for media to publish without government control

Seven out of 10 adult citizens (70%) say the media should have the right to publish any ideas and views without government control, a view opposed by 28% who think that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it disapproves of. A very tiny proportion (2%) agreed with neither statement or professed ignorance on the matter (Figure 1).

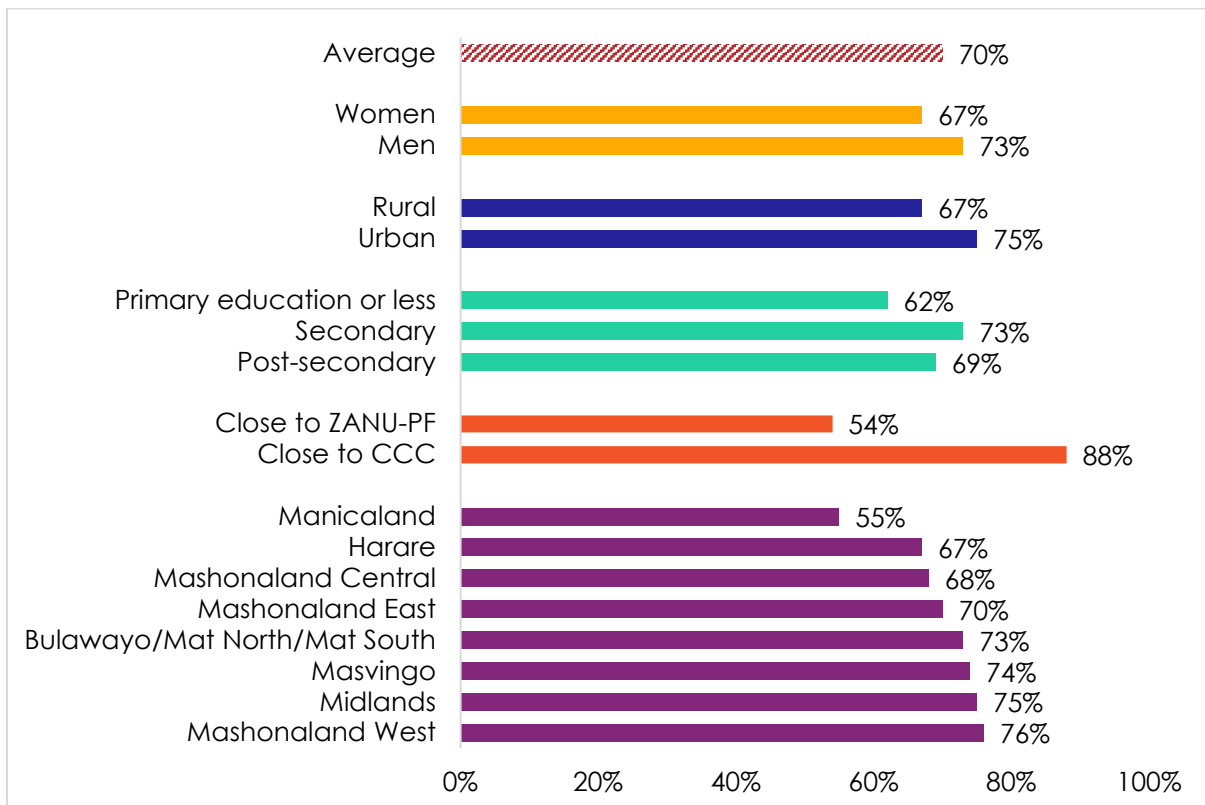
Majorities support media freedom in all provinces, though less strongly in Manicaland (55%) than elsewhere (67%-76%) (Figure 2). More men (73%) than women (67%) and more urbanites (75%) than rural residents (67%) favour this view, which is also far more popular among supporters of the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) (88%) than among ZANU-PF adherents (54%).

**Figure 1: Support for free media | Zimbabwe | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.  
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

**Figure 2 : Support for free media | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022**



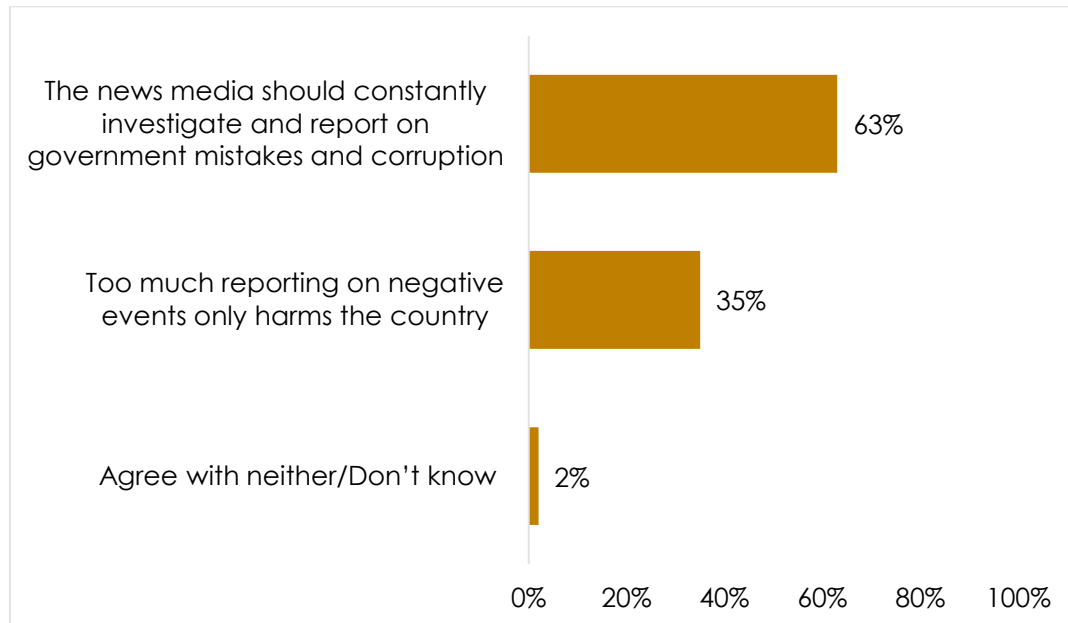
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 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of.  
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

### Media's watchdog role

Almost two-thirds (63%) of surveyed citizens say the news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption, while 35% think that too much reporting on negative events only harm the country (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Should the media investigate and report on government mistakes?**

| Zimbabwe | 2022



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

Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

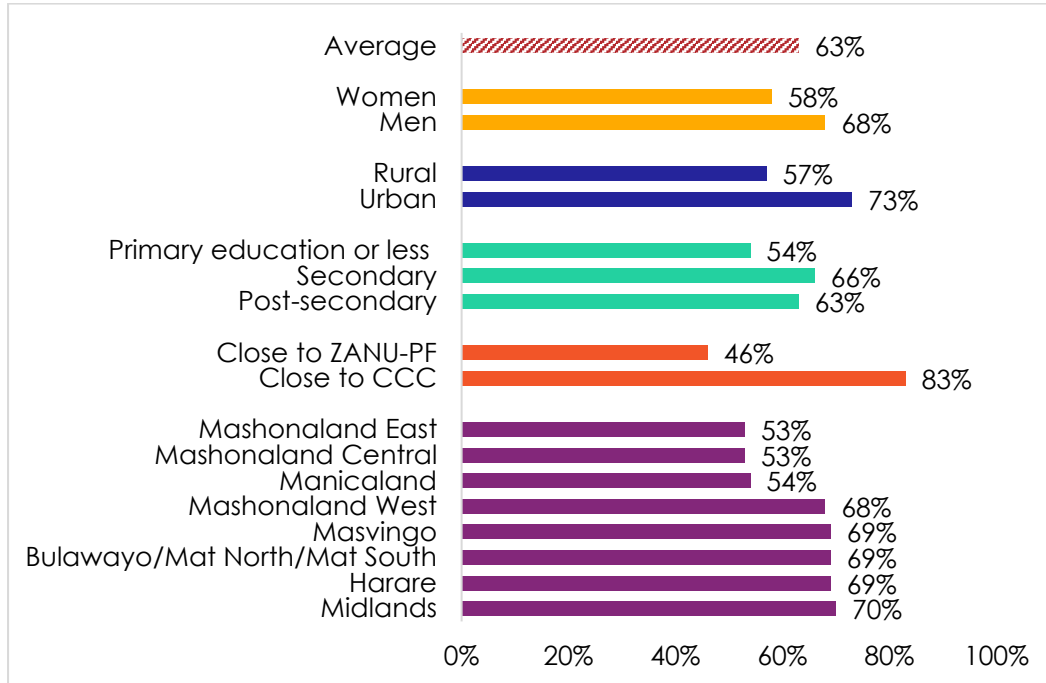
Support for the media's role as a watchdog on the government is the majority view in all provinces, but is significantly less widespread in Mashonaland East (53%), Mashonaland Central (53%), and Manicaland (54%) than in other provinces (68%-70%) (Figure 4). A stark partisan divide is evident on this question, too: 83% of CCC supporters vs. 46% of ZANU-PF adherents. Less educated citizens (54%), rural residents (57%), and women (58%) are less likely to favour the media's watchdog role than citizens with at least a secondary education (63%-66%), urban residents (73%), and men (68%),

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**Figure 4: Support for media’s watchdog role** | by demographic group | Zimbabwe  
 | 2022

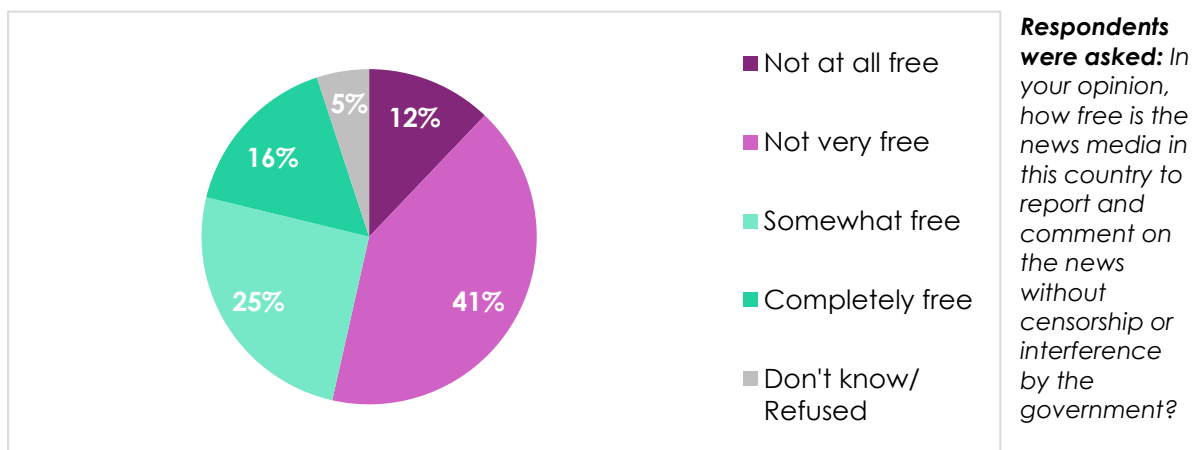


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 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.  
 Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.  
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with Statement 1)

**Perceptions of media freedom**

While strong majorities favour a free and enterprising media, only 41% of Zimbabweans say their media is actually “somewhat free” (25%) or “completely free” (16%) to report and comment on news without censorship or interference by the government (Figure 5). More than half (53%) consider the country’s media “not very free” (41%) or “not at all free” (12%).

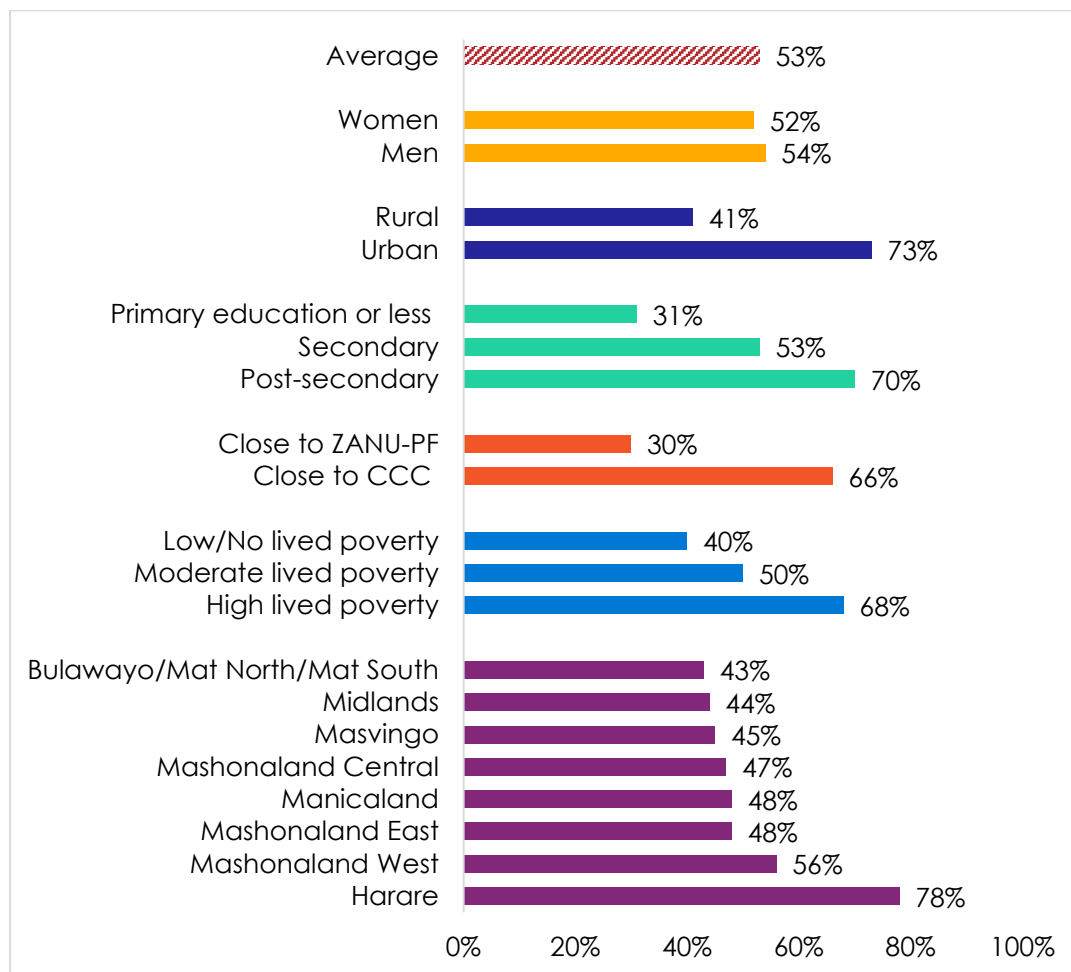
**Figure 5: Is the news media free to report without government censorship?**  
 | Zimbabwe | 2022



The view that the news media is not free from government censorship is most pronounced in Harare metropolitan province, where 78% concur with the assertion, and in general is more common in cities than in rural areas (73% vs. 41%) (Figure 6). It gains strength as citizens' experience of lived poverty<sup>1</sup> increases, ranging from 40% among better-off respondents to 68% among the poorest.

On the other hand, the most educated citizens are most likely to see the news media as unfree (70%, compared to 31% among those with primary schooling or less). And as might be expected, CCC supporters are more than twice as likely as ZANU-PF supporters to share this assessment (66%) vs. 30%).

**Figure 6: News media not free to report without censorship | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022**



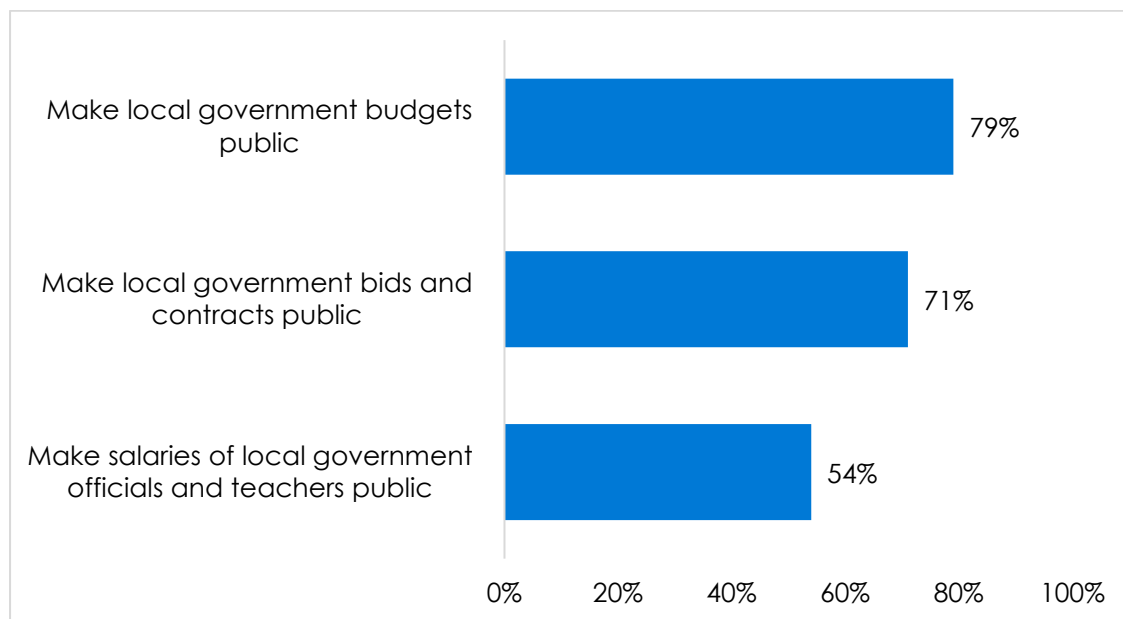
**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government? (% who say “not very free” or “not at all free”)*

<sup>1</sup> 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).

## Public's right to government information

Beyond the media's right to freely report the news, most Zimbabweans support the public's right to access a variety of types of government information. Large majorities endorse the right of ordinary citizens and the news media to have access to information on budgets and expenditures for local government councils (79%) as well as bids and contracts with businesses that have competed for government-funded projects or purchases (71%). A slimmer majority (54%) say the public should have access to information about the salaries of teachers and local government officials (Figure 7).

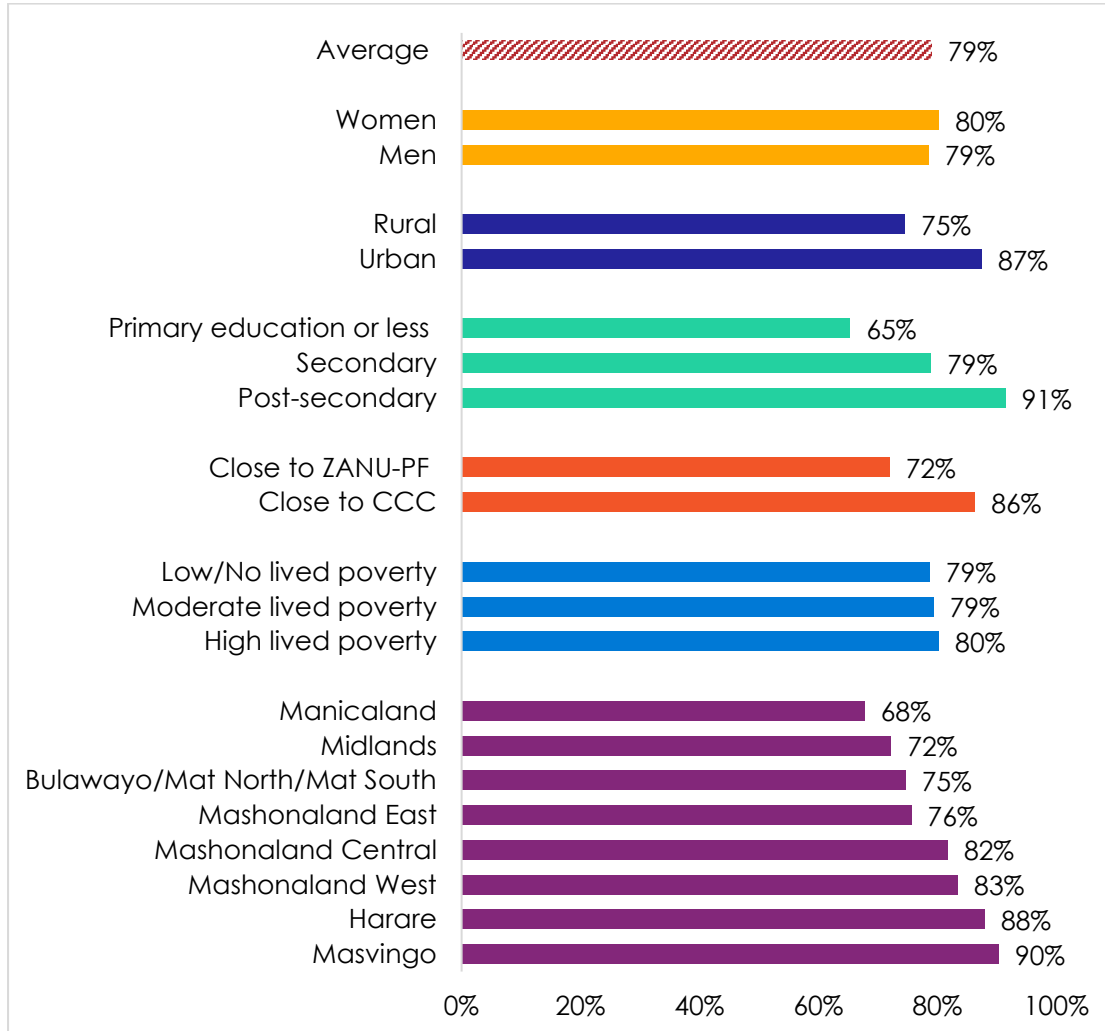
**Figure 7: Should ordinary citizens and news media have access to government information? | Zimbabwe | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from the government, or whether the government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public: Budgets and expenditures for the local government council? All bids and contracts with businesses that have competed for government-funded projects or purchases? Salary information for teachers and local government officials? (% who say this information should be available to the public)

On all three questions, support for the public's right to information is particularly strong in cities, among more educated citizens, among CCC supporters, and in Masvingo. For example, on the question of local government budgets and expenditures, support for public access totals 87% of urbanites, vs. 75% of rural residents; 91% of citizens with post-secondary qualifications, vs. 65% of those with primary schooling or less; 86% of CCC adherents, vs. 71% of ZANU-PF supporters; and 90% of Masvingo residents, compared to 68% of respondents in Manicaland (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Support for right to information on local government budgets | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022**



**Respondents were asked:** For each of the following, please tell me whether ordinary citizens and news media should have the right to obtain this information from the government, or whether the government should be allowed to keep the information away from the public: Budgets and expenditures for the local government council? (% who say this information should be available to the public)

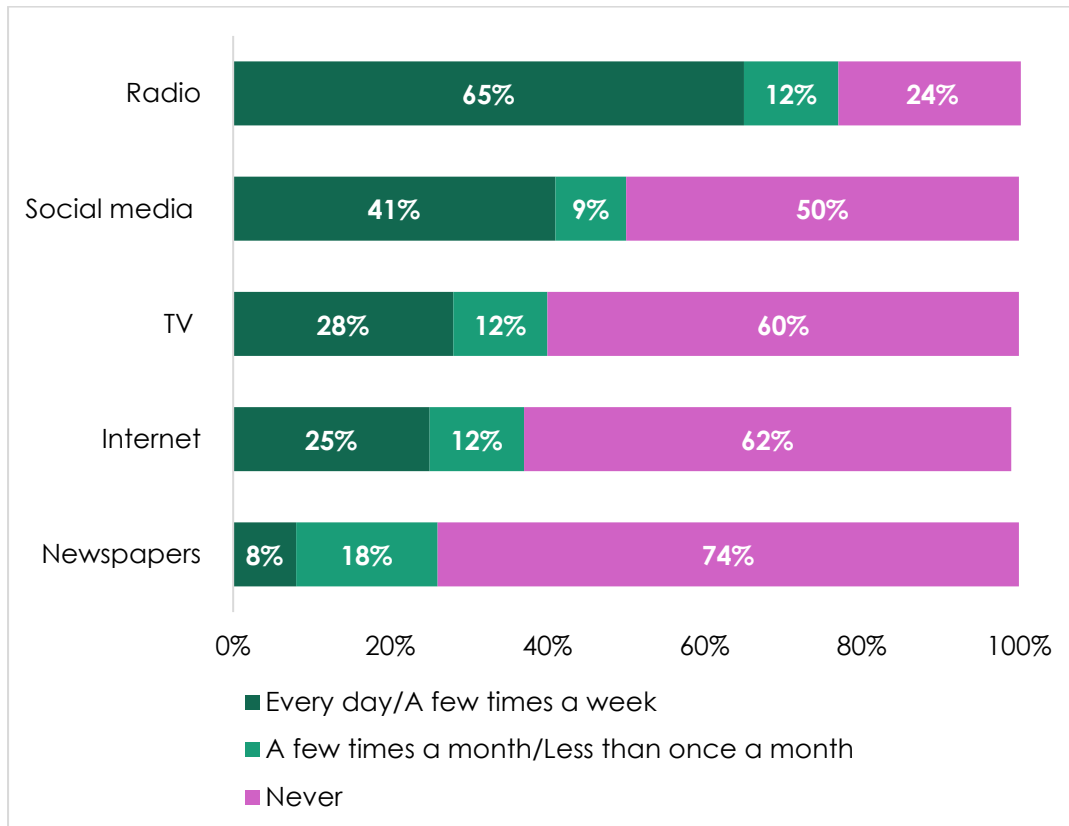
### Sources of news

If Zimbabweans value the free flow of information, where do they get their information in daily life?

As in previous Afrobarometer surveys, radio remains the most popular source of news for Zimbabweans, while social media has passed television to claim second place (Figure 9). About two-thirds (65%) of respondents say they tune in to radio news “every day” or “a few times a week,” followed by social media (41%), television (28%), the Internet (25%), and print newspapers (8%).



**Figure 9: News sources** | Zimbabwe | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following: Radio? Television? Print newspapers? Internet? Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others?

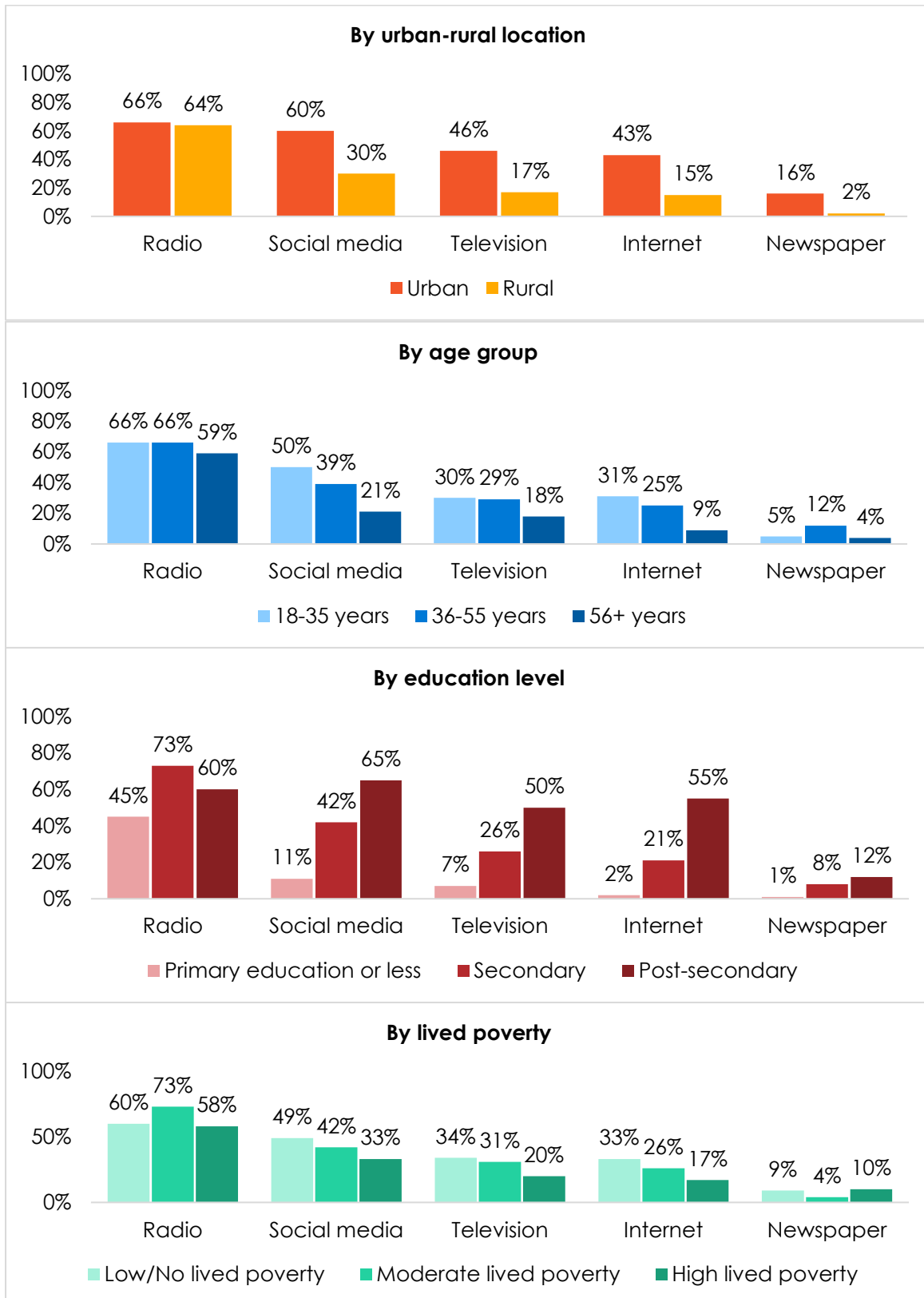
Urbanites are far more likely than rural residents to regularly use all these sources of news except radio, whose usage is about equal in cities (66%) and villages (64%) (Figure 10).

Generational differences are particularly evident with regard to digital media. Half (50%) of 18- to 35-year-olds get news regularly from social media, compared to 39% of the middle age cohort and 21% of older citizens. Similarly, regular Internet news consumers are more common among the youngest adults (31%) than among their elders (25% and 9% among the middle and older groups).

The frequency of regular news consumption via these five sources increases with respondents' education level. Citizens with post-secondary education are more than five times as likely as those with primary schooling or less to obtain news regularly from social media (65% vs. 11%), television (50% vs. 7%), the Internet (55% vs. 2%), and newspapers (12% vs. 1%). Radio is the only news source used regularly by a substantial share of less educated citizens (45%).

With the exception of radio, these news sources are more frequently used by economically better-off citizens than by those with moderate or high lived poverty.

**Figure 10: News sources** | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? Television? Print newspapers? Internet? Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others?

## Conclusion

The survey data show that most Zimbabweans treasure a media that is free from the shackles of government interference and that acts as a watchdog over government, investigating and reporting on its mistakes and corruption. Despite this dominant preference, only a minority think the country currently has a free media, suggesting that citizens want the government to do more to ensure that journalists can deliver on their mandate freely and safely.

Majorities also endorse the right of ordinary citizens and the media to access various types of government information, including budgets and expenditures for local government, bids and contracts, and salary information for teachers and local government officials.

As for where Zimbabweans obtain their news, radio still rules the roost among news sources, though social media is challenging its dominance among young, urban, and educated citizens.

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