



Dispatch No. 688 | 21 August 2023

Zimbabweans want councillors to prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 688 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Zimbabwe's local government is composed of urban and rural local authorities with a mandate to represent and manage the affairs of people in their jurisdictions (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2021). The country has 92 local authorities partitioned into 1,958 wards. Councillors are elected in these wards every five years, concurrently with parliamentary and presidential polls (We Pay You Deliver Consortium, 2017).

With Zimbabwe's 2023 harmonised elections on their doorstep, how do citizens perceive local government councils meant to serve people at the ward level? Key aspects of responsive and accountable local government include the delivery of services that citizens need and good governance that engages citizens in policy making, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (United Nations, 2015). Other important considerations include conducting the public's business with integrity, ensuring public access to public information, and being open to citizens' concerns, inputs, and scrutiny.

Reports by the media and government agencies suggest that some local authorities fall short on several counts, including issues related to integrity. The Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission's 2021 annual report brought these matters to the fore: The Harare City Council was at the top of the list of local authorities whose leadership was tainted by allegations of corruption, including the illegal sale of land and residential stands (New Ziana, 2022). There are also concerns about poor service delivery, highlighted by irregular or non-existent collection of garbage (New Ziana, 2022). Gaps in service delivery are made worse by power politics in which the ruling ZANU-PF has tried to flex its muscle over local authorities at the expense of residents (Chigwata, Marumahoko, & Madhekeni, 2019). To add insult to injury, critics have described some local councillors as vastly under-qualified for the job (Razemba, 2015).

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey sheds light on Zimbabweans' perceptions and expectations of their local elected officials. Findings show that a majority of Zimbabweans want local authorities to prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas. But only a minority believe that local government councillors actually listen to them, even though most are confident that they could get together with others to make their concerns heard.

As for transparency in local government, citizens are far from confident that they could obtain information about local development plans, budgets, and contracts. Most see at least some councillors as corrupt, and only about half trust their local councils.

Overall, public ratings of local government councillor performance are mixed.

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. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. 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

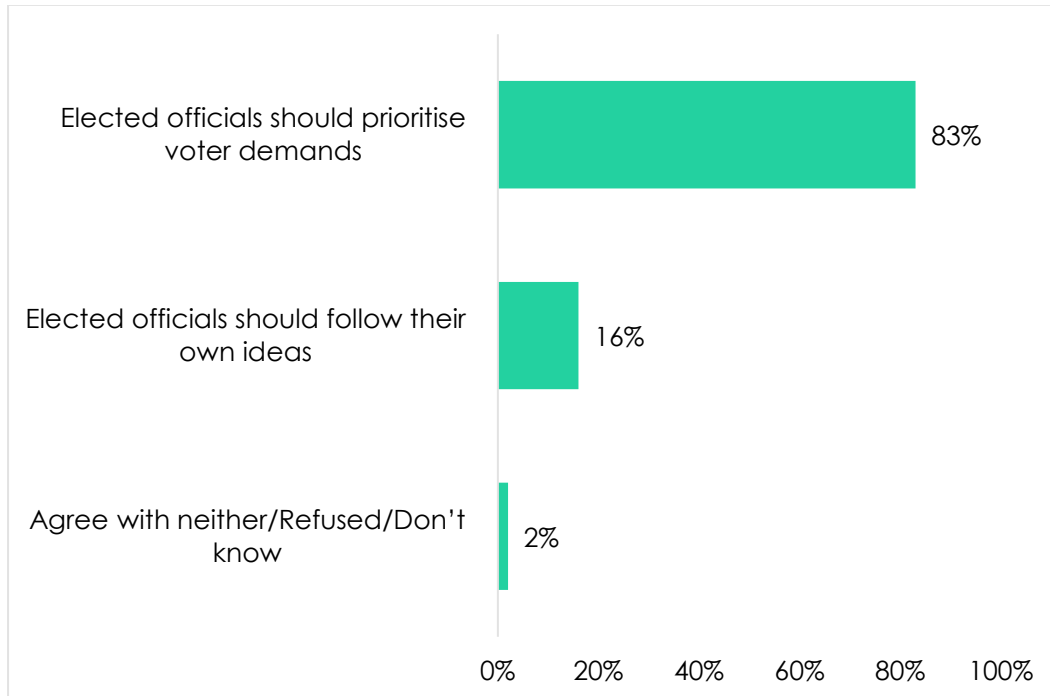
- More than eight in 10 Zimbabweans (83%) say elected officials should prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas.
- Only 27% of citizens say local government councillors "often" or "always" try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say. Nearly half (46%) say they do so "only sometimes," while 22% think they "never" do.
- However, more than two-thirds (69%) of citizens think it is likely that they could get together with others and make their elected local government councillors listen to their concerns.
- But majorities doubt that local leaders or local government offices would take action if citizens requested assistance for a development project in their communities (56%) or reported corrupt behaviour (58%).
- Majorities of Zimbabweans say it is "not very likely" or "not at all likely" that they could obtain information about local development plans and budgets (59%) or about contracts for government-funded projects or purchases (60%).
- One-third (33%) of respondents say that "most" or "all" local government councillors are involved in corruption, while 52% believe that "some" of them are.
- A slim majority (51%) of Zimbabweans say they trust their local government councils "somewhat" or "a lot," while 45% say they trust them "just a little" or "not at all."
- Half (50%) of citizens "approve" or "strongly approve" of the way their local government councillors have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, while 42% express disapproval.

Should elected officials follow voter demands or their own ideas?

In a democracy, elected officials are expected to lead as well as to represent their constituents. When it comes to making difficult policy choices, should they follow their own instincts or the will of the people?

A large majority (83%) of Zimbabweans say their elected officials should prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas. Only 16% think elected officials should be guided primarily by their own ideas (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Should elected officials prioritise voter demands or their own ideas?
 | Zimbabwe | 2022



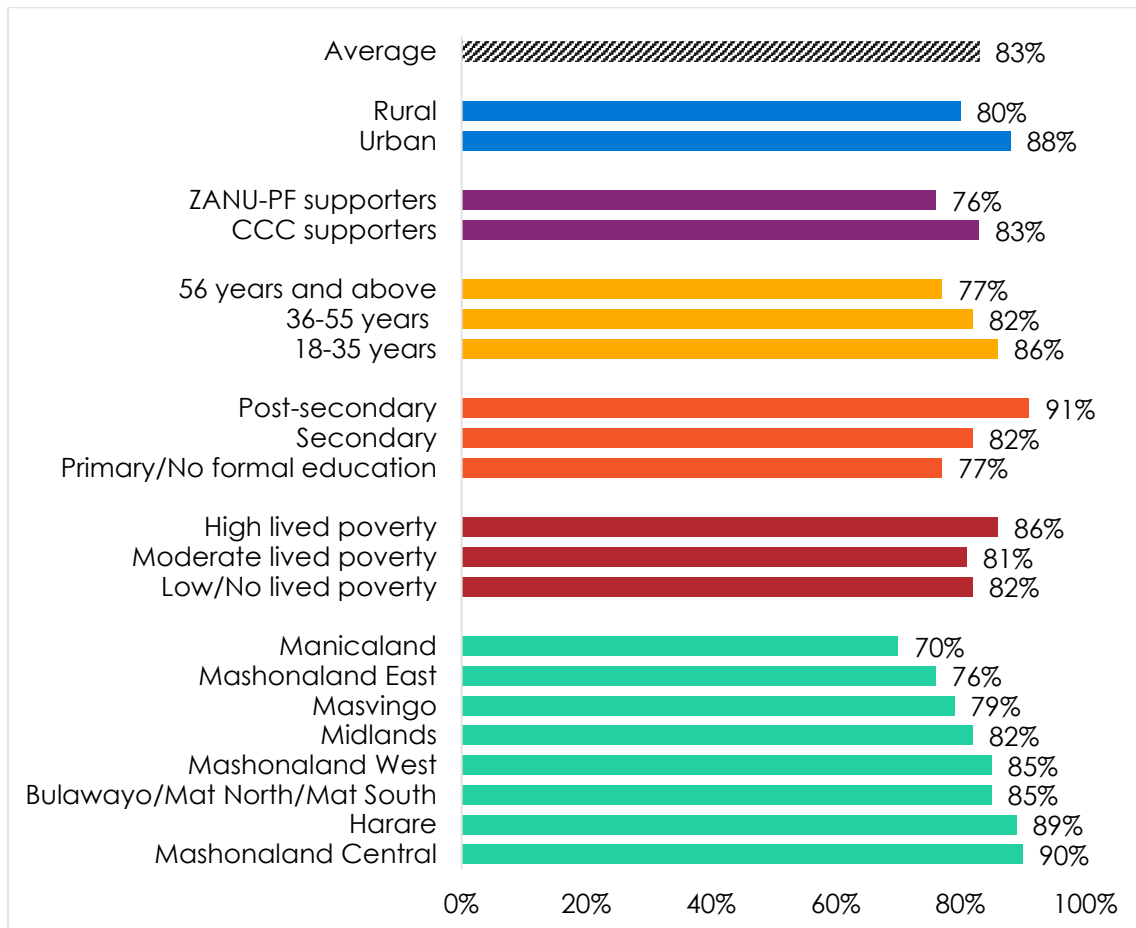
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Our elected officials should listen to voters' views and do what they demand.
 Statement 2: Our elected officials should follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

The view that elected officials should prioritise voters' demands is shared by large majorities across key demographic groups. It is more widespread in cities than in rural areas (88% vs. 80%) and among supporters of the opposition Citizens' Coalition for Change (CCC) than among adherents of the ruling ZANU-PF (83% vs. 76%), although Mashonaland Central province, which is a ZANU-PF stronghold, has the largest proportion of citizens who share this view (90%) (Figure 2).

The youth are more likely than older citizens to support this view (86% vs. 77%), as are the most educated respondents compared to those with primary schooling or less (91% vs. 77%). Poor citizens (86%) are also more likely than their better-off counterparts (81%-82%) to say that elected officials should follow voter demands.¹

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 2: Elected officials should prioritise voter demands | by demographic group
 | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Our elected officials should listen to voters' views and do what they demand.
 Statement 2: Our elected officials should follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

Responsiveness of local government councillors

To be guided by voters' demands requires hearing voters' demands. Do local elected officials listen to their constituents?

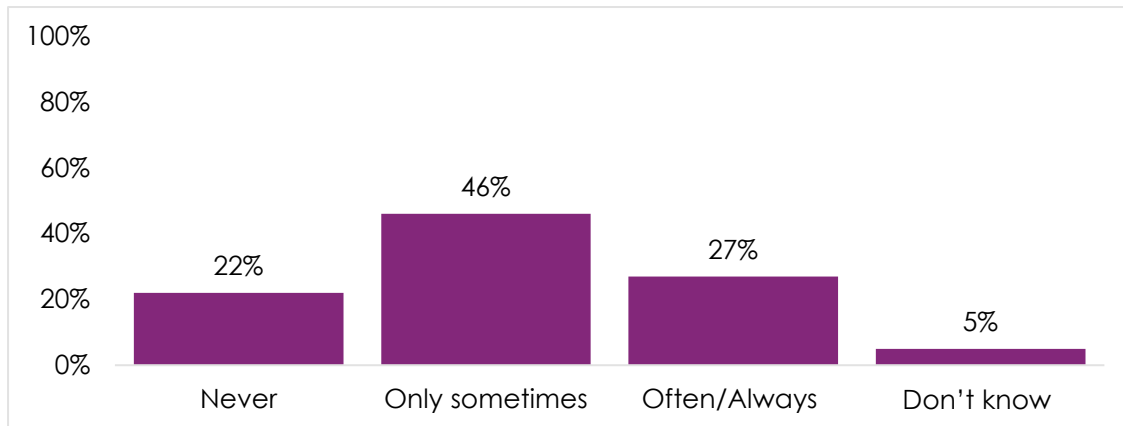
Citizens offer a mixed assessment: Almost half (46%) say local government councillors "only sometimes" do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say, while 22% say this "never" happens. Only about one-fourth (27%) say local government councillors "often" or "always" listen (Figure 3).

More rural respondents (32%) than urbanites (18%) say local government councillors "often" or "always" listen to ordinary people. ZANU-PF adherents are three times more likely (53%) than CCC supporters (17%) to see local government councillors as open to hearing citizens' concerns (Figure 4).

The view that local government councillors listen to citizen issues decreases as respondents' education level increases, ranging from 38% among citizens with primary schooling or less to just 15% among those with post-secondary qualifications. Significantly, poor Zimbabweans are less likely than their better-off compatriots (18% vs. 31%-32%) to say that councillors listen.

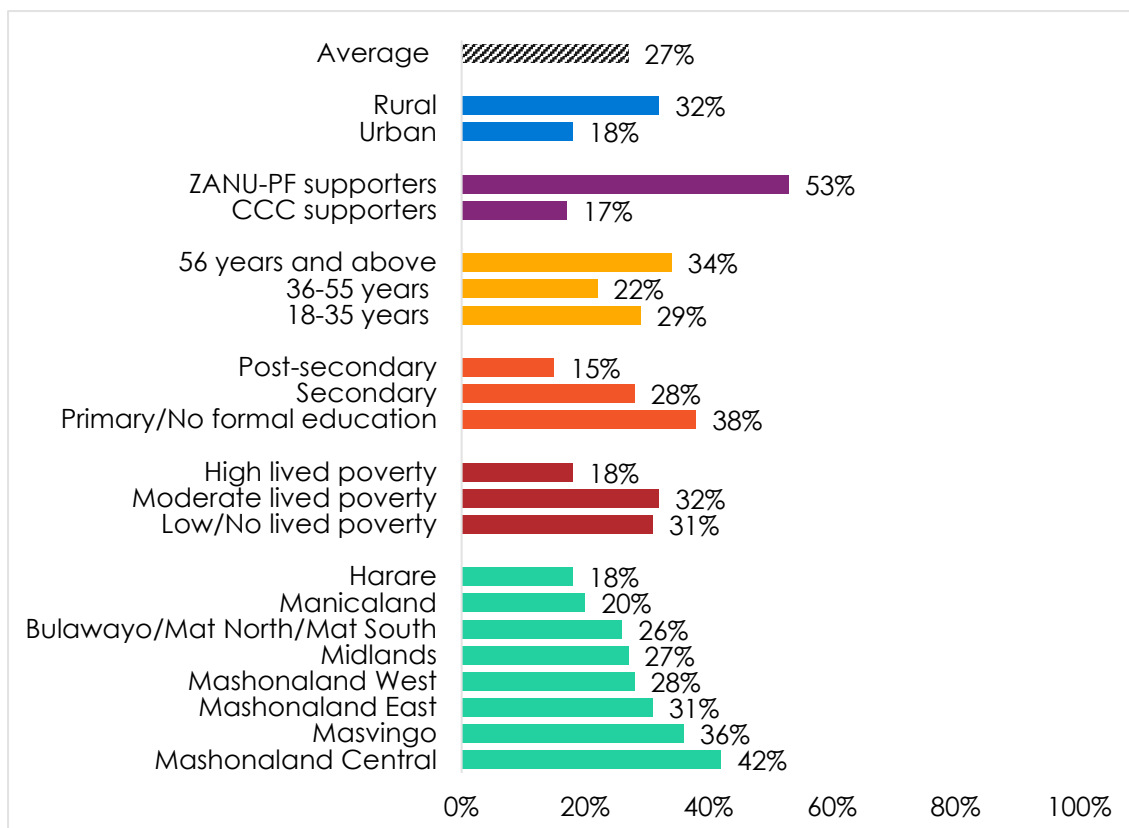
Geographically, Mashonaland Central province has the largest share of respondents who say local government councillors “often” or “always” try to listen to what ordinary citizens have to say (42%), while Harare has the smallest (18%).

Figure 3: Perceived responsiveness of local government councillors | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: Members of local government councils?

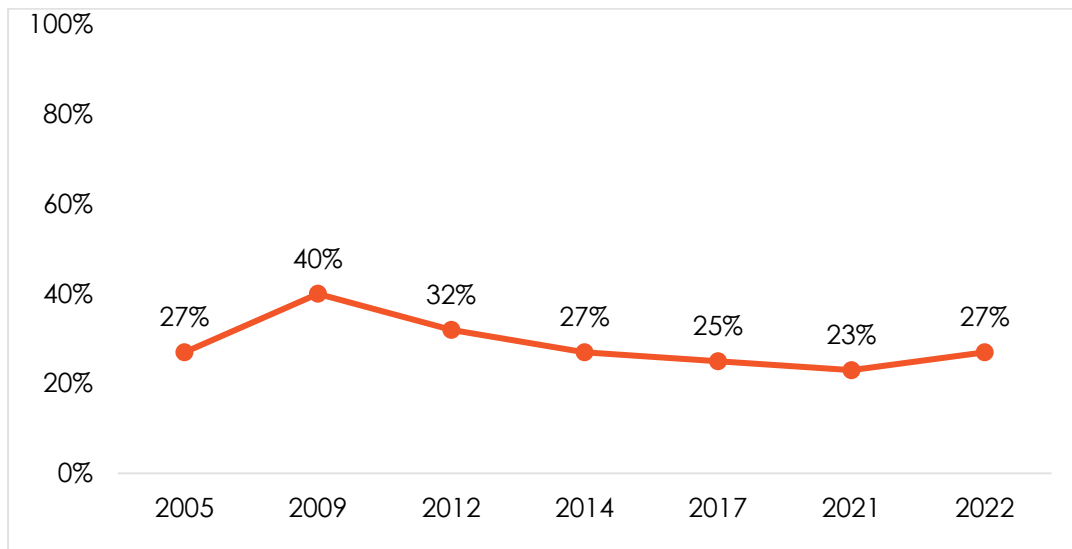
Figure 4: Local government councillors often/always listen | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: Members of local government councils? (% who say “often” or “always”)

The perception that local government councillors “often” or “always” listen to what ordinary people have to say has been a minority view over the years, dipping to a low of 23% in 2021. By contrast, it was most common (40%) in 2009, the year when a Government of National Unity was in charge of the country’s affairs (Figure 5).

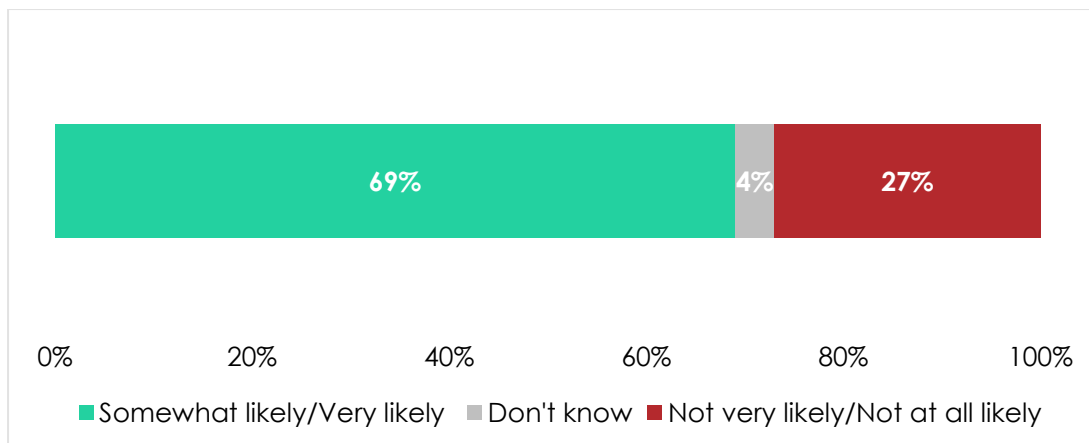
Figure 5: Local government councillors often/always listen | Zimbabwe | 2005-2022



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: Members of local government councils? (% who say “often” or “always”)

While perceptions of councillors’ openness are mixed, citizens are more confident that they could get their elected officials’ ear if they make a concerted effort. Seven in 10 (69%) say it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could get together with others and make their local government councillors listen to their concerns about matters of importance to the community (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Likelihood of getting together to make elected councillors listen | Zimbabwe | 2022



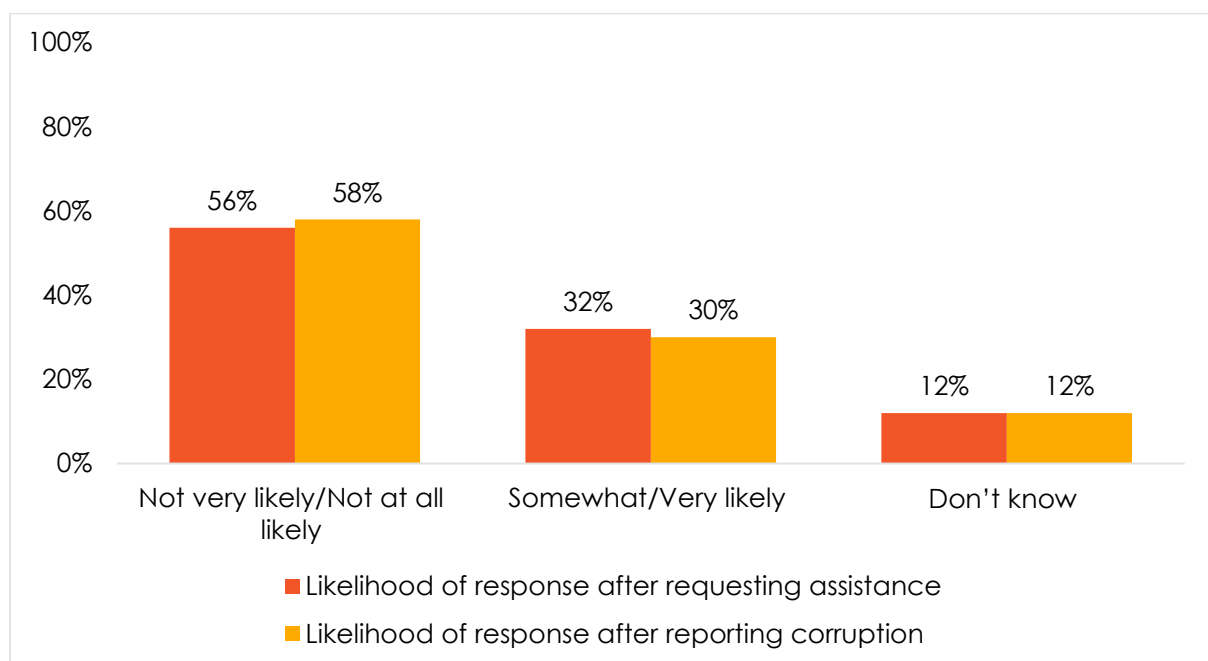
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how likely is it that you could get together with others and make your elected local government councillor listen to your concerns about a matter of importance to the community?

If they are heard, do citizens expect that their words will lead to action?

Zimbabweans express reservations about whether local leaders or local government offices will respond with action if citizens request assistance for a development project in their communities, such as an improved water supply or a community clean-up activity. A majority (56%) say such action is “not very likely” or “not at all likely,” while only about one-third (32%) say action will probably be taken (Figure 7).

Similarly, 58% of citizens consider action unlikely if they report corrupt behaviour, such as misuse of funds or requests for bribes, to a local government office or anti-corruption authority.

Figure 7: Likelihood of action after requests to local government councils
 | Zimbabwe | 2022



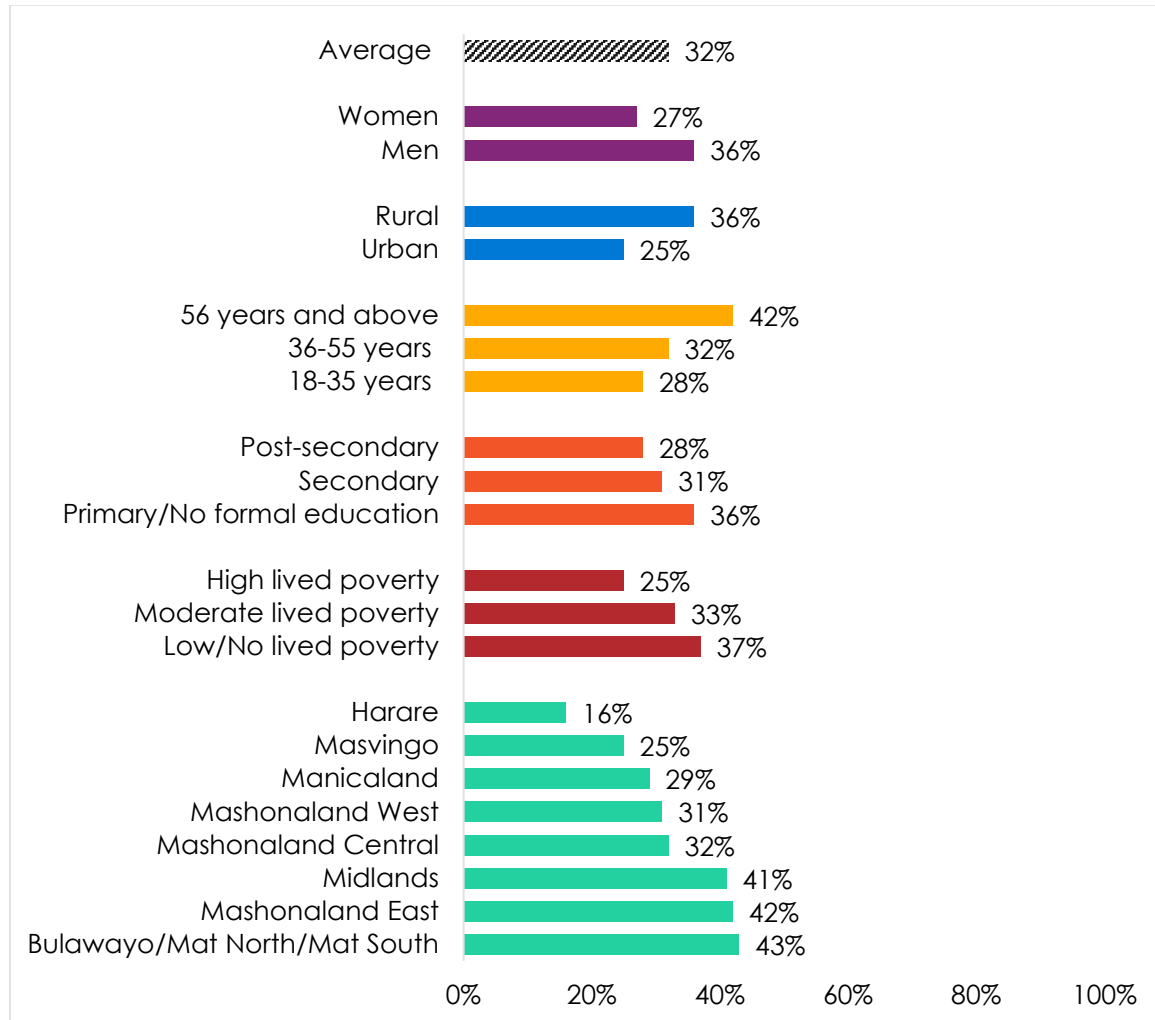
Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action:
 If you went to a local leader or a local government office to request assistance for a development project in your community, like an improved water supply or community clean-up activity?
 If you went to a local government office or anti-corruption authority to report corrupt behaviour like misuse of funds or requests for bribes?

Though a minority view, the belief that action is likely to be taken after a request for assistance with a development project is more widespread among men than women (36% vs. 27%), among rural residents than urbanites (36% vs. 25%), and among older citizens than younger ones (42% vs. 28%-32%) (Figure 8).

This expectation decreases as education levels increase, ranging from 36% among those with primary schooling or less to 28% among those with post-secondary education. It also decreases as poverty levels increase, ranging from 37% among those experiencing no or low lived poverty to 25% among those experiencing high lived poverty.

Residents in Harare metropolitan province (16%) are least likely to share this view, while those in Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South (43%), Mashonaland East (42%), and Midlands (41%) are most likely to do so.

Figure 8: Action likely to be taken after request for assistance for development project | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



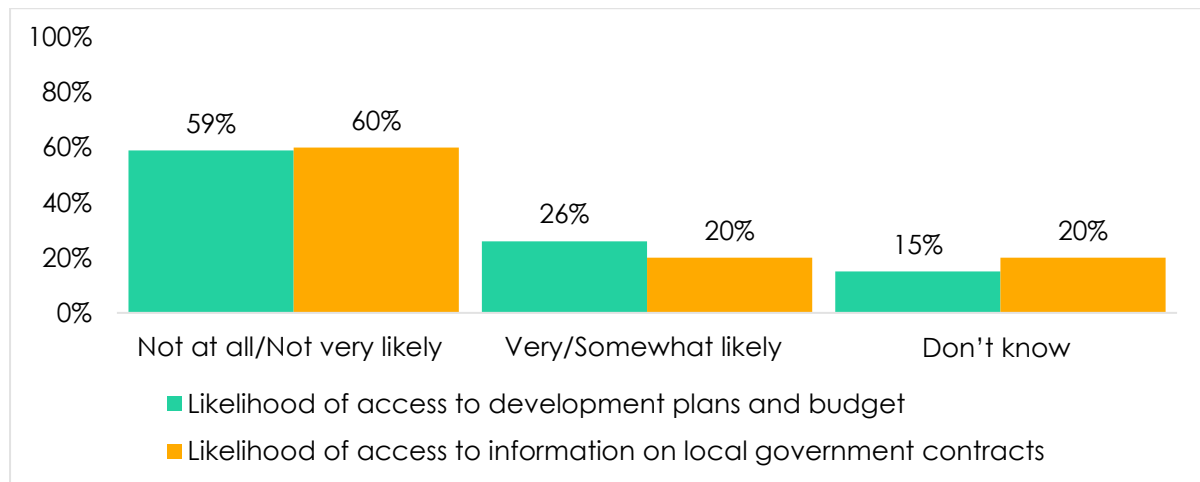
Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get someone to take action: If you went to a local leader or a local government office to request assistance for a development project in your community, like an improved water supply or community clean-up activity? (% who say “somewhat likely” or “very likely”)

Access to information

To function as effective citizens, people need information about local affairs. Survey findings show that Zimbabweans are not very confident about their ability to obtain information about local development plans and budgets: 59% see it as “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that they could get such information, while only 26% think they probably could (Figure 9).

Access to information about contracts for local government-funded projects or purchases appears just as difficult: 60% of respondents doubt they could get such information, while only 20% think they probably could.

Figure 9: Access to information on local government processes | Zimbabwe | 2022



Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say:

If you contacted your local government office to find out about the local development plan and budget?

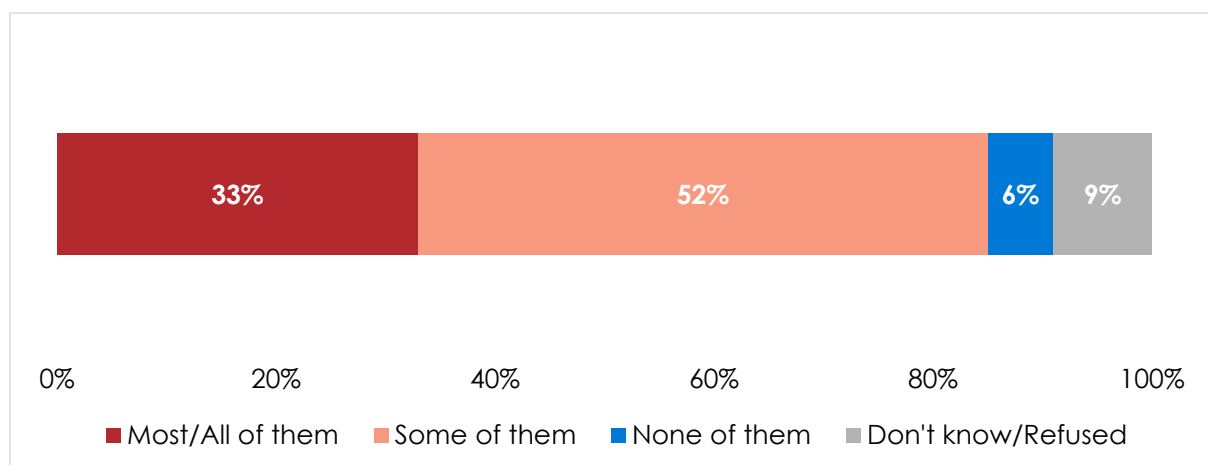
If you contacted your local government office to request to see a contract for a government-funded project or purchase?

Perceived corruption and trust in local government councils

A lack of transparency and access to information may fuel perceptions – accurate or not – that some government officials have something to hide.

One-third (33%) of survey respondents think that “most” or “all” local government councillors are involved in corruption, and more than half (52%) say “some” of them are corrupt. Only 6% think there is no corruption among local government councillors (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Perceptions of corruption among local government councillors | Zimbabwe | 2022

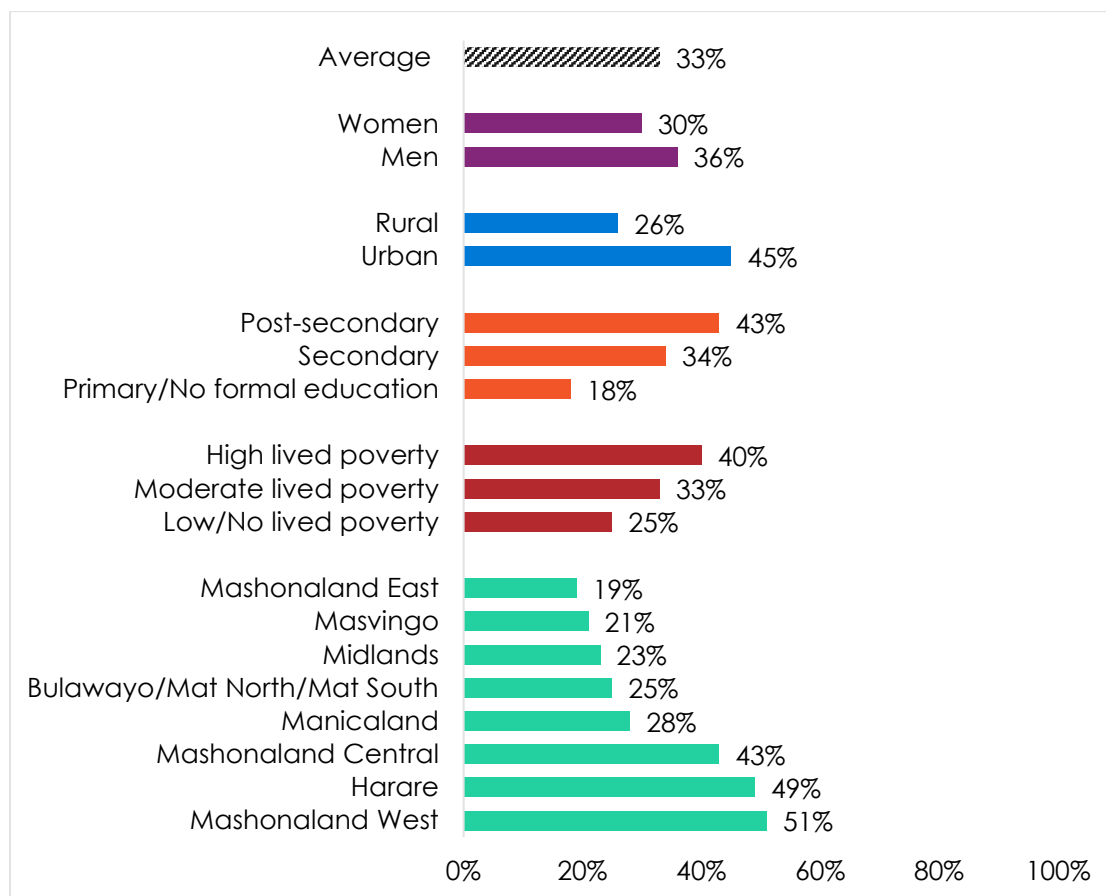


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Local government councillors?

More men (36%) than women (30%) and more urbanites (45%) than rural residents (26%) say “most” or “all” local government councillors are involved in corruption (Figure 11). This

perception increases with respondents' education level, ranging from 18% among those with primary education or less to 43% among those with post-secondary qualifications. It also increases with respondents' level of poverty, ranging from 25% among better-off respondents to 40% among those experiencing high lived poverty. Mashonaland West province (51%) and Harare (49%) record the largest proportions of citizens who say most/all local government councillors are involved in corruption.

Figure 11: Perceptions that most/all local government councillors are corrupt
 | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022

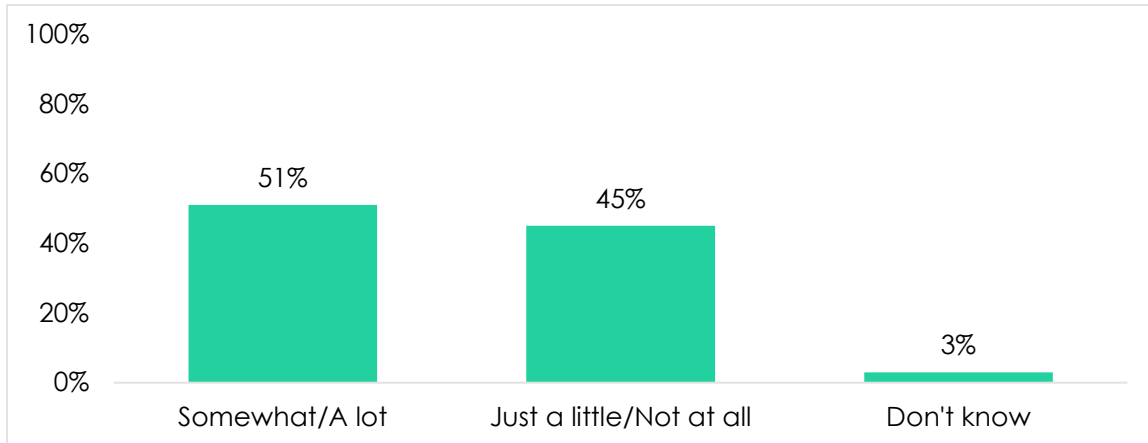


Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? Local government councillors? (% who say "most of them" or "all of them")

One effect of perceived corruption is that it undermines popular trust in officials. In Zimbabwe, trust in local government councils is not very pervasive. While a slim majority (51%) say they trust their council "somewhat" or "a lot," almost as many (45%) express "just a little" or no trust in them (Figure 12).

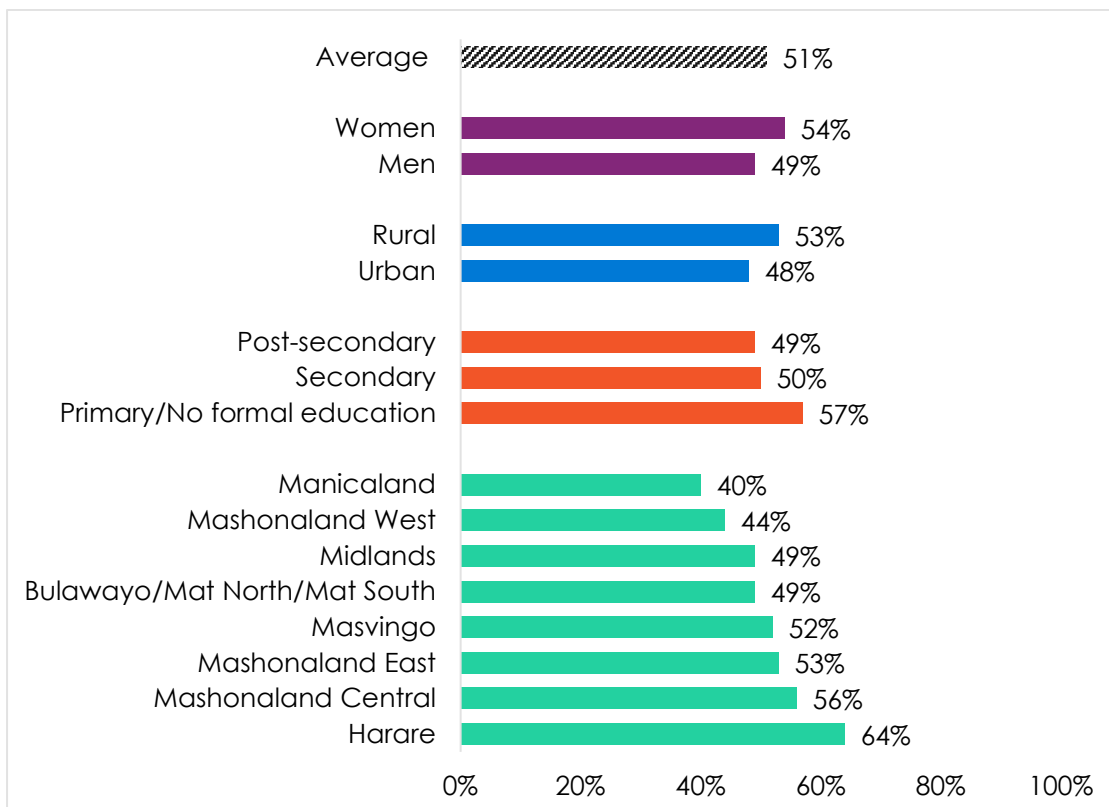
Trust in local government councils is somewhat stronger among women than men (54% vs. 49%) and in rural areas compared to cities (53% vs. 48%) (Figure 13). Respondents with primary education or less (57%) are also more likely to trust local government councils than those with more education (49%-50%). Manicaland province (40%) has the smallest proportion of respondents who express faith in local government councils, while Harare has the largest (64%).

Figure 12: Trust in local government councils | Zimbabwe | 2022



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

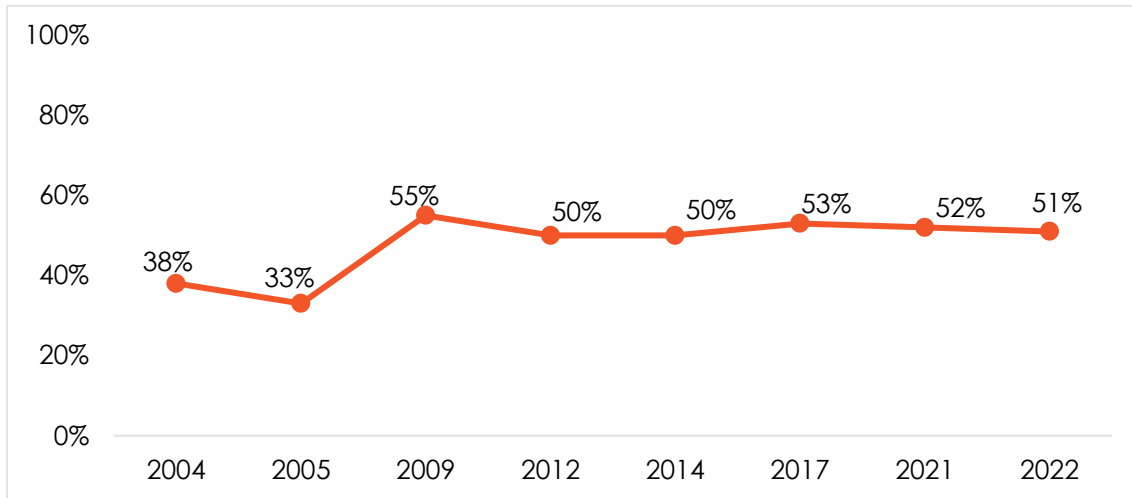
Figure 13: Trust local government councils somewhat/a lot | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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

Trust in local government was very low in 2004 (38%) and 2005 (33%) but improved somewhat in subsequent years, recording slim majorities (50%-55%) who said they trusted their local government councils "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Trust local government councils somewhat/a lot | Zimbabwe | 2004-2022



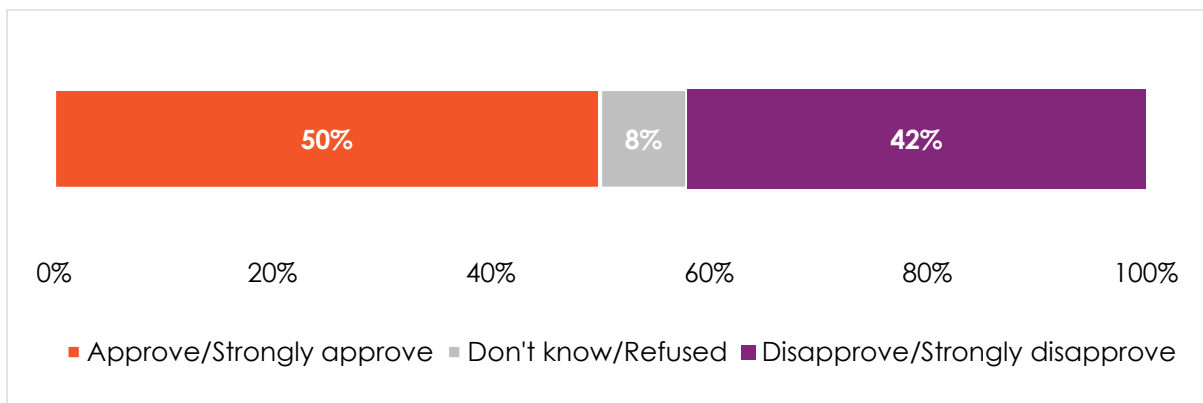
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your local government council? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Performance of local government councillors

Overall, how well do Zimbabweans think their elected local government councillors are doing their jobs?

Performance ratings are mixed: Half (50%) of citizens say they "approve" or "strongly approve" of the way local government councillors have done their work over the past 12 months, while 42% express disapproval (Figure 15).

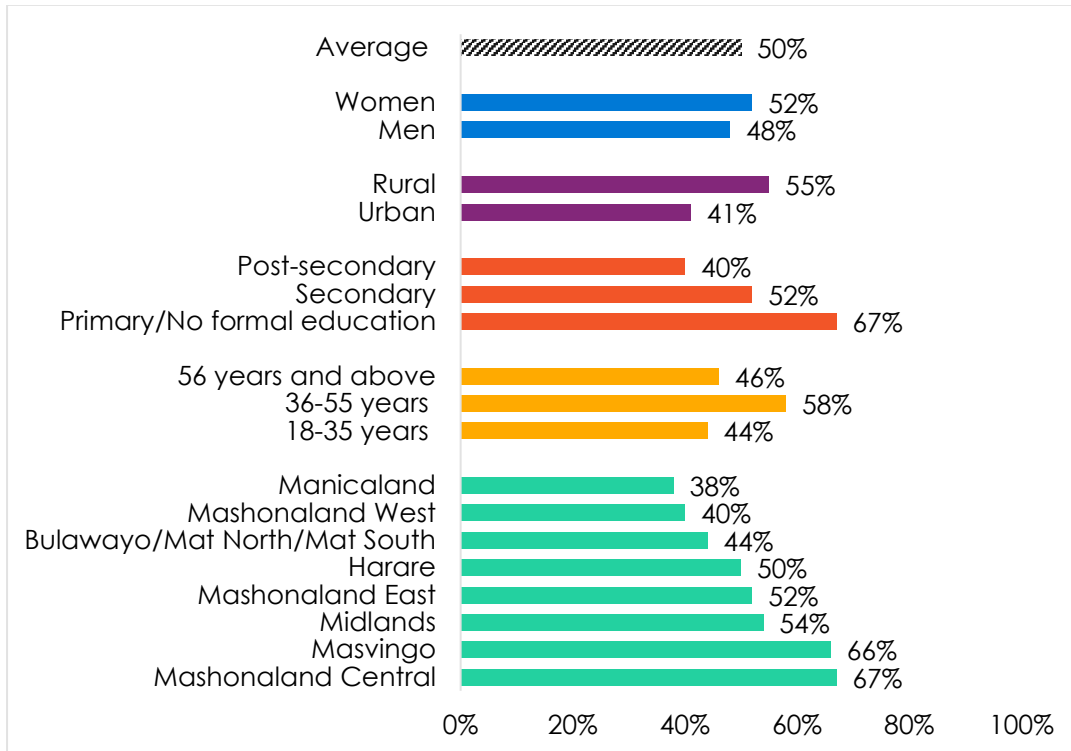
Figure 15: Assessments of performance of local government councillors | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 elected local government councillor?

Women (52%) rate local government councillors slightly better than men (48%), as do rural dwellers (55%) compared to their urban based counterparts (41%) (Figure 16). The most educated citizens are least likely to approve of their performance (40%, vs. 52%-67% of those with less schooling). Residents of Manicaland (38%) and Mashonaland West (40%) are less likely to approve of the performance of local government councillors than those in other provinces.

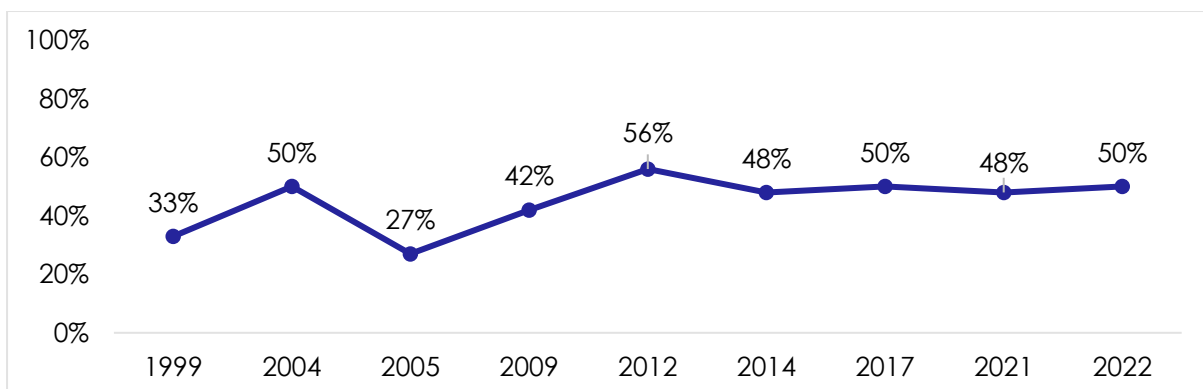
Figure 16: Approval of performance of local government councillors | by demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2022



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 elected local government councillor? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

A look at approval ratings for local government councils in Zimbabwe over time shows that approval ratings were at their lowest in 2005 (27%) and highest in 2012 (56%), the only survey in which a clear majority "approved" or "strongly approved" of their performance (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Approval of performance of local government councillors | Zimbabwe | 1999-2022



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 elected local government councillor? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")

Conclusion

As Zimbabwe stands ready to vote, a key demand from the electorate is for elected officials to prioritise voter demands rather than their own ideas. Making their demands known may not be easy, since local councillors are not seen as trying to listen to their constituents, but citizens are confident that they have the ability to join forces to make themselves heard.

While information is power, survey findings show that Zimbabweans see it as difficult to access information about local development plans, budgets, and contracts – information that would enable them to function more effectively in their role as citizens.

Perceptions of corruption and mixed job-performance ratings represent challenges that the winners in the upcoming local elections can take up if they want to gain the trust and approval of their constituents. Overall, these findings point to a variety of ways in which local governments can do a better job of serving their citizens.

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Stephen Ndoma is Afrobarometer assistant surveys manager for Southern Africa. Email: ndomashe@gmail.com.

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