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Ugandans trust their president despite perceptions of corruption in his office

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 852 | Madrine Namubiru

Summary

Widespread perceptions of corruption erode public trust in government institutions and hamper investment and economic growth (Lagarde, 2018). In Uganda, corruption is a major obstacle to economic development and service delivery (Inspectorate of Government, 2022). According to a study commissioned by the Inspectorate of Government, corruption is estimated to cost the country UGX9.144 trillion (about U.S. $2.4 billion) per year, the equivalent of 23% of the annual government budget (Fazekas, Adam, & Nikulina, 2021).

Although efforts have been made to combat graft in Uganda, including the 2023 arrest of a minister charged with defrauding the public (Biryabarema, 2023), corruption continues to impose wide-ranging costs on the society (Republic of Uganda, 2023). Transparency International's (2023) Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks Uganda among countries with high levels of perceived corruption.

Allegations of embezzlement, bribery, and nepotism have long reached into the highest levels of the Ugandan government (Al Jazeera, 2012). Among prominent cases highlighting the extent of corruption, one scandal involved four officials from the prime minister's office who were accused of inflating the prices of COVID-19 food relief (Athumani, 2020).

While President Yoweri Museveni has declared a "zero tolerance" policy for corruption (Republic of Uganda, 2019), the former minister for the Presidency, Kabakumba Masiko, and other observers have publicly questioned his commitment to action against corruption in his own government (NTV, 2024). But on the heels of a social-media series about suspected corruption in Parliament (Samilu, 2024) and U.S. and British travel sanctions against several high-ranking government officials accused of graft (AfricaNews, 2024), Museveni signalled in his State of the Nation address that he intends to act on information about government corruption (Kahungu, 2024). Subsequently, three legislators affiliated with the ruling party and other senior civil servants have been arrested and arraigned in court (East African, 2024).

Findings from Afrobarometer's Round 9 survey in 2022 shed some light on Ugandans' perceptions of corruption in the Presidency as well as the incumbent's trustworthiness, accountability, and performance.

Citizens overwhelmingly believe that "some," "most," or "all" officials in the president's office are engaged in corruption, and this has been the majority perception for the past two decades. While most Ugandans say the president must be accountable to Parliament and obey the country's courts and laws, only about half of them say Museveni usually does so.

At the same time, a majority of citizens express trust in Museveni and approve of his performance in office.

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. Round 10 surveys were launched in January 2024. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

For Round 9, the Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult Ltd., interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 adult Ugandans in January 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. This was the 12th Afrobarometer survey in Uganda since 1999.

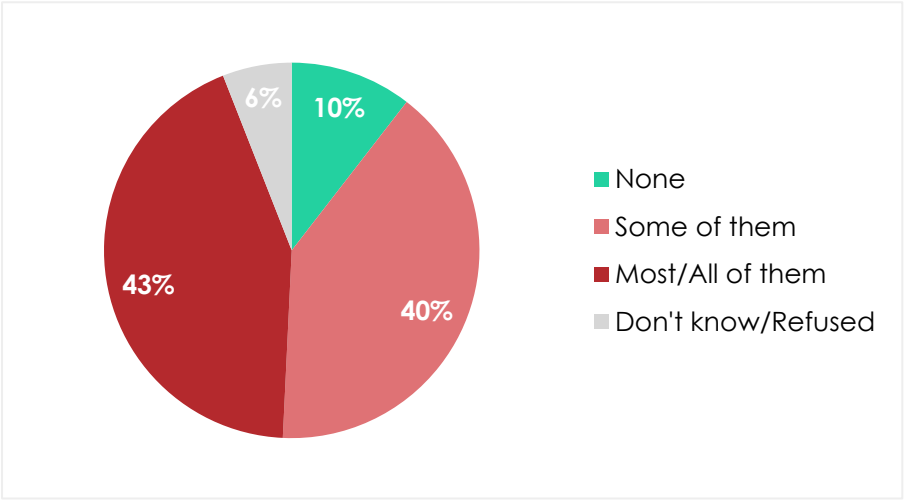
Key findings

- An overwhelming majority (84%) of Ugandans think that at least "some" officials in the president's office are corrupt, including 43% who say that "most" or "all" of them are involved in graft.
    - The share of citizens who see at least "some" corruption in the Presidency has increased by 12 percentage points compared to 2019.
- Three-quarters (75%) of respondents say the president should regularly account to Parliament about how the government spends taxpayers' money, and 79% say he must always obey the courts and laws, even if he thinks they are wrong.
- About four in 10 citizens say the president "often" or "always" ignores Parliament (41%) and the country's courts and laws (42%).
- Despite perceptions of corruption in the Presidency and lack of accountability by the president, more than six in 10 Ugandans (62%) say they trust the president "somewhat" or "a lot," and more than two-thirds (68%) "approve" or "strongly approve" of his performance in office.

Perceived corruption in the Presidency

In Uganda, the highest office in the land is widely seen to be tainted by venality. More than eight in 10 Ugandans (83%) think that at least "some" officials in the president's office are corrupt, including 43% who say that "most of them" or "all of them" are involved in corruption (Figure 1). Only one-tenth (10%) of citizens believe that the president and all officials in his office are clean.

Figure 1: Perceived corruption in the presidency | Uganda | 2022



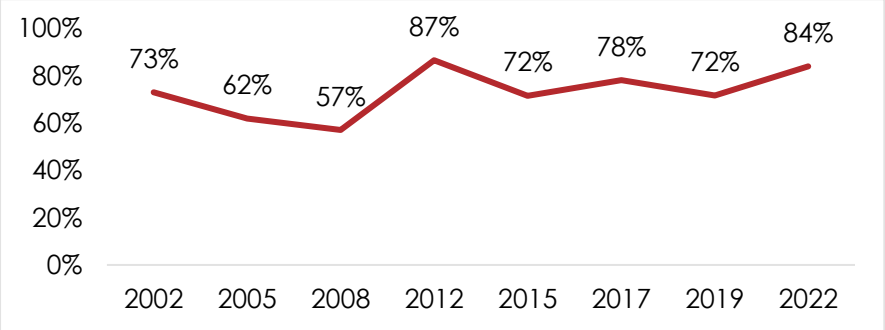
Respondents were asked: *How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president and officials in his office?*

Perceptions of corruption in the Ugandan Presidency show significant variation over time, but the share who say at least "some" officials are corrupt has never dropped below 57% in Afrobarometer surveys since the early 2000s (Figure 2). While perceptions of corruption declined from a high of 87% in 2012 to 72% in 2015, they have subsequently risen again to a near-record 84%. One reason for this may be the widely publicized corruption scandals involving senior government officials during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since Museveni has been in power for the duration of this period, changes in perceptions of corruption may reflect changing views of individuals surrounding him, as opposed to changes in the leadership itself.

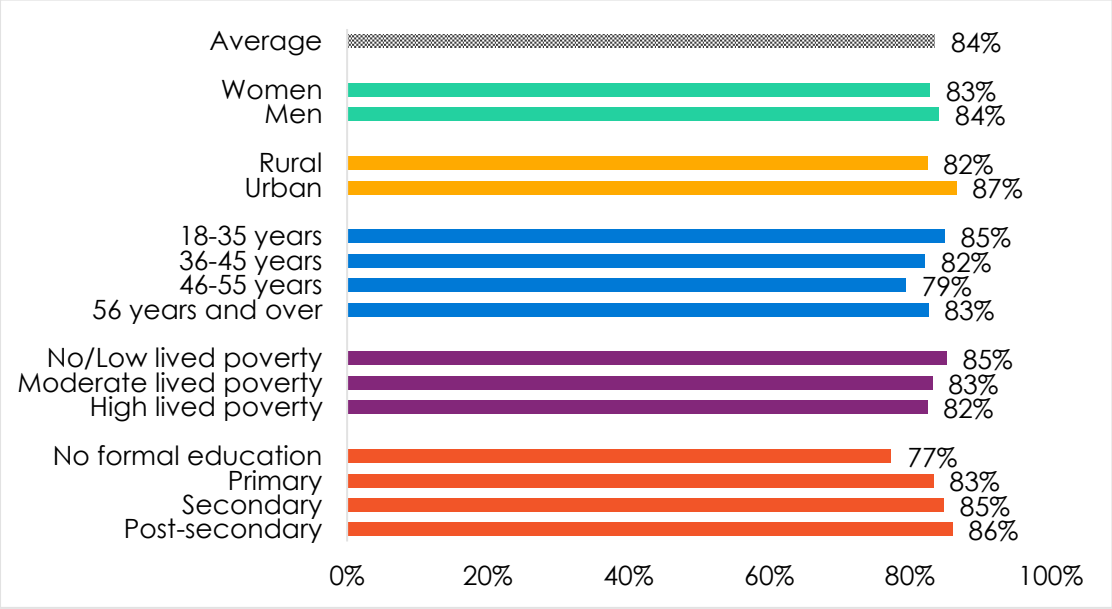
The belief that the Presidency is home to at least some corrupt officials is robust across key demographic categories: Even among respondents lacking formal education, the group least likely to espouse this view, more than three-fourths (77%) nevertheless do so (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Perceived corruption in the Presidency | Uganda | 2002-2023



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: The president and officials in his office? (% who say "some of them," "most of them," or "all of them")*

Figure 3: Perceived corruption in the Presidency | by demographic group | Uganda | 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: The president and officials in his office? (% who say "some of them," "most of them," or "all of them")*

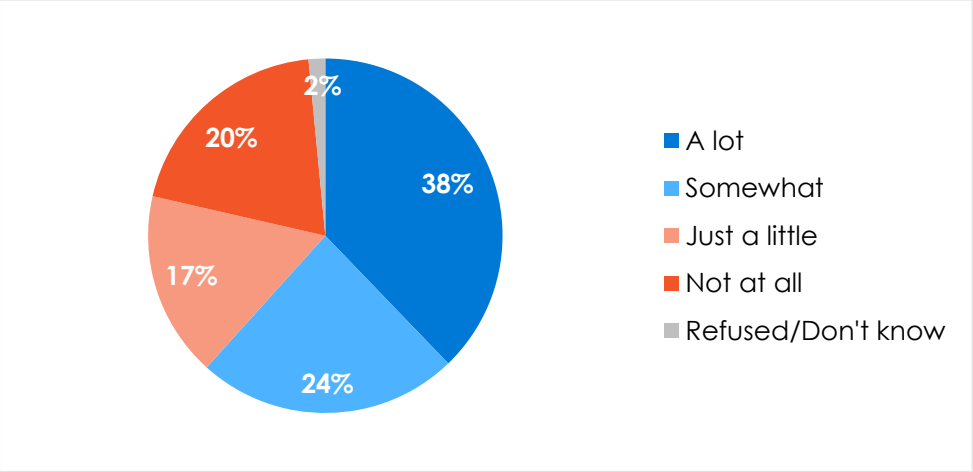
Trust in the president

Yet despite pervasive views about corruption in his office, the president enjoys the trust of a majority (62%) of Ugandans, including 38% who say they trust him "a lot" (Figure 4).

On this question, however, different demographic groups hold vastly differing opinions (Figure 5). Individuals with primary schooling or less (71%-72%) are far more trusting of the president than those who have studied more (47%-51%). Rural residents also express far greater trust in the president than urbanites (66% vs. 49%).

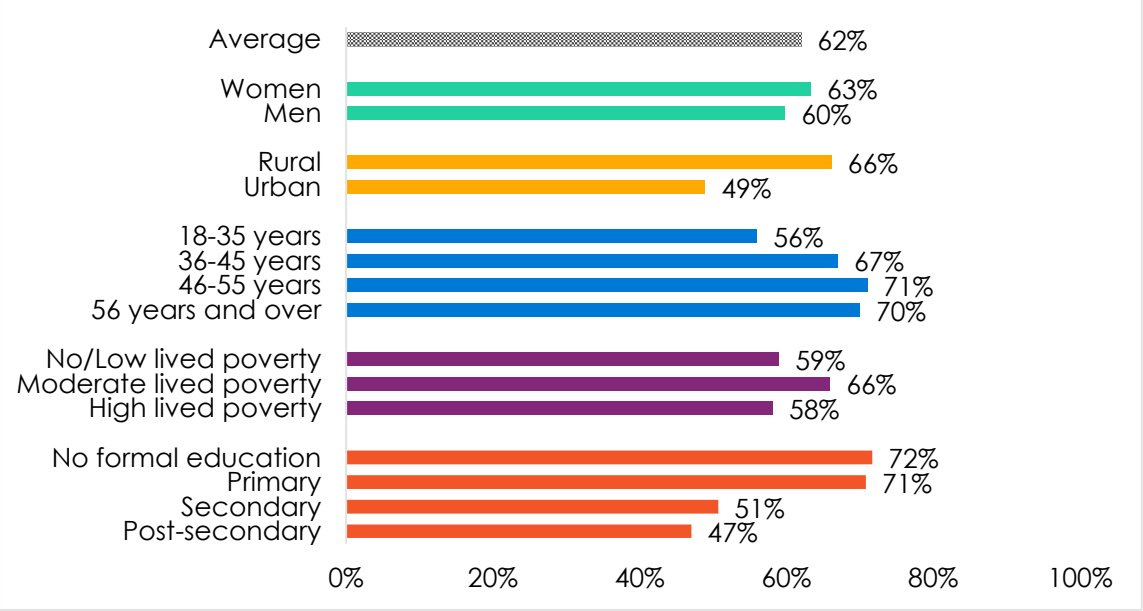
Age also seems to play a role: 18- to 35-year-olds (56%) are significantly less likely to place their trust in their country's leader than their elders (67%-71%).

Figure 4: Trust in the president | Uganda | 2022



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

Figure 5: Trust in the president | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



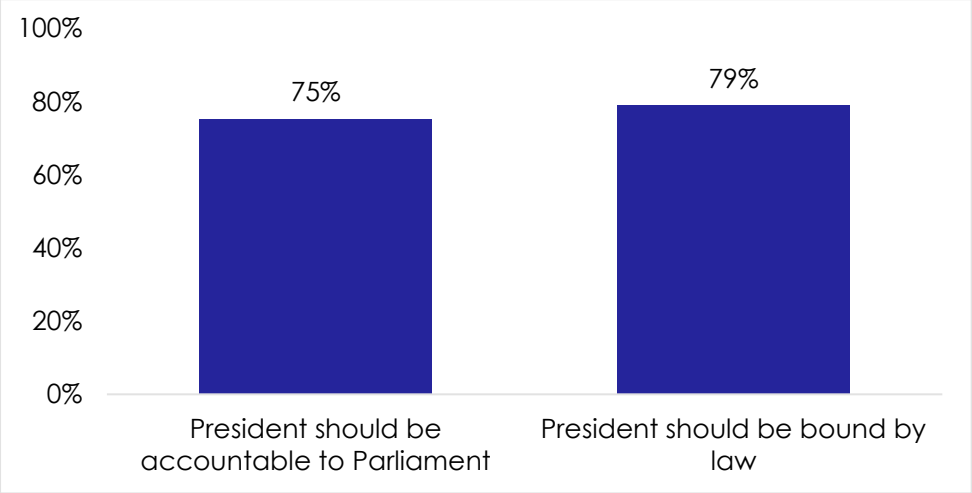
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Accountability and adherence to the rule of law

Most Ugandans want their president to be publicly accountable and to respect the rule of law. These are important signifiers of ordinary citizens' wish that the executive be subject to checks and balances in an appropriately ordered government.

Three-quarters (75%) of respondents say the president should give regular reports to Parliament on how the government spends taxpayers' money, and nearly eight in 10 (79%) say he should obey the laws and courts even when he thinks they are wrong (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Should the president be accountable to Parliament and bound by the law? | Uganda | 2022



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)

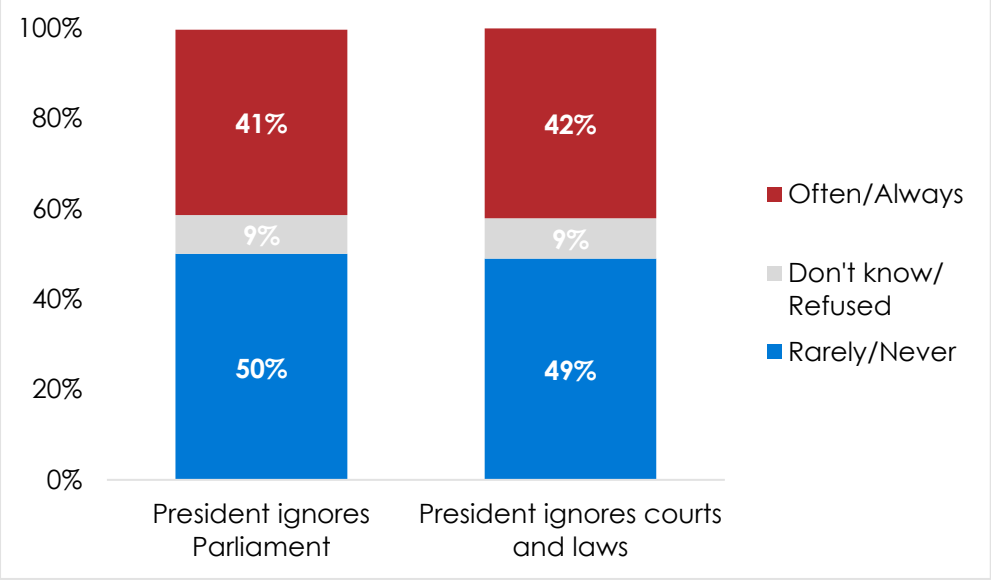
Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.
Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 2)

In practice, Ugandans are quite divided in their assessments of the president's behaviour. Half (50%) of respondents say he "rarely" or "never" ignores Parliament and does as he pleases, but a sizeable minority (41%) say he "often" or "always" does so (Figure 7).

Roughly the same proportions are recorded on the question of whether or not he ignores the courts and laws: 49% rarely/never vs. 42% often/always.

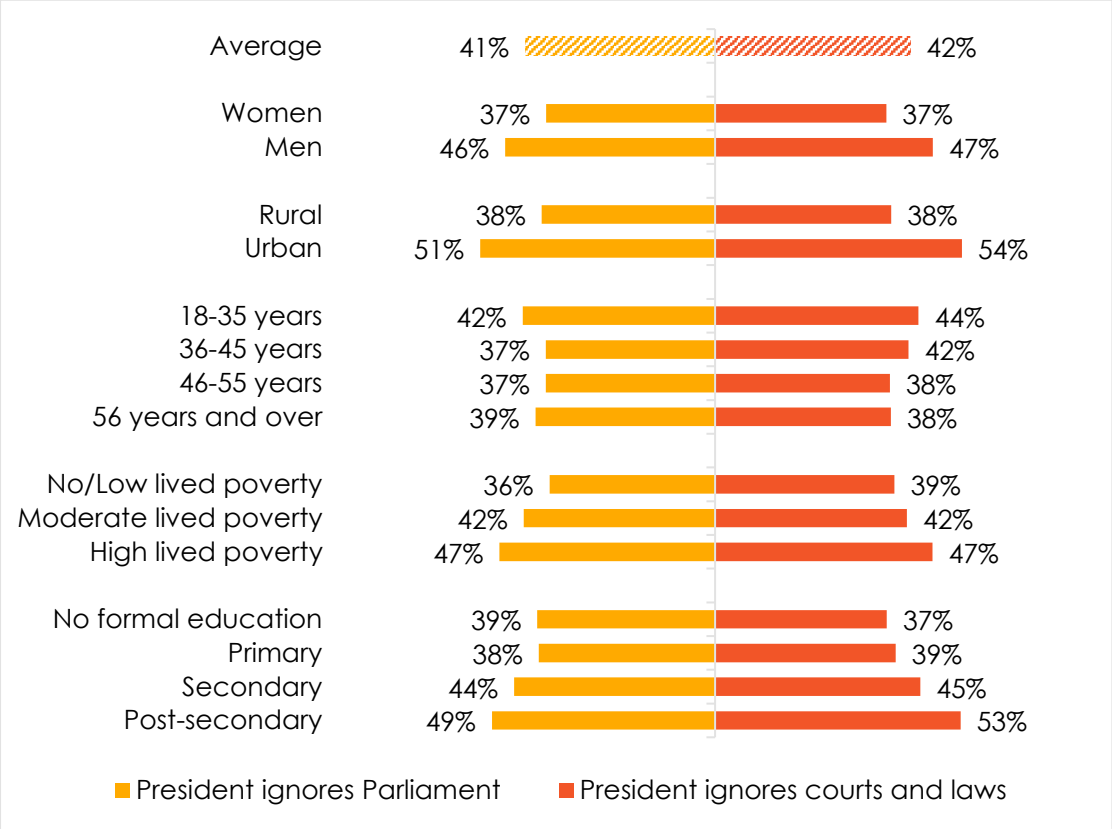
Those most likely to see the president as often ignoring the legislature and the courts/laws men, urban residents, youth, the poorest respondents, and citizens with post-secondary education (Figure 8).

Figure 7: How often does the president ignore Parliament? | Uganda | 2022



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

Figure 8: The president often/always ignores Parliament and laws | by demographic group | Uganda | 2022



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

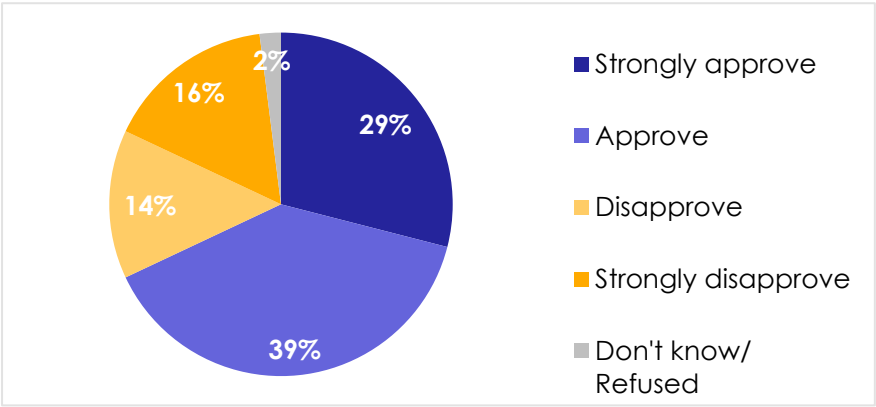
President's performance

Despite a prominent sense in the population that the president is prone to doing as he pleases – or, perhaps, because of it – Museveni's public scorecard is fairly positive. Survey findings show that more than two-thirds (68%) of Ugandans "approve" (39%) or "strongly approve" (29%) of the president's performance, while only 30% disapprove (Figure 9).

And while there is notable variation in approval levels across a range of demographic categories, majorities in all of these groups express satisfaction with the president performance (Figure 10). The lowest approval rating comes from urban residents, still a solid majority at 60%, though well below the 72% approval recorded in rural areas.

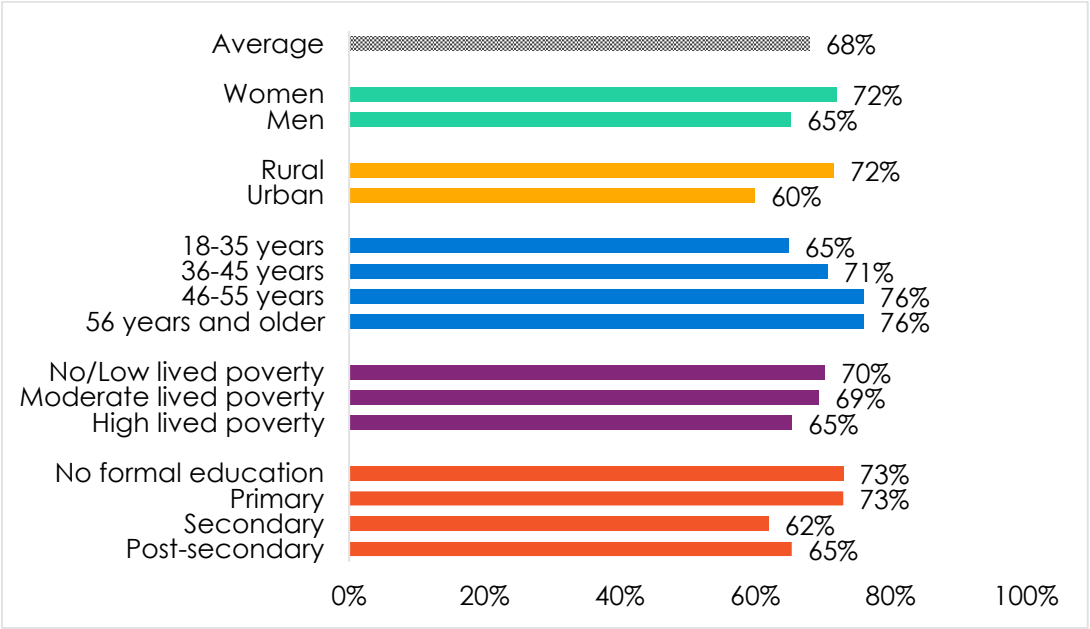
Approval is also particularly high among women (72%), citizens over age 45 (76%), and those with primary schooling or less (73%).

Figure 9: The president's performance | Uganda | 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: President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni?*

Figure 10: Approval of the president's performance | by demographic group | Uganda | 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: President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni? (% who "approve" or "strongly approve")*

Conclusion

President Museveni's office is clearly marked by suspicion: Afrobarometer survey findings show that the vast majority of ordinary Ugandans believe the Presidency is staffed by at least some corrupt individuals who serve themselves at the expense of the public at large.

Yet the president himself is, in the eyes of a majority, trustworthy and doing a good job, despite the fact that nearly half of all citizens believe he often ignores Parliament and fails to abide by court rulings and laws – something that most of them feel he is not entitled to do.

These findings present a couple of puzzles. The first is Ugandans' continued trust in the president, despite his hiring decisions. This is especially puzzling given how long he has been in charge: A trend analysis shows that hefty majorities of survey respondents have believed the Presidency to be home to corrupt officials for the past two decades.

The second is his approval rating when so many see him as acting in contravention of broadly shared norms calling for his accountability to Parliament and his respect for judicial authorities.

Understanding and resolving these puzzles will require further research. In the meantime, if Uganda is to rid itself of the stench of corruption, the president will have to make good on his "zero tolerance" promises – and be seen to be doing so.

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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