Advision Lesotho

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Basotho want Parliament to heed voters' demands but see MPs as serving their own interests

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 899 | Libuseng Malephane

Summary

Lesotho is a parliamentary democracy whose legislature consists of two chambers, the Senate (the upper chamber) and the National Assembly (the lower chamber, generally referred to as Parliament in Lesotho).

The National Assembly consists of 120 elected members. These members are elected in a mixed-member electoral system: 80 seats are elected via a first-past-the-post system, while the other 40 are elected on a proportional-representation basis (Parliament of Lesotho, n.d.).

Globally, the fundamental roles of a legislature are accepted as making laws, holding the executive accountable, and representing the people (Indicators for Democratic Parliament).

So what do Basotho want from their National Assembly? And how do they evaluate its members' performances?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey show that Basotho want a Parliament that responds to voters' demands, is responsible for enacting laws, and holds the executive to account.

However, what they perceive is members of Parliament (MPs) who serve their own interests and do not listen to citizens. Trust in Parliament is low, and almost half of Basotho say "most" or "all" MPs are corrupt.

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

The Afrobarometer team in Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Basotho in March 2024. 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 Lesotho in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- About six in 10 Basotho say that Parliament, not the prime minister, should make laws (60%) and that MPs should ensure that the prime minister accounts for how his government spends taxpayers' money (62%).

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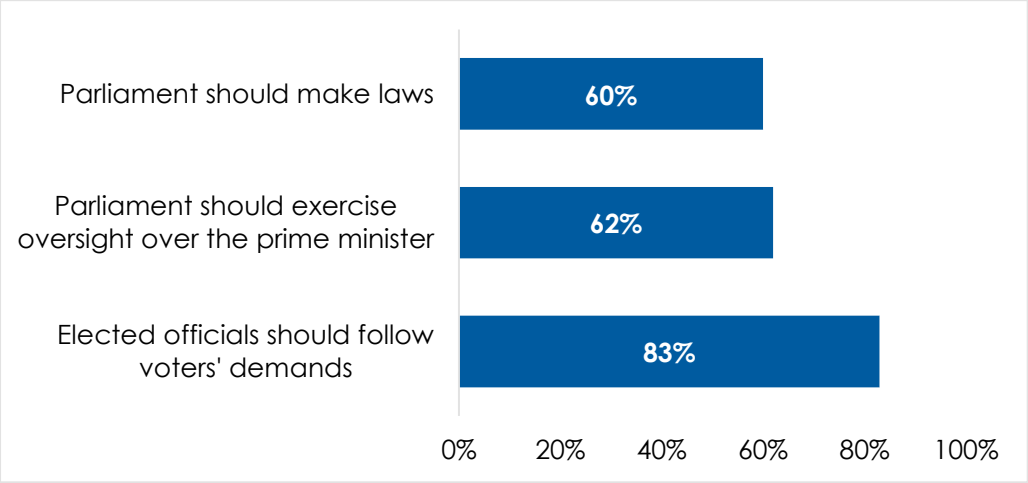
- More than eight in 10 citizens (83%) want MPs to act in accordance with voters' demands rather than their own ideas.
- But more than two-thirds (69%) of respondents say MPs never listen to ordinary citizens.
- Two-thirds (66%) of Basotho say MPs mainly serve their own interests. One-fifth (21%) say they serve the interests of their political parties, and only one in 10 survey participants (11%) believe MPs act in the interests of all Basotho.
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Basotho disapprove of their MP's performance.
    - Only 30% are satisfied with Parliament's monitoring of the executive, while one-fourth (25%) are satisfied with MPs' legislative work.
- Nearly half (48%) of citizens perceive "most" or "all" MPs as corrupt.
- And seven in 10 (69%) say they trust parliamentarians "just a little bit" or "not at all."

Parliament's role and function

What is the ideal role of a legislative assembly? According to the overwhelming majority (83%) of Basotho, MPs should act according to voters' demands as opposed to following their own ideas (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Views on parliamentary functions | Lesotho | 2024



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 leaders should follow their own ideas in deciding what is best for the country.
Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Members of Parliament represent the people; therefore, they should make laws for this country, even if the prime minister does not agree.
Statement 2: Since the prime minister represents all of us, he should pass laws without worrying about what Parliament thinks.
Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the prime minister explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.
Statement 2: The prime minister should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
(Figure shows % who "agree" with Statement 1 in each case.)

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And about six in 10 respondents say that Parliament should be responsible for making legislation even if the prime minister does not agree (60%) and should exercise oversight over the prime minister (62%).

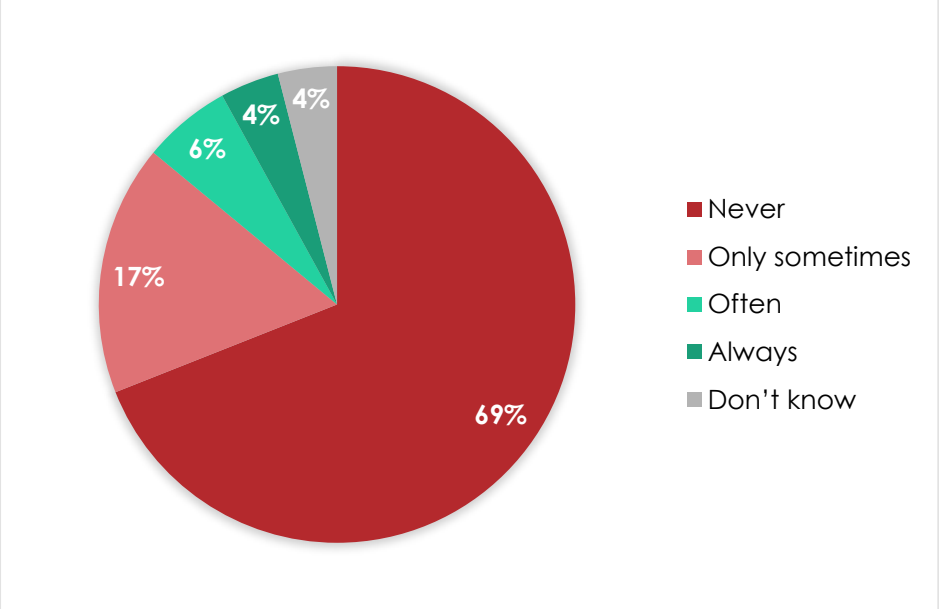
MPs' responsiveness

Do MPs listen to voters?

MPs can be evaluated on their interaction – or lack thereof – with the people they are supposed to represent.

On the question of whether MPs listen to ordinary citizens, about seven in 10 respondents (69%) say they "never" do, while only one in 10 maintain that they "often" or "always" listen (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Do MPs listen to ordinary citizens? | Lesotho | 2024



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 Parliament?*

The perception that MPs don't listen to citizens is fairly consistent across key demographic groups (Figure 3). Respondents experiencing moderate or high levels of lived poverty[1] (73%-74%) are more likely to say MPs don't listen than better-off Basotho (62%), as are supporters of the political opposition (70%) compared to supporters of the ruling coalition parties (65%).

[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 previous year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Patel (2022).

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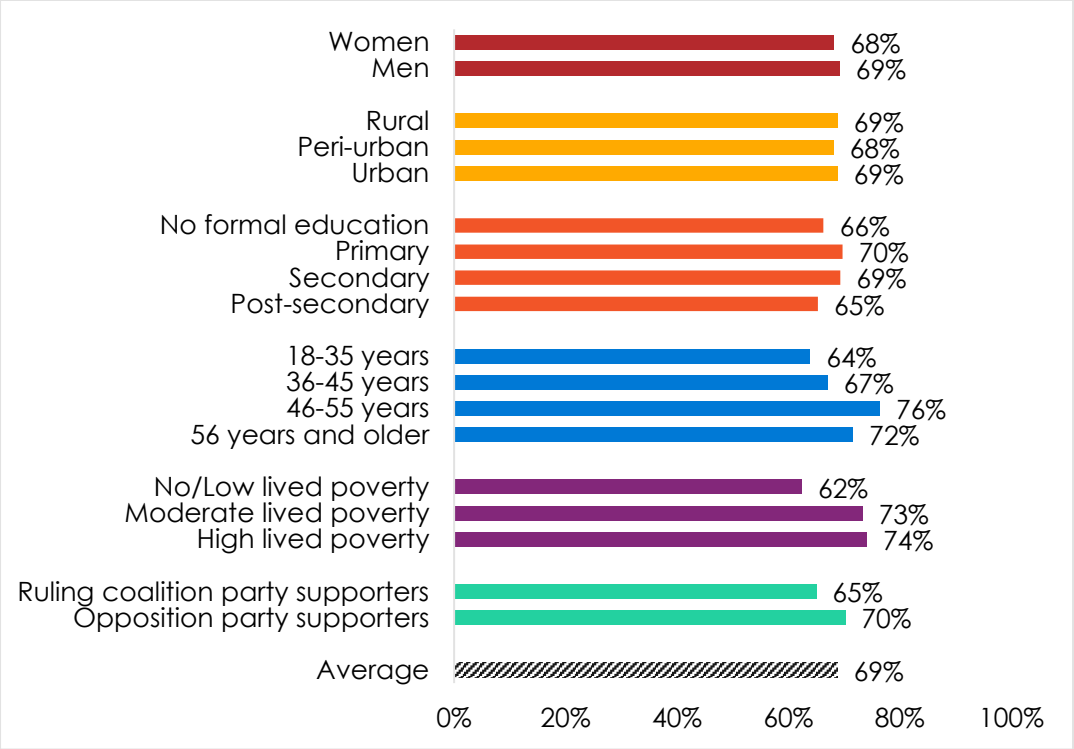
Figure 3: MPs never listen to ordinary citizens | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



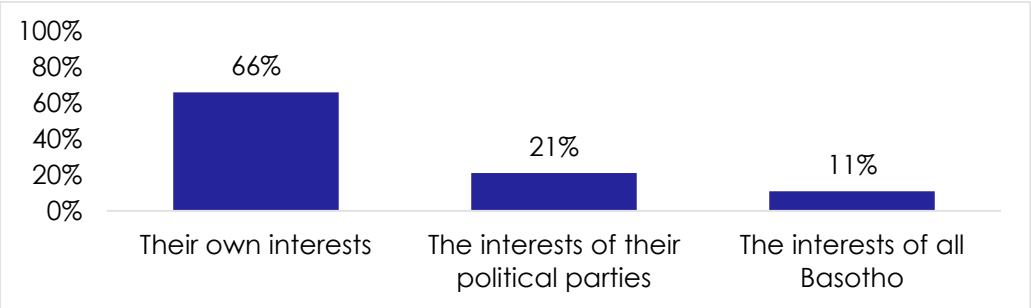
Respondents were asked: *How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say: Members of Parliament? (% who say "never")*

Whose interests do MPs serve?

Critics have accused MPs of being in Parliament for their own interests, particularly for the salary and benefits they receive (Lesotho News Agency, 2024; Liphoto, 2024). And the courts have censured Parliament for its legislative decisions, including a Constitutional Court judgement that decisions were taken along party lines and not necessarily for the benefit of citizens (Rickard, 2019).

How do ordinary Basotho view their MPs in this regard? Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say MPs prioritise their own interests (Figure 4). One fifth (21%) think they prioritise the interests of their political parties, while only one in 10 (11%) say they act in the interests of all citizens.

Figure 4: Whose interests do MPs serve? | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Thinking about how members of Parliament operate in this country, whose interests would you say they prioritise first; would you say their own interests, the interests of all Basotho or the interests of their political parties?*

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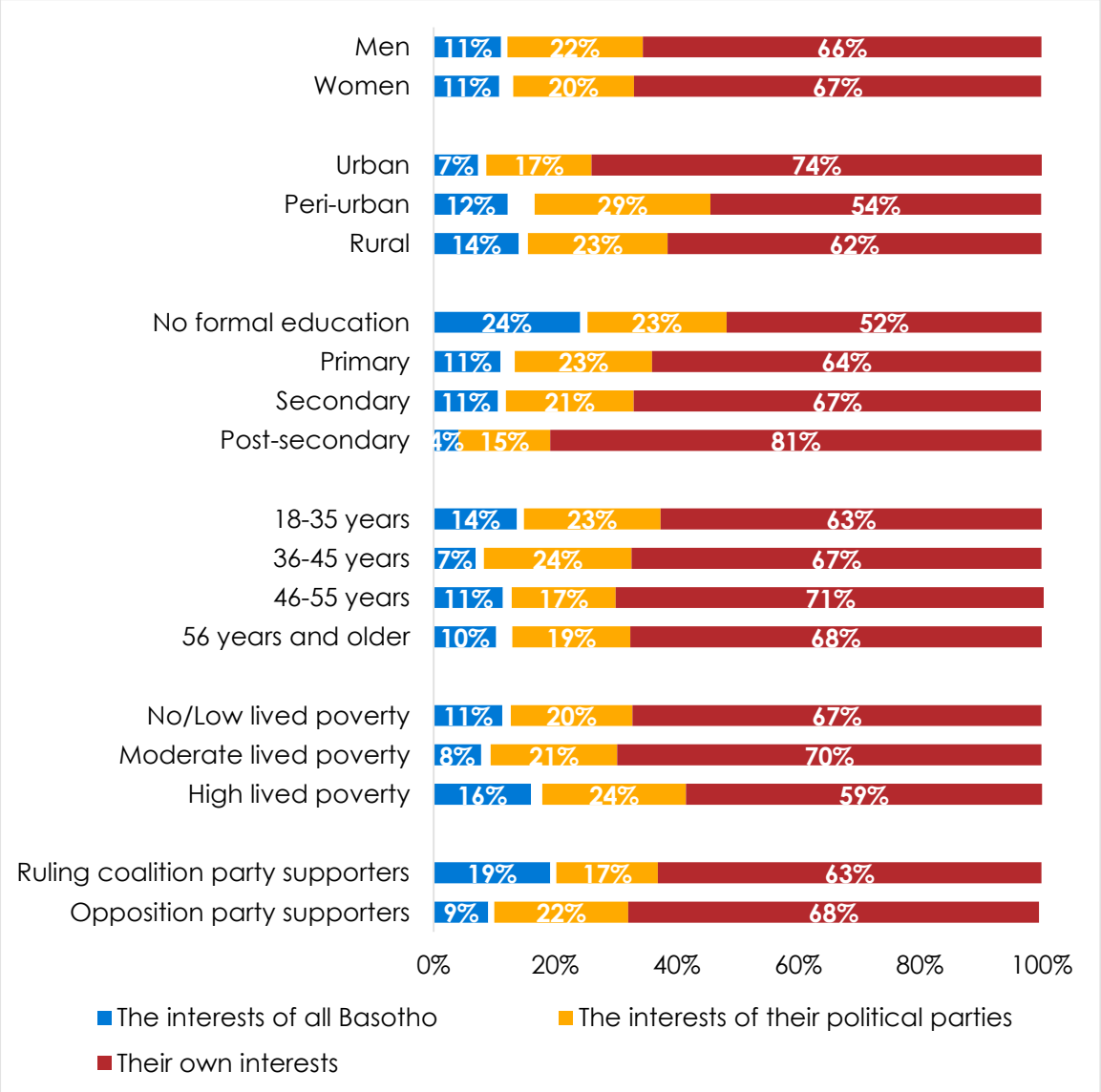
The perception that MPs are there to serve their own interests increases with respondents' education level, reaching 81% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 5). Urban residents are more likely to share this belief than those living in rural and peri-urban areas (74% vs. 54%-62%). Supporters of the ruling coalition parties are twice as likely as opposition supporters to say that MPs serve the interests of all Basotho (19% vs. 9%).

Figure 5: Whose interests do MPs serve? | by demographic group | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked: *Thinking about how members of Parliament operate in this country, whose interests would you say they prioritise first; would you say their own interests, the interests of all Basotho, or the interests of their political parties?*

Parliamentary performance

Citizens' evaluations of their MPs' performance and integrity are largely negative (Figure 6).

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Basotho "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of the way their MPs have done their jobs over the previous year. Seven in 10 respondents say they trust Parliament "just a little" or "not at all." And almost half (48%) say that "most" or "all" MPs are corrupt.

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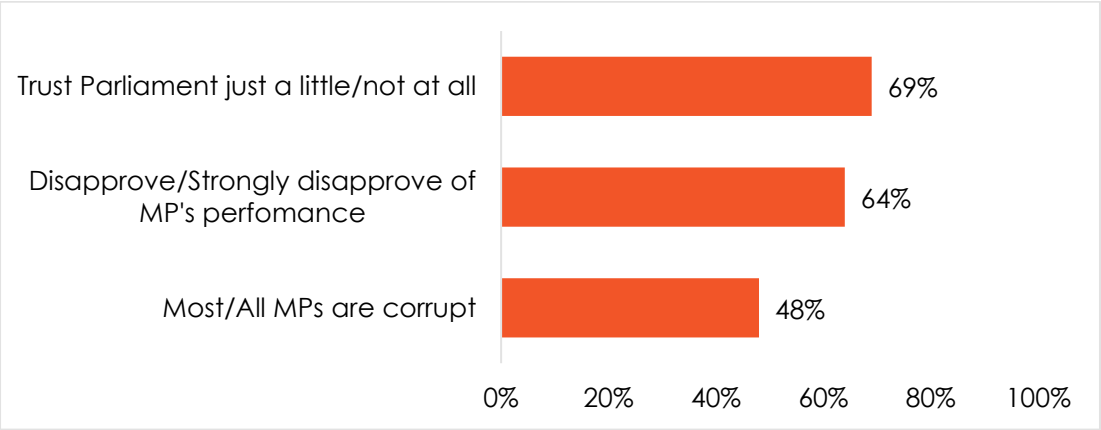
Figure 6: Negative evaluations of Parliament | Lesotho | 2024

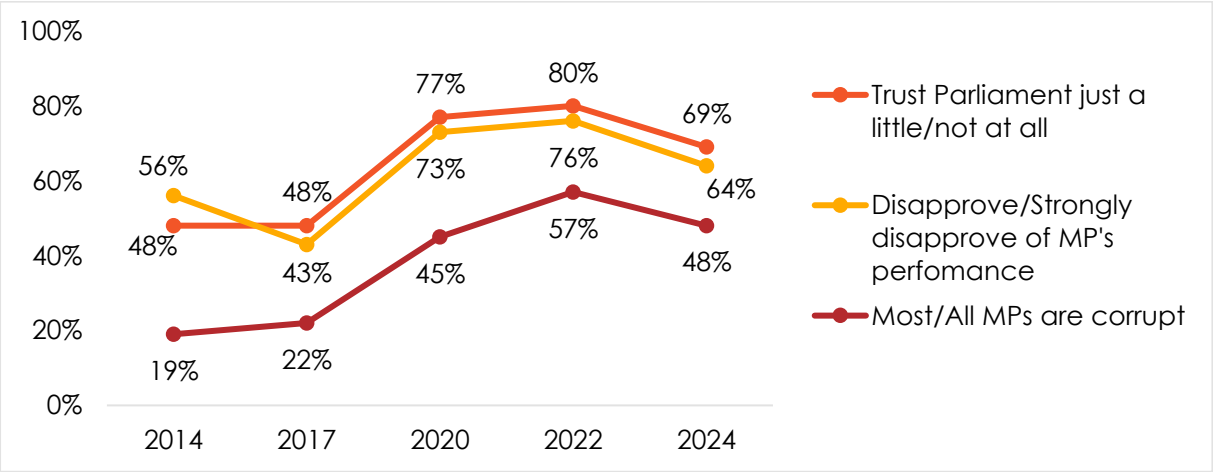


Respondents were asked:

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 member of Parliament?
How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Parliament?
How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Members of Parliament?

Negative evaluations of Parliament have increased sharply over the past decade, reaching their highest levels in 2022 before declining somewhat in 2024 (Figure 7). Disapproval of MPs' job performance climbed from 43% of Basotho in 2017 to 76% in 2022, then came down to 64% in 2024. Similarly, distrust increased from 48% to 80% in 2022 before dropping back to 69% in 2024. And the share of citizens reporting perceptions of widespread corruption in Parliament tripled between 2014 (19%) and 2022 (57%) before decreasing by 9 percentage points.

Figure 7: Negative evaluations of Parliament | Lesotho | 2014-2024



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 member of Parliament?
How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Parliament?
How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Members of Parliament?

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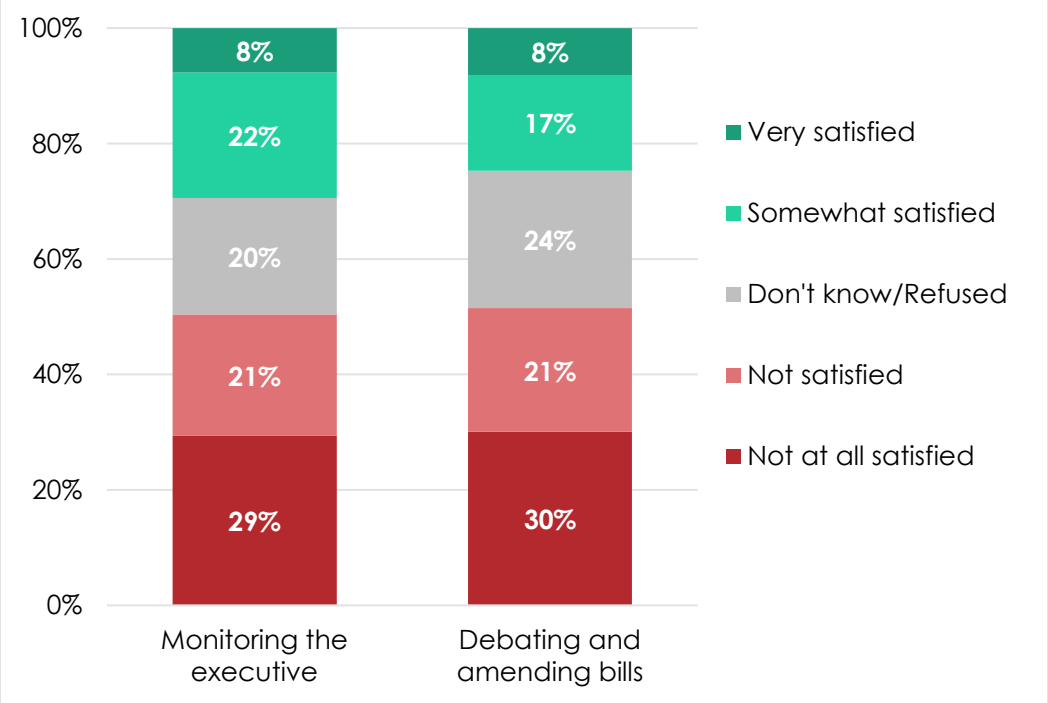
As part of assessing Parliament's work, Basotho were also asked how satisfied they are with the way the National Assembly performs its legislative and oversight duties. Only three in 10 respondents (29%[2]) say they are "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" with MPs' monitoring of the executive branch of government, while half (50%) are "not satisfied" or "not at all satisfied" (Figure 8).

As for debating and amending bills presented in the House to ensure that laws reflect the best interests of the people, even fewer (25%) are happy with MPs' efforts, while half (51%) are dissatisfied.

Large proportions (20%-25%) declined to offer opinions on these questions or say they "don't know."

Figure 8: Satisfaction with the work of Parliament | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked:

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with how the National Assembly undertakes the following roles and functions, or have you not heard enough to say:
Monitoring the work of the executive branch of government?
Debating all bills presented in the House and making amendments to ensure that laws reflect the best interests of Basotho?

Dissatisfaction with the work of Parliament increases with respondents' education level, reaching 60% on both counts among those with post-secondary education (Figure 9). Respondents aged 46-55 are the only age cohort where fewer than half are displeased with MP performance on either of these key parliamentary functions.

[2] Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 22% "somewhat satisfied" and 8% "very satisfied" sum to 29%).

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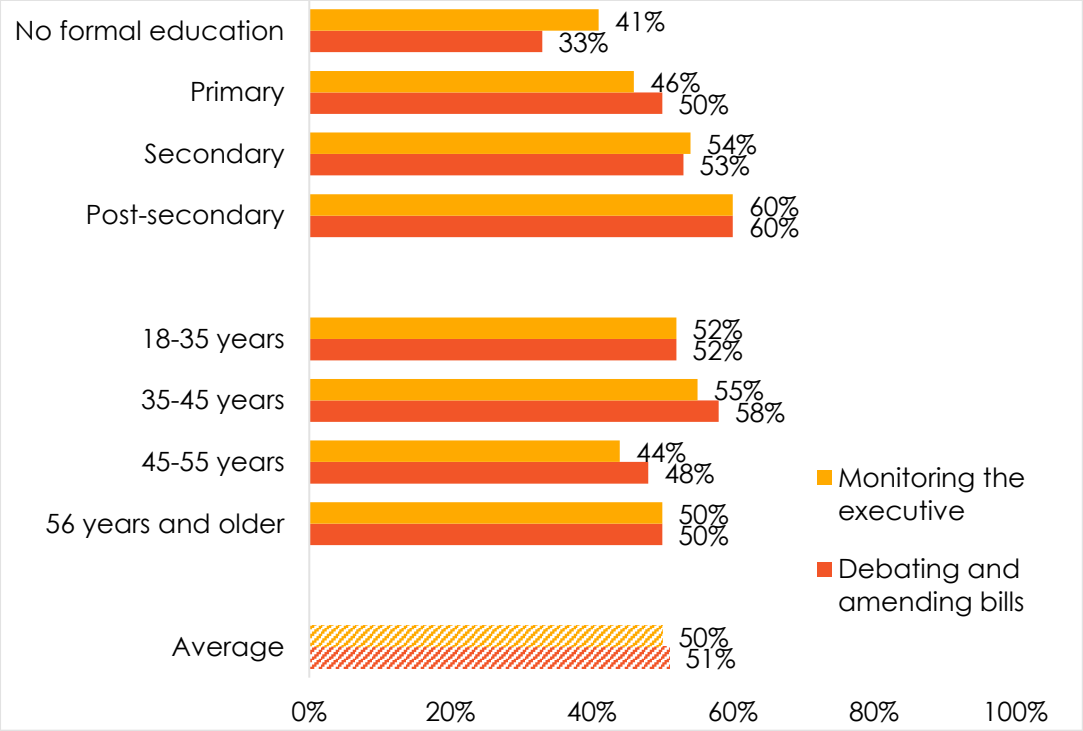
Figure 9: Dissatisfaction with the work of Parliament | by age and education level | Lesotho | 2024



Respondents were asked:

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with how the National Assembly undertakes the following roles and functions, or have you not heard enough to say:
Monitoring the work of the executive branch of government?
Debating all bills presented in the House and making amendments to ensure that laws reflect the best interests of Basotho?

Conclusion

While Basotho see Parliament as fulfilling essential roles in a functioning democracy, they express deep disappointment with its current performance.

Citizens report low levels of trust in MPs, feeling that their representatives are largely self-serving and unresponsive to public demands. Satisfaction with Parliament's legislative and oversight performance is minimal, with only a minority approving of its efforts to hold the executive accountable and amend laws in the public's interest.

Mistrust, negative job performance ratings, and perceptions of widespread corruption in Parliament are down somewhat from 2022's record highs, but still represent enormous increases over the past decade.

These findings suggest a pressing need for reforms to restore public confidence and strengthen the democratic mandate of Lesotho's National Assembly. MPs would be wise to heed these sentiments if they hope to secure the public's endorsement in future elections and contribute to consolidating democracy in the country.

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Libuseng Malephane is the national investigator for Advision Lesotho, Afrobarometer's national partner in Lesotho. Email: libusengmalephane@gmail.com.

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