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Zambians prefer democracy despite decline in satisfaction with how it is working

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 981 | Edward Chibwili

Summary

Zambia's democratic expedition has been marked by noteworthy progress and challenges, with citizens dependably indicating a strong preference for democratic governance (Ministry of Justice, 2024). Since transitioning to multiparty democracy in 1991, Zambia has held regular and credible elections, reinforced its institutions, and encouraged citizen participation. But the country has also experienced periods of democratic relapsing, including restrictions on civil liberties and manipulation of electoral processes (Chibwili, 2024; Olukoshi, 2022). Notwithstanding these challenges, Zambia has upheld a commitment to democratic principles, including separation of powers, protection of individual rights, and promotion of accountability (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

However, current trends suggest that Zambians are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the performance of their democratic system. This dissatisfaction is reflected in declining trust in government and institutions and growing perceptions of corruption and inequality (Kasonde, 2024). The economy has also been a major concern as many Zambians experience rising costs of living, poverty, unemployment, and limited access to basic services (Civil Society for Poverty Reduction, 2024; Chibwili, 2025). These problems have eroded confidence in the government's ability to deliver on its promises and have raised questions about the effectiveness of Zambia's democratic system (Chanda & Lufeyo, 2024).

According to the Afrobarometer Round 10 survey, Zambians overwhelmingly support democracy, elections, and a two-term limit on presidential mandates. Most citizens also say they feel free to choose whom to vote for, to join political organisations of their choice, and to say what they think. But assessments of the country's democracy, and satisfaction with its workings, have declined sharply after peaking in the wake of the last general election.

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 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 Zambia, led by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (INESOR), interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult citizens between 8 and 28 July 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 standard Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Zambia in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

Key findings

- More than eight in 10 Zambians (85%) say they prefer democracy to any other form of government.

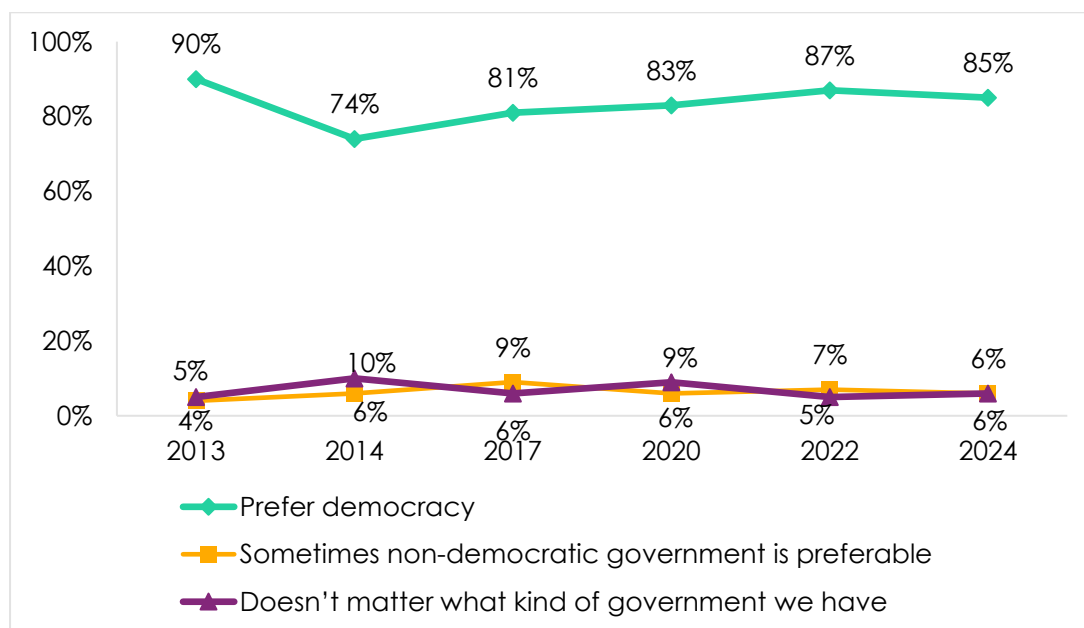
- Overwhelming majorities reject dictatorship (90%), military rule (88%), and one-party rule (85%).
- Almost nine out of 10 Zambians (86%) support regular, open, and honest elections as the best way to choose their political leaders, a position that has consistently had strong support over the past decade.
- Seven in 10 citizens (70%) endorse a two-term limit on presidential mandates, though this position has weakened somewhat since 2020.
- But about three in 10 citizens (29%) describe the country as “not a democracy” or “a democracy with major problems,” an 11-percentage-point increase compared to 2022.
- And the share of citizens who say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy is working in Zambia declined from 71% in 2022 to 54%.
- Nevertheless, large majorities of Zambians say they feel free to choose whom to vote for without pressure (93%), to join political organisations of their choice (80%), and to say what they think (78%).

Views on democracy

Support for democracy

Zambians largely agree on the kind of political system they want and how they want to choose their political leaders. Almost nine out of 10 citizens (85%) prefer democracy over any other system (Figure 1). Except for a dip to 74% in Afrobarometer's 2014 survey, support for democracy has consistently exceeded 80% for the past decade.

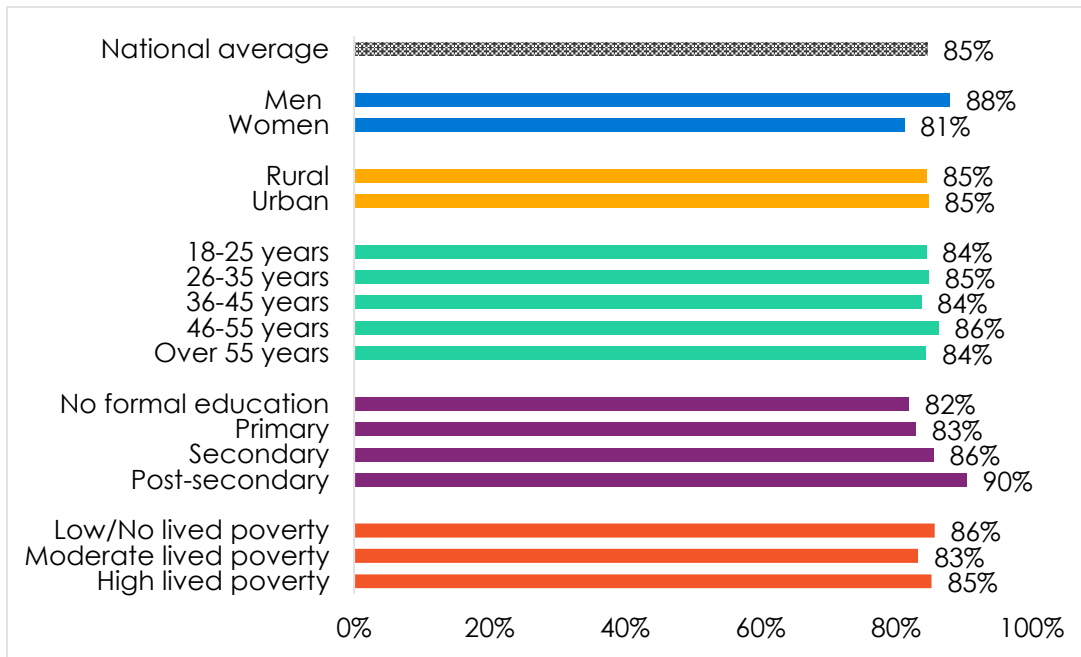
Figure 1: Support for democracy | Zambia | 2013-2024



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Men (88%) and the most educated citizens (90%) are somewhat more likely to favour democracy than women (81%) and those with less schooling (82%-86%) (Figure 2).

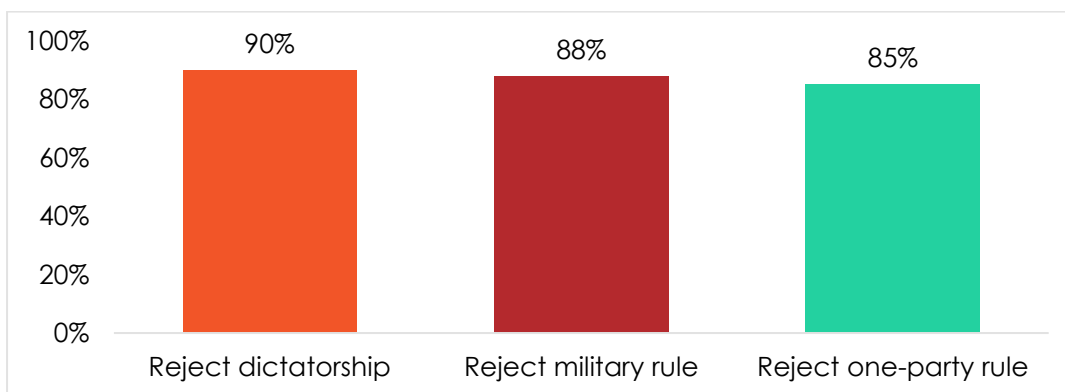
Figure 2: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government
 | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
 (% who agree with Statement 1)

In addition, overwhelming majorities reject non-democratic alternatives, including dictatorship (90%), military rule (88%), and one-party rule (85%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Rejection of non-democratic alternatives | Zambia | 2024

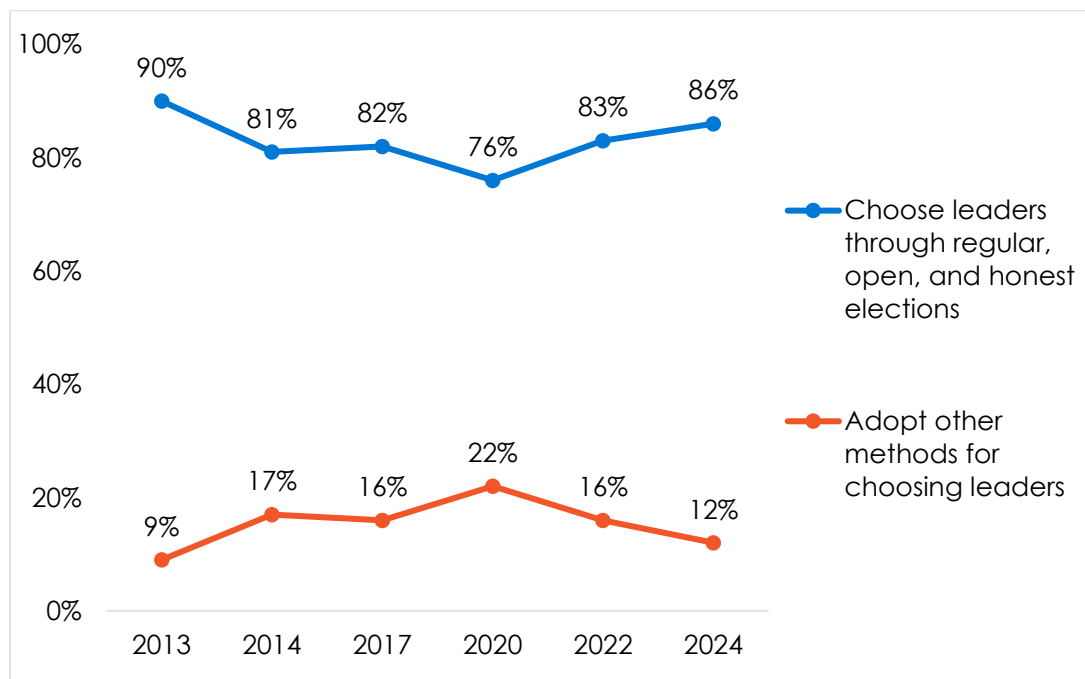


Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?
 Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.
 The army comes in to govern the country.
 Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.
 (% who "disapprove" or "strongly disapprove")

Similarly, 86% say regular, open, and honest elections are the best method for choosing the country's leaders. Support for elections has been consistently high, ranging between 76% and 90% over the past decade (Figure 4).

As we might expect, support for elections is higher among citizens who prefer democracy (88%) than among those who accept non-democratic forms of government (64%) or don't care what kind of government they have (73%), and is about equally strong among supporters of the United Party for National Development (UPND) (91%) and the Patriotic Front (PF) (88%) (not shown).

Figure 4: Views on elections as the best method for choosing leaders | Zambia
 | 2013-2024

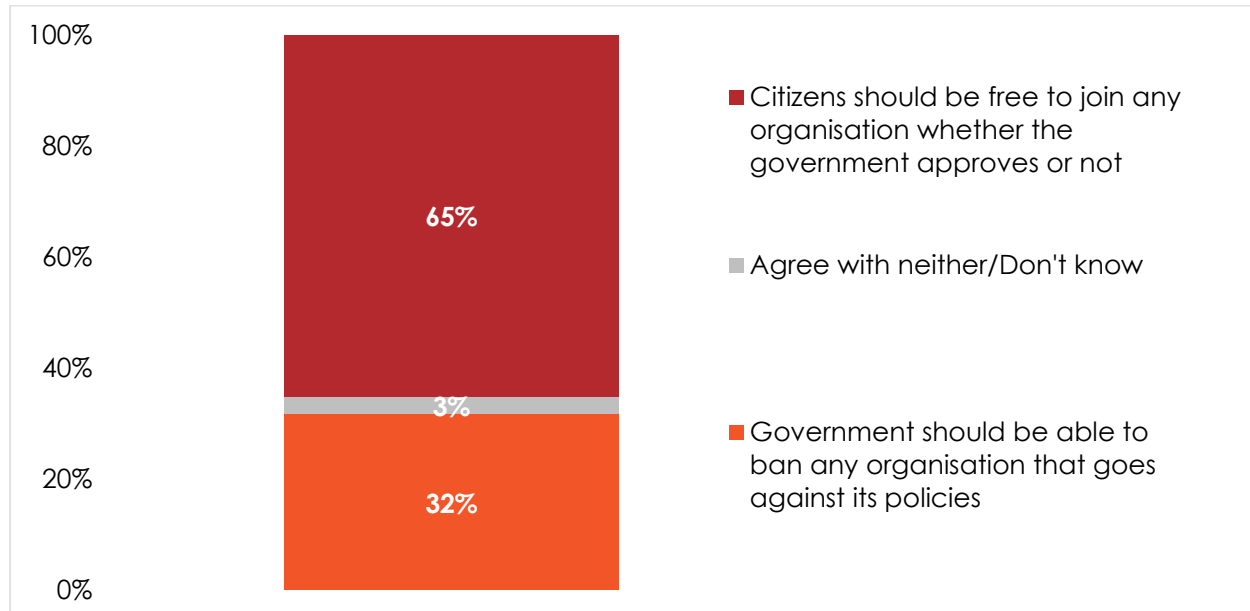


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's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

As part of their democratic freedoms, Zambians also want freedom of assembly: About two-thirds (65%) say citizens should be free to join any organization, even if government does not approve of it (Figure 5).

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Figure 5: Freedom to join any organisation vs. government right to ban organisations
 | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The government should be able to ban any organisation that goes against its policies.
 Statement 2: We should be able to join any organisation, whether or not the government approves of it.

Support for presidential term limits

In a democracy where leaders are chosen through elections, do Zambians want a law governing how long their presidents may serve? The Constitution of Zambia explicitly prescribes presidential term limits, allowing a president to serve a maximum of two five-year terms.

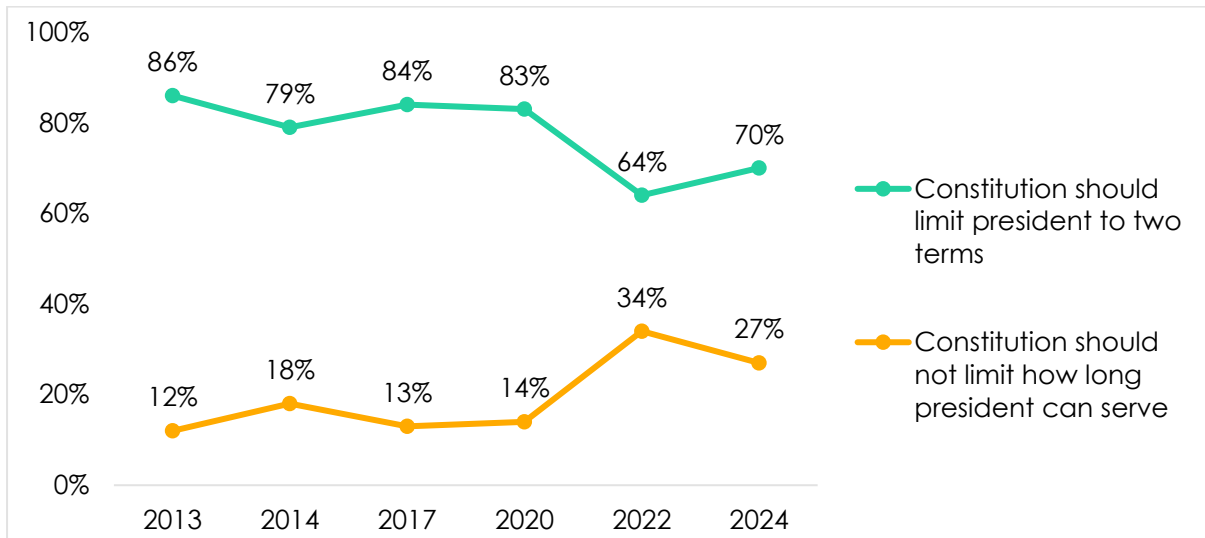
Seven in 10 citizens (70%) endorse a two-term limit on presidential mandates. Though still strong, support for term limits has weakened since 2020 (83%) (Figure 6).

Presidential term limits are particularly popular among men (73%), older citizens (81%), the most educated respondents (78%), and those experiencing high lived poverty¹ (74%) (Figure 7).

Citizens who think that a non-democratic government can sometimes be preferable are about as likely to want presidential terms limits as those who prefer democracy (70% vs. 72%). In terms of political affiliation, term limits draw majority endorsements – though slightly weaker than average – from supporters of both the UPND (67%) and the PF (64%) (not shown).

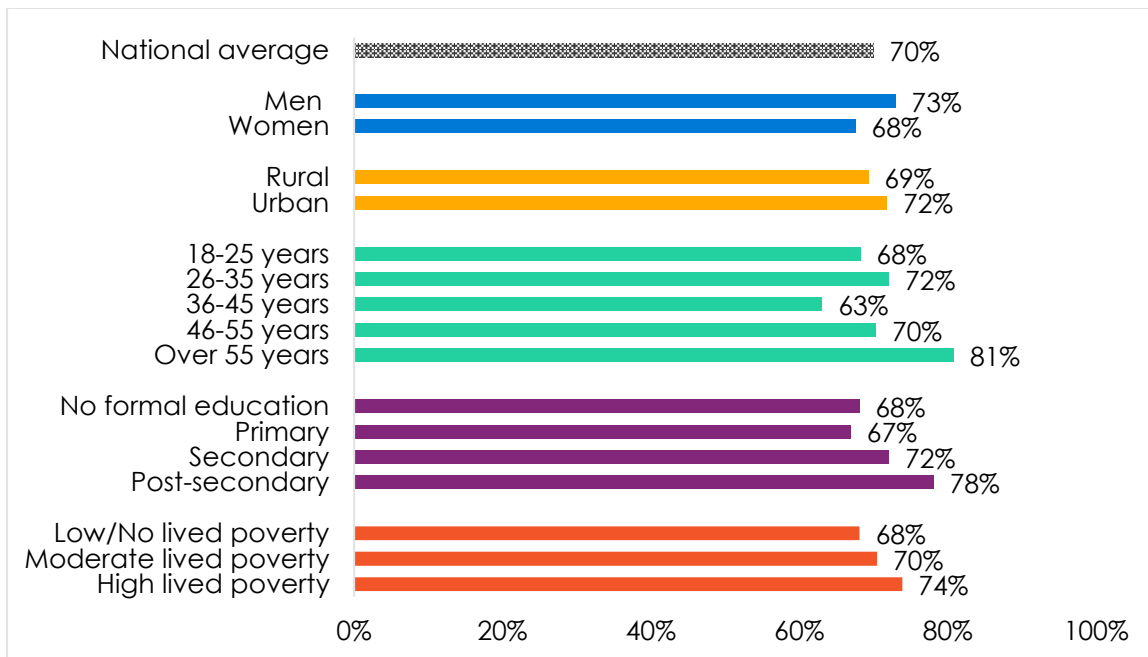
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes and Lekalake (2025).

Figure 6: Views on presidential term limits | Zambia | 2013-2024



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Figure 7: Support for presidential term limits | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



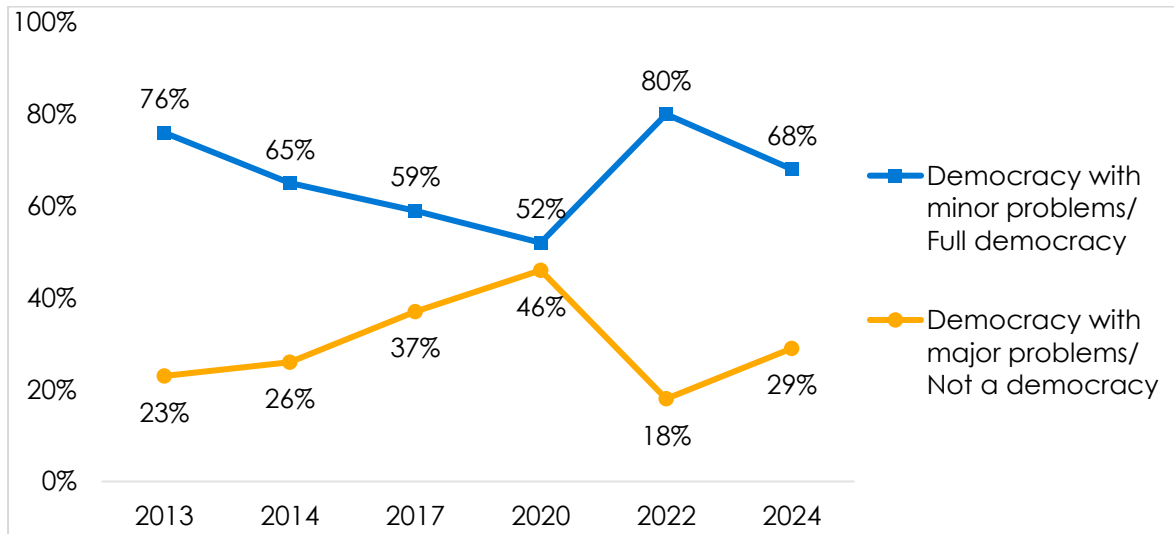
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.
 (% who agree with Statement 1)

Quality of Zambia's democracy

Nearly seven in 10 Zambians (68%) describe their country as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” (Figure 8). Citizens' assessments of the extent of their

democracy have varied significantly over the past decade. Between 2013 and 2020, roughly the period of the increasingly authoritarian presidency of Edgar Lungu, the share of citizens who saw their country as a functioning democracy declined steadily from 76% to 52%. In 2022, this number shot up to 80%, perhaps reflecting post-election euphoria after the landslide victory of presidential challenger Hakainde Hichilema in 2021, before sliding back to its current level. Almost one-third (29%) of Zambians now say the country is “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy.”

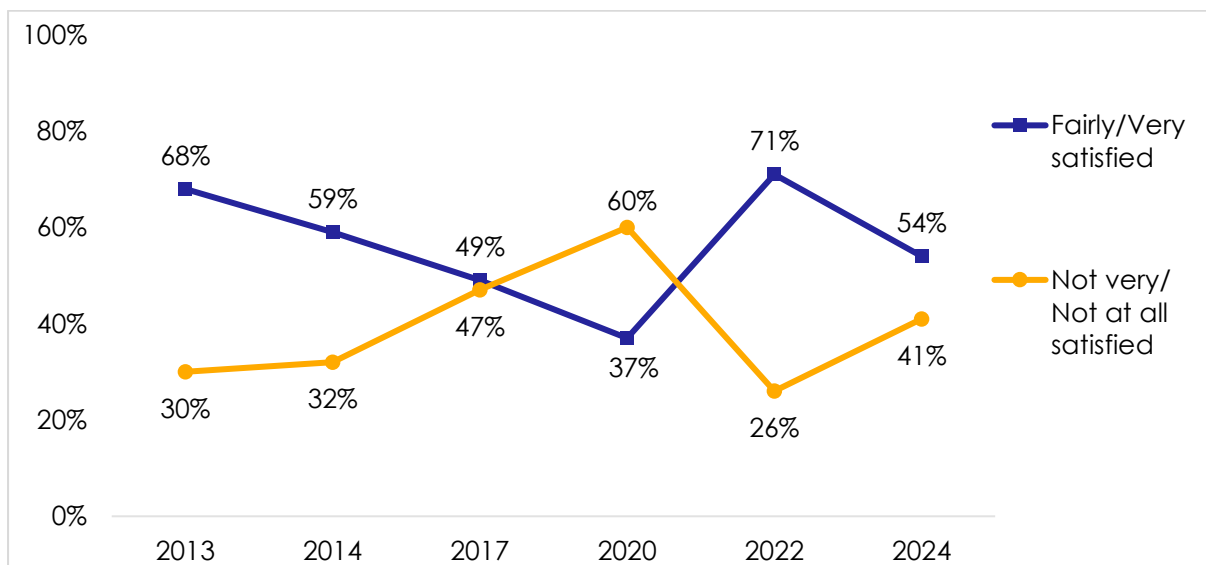
Figure 8: Extent of democracy | Zambia | 2013-2024



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Zambia today?*

Satisfaction with the way Zambia's democracy is working shows a similar pattern: Steady decline between 2013 (68%) and 2020 (37%), followed by an explosive high (71%) in 2022 before sliding back to its current level: 54% of citizens say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their democracy (Figure 9).

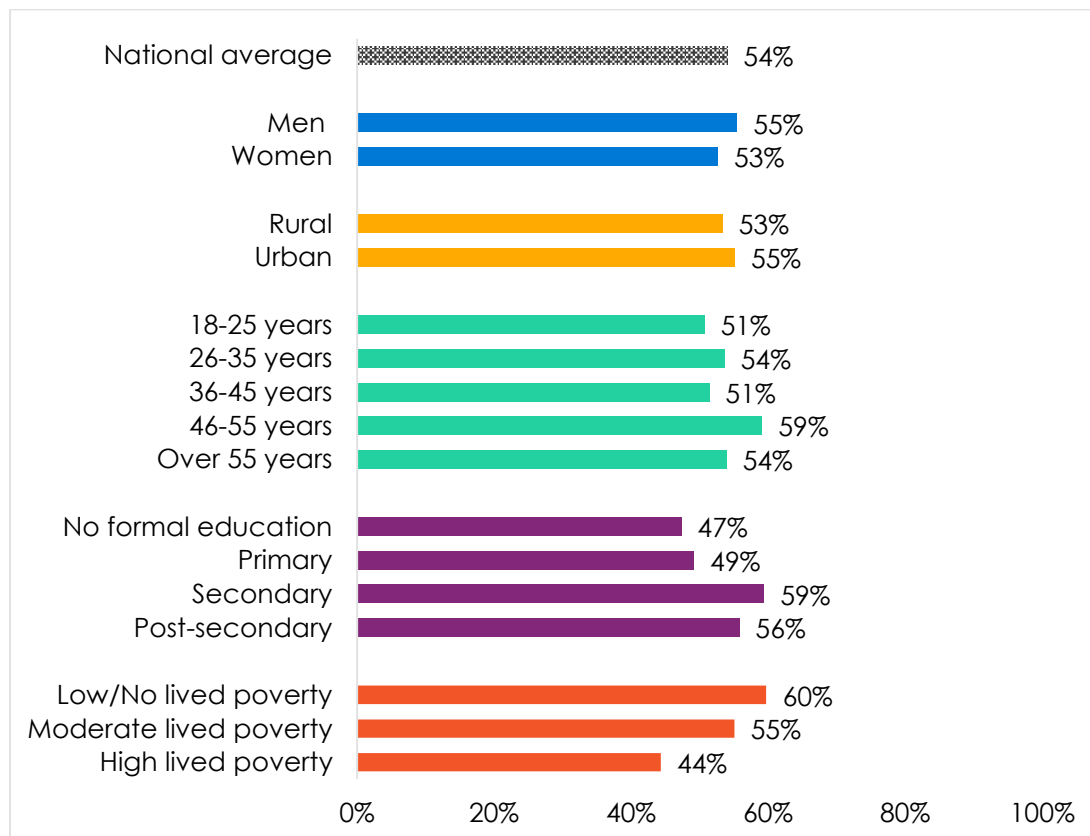
Figure 9: Satisfaction with democracy | Zambia | 2013-2024



Respondents were asked: *Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Zambia?*

Levels of satisfaction with the way democracy is working are higher among respondents' with secondary or post-secondary education (56%-59%) than among those with less schooling (47%-49%) (Figure 10). Satisfaction increases with respondents' economic status, ranging from 44% among the poorest to 60% among well-off citizens.

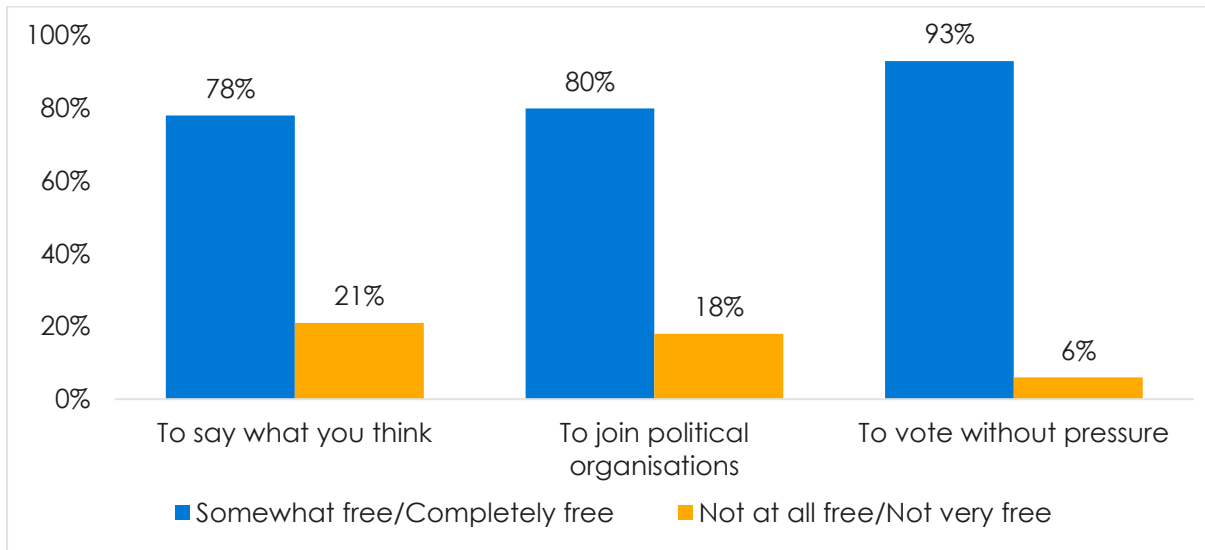
Figure 10: Satisfied with the way democracy is working | by demographic group | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Zambia? (% who say "fairly satisfied" or "very satisfied")

While satisfaction with democracy has declined, most Zambians say they feel free to enjoy their democratic freedoms. Large majorities say they are free choose whom to vote for without feeling pressured (93%), to join political organisations of their choice (80%), and to say what they think (78%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Political freedoms | Zambia | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you: To say what you think? To join any political organisation you want? To choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*

Conclusion

Zambians' satisfaction with the way their democracy is working has declined sharply from a post-election peak in 2022. Nonetheless, citizens overwhelmingly support democracy, reject authoritarian alternatives, and see regular and credible elections as the best way to choose their leaders. Most support presidential term limits and say they are free to vote, join organisations, and speak as they please. This enduring commitment to democratic governance, even in the face of discontent with its performance, provides a promising foundation for strengthening democratic institutions and addressing emerging challenges.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University, the University of Cape Town, and the University of Malawi provide technical support to the network.

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