



Zimbabwe's MPs, local councillors get poor ratings on responsiveness and performance

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 206 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

In a democracy, elected local and parliamentary representatives are critical channels through which citizens' views and preferences can impact local and national policies. They are also important conduits for disseminating information about government actions to the grass roots.

As Zimbabwe gears up for its 2018 harmonized elections, this dispatch examines how citizens perceive their members of Parliament (MPs) and local government councillors in terms of responsiveness and job performance. Do Zimbabweans feel free to criticize the people they elect to serve them, and how much faith do they have in them?

According to results of the 2017 Afrobarometer survey in Zimbabwe, few citizens think their MPs and local councillors are willing to listen to their constituents, and a majority don't feel free to criticize them. Only about half approve of their job performance and express trust in them. Zimbabweans who live in urban areas, have post-secondary education, and/or support the opposition political party are particularly critical of their MPs and local councillors.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 1,200 adult Zimbabweans between 28 January and 10 February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

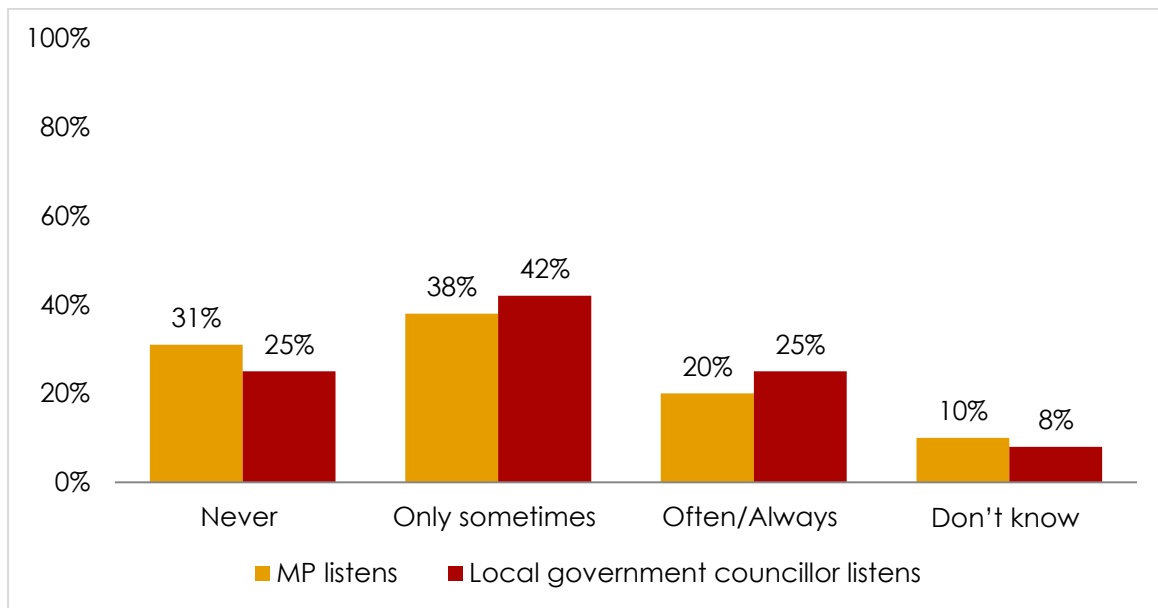
- Only one-fifth (20%) of Zimbabweans believe that MPs "often" or "always" do their best to listen to the people. A slightly larger proportion (25%) say the same thing about local government councillors.
- Zimbabweans are divided as to whether MPs' willingness to listen has gotten better (37%) in recent years or stayed the same (36%), but only one in six (17%) think it's gotten better.

- A majority of Zimbabweans say they don't feel free to criticize their MPs (62%) and local councillors (55%).
- Fewer than half of respondents "approve" or "strongly approve" of the way their MPs (40%) and local government councillors (49%) have done their jobs over the previous 12 months. Disapproval is particularly high among urban residents, the best-educated respondents, and MDC-T supporters
- Slightly more than half of Zimbabweans say they trust Parliament (55%) and their elected local government council (51%) "somewhat" or "a lot." As with disapproval, distrust is stronger among urbanites, better-educated respondents, and MDC-T adherents.

Responsiveness of MPs and local government councillors

Few Zimbabweans think their elected local officials listen to them. Only two out of 10 respondents (20%) say MPs "often" or "always" do their best to listen to citizens, while a majority say they "never" listen (31%) or "only sometimes" listen (38%) (Figure 1). Similarly, only one in four respondents (25%) think local government councillors often/always listen.

Figure 1: Do MPs and local government councillors listen to their constituents?
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors?

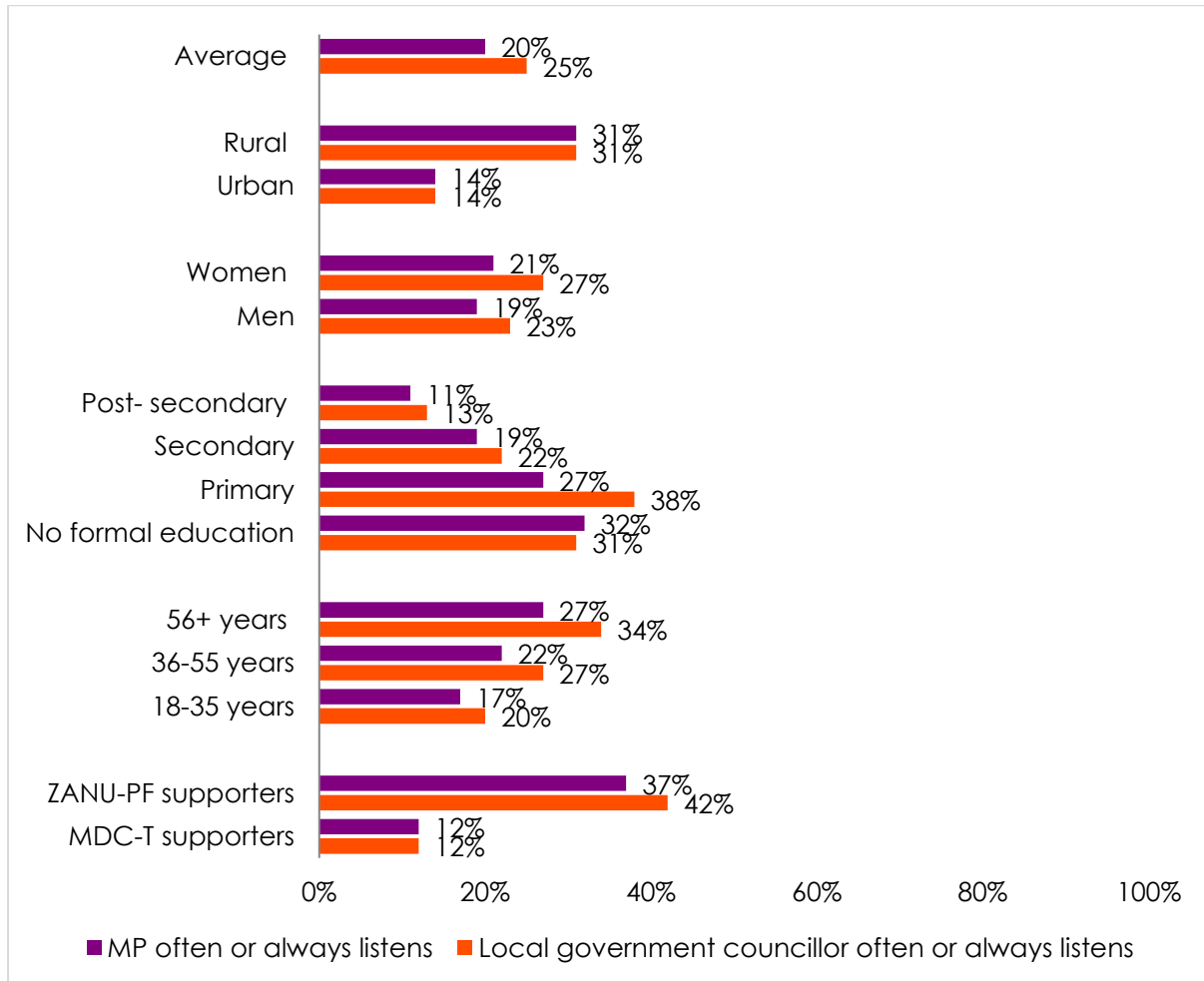
Rural residents are twice as likely as urbanites to perceive both groups of representatives as often/always doing their best to listen (31% vs. 14%) (Figure 2). Similarly, older and less-educated respondents are more likely to feel listened to than their younger and more-educated counterparts. Since these officials are elected on a partisan basis and the ruling ZANU-PF party holds a majority of seats, it is not surprising that respondents who identify as ZANU-PF supporters¹ are more than three times as likely as MDC-T adherents to see MPs and

¹ Afrobarometer determines party affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

local government councillors as willing to listen. But even among supporters of the ruling party, only about four in 10 think that MPs (37%) and local councillors (42%) listen to the people.

Geographically, Bulawayo and Harare are well below the national average in the proportions of residents who feel listened to by their elected local representatives.

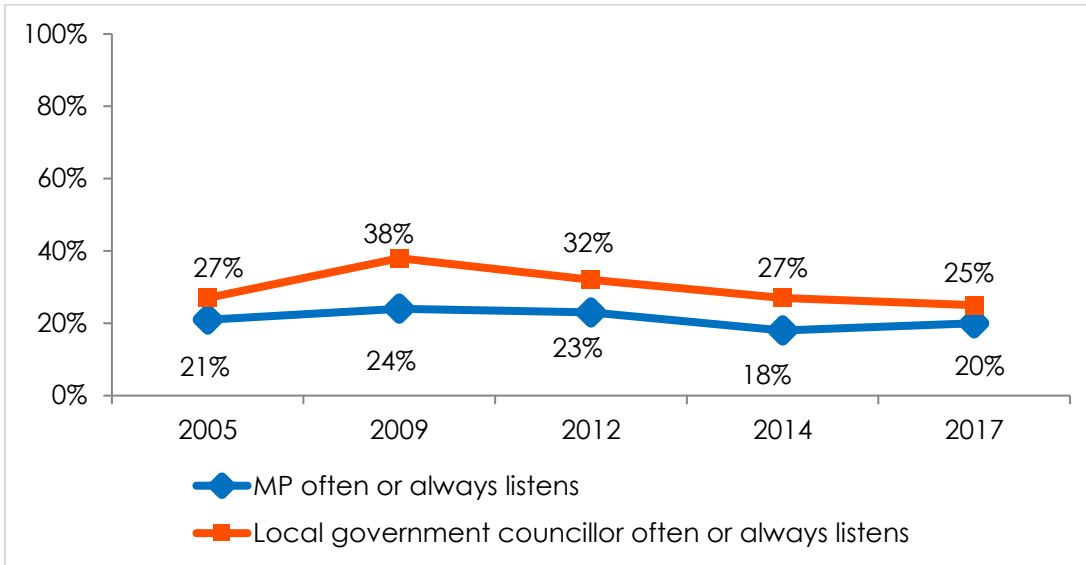
Figure 2: MPs and local government councillors often/always listen
 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



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

In five Afrobarometer surveys over the past 13 years, views on MPs' responsiveness have been stable; the proportion who see them as doing their best to listen has never exceeded 24% (Figure 3). This proportion has varied a bit more for local government councillors, ranging from a high of 38% in 2009 to the current low of 25%.

Figure 3: MPs and local government councillors often/always listen | Zimbabwe
 | 2005-2017

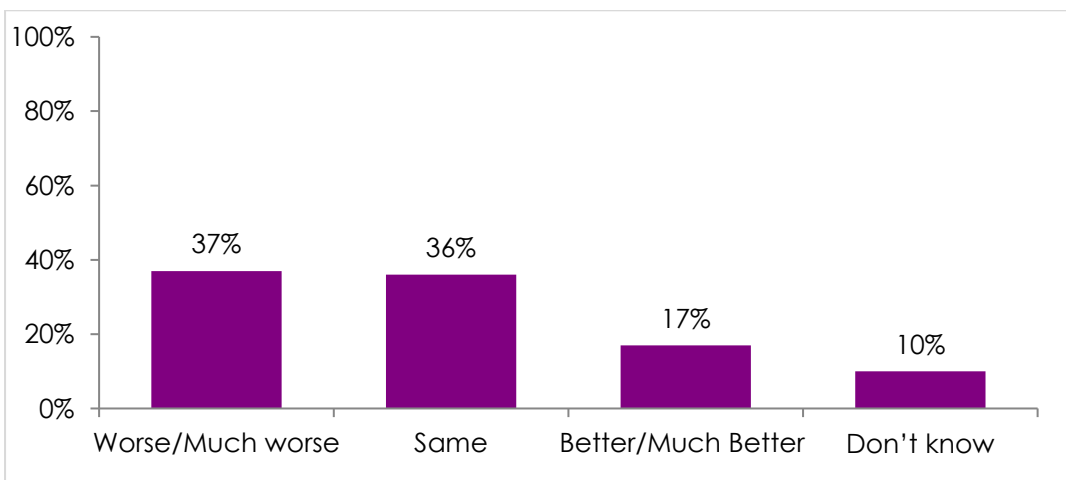


Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors? (% who say "often" or "always")

Almost four in 10 citizens (37%) say MPs' willingness to listen to constituents has become "worse" or "much worse" over the past few years, while 36% think nothing has changed. Only one in six (17%) think it's gotten "better" or "much better" (Figure 4).

Socio-demographic differences follow a similar pattern as on views of current MP responsiveness, with urban residents, better-educated respondents, and MDC-T supporters more likely to say that MP have become less willing to listen in recent years. Geographically, above-average perceptions that MP responsiveness has worsened are recorded in Manicaland (53%), Matabeleland South (50%), and Midlands (48%) provinces.

Figure 4: Perceptions of MP responsiveness – now vs. few years back | Zimbabwe
 | 2017

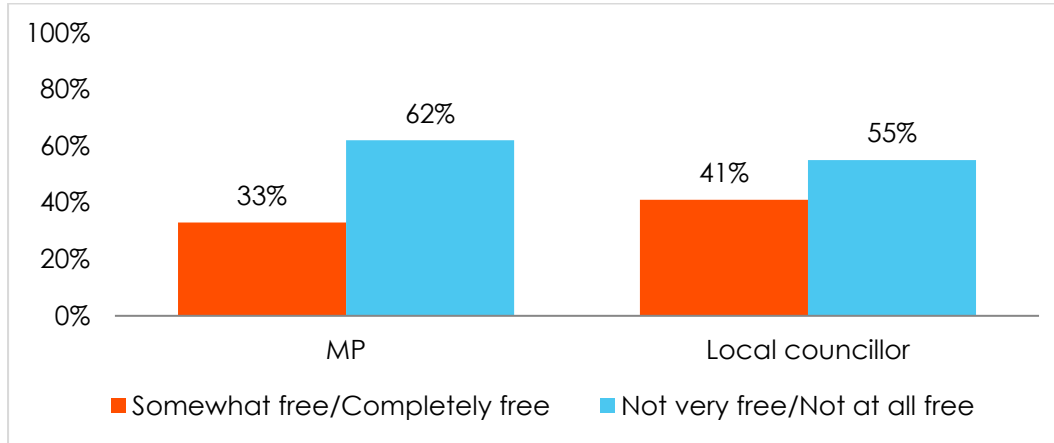


Respondents were asked: Please tell me if the following things are worse or better now than they were a few years ago, or are they about the same: The extent to which members of Parliament listen to what ordinary people have to say?

Freedom to criticize MPs and local government councillors

Hand in hand with being willing to listen to constituents, effective representatives must be able to hear criticism and take it into account in their work. But a majority of Zimbabweans say they don't feel free to criticize their MPs (62%) and local councillors (55%) (Figure 5). Only one-third (33%) say they feel "somewhat free" or "completely free" to voice criticism of their MPs, while 41% say the same about local councillors.

Figure 5: Freedom to criticize local elected officials | Zimbabwe | 2017

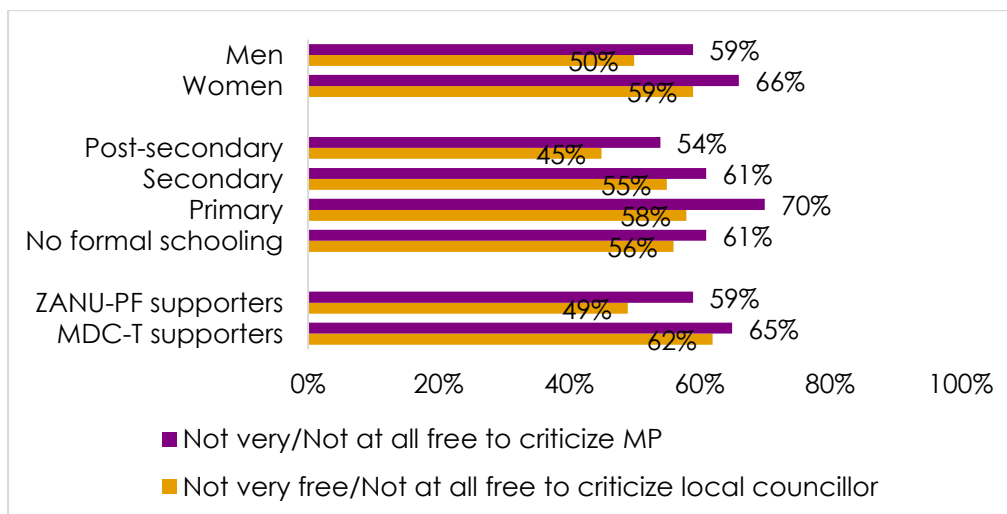


Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: Your local councillor? Your MP?

Men, respondents with post-secondary qualifications, and ZANU-PF supporters feel less constrained than women, respondents with less education, and MDC-T adherents in expressing criticism of local elected representatives. But even among these less-constrained groups, about half say they feel "not very free" or "not at all free" to criticize (Figure 6).

Among provinces, Midlands stands out: Eight out of 10 respondents (83%) say they feel unfree to criticize their MPs and local councillors.

Figure 6: Freedom to criticize local elected officials | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017

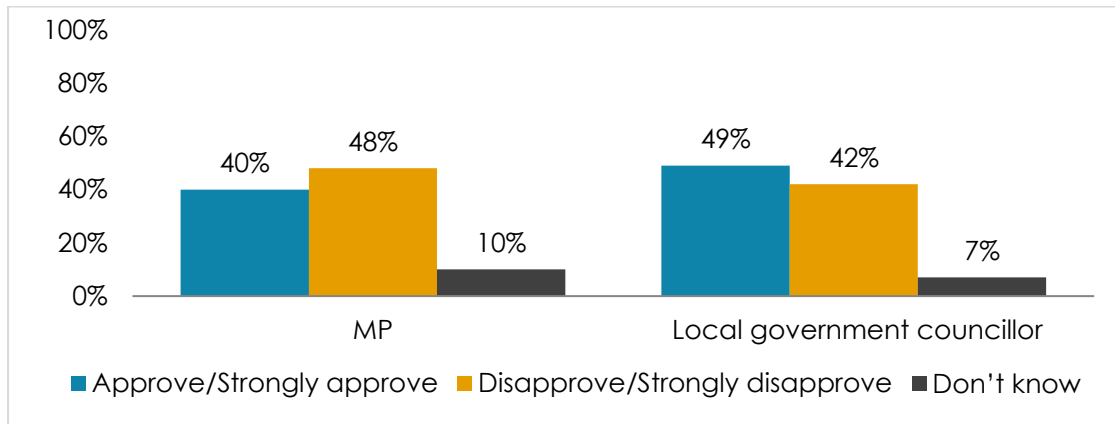


Respondents were asked: In this country, how free do you feel to criticize the following: Your local councillor? Your MP?

Performance ratings for MPs and local government councillors

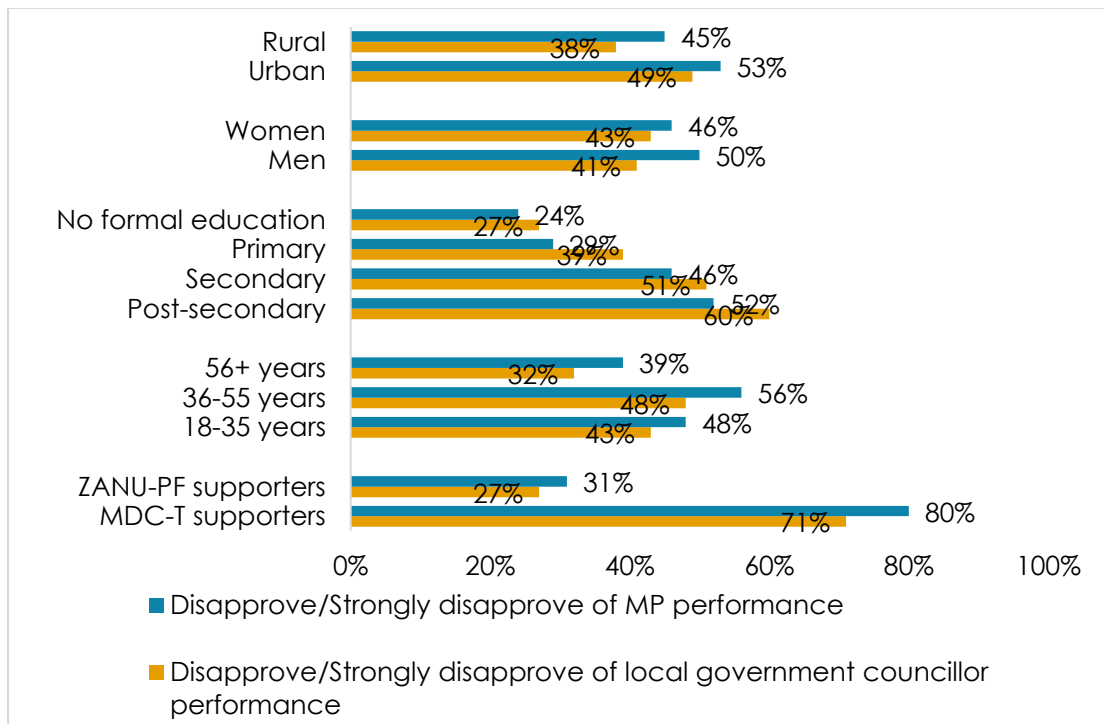
On the whole, Zimbabweans are not impressed by the performance of their local elected officials. Fewer than half of respondents “approve” or “strongly approve” of the way their MPs (40%) and local government councillors (49%) have done their jobs over the previous 12 months (Figure 7). Disapproval is particularly high among urban residents, the best-educated respondents, the middle-aged (36- to 55-year-olds), and MDC-T supporters (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Performance of MPs and local government councillors | Zimbabwe | 2017



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? Your elected local government councillor?

Figure 8: Performance ratings for MPs and local government councillors | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017

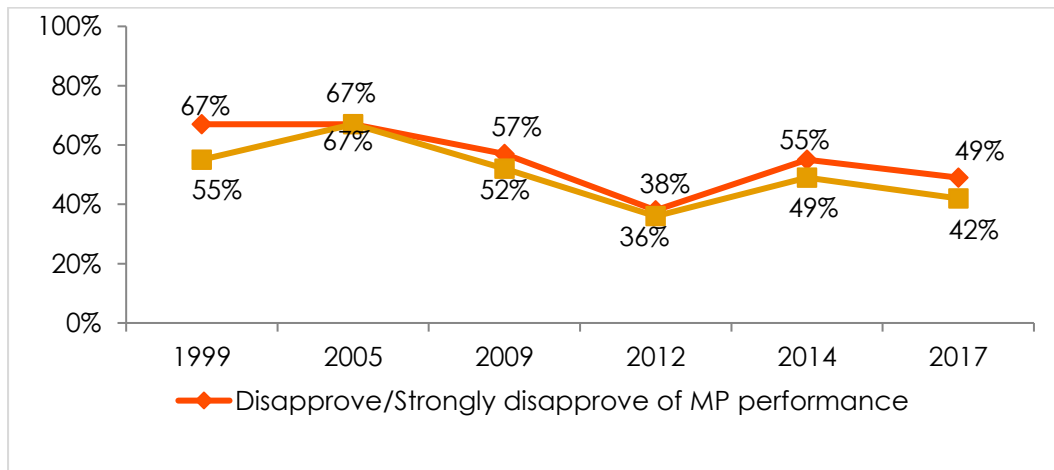


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your member of Parliament? Your elected local government councillor?

Manicaland stands out with its high disapproval rates for MPs (62%) and local councillors (58%), while Matabeleland North residents are least likely to complain about the performance of their local elected officials (31% for MPs, 27% for local councillors).

Over the years, popular disapproval has usually been higher for MPs than for local government councillors, with gaps ranging up to 12 percentage points in 1999 and 7 points in 2017 (Figure 9). The year 2012, which coincides with the tenure of the Government of National Unity, saw the lowest levels of disapproval local elected officials.

Figure 9: Trend in disapproval of elected officials' performance | Zimbabwe | 1999-2017

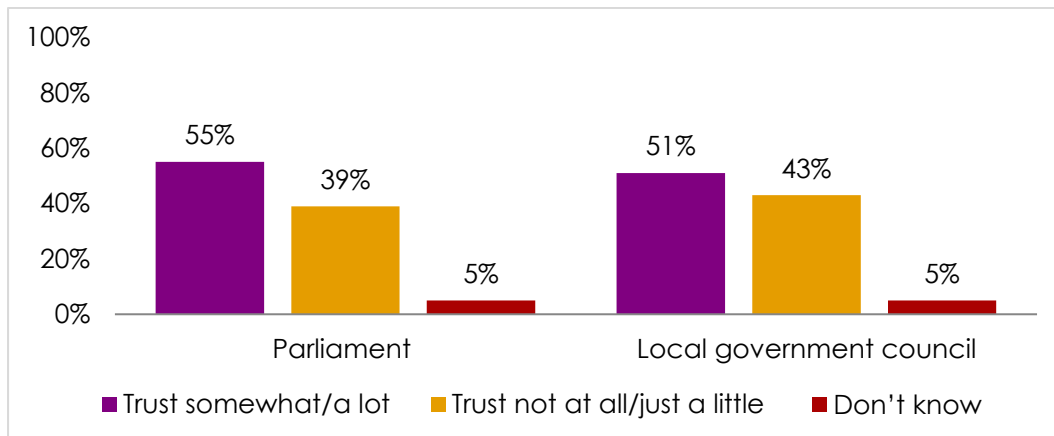


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Your member of Parliament? Your elected local government councillor?

Trust in Parliament and local government council

Apart from their views on their individual elected officials, the Afrobarometer survey asks respondents how much they trust the institutions of Parliament and elected local government councils. More than half of Zimbabweans say they trust the National Assembly (55%) and their local council (51%) "somewhat" or "a lot," while substantial minorities (39% and 43%, respectively) say they trust them "not at all" or "just a little" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Trust in Parliament and local government council | Zimbabwe | 2017



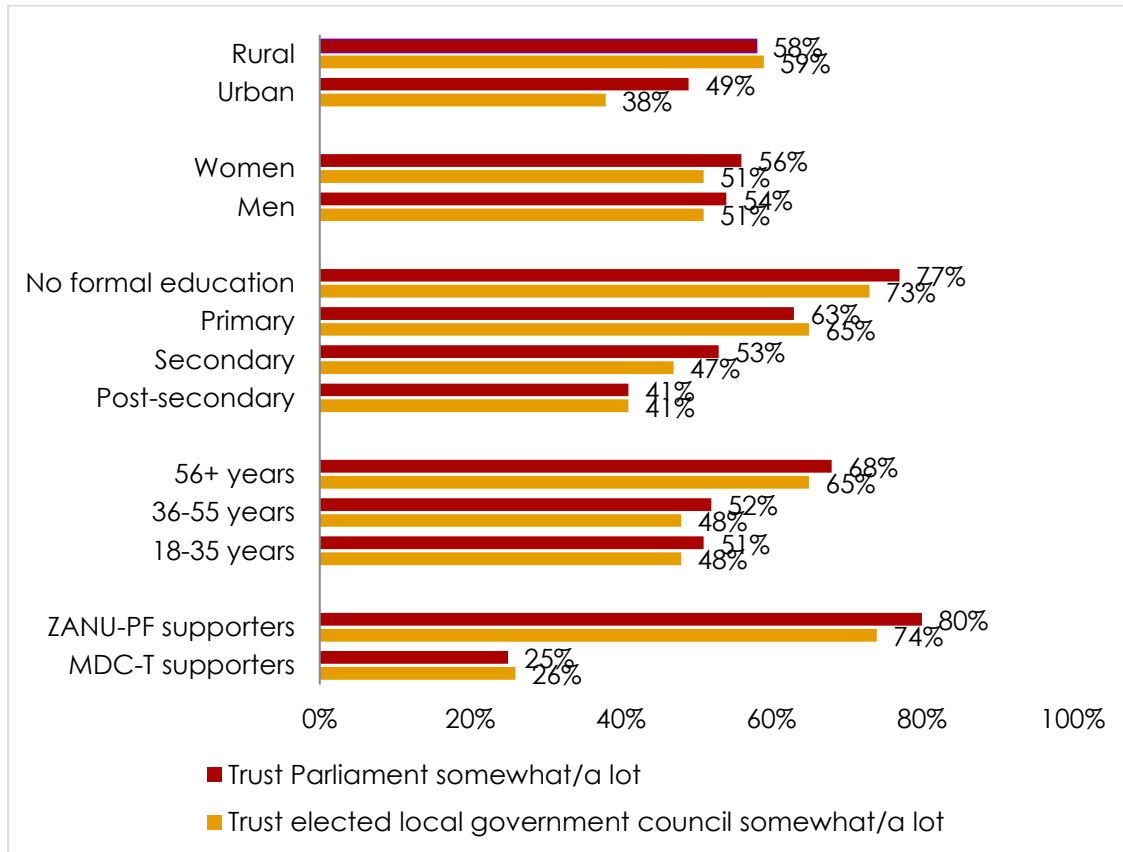
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't heard enough about them to say: Parliament? Your local government council?

Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to trust these institutions; in the cities, trust in local councils is particularly low (38%, compared to 59% in rural areas) (Figure 11). Men and women differ little in their trust in these two institutions, but popular trust declines sharply as respondent education level increases; for both institutions, trust ranges from more than seven in 10 among those without formal education to just 41% among those with post-secondary qualifications.

Older Zimbabweans (aged 56 or more) express considerably more trust in Parliament and local councils than their younger counterparts, and ZANU-PF supporters are about three times as likely as MDC-T adherents to say they trust these institutions.

Among provinces, Bulawayo has the smallest proportion of residents who trust Parliament (42%) and their local councils (32%).

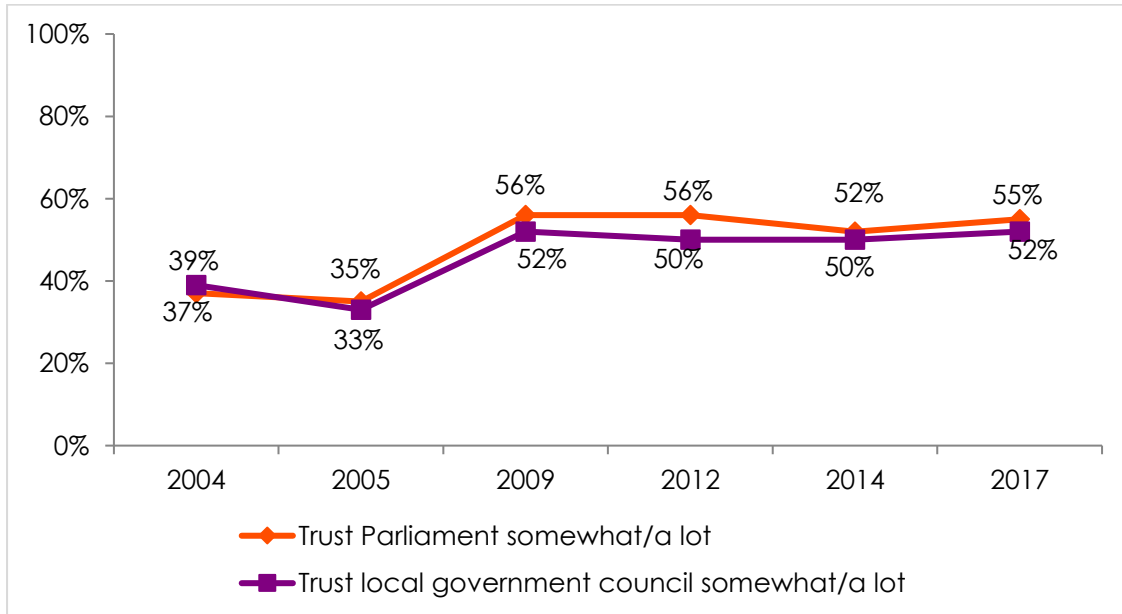
Figure 11: Trust in Parliament and elected local government council
 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



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

Over time, popular trust in Parliament has generally been slightly higher than trust in elected local government councils. As Figure 12 shows, trust in both institutions increased significantly between 2005 and 2009 (the year the Government of National Unity was established) and has held fairly steady since then.

Figure 12: Trends in trust in Parliament and local government council | Zimbabwe
 | 1999-2017



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

Conclusion

Zimbabwean MPs and local government councillors get a failing grade on a key test of representative democracy: Most of their constituents don't think their elected officials listen to them. Moreover, a majority of citizens don't feel free to criticize their representatives. Little wonder that for MPs and local councillors, popular job performance ratings and trust levels are mixed at best.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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