



Fear and trust: Explaining professed popular trust in Zimbabwe's presidents

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 399 | Simangele Moyo-Nyede

Summary

Popular trust in public institutions and officials is an important indicator of political legitimacy, a key resource for the development and functioning of modern democracies (Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009; Chingwete, 2016; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Newton, 2001). However, some analysts argue that while trust is important in a democracy, citizens would be naïve if they didn't have a certain level of distrust as well (van de Walle & Six, 2004).

In Zimbabwe, almost two-thirds of Afrobarometer survey respondents in 2017 said they trusted then-President Robert Mugabe "somewhat" or "a lot." The following year, after Mugabe ended his 37-year rule under pressure from the military, more than half of respondents expressed trust in his successor, President Emmerson Mnangagwa.

At the same time, clear majorities said their country was "going in the wrong direction," assessed the national economic situation as bad, rated the government's performance on the economy as poor, and said they did not feel free to criticize the president. As they had for years, headlines portrayed a country contending with a ruined economy, a collapsing health care system, high unemployment and corruption, and poor public services (Pindula News, 2018; Muronzi, 2020).

This raises the question: How can citizens who see their country as "going in the wrong direction" express trust in the person leading it there? Do substantial numbers of Zimbabweans really trust their president? If so, what drives this trust?

An analysis of Afrobarometer survey data from 2017 and 2018 – during Mugabe's last year in office and Mnangagwa's first – suggests that in addition to any number of possible reasons that Zimbabweans may have had for trusting their president, fear of appearing anti-government was one factor contributing to high levels of professed trust.

As indicated to survey enumerators, trust in Mugabe was higher among respondents who also said they felt unfree to criticize the president and feared being victimized by political intimidation or violence. Moreover, respondents were significantly more likely to say they trusted Mugabe and Mnangagwa if they thought that Afrobarometer fieldworkers were in fact agents sent by the government. In other words, it appears that survey respondents who might fear expressing their true views in the public square would tell a pollster in an anonymous interview that they distrusted the president – but only if they believed that the pollster wasn't working for the government.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult Zimbabweans in January-February 2017, producing a sample that yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. In June-July 2018, MPOI conducted a pre-election survey (the second of two such surveys commissioned by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's core partner for Southern Africa) of 2,400 adult citizens, yielding country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Zimbabweans said in 2017 that they trusted Mugabe "somewhat" or "a lot." In 2018, more than half (51%) said the same about Mnangagwa.
- Large majorities of Zimbabweans said they do not feel free to criticize their president – 78% in 2017 (about Mugabe) and 74% in 2018 (about Mnangagwa).
- More than half (52%) of survey respondents in 2017 (during Mugabe's rule) reported that they feared ("somewhat" or "a lot") becoming victims of political intimidation or violence during elections. Almost half (43%) said the same thing in 2018 (under Mnangagwa).
- In both surveys, three-fourths (76%) of respondents said people "always" or "often" have to be careful what they say about politics.
- In 2017, professed trust in Mugabe was higher among respondents who said they felt unfree to criticize the president and among those who feared political intimidation/violence than among those who did not share those concerns.
- In both 2017 and 2018, citizens who thought the surveys were sponsored by the government were about 20 percentage points more likely to say they trusted Mugabe and Mnangagwa than were respondents who believed that the fieldworkers were from non-governmental entities.

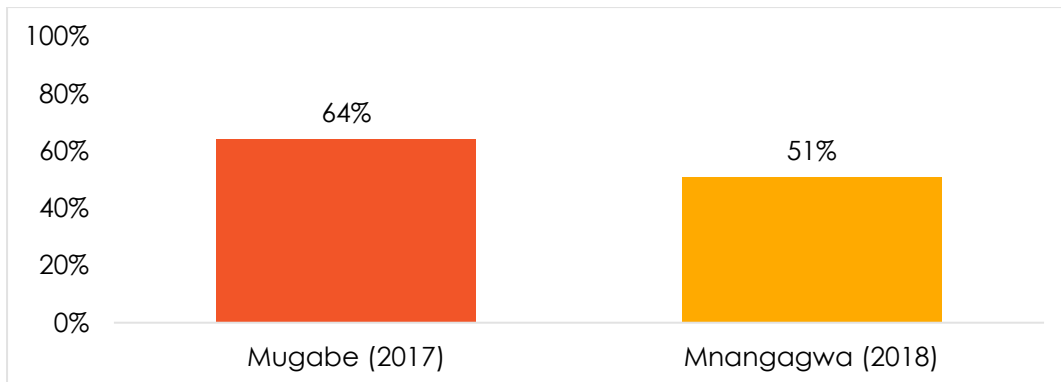
Popular trust in the president

Given the myriad social, economic, and political challenges besetting the country, one might expect citizens to distrust their leader. Yet Afrobarometer data show otherwise. In 2017, almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents who expressed an opinion said they trusted Mugabe "somewhat" or "a lot." A smaller majority (51%) said in 2018 that they trusted Mnangagwa at least somewhat (Figure 1).

Among 12 countries in Southern Africa surveyed in 2016/2018, Zimbabwe ranked near the top in reported popular trust in the president, surpassed only by Tanzania (74%), Mozambique (74%), and Namibia (66%) (Figure 2). Trust was about twice as high in Zimbabwe as in Mauritius (28%), and well above the 12-country average of 55%.

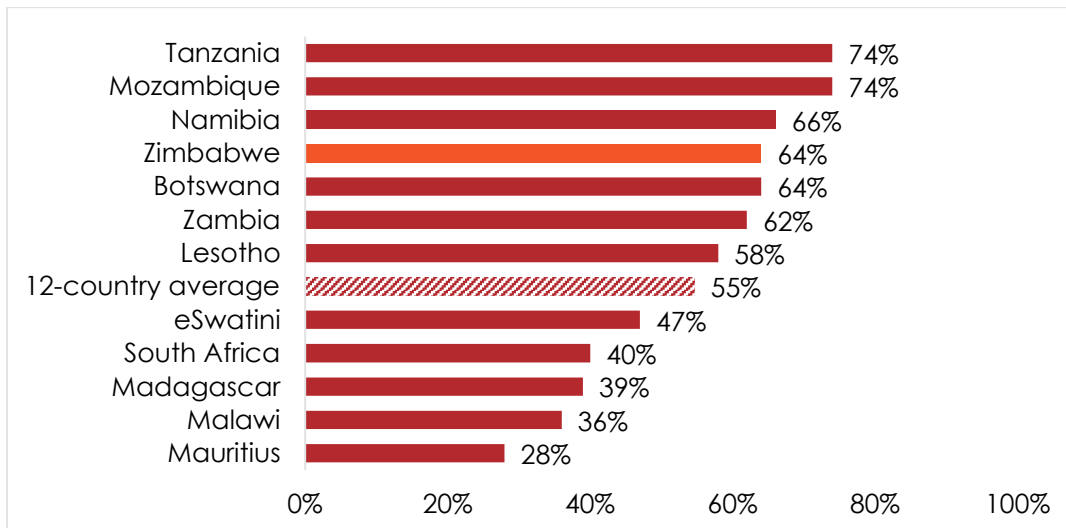
Afrobarometer has been asking Zimbabweans how much they trust their president since its first survey round in 1999. At that time, only one in five respondents (19%) said they trusted Mugabe "somewhat" or "a lot." By 2004, trust had more than doubled, to 46%, before dropping back down to around one-third in 2005 (31%) and 2009 (35%) (Figure 3). Yet between 2009 and 2012 – after the bloody 2008 elections and during the run-up to the 2013 elections, when many opposition supporters became victims of intimidation and violence – the share of Zimbabweans who said they trusted the president rose sharply, and remained high until his forced departure in 2017.

Figure 1: Popular trust in the president | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018



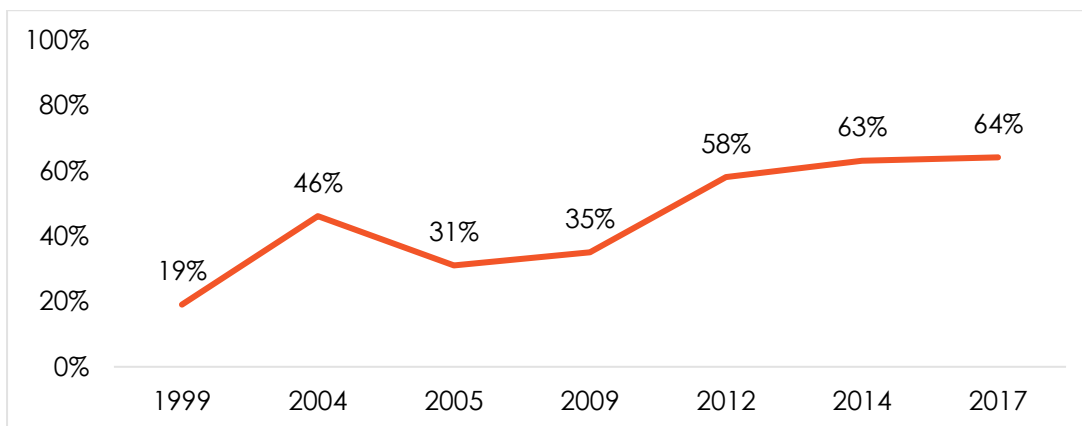
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 2: Popular trust in the president | Southern Africa | 2016/2018



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 said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 3: Trust in Mugabe over time | Zimbabwe | 1999-2017

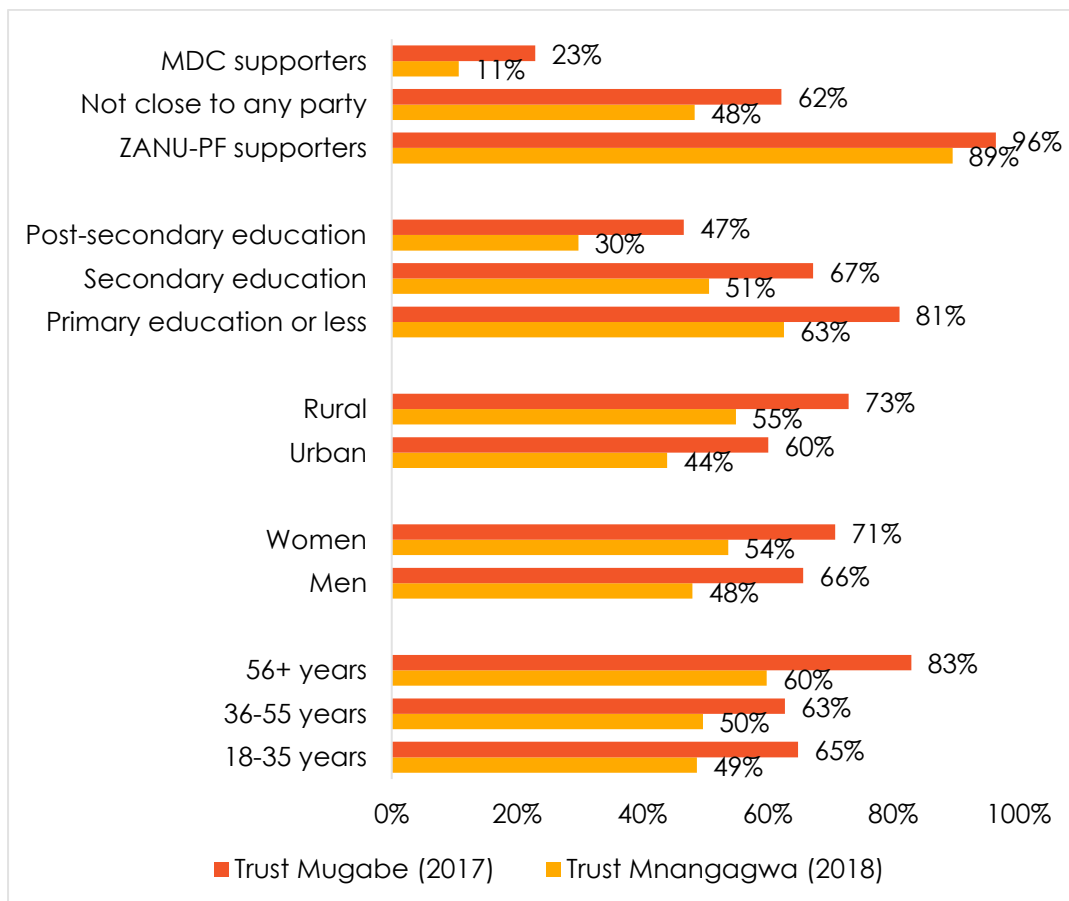


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

As might be expected, political partisanship, a key factor in contemporary Zimbabwean politics (Bratton & Masunungure, 2012), also seems to play a role in how much respondents say they trust the president. Citizens who said they “feel close to” the ruling ZANU-PF party were far more likely to express trust in both Mugabe (96%) and Mnangagwa (89%) than were supporters of the opposition MDC (23% and 11%, respectively), with non-partisans scoring between the two extremes (62% for Mugabe, 48% for Mnangagwa) (Figure 4).

Trust in both presidents was stronger among rural residents than among urban dwellers, and among older respondents compared to their younger counterparts. Fewer than half of respondents with a post-secondary education said they trusted Mugabe (47%) and Mnangagwa (30%), compared to majorities of respondents with primary schooling or less (81% for Mugabe, 63% for Mnangagwa).

Figure 4: Popular trust in the president | by party affiliation, education, urban-rural location, gender, and age | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018



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 said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Mnangagwa's somewhat lower levels of professed popular trust, compared to Mugabe's, may reflect a number of factors. The June 2018 survey was conducted when Mnangagwa had been in office for a mere seven months, and some survey respondents may have been adopting a wait-and-see attitude. On the other hand, he was not a new figure in Zimbabwean politics, having enjoyed a long career as Mugabe's lieutenant, minister of state, and vice president. Perceptions of his role in past state repression and violence (ZWNNews, 2018; Ray, 2018) and in the military intervention forcing Mugabe's resignation

(International Crisis Group, 2017; York, 2017; Asuelime, 2018) may also have affected respondents' reported trust.

Another plausible explanation might be that in the post-Mugabe era, survey respondents were feeling somewhat less fearful about expressing their true attitudes, a possibility we will explore in the next section.

Political fear

In 2017, the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) attributed high levels of reported popular trust in Mugabe to a "culture of fear" in Zimbabwe, arguing that "...the average person ... is so fearful, especially when they are asked politically-sensitive questions, and the natural reaction is to give an answer that they think won't upset the political establishment" (News24, 2017). Independent observers have also pointed to fear as affecting survey responses (Bratton & Masunungure, 2012; Meldrum, 2004), while others have credited state propaganda with having burnished Mugabe's standing (South African Institute of International Affairs, 2004).

An analysis of Afrobarometer findings suggests that fear may indeed play a role in some professions of trust in Mugabe and Mnangagwa.

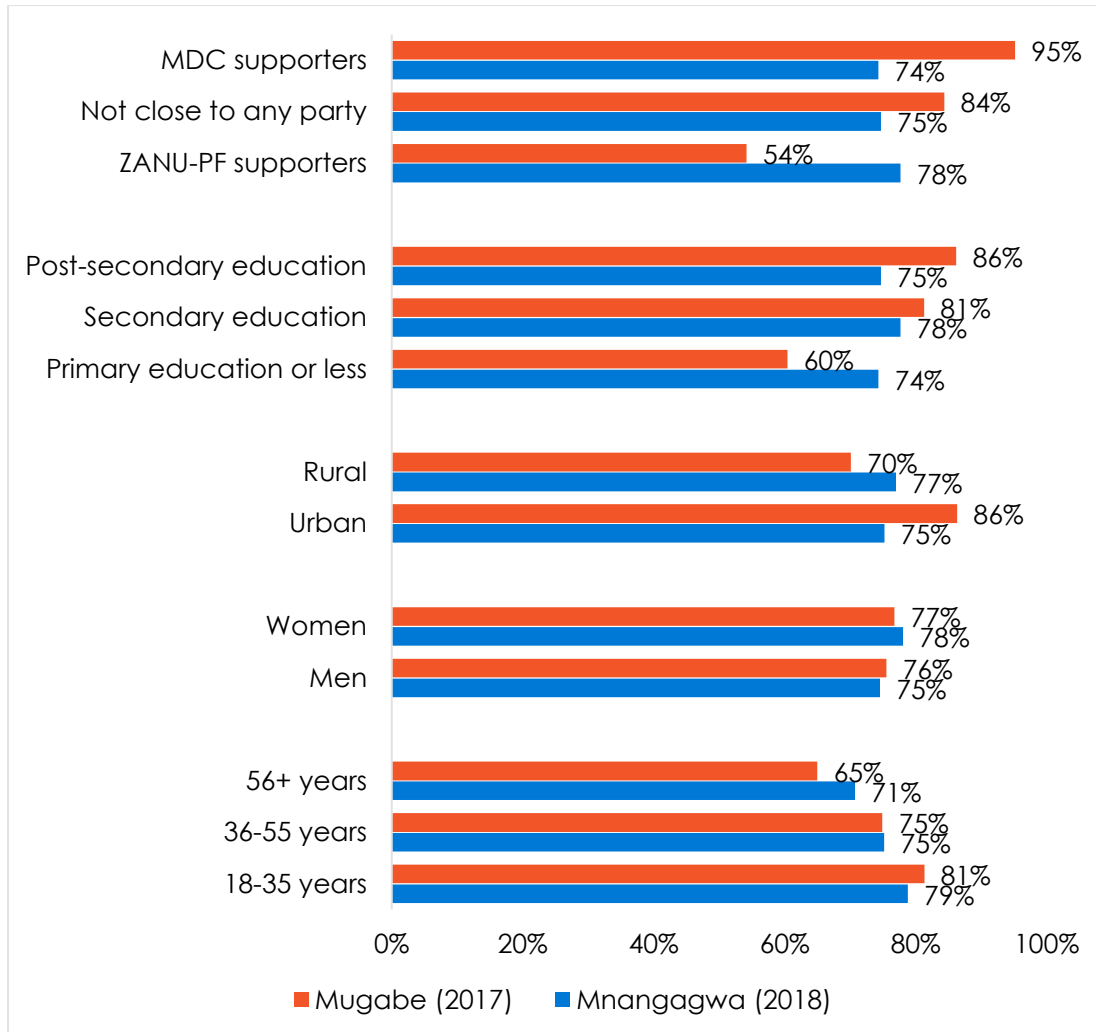
Political fear arises from the perception that it is not safe to express one's political beliefs, whether in public, in discussion with acquaintances, or even through the ballot box (Mattes & Teka, 2016). In Zimbabwe, where Mugabe ruled with an iron fist for 37 years, large majorities of survey respondents reported that they did not feel free to express their political views. Three-fourths (76%) said that people "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics (76% in both 2017 and 2018) and that they were "not very free" or "not at all free" to criticize the president (78% in 2017, 74% in 2018) (Table 1). Large proportions of respondents also said they feared political intimidation and violence during elections "somewhat" or "a lot" (52% in 2017, 43% in 2018).

Table 1: Political fear | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018

		2017 (under Mugabe)	2018 (under Mnangagwa)
In this country, how much do you fear political intimidation and violence during elections?	A lot	34%	29%
	Somewhat	18%	14%
	A little bit	17%	18%
	Not at all	30%	38%
	Don't know/Refused	1%	0%
In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful what they say about politics?	Always	43%	43%
	Often	33%	33%
	Rarely	15%	16%
	Never	6%	7%
	Don't know/Refused	3%	1%
In this country, how free are you to criticize the president?	Not at all free	62%	58%
	Not very free	16%	16%
	Somewhat free	9%	12%
	Completely free	7%	12%
	Don't know/Refused	7%	2%

Caution about political speech was more common among young respondents (aged 18-35) than among their elders and among more educated respondents compared to their less educated counterparts (Figure 5). In 2017 (under Mugabe), urban dwellers tended to be considerably more careful about political speech than rural residents (86% vs. 70%), while there wasn't much difference between the two in 2018 (under Mnangagwa). Similarly, MDC supporters tended to be more cautious than ZANU-PF adherents and non-partisans in 2017, but that difference did not emerge in 2018.

Figure 5: Self-censorship | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful what they say about politics? (% who said "often" or "always")*

Suspicious survey respondents

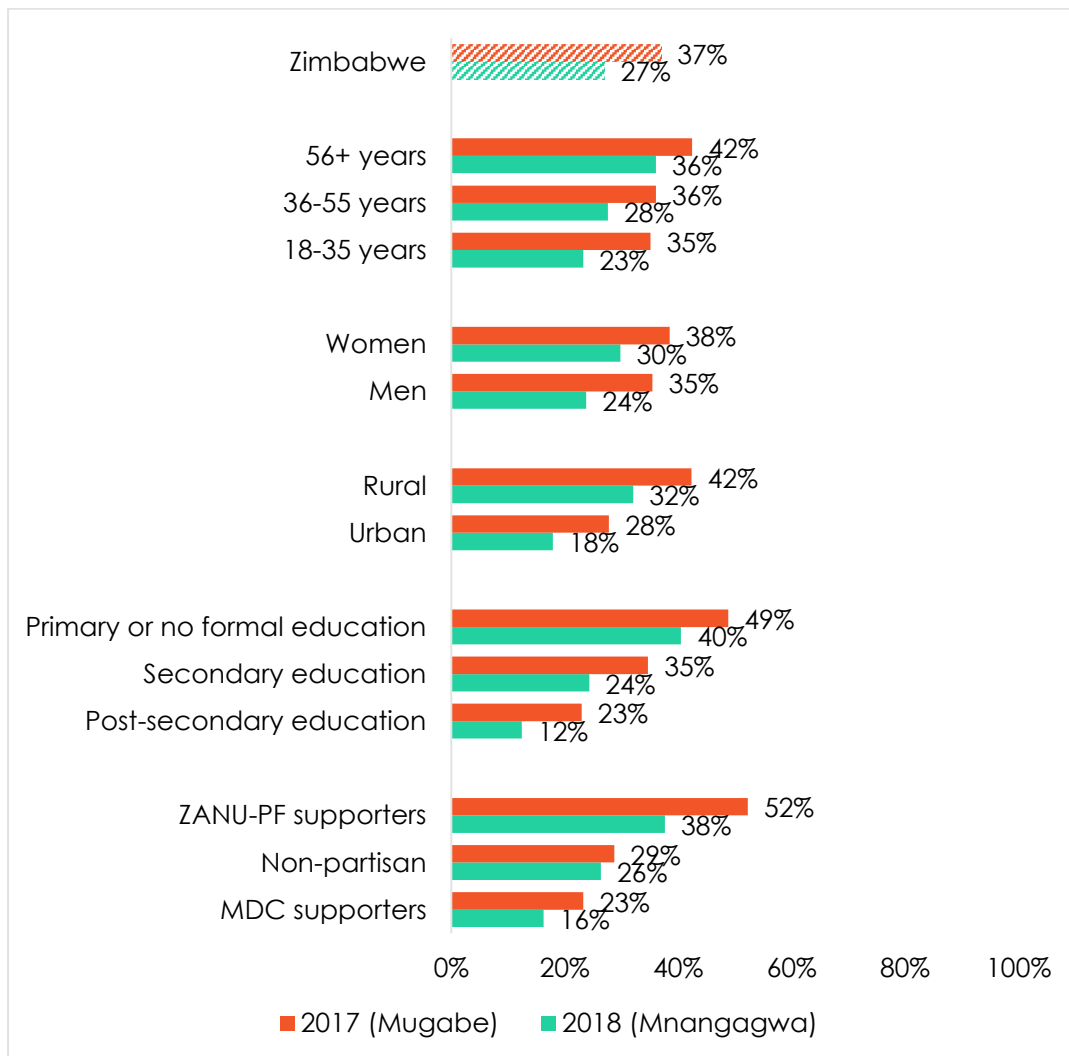
At the beginning of each interview, Afrobarometer interviewers explain that they represent an independent research organization rather than a state agency or political party. In addition, to check whether respondents accept this assurance, the last question of the interview asks, "Who do you think sent us to do this interview?"

Across Africa, despite the explanation at the outset, findings show that a substantial number of respondents think that Afrobarometer interviewers represent the state in some way (Mattes & Teka, 2016). In the 2017 survey in Zimbabwe (when Mugabe was president), 37% of respondents said they thought the survey was sponsored by the government; in 2018 (when

Mnangagwa was president), 27% held that view. The 10-percentage-point decline in the proportion of people who suspected that the surveyors were working for the government may reflect a perceived “opening up” of democratic space during Mnangagwa’s early days in office, when he was talking about “a new Zimbabwe.”

In both surveys, older, rural, and less educated respondents were more likely to doubt the non-governmental identity of Afrobarometer surveyors than were their younger, urban, and more educated counterparts (Figure 6). ZANU-PF supporters were more than twice as likely as MDC adherents to think that surveyors worked for the government.

Figure 6: Perceived survey sponsorship by government | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018



Respondents were asked: Who do you think sent us to do this interview? (% who said a government entity)

In addition, Afrobarometer asks its survey enumerators to record descriptive data about each interview, including whether the respondent seemed suspicious of the enumerator or at ease and whether he or she seemed misleading or honest. In the 2017 survey (during the Mugabe era), researchers rated 9% of respondents as appearing ill at ease/suspicious of the interviewer and 7% as appearing to be misleading. The 2018 survey (during Mnangagwa’s rule) offered similar assessments (9% ill at ease/suspicious, 5% misleading).

Political fear and trust

When we examine political fear and trust together (Table 2), we see that reported trust in Mugabe was lower among respondents who, in everyday life, felt unfree to criticize the president (65%, vs. 79% of those who felt free to criticize) and among respondents who feared intimidation or violence during election campaigns (57%, vs. 80% of those who did not express such fear). For some of these respondents, fearful of expressing anti-government sentiments in public, the confidential survey may have been an opportunity to express their distrust of the president. In the 2018 survey, trust in Mnangagwa showed no such differences.

But remarkably, Zimbabweans who thought that Afrobarometer enumerators were sent by the government were far more likely to say they trusted Mugabe (82%) than were respondents who thought, correctly, that the enumerators were from a non-governmental entity (60%). The gap was similarly large when it came to professed trust in Mnangagwa (64% vs. 45%). A chi-square statistical test confirms that professed trust was contingent upon respondents' perceptions of who was carrying out the survey. In other words, it appears that perceived government sponsorship of the survey inclined some respondents to say they trusted the president, presumably to avoid being seen as critical of the government.

Similarly, respondents whom survey enumerators perceived as ill at ease or misleading during the interview were far more likely to say that they trusted both presidents (about nine out of 10 for Mugabe and seven out of 10 for Mnangagwa) than were respondents who appeared at ease and honest.

Table 2: Trust and political fear | Zimbabwe | 2017/2018

		Trust Mugabe somewhat/a lot	Trust Mnangagwa somewhat/a lot
Free to criticize the president	Not very free/Not at all free	65%	52%
	Somewhat/Completely free	79%	52%
Fear of political intimidation or violence	Fear somewhat/a lot	57%	50%
	Fear a little bit/not at all	80%	51%
Who do you think sent us to do this interview?	Government	82%	64%
	Non-government entity	60%	45%
Respondents' demeanor	Ill at ease/Suspicious	86%	70%
	At ease/Not suspicious	66%	46%
Respondents' candor	Misleading	91%	67%
	Honest	64%	45%

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 do you think sent us to do this interview?*
- In this country, how much do you fear political intimidation and violence during elections?*
- In this country, how free are you to criticize the president?*

Survey enumerators were asked to record: *What was the respondent's attitude toward you during the interview?*

These findings are consistent with Mattes and Teka's (2016) argument that citizens who are fearful of speaking their minds in public may take advantage of the confidentiality of the survey environment to state opinions and preferences they feel they cannot otherwise reveal – but only if they accept the political neutrality of the interviewer and his or her promise of confidentiality.

Conclusion

Zimbabweans may have had any number of reasons for trusting Mugabe, such as his history in the fight for independence, his longevity, or his policies. Similarly, Mnangagwa may have earned trust through his long tenure at Mugabe's side or, at the other extreme, his role in forcing Mugabe out and his promise of a "new Zimbabwe."

But this analysis points to fear as one factor that contributed to relatively high levels of professed trust in these presidents recorded in Afrobarometer's 2017 and 2018 surveys. In effect, a belief that they were being questioned by government agents – rather than independent survey fieldworkers – led some respondents to profess trust in the president.

Even if survey teams emphasize that they are from neutral, non-government organizations, "*Who do you think sent us to do this interview?*" remains an important check for survey research in Zimbabwe.

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit 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 (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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