



Dispatch No. 469 | 3 August 2021

## Zimbabweans see traditional leaders as influential but want them to stay out of politics

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 469 | Stephen Ndoma**

### Summary

The functions of traditional leaders in Zimbabwe's rural areas are outlined in the Constitution and the 1988 Traditional Leaders Act. They include promoting and upholding the cultural values of their communities, facilitating development, and administering communal lands. They are also charged with protecting the environment, resolving disputes in their communities, and exercising any other functions conferred or imposed on them by an act of Parliament.

Importantly, the Constitution bars traditional leaders from being members of any political party, participating in partisan politics, and furthering the interests of any political party or cause. Despite this constitutional provision, some traditional leaders in Zimbabwe have been accused of dabbling in politics, typically in support of the ruling ZANU-PF party. Critics say the party acquires allegiance through measures such as subsidized vehicle-purchase schemes and electrification of traditional leaders' homes, and in exchange some traditional leaders openly support ZANU-PF and restrict mobilization by opposition political parties (Chigwata, 2016). In May 2018, in response to a complaint by an opposition leader, the High Court of Zimbabwe issued a ruling banning all traditional leaders from engaging in politics (Kurebwa, 2020; Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights, 2018).

How do Zimbabweans see the role of their traditional leaders?

In the most recent Afrobarometer survey, a majority of citizens describe traditional leaders as wielding influence in the governance of local communities, the allocation of land, and the resolution of local disputes. About half say they are also influential in how people in their communities vote.

While Zimbabweans hold mixed views of traditional leaders' motives and impact on democracy, a majority trust them. Both perceived influence and trust are considerably higher in rural areas than in cities.

One key message on which rural and urban residents agree is that they want their traditional leaders to stay out of politics.

### 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. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by the Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens of Zimbabwe in April 2021. 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 Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

## Key findings

- About two-thirds of Zimbabweans say traditional leaders wield “some influence” or “a lot of influence” in resolving local disputes (68%), governing local communities (67%), and allocating land (62%).
- Almost half (47%) say traditional leaders have significant influence on how people in their communities vote.
- Half (49%) of Zimbabweans are happy with the level of influence that traditional leaders exert; far fewer wish it would increase (24%) or decrease (13%).
- Zimbabweans are divided in their views on whose interests traditional leaders serve – those of people in their communities (38%), politicians and government officials (31%), or their own (18%).
- A majority (60%) of citizens say they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- About one-fifth (19%) say “most” or “all” traditional leaders are involved in corrupt activities.
- Overall, public opinion is split on the impact of traditional leaders on democracy: 28% believe they make democracy stronger, 28% say they weaken it, and 26% say they don't make a difference.
- But almost three-quarters (72%) want traditional leaders to stay out of politics and let people decide for themselves how to vote.

## Traditional leaders' influence in local communities

More than six in 10 Zimbabweans say traditional leaders wield “some influence” or “a lot of influence” in resolving local disputes (68%), governing local communities (67%), and allocating land (62%) (Figure 1).

Fewer than half (47%) say they substantially influence how people vote, although an additional 17% say they have “a small amount” of influence on voting.

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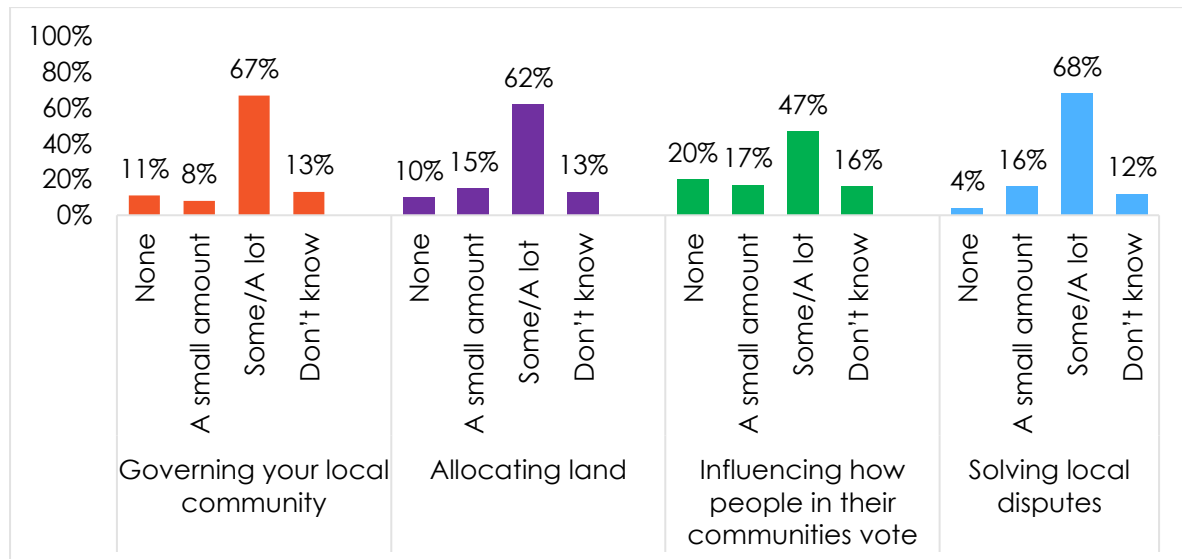
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As might be expected, rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to see traditional leaders as influential in their communities. The proportions who say traditional leaders have “some influence” or “a lot of influence” are almost twice as high in rural areas when it comes to governing local communities (82% vs. 43% in cities), allocating land (75% vs. 41%), and resolving disputes (83% vs. 44%) (Figure 2).

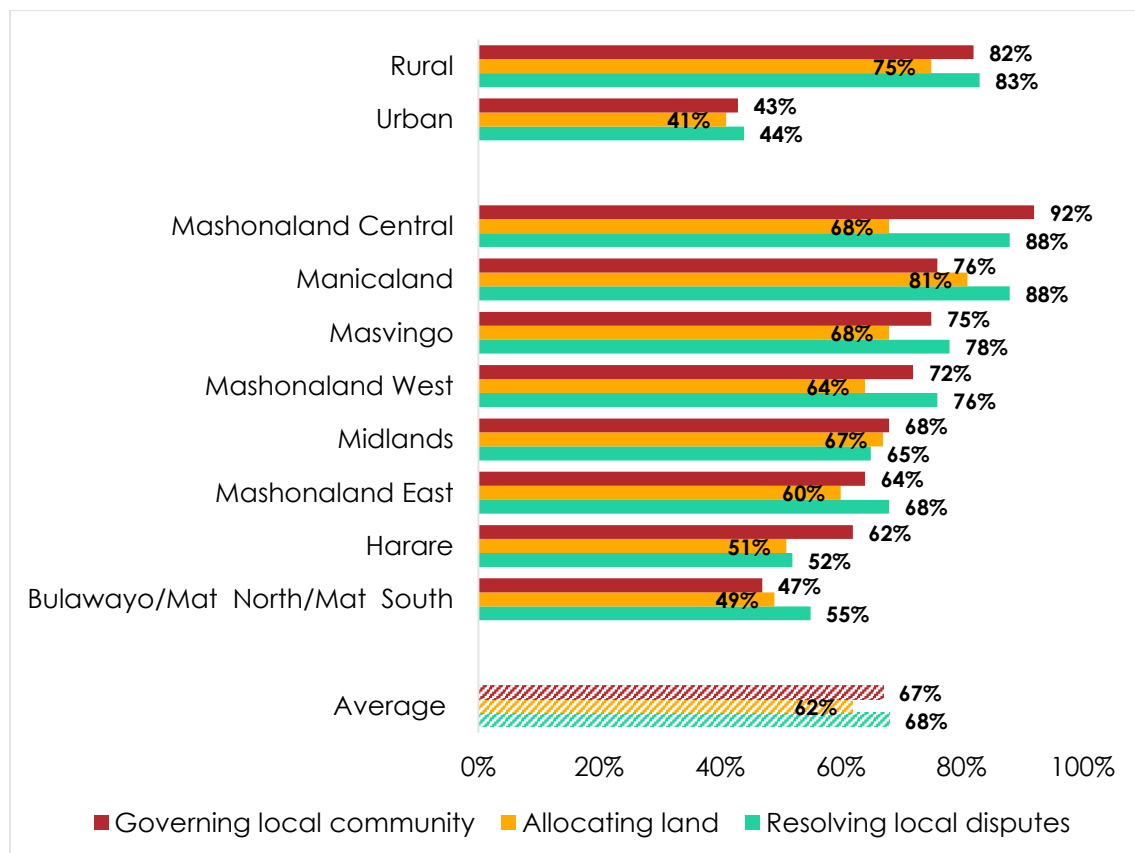
Accordingly, the largely rural provinces of Mashonaland Central and Manicaland tend to be at the high end in terms of perceived influence of traditional leaders on these issues, while residents of Harare and Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South are far less likely to see them as influential.

**Figure 1: Traditional leaders' influence in local communities | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas?

**Figure 2: Traditional leaders' influence in governing, allocating land, and resolving disputes | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**

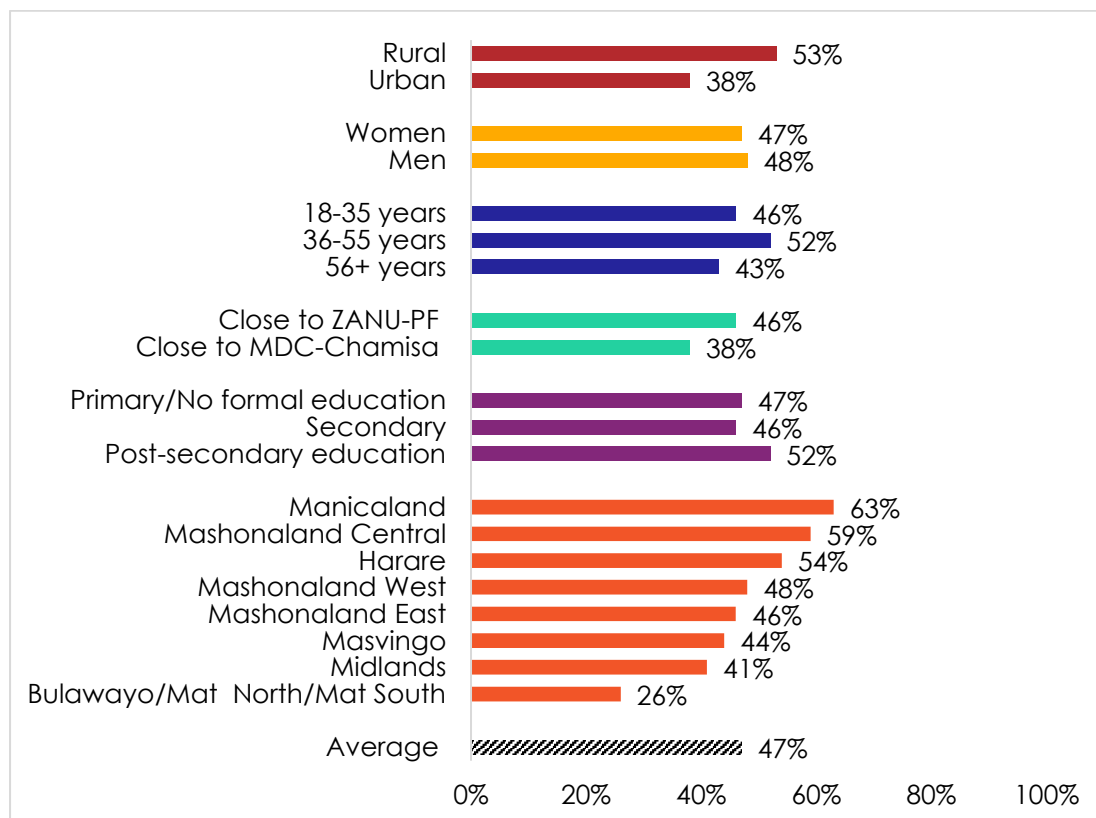


**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Governing your local community? Allocating land? Solving local disputes? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

The rural-urban pattern is similar (53% vs. 38%) when it comes to perceived influence on how people vote, and again Mashonaland Central (59%) and Manicaland (63%) are at the top and Bulawayo at the bottom. But more than half (54%) of Harare residents also believe that traditional leaders are influential when it comes to voting (Figure 3).

Women and men are about equally likely to believe that traditional leaders influence voting. Citizens with post-secondary education (52%) and middle-aged respondents (52%) are somewhat more likely to share this view, as are ZANU-PF supporters (46%) compared to MDC-Chamisa adherents (36%).

**Figure 3: Traditional leaders' influence on how people vote | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** How much influence do traditional leaders currently have in each of the following areas: Influencing how people in their communities vote? (% who say "some" or "a lot")

### Should traditional leaders' influence increase or decrease?

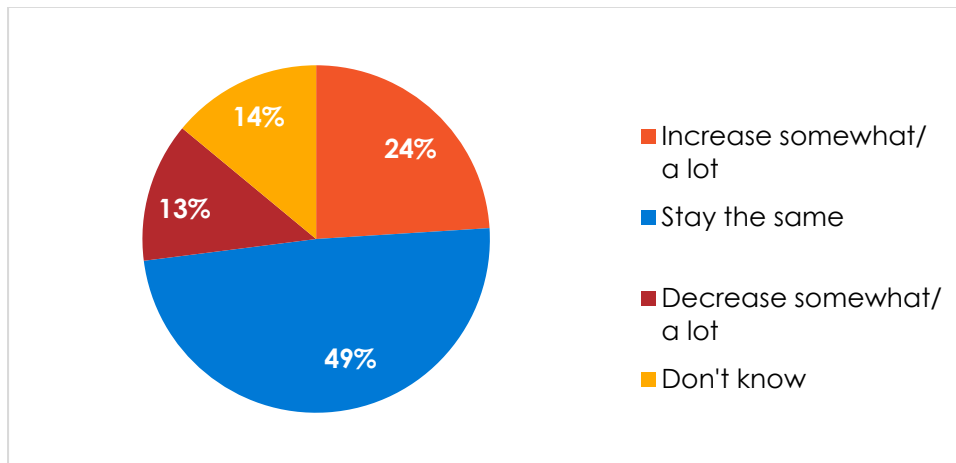
About half (49%) of Zimbabweans are satisfied with the level of influence wielded by traditional leaders, while one-fourth (24%) want it to increase "somewhat" or "a lot" and 13% would prefer to see it decrease (Figure 4).

Satisfaction with the current level of influence by traditional leaders is the most popular option across key demographic groups (Figure 5).

To some extent, support for increasing or decreasing their influence mirrors – in reverse – assessments of how much influence they currently have. For example, residents in Harare and Bulawayo/Matabeleland North/Matabeleland South, who tend to see traditional leaders as less influential, are most likely to say they should have more influence, while residents in Mashonaland Central and Manicaland, who tend to see them as more influential, are more inclined to want their influence to be reduced.

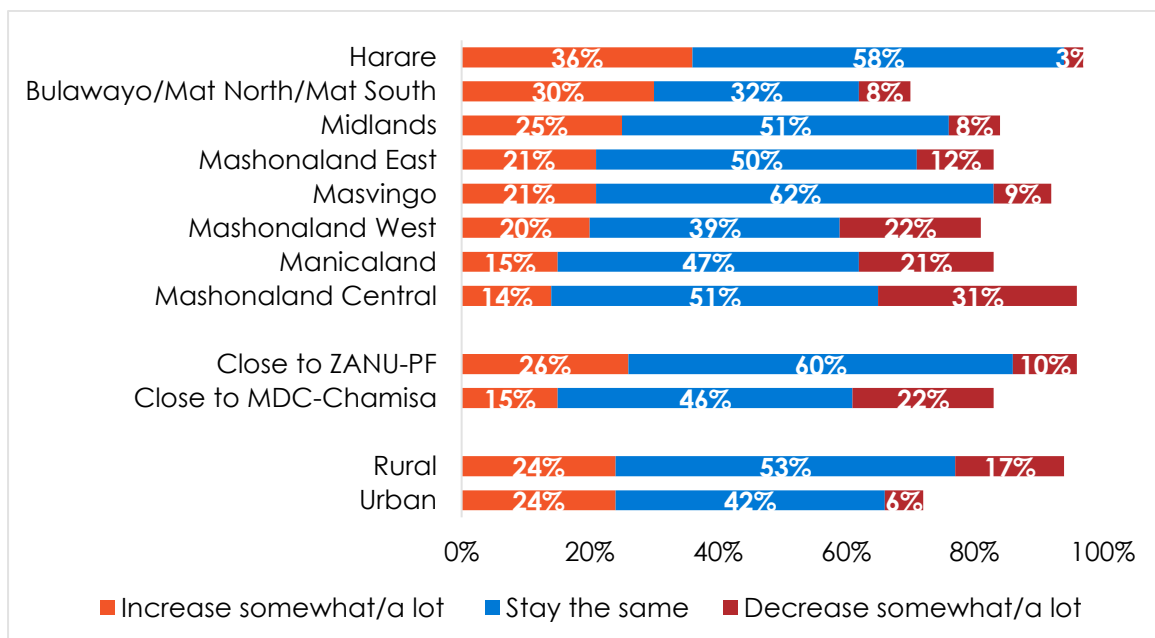
Rural and urban residents are equally likely to call for greater influence (24% each), but rural residents are more likely their urban counterparts to say their influence should stay the same (53% vs. 42%) or be reduced (17% vs. 6%). ZANU-PF fans are more likely than MDC-Chamisa supporters to favour increasing the influence of traditional leaders (26% vs. 15%).

**Figure 4: Should traditional leaders' influence increase, stay the same, or decrease?**  
 | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?

**Figure 5: Should traditional leaders' influence increase, stay the same, or decrease?**  
 | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that the amount of influence traditional leaders have in governing your local community should increase, stay the same, or decrease?

### Whom do traditional leaders serve?

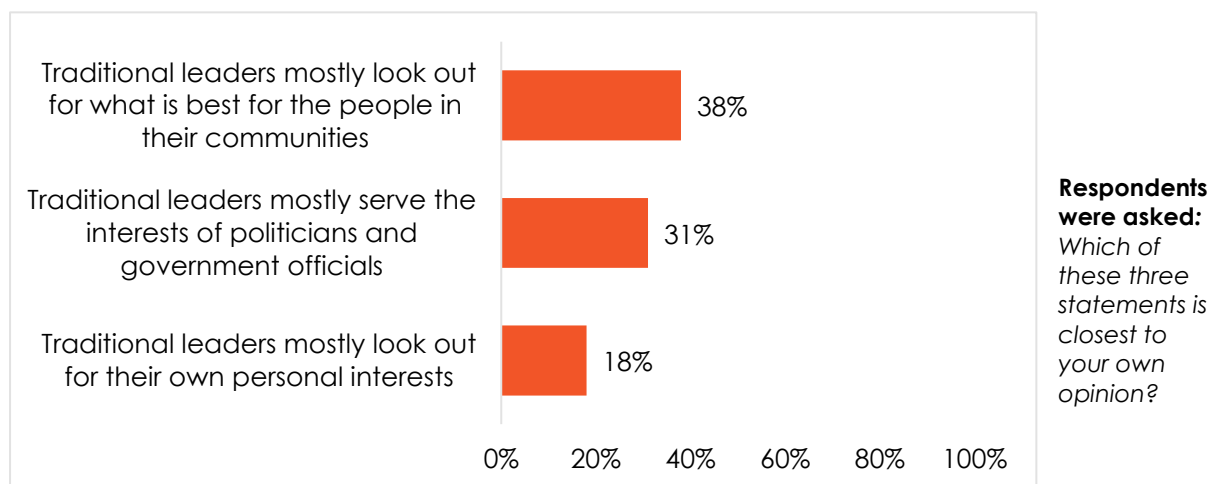
Just as Zimbabweans hold mixed views of how much influence traditional leaders should exert, they are divided in their views of whose interests these unelected leaders serve. A

plurality (38%) say traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities, but almost as many (31%) believe they mostly serve the interests of politicians and government officials. About two in 10 (18%) see them as mostly looking out for their own personal interests (Figure 6).

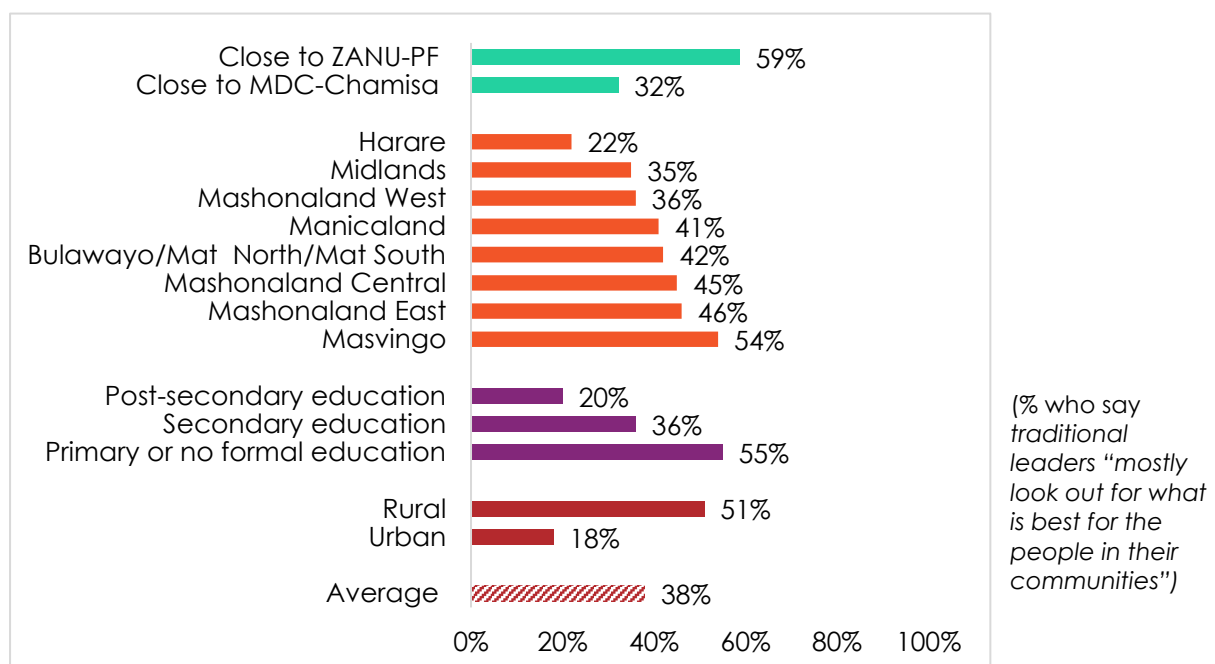
The view that traditional leaders mostly look out for what is best for the people in their communities is more prevalent among rural residents (51%) and supporters of the ZANU-PF (59%) than in towns and cities (18%) and among MDC-Chamisa adherents (32%) (Figure 7). It is also the majority opinion among respondents with primary or no formal education (55%, vs. only 20% of those with post-secondary education).

Masvingo is the only province where a majority (54%) of respondents say traditional leaders mostly serve their communities' interests. In Harare, just one in five respondents (22%) agree.

**Figure 6: Whose interests do traditional leaders serve? | Zimbabwe | 2021**



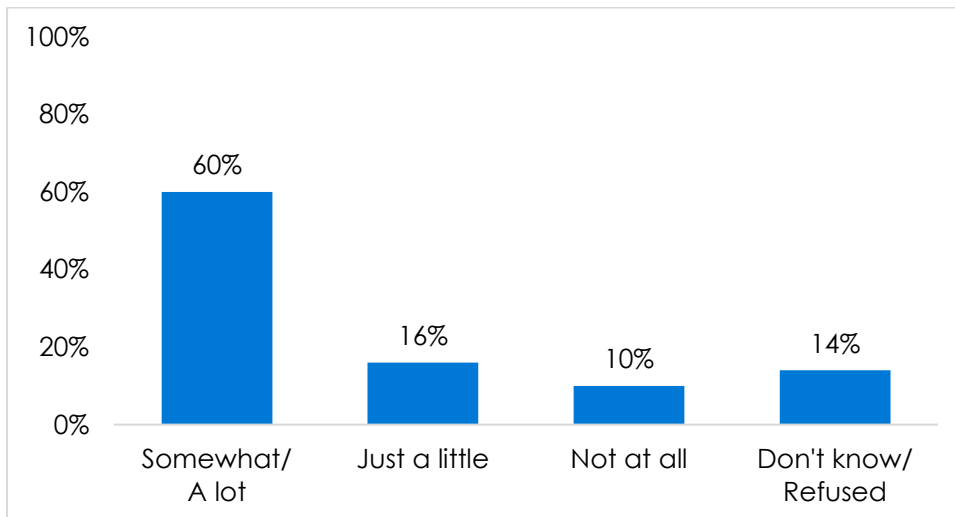
**Figure 7: Traditional leaders serve interests of their communities | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**



### Trust in traditional leaders

Despite some doubts about whose interests they serve, a clear majority (60%) of Zimbabweans say they trust traditional leaders “somewhat” or “a lot” (Figure 8). Only 10% say they don’t trust them “at all.”

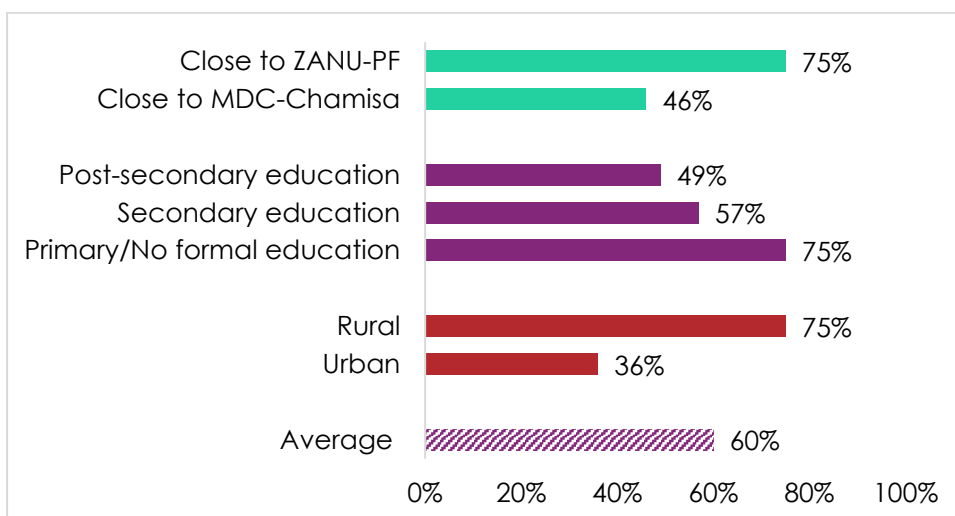
**Figure 8: Trust in traditional leaders** | Zimbabwe | 2021



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

In line with results shown above, traditional leaders enjoy greater trust among rural residents (75%) than among urbanites (36%), and among ZANU-PF supporters (75%) compared to MDC-Chamisa adherents (46%) (Figure 9). The least educated citizens (with primary or no formal schooling) are most likely to express trust in traditional leaders (75%, vs. 49%-57% of their more educated counterparts).

**Figure 9: Trust in traditional leaders** | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



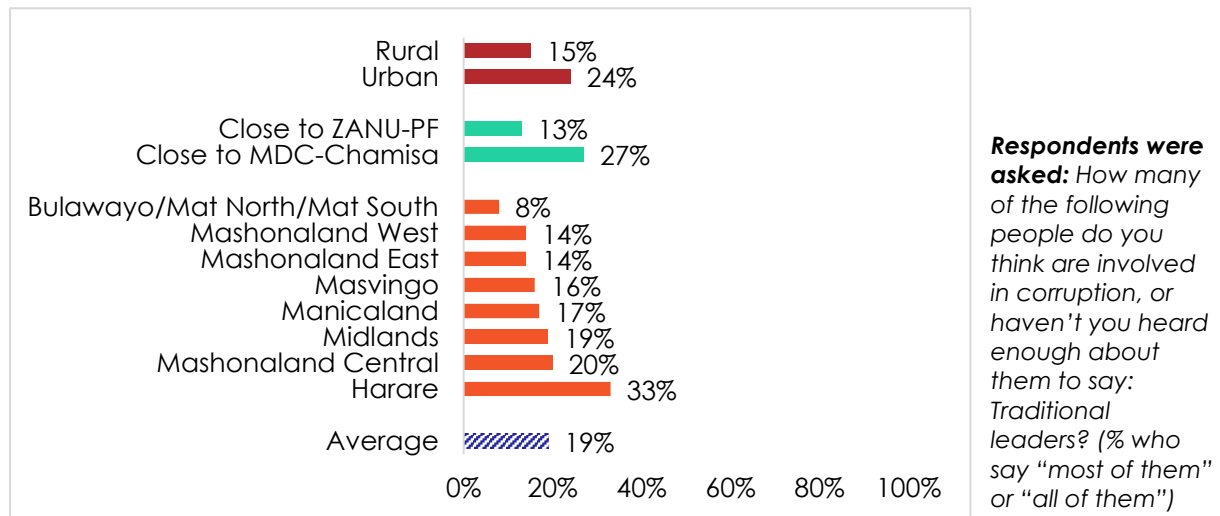
**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Traditional leaders? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

### Perceptions of corruption

About one in five Zimbabweans (19%) see “most” or “all” traditional leaders – half as many as report widespread corruption among members of Parliament (40%). In addition, more than four in 10 (43%) say “some” traditional leaders are corrupt.

Perceptions that most/all traditional leaders are involved in corrupt activities are more common among urban residents (24%), especially in Harare (33%), and among supporters of the MDC-Chamisa (27%, vs. 13% of ZANU-PF adherents) (Figure 10).

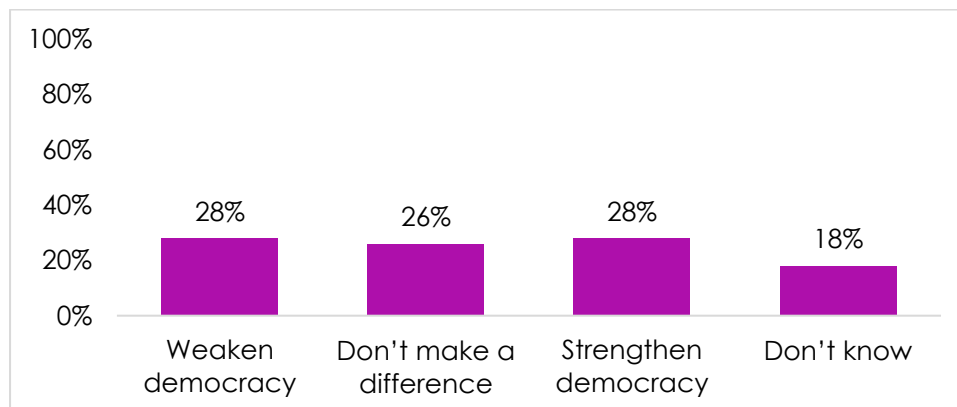
**Figure 10: Perceptions that most/all traditional leaders are corrupt | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021**



### Are traditional leaders bad or good for democracy?

Overall, Zimbabweans are evenly divided in their assessment of whether non-elected traditional leaders are bad or good for democracy. Almost three in 10 (28%) say they strengthen democracy, while the same proportion (28%) think they weaken it. A quarter (26%) say traditional leaders don't affect democracy one way or the other (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Are traditional leaders bad or good for democracy? | Zimbabwe | 2021**

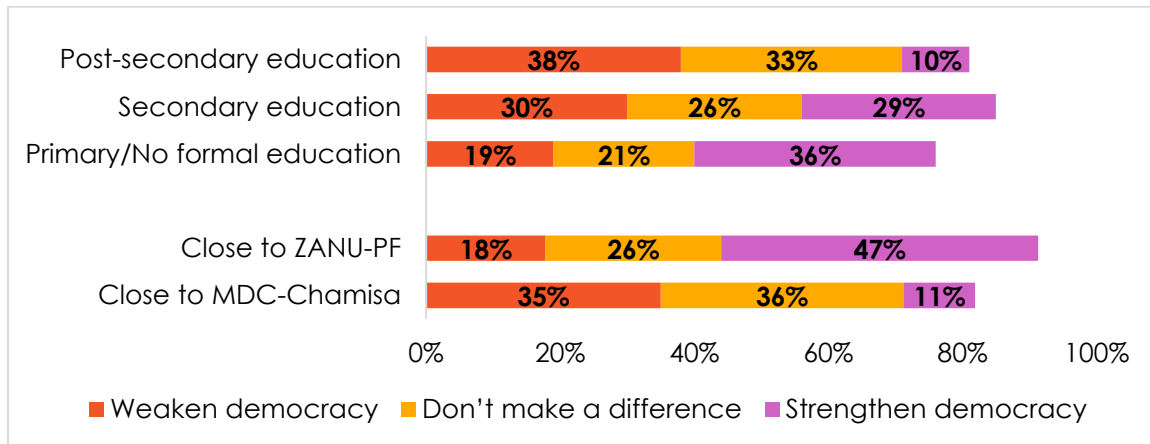


**Respondents were asked:** Some people think that because traditional leaders are not elected, they are bad for democracy, but other people think that traditional leaders can work together with elected leaders to make democracy work better. What about you? Do you think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy, weaken democracy, or don't make a difference?



More educated respondents are more likely to see traditional leaders as weakening democracy, ranging from just 19% of those with primary or no formal schooling to 38% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 12). ZANU-PF adherents are four times as likely as MDC-Chamisa supporters to say traditional leaders strengthen Zimbabwe's democracy (47% vs. 11%).

**Figure 12: Are traditional leaders bad or good for democracy? | by education and political party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2021**

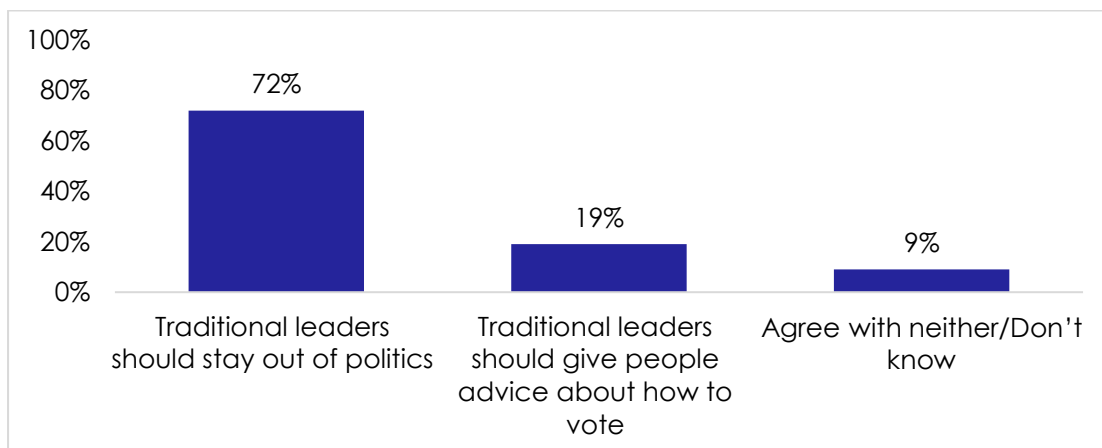


**Respondents were asked:** Do you think that traditional leaders strengthen democracy, weaken democracy, or don't make a difference?

### Traditional leaders' role in vote choice

While they are split in their assessments of traditional leaders' impact on democracy, Zimbabweans are much more unified in their view that traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote (72%). Only one-fifth (19%) say traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary citizens and should give them advice about how to vote (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Traditional leaders' role in vote choice | Zimbabwe | 2021**



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

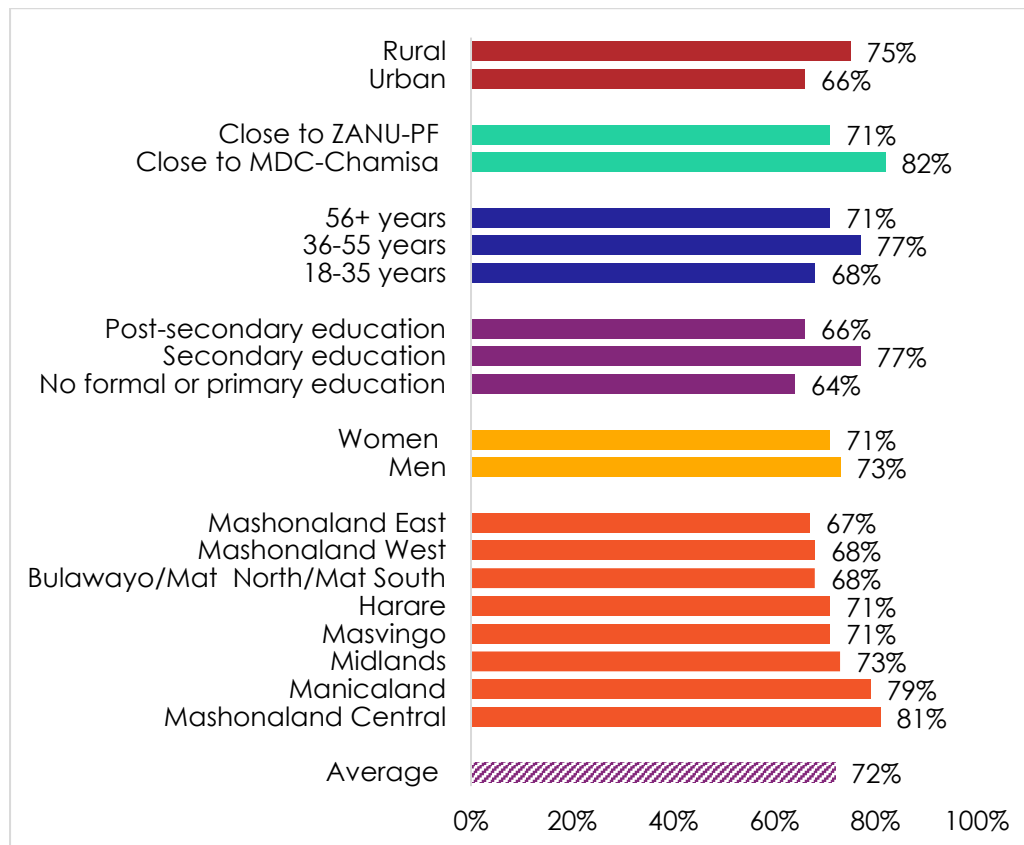
Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.

Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

The opinion that traditional leaders should stay out of politics is strong across all key demographic groups, including ZANU-PF supporters (71%). Surprisingly, rural residents are even more insistent on this point than their urban counterparts (75% vs. 66%) (Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics** | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2021



**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Traditional leaders have a better grasp of political issues than ordinary people; they should give their people advice about how to vote.

Statement 2: Traditional leaders should stay out of politics and leave people to make their own decisions about how to vote.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 2)

## Conclusion

Zimbabweans report that traditional leaders retain significant influence in local governance, in dispute resolution, in the allocation of land, and to a lesser degree in shaping how people in their communities vote.

Few citizens want the influence of traditional leaders to increase, but even fewer want it to decrease.

Zimbabweans hold mixed views on whether traditional leaders serve the interests of the people and on whether they strengthen or weaken democracy, but they generally trust these non-elected leaders, especially in rural areas.

However, their clearest message to their traditional leaders is: Stay out of politics.

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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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