Demand for competitive multiparty politics is high in Zimbabwe

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 46 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Starting from five major political parties at independence, the history of multiparty politics in Zimbabwe is marked by a fragmented opposition that reached a peak in a power-sharing Government of National Unity (GNU) but has never broken the ruling party's 35-year hold on power. Does this history reflect what Zimbabweans want in their politics?

With a clear voice, Zimbabweans demand a choice among multiple parties in competitive elections, according to the latest Afrobarometer survey. Yet a majority of citizens also fear that competition among political parties often leads to violent conflict. Most have little faith in the country's opposition parties, and public opinion is divided as to whether the opposition presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country.

Survey findings indicate that Zimbabweans see differences between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and opposition parties based on their economic and development policies and the perceived integrity and experience of party leaders. The ruling party is more likely than the opposition to be perceived as capable of dealing with challenges confronting the nation, including fighting corruption, controlling prices, creating jobs, and improving health care.

Yet for ruling and opposition parties alike, Zimbabweans believe that political leaders are more interested in advancing their own political ambitions than in serving the people.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Zimbabwe, led by Mass Public Opinion Institute, interviewed 2,400 adult Zimbabweans in November 2014. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2012.

Key findings

- More than two-thirds (69%) of adult Zimbabweans believe that many political parties are necessary to make sure that citizens have real choices in who governs them. This has been a majority view since 2004.

- Two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents believe that competition between political parties "often" or "always" leads to violence.

- Only one-third (34%) of Zimbabweans trust opposition parties, whereas more than half (54%) trust the ruling party.

- Seven of 10 Zimbabweans (71%) share the opinion that political leaders are more concerned about advancing their own political ambitions than about serving the people's interests.

Support for multiparty politics

Upon attainment of nationhood in 1980, Zimbabwe had five main political parties: the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), ZANU-Ndonga, United African National Congress (UANC), and Rhodesian Front (RF), which was later renamed the Conservative Alliance of Zimbabwe (CAZ). In 1987, the ZAPU and ZANU merged to become the ZANU-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), the dominant party on Zimbabwe's political scene.

During the 1980s, the ZANU-PF government tried to push for the establishment of a one-party state, but this idea was abandoned in 1990 as the wind of democratisation swept across Africa. More parties emerged in the 1990s, including the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM), the Forum Party of Zimbabwe (FPZ), and the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats (ZUD). In 1999, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) came onto the scene under the leadership of Morgan Tsvangirai. Since then, the MDC has splintered into the MDC-T under Tsvangirai, the MDC-M under Welshman Ncube, and the MDC Renewal led by Tendai Biti.

The MDC was the first opposition party to pose a threat to the ZANU-PF, as seen in the MDC's role in the "No" campaign against a constitutional referendum in 2000; serious challenges in 2000, 2005, and 2008 parliamentary elections as well as the 2002 and 2008 presidential elections; and participation in the GNU. The GNU, negotiated after inconclusive elections of March 2008, marked the only phase in the country's history when the ZANU-PF was forced to share power with other political parties as Zimbabwe continues to practice multiparty politics within a one-dominant-party system.

Against this backdrop, this paper tracks public support for multiparty politics in Zimbabwe. Two surveys were conducted before the GNU was established in February 2009, while data from rounds 4, 4.5, and 5 were collected during the GNU era. Data obtained in November 2014 represent the post-GNU period, as the shaky coalition government ended with the July 2013 elections, which saw the ZANU-PF gaining majority status in Parliament.

In the latest survey (November 2014), more than two-thirds (69%) of Zimbabweans "agree" or "agree very strongly" that many political parties are needed in order to make sure that citizens have real choices in who governs them, while 29% say that many political parties are unnecessary and create division and confusion (Figure 1).

Support for multiparty competition has been the majority view for the past decade, starting with 55% in 2004 and jumping by 21 percentage points, to 76%, in 2005 and 2009 before settling in the 60%-70% range.

Support for multiple parties is much stronger among urban residents (91%) than among rural dwellers (61%) (Figure 2). Differences between the views of men (70%) and women (67%) are slight.

Figure 1: Support for multiparty competition | Zimbabwe | 2004-2014
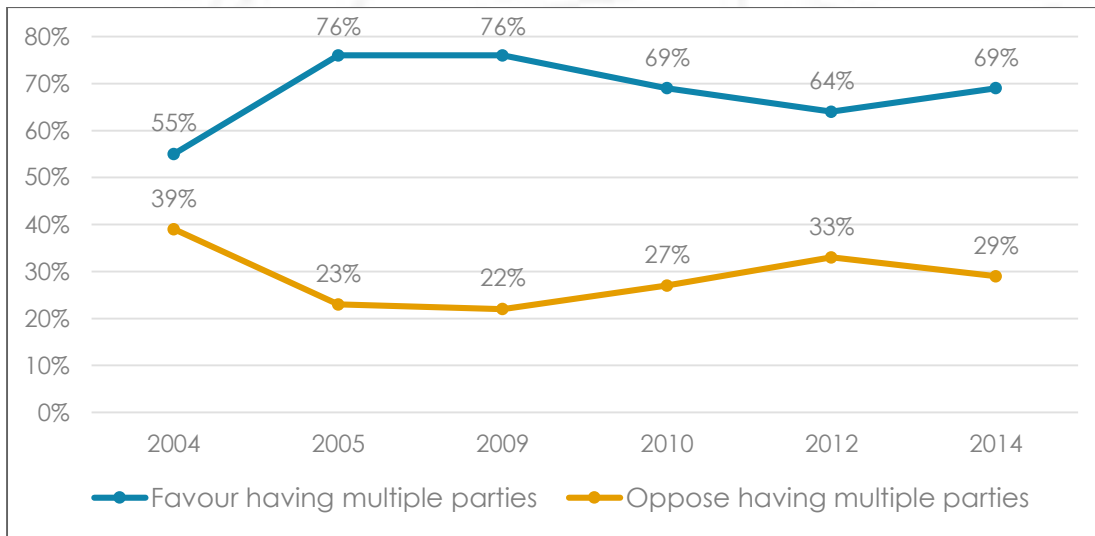
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view? Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2. (% who agree/agree very strongly and % who disagree/disagree very strongly)*
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Zimbabwe.
Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Zimbabweans have real choices in who governs them.

Figure 2: Support for multiparty competition | by location and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014
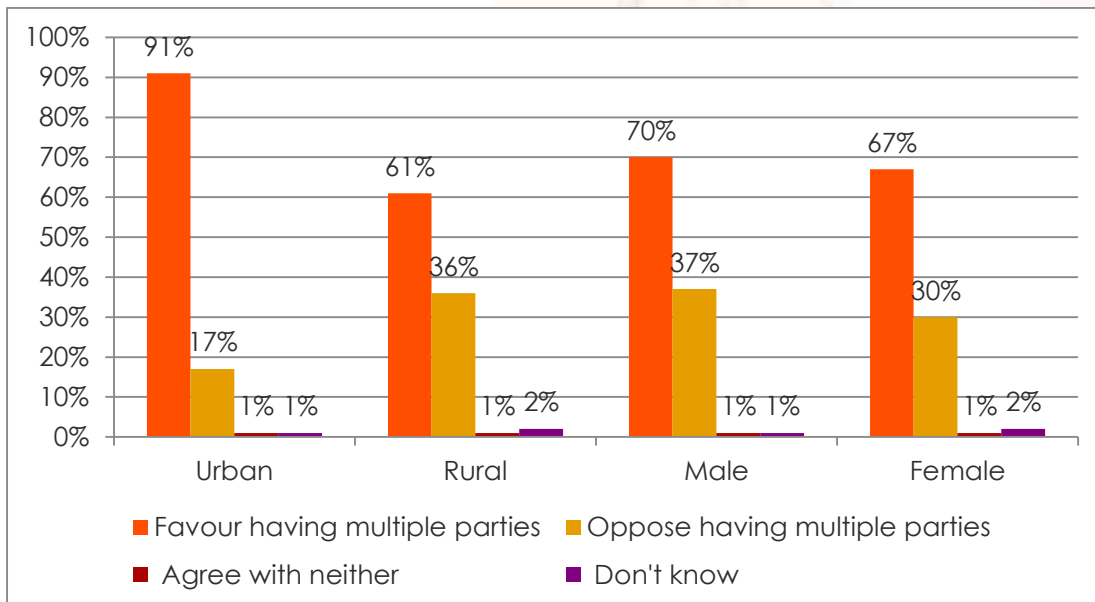
Consistent with their support for multiparty politics, almost three-fourths (73%) of survey respondents reject allowing only one political party to stand for election and hold office (Figure 3). Urban dwellers (86%) are more likely than rural residents (67%) to reject one-party politics (86%), and men (77%) are slightly more opposed than women (72%) (Figure 4).

Respondents' level of education is a good predictor of their opposition to single-party politics. Disapproval rises from 50% among those with no formal schooling to 89% among those with tertiary education (Figure 5).

Figure 3: Disapproval of single-party politics | Zimbabwe | 2014
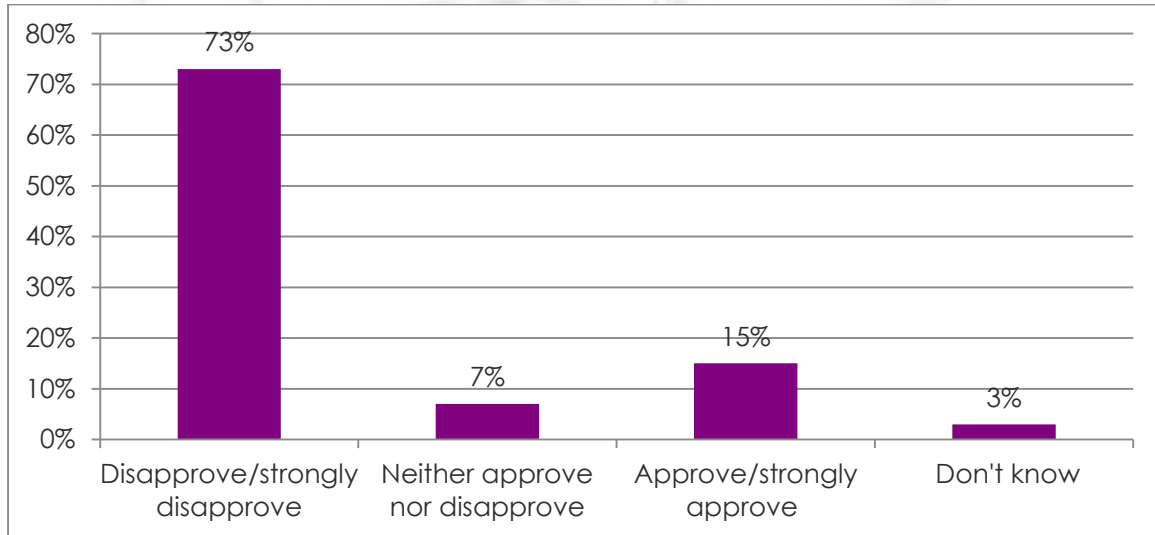
Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?*

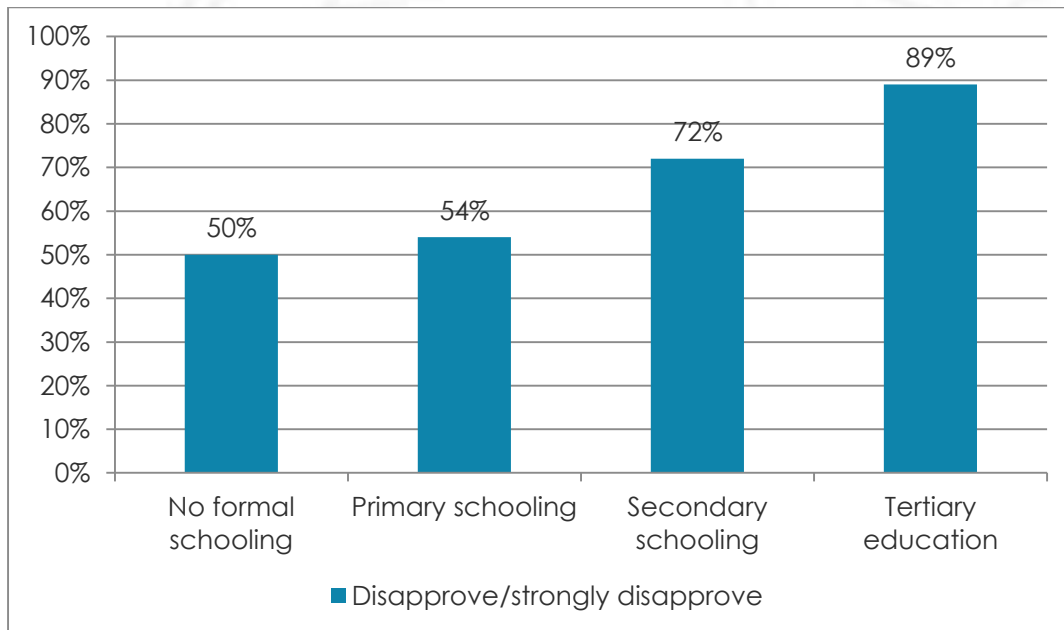**Figure 4: Disapproval of single-party politics** | by location and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014
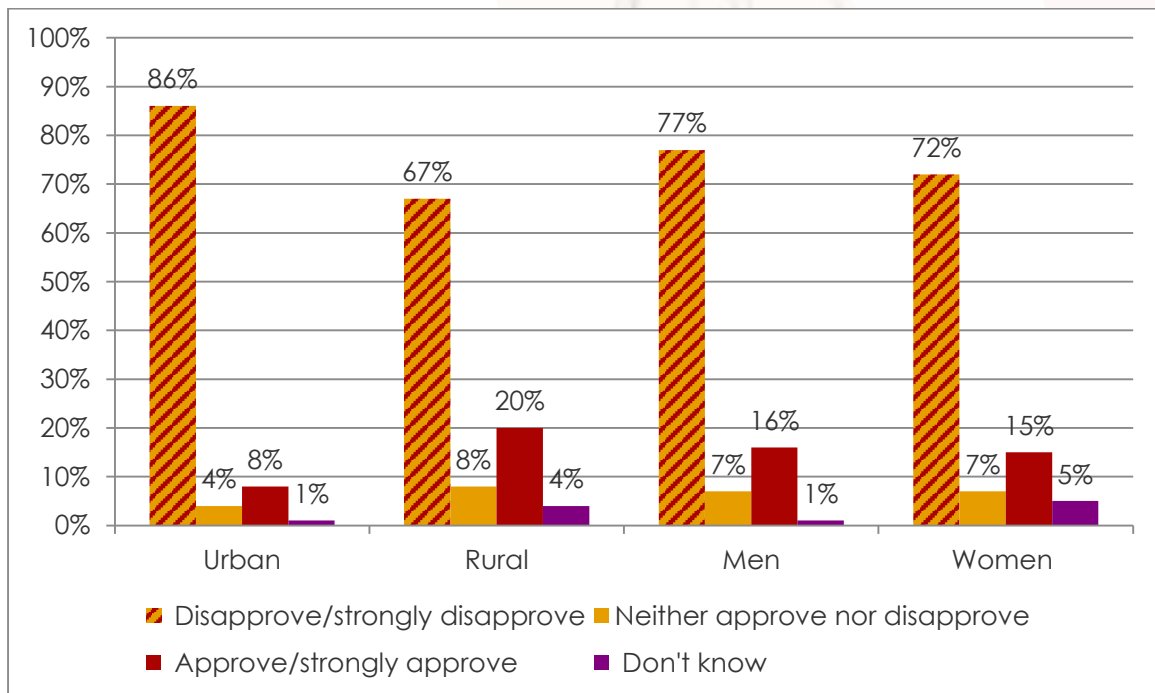
Figure 5: Disapproval of single-party politics | by level of education | Zimbabwe | 2014

Bar chart legend: ■ Disapprove/strongly disapprove

- No formal schooling: 50%
- Primary schooling: 54%
- Secondary schooling: 72%
- Tertiary education: 89%

Multiparty politics and violence

While Zimbabweans value multiparty politics, they also express a fear that competition between political parties leads to violent conflict. Two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents believe that such competition "often" or "always" leads to strife (Figure 6). Views on this issue do not differ much between urban and rural residents or between men and women.

**Figure 6: View that multiparty competition leads to violent conflict** | Zimbabwe | 2014

- Never: 6%
- Rarely: 22%
- Often/always: 67%
- Don't know: 5%
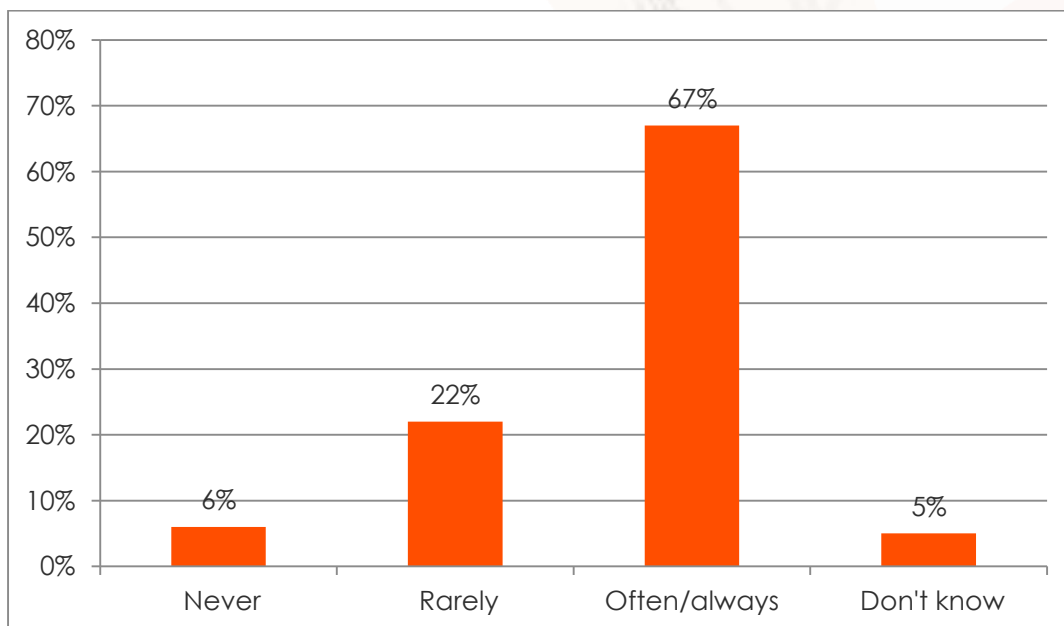
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?*

Trust in ruling vs. opposition parties

Survey data show that trust in opposition parties is low, with barely one-third (34%) of the adult population asserting that they trust them "somewhat" or "a lot" – the same proportion that trust them "not at all" (Figure 7). More Zimbabweans (54%) trust the ruling ZANU-PF party.

Trust levels vary by residence location, showing differences both by urban-rural residence and by province. Distrust of the opposition is stronger in rural areas (where 37% say they trust them "not at all") than in urban areas (29%). Similarly, trust in the ruling party is much stronger in rural areas (where 65% say they trust the ZANU-PF "somewhat" or "a lot") than among urban residents (37%). More than half of both men (53%) and women (56%) say they trust the ruling party.

Figure 7: Trust in ruling vs. opposition political parties | Zimbabwe | 2014
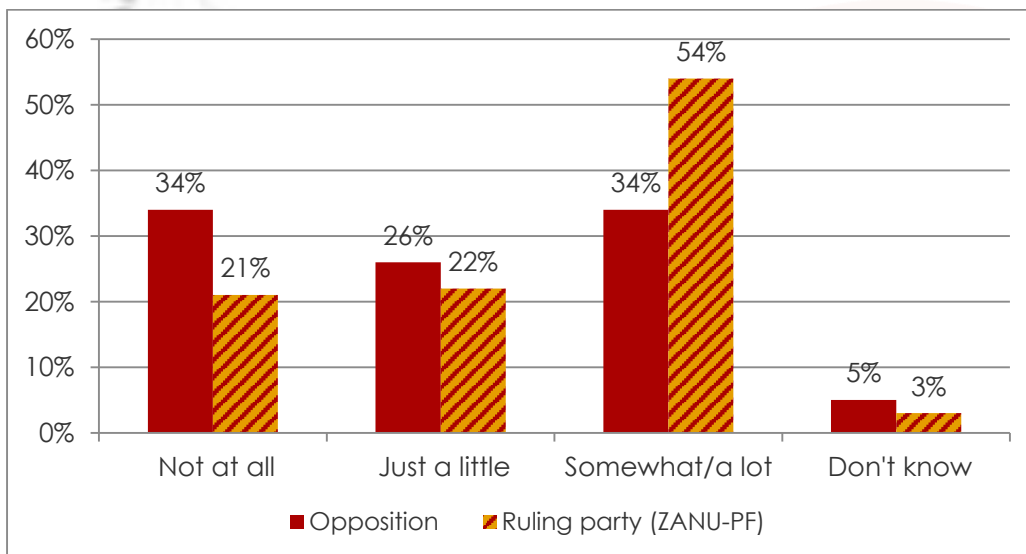
Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Opposition political parties? The ruling party?*

Figure 8: Trust in ruling party vs. opposition political parties | by respondent location and gender| Zimbabwe | 2014
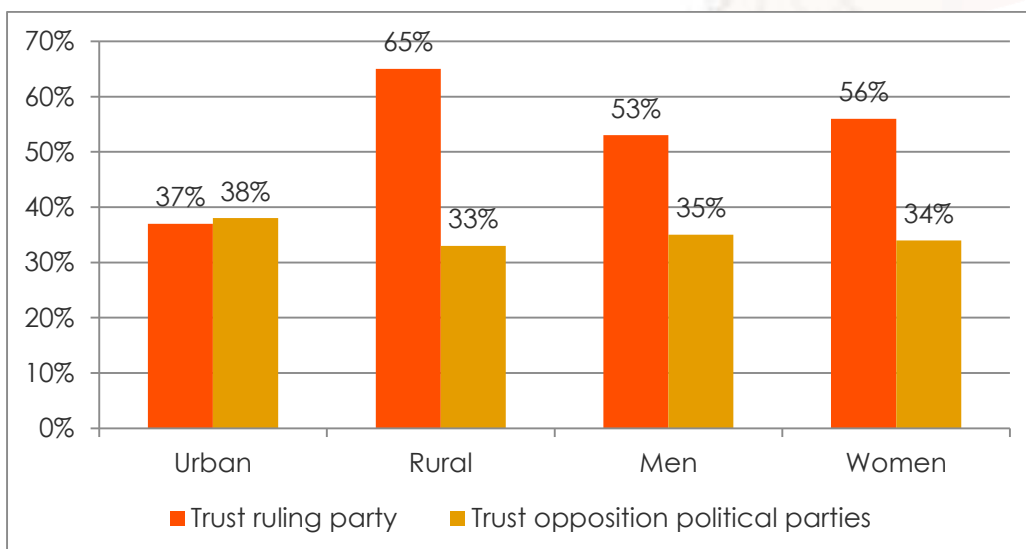
(% who say they trust "somewhat" or "a lot")

No province in the country has a majority that trusts opposition parties "somewhat" or "a lot." Even in traditional opposition strongholds such as Harare and Bulawayo, only 36% and 37%, respectively, say they trust the opposition (Table 1). In Mashonaland West province, a ZANU-PF stronghold, close to half (48%) say they do not trust opposition parties "at all."

Table 1: Trust in opposition political parties | by province | Zimbabwe | 2014

	Trust opposition somewhat/a lot
Manicaland	43%
Mashonaland East	37%
Bulawayo	37%
Harare	36%
Midlands	36%
Masvingo	36%
Matabeleland South	35%
Matabeleland North	34%
Mashonaland West	27%
Mashonaland Central	25%

Perceived differences between ruling and opposition parties

Alongside differences in trust, and perhaps related to them, are public perceptions of differences between the opposition and ruling parties. The most commonly cited difference, cited by 29% of survey respondents, are their economic and development policies, followed by party leaders' honesty or integrity (16%) and experience (15%) (Table 2).

About one in seven (14%) see no difference between the ruling party and the opposition; more urbanites (17%) than rural dwellers (12%) share this view.

Table 2: Perceived differences between opposition and ruling party | 2014

	Urban	**Rural**	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**
Economic and development policies	34%	26%	30%	27%	29%
Honesty or integrity of party leaders	15%	17%	17%	15%	16%
Experience of party leaders	13%	16%	16%	14%	15%
There is no difference	17%	12%	15%	13%	14%
Don't know	6%	13%	7%	13%	10%
Personalities of party leaders	8%	9%	8%	9%	9%
Ethnicity of party leaders or members	3%	1%	2%	2%	2%
None of these / some other answer	2%	3%	2%	2%	2%
Religion of party leaders or members	1%	2%	1%	2%	1%
Regional identity of party leaders/members	1%	1%	1%	2%	1%

Respondents were asked: *Which of the following do you see as the most important difference between the ruling party and opposition parties in Zimbabwe?*

A majority of citizens believe that the ruling party is better equipped than the opposition to address problems bedevilling the country, such as controlling prices (57%), creating jobs (51%), improving health care (57%), and fighting corruption (50%). Only about one in four respondents say the opposition is better placed to deal with these issues (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Perceived capacity to address problems** | ruling party vs. opposition | Zimbabwe | 2014
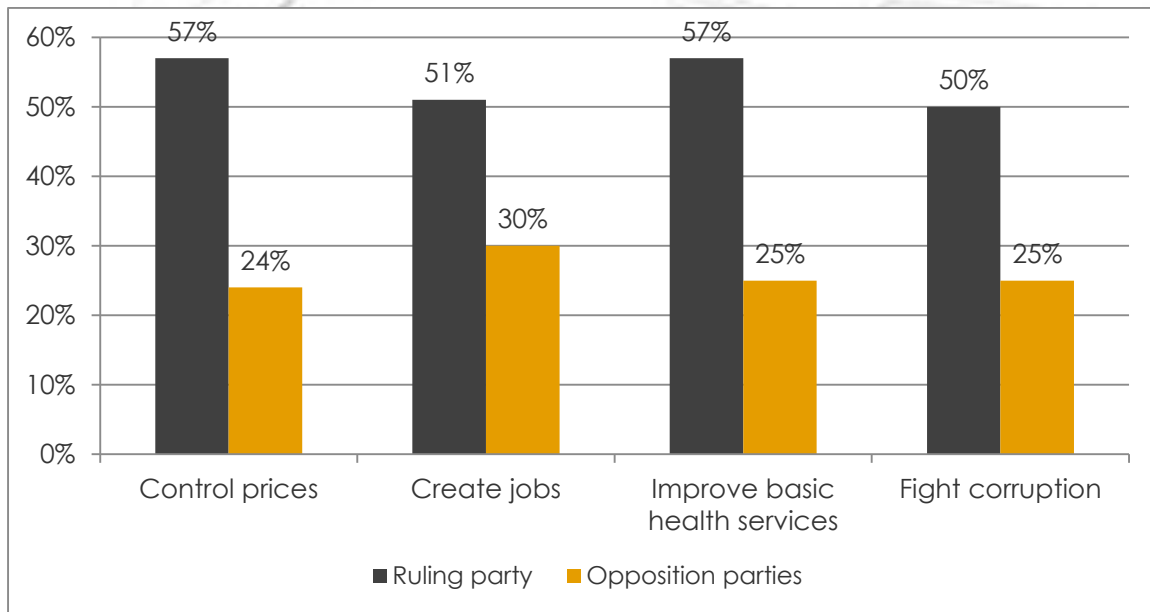
Respondents were asked: *Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Mirroring responses to the question on trust, rural residents are more likely than urban residents to see the ruling party as better able to address these issues, and women are slightly more likely than men to do so.

Perceptions of political leaders

Neither the ruling party nor the opposition escapes the public's assessment (by 71% of respondents) that political leaders are more concerned about advancing their own political ambitions than about serving the people's interests (Figure 10). This view is particularly common among urbanites (80%, including 51% who "agree strongly"), but even among rural residents, it is a majority view (66%). Perceptions of political leaders as interested primarily in serving their own ambitions are common in all the country's 10 administrative provinces (Table 3).

Figure 10: Perceptions of political leaders' motivations | Zimbabwe | 2014
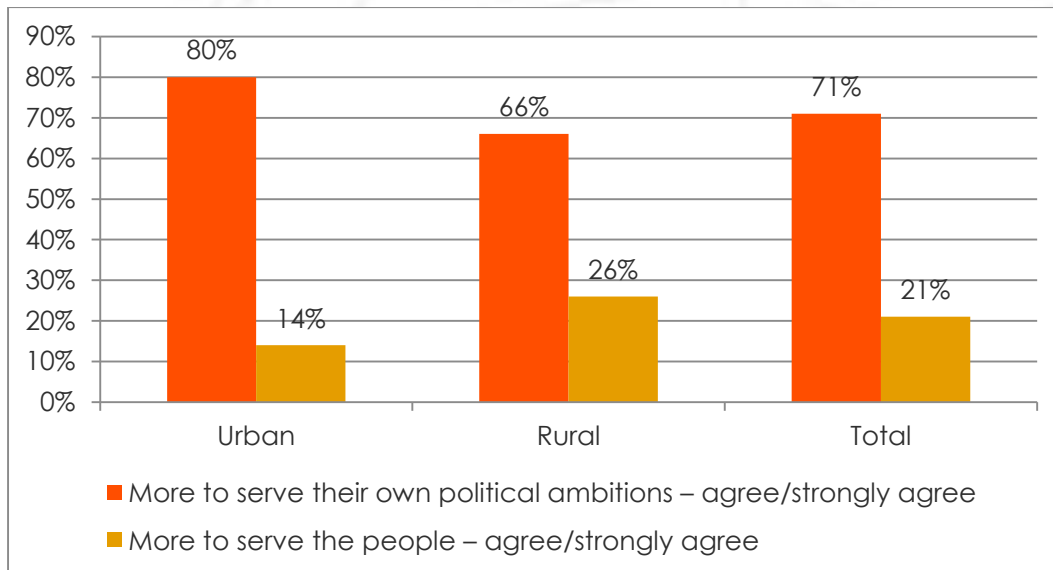
Respondents were asked: *Do you think that the leaders of political parties in this country are more concerned with serving the interests of the people, or more concerned with advancing their own political ambitions, or haven't you heard enough to say?*

Table 3: Perceptions of political leaders' motivations | by province | Zimbabwe | **2014**

	More to serve their own political ambitions – agree/strongly agree	More to serve the people – agree/strongly agree
Bulawayo	85%	8%
Mashonaland East	83%	11%
Harare	79%	17%
Matabeleland South	73%	21%
Masvingo	70%	18%
Midlands	68%	23%
Manicaland	66%	27%
Matabeleland North	64%	21%
Mashonaland Central	64%	29%
Mashonaland West	58%	31%

Perceptions of the opposition as a viable alternative

Zimbabweans are evenly divided (36% each) on the question of whether opposition political parties present a viable alternative vision and plan for the country (Figure 11). There is a clear rural-urban distinction: Urbanites (49%) are more likely than rural residents (29%) to "agree" or "strongly agree" that opposition political parties in Zimbabwe offer a viable alternative vision for the country.

Figure 11: Perceptions of the opposition as viable alternative | Zimbabwe | 2014
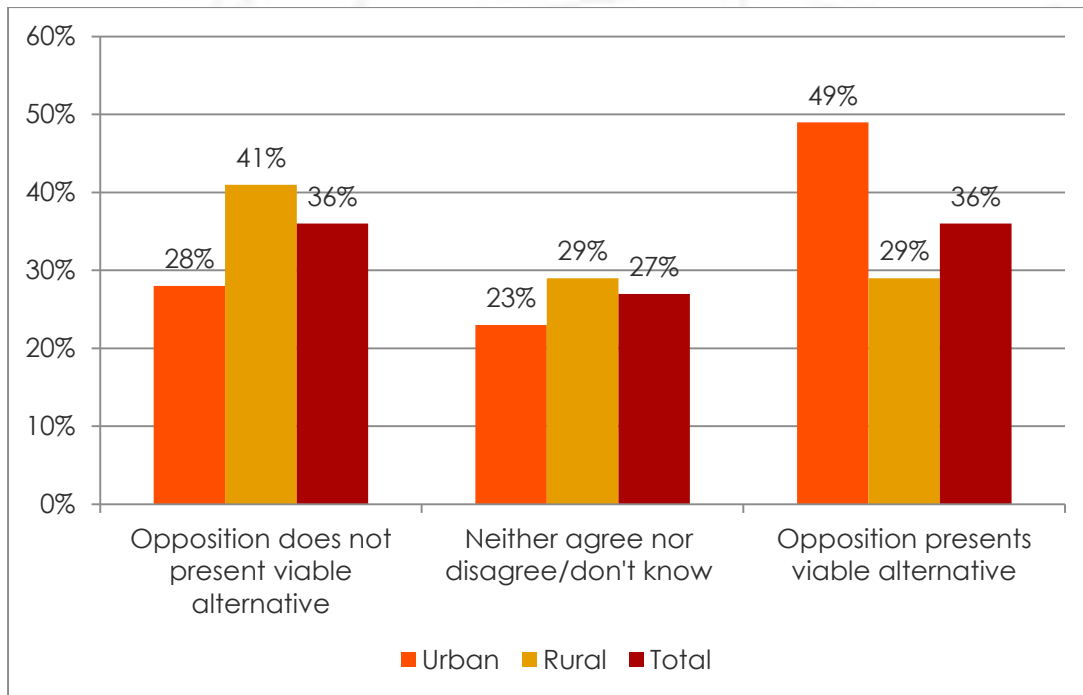
Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in Zimbabwe presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country?*

Conclusion

Zimbabweans' demand for multiparty politics is high, and this has been consistently so since 2004. At the same time, many Zimbabwean citizens distrust existing opposition political parties and fear that party competition often leads to violence. One wonders whether this distrust is related to the opposition's fragmentation (as evidenced by frequent splits from the main opposition party, the MDC) and its poor showing in the July 2013 elections. Robust democracy flourishes when opposition parties add value, but the "balkanisation" of the opposition – a problem that is not unique to Zimbabwe – in essence narrows the band of real choices for the electorate and contributes to a multiparty politics that is largely symbolic.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.