



# Popular trust in national electoral commission a question mark as Zimbabwe enters new era

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 177 | Stephen Ndoma**

## Summary

As Zimbabwe moves into a new era following its dramatic change in leadership, all eyes will be on the 2018 elections as a referendum on the people's will and a test of progress toward freedom and fairness in its democratic practices. A central player will be the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), which is charged with preparing, conducting, and supervising all national and local elections.

While managing three parliamentary and two presidential elections since taking over from the Electoral Supervisory Commission and Registrar General in 2004, the ZEC, whose members are appointed by the president, has frequently been accused of bias and incompetence (see, for example, [NewZimbabwe.com](http://NewZimbabwe.com), 2013).

Given that public trust in the national electoral commission is "instrumental to the overall credibility of elections and to democratic legitimacy more broadly" (Roberts, Gordon, & Struwig, 2016), how do Zimbabweans perceive the ZEC? Afrobarometer survey data collected in early 2017 suggest that popular trust in the ZEC remains feeble despite some improvement. Findings point to better-educated citizens, opposition supporters, and other sub-groups where building trust will require concerted efforts.

## 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

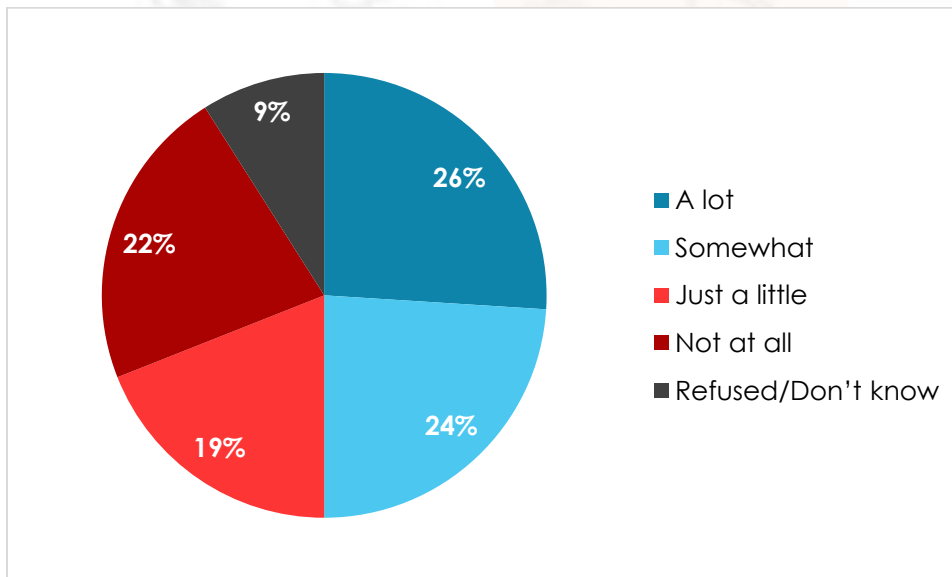
- Half (50%) of respondents say they trust the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission "somewhat" or "lot," continuing an upward trend over the past decade. Four in 10 (41%) say they trust the commission "just a little" or "not at all."

- Trust in the ZEC is particularly low among better-educated Zimbabweans, urban residents, opposition supporters, and residents of Bulawayo and Manicaland provinces.
- Compared to other Zimbabwean institutions and other electoral commissions in Southern Africa, the ZEC ranks poorly in terms of popular trust.
- Only one-fifth (22%) of Zimbabweans believe that votes in elections are “always” counted fairly, while another 17% say they are “often” counted fairly. But a majority say the ZEC only “sometimes” (33%) or “never” (20%) oversees a fair vote count. Again, skepticism about fair vote counting is especially high among better-educated respondents, urbanites, opposition supporters, and residents of Bulawayo metropolitan province.
- The proportion of citizens who see their national elections as generally free and fair has fluctuated over the years, but has never exceeded 58% of the population. Fewer than half (48%) of Zimbabweans hold this positive view of the 2013 elections.

### Only half of the population trusts the electoral commission

Zimbabweans are divided in their faith in the institution mandated to run their elections. Half say they trust the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission “somewhat” (24%) or “a lot” (26%), while nearly as many trust it “just a little” (19%) or “not at all” (22%) (Figure 1).

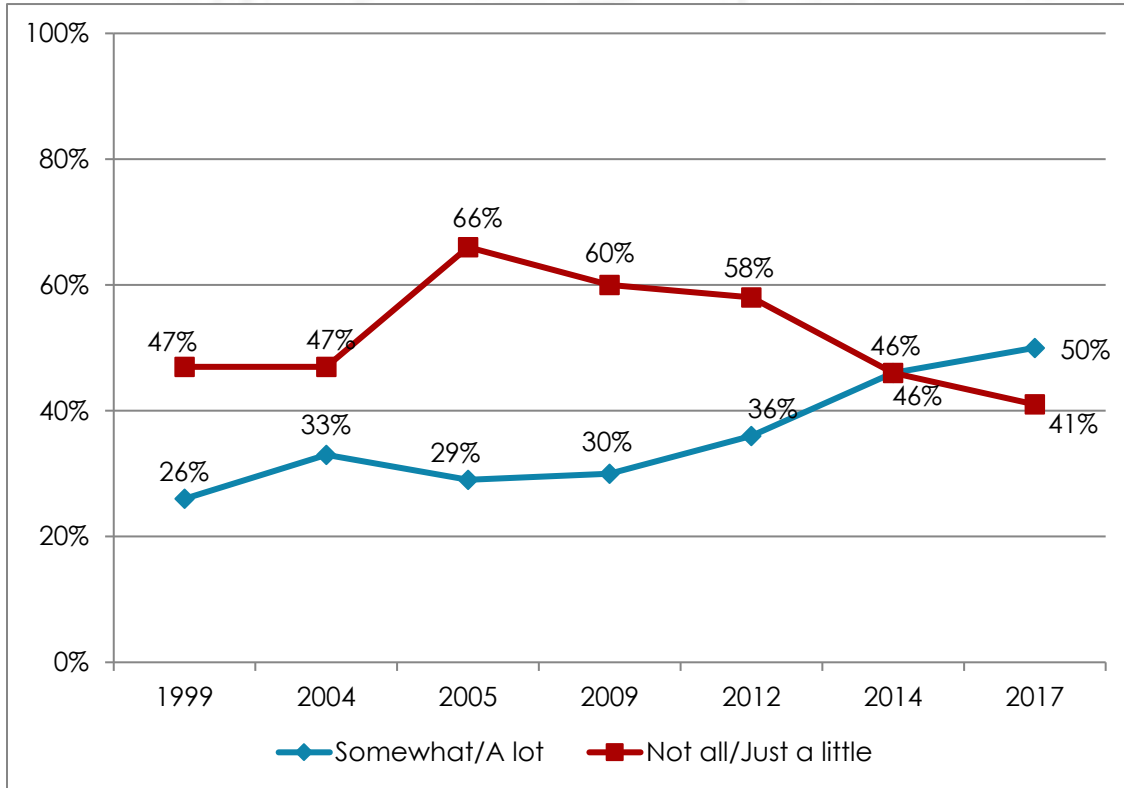
**Figure 1: Trust in the electoral commission | Zimbabwe | 2017**



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

While hardly an overwhelming endorsement of the ZEC, this level of popular trust continues an upward trend over the past decade, and is the first time since Afrobarometer surveys began in 1999 that at least half of responses have been positive (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Trust in the electoral commission | 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? (% who said 'not at all', 'just a little' or 'somewhat/a lot')

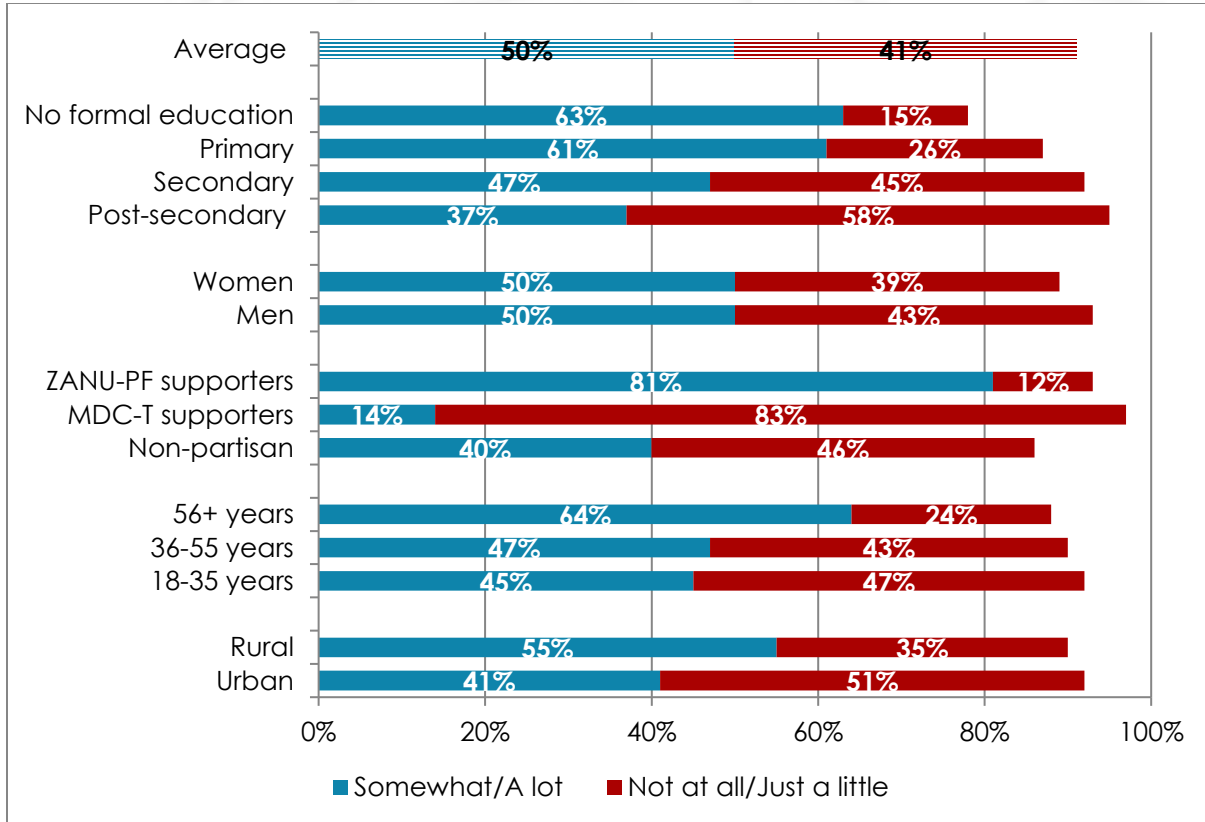
The electoral commission commands more trust among less-educated citizens: More than six in 10 respondents with no formal education (63%) or only a primary education (61%) say they trust the commission at least “somewhat,” compared to just 37% of those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 3). Similarly, rural (55%) and elderly citizens (64%) are more likely to trust the electoral commission than urban residents (41%) and younger respondents (45%-47%).

Not surprisingly, there is a sharp partisan divide in trust: Only 14% of MDC-T adherents<sup>1</sup> say they trust the electoral management body at least “somewhat,” compared to 81% of ZANU-PF supporters.

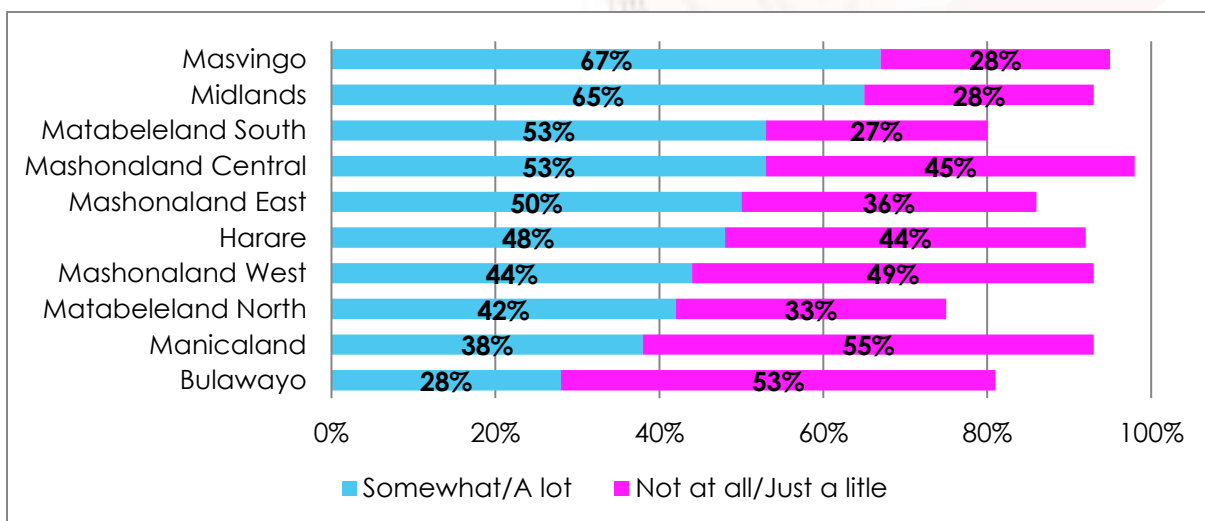
Geographically, trust varies sharply: The ZEC commands the greatest trust amongst residents in Masvingo (67%) and Midlands (65%) provinces, while fewer than half as many residents trust the commission even “somewhat” in the Bulawayo metropolitan province (28%) (Figure 4).

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

**Figure 3: Trust in the electoral commission** | by education, gender, party affiliation, age, and rural-urban location | Zimbabwe | 2017



**Figure 4: Trust in the electoral commission** | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017

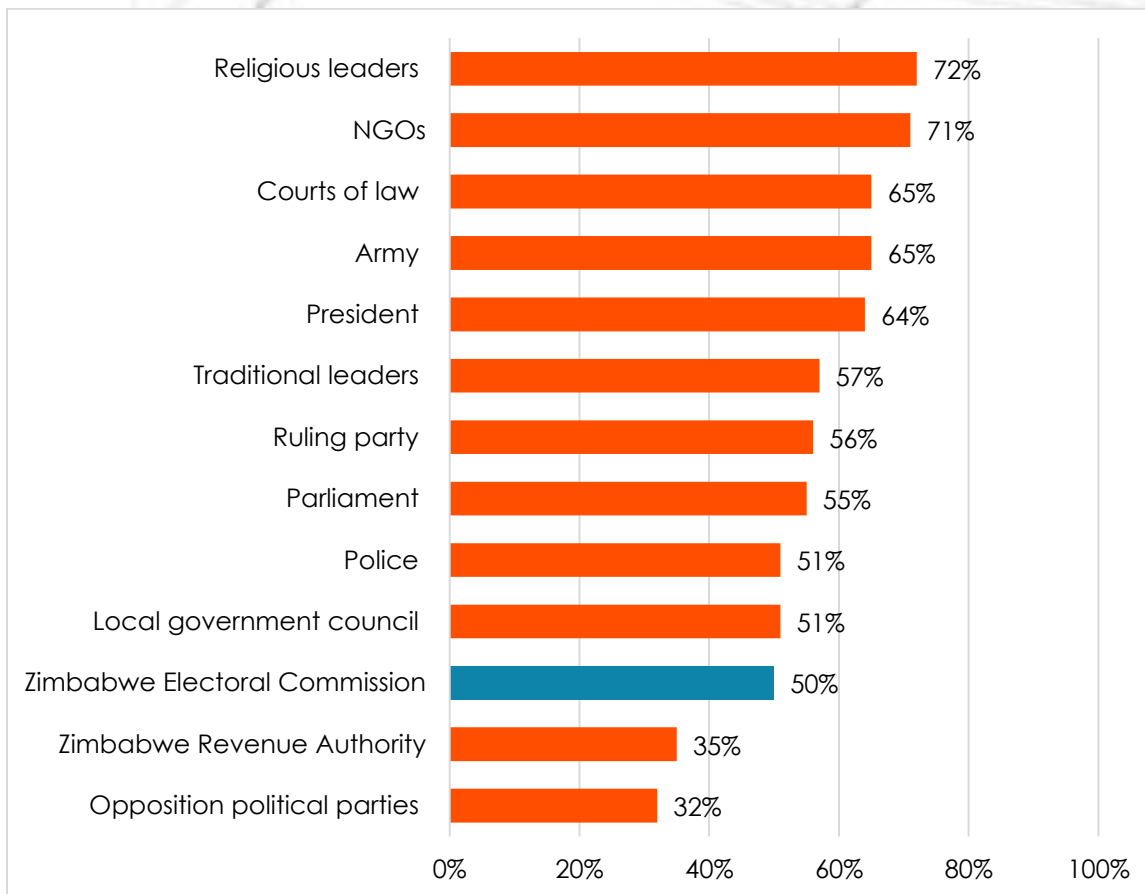


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission?

### Trust in electoral commission vs. other national institutions

Compared with other national institutions and leaders, the electoral commission fares poorly in terms of people's trust. While ranking ahead of opposition political parties (trusted somewhat/a lot by 32% of respondents) and the Zimbabwe Revenue Authority (35%), the ZEC ranks about even with the police and local government councils, well behind religious leaders (72%), non-governmental organisations (71%), and the courts and the army (each 65%) (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Trust in the electoral commission vs. other institutions | Zimbabwe | 2017**

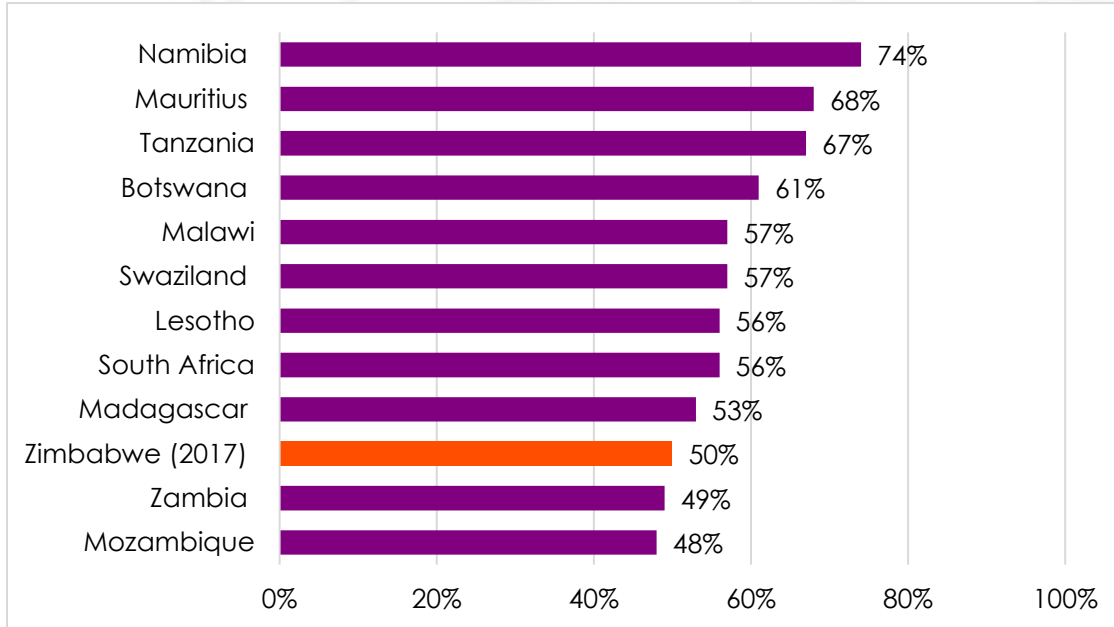


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Trust in electoral commissions across Southern Africa

Limited popular trust in national electoral commissions is not unique to Zimbabwe. In Afrobarometer's Round 6 surveys (2014/2015), electoral commissions in Mozambique (48%) and Zambia (49%) received similar levels of public trust, and only Namibia (74%), Mauritius (68%), and Tanzania (67%) boasted electoral commissions trusted by more than two-thirds of the population (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Trust in national electoral commissions | Southern Africa | 2014/2015**

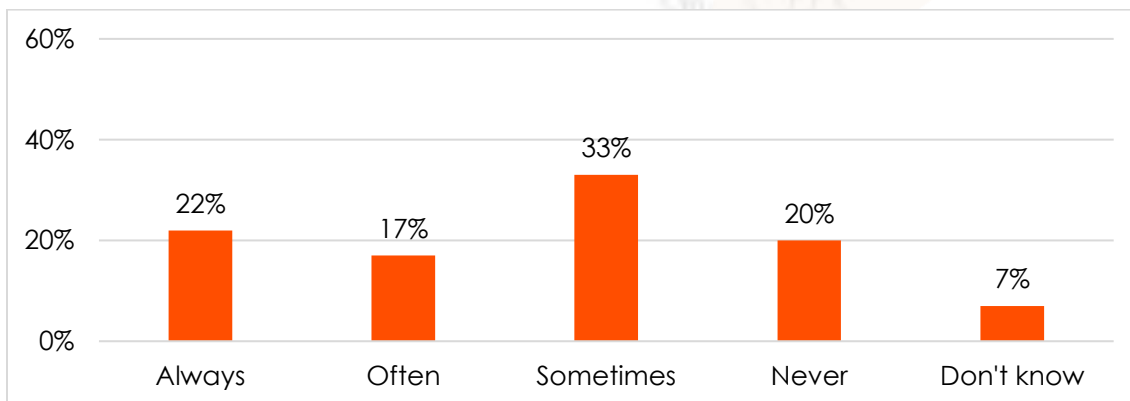


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Trust and perceptions of election quality

While this dispatch does not attempt to identify causes of weak public trust in the ZEC, popular perceptions of the quality of Zimbabwe's elections may suggest some possible factors. Based on 2014 survey responses, only one-fifth (22%) of Zimbabweans believed that votes in elections are "always" counted fairly, while another 17% said they are "often" counted fairly. But a majority said the ZEC only "sometimes" (33%) or "never" (20%) oversees a fair vote count (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Perceptions of fair vote count | Zimbabwe | 2014**

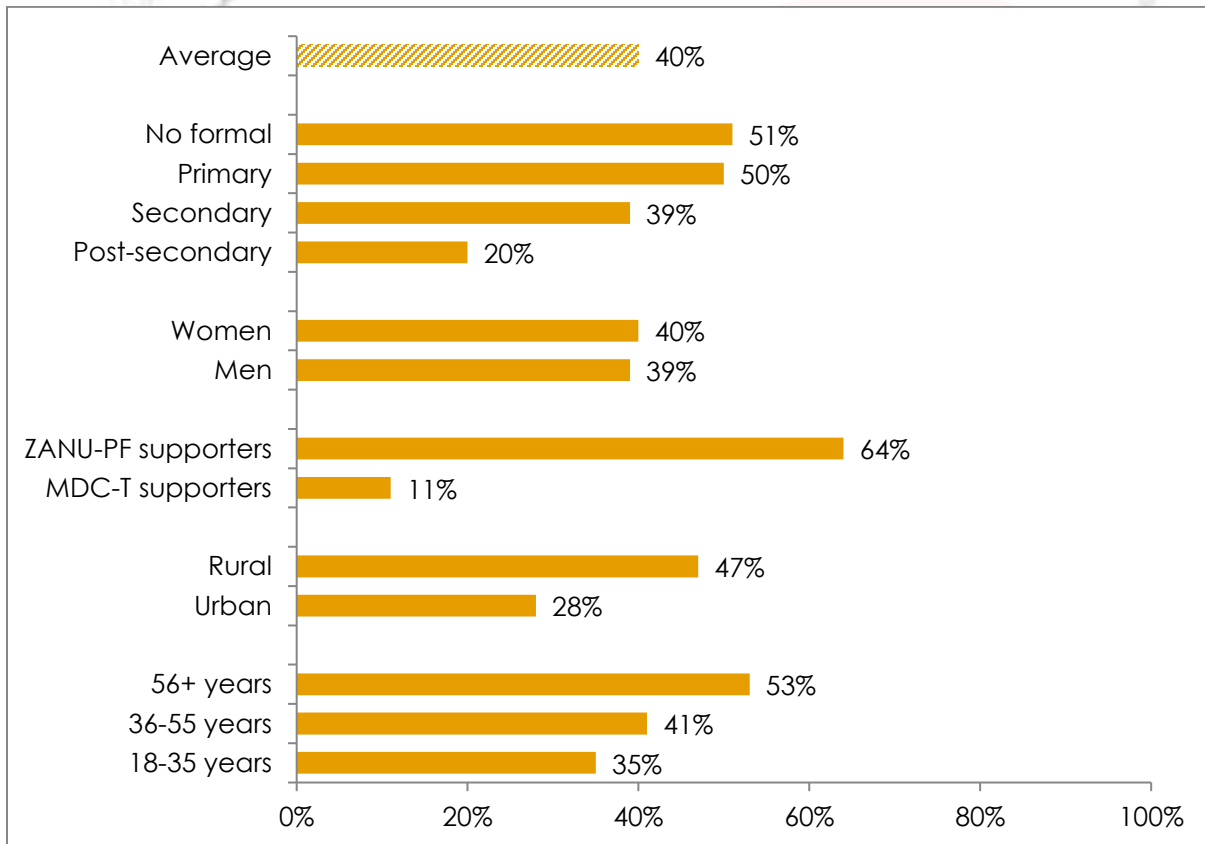


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Votes are counted fairly?



Skepticism about fair vote counts is far more prevalent amongst better-educated respondents: Only 20% of those with post-secondary qualifications think votes are “often” or “always” counted fairly, less than half the proportion of respondents with only primary education or no formal education who hold this view (Figure 8). The partisan divide looms large (11% of MDC-T supporters vs. 64% of ZANU-PF adherents), as does the urban-rural gap (28% urban vs. 47% rural). Satisfaction with the counting of votes is less common amongst youth (35%) and the middle-aged (41%) than amongst their elders (53%).

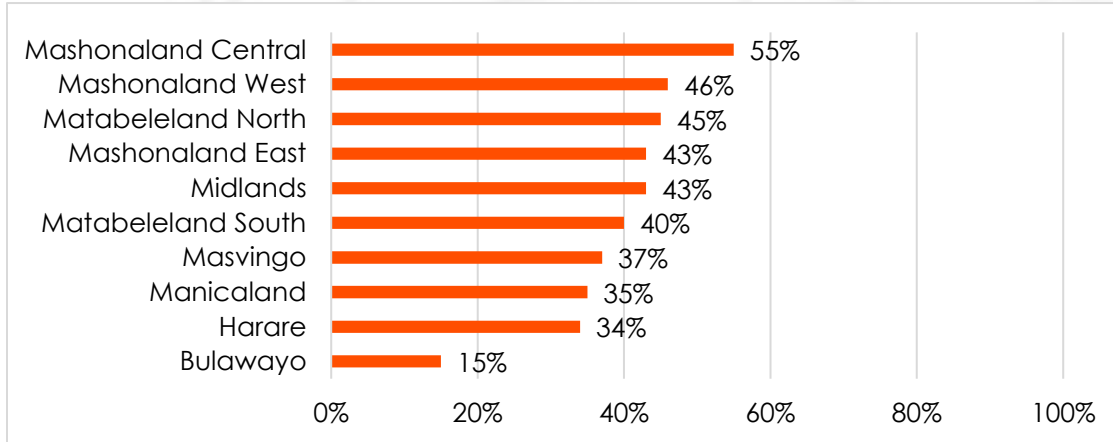
**Figure 8: Votes ‘often’ or ‘always’ counted fairly** | by education, gender, party affiliation, rural-urban location, and age | Zimbabwe | 2014



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Votes are counted fairly? (% who say “often” or “always”)

In the metropolitan province of Bulawayo, only about one in seven residents (15%) believe that votes are often/always counted fairly; about one in three residents of Harare (34%) and Manicaland (35%) provinces agree. Mashonaland Central (55%) is the only province where a majority of respondents think fair vote counts are the norm (Figure 9).

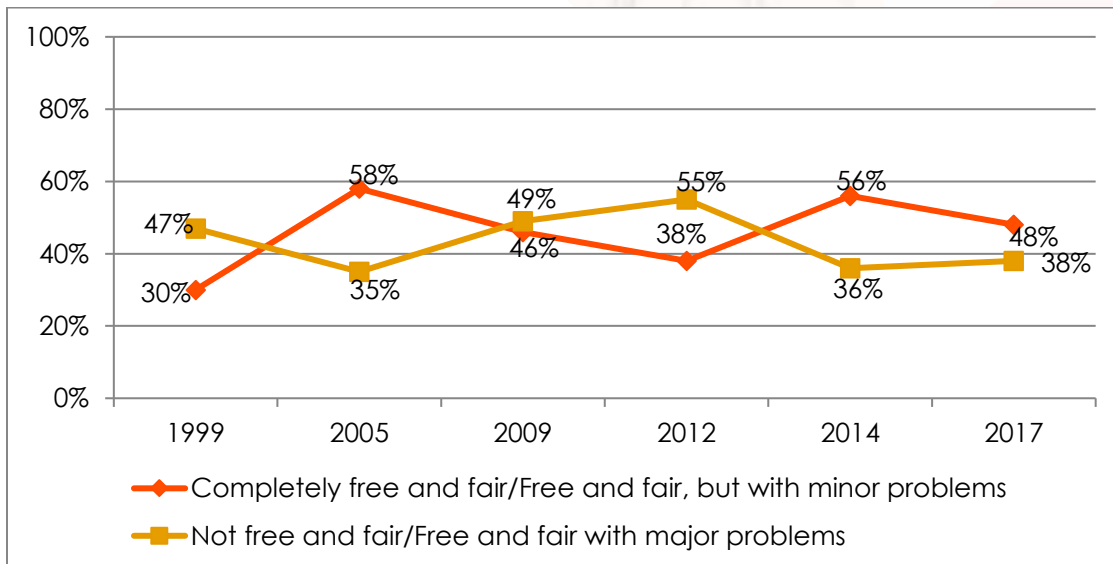
**Figure 9: Votes 'often' or 'always' counted fairly** | by province | Zimbabwe | 2014



**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Votes are counted fairly? (% who say "often" or "always")

Given the ZEC's central role in elections management, citizens' perceptions of the freeness and fairness of their elections are likely to factor into their views on the ZEC. As shown in Figure 10, Zimbabweans' assessments of the most recent national election have fluctuated over the years since Afrobarometer surveys began, but no more than 58% of the population have ever judged a national election as generally free and fair (either "completely free and fair" or "free and fair, but with minor problems"). About half (48%) rate the 2013 election as generally free and fair in the 2017 survey, down from 56% who rated the same election that way in the 2014 survey.

**Figure 10: How free and fair are elections?** | Zimbabwe | 1999-2017

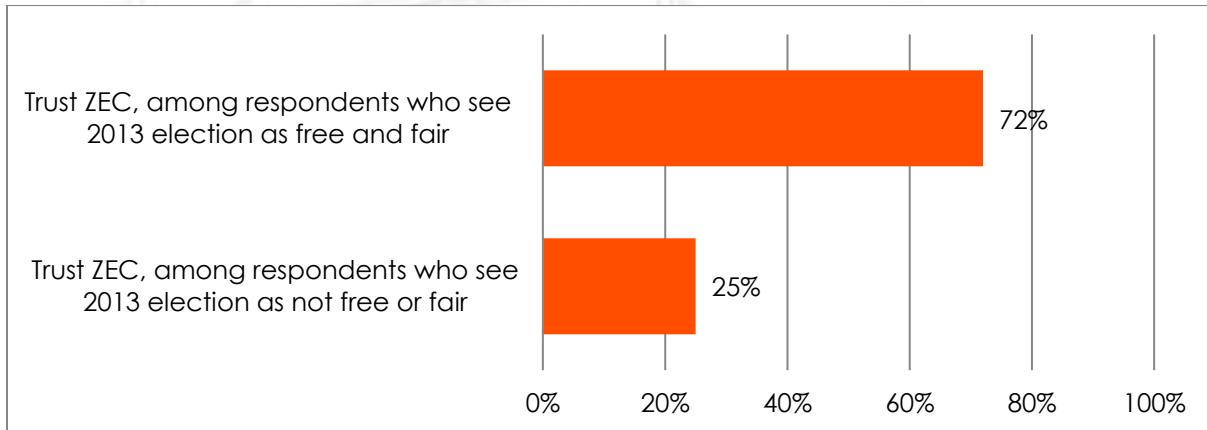


**Respondents were asked:** On the whole, how do you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2013?



Respondents who consider Zimbabwe's 2013 election to have been generally free and fair are about three times as likely to express trust in the ZEC as those who say the 2013 election was "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems" (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Trust in the electoral commission** | by perceived quality of 2013 election  
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



**Respondents were asked:**

- On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2013? ("Free and fair" combines responses of "Completely free and fair" and "Free and fair, but with minor problems." "Not free and fair" combines responses of "Not free and fair" and "Free and fair with major problems.")
- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

**Conclusion**

As Zimbabwe moves toward the 2018 elections under a new administration, the country's electoral management body will be in the spotlight. While popular trust in the ZEC continues to increase slowly, it is still far from solid, comparing poorly with citizens' trust in other national institutions and in electoral commissions across the region. Credible elections in 2018 – vitally important during a period of change and uncertainty – will be a milestone on Zimbabwe's path toward a trusted electoral commission.

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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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