



Zimbabweans affirm right to government information, but skeptical about access

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 189 | Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Information is the lifeblood of political accountability. Without reliable, timely information, citizens are unable to evaluate and constructively engage with what their government is doing. If such information is absent, willfully denied, physically inaccessible, or not available in a format that is understandable to users, public accountability is undermined (ANSA-EAP, 2017).

Citizens' right to information is recognized in international human-rights standards and treaties, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights African (Freedom of Information Centre, 2014). Even so, some observers argue that access-to-information laws are being used to clamp down on the free flow of information instead of creating a conducive environment for citizens to access public information (African Freedom of Information Centre, 2017). In Zimbabwe, the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) is often criticized for limiting access to information.

Afrobarometer's 2017 survey finds that a majority of Zimbabweans endorse the idea that information held by public authorities is not just for use by the government but should be shared with the public. However, it also finds widespread skepticism about whether citizens can actually access such information at local levels, such as school budgets and district development plans.

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 carried out 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

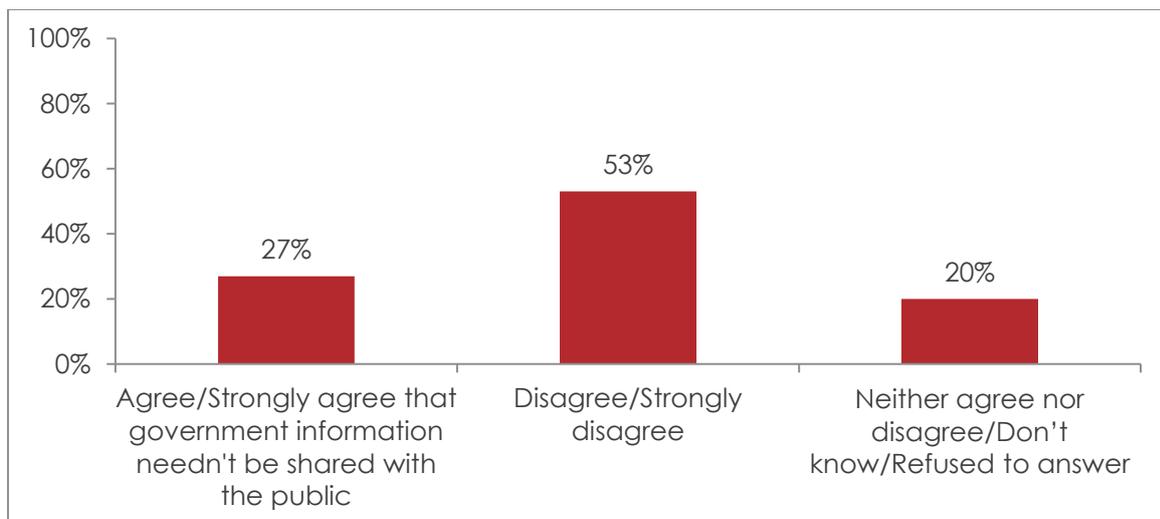
- By a 2-to-1 margin, Zimbabweans say that information held by public authorities is not only for use by government officials but rather should be shared with the public. More-educated citizens are more likely to support the public's right to government information.

- But many Zimbabweans doubt they could actually access such information from local authorities. Fewer than half think it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could find out from their local council how to register a new business (49%), obtain information from a local school about school budgets and expenditures (41%), find out from the district land office who owns a piece of land in their community (35%), or get information about their district’s development plan and budget from their local council (24%).
- Rural residents have somewhat greater confidence than their urban counterparts in their ability to obtain such information. Surprisingly, respondents’ gender, age, and education level make little difference, except that more-educated citizens are more likely to think they could probably get the information they need to register a new business.

Citizens’ right to information held by public authorities

A majority (53%) of Zimbabweans endorses citizens’ right to government information; disagreeing with the assertion that information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials (Figure 1). About half as many (27%) favour limiting such information to government use, while one in five don’t take sides or say they “don’t know.”

Figure 1: Support for public information sharing | Zimbabwe | 2017

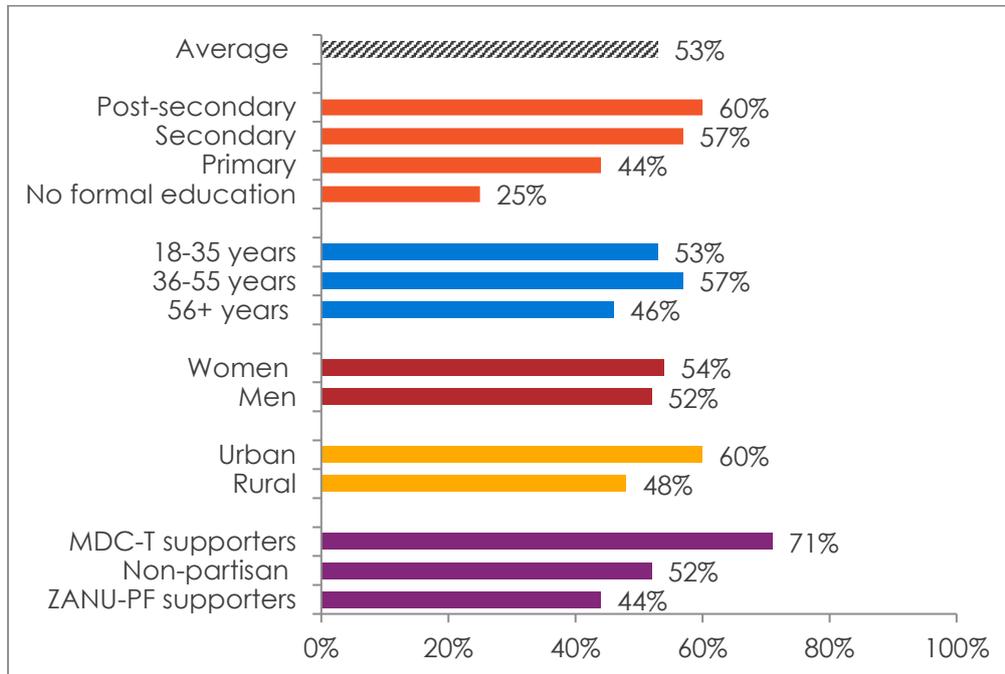


Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public?

Support for public information sharing is stronger among more-educated respondents, ranging from 25% of those without formal education to 60% of post-secondary graduates (Figure 2). It is also stronger among urban residents (60%) than rural dwellers (48%), and is less pronounced among older citizens (46% among those aged 56 and above). There is also a stark partisan divide on this question: MDC-T adherents¹ are considerably more likely to favour public information sharing than supporters of the ruling ZANU-PF (71% vs. 44%).

¹ Political-party affiliation is determined based on responses to the following questions: “Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?”

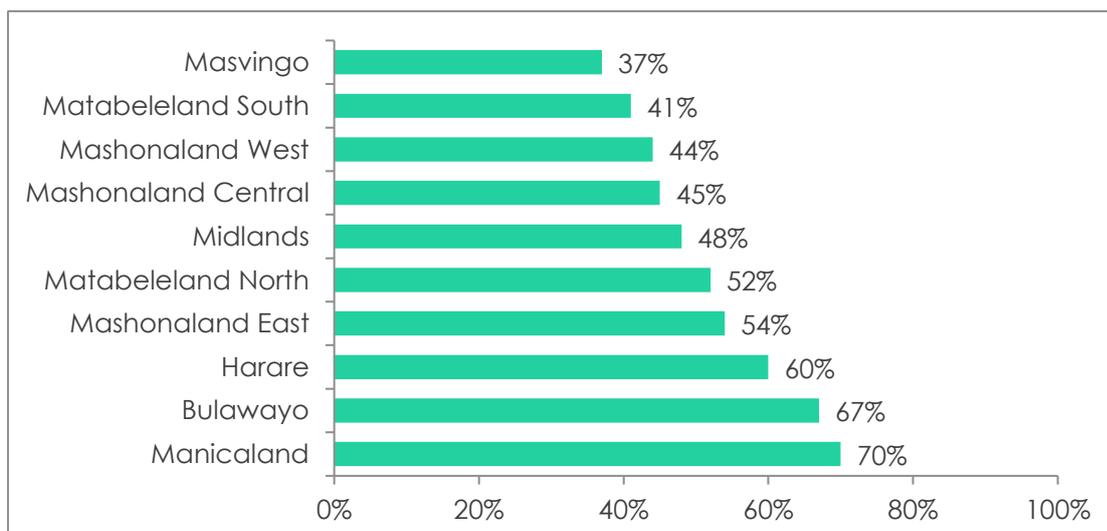
Figure 2: Support for public information sharing | by socio-demographic group | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public? (% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

By geography, disagreement with the assertion that information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials is the majority view in five out of 10 provinces and is most common among Manicaland residents (70%) and least popular among Masvingo province residents (37%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Support for public information sharing | by province | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public? (% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

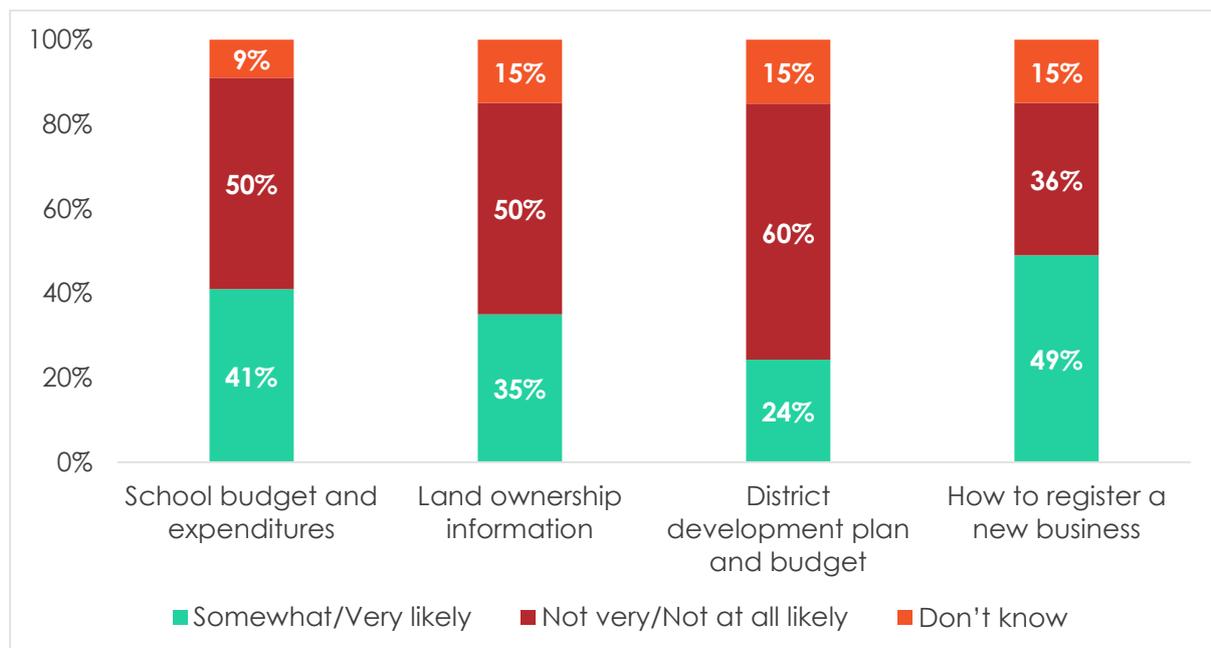
Accessing public information at the local level

While a majority of Zimbabweans think that information held by public authorities should be shared with the public, many are skeptical about whether such information is readily accessible (Figure 4). Only four in 10 survey respondents (41%) think it is “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that they could obtain information about school budgets and expenditures from a local school, while a majority say that it is “not very” or “not at all likely” (50%) or that they “don’t know” (9%). Similarly, only one in three (35%) think they could find out from the district land office who owns a piece of land in their community, while two-thirds say it’s unlikely (50%) or they “don’t know” (15%).

Worse, only one in four (24%) think they could get information from the local council about their district’s development plan and budget, vs. three-fourths who say it’s unlikely (60%) or they “don’t know” (15%).

Citizens are somewhat more optimistic about their ability to find out from their local council how to register a new business in their community: Half (49%) say it’s “somewhat” or “very” likely, while 36% see it as unlikely and 15% say they “don’t know.”

Figure 4: Probability of accessing information from government | Zimbabwe | 2017



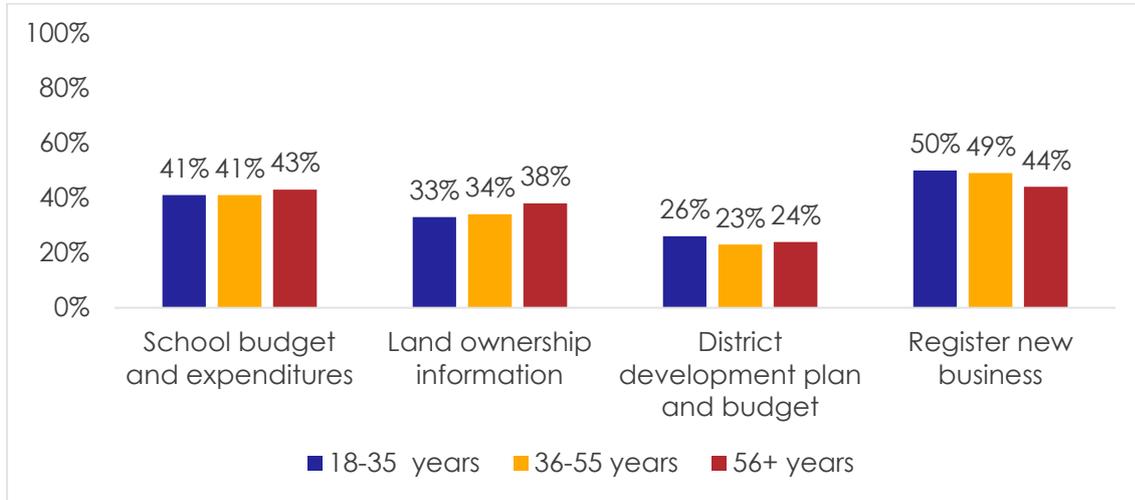
Respondents were asked: How likely is that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to:

- The local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- The district land committee to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

When we look at key socio-demographic groups, we find little difference between men and women in the proportions who say it's likely that they could obtain such information. (While slightly more men say it's unlikely, slightly more women say they “don't know.”)

Age also does not show major differences in how likely respondents consider it that they can obtain public information except that older citizens (aged 56 and above) are somewhat more confident about getting information on land ownership and somewhat less confident about finding out how to register a new business than their younger counterparts (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Likelihood that citizens could access government information | by age group | Zimbabwe | 2017

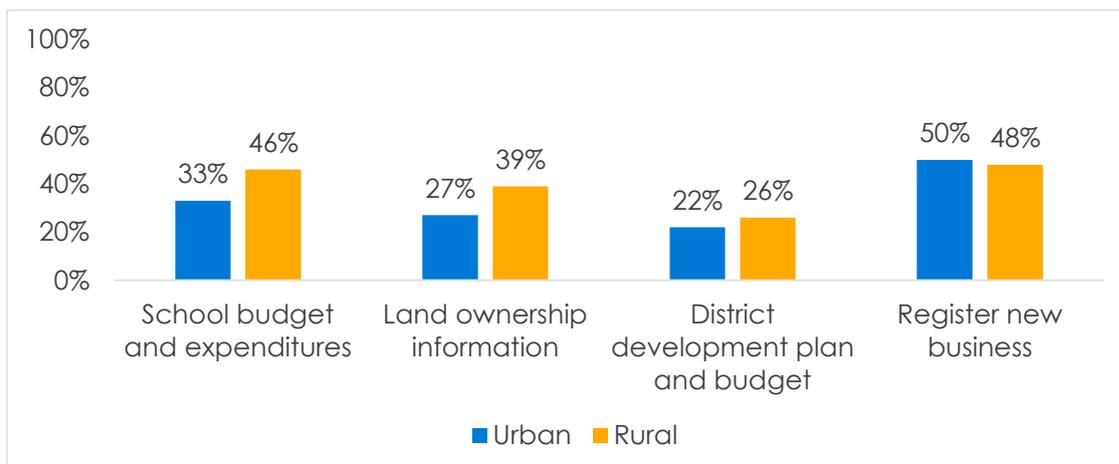


Respondents were asked: How likely is that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to:

- The local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- The district land committee to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Rural residents more often consider it "somewhat" or "very" likely that they can obtain public information about school budgets (46% vs. 33% of urban residents), land ownership (39% vs. 27%), and district development plans (26% vs. 22%) (Figure 6). Regarding information about registering a new business, there is no significant difference between urban and rural residents.

Figure 6: Likelihood that citizens could access government information | urban vs. rural residents | Zimbabwe | 2017

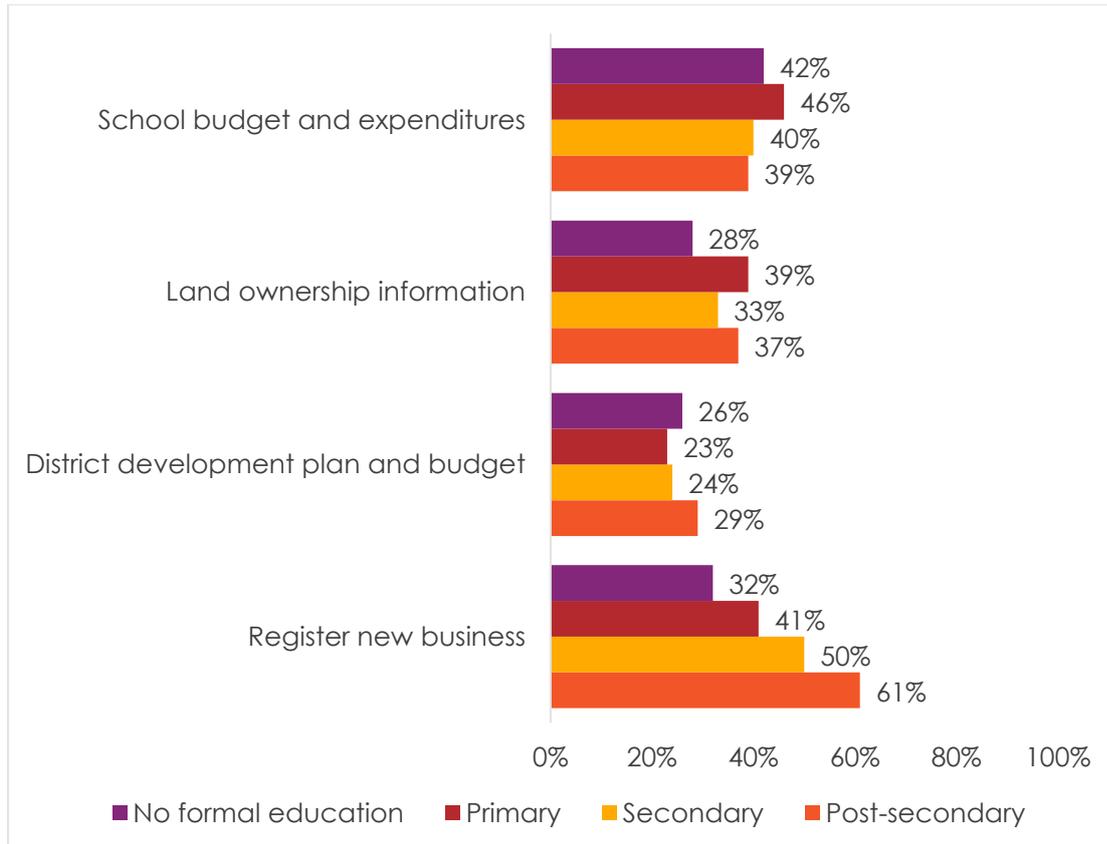


Respondents were asked: How likely is that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to:

- The local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- The district land committee to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Surprisingly, respondents' education levels (Figure 7) do not show a clear association with how confident citizens are that they can get information about school budgets, land ownership, and district development plans. But for registering a new business, greater confidence goes along with higher education levels; citizens with post-secondary qualifications (61%) are twice as likely to think they can probably get the information they need as those with no formal education (32%).

Figure 7: Likelihood that citizens could access government information | by education level | Zimbabwe | 2017

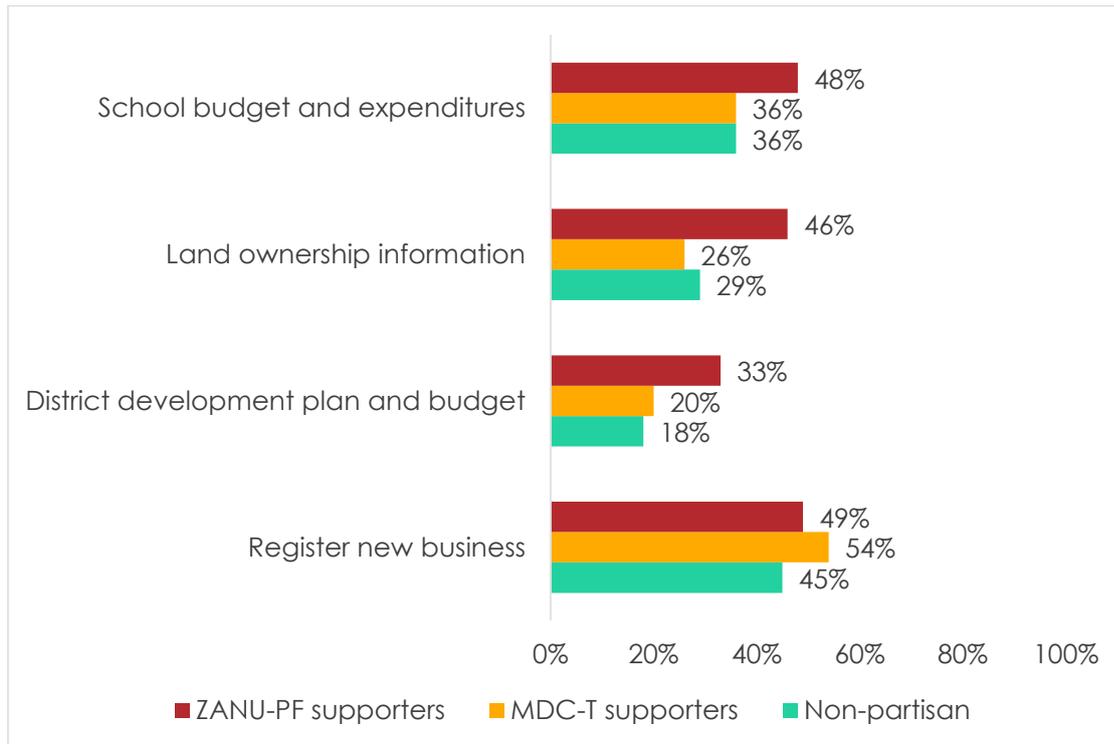


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- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

ZANU-PF adherents are more confident than MDC-T supporters and citizens with no political-party affiliation that they can obtain public information about school budgets, land ownership, and district development plans (Figure 8). With regard to registering a new business, MDC-T supporters are somewhat more confident.

Figure 8: Likelihood that citizens could access government information | by political-party affiliation | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to:

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- The district land committee to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Perceptions vary considerably by province (Figure 9). Mashonaland Central and Mashonaland West generally have the largest proportions of citizens who believe they could

probably obtain such information, scoring above-average percentages on all four types of information.

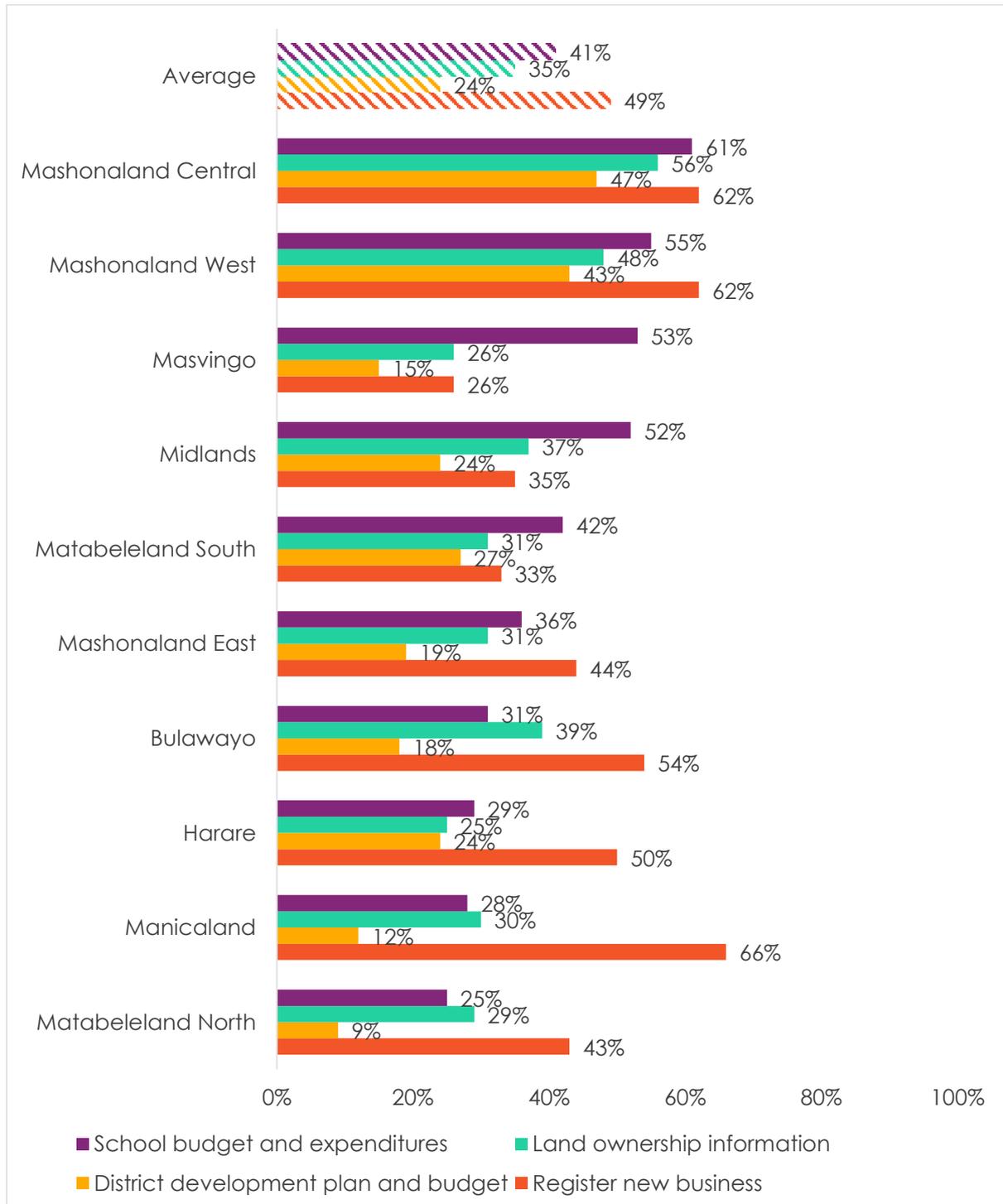
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Mashonaland East and Matabeleland North record lower-than-average percentages on all four types of information. Harare

scores below average when it comes to school budgets, land ownership, and district development plans, and about average for registering a new business.

Manicaland scores below average on the first three types of information but records the largest proportion (66%) who think they could obtain the information needed to register a new business.

Figure 9: Likelihood that citizens could access government information | by province
 | Zimbabwe | 2017



Respondents were asked: How likely is that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say: If you went to:

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- The district land committee to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- The local council to find about the district development plan and budget?
- The local council to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Conclusion

While a majority of Zimbabweans believe that information held by public authorities should be shared with the public, there is widespread doubt about citizens' ability to access such information at local levels. Given that information is a critical component of constructive citizen engagement, these findings suggest a gulf between the principle and the realities of holding government accountable.

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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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