

Who's watching? Voters seen as key in holding elected officials accountable

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 196 | Thomas Isbell

Summary

In addition to the growing number of African states that conduct regular elections and embed democratic principles in their constitutions, evidence comes from survey-based research that most Africans support democratic values and reward governments that adhere to democratic rules (Mattes & Bratton, 2007; Bratton & Mattes, 2001). However, in many countries, citizen demand for democracy is not met by supply of democracy (Mattes & Bratton, 2016) as governments, once elected, fail to respect the norms of democratic governance (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). Beyond Election Day, democracy requires day-to-day accountability to ensure that those elected to represent the people in fact do their jobs (O'Donnell, 1998; Schedler, 1999; Warren, 2014).

How do ordinary Africans view accountability? Whom do they see as responsible for monitoring those in power? Findings from Afrobarometer surveys in 36 African countries show that most Africans support checks on executive power by lawmakers, the courts, and the news media. But when it comes to holding elected officials accountable, that responsibility is most often assigned to the voters.

Afrobarometer

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. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples, which yield country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% (for a sample of 2,400) or +/-3% (for a sample of 1,200) at a 95% confidence level. This dispatch draws mainly on Round 6 (2014/2015) surveys in 36 countries.

Key findings

- Africans broadly support checks on executive power: Solid majorities say presidents should always obey laws and courts (70%) and should be required to account to Parliament (64%). They also endorse the news media's "watchdog" role over government (69%). But most see the opposition's main role as cooperating with, rather than monitoring, the government.
- Asked who should be responsible for making sure that elected leaders do their jobs, Africans most commonly assign this task to voters.
- But many citizens also prioritize horizontal accountability, i.e. the executive and legislative holding each other accountable.

- “Committed democrats” – citizens who prefer democracy over any other system and reject authoritarian alternatives – are more likely than other respondents to see voters as responsible for making sure that elected officials do their jobs.
- Similarly, respondents who are highly involved in voluntary associations and frequently attend community meetings are more likely to see it as the voters' role to hold elected officials accountable.

Checks on executive power

On average across 36 African countries, solid majorities endorse checks on the powers of the executive (Figure 1). Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens “agree” or “agree very strongly” that Parliament should “ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.” About half as many (31%) instead argue that the president should be able to “devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.”

Seven in 10 citizens (70%) say the president must always obey laws and courts, even if he disagrees with them.

Likewise, 69% endorse the news media's role in investigating and reporting on government mistakes and corruption, while 27% believe that “too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.”

But when it comes to opposition political parties, only three in 10 Africans (28%) see their role as monitoring and criticizing the government in order to hold it accountable, preferring instead that they “cooperate with the government to help it develop the country” (69%).

When asked who should be responsible for making sure that the president does his or her job, citizens are most likely to cite voters (39%) and Parliament (31%). Only about one in 10 assign this responsibility primarily to the executive itself (12%) or to the president's political party (9%).

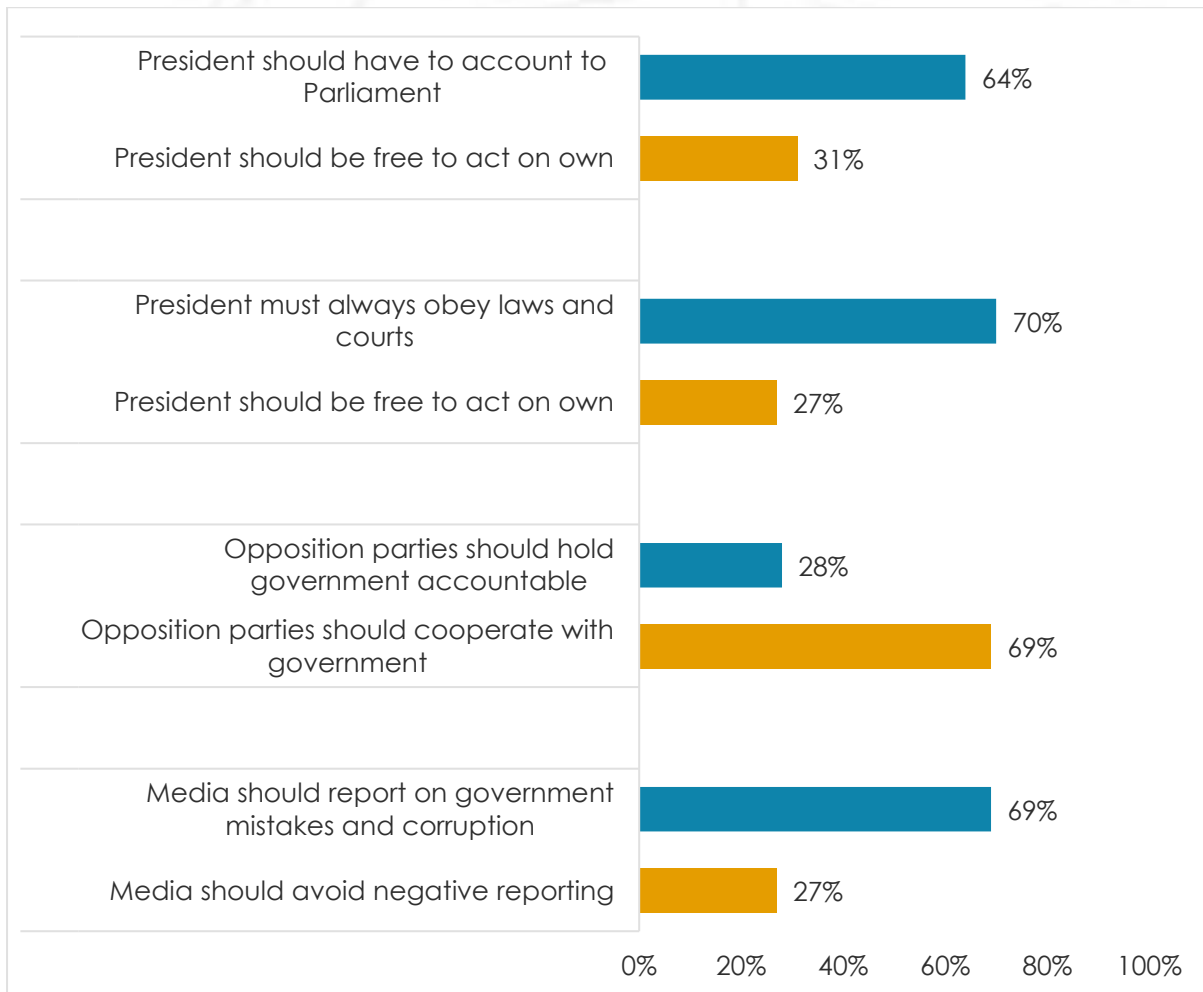
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But countries vary considerably in their views on presidential accountability (Figure 2). While voters are mainly responsible in the eyes of significant majorities in Malawi (78%), Côte d'Ivoire (66%), Togo (65%), and Madagascar

(60%), fewer than two in 10 agree in Nigeria (17%), São Tomé and Príncipe (16%), and Sudan (13%), where citizens are more likely to say Parliament bears that responsibility. Parliament is also the most frequent answer in Tunisia (57%), Liberia (48%), and Mauritius (46%), but is not often seen as primarily responsible for monitoring the president in Mozambique (18%), Zambia (17%), Côte d'Ivoire (17%), Sierra Leone (13%), and Malawi (10%).

One-fourth of Mozambicans (25%) and around one-fifth of Sierra Leoneans (18%), Cape Verdeans (19%), and São Toméans (18%) say they “don't know” who should hold the president accountable.

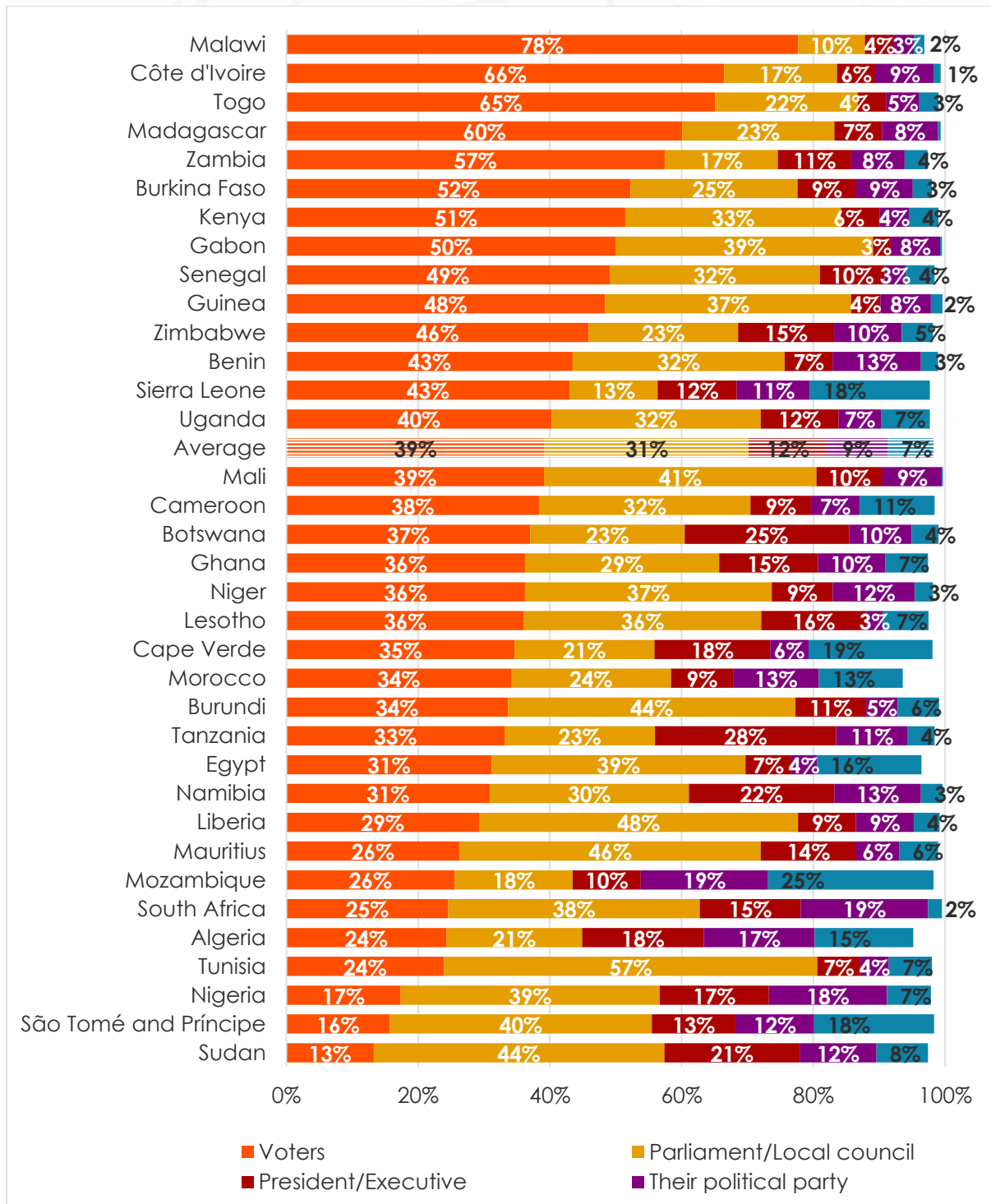
Figure 1: Attitudes toward checks on executive power | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money. Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.
 - Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong. Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.
 - Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticize the government in order to hold it accountable. Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country. (Note: This question was not asked in Swaziland.)
 - Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption. Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.
- (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 2: Who should ensure that president does his job? | 35 countries | 2014/2015

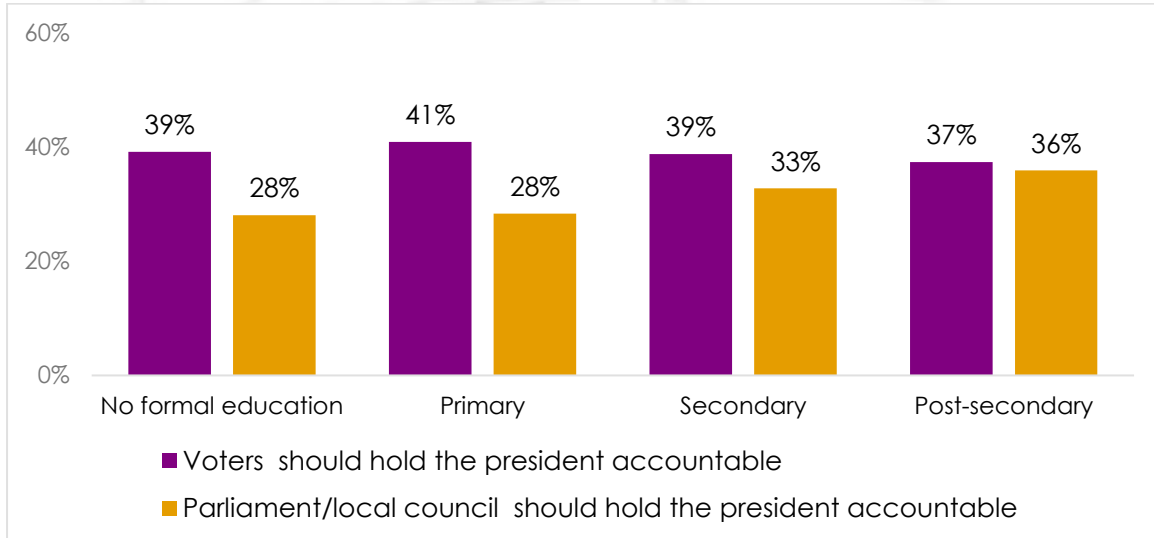


Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president does his job? (Note: This question was not asked in Swaziland.)

Respondents with at least a secondary education are somewhat less likely than their less-educated counterparts to assign voters primary responsibility for holding the president accountable. Instead, they are somewhat more likely to say it's Parliament or the local council that is primarily responsible for making sure the president does his or her job (Figure 3).

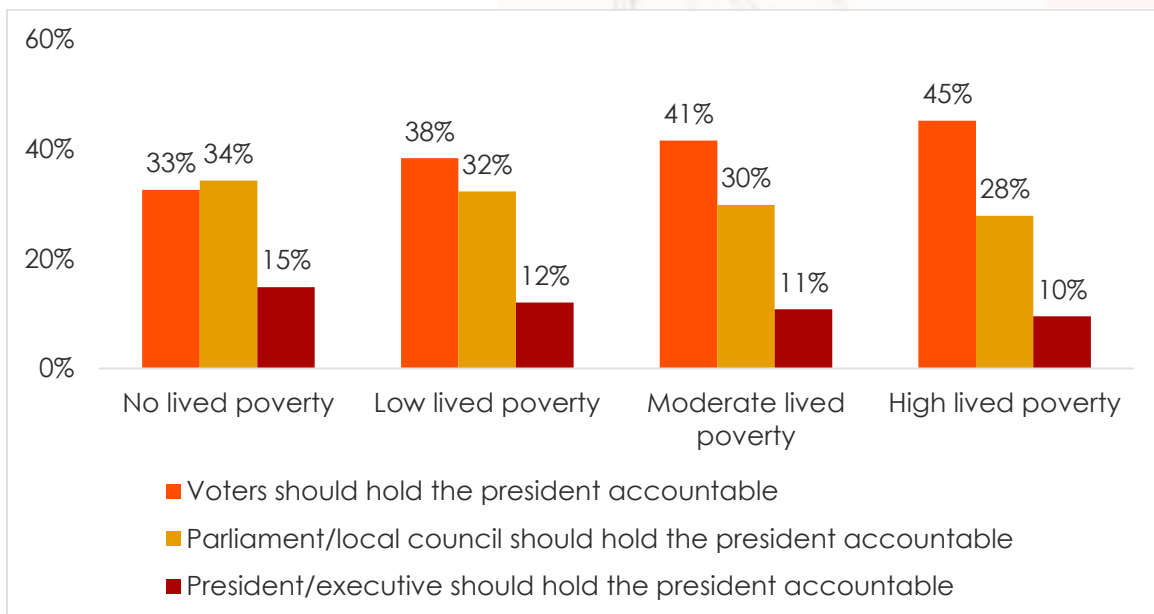
The same is true of wealthier respondents (i.e. those experiencing no or low “lived poverty”¹) compared to poorer citizens (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Who should ensure that president does his job? | by education level
 | 35 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president does his job?

Figure 4: Who should ensure that president does his job? | by lived poverty
 | 35 countries | 2014/2015



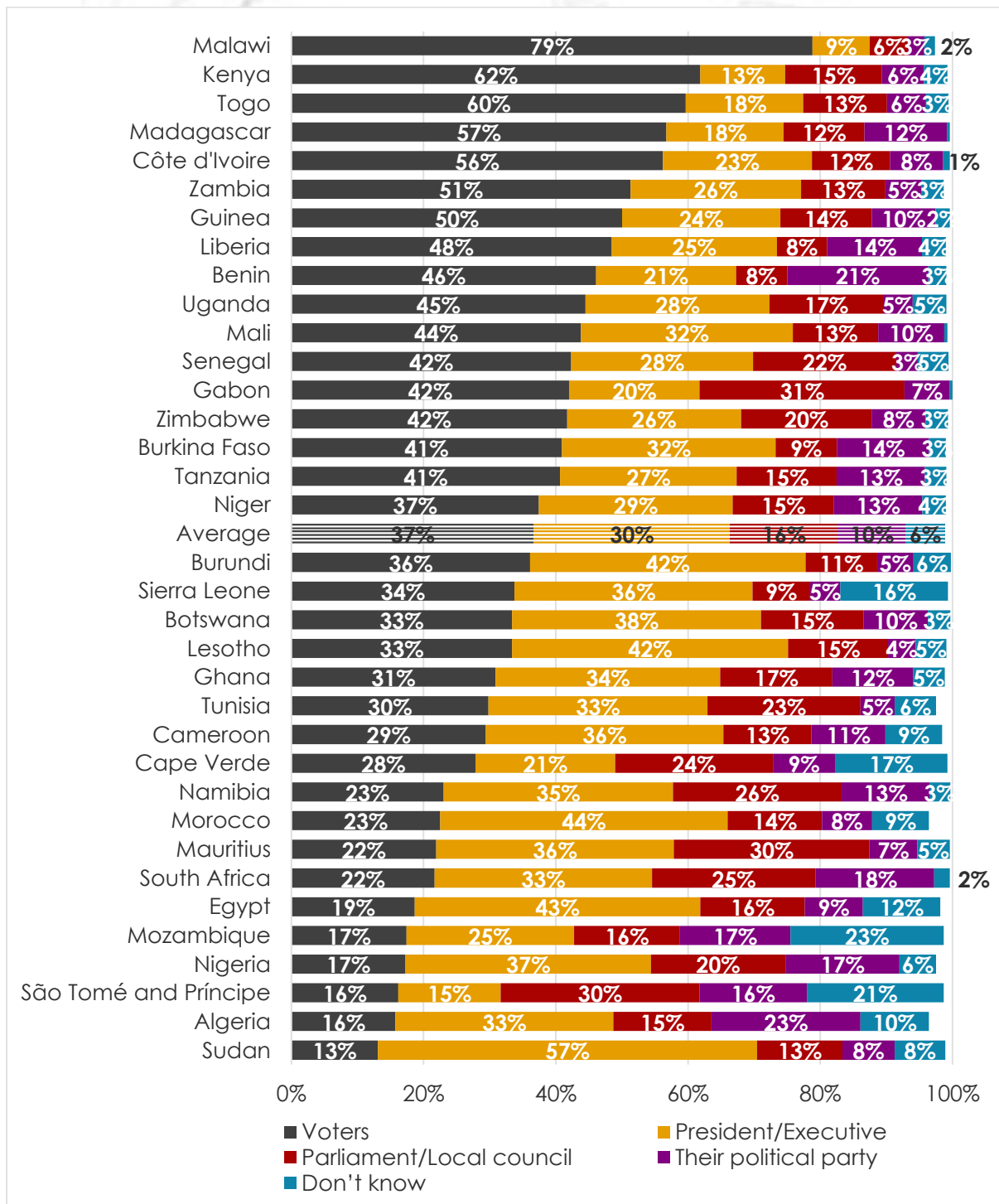
Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president does his job?

¹ Afrobarometer measures “lived poverty” with an index based on responses to the following questions: “Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?”

Who should make sure that MPs do their jobs?

As with the president, Africans most commonly look to voters to make sure that MPs do their jobs (37%), followed by the president (30%) and Parliament itself (16%) (Figure 5). Only one in 10 (10%) expect an MP's political party to hold the officeholder accountable.

Figure 5: Who should ensure that MPs do their jobs? | 35 countries | 2014/2015



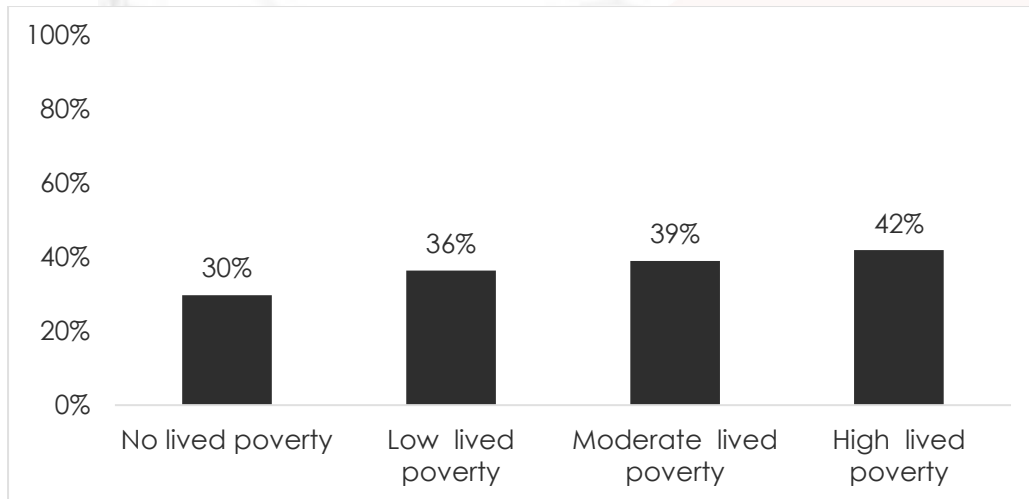
Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, members of Parliament do their jobs? (Note: This question was not asked in Swaziland.)

Again views vary widely by country, with Malawi (79%) most likely to say voters have this responsibility. Strong majorities agree in Kenya (62%) and Togo (60%), while respondents in São Tomé and Príncipe (16%), Algeria (16%), and Sudan (13%) least frequently expect voters to hold MPs accountable.

In Sudan, a majority (57%) say the president should ensure that MPs do their jobs, as do more than four in 10 respondents in Morocco (44%), Egypt (43%), Lesotho (42%), and Burundi (42%). But this is not a widely held view in São Tomé and Príncipe (15%), Kenya (13%), and Malawi (9%).

While respondents' education level makes little difference in whether they see voters as responsible for holding MPs accountable, poorer respondents are again more likely than their wealthier counterparts to assign this task to voters (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Voters should ensure that MPs do their jobs | by lived poverty | 35 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, members of Parliament do their jobs? (Note: This question was not asked in Swaziland.)
 (% who say "voters" should be responsible)

Who checks on local councillors?

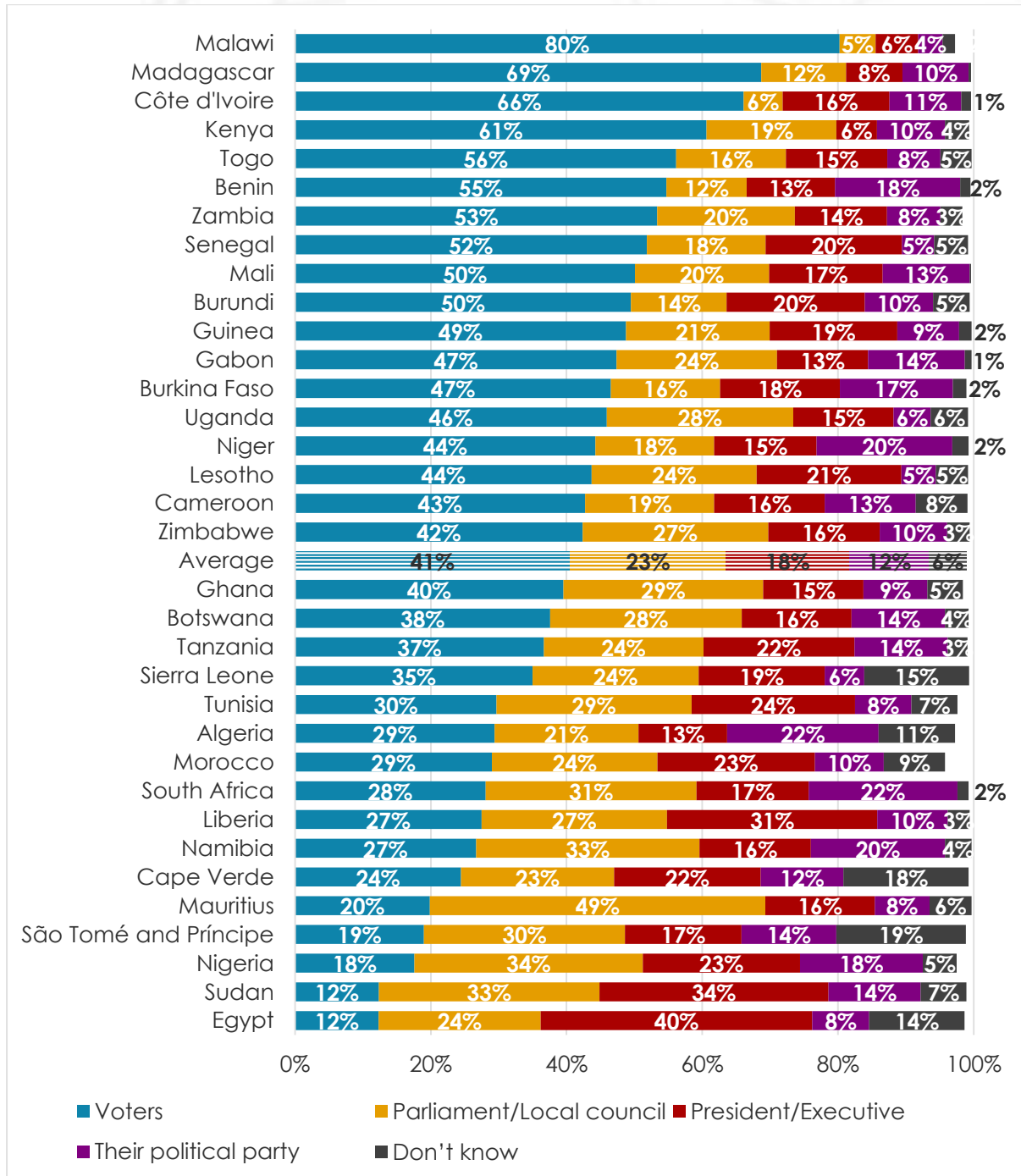
Below the national level, local government councils form the key institution through which citizens interact with the political state. When asked who should make sure that local councillors do their jobs, on average 41% of respondents say this is the responsibility of voters, while about two in 10 assign this task to Parliament (23%) or to the president or executive (18%) (Figure 7). As was the case with holding the president and Parliament accountable, only about one in 10 (12%) see this as the responsibility of political parties.

Again Malawians (80%) are most likely to charge voters with holding local councillors accountable, followed by Madagascans (69%), Ivoirians (66%), and Kenyans (61%). Fewer than one in five respondents in São Tomé and Príncipe (19%), Nigeria (18%), Sudan (12%), and Egypt (12%) agree.

The view that Parliament should hold local councillors accountable is particularly common in Mauritius (49%), Nigeria (34%), Namibia (33%), and Sudan (33%). Conversely, fewer than one in 10 hold this view in Côte d'Ivoire (6%) and Malawi (5%).

Respondents in Egypt (40%), Sudan (34%), and Liberia (31%) are considerably more often of the opinion that the president should make sure that local councillors do their jobs than the continental average of 18%. This view is least often voiced in Malawi and Kenya (each 6%).

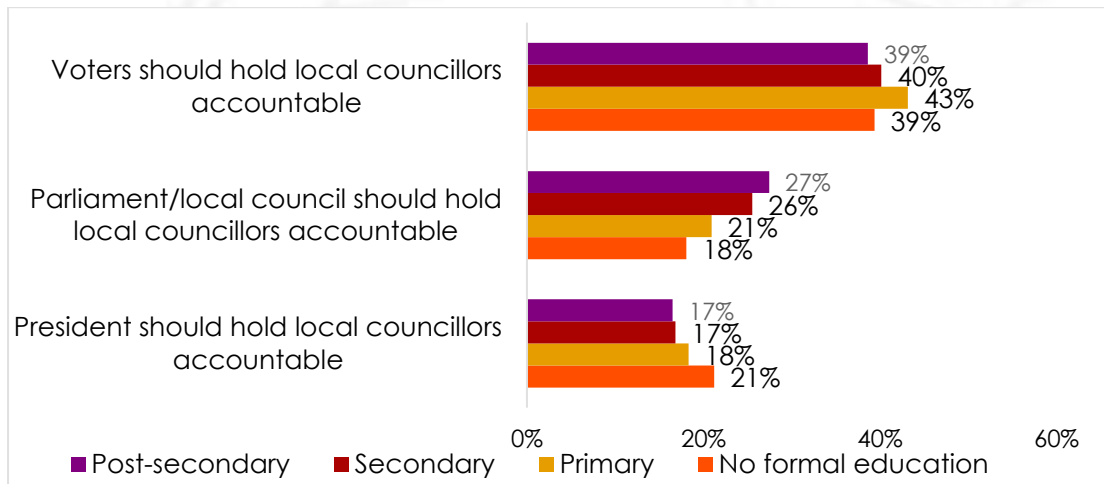
Figure 7: Who should ensure that local councillors do their jobs? | 34 countries
 | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, local government councillors do their jobs? (Note: This question was not asked in Swaziland and Mozambique.)

Better-educated respondents are somewhat more likely than their less-educated counterparts to see MPs as responsible for holding local councillors accountable, but otherwise respondents' education level seems to make little significant difference on this question (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Who should ensure that local councillors do their jobs? | by education level
 | 34 countries | 2014/2015



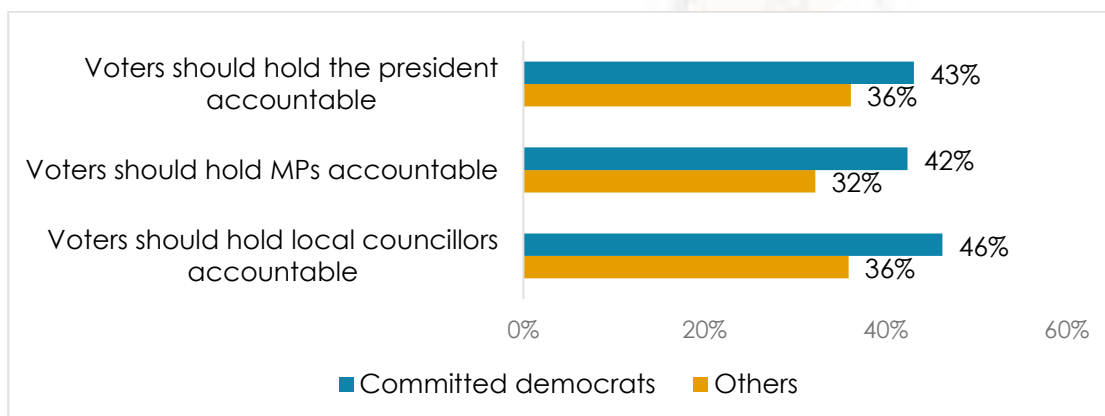
Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, local government councillors do their jobs?

Views of 'committed democrats'

It's plausible to speculate that citizens' views on who should hold elected officials accountable might be influenced by whether and how strongly they endorse democracy in general. Afrobarometer data allow us to assess respondents' "demand for democracy" based on whether they assert that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government" and approve or disapprove of one-man rule, one-party rule, and military rule. Respondents who both prefer democracy and reject all three authoritarian alternatives are said to demand democracy and might be described as "committed democrats." Across the 36-country sample, 43% of respondents qualify as committed democrats.

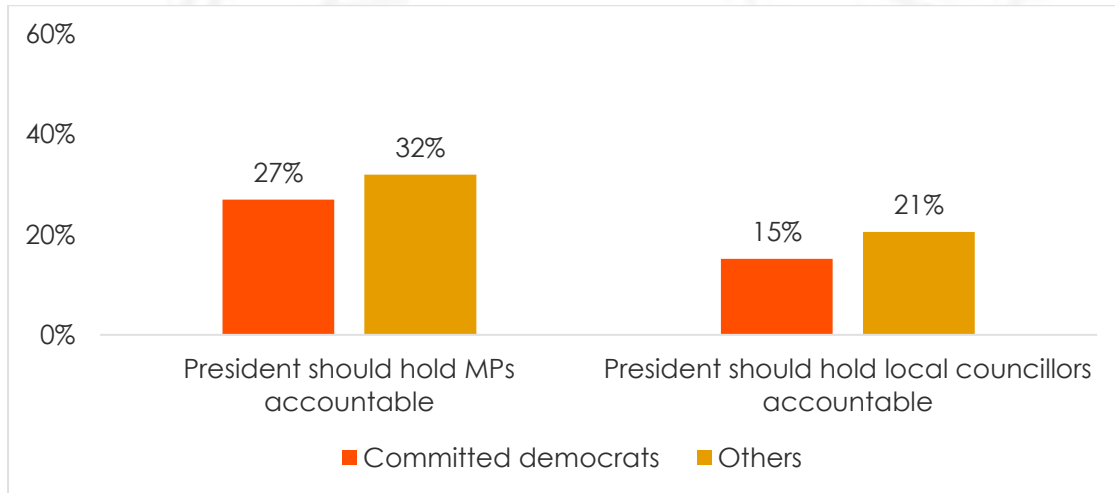
On the question of accountability, committed democrats are somewhat more likely than other respondents to see voters as responsible for making sure that elected officials do their jobs; as Figure 9 shows, the gap ranges from 7 to 10 percentage points. Respondents who are not categorized as committed democrats are somewhat more likely to say that the president should make sure that MPs and local councillors do their jobs (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Voters should ensure that president, MPs, and local councillors do their jobs
 | 'committed democrats' vs. others | 35 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president/ members of Parliament local government councillors do their jobs?

Figure 10: President should ensure that MPs and local councilors do their jobs
 | 'committed democrats' vs. others | 35 countries | 2014/2015

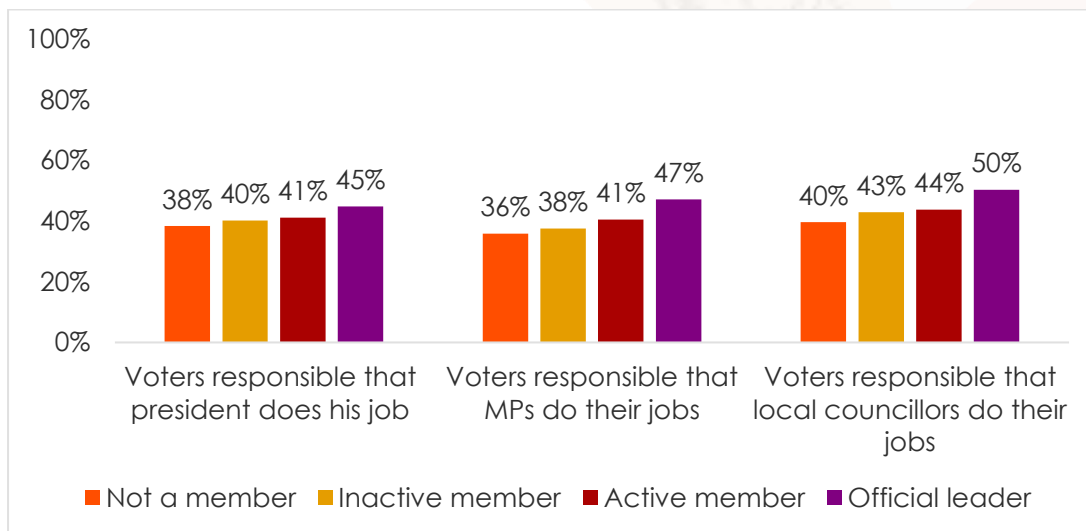


Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, members of Parliament/ local government councilors do their jobs? (% who say "president")

Civic engagement and perception of accountability

Beyond respondents' levels of education, lived poverty, and demand for democracy, their engagement in civic activities might also be a factor that is correlated with their views on who should hold elected officials accountable. Survey responses show that citizens who are "leaders" in voluntary associations are more likely than other respondents to see voters as responsible for making sure that elected officials do their jobs (Figure 11). For example, while 47% of association leaders say voters are responsible for holding MPs accountable, only 36% of respondents who are not members of an association agree.

Figure 11: Voters should ensure that elected officials do their jobs | by membership in a voluntary association | 35 countries | 2014/2015

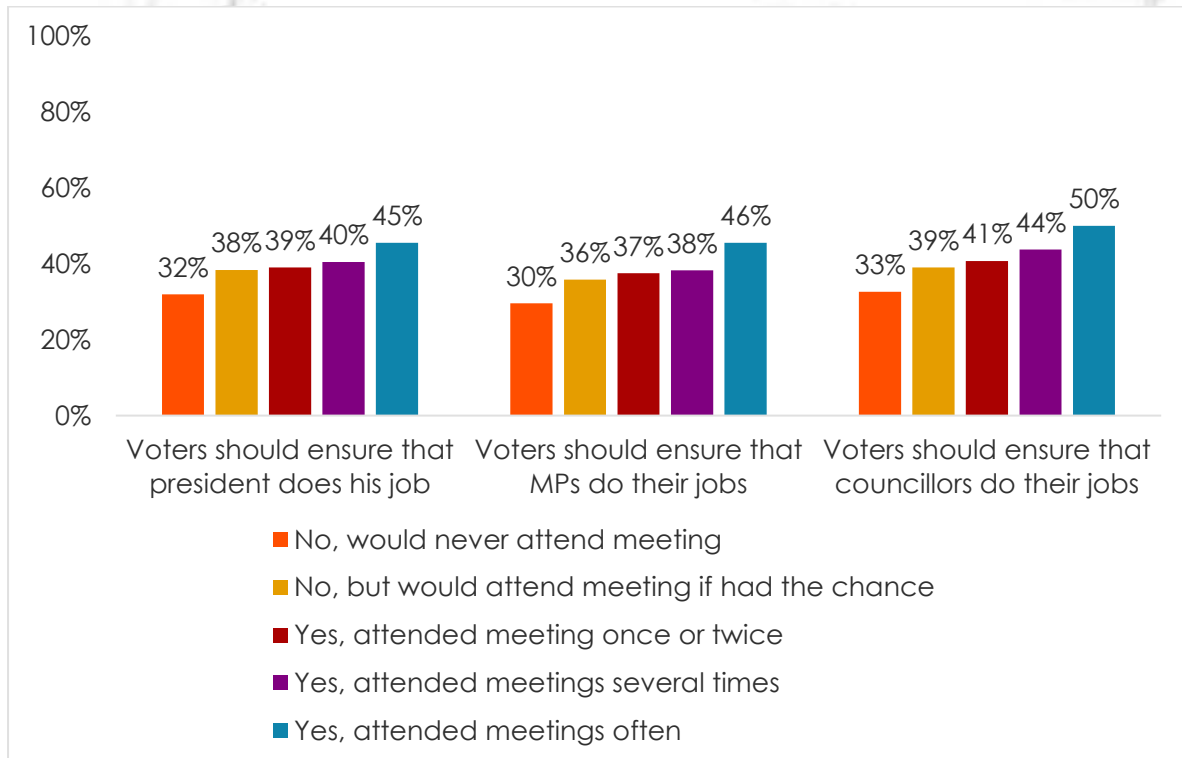


Respondents were asked:

- Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: Some other voluntary association or community group?
- Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, ... do their jobs?

Moreover, respondents who attend community meetings more frequently are also more likely to see voters as responsible for holding elected officials accountable (Figure 12). For example, while only 33% of respondents who say they “would never” attend a community meeting see voters as primarily responsible for holding local councillors accountable, that proportion rises to 50% among respondents who “often” attended community meetings during the previous year.

Figure 12: Voters should ensure that elected officials do their jobs | by frequency of attending community meetings | 35 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked:

- Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Attended a community meeting?
- Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, ... do their jobs?

Conclusion

While elections often garner the greatest media and public attention, the day-to-day interactions of a democracy are arguably at least as important for building a sustainable and resilient system. Elected officials who do their jobs – and are held accountable if they don’t – are a critical component of a well-functioning system. On average across Africa, voters are seen as key to holding presidents, MPs, and local councillors accountable.

This view is particularly common among citizens whose demand for democracy qualifies them as “committed democrats.” In addition, substantial proportions of the population prioritize horizontal accountability, meaning that the executive and legislative branches hold each other accountable. Countries vary considerably in how they distribute responsibility for holding elected officials accountable. But across the board, few Africans expect political parties to ensure accountability.

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