



Public attitudes toward Zimbabwe's 2018 elections: Downbeat yet hopeful?

By Michael Bratton and Eldred V. Masunungure

Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 47 | June 2018

Introduction

Zimbabweans will go to the polls in presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections on July 30, 2018. These elections are the first test of the popular will since the dramatic military intervention of November 2017 that forced an end to the 37-year reign of Robert Mugabe.

To assess the prevailing public mood, including voting intentions, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's core partner for Southern Africa, commissioned a baseline pre-election survey. Fieldwork and public dissemination of results were conducted by the Mass Public Opinion Institute, Afrobarometer's national partner in Zimbabwe. As a support unit, Afrobarometer provided technical assistance.



The survey interviewed a nationally representative sample of 2,400 Zimbabweans between April 28 and May 12, 2018, that is, some three months before the election.¹ A shorter final pre-election survey will follow in late June/early July with results planned for release shortly before voting day (July 30).

This policy paper selects the most salient results from the survey to address the following questions:

- What explains the seemingly contradictory public mood among Zimbabweans, who express both economic pessimism and cautious political hope?
- What is the election about? What are the main issues driving different sorts of voters – young and old, rural and urban – to the polls?
- To what extent will large numbers of young (including first-time) voters affect the nature of the campaign and the outcome of the election? Or do factors other than age matter more?
- As of May 2018, what was the state of the presidential race between incumbent Emmerson Mnangagwa of ZANU-PF and main challenger Nelson Chamisa of MDC-T?
- How do perceptions about who sponsored the survey – a governmental or non-governmental agency – affect respondents' willingness to report a partisan voting intention?
- What can we surmise about how the "reticents" (that is, those who refuse to reveal a partisan preference) might actually vote?
- Among other unresolved issues, to what extent do citizens worry about a lack of ballot secrecy, bias in the mass media, and the possible announcement of incorrect election results?
- In the short time remaining before the election, what can advocates of free and fair elections, including in the international community, do about these unresolved issues?

The public mood: Economic pessimism, political hope?

As elections fast approach, Zimbabweans express contradictory views. Whereas most people are gloomy about prevailing economic conditions and worry about electoral

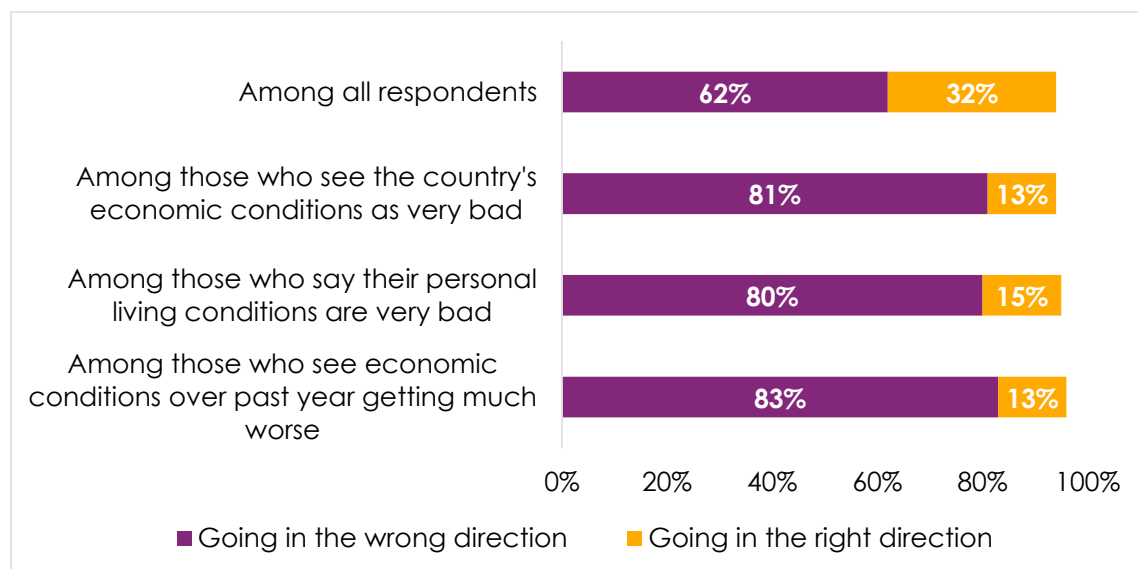
¹ Afrobarometer, a pan-African, non-partisan research network, conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples. A sample of 2,400 yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Zimbabwe in 1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014. For details, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

violence, they also hazard cautious political hope that the 2018 elections will set the country on a better path. Wary anticipation seems to have displaced the euphoria that immediately followed the military intervention in November 2017.

On one hand, the general public was in a downcast mood in May 2018 about the country's overall direction; at that time, a clear majority (62%) felt that Zimbabwe is "going in the wrong direction." Fewer than one-third (32%) saw the country "going in the right direction." Perhaps surprisingly, the public mood on this issue hardly changed as a result of the November 2017 presidential transition from Mugabe to Mnangagwa; in February 2017, a similar proportion (60%) already felt that the country was going in the wrong direction.

This pessimistic cast of mind is driven principally by economic reasoning. As shown in Figure 1 and Table 1, the country's perceived direction is strongly correlated with popular assessments of poor economic performance. For example, more than eight in 10 persons (81%) who regard the present condition of the Zimbabwean economy as "very bad" also see the country going in the wrong direction. Bleak assessments of the country's direction are similar among those who see present personal living standards as "very bad" and macroeconomic conditions getting "much worse" over the previous year.

Figure 1 and Table 1: Country direction by economic conditions | Zimbabwe | 2018



See country going in the wrong direction	
	Bivariate correlation coefficients (***significant at p<.0001)
See condition of the economy as bad/very bad	.471***
See personal living conditions as bad/very bad	.398***
See economic conditions over past year getting worse/much worse	.350***

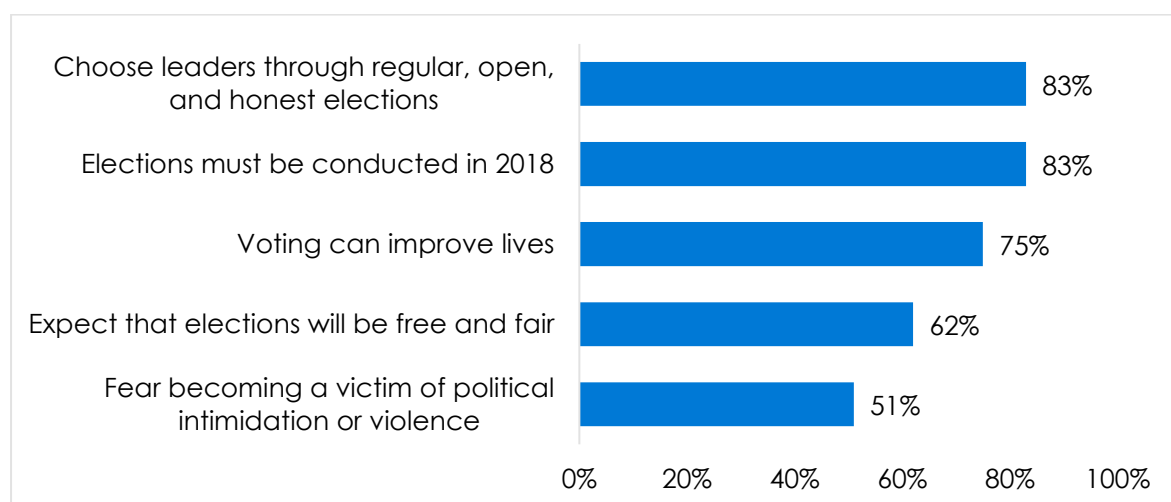
Note: Survey question texts for all figures and tables are listed in the Appendix.

On the other hand, Zimbabweans place a measure of faith in democratic elections as a possible means of addressing the difficult economic situation (Figure 2). As of May 2018, fully 83% of all adults interviewed in the survey preferred to "choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections" rather than by "other methods." The same large proportion (83%) felt that, in accordance with the constitutional requirement that elections be held every five years and notwithstanding the possibility that there were "more important matters for the country to attend to," elections must be held in 2018.

Most importantly, despite past disappointments with disputed elections, three-quarters of all survey respondents (75%) considered that “we can use our power as voters to choose leaders who will help us improve our lives.” Just two in 10 (20%) demurred, saying “no matter whom we vote for, things will not get better in the future.” These opinions are distributed evenly throughout the population, for example by age, gender, and urban-rural location. Adding to this somewhat hopeful outlook, a clear majority (62%) expressed the expectation that the July 2018 elections would be “free and fair.”

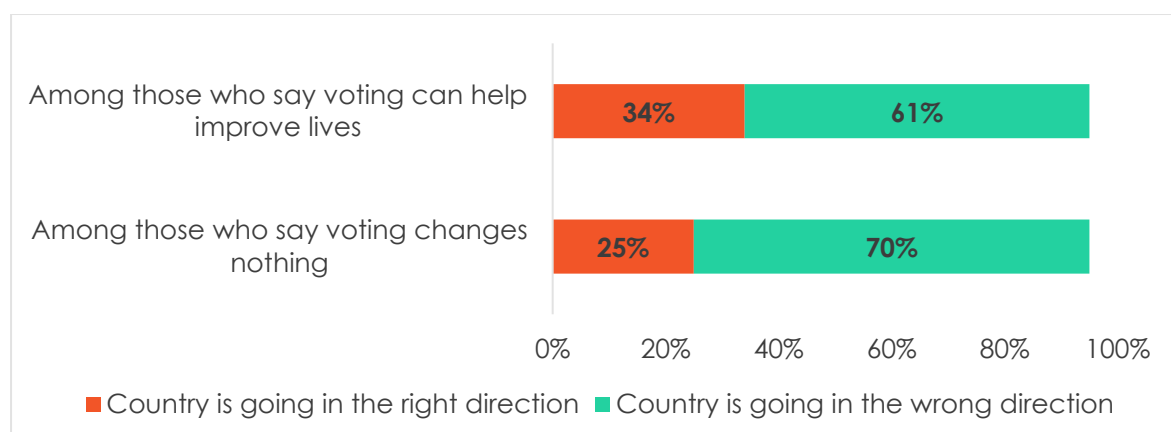
But only a minority (44%) thought that the contest would be “completely free and fair.” Perhaps remembering past episodes of heavy-handed electioneering, at least half of all adults interviewed (51%) voiced fear that they, personally, would “become a victim of political intimidation or violence” during the current campaign. Thus, of all measures contributing to a free and fair election, people attached most importance to “ensuring that there is no political violence.”

Figure 2: Views on elections | Zimbabwe | 2018



The contradiction in the public mood is on full display in Figure 3. Admittedly, there is a tendency for the people who think that “voting changes nothing” to be more inclined than average to think the country is going in the wrong direction (70%). But, strikingly, economically driven pessimism about the direction of the country does not deter the clear majority from believing that “voting helps improve lives” (61%). One inference from these results is that many people anticipate that the 2018 elections offer a rare opportunity to chart a new course for the country by peacefully installing a government that enables meaningful economic change.

Figure 3: Economic pessimism, political hope? | Zimbabwe | 2018



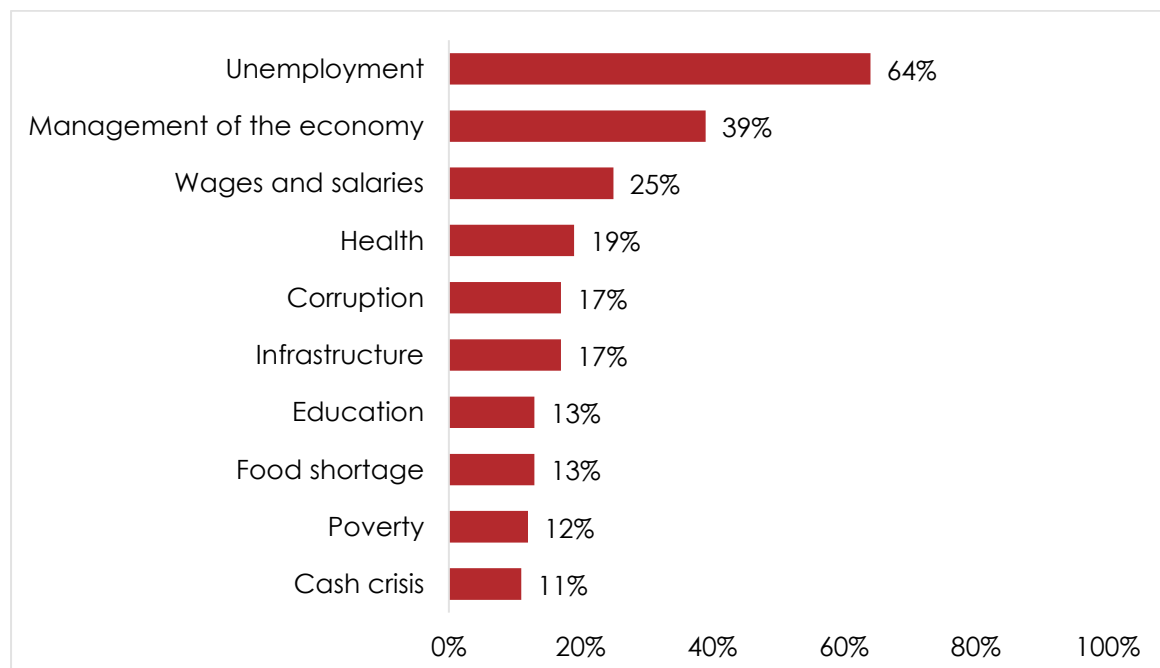
It is therefore relevant that the 2018 contest is the first in Zimbabwe's history in which both leading candidates for the presidency are campaigning on messages of economic reform. At the same time, it remains unclear how far either candidate – Emmerson Mnangagwa of ZANU-PF and Nelson Chamisa of MDC-T – is willing or able to go in dismantling party-state overreach into the economy and implementing policies of inclusive economic growth. While voters remain cautiously optimistic about post-election gains – 59% expect economic conditions to be “better” or “much better” by mid-2019 – most also remain skeptical about campaign promises whose sincerity and realism have yet to be tested.

What is the election about?

As suggested above, Zimbabweans hope that the election will produce a government that will put an end to the country's slide into economic penury. To test this proposition, the survey applied a standard Afrobarometer question to the pre-election circumstances prevailing in 2018: “What are the most important problems facing this country that the forthcoming election campaign should address?” Each of the survey's 2,400 respondents could offer up to three answers, which generated a robust total of 7,197 responses.

As Figure 4 shows, unemployment was far and away the most pressing issue of the day, cited by almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents. It was followed by two other economic issues: management of the economy (39%) and wages and salaries (25%). Indeed, eight out of the top 10 issues mentioned by citizens were economic problems, ranging from the country's decaying infrastructure (symbolized by proliferating potholes on public roads) to “the cash crisis” (that is, the limited amount of currency in circulation). On a brighter note, while Zimbabweans cited official corruption as a campaign issue, twice as many respondents – 42% versus 21% – saw this problem as shrinking rather than growing since the leadership transition in November 2017.

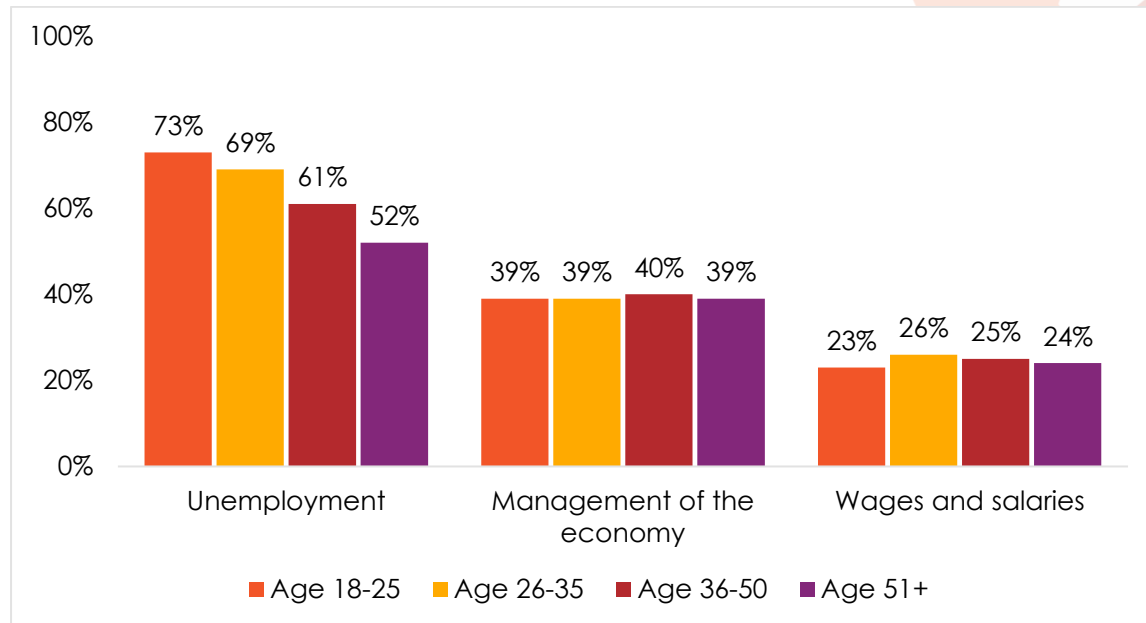
Figure 4: Most important problems that the election campaign should address
| Zimbabwe | 2018



Unemployment is an especially pressing problem for young people. Figure 5 displays a stepwise decline in concern about job creation by age. Whereas just about half (52%) of persons aged 51 and older regard unemployment as one of their campaign priorities, almost three-quarters (73%) of young people aged 18-25 do so. So it might be expected that, if

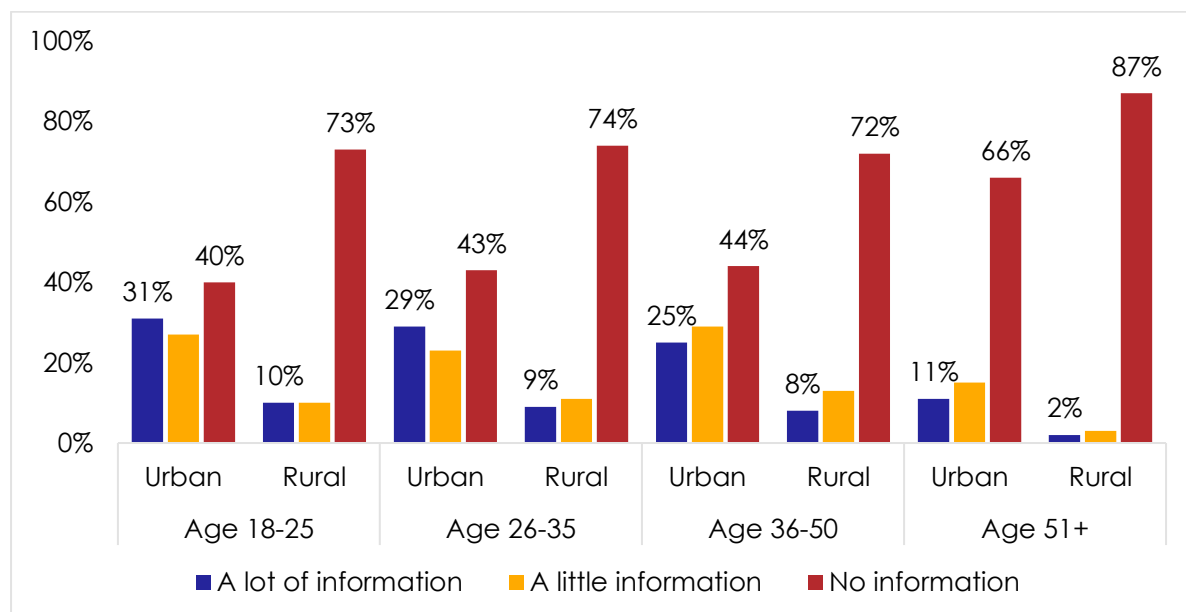
young people turn out to vote, they will do so for the candidates who have the most compelling and convincing message about how to deliver “jobs, jobs, jobs.”

Figure 5: Top three election issues by age | Zimbabwe | 2018



Moreover, this message will be most effective in reaching young voters – especially those in urban areas – if disseminated via the latest information and communications technology. The survey suggests that in 2018, almost one-third (31%) of youthful urbanites receive election information via social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (see Figure 6). Both major political parties have developed a slick social-media presence precisely to appeal to this growing segment of the political market. The diversity of competing messages on electronic platforms – both reliable and fake – stands in stark contrast to the one-dimensional diet of official information disseminated over government-operated radio. In this regard, younger urban audiences may be exposed to a very different campaign than older rural listeners.

Figure 6: Election information from social media | by age | Zimbabwe | 2018



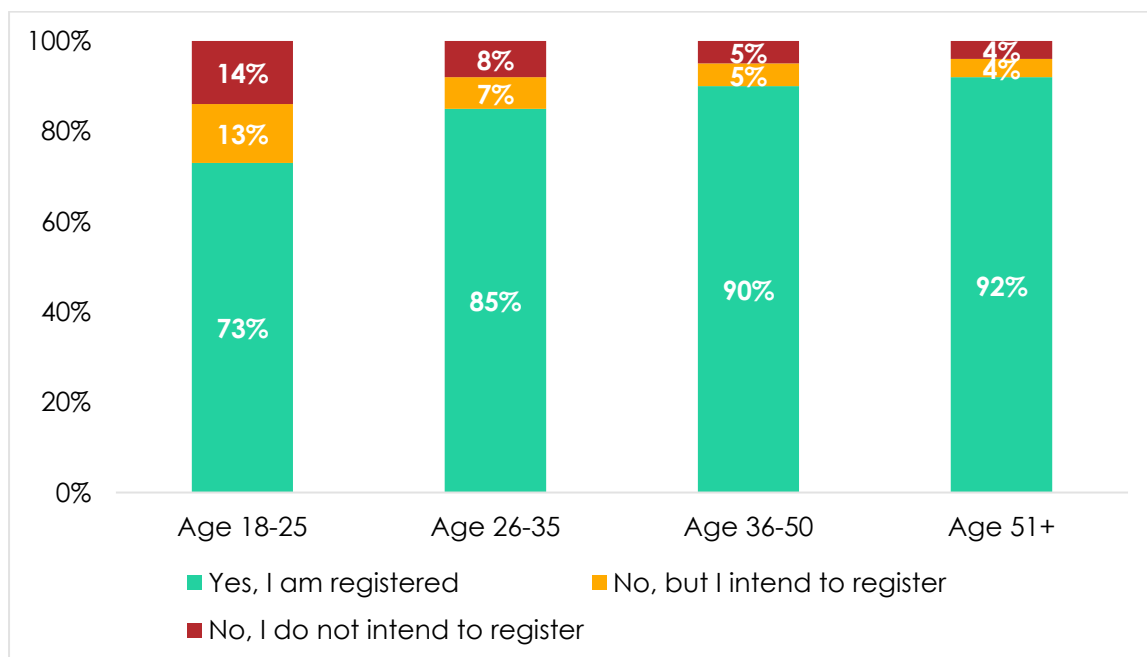
A youth wave?

Like many African countries, Zimbabwe has a youthful population. The Zimbabwe National Statistical Agency (ZimStat) uses projections from the 2012 census to estimate that 29% of the 2018 voting-age population is aged between 18 and 25. Many of these individuals are eligible to vote for the first time in the July 30 elections. In the past, however, young Zimbabweans have registered to vote and turned out at the polls in far smaller numbers than their share of the voting-age population would allow.

Starting in 2017, the government introduced a biometric voter registration (BVR) system designed to improve the integrity of Zimbabwe's voters' roll. The implementation of BVR was well received by citizens; more than 75% of all eligible voters (and more than 90% of registered voters) praised various aspects of the process. Among other things, BVR promised to increase the rate of youth voter registration.

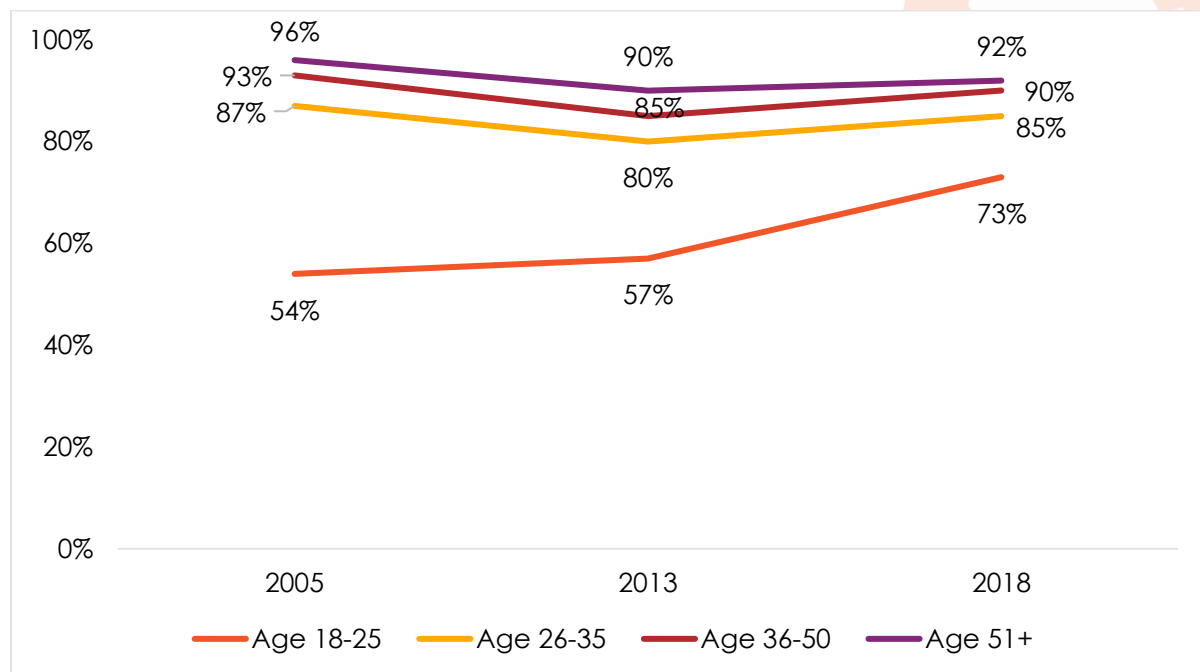
The pre-election baseline survey of May 2018 asked all respondents whether they had registered to vote. The self-reported results, which are displayed by age group in Figure 7, demonstrate a pattern common around the world, namely that age and voter registration are positively related. Stated differently, older cohorts register to vote in larger proportions than younger cohorts. In Zimbabwe, 92% of persons aged 51 and above said they were registered to vote, compared to 73% of those in the 18-25 age bracket.

Figure 7: Voter registration, self-reported | by age | Zimbabwe | 2018



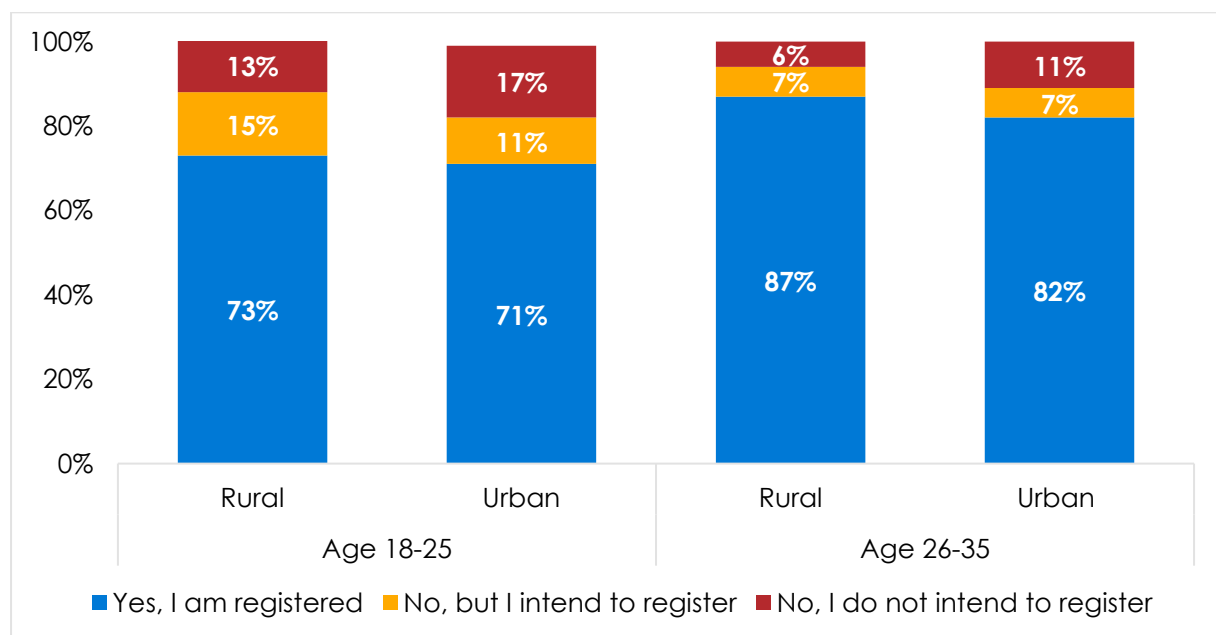
But the 2018 snapshot conceals change over time. As shown in Figure 8, the rate of youth voter registration has risen sharply over previous election periods. The question “Are you registered?” is asked in Afrobarometer surveys only in election years. In 2005, slightly more than half (54%) of eligible 18- to 25-year-old Zimbabweans said they were registered to vote, a figure that barely rose (to 57%) by the time of Zimbabwe's last general elections in 2013. Against this background, the fact that 73% of the youngest cohort now claim to be registered suggests that young (including first-time) voters could play an influential role in the 2018 elections.

Figure 8: Voter registration, self-reported | by age | Zimbabwe | 2005-2018



Where are these new young voters located? As Figure 9 shows, they reside in both rural and urban areas, which implies that both the rural-based ZANU-PF and the urban-centered MDC-T could benefit from the turnout of these voters at the polls. But the incumbent party might benefit more than the challenger. First, about one in six members of the youngest cohort in urban areas report that they have no intention of registering to vote, which points to a troubling degree of alienation from politics among some youthful elements in Zimbabwe's cities and towns. Second, voter registration among the second-youngest age bracket (26-35) is somewhat higher in rural than urban areas (87% vs. 82%). It is not unreasonable to suppose that these voters, like others in rural areas, may turn out to vote in larger numbers than their urban counterparts.

Figure 9: Youth registration | by location | Zimbabwe | 2018

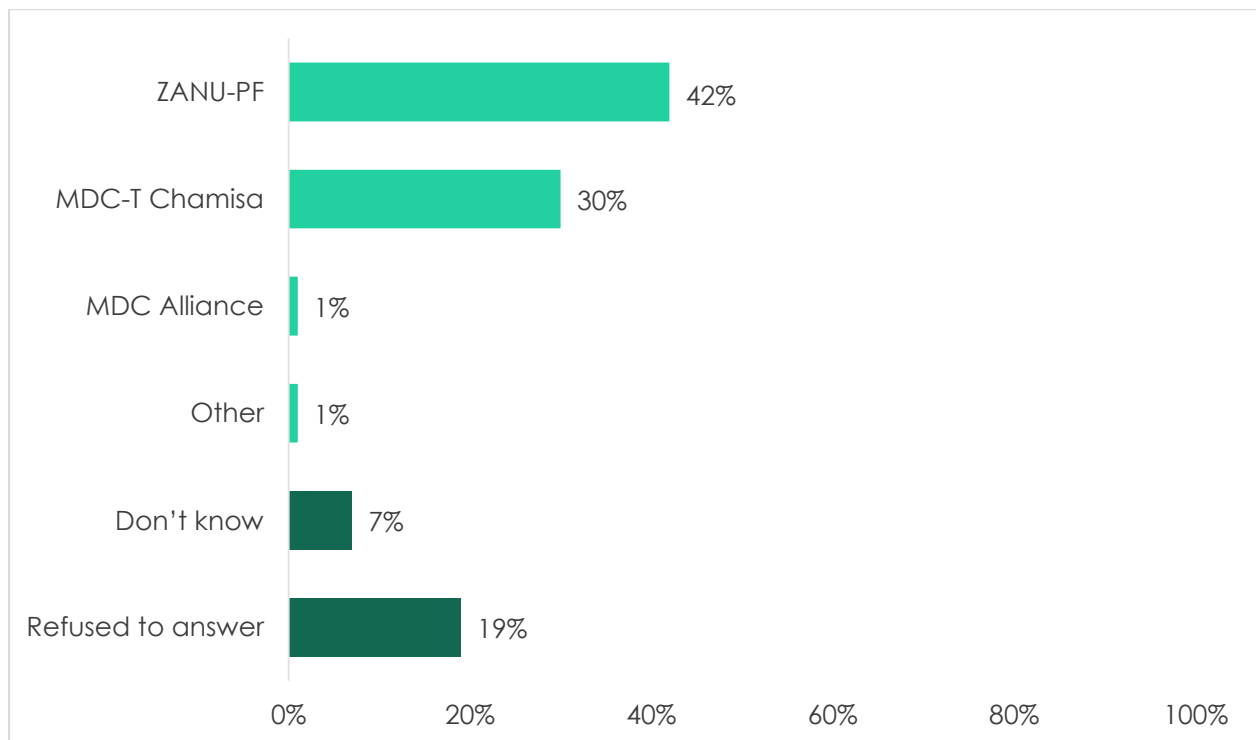


Voting intentions

How then might Zimbabweans vote on July 30? To gain a measure of insight into this all-important issue, the May 2018 survey asked a hypothetical question: “If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for?” The question was asked only of respondents who said they were both registered to vote and “probably” or “definitely” going to vote. Analysis is limited here to the presidential (not parliamentary) election since the presidency is the grand prize in Zimbabwean politics and the subject of greatest popular interest.

The results are displayed in Figure 10. Some 42% indicated that they favoured ZANU-PF, whose candidate is the sitting president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. By contrast, a total of 31% opted for Nelson Chamisa, the candidate of both the MDC-T party (still named after its late leader, Morgan Tsvangirai) and a newly formed MDC-Alliance (which includes parties led by Tendai Biti (PDP) and Welshman Ncube (MDC-Ncube), among others). Bringing up the rear, fewer than 2% (combined) said they intended to vote for parties led by Joice Mujuru (NPP), Dumiso Dabengwa (ZAPU), and Thokozana Khupe (MDC-T Khupe). In short, as of May, the presidential election of 2018 had turned into a two-horse race.

Figure 10: Voting intentions of registered likely voters in the presidential election as of April/May 2018 | Zimbabwe



(Analysis includes only registered likely voters.)

A couple of important caveats must be borne in mind about these data. First, the voting intentions of a quarter (26%) of likely voters remain unknown: 19% refused to answer the question, and 7% said they didn't know whom they would vote for. Some of these voters may be genuinely undecided, though this is rather unlikely in Zimbabwe's historically polarized party system. Certainly, it would be incorrect to describe this entire bloc of silent respondents as “undecided” or “uncommitted.” More likely, most of them have well-established political commitments that they justifiably decline to reveal in order to protect the privacy of their vote. For this reason, it seems more appropriate to call this group of voters the “reticents.”

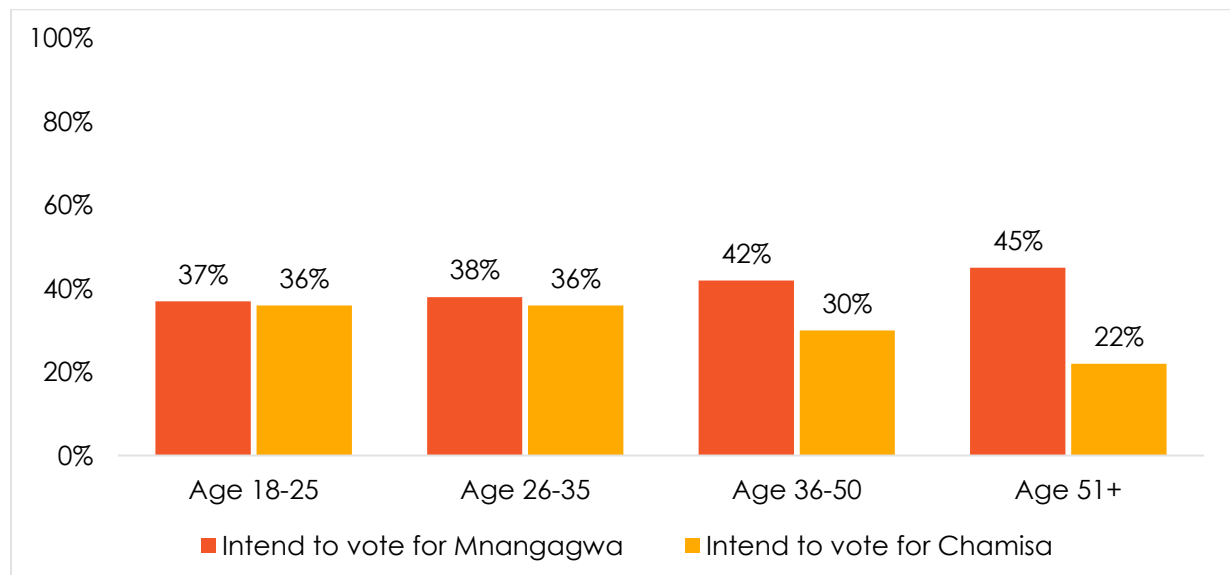
The second caveat is that the voting-intention results refer to early May 2018. At that time, some voters were still learning about the two major candidates, neither of whom had run for

the top office before. While Mnangagwa's history as a ZANU-PF stalwart was common public knowledge, he has embarked on a charm offensive to remake his image as an economic reformer. And Chamisa, a 40-year-old who was well known only within MDC-T circles, faced the challenge of introducing himself and his idealistic message of sweeping change to a broader electorate. Moreover, both major parties had recently suffered serious internal splits and defections, which complicated the range of options open to voters. In such a fluid political environment, voting intentions could easily change – perhaps even tip the balance – by July 30. As a result, caution is warranted in handicapping the presidential horse race.

Demographic structure

How does an expected increase in voter turnout among young people affect anticipated election outcomes? One popular narrative suggests that young people, especially urban youth, favour the challenger and thus represent Chamisa's best chance for an upset victory. Figure 11 confirms that there is some merit to this case: Younger voters lean toward Chamisa, and older voters lean toward Mnangagwa. However, the vote of the 18- to 25-year-olds appears to be up for grabs, with each candidate securing just over one-third of the youth vote, at least as of a hypothetical race in early May 2018.

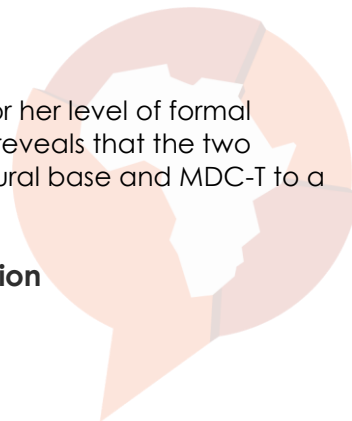
Figure 11: Voting intentions of registered likely voters in the presidential election as of April/May 2018 | by age | Zimbabwe



(Analysis includes only registered likely voters.)

But there is reason to question the narrative of a decisive youth wave in Zimbabwe's 2018 election. Table 2 displays a regression analysis that weighs the influence of four key demographic factors in explaining intended vote choices.² It shows that all factors – age, gender, education, and residential location (urban or rural) – have some meaningful effect on voting intentions. But once these factors are controlled for each other, age becomes the least influential consideration. Instead, the best demographic predictors are the voter's rural

² The analysis is run twice: once for an intended vote for Mnangagwa and again for an intended vote for Chamisa. The signs on the coefficients indicate whether the relationship between the demographic predictor and voting intentions is positive or negative. The coefficients in each column are arithmetically comparable with each other, with higher values indicating stronger relationships. All relationships are mutually controlled for the other variables in the model. Statistical significance is portrayed with asterisks; the more asterisks, the less likely the observed relationship is due to chance. In plain language, and other things being equal, the demographic factors with the largest values and highest significance are the ones that “matter the most.”



residential location (for an intended vote for Mnangagwa) and his or her level of formal education (for an intended vote for Chamisa). Indeed, the analysis reveals that the two major parties appeal to very different political bases: ZANU-PF to a rural base and MDC-T to a base among educated people.

Table 2: Demographic factors in vote choice, presidential election
| Zimbabwe | 2018

	Intend to vote for Mnangagwa	Intend to vote for Chamisa
(Constant)	(.131)	(.462)
Age	.037*	-.042*
Gender (male)	.052**	-.072***
Education	-.185****	.214****
Location (rural)	.240****	-.163****

Notes: OLS regressions: Cell entries are standardized coefficients (Beta). Statistical significance: **** $p < .001$, *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .10$. Analysis includes only registered likely voters.

These stark findings reveal some hard structural realities. First, there is no denying that Zimbabwe's population remains predominantly rural; the latest census projections estimate the rural-urban population breakdown at 63:37. Second, Zimbabwe has suffered an extensive brain drain during recent decades as many of the country's most educated citizens emigrated for economic opportunities in the region and abroad. So while ZANU-PF's rural base remains numerically large and stable, MDC-T's potential base is undercut by the dispersal of many of its core supporters into the diaspora, where they cannot vote.³

Thus, if July 30, 2018 turns out to be a "turnout election" – that is, an election won or lost on the ability of political parties to mobilize their most loyal voters to the polls – then the challenger would seem to face an uphill climb. Moreover, there is reason to believe that the incumbent party also enjoys a more intact and better-resourced party organization, which could prove to be a decisive asset in getting its voters to the polls.

Survey sponsorship

The analysis in this paper is based on survey data. Skeptics of this methodology are correct to ask: How do survey researchers know that respondents are offering honest answers to survey questions? Couldn't they simply offer socially desirable or politically correct responses that they think the researcher wants to hear? Especially in the context of an electoral authoritarian regime, could citizens state a voting intention for one party but then actually vote for another?

In an effort to address these concerns, the Zimbabwe baseline pre-election survey adopted the Afrobarometer protocol of ending the interview with the question, "By the way, who do you think sent us to do this interview?" Even though the interviewers had introduced the survey sponsor as a non-partisan, non-governmental agency (in this case the Mass Public Opinion Institute), a significant proportion of respondents continued to believe that the survey originated from the government or ruling party.

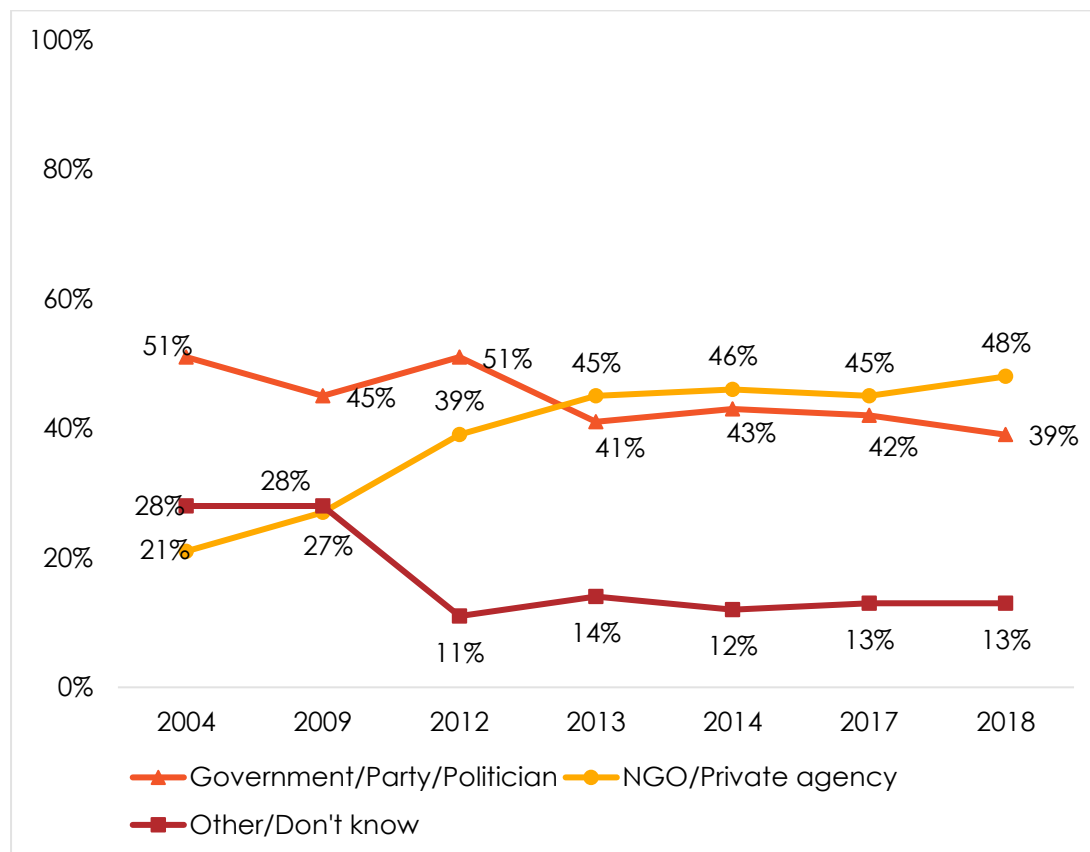
³ Expanding on a 2013 Constitutional Court ruling, Chief Justice Luke Malaba wrote in July 2017 that "the Constitution did not place an obligation upon the State to make arrangements for voters who, for personal reasons, were unable to attend at the polling stations to vote. ..." See <https://www.herald.co.zw/concourt-says-no-to-diaspora-vote/>.

In Zimbabwe in April/May 2018, 39% of all respondents saw the survey this way. As expected, more rural dwellers (45%) than townsfolk (29%) perceived government sponsorship.

Are these figures high or low? From a comparative African perspective, 39% might seem high: In at least four African countries – Namibia (24%), Mauritius (22%), Nigeria (18%), and Togo (17%) – fewer than a quarter of respondents identified a government sponsor in 2017 Afrobarometer surveys. Moreover, if almost four in 10 Zimbabweans suspect a hidden official hand in the survey, they might offer misleading responses that could weigh more heavily on voting intentions than even the strongest demographic factors.

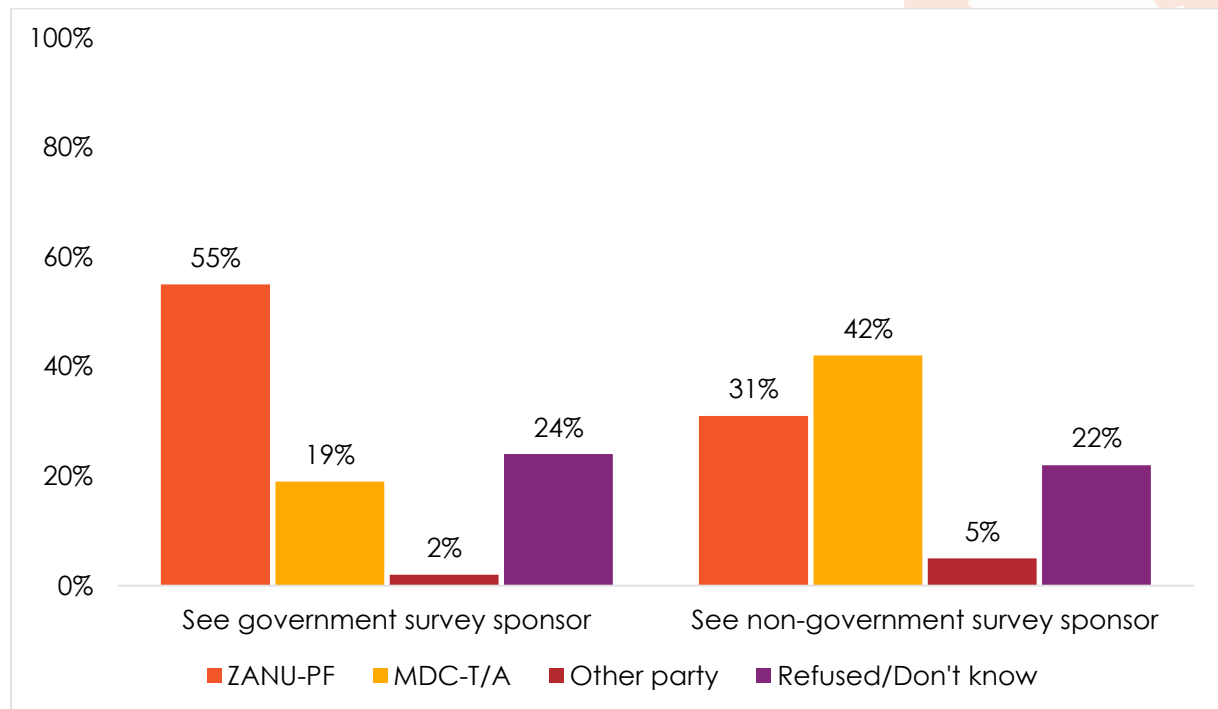
On the other hand, the more relevant comparison may be with Zimbabwe's own past. Figure 12 tracks perceived survey sponsorship over time. In the early days of public opinion research on democratic governance in Zimbabwe, a majority thought the surveyors were sent by government or a political party (51% in 2004 and 2012). But a notable turnaround has occurred, perhaps as people have learned about the origins and purposes of survey research or, more recently, as political space has opened up since November 2017. By May 2018, more people thought the present survey was sponsored by a non-governmental or private agency (48%) than saw it as a governmental project (39%) – a 9 percentage-point gap.

Figure 12: Perceived survey sponsorship | Zimbabwe | 2004-2018



What are the implications of perceived survey sponsorship for stated voting intentions? If citizens think the government commissioned the survey, then they are more likely to report support for ZANU-PF (55%, vs. 19% for MDC). If, however, they think a non-governmental agency was behind the survey, then the tables are turned; under these circumstances, more people say that they support MDC (42%, vs. 31% for ZANU-PF) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Voting intentions by perceived survey sponsorship | Zimbabwe | 2018



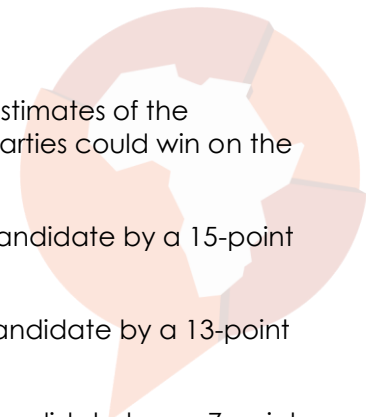
(Analysis includes only registered likely voters.)

These figures provide a basis for estimating the likely behaviour at the polls of “reticent” voters who refuse to declare a voting intention. As stated earlier, this group consists of 26% of registered likely voters. Several alternative assumptions can be made about their undisclosed partisan preferences:

- **Assumption A:** Reticents are distributed in the same proportion as declared voters (that is, ZANU-PF:MDC = 42:31; see Figure 10). For the purpose of comparing assumptions, this scale is standardized on a scale of 100, which yields a ratio of 58:42.
- **Assumption B:** All reticents are opposition supporters (ZANU-PF:MDC = 0:100).
- **Assumption C:** Reticents split according to voters' perceptions of an NGO/private survey sponsor. This perception serves as a proxy for people's preferences absent the fear that they are being surveilled by a government agency. The ratio of ZANU-PF:MDC support of 31:42 (see Figure 13) is equivalent to a standardized ratio of 42:58. Thus, according to the observed data, Assumption C perfectly reverses the assumed distribution of reticent votes in MDC's favour.

But which assumption best captures the real world? Assumptions A and B seem too extreme. On the one hand, Assumption A surely underestimates the proportion of voters who fear revealing that they do not support a powerful ruling party. On the other hand, Assumption B is surely too enthusiastic in allocating all reticent votes to a divided opposition with an untested leader. For these reasons, Assumption C seems to be the most realistic scenario. Under conditions of suspected respondent self-censorship, one would expect to discover more hidden opposition than ruling-party votes. It therefore seems reasonable to allocate reticent votes in the 42:58 ratio that favours MDC.

A recalculation of voting intentions along these lines is reported in Table 3. It shows the status of the presidential race if (a big IF) the election had been held in early May 2018. For the first time, we gain insight into the probabilities of either party winning on the first round of presidential voting. The Constitution of Zimbabwe and the electoral law require a winning candidate to obtain a simple majority of votes (50% plus one) in order to avoid a second-



round runoff.⁴ In all three of the following scenarios, which include estimates of the distribution of reticent votes, one or the other of the main political parties could win on the first round.

- **Scenario A:** The ZANU-PF candidate might beat the MDC candidate by a 15-point margin;
- **Scenario B:** The MDC candidate might beat the ZANU-PF candidate by a 13-point margin; or
- **Scenario C:** The ZANU-PF candidate might beat the MDC candidate by an 7-point margin.

The survey data suggest that Scenario C would have been the most likely outcome. But, to repeat: A ZANU-PF victory is not a prediction of where the race will stand on July 30; it is simply an estimate of where the race stood in early May 2018.

Table 3: Estimated voting intentions, including “reticents” | Zimbabwe | 2018

	Estimated vote for Mnangagwa	Estimated vote for Chamisa
Assumption A (ZPF:MDC = 58:42)	57.6%	42.4%
Assumption B (ZPF:MDC = 0:100)	43.4%	56.6%
Assumption C (ZPF:MDC = 42:58)	53.7%	46.3%

(Calculations include only registered likely voters. Calculations exclude intended votes for small parties (<2%).)

Key electoral issues

At the time of writing, about six weeks remained until the day of the election. In the late stages of the campaign, which unresolved issues continued to exercise the minds of Zimbabwean voters? Given Zimbabwe’s history with disputed elections, there are many such issues. This paper selects and prioritizes just three based on aspects of election management that citizens themselves are most concerned about.

The issues are:

- The secrecy of the ballot
- Equal access of contending parties and candidates to the mass media
- The announcement of election results

What exactly do citizens have to say about these issues? And what actions can be taken by advocates of free and fair elections, including friends of Zimbabwe in the international community? Special attention is given to actions that might be taken to address these issues before July 30.

⁴ Section 129(1) of the Electoral Act (Chapter 2:13)

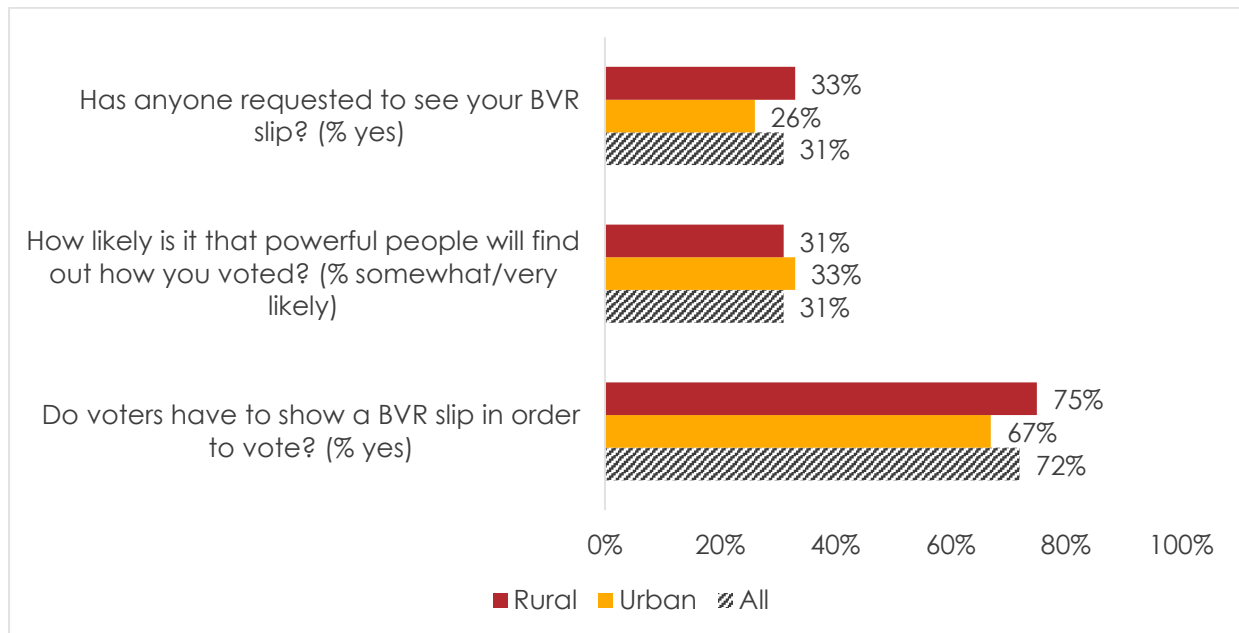
Ballot secrecy

As shown in Figure 14, too many Zimbabweans remain concerned about the secrecy of the ballot. Even though people are broadly satisfied with the BVR process and enjoy improved confidence in the accuracy of the voters' roll, they also harbor doubts about possible abuse of the new registration system. As early as May, almost one-third (31%) of registered likely voters reported that "someone" – usually an official from the ruling party or a traditional leader – had requested to inspect the serial number on their voter-registration slip. According to a well-publicized statement from the Zimbabwe Republic Police (see at right), all such transactions are unauthorized and illegal. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission reinforced this message with a statement on January 31, 2018,⁵ saying it had "received reports that there are individuals forcibly demanding voter registration slips or details thereof, such as serial numbers from registrants, which action is tantamount to intimidation. This is contrary to the provisions of both the Constitution and the Electoral Act."

Yet, according to the survey, reports of such demands are widespread, especially in rural areas (33%) and especially in Masvingo (49%), Bulawayo (35%), and Mashonaland East (35%) provinces.



Figure 14: Ballot secrecy | Zimbabwe | 2018



(Analysis includes only registered likely voters.)

⁵ See <http://www.thezimbabweemail.com/main/zec-condemns-voter-intimidation-polls-loom/>

The inspection of BVR slips apparently provokes popular fear of a loss of ballot secrecy. Almost one-third of respondents (again 31%, mostly the same people) reported that they think it is “somewhat” or “very” likely that “powerful people will find out how you voted.” Citizens were unsure about exactly how the authorities might make use of their computerized personal records – including photographs and fingerprints, whose acquisition in itself frightened some registrants – but they were worried about the potential for abuse.

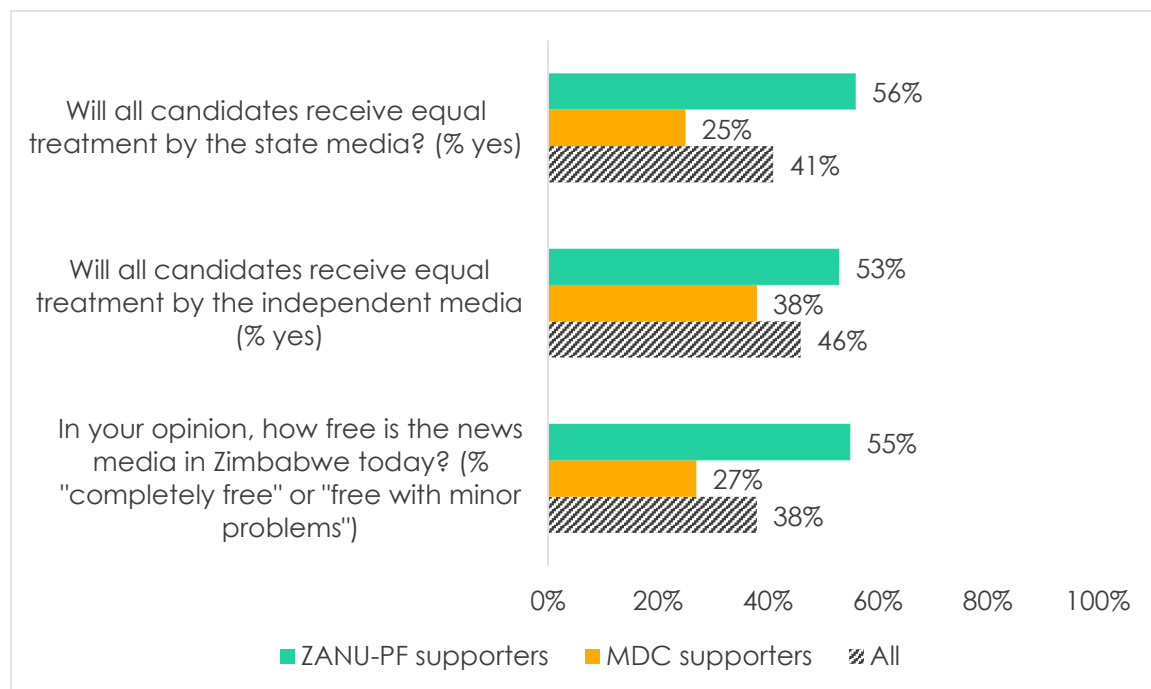
Moreover, a very large majority of citizens were under the misapprehension that a BVR registration slip is a necessary requirement for the act of voting. Some 72% of respondents (75% in rural areas) thought that, in order to exercise the right to vote, voters must carry this document to the polls and produce it on demand to an election official. Some political parties have been propagating this misinformation, perhaps as a form of political intimidation. Yet the only legal requirement is that a voter offer some form of verifiable identification, such as a national identity card (but not a driver's license), that can be matched to the voter's personal details on the voters' roll. Taken together, unresolved concerns about the improper use of biometric information have the unfortunate potential to undermine new popular confidence in voter registration and reinforce deep-seated skepticism about balloting procedures.

Media access

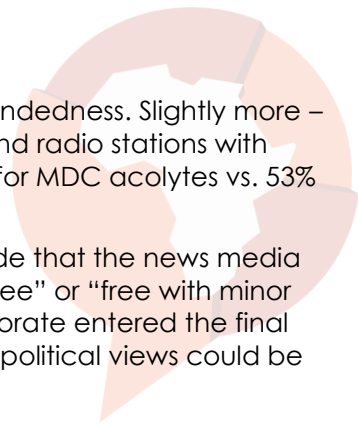
One key requirement of a free and fair electoral process is a level playing field on which all political parties, alliances, and candidates can get their political messages out to the electorate. Yet the media environment in Zimbabwe is as polarized as the parties, with competing outlets affording selective – often strident and even deceptive – coverage to different political audiences. As a result, the electorate is split along partisan lines about whether their preferred candidates are covered freely and fairly by various media.

Take the state media, notably the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation television and radio services. Figure 15 shows that fewer than half (41%) of all citizens said that these outlets offer equal treatment to all comers. And views were split along partisan lines on this issue. MDC supporters were less than half as likely as ZANU-PF supporters (25% vs. 56%) to think that their candidates get equal access to the state airwaves.

Figure 15: Media access | Zimbabwe | 2018



(Analysis includes all respondents.)



Even the independent media were given a failing grade on evenhandedness. Slightly more – but still fewer than half (46%) – credited independent newspapers and radio stations with providing equal access. And the partisan gap remained wide (38% for MDC acolytes vs. 53% for ZANU-PF followers).

Lastly, popular concerns about media access led citizens to conclude that the news media in Zimbabwe are not free. Only 38% saw this sector as “completely free” or “free with minor problems.” The usual partisan gap applied. For this reason, the electorate entered the final weeks of the campaign without media platforms on which different political views could be discussed equably and dispassionately.

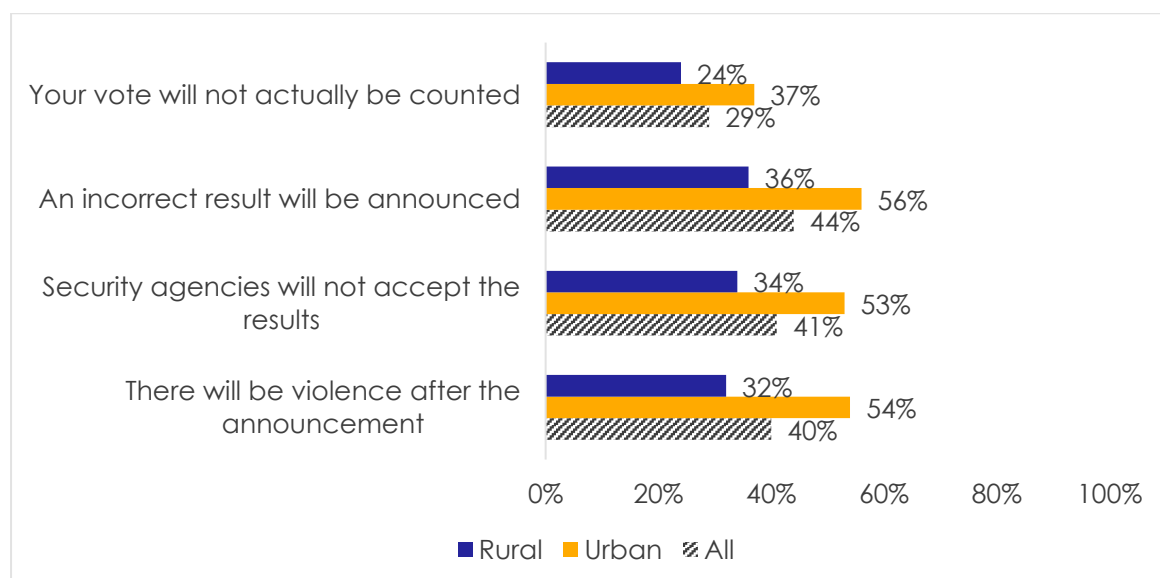
Announcement of results

Of all electoral procedures in Zimbabwe, the final stages of centralized counting, tabulating, and announcing results are the most opaque. In 2008, for example, the final count in the first round of the presidential election was moved from the electoral commission to military barracks, and an announcement of disputed results was made only after a suspicious five-week delay. Vivid recollections of this episode are seared in the collective public memory.

The present pre-election survey uncovered evidence of persistent public anxiety about how the endgame of the 2018 election might play out (Figure 16). Almost one-third of respondents (29% overall, 37% in urban areas) worried that their vote “will not actually be counted.” Even more (44% overall, 56% urban) thought it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that an incorrect result would be announced. To repeat: Almost one-half (more than half in cities and towns) already expressed doubts about the reliability of expected results. This finding, perhaps more than any other in the survey, signals popular unease about election quality.

Many Zimbabweans were even willing to engage in further speculation about election outcomes. Four in 10 respondents (more than five in 10 in urban areas) anticipated that “security agencies will not accept the result of the presidential election,” presumably in the event that opposition forces manage to defeat the ruling party. And the announcement of any results could trigger the sorts of post-election violence that Zimbabwe has experienced in the aftermath of elections going back as far as the 1980s. Some 40% overall said they fear this outcome, including majorities in the MDC-T urban strongholds of Harare (59%) and Bulawayo (57%).

Figure 16: Popular apprehensions about election results | Zimbabwe | 2018



(Analysis includes all respondents.)

Taken together, popular apprehensions about the announcement of election results – particularly if these results become a matter of dispute – could potentially undermine the legitimacy of upcoming 2018 elections. The prospect that these elections could be seen as illegitimate should worry the winning side as much as the losers. After all, in the wake of a military intervention in November 2017, most Zimbabweans would prefer to return their country to an era of constitutional rule.⁶ Only a genuinely free and fair election can fully achieve this outcome.

Action steps

What, in the waning days of the campaign, can advocates of election quality do to help ensure a positive outcome? In particular, how can the international community use its in-country presence to draw attention to the most pressing remaining issues? The following steps are recommended:

On ballot secrecy

- Enable civic organizations and public and private mass media to undertake a voter-education blitz. Among other key messages, inform would-be voters that national identity cards (rather than BVR slips) are sufficient to identify themselves at the polls.
- Implore President Mnangagwa to issue a high-profile statement to the nation that “your vote is secret.” Although not every voter will fully trust a mere verbal assurance, an official declaration to this effect may help to build confidence

On media access

- Capacitate the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission to fulfill its media-monitoring mandate (assumed after the June 14 nomination day).
- Ensure early and regular issuance of media-monitoring reports in the final weeks of the election campaign. Avoid the common practice of issuing such reports only after the election, when it is too late to correct any imbalances.
- Alert international election-observation delegations on arrival in Zimbabwe of the importance of the media-access issue. Urge them to flag disparities early and often.

On the announcement of results

- Ask Vice President Constantino Chiwenga (who is de facto Minister of Defense) to issue a public statement to explicitly assure the public that security forces will abstain from electioneering and respect the results of the election as determined by the electoral commission.
- Encourage political parties through the Multi-party Liaison Committee and other forums to take electoral disputes to the courts rather than into the streets.

Conclusion and disclaimers

About three months ahead of voting day, Zimbabweans were downbeat about economic conditions but tentatively hopeful that free and fair elections on July 30 would break the mold of past disputed contests, restore political legitimacy, and launch economic reforms.

The citizenry's biggest unresolved concern was that government authorities will announce an incorrect election result, thus derailing the country's quest for a return to constitutional order.

⁶ Majorities of Zimbabweans reject military rule as an alternative to democracy (71%) and assert that the armed forces “must not be involved at all in the country's politics” (68%). Most also consider that the 2017 military action was the “wrong thing to do” (52%) even if it was “necessary.”

The analysis in this paper is based on a systematic survey of a random cross-section of citizens aged 18 years and older. It is possible (but unlikely) that results based on quantitative survey data have missed certain qualitative aspects of the public mood.

Important: The survey represents a snapshot at one moment in time. It was conducted before the campaign was disrupted by a blast at a Bulawayo campaign rally that sullied hopes for an election free of tension. There is also every reason to expect swings in public opinion, including voting intentions, in the late stages of any election campaign. Last-minute changes in the momentum of any party, alliance, or candidate will be monitored in a follow-up survey to be conducted in late June/early July, with results to be reported before voting day.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

Appendix

Survey question texts for figures and tables



Figure 1 and Table 1

- Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
- In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?
- Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?

Figure 2

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should consider other methods for choosing this country's leaders

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: In accordance with the Constitution, which requires elections every five years, elections must be held in 2018.

Statement 2: Elections are not necessary in 2018 since there are other more important matters for the country to attend to.

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: No matter whom we vote for, things will not get better in the future.

Statement 2: We can use our power as voters to choose leaders who will help us improve our lives.

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

- How free and fair do you expect the next elections of 2018 to be? (% "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems")
- During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 3

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: No matter whom we vote for, things will not get better in the future.

Statement 2: We can use our power as voters to choose leaders who will help us improve our lives.

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

Figures 4-5

- What are the most important problems facing this country that the forthcoming election campaign should address?

Figure 6

- How much information on the 2018 elections have you received from the following sources: Social media?

Figures 7-9

- Are you registered to vote in the upcoming 2018 elections?

Figures 10-11 and Tables 2-3

- If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?

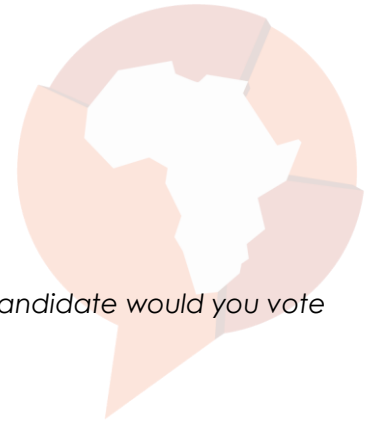


Figure 12

- Who do you think sent us to do this interview?

Figure 13

- Who do you think sent us to do this interview?
- If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?

Figure 14

- As you may know, Zimbabwe will hold elections in 2018. I would like to ask you a few questions about these elections: Has anyone demanded to see the serial number of your voter registration slip?
- In your opinion, how likely will the following things happen in the 2018 elections: Even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country, powerful people will find out how you voted?
- To your knowledge, will a citizen have to show a biometric voter registration slip in order to vote?

Figure 15

- Let's break down the various parts of the upcoming 2018 elections. How free and fair do you expect these elections to be in terms of: Equal treatment of all candidates by state media? Equal treatment of all candidates by the independent media?
- In your opinion, how much of a free and uncensored news media does Zimbabwe have today?
- Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that?

Figure 16

- In your view, how likely is it that:
- Even though you will cast a ballot, your vote will not actually be counted?
- Even after all ballots are counted, an incorrect result will be announced?
- Security agencies will not recognize the result of the presidential election?
- There will be violence after the announcement of election results?

(% who say "somewhat" or "very" likely)



Michael Bratton is senior adviser to Afrobarometer.

Eldred V. Masunungure is executive director of Mass Public Opinion Institute, Harare, Zimbabwe.

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.

The Delegation of the European Union to Zimbabwe provided financial support for 2018 pre-election surveys in Zimbabwe to the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Afrobarometer's core partner in Southern Africa.

Donations help the Afrobarometer Project give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Aba Kittoe (akittoe@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

Follow our releases on Twitter and Facebook.

Cover photo: Adapted from photograph by Lovejoy Mutongwiza/263Chat.com, via Google.

Contact: mbratton@msu.edu, director@mpoi.org.zw

Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 47 | June 2018