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Citizen engagement in Zimbabwe at lowest level in a decade

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 70 | Stephen Ndoma and Richman Kokera

Summary

Seven of 10 Zimbabweans consider it the duty of every citizen not only to vote in elections but also to participate in national and community affairs between elections, the latest Afrobarometer survey shows.

Yet most Zimbabweans never engage with their elected leaders to discuss important problems or share their views; on this indicator, citizen engagement is at its lowest level in a decade. Similarly, a majority do not contact non-elected leaders such as government officials and traditional and religious leaders. Few are active in voluntary or community organisations, and even fewer participate in individual or group action to raise an important issue or express dissatisfaction with the government. Urban residents are particularly disengaged, and women are generally less likely to engage than men.

One contributing factor to low levels of engagement may be the widespread public perception that members of Parliament (MPs) and local government councillors "never" or "only sometimes" try to listen to citizens.

Afrobarometer survey

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

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

Key findings

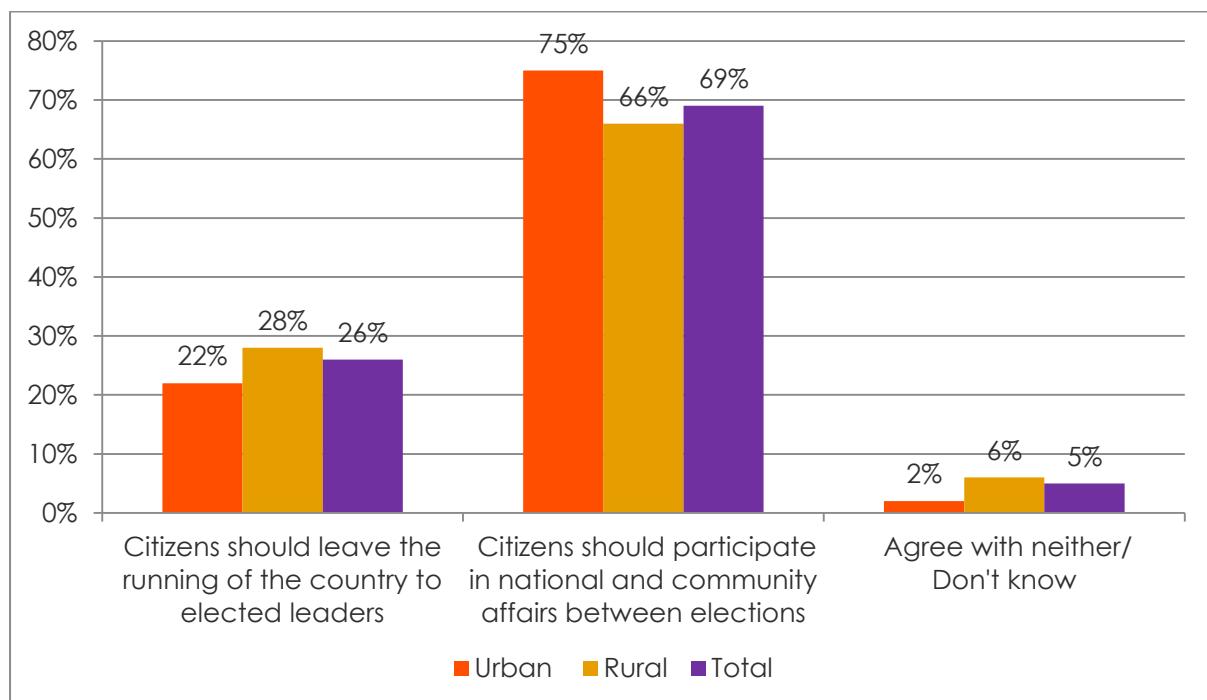
- About seven of 10 Zimbabwean adults say citizens have an obligation to vote in elections (74%) and to participate in national and community affairs between elections (69%).
- But most Zimbabweans do not interact with their elected leaders; large majorities say they did not contact local government councillors (67%) or MPs (86%) in the year preceding the survey. Civic engagement through contact with elected leaders is at its lowest level in a decade.

- Disengagement is also evident in low rates of contact with non-elected leaders such as officials of government agencies, political party officials, traditional leaders, and religious leaders.
- Most Zimbabweans say they are not members of voluntary associations or community groups (75%) and did not get together with others in the previous 12 months to raise an issue (63%).
- Urban residents are less engaged than their rural counterparts, and women are less engaged than men except when it comes to contact with religious leaders.

Citizen participation between elections

Seven of 10 Zimbabweans (69%) say that the duty of every Zimbabwean citizen is not only to vote in elections but also to participate in national and community affairs between elections, as opposed to leaving the running of the country to elected leaders. This view is more widespread among urban dwellers (75%) than among rural residents (66%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Citizen engagement between elections | by urban-rural residence
| Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your own view?

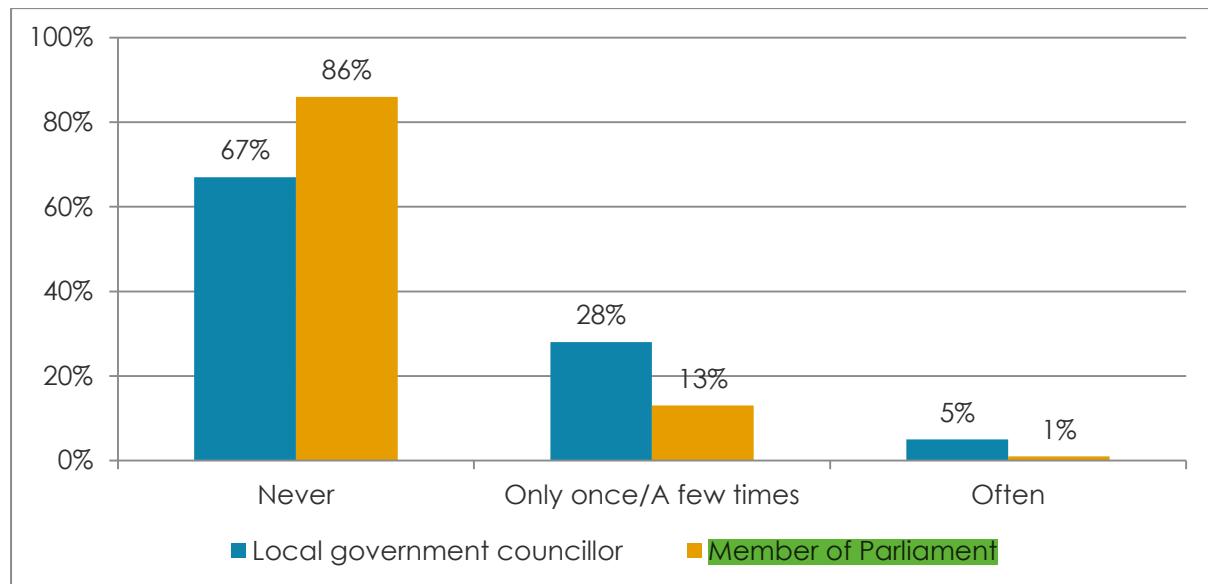
Statement 1: Citizens of Zimbabwe have a duty to vote in elections every five years but, at other times, should leave the running of the country up to elected leaders.

Statement 2: The duty of every citizen of Zimbabwe is not only to vote in elections, but also to participate in national and community affairs between elections.

Citizens can participate in public affairs through a variety of means. Contact between citizens and elected leaders is one indicator of citizen engagement. But despite their expressed belief that every citizen should engage in national and community affairs, the overwhelming majority of Zimbabweans never or rarely get in touch with their elected leaders. Most respondents indicate that during the year preceding the survey, they never

contacted local government councillors (67%) or MPs (86%) in order to share their views (Figure 2).

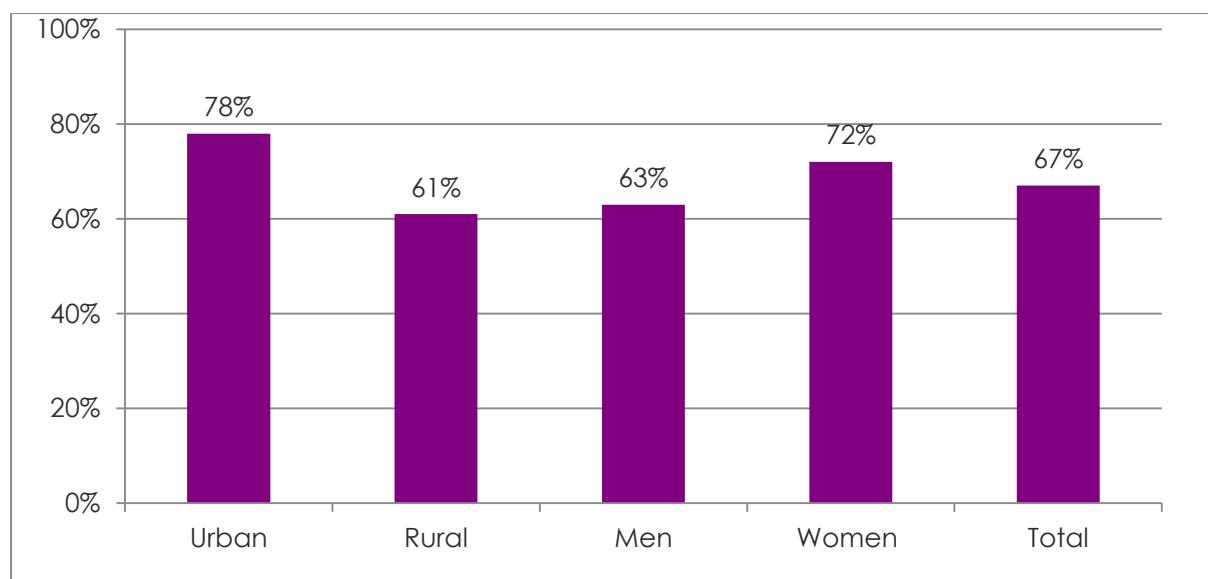
Figure 2: Citizen contact with local councillors and MPs | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views?

As shown in Figure 3, contacting local government councillors is less likely among women than men (72% vs. 63% who say they “never” made contact) and less common among urban than rural residents (78% vs. 61% “never”).

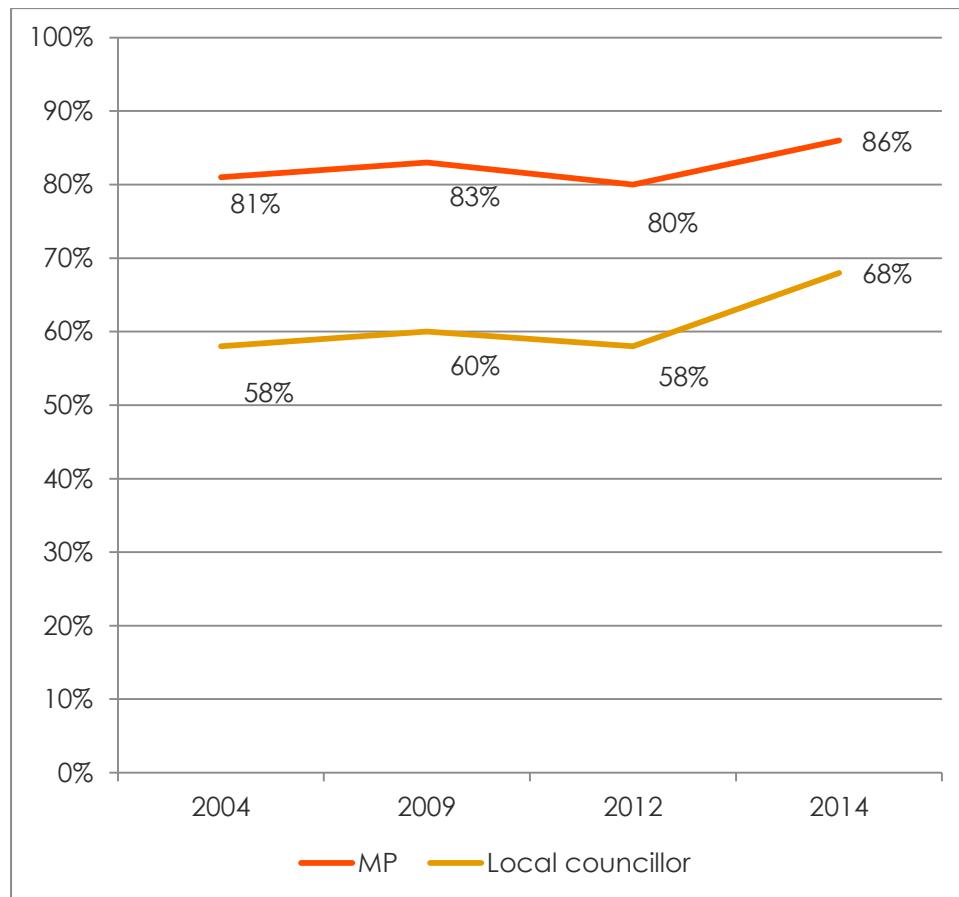
Figure 3: Citizens who ‘never’ contacted local government councillors | by urban-rural residence and gender | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A local government councillor? (% who say “never”)

The proportion of citizens who had contact with their elected officials is at its lowest level since Afrobarometer began tracking this indicator in Zimbabwe in 2004 (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Citizens who 'never' contacted elected officials | Zimbabwe | 2004-2014



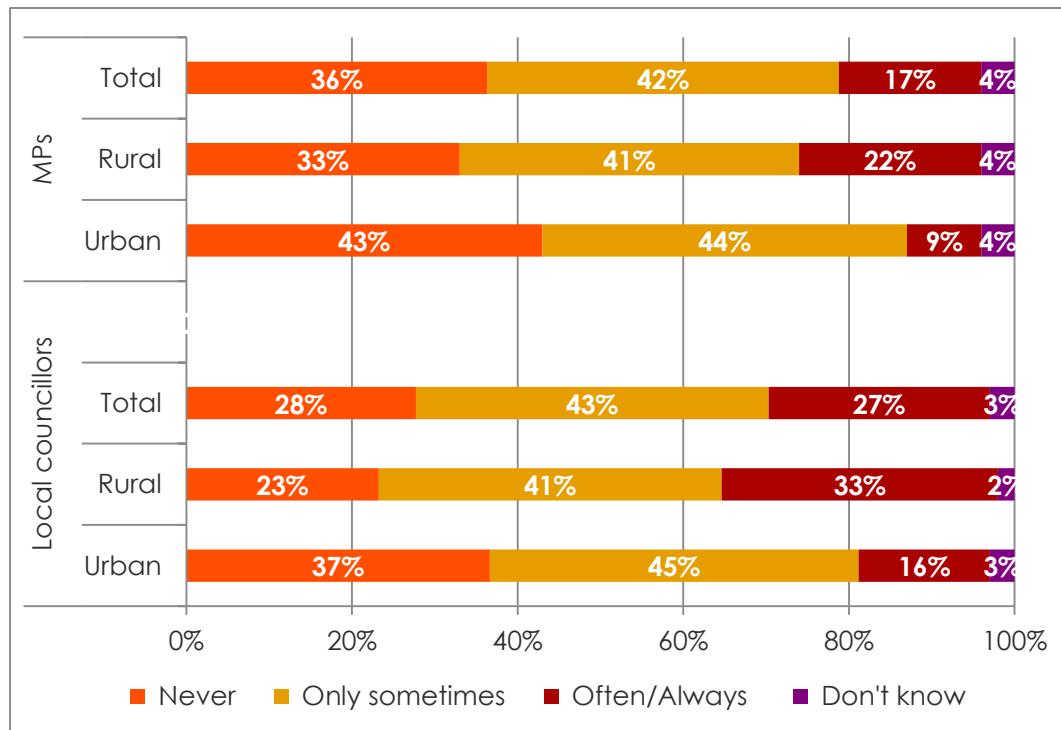
Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A Member of Parliament? A local government councillor? (% who say "never")

Are elected leaders open to citizen engagement?

If many Zimbabweans fail to engage with their elected officials, one reason may be their perception that their leaders are not interested in hearing what they have to say. Almost eight of 10 Zimbabweans say parliamentarians “never” (36%) or “only sometimes” (42%) try their best to listen to ordinary citizens. Only 17% say MPs “often” or “always” do their best to listen. Urban dwellers are more critical than their rural counterparts on this issue (43% vs. 33% who say MPs “never” listen) (Figure 5).

Local government councillors perform only slightly better than MPs in terms of lending their ears to the electorate: Seven of 10 respondents say councillors “never” (28%) or “only sometimes” (43%) listen to citizens. Again, urban residents are more critical than rural residents (37% vs. 23% who say that councillors “never” listen).

Figure 5: Willingness of MPs and local government councillors to listen to citizens
| by residence location | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors?

Perceptions of elected leaders' willingness to listen vary by province. In Bulawayo, almost half (46%) of respondents say that local government councillors never listen, while only 18% share this view in Mashonaland Central. Similarly, two-thirds (67%) of respondents in the metropolitan province of Bulawayo say that MPs never pay attention, while only 27% in Matabeleland North feel the same way (Table 1).

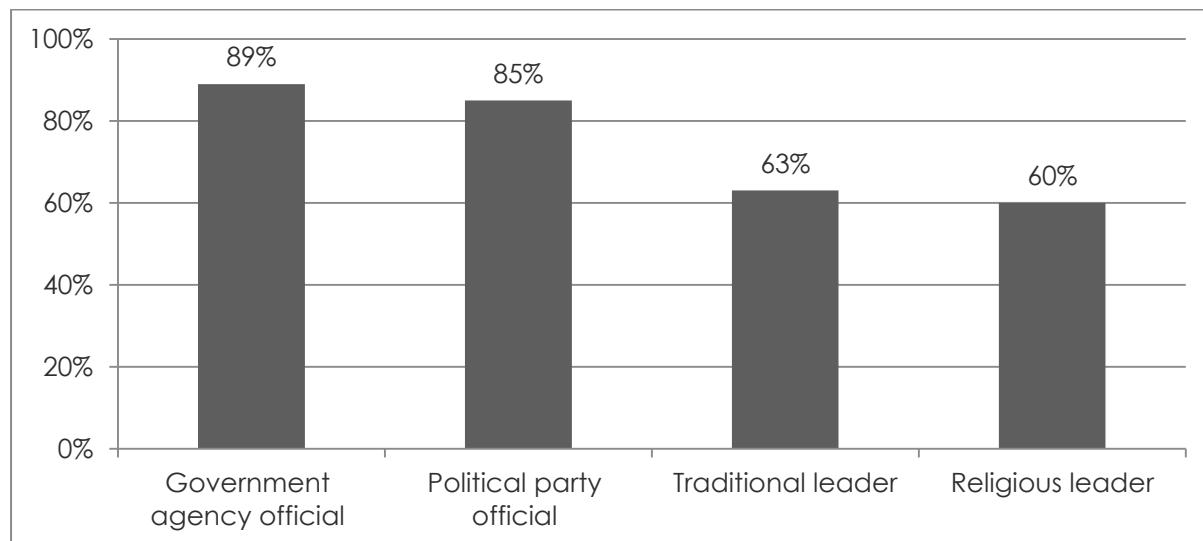
Table 1: Perceptions of local government councillors and MPs | by province
| Zimbabwe | 2014

	Local government councillors “never” listen	MPs “never” listen
Bulawayo	46%	67%
Mashonaland East	36%	38%
Harare	34%	33%
Masvingo	31%	41%
Manicaland	28%	37%
Midlands	25%	31%
Mashonaland West	22%	36%
Matabeleland North	21%	27%
Matabeleland South	19%	29%
Mashonaland Central	18%	31%

Engagement with non-elected leaders

A fairly high level of disengagement is also apparent in most citizens' lack of contact with non-elected leaders. Nine of 10 respondents (89%) say they had no contact with officials from a government agency to present some important problem or to share their views. Citizen contact is more frequent with traditional and religious leaders. Still, about six of 10 respondents say they "never" contacted these leaders in the preceding year (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Citizens who 'never' contacted non-elected leaders | Zimbabwe | 2014



Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "never")

As with elected officials, contact with these non-elected officials is generally more frequent for rural than for urban residents, and more frequent for men than for women. The only exception is religious leaders, with whom women are more likely than men to have contact (Table 2).

Table 2: Citizens who 'never' contacted non-elected leaders | by residence location and sex | Zimbabwe | 2014

	Urban	Rural	Men	Women	Total
Government agency officials	92%	87%	85%	92%	89%
Political party officials	92%	81%	81%	89%	85%
Traditional leaders	88%	48%	59%	67%	63%
Religious leaders	67%	56%	63%	57%	60%

Respondents were asked: During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? (% who say "never")

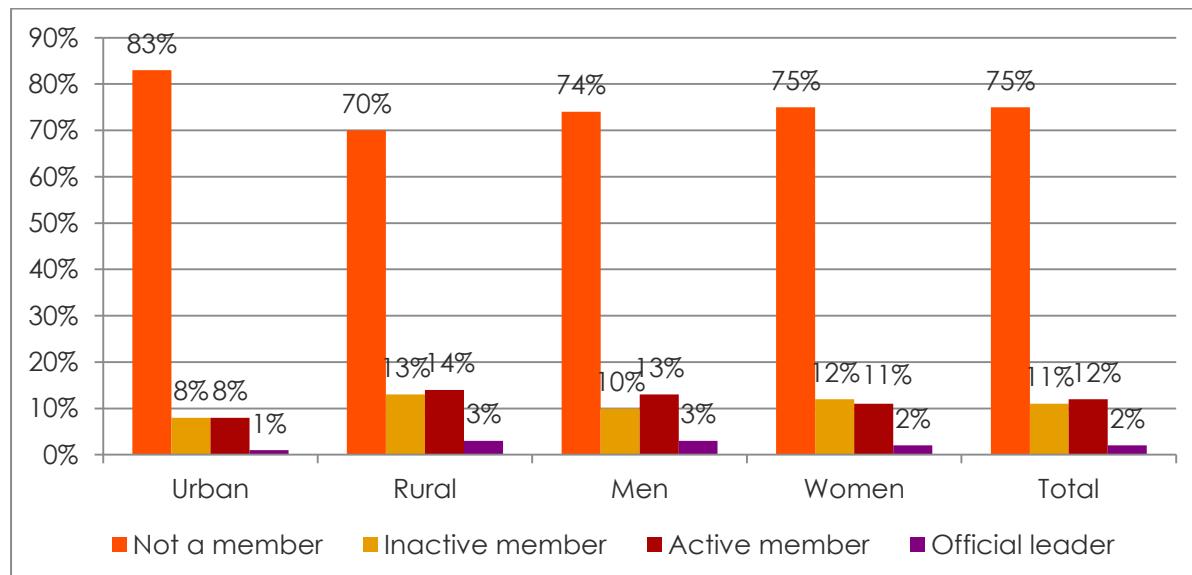
Engagement in voluntary or community groups

Most Zimbabweans are not active in (non-religious) voluntary associations or community groups: Three-fourths (75%) say they are not members of such organisations, and of the one-fourth who claim membership, almost half say they are inactive (Figure 7). (By contrast, only 35% are not members of religious groups that meet outside of regular worship services.) Rural

residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to join voluntary or community groups, 30% vs. 17%. Men and women are about equally likely to be active in such organisations.

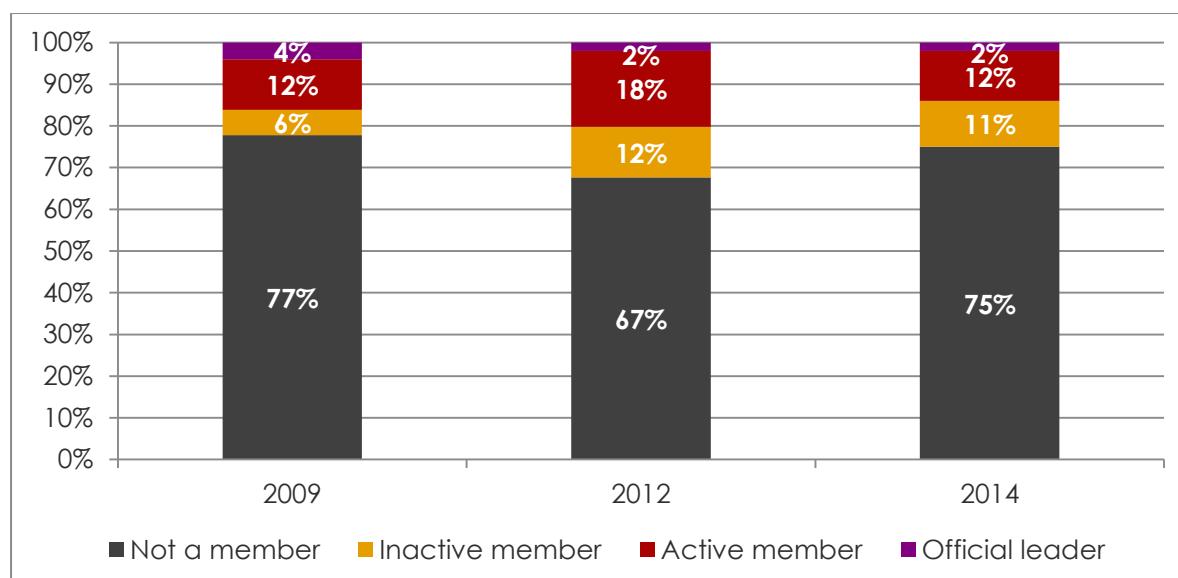
Reported membership in voluntary/community groups was higher around 2012 – at the height of the coalition Government of National Unity – than either before or after (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Membership in voluntary or community groups | by residence location and sex | Zimbabwe | 2014



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 (non-religious) voluntary association or community group?

Figure 8: Trend in membership in voluntary or community groups | Zimbabwe | 2009-2014

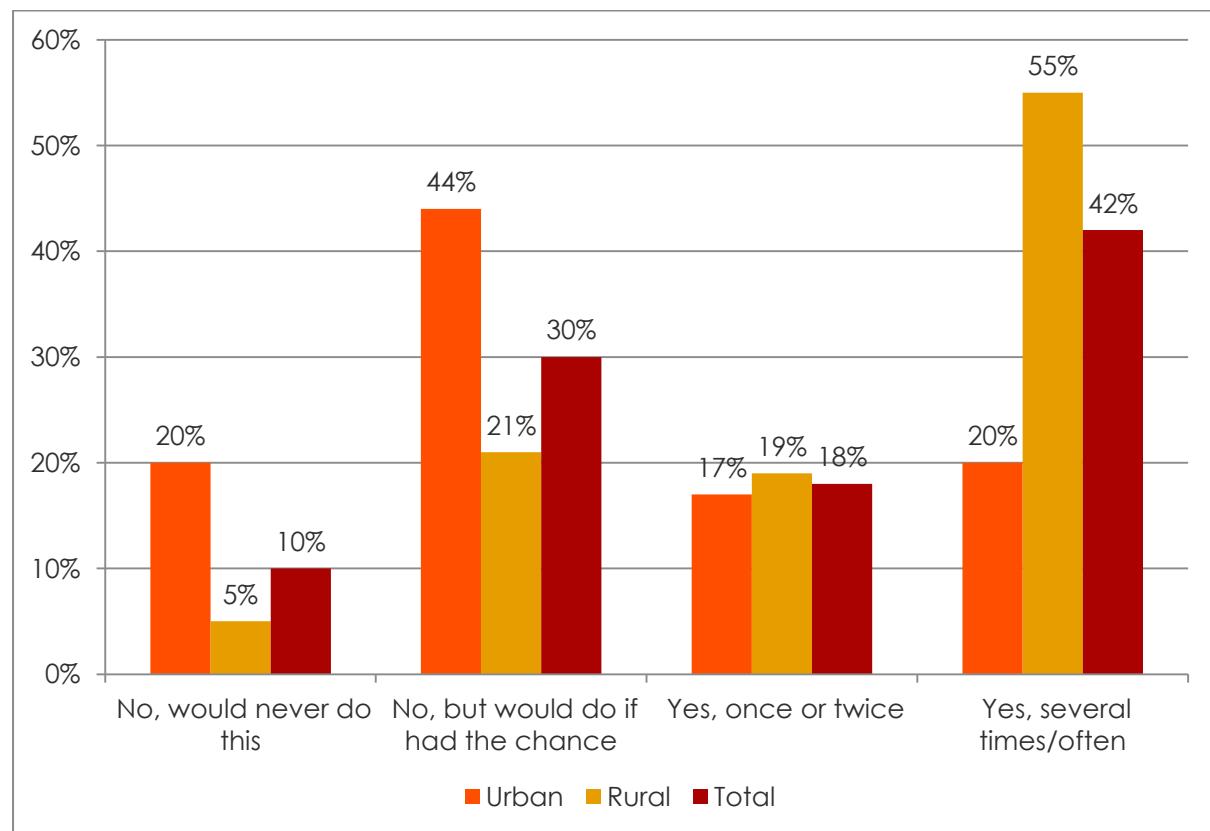


Respondents were asked: Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: Some other (non-religious) voluntary association or community group?

Attendance at community meetings is more common than group membership. Six of 10 respondents say they attended a community meeting in the previous year, either "once or twice" (18%) or at least "several times" (42%) (Figure 9). Three of 10 (30%) say that although they did not attend a community meeting during the review period, they would do so if afforded a chance.

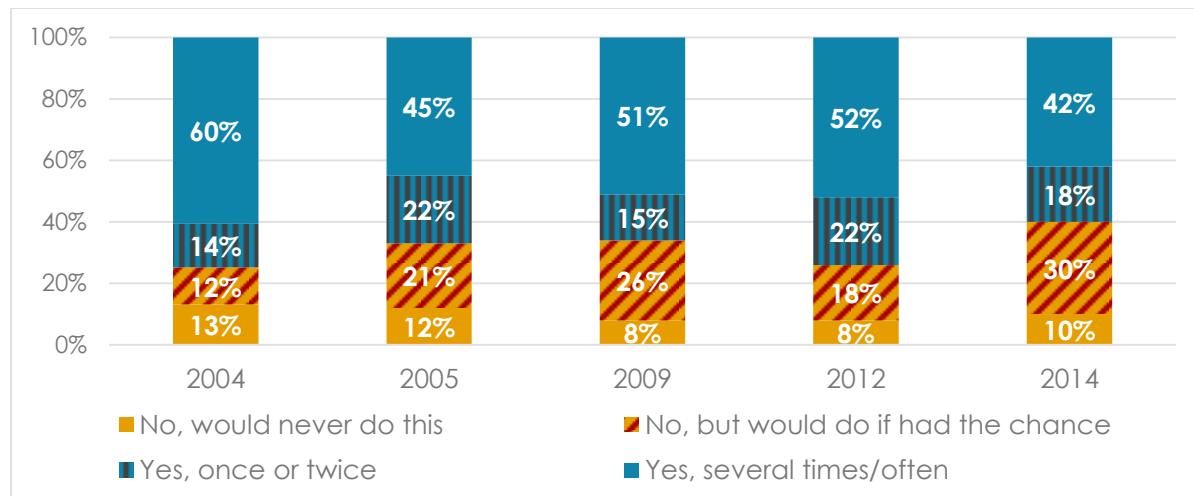
Rural residents (74%) are twice as likely as urbanites (37%) to have attended at least one community meeting during the previous year; a majority (55%) of rural residents attended meetings "several times" or "often." One of five urban residents, but only one of 20 rural residents, say they would never attend community meetings. A majority of Zimbabweans in every survey since 2004 have attended community meetings at least once or twice, but the proportion is currently at its lowest point (60%) (Figure 10).

Figure 9: Attendance of community meetings | Zimbabwe | 2014



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: Attended a community meeting? If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Figure 10: Trend in attendance of community meetings | Zimbabwe | 2004-2014

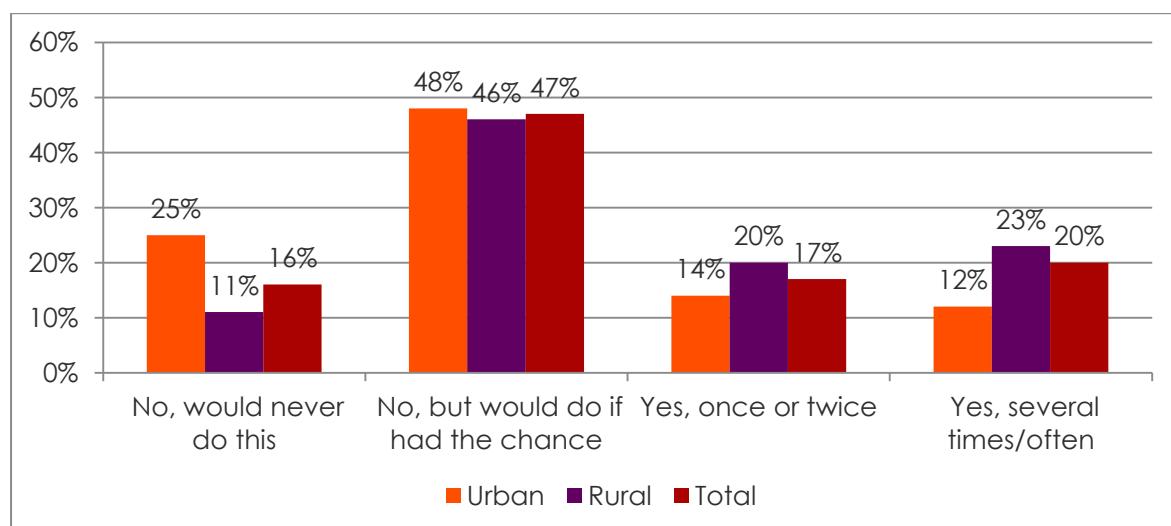


Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year: Attended a community meeting? If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Engagement through group or individual action

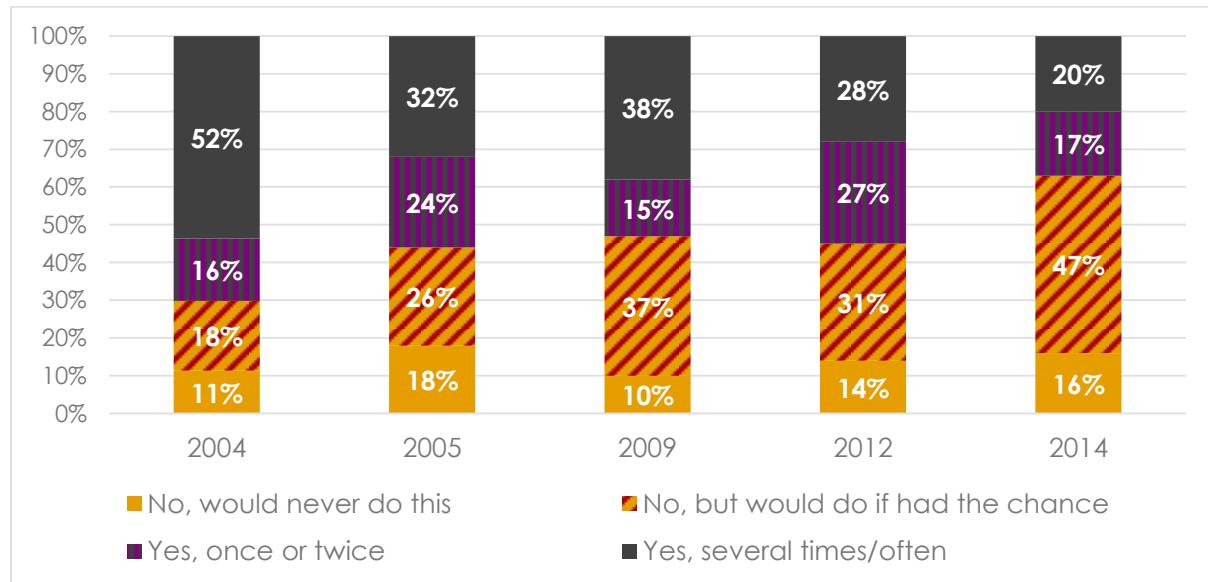
Citizens can also engage in group or individual action for a specific purpose, such as to raise an important issue or to express dissatisfaction with government performance. More than one-third of Zimbabweans say they got together with others during the previous 12 months to raise an issue; 17% say they did so “once or twice,” and 20% say they did so “several times” or “often” (Figure 11). Moreover, almost half (47%) of respondents say that while they did not join others to raise an issue during the previous year, they would do so if they had the chance. As with attendance of community meetings, urban residents are far less likely than their rural counterparts to engage in group action, and the proportion of citizens who joined others to raise an issue is at its lowest point since 2004 (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Getting together with others to raise an issue | Zimbabwe | 2014



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: Got together with others to raise an issue? If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Figure 12: Trend in getting together to raise an issue | Zimbabwe | 2004-2014



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: Got together with others to raise an issue? If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

Small minorities of Zimbabweans engaged in actions to express dissatisfaction with government: 1% say they participated in demonstrations or protest marches at least once in the previous year, 2% say they refused to pay a tax or fee, 5% say they contacted the media, 15% say they contacted a government official, and 27% say they joined others to request action from the government (Table 3).

Urban residents are more likely than their rural counterparts, and women more likely than men, to say they would never engage in such actions to express their dissatisfaction.

Table 3: Public attitudes toward modes of engagement | Zimbabwe | 2014

	No, would never do this	No, but would do if had the chance	Yes, once or twice	Yes, several times/often	Don't know
Refused to pay a tax or fee to government	74%	22%	1%	1%	1%
Participated in demonstration or protest march	69%	28%	1%	0%	1%
Contacted the media	34%	60%	4%	1%	1%
Contacted a government official	23%	62%	10%	5%	0%
Joined others to request action from government	19%	55%	15%	11%	0%

Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government. 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?

Conclusion

Although most Zimbabweans say it is the duty of every citizen to actively participate in national and community affairs between elections, relatively few of them actually do so. The strong public perception that elected leaders don't listen to citizens may be one area where action could contribute to bridging this gap.

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Stephen Ndoma is principal researcher for Mass Public Opinion Institute (MPOI), the Afrobarometer Zimbabwe national partner, in Harare. Email: stephen@mpoi.org.zw

Richman Kokera is research officer for MPOI. Email: richmank@mpoi.org.zw

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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