Support for elections weakens among Africans; many see them as ineffective in holding leaders accountable

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 425 | Fredline M'Cormack-Hale and Mavis Zupork Dome

Summary

For Africa watchers, the 1990s ushered in a period of democratic renewal (Joseph, 1997; Schraeder, 1995). Democracy's retreat globally over the past decade (Freedom House, 2019) has touched Africa as well (Logan & Penar, 2019; Gadjanova, 2018), although Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that it's in the delivery of democratic goods, rather than citizens' aspirations, that democracy in Africa is falling short (Gyimah-Boadi, 2019).

Although elections do not equate with democracy, the holding of free and fair elections is recognized as a hallmark of accountability and a fundamental component of a functioning democracy (Lindberg, 2006). The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (African Union, 2007) reinforces this link and sets electoral standards for the continent.

While elections are institutionalized in a majority of African countries (Posner & Young, 2007) analysts have argued that a change in leadership does not necessarily mean systemic change or greater democratic consolidation (Donner, 2020). Moreover, there has been concern that African elections are becoming increasingly contentious and marked by fear (Jenkins, 2020). In some cases, elections have been little more than springboards for leaders who, once in office, subvert democratic institutions to consolidate their position (Onyulo, 2017).

In light of these developments, how do Africans perceive the quality and efficacy of their elections? Drawing on 2019/2020 Afrobarometer data from 18 African countries, we find that while most Africans believe in elections as the best way to select their leaders, popular support for elections has weakened, and only a minority think elections help produce representative, accountable leadership.

In line with Bratton and Bhoojedhur (2019), our findings show that voting and popular faith in elections get a boost if citizens believe that their elections are high-quality and effective tools for holding leaders accountable.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was

suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Round 8 surveys started up again in October 2020 and are expected to cover a total of at least 35 countries.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This 18-country analysis is based on 26,777 interviews (see Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. When reporting multi-country averages, each country is weighted equally (rather than in proportion to population size).

Key findings

- On average across 18 countries, just four in 10 Africans (42%) believe that their elections work well to ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the view of voters and to enable voters to remove leaders who do not do what the people want (Figure 1).
  - o Countries vary widely in their views of the efficacy of elections to fulfill these functions. Large majorities in Ghana (70%) and Sierra Leone (65%) – countries where challengers defeated incumbent presidents in 2016 and 2018, respectively – say elections work well to enable voters to remove non-performing leaders. Even in Uganda, which has had the same president for 34 years, a majority (58%) agrees. But in Gabon, where two generations of the Bongo family have been in power since 1967, only 15% think elections serve this function well (Figure 2).
  - o Across 11 countries surveyed regularly since 2008/2009, the belief that elections enable voters to remove leaders has dropped by 11 percentage points, from 56% to 45% (Figure 3).
  - o Key demographic groups differ very little in these assessments. More educated citizens are less likely to affirm the efficacy of elections (38% of those with post-secondary qualifications vs. 43%-44% of those with no formal education or only primary schooling) (Figure 4).

- On average, nearly three-quarters (73%) of Africans say they want to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, including 50% who feel "very strongly" about this issue (Figure 5).
  - o Support for elections exceeds two-thirds of the population in 14 of the 18 countries, including 87% in Sierra Leone and 84% in Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. Lesotho is the only country where fewer than half (40%) endorse elections as the best way to choose leaders (Figure 6).
  - o Across 15 countries surveyed regularly since 2011/2013, support for elections has declined by 8 percentage points, from 82% to 74%. Lesotho records the largest decline (-23 percentage points), followed by Tunisia (-21 points) and Malawi (-19 points).[1] Only Sierra Leone shows stronger support for elections than a decade ago (+11 points) (Figure 7).

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[1] Malawi data were collected in November-December 2019, i.e. after the disputed May 2019 presidential election (which was later annulled) and before the June 2020 rerun.

- While differences by demographic group are small, support for elections is highest among citizens with no formal education (79%), rural residents (75%), and older citizens (76% of those aged 56 and above) (Figure 8).

▪ More than six out of 10 Africans (62%) endorse multiparty competition as necessary to give voters real choices, while 36% say the presence of many parties just creates division and confusion. Opposition to multiparty competition is the majority view in just two countries, Tunisia and Lesotho (Figure 9).
- On average, support for multiparty competition is fairly stable across the 15 countries surveyed regularly since 2011/2013, declining by just 1 percentage point. But two countries experienced double-digit declines, including a remarkable 35-point drop in Lesotho, while Botswana and Kenya recorded 10-point increases (Figure 10).

▪ Participation in elections is as high as support for elections: Almost three-fourths (73%) of Africans (excluding those who would have been too young to vote) say they voted in the previous election in their country. Participation in campaigns is far more modest, though about one-third (35%) say they attended a campaign rally, and one in six (17%) report having worked for a candidate or party (Figure 11).
- Sierra Leone and Guinea stand out with high self-reported voting rates (90% and 87%, respectively), while only around half of Ivoirians (52%) and Gabonese (50%) say they cast their ballots (Figure 12).
- Men (75%) and rural residents (77%) are more likely than women (70%) and urbanites (69%) to report having voted. Young adults (64%) are considerably less likely to vote than their elders (80%-84%) (Figure 13).

▪ Almost nine out of 10 Africans (87%) say they feel "somewhat" or "completely" free to vote for candidates of their choice without feeling pressured (Figure 14), including majorities in every country.

▪ Almost two-thirds (64%) of Africans say their country's most recent national election was free and fair (either "completely" or "with minor problems"). About one in four say it had "major problems" (12%) or was "not free and fair" (15%) (Figure 15). These assessments have varied little across the 15 countries that have been tracked since 2011 (Figure 16).
- Citizens overwhelmingly describe their most recent elections as generally free and fair in Burkina Faso (86%), Ghana (81%), Botswana (80%), Sierra Leone (80%), and Namibia (78%). Only 41% and 30% of citizens agree, respectively, in Malawi (referring to the May 2019 election) and Gabon, where elections were heavily disputed (Figure 17).

▪ On other indicators of election quality, significant proportions of the population report negative experiences and perceptions (Figure 18). About half (49%) of Africans say that in their country's most recent election, the media "never" or only "sometimes" provided fair coverage of all candidates. More than one-third (35%) believe that votes were not accurately counted or reflected in the results, while 20% think people voted more than once and 18% say they were offered food, a gift, or money in exchange for their vote. One in four respondents (24%) suspect that powerful people can find out how they voted.
- Overall, one in four Africans (26%) believe that the officially announced results of their most recent election were "not very accurate, with major discrepancies" or "not

accurate at all." Again Gabon (68%) and Malawi (57%, referring to the May 2019 election) stand out, while fewer than one in 10 citizens make this complaint in Namibia (9%), Ghana (8%), Botswana (7%), Cabo Verde (7%), and Burkina Faso (6%) (Figure 19).

- Citizens who think elections are effective at removing non-performing leaders are more likely to vote and to support elections, but these gains are quite modest, suggesting that many Africans care about elections even if they're unsure whether they can lead to change. Support for elections gets a bigger boost if citizens think their elections are free and fair (Figure 20).
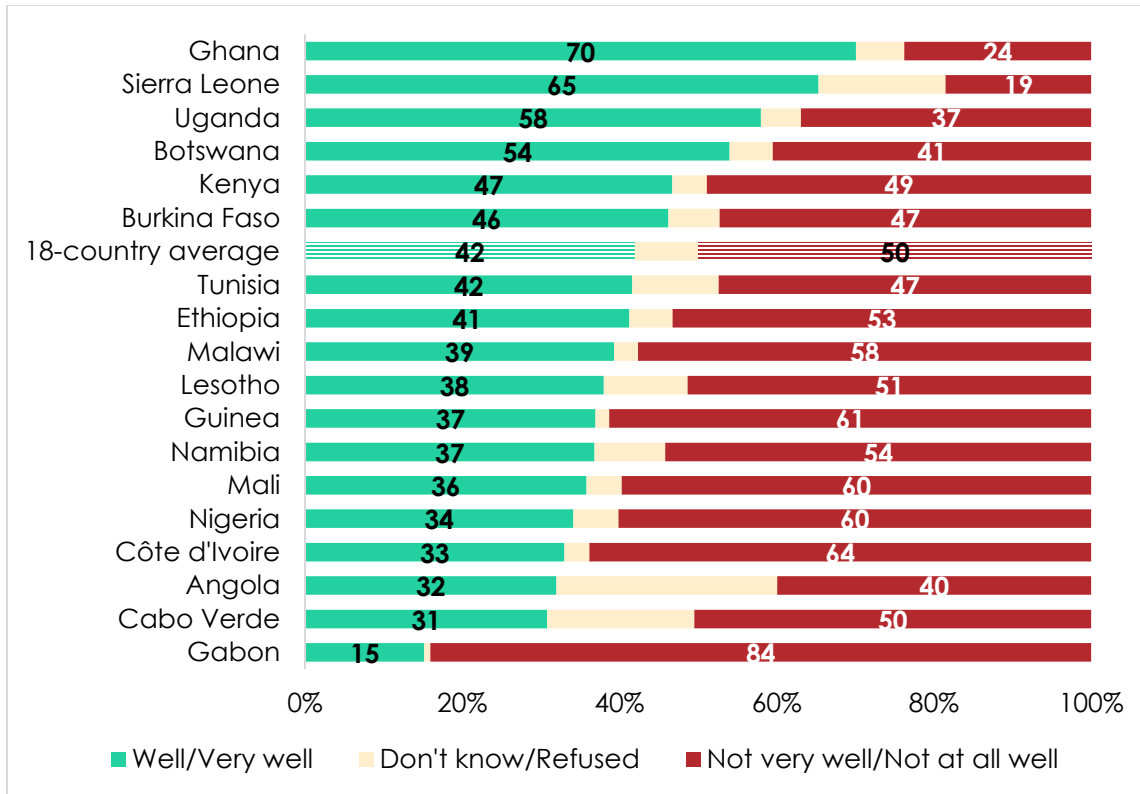
Charts

Efficacy of elections

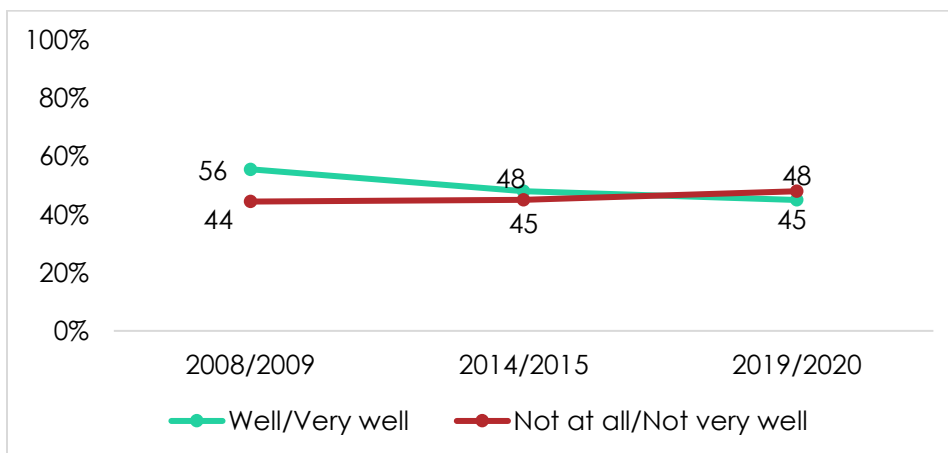**Figure 1: Efficacy of elections** | 18 countries | 2019/2020
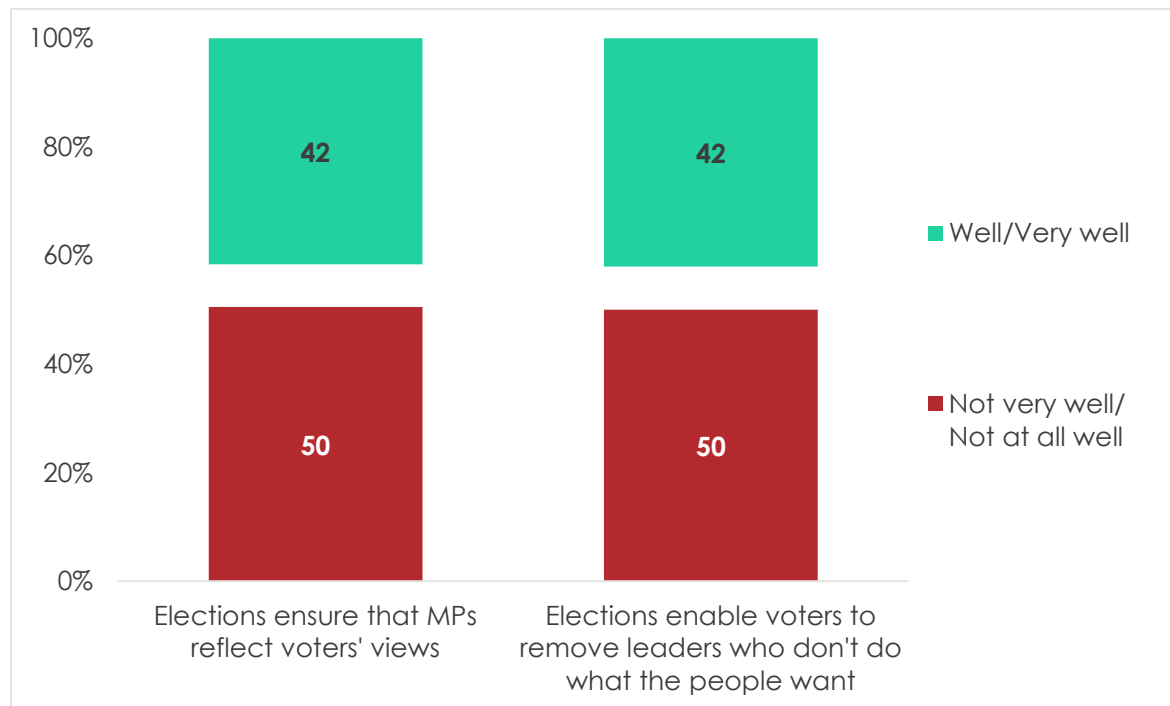
Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections:
Ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the views of voters?
Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Figure 2: Do elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders? | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Country	Well/Very well	Don't know/Refused	Not very well/Not at all well
Ghana	70		24
Sierra Leone	65		19
Uganda	58		37
Botswana	54		41
Kenya	47		49
Burkina Faso	46		47
18-country average	42		50
Tunisia	42		47
Ethiopia	41		53
Malawi	39		58
Lesotho	38		51
Guinea	37		61
Namibia	37		54
Mali	36		60
Nigeria	34		60
Côte d'Ivoire	33		64
Angola	32		40
Cabo Verde	31		50
Gabon	15		84

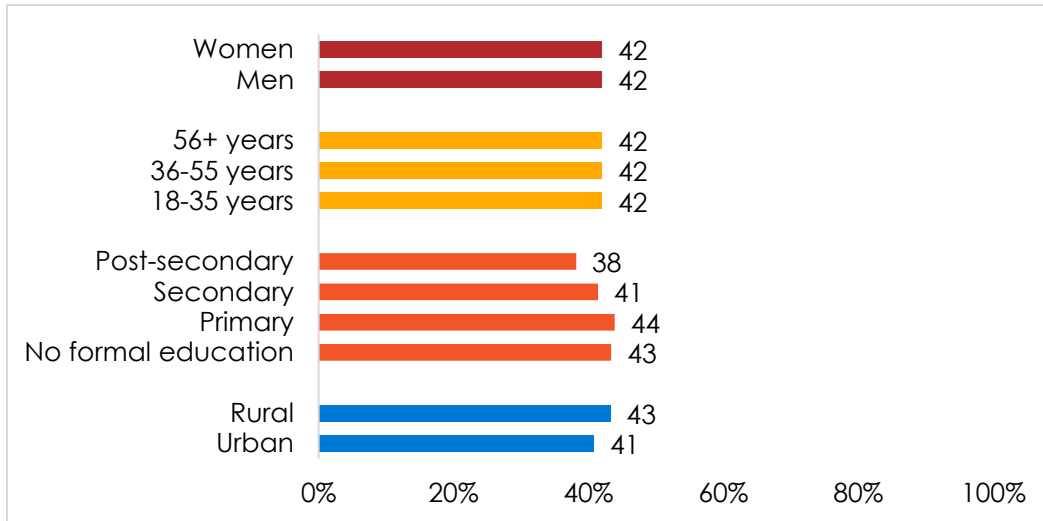■ Well/Very well ■ Don't know/Refused ■ Not very well/Not at all well

Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Figure 3: Do elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders? | 11 countries | 2008-2020

	2008/2009	2014/2015	2019/2020
Well/Very well	56	48	48
Not at all/Not very well	44	45	45

━●━ Well/Very well ━●━ Not at all/Not very well

Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Figure 4: Efficacy of elections | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? (% who say "well" or "very well")

Support for elections

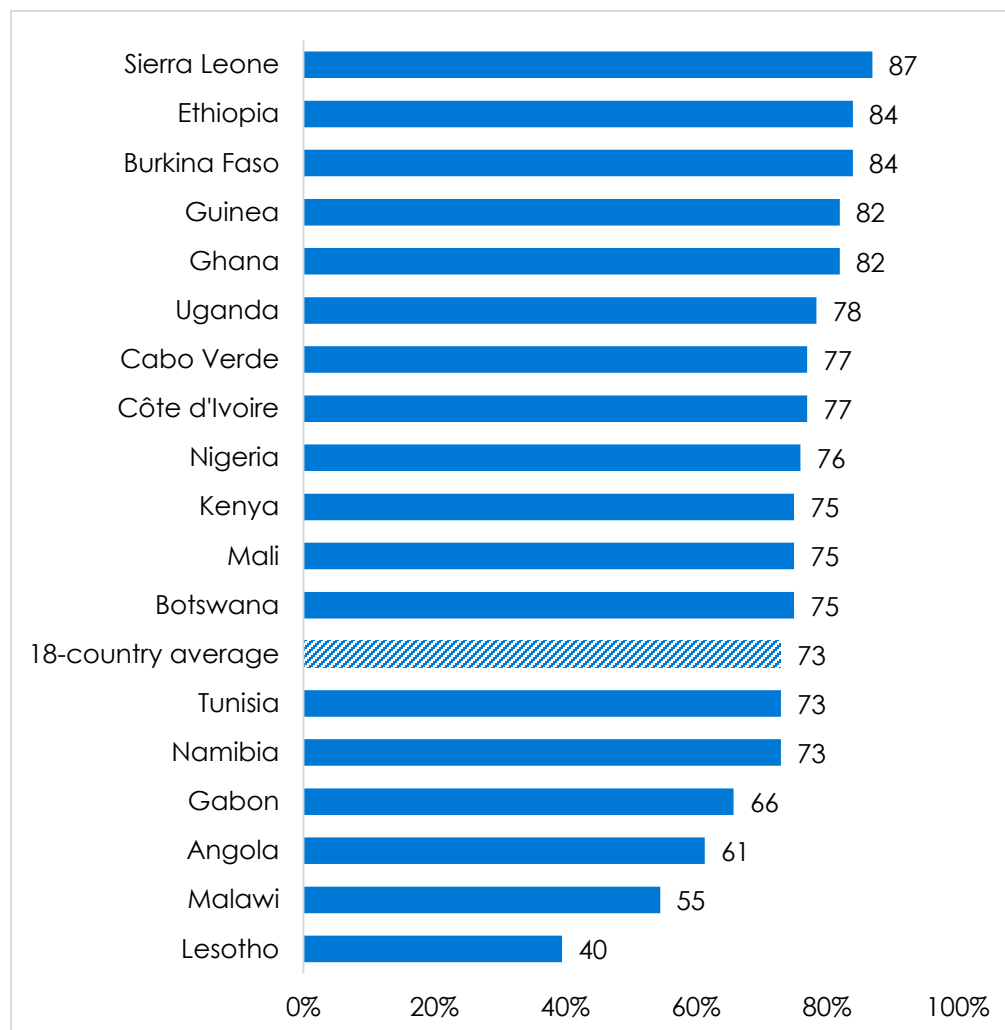**Figure 5: Support for elections** | 18 countries | 2019/2020
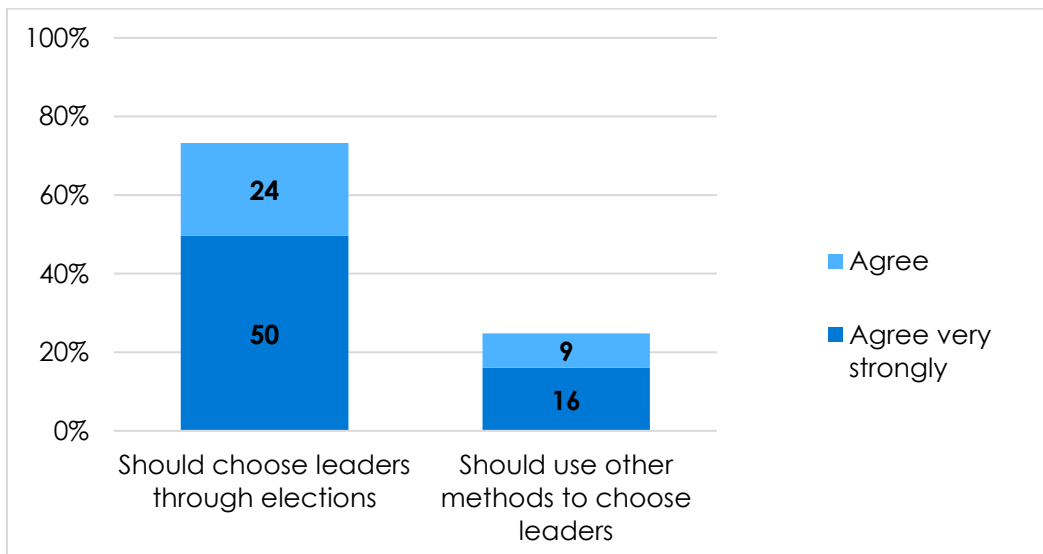
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
Note: Due to rounding, the sum of sub-categories may differ from the combined total by 1 percentage point (e.g. 50% "agree very strongly" + 24% "agree" = 73% total support)

Figure 6: Support for elections | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: 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 adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through elections)

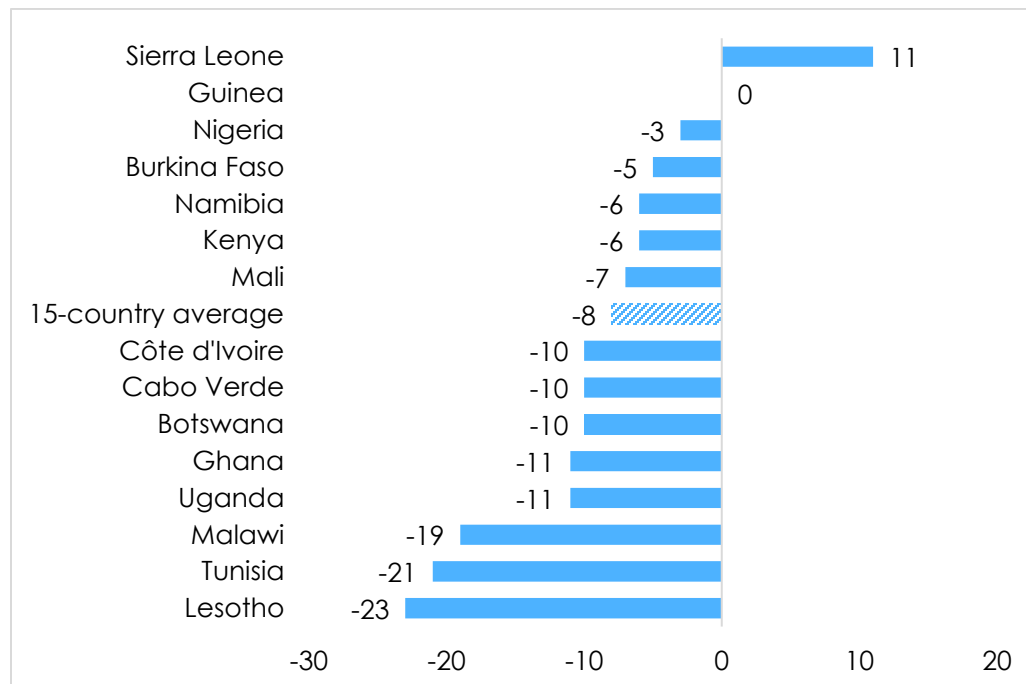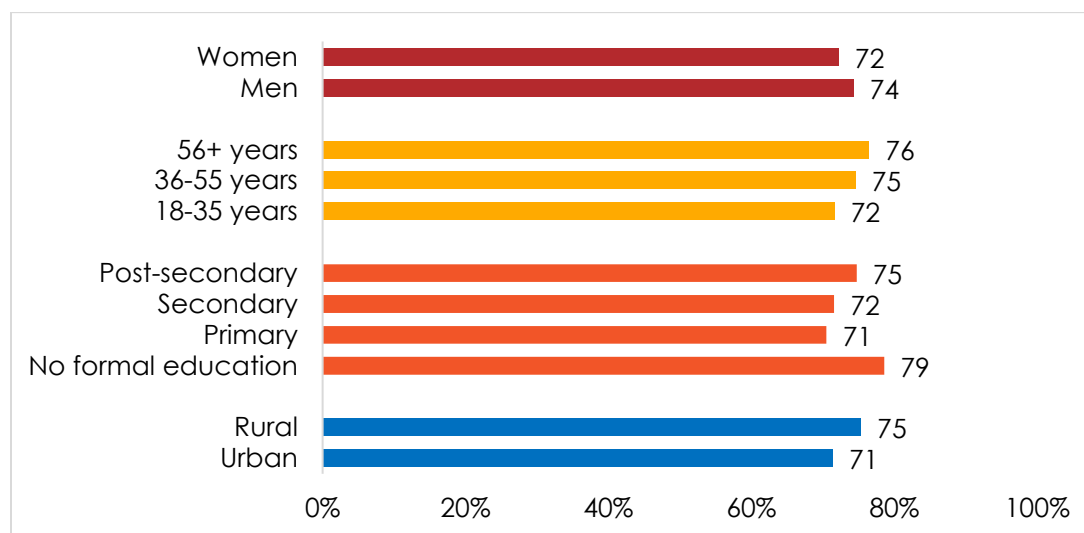**Figure 7: Change in support for elections** | 15 countries | 2011-2020

Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2019/2020 in the proportion of respondents who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through elections.

Figure 8: Support for elections | by socio-demographic group | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
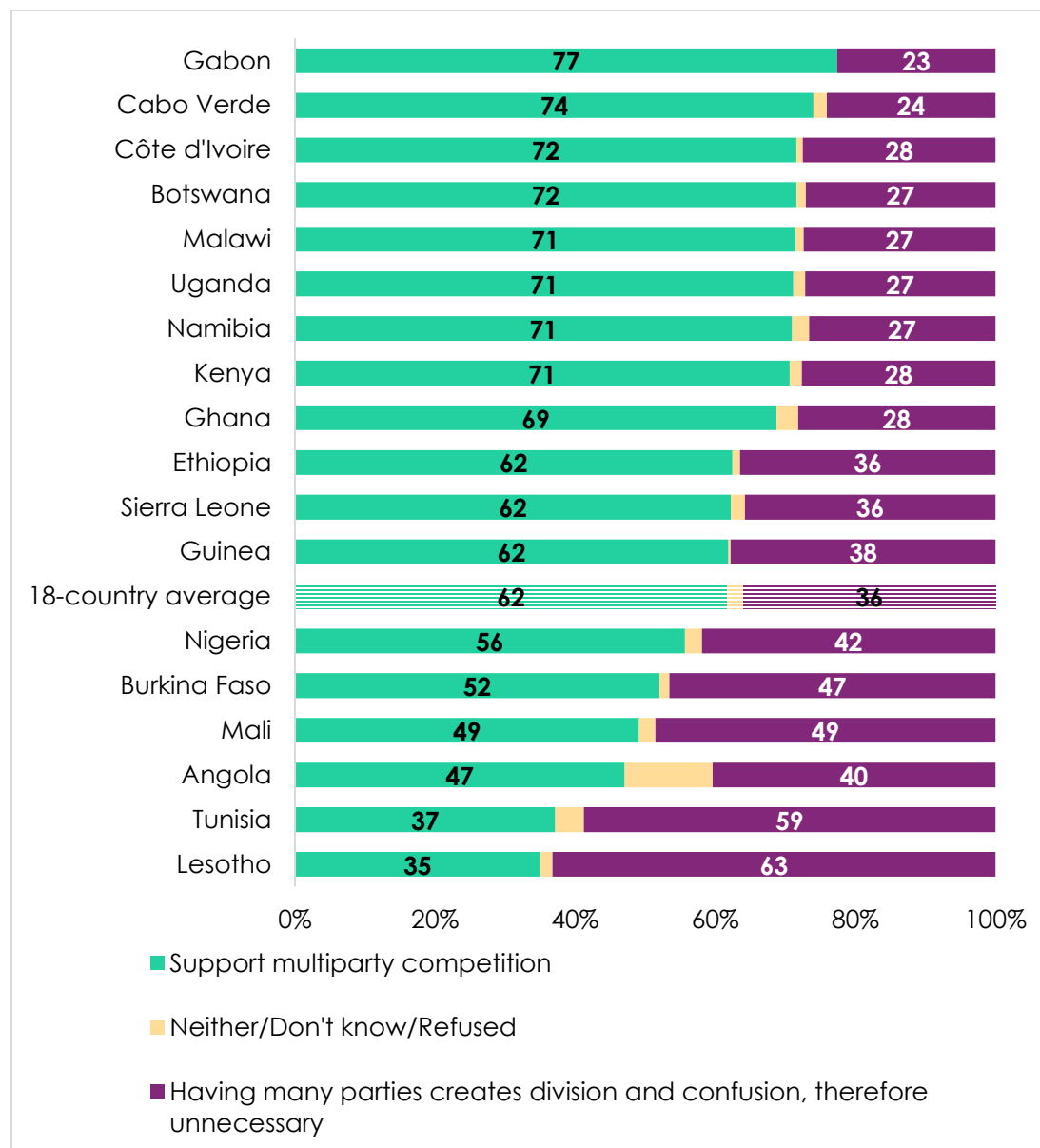*Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.*
Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through elections)

**Figure 9: Support for multiparty competition** | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Gabon — 77 | 23
Cabo Verde — 74 | 24
Côte d'Ivoire — 72 | 28
Botswana — 72 | 27
Malawi — 71 | 27
Uganda — 71 | 27
Namibia — 71 | 27
Kenya — 71 | 28
Ghana — 69 | 28
Ethiopia — 62 | 36
Sierra Leone — 62 | 36
Guinea — 62 | 38
18-country average — 62 | 36
Nigeria — 56 | 42
Burkina Faso — 52 | 47
Mali — 49 | 49
Angola — 47 | 40
Tunisia — 37 | 59
Lesotho — 35 | 63

■ Support multiparty competition

■ Neither/Don't know/Refused

■ Having many parties creates division and confusion, therefore unnecessary

Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in [this country].
Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that [this country's citizens] have real choices in who governs them.
*(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)*

Figure 10: Support for multiparty competition | biggest gainers and losers | 2011-2020
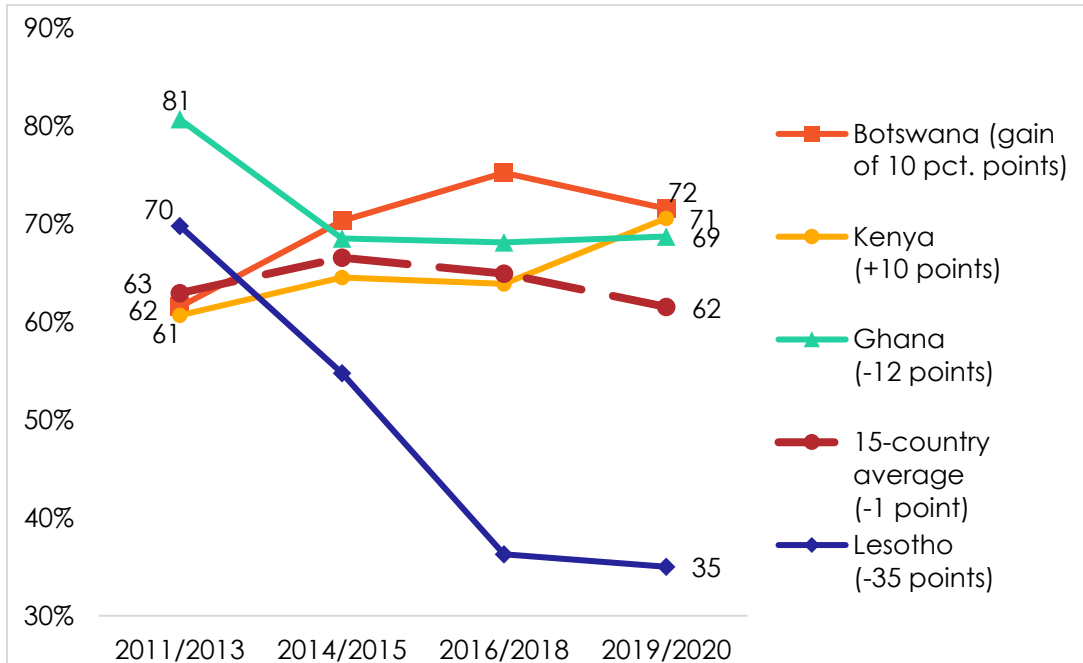
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that many political parties are needed to make sure that citizens have real choices in who governs them)

Participation in elections

Figure 11: Particpation in electoral processes | 18 countries | 2019/2020
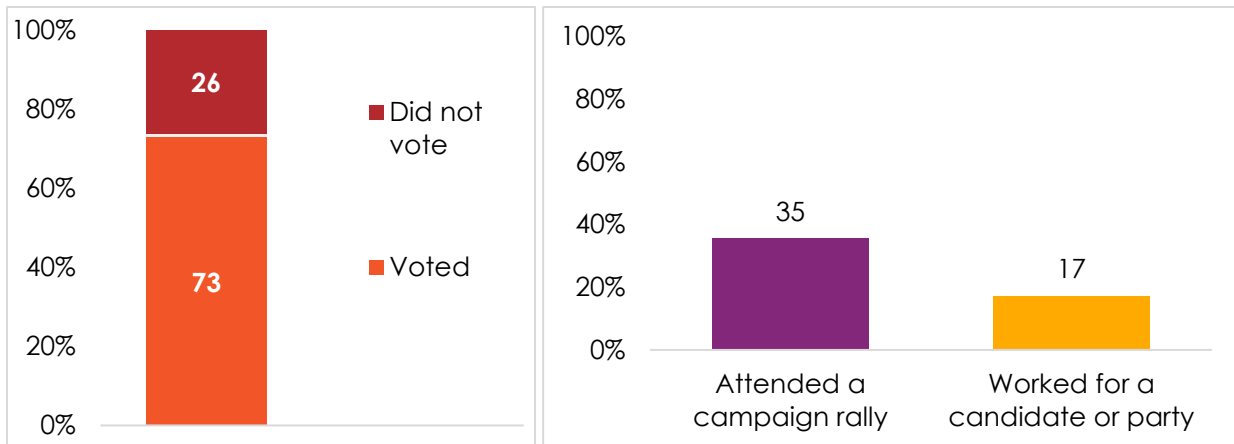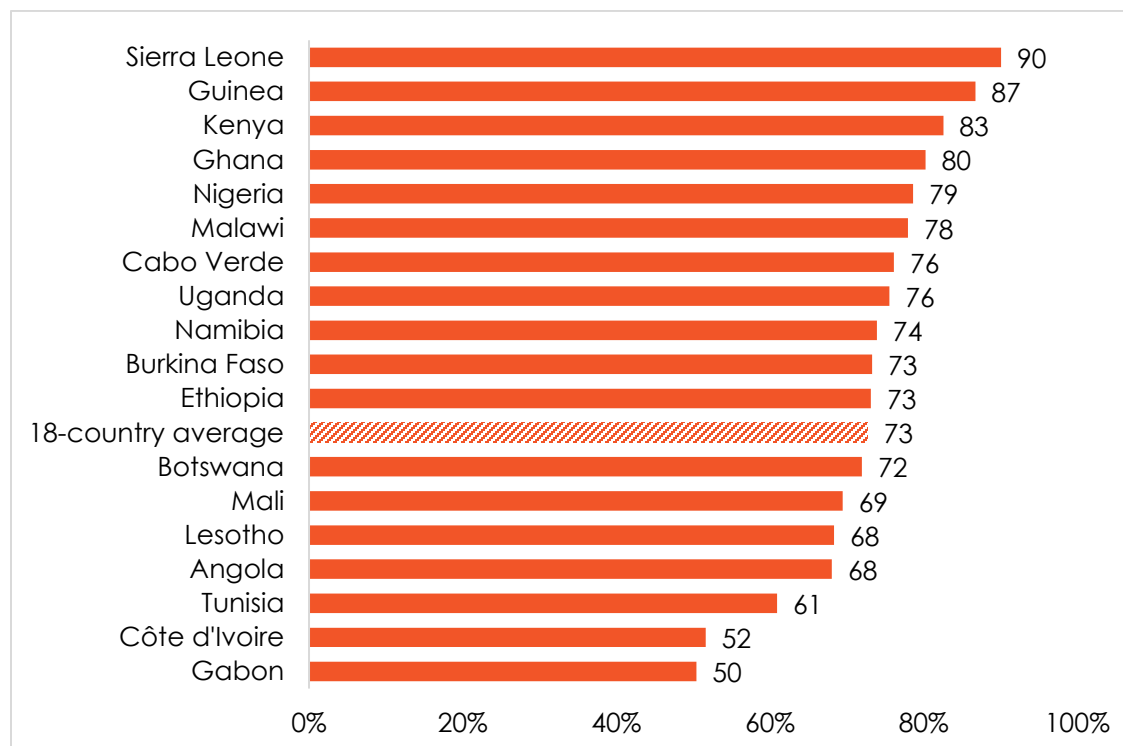

Respondents were asked:

In the last national election, held in [20XX], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Note: Respondents who were too young to vote in the last national election are excluded.)
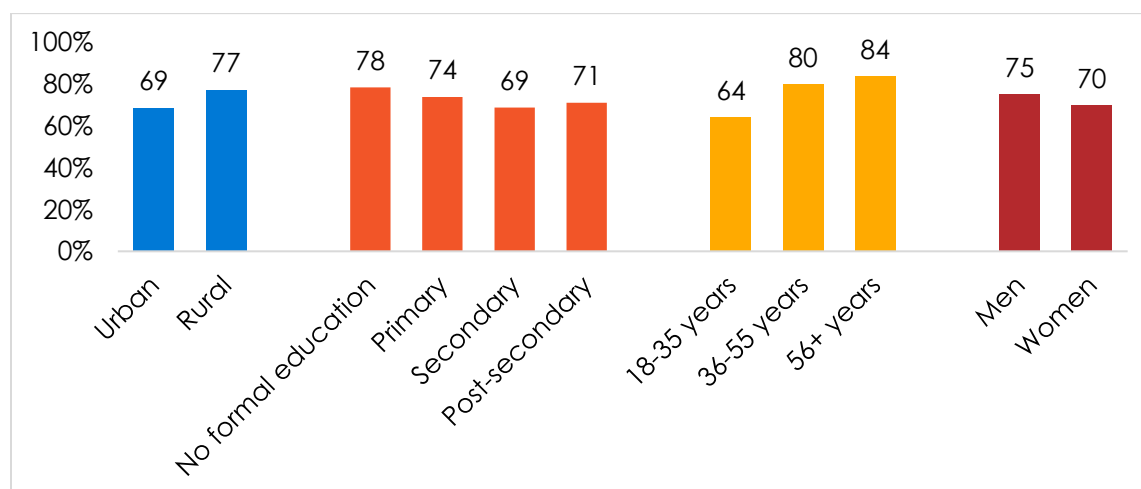
Thinking about the last national election: Did you attend a campaign rally? Did you work for a candidate or party?

Figure 12: Voted in most recent election | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Country	%
Sierra Leone	90
Guinea	87
Kenya	83
Ghana	80
Nigeria	79
Malawi	78
Cabo Verde	76
Uganda	76
Namibia	74
Burkina Faso	73
Ethiopia	73
18-country average	73
Botswana	72
Mali	69
Lesotho	68
Angola	68
Tunisia	61
Côte d'Ivoire	52
Gabon	50

Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in [20XX], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Note: Respondents who were too young to vote in the last national election are excluded.)

Figure 13: Voted in most recent election | by socio-demographic group| 18 countries | 2019/2020

	%
Urban	69
Rural	77
No formal education	78
Primary	74
Secondary	69
Post-secondary	71
18-35 years	64
36-55 years	80
56+ years	84
Men	75
Women	70

Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in [20XX], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Note: Respondents who were too young to vote in the last national election are excluded.)
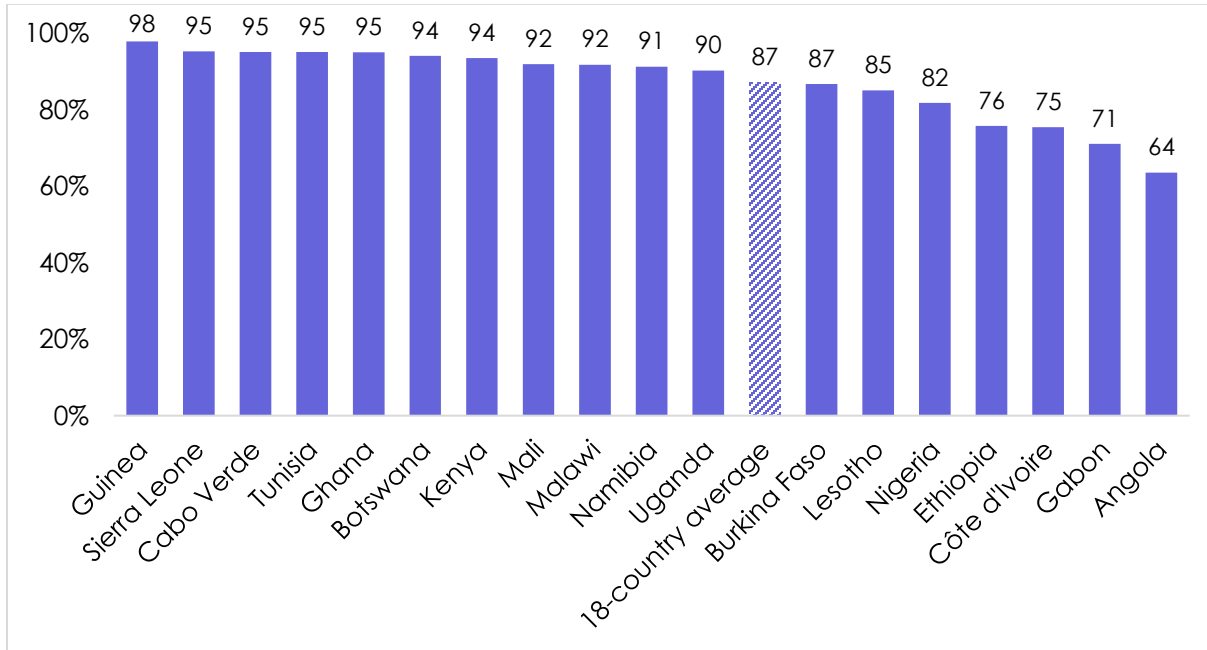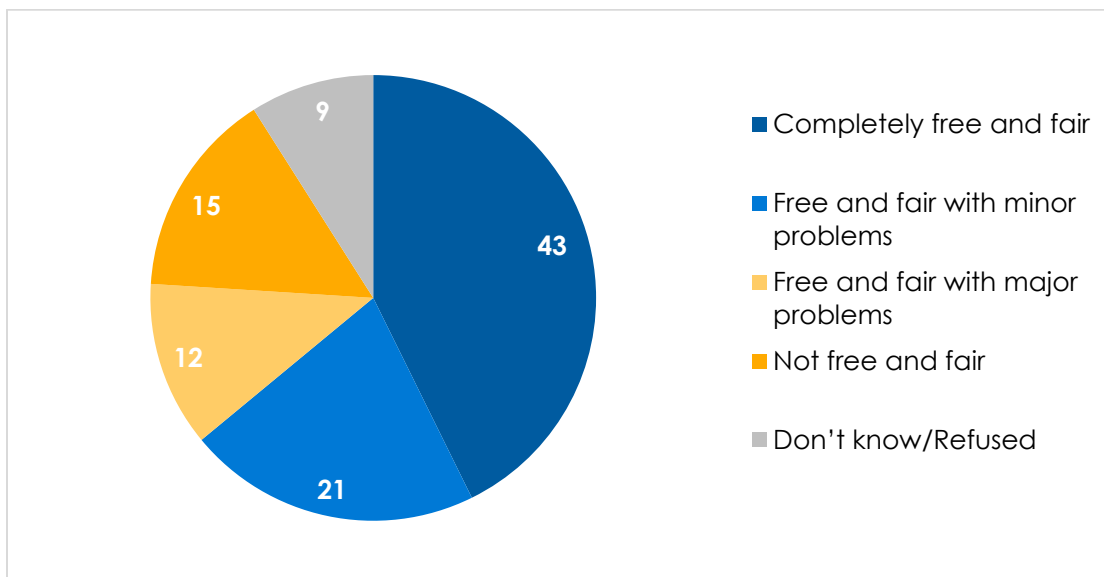
**Figure 14: Free to vote without pressure** | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

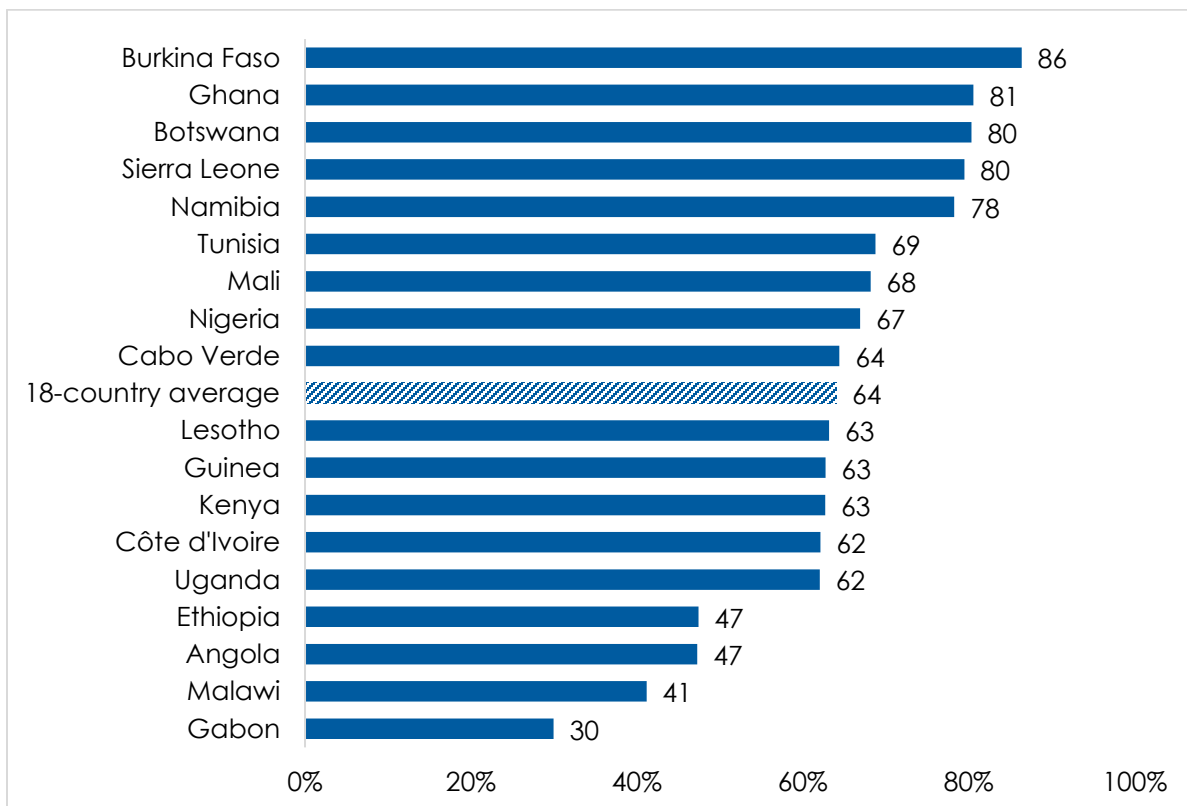**Figure 15: How free and fair was the most recent election?** | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

Figure 16: How free and fair was the most recent election? | 15 countries | 2011/2020
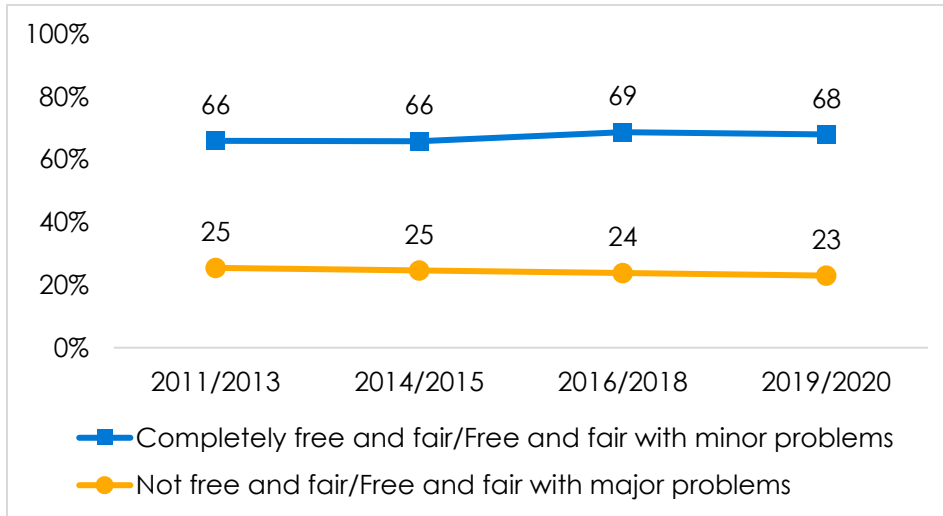
Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

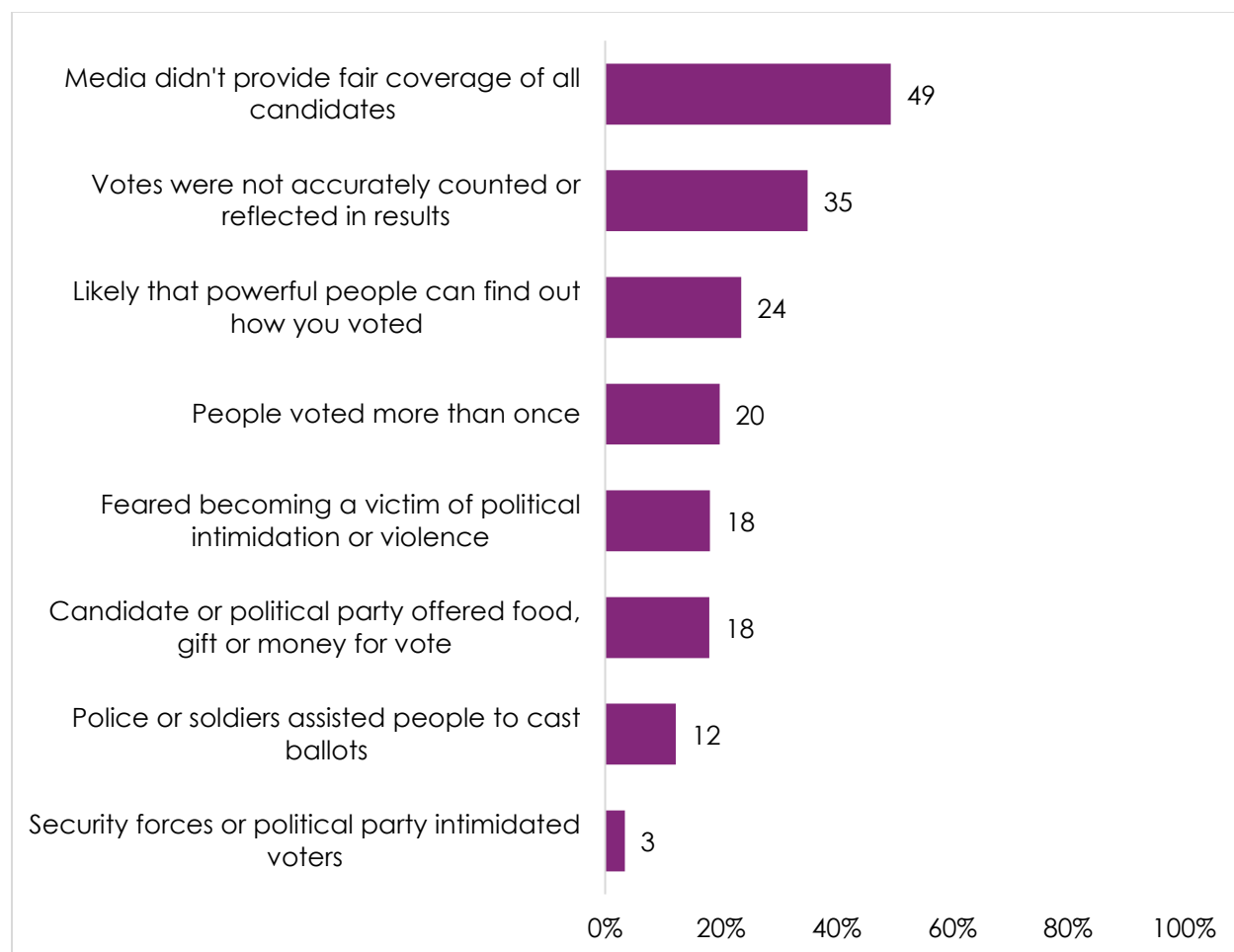**Figure 17: Most recent election was free and fair** | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]? (% who say "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems")

Figure 18: Election quality: Negative experiences and perceptions | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Media didn't provide fair coverage of all candidates — 49

Votes were not accurately counted or reflected in results — 35

Likely that powerful people can find out how you voted — 24

People voted more than once — 20

Feared becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence — 18

Candidate or political party offered food, gift or money for vote — 18

Police or soldiers assisted people to cast ballots — 12

Security forces or political party intimidated voters — 3

Respondents were asked: During the last national election in [20XX]:

How often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates? (% who say "never" or "sometimes")

How often did each of the following things happen: People's votes were not accurately counted or not fairly reflected in the results? (% who say "a few times" or "often")

How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country? (% who say "somewhat likely" or "very likely")

How often did each of the following things happen: People voted more than once? (% who say "a few times" or "often")
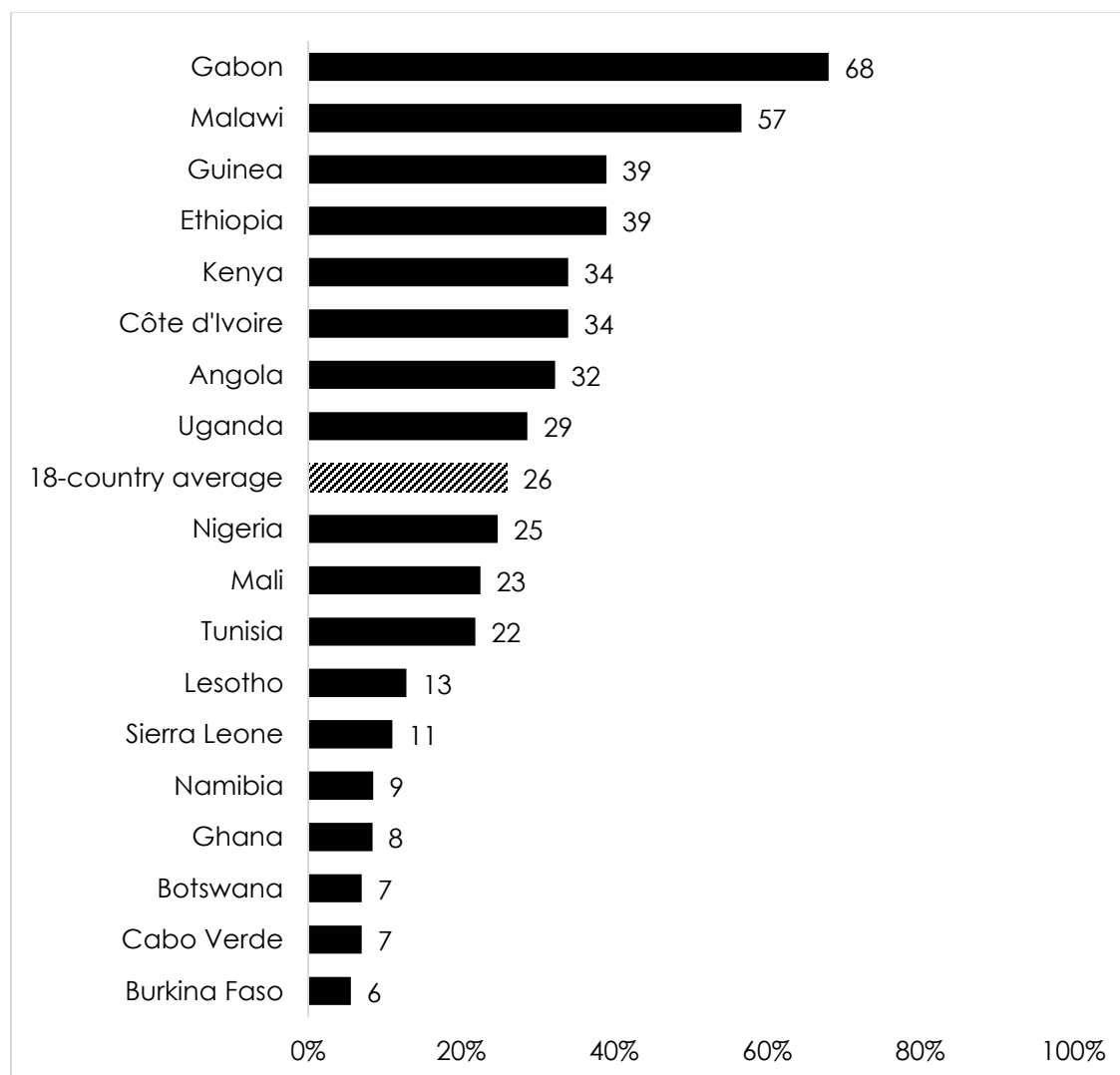
How much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

How often, if ever, did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, a gift, or money, in return for your vote? (% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Did you witness police or soldiers, rather than election officials, assisting some people to cast their ballot? (% who say "yes")
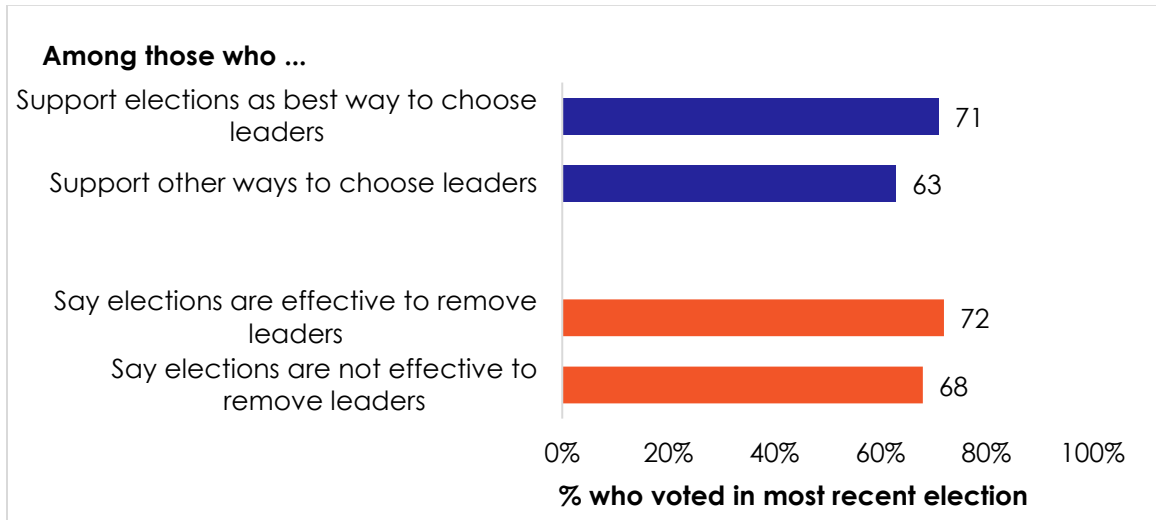
Did you witness anyone from the security forces or a political party trying to intimidate voters? (% who say "yes")

Figure 19: Announced results of most recent election were inaccurate | 18 countries | 2019/2020
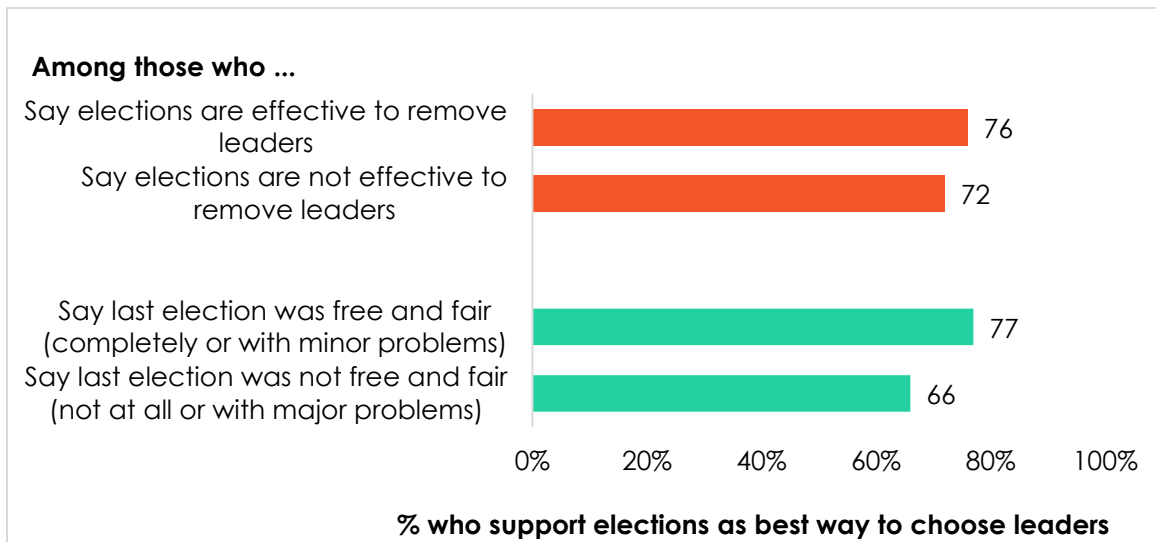
Country	Value
Gabon	68
Malawi	57
Guinea	39
Ethiopia	39
Kenya	34
Côte d'Ivoire	34
Angola	32
Uganda	29
18-country average	26
Nigeria	25
Mali	23
Tunisia	22
Lesotho	13
Sierra Leone	11
Namibia	9
Ghana	8
Botswana	7
Cabo Verde	7
Burkina Faso	6

Respondents were asked: With regard to the last national election in [20XX], to what extent do you think the results announced by the National Electoral Commission accurately reflected the actual results as counted? (% who say "not very accurate, with major discrepancies" or "not accurate at all")

Figure 20a: Voted in most recent election | by views on elections | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Among those who ...

Support elections as best way to choose leaders	71
Support other ways to choose leaders	63
Say elections are effective to remove leaders	72
Say elections are not effective to remove leaders	68

% who voted in most recent election

Figure 20b: Support for elections | by views on elections | 18 countries | 2019/2020

Among those who ...

Say elections are effective to remove leaders	76
Say elections are not effective to remove leaders	72
Say last election was free and fair (completely or with minor problems)	77
Say last election was not free and fair (not at all or with major problems)	66

% who support elections as best way to choose leaders

Respondents were asked:
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 adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?
In the last national election, held in [20XX], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted?
On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 8 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Months when Round 8 fieldwork was conducted	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov-Dec 2019	N/A
Botswana	July-Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2-17
Cabo Verde	Dec 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Ethiopia	Dec 2019-Jan 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb 2020	2015, 2017
Ghana	Sept-Oct 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov-Dec 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	Aug-Sept 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Malawi	Nov-Dec 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Namibia	Aug 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Nigeria	Jan-Feb 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
Tunisia	Feb-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept-Oct 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017

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Afrobarometer, a non-profit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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