

# Malawi's 2014 Elections: Amid Concerns About Fairness, Outcome is Too Close to Call

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch 1 | Carolyn Logan, Michael Bratton and Boniface Dulani**

## **Introduction**

Malawians will go to the polls on 20 May 2014 to select their next leaders. In an Afrobarometer<sup>1</sup> poll conducted 6 to 8 weeks before the election, Malawians express strong confidence in their ability to vote as they choose, but also concerns about the freeness and fairness of the overall process, especially the vote count. Given uncertainty about registration and turnout levels among Malawian youth, as well as the significant number of respondents who did not reveal a vote choice, the election remains too close to call.

## **The Survey**

From 23 March to 7 April 2014, Afrobarometer conducted a survey of public attitudes on democracy and governance in Malawi. The nationally representative sample of 2400 adult Malawians was selected to represent all adult citizens of voting age; a sample of this size yields a margin of sampling error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. The sample was drawn randomly based on probability proportionate to population size (PPPS), thus taking account of population distributions across regions, rural-urban location, and gender. The sampling process ensures that every adult Malawian citizen has an equal and known chance of being selected in the sample. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in the language of the respondents' choice. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Malawi in 1999 (Round 1), 2003 (Round 2), 2005 (Round 3), 2008 (Round 4) and 2012 (Round 5). Some results from the Round 5 (2012) survey (also with a sample size of 2400) are also reported in this brief.

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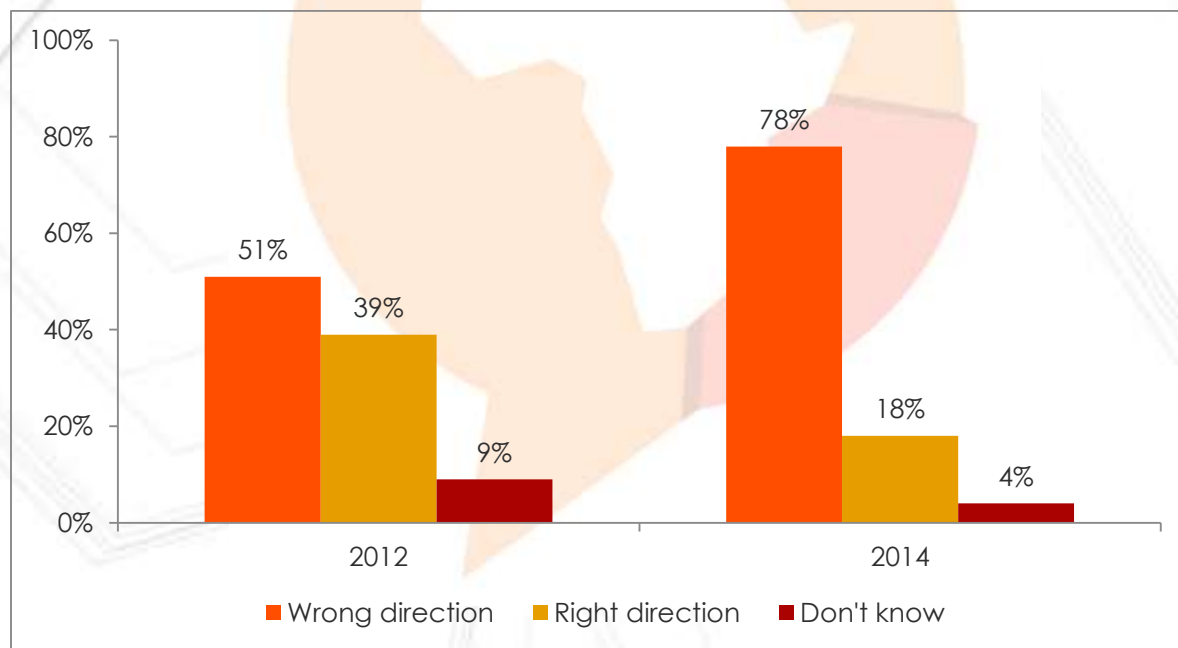
<sup>1</sup> The Afrobarometer, a cross-national survey managed by a network of African social scientists, measures public opinion on key political, social and economic issues of the day. Round 6 surveys will be conducted in 35 countries during 2014 and 2015. Malawi is the first survey of Afrobarometer Round 6. For more information visit the Afrobarometer website at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)

**Key Findings: ELECTION CONTEXT**

Malawians express widespread concern about the current direction of their country:

- 78% say the country is going in the wrong direction in 2014, while just 18% say it is going in the right direction. Dissatisfaction has increased from 2012<sup>2</sup>, although even then a majority of 51% said things were going in the wrong direction (Figure 1)
- 49% say they are satisfied with the way democracy works in Malawi in 2014, down slightly from 53% who said the same in 2012
- President Banda’s approval rating has dropped from a high of 68% shortly after she took office in 2012, to just 38% in 2014 (with 60% disapproval)

Figure 1: **Overall Direction of the Country**  
 | 2012-2014 |



Participants were asked: 'Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?'

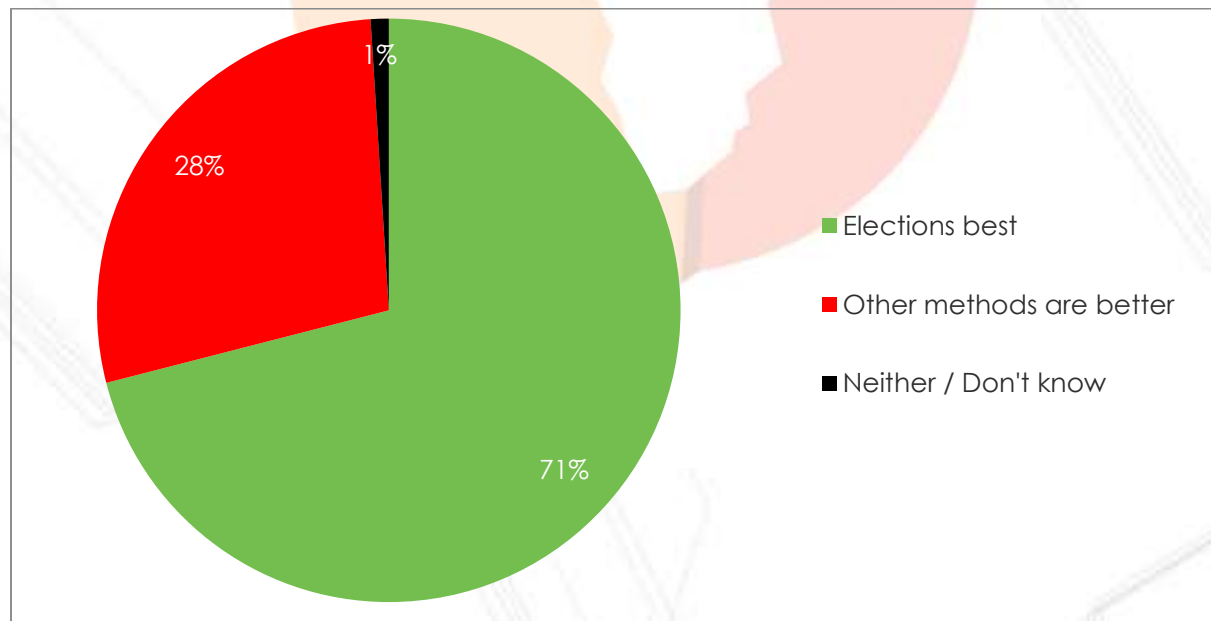
<sup>2</sup> The Afrobarometer Round 5 survey in Malawi was conducted from 4 June to 1 July 2012, with 2407 adult Malawians.

**Key Findings: POPULAR COMMITMENT TO ELECTIONS**

Malawians remain highly committed to elections as the best means for choosing leaders:

- 71% agree that ‘We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections’, compared to just 28% who instead believe that ‘Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country’s leaders’ (Figure 2)
- Commitment to elections is increasing: 65% *strongly* agree that elections are the best method for choosing leaders in 2014, up from 55% who strongly agreed in 2012 (Figure 3)
- Similarly, 74% agree that ‘Many political parties are needed to make sure that Malawians have real choices in who governs them’, compared to 25% who instead believe that ‘Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Malawi’ (2% say ‘neither’ or ‘don’t know’)

Figure 2: **Support for Elections**



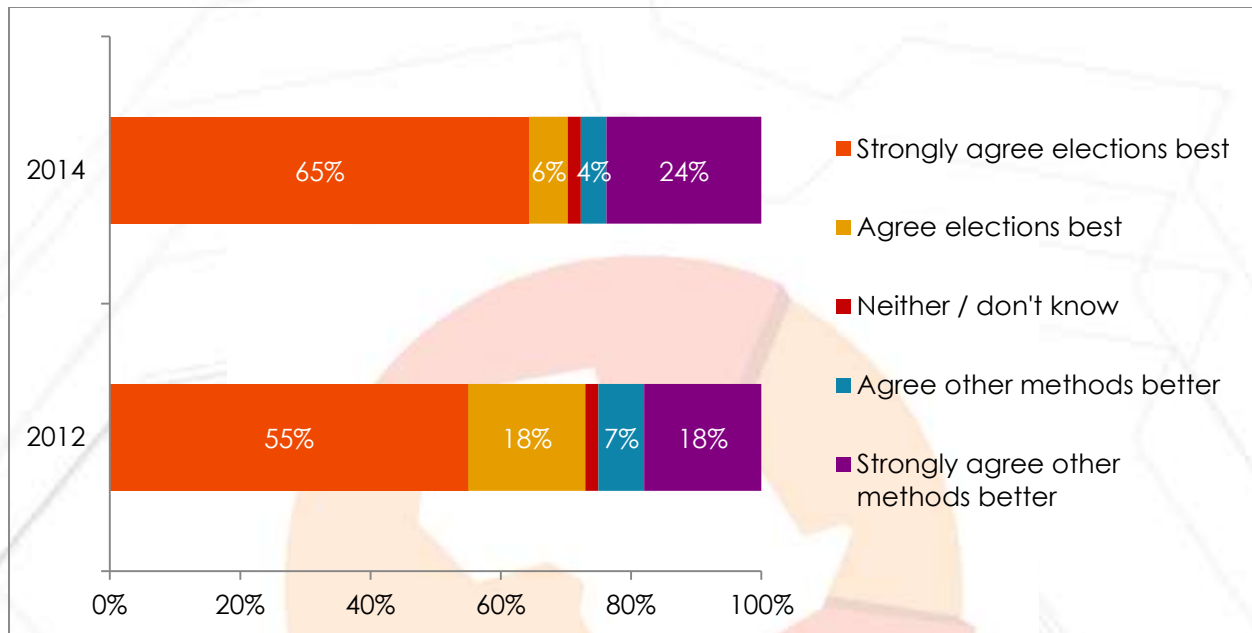
Participants were asked: Please tell me which of the following statements is closest to your view. Choose Statement 1 or Statement 2:

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.'

Figure 3: **Support for Elections**

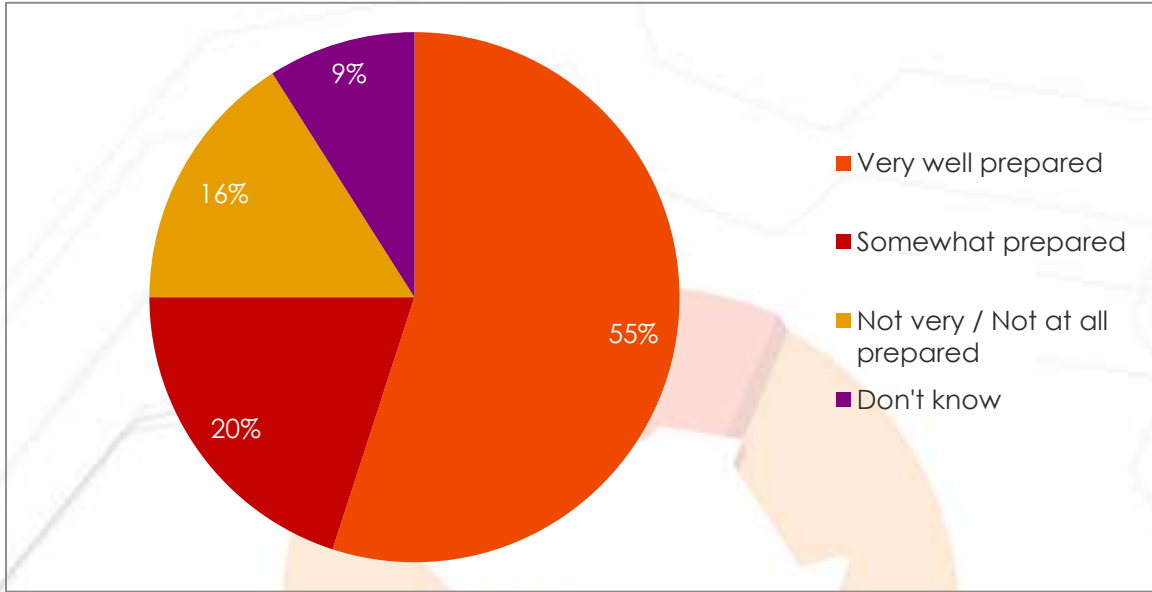
| 2012-2014 |



**Key Findings: CONFIDENCE IN THE MALAWI ELECTORAL COMMISSION (MEC)**

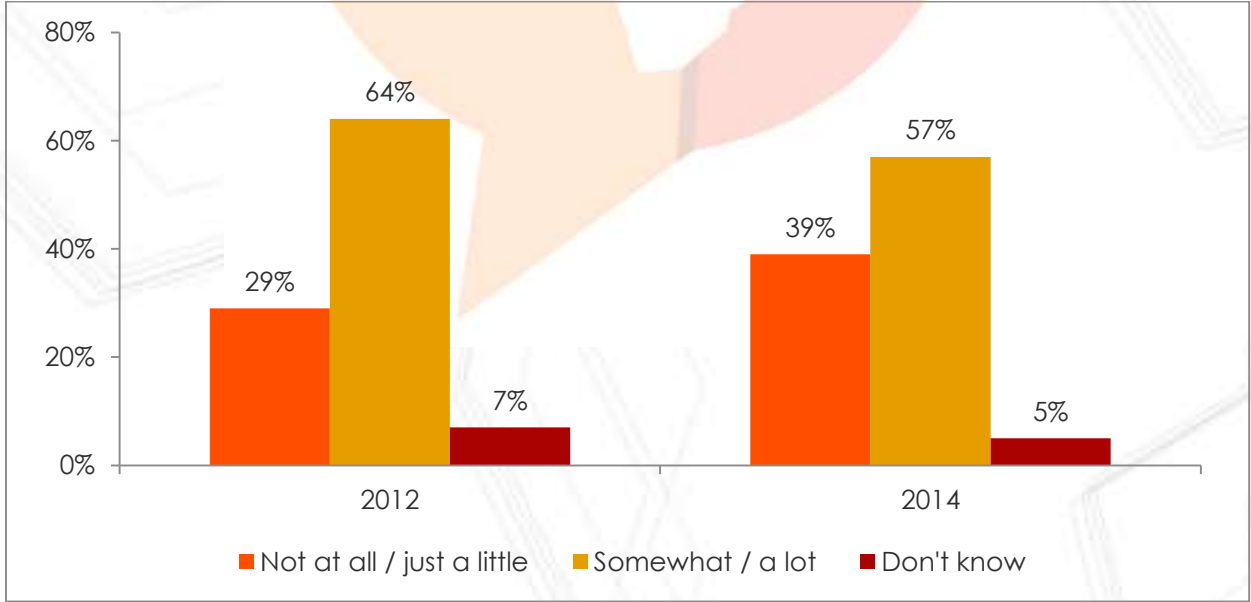
- A majority of Malawians are confident in the capabilities and neutrality of the MEC, but a significant minority disagrees:
- 55% think the MEC is ‘very well prepared’ for the upcoming election, and 20% think it is at least somewhat prepared; just 16% think it is ‘not at all’ or ‘not very well’ prepared (Figure 4)
- 57% trust the MEC ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot’ in 2014, down somewhat from 64% who said the same in 2012; 38% say they trust the MEC ‘not at all’ or ‘just a little’ (Figure 5)
- Nearly two-thirds (63%) believe that ‘The MEC performs its duties as a neutral body guided only by law.’ This is an increase from 56% of Malawians who said the same about MEC in 2012. However, one person in three (32%) in 2014 voiced the concern that ‘The MEC makes decisions that favour particular people, parties or interests’ (4% ‘don’t know’)

Figure 4: MEC Preparedness



Participants were asked: 'In your opinion, how well prepared is the Malawi Electoral Commission for the May 20, 2014 elections?'

Figure 5: Trust in the MEC  
 | 2012-2014 |



Participants were asked: 'How much do you trust the Electoral Commission, or haven't you heard enough to say?'

## Key Findings: THE ELECTION ENVIRONMENT

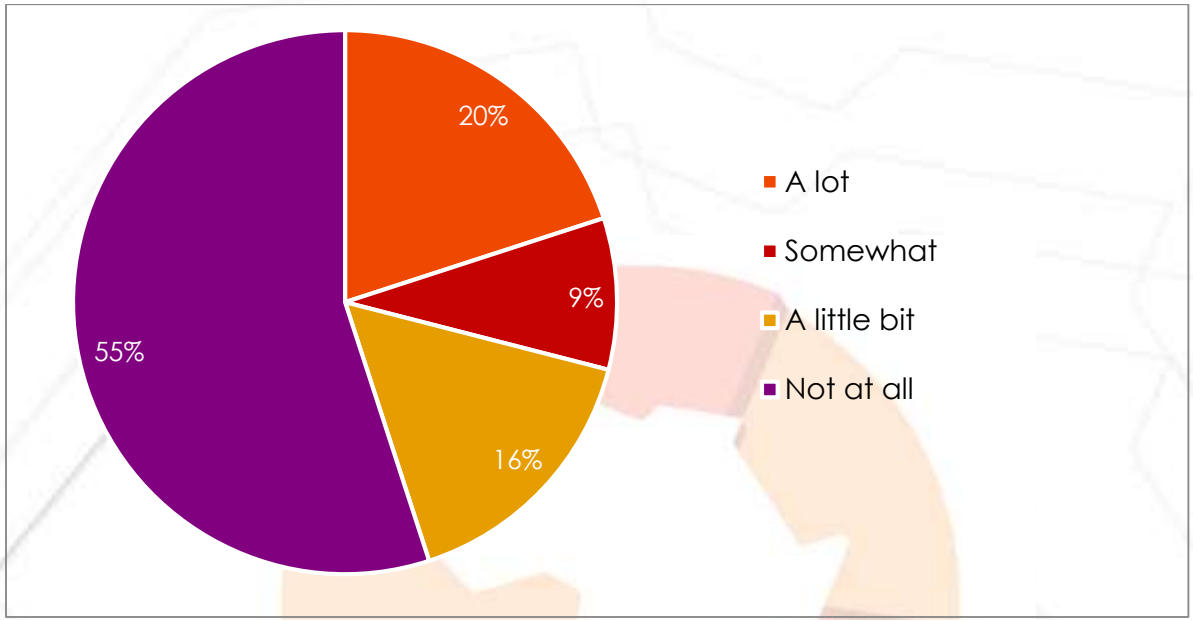
Several positive indicators point to the freeness and openness of the election environment:

- 94% of Malawians say they are ‘completely free’ to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured
- 74% say that voters are ‘often’ or ‘always’ offered a genuine choice in elections (16% say this only happens ‘sometimes’ and 8% say ‘never’) (Table 1)
- 59% think voters in general ‘never’ face threats of violence at the polls (24% sometimes, 14% often/always) (Table 1)
- And 71% express little fear (‘not at all’ or only ‘a little bit’) of personally becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence (Figure 6)

Table 1: Evaluations of the Election Environment

In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections:	Never	Sometimes	Often/Always	Don't know
<b>Positive indicators:</b>				
Voters are offered genuine choice in the elections	8	16	74	2
Voters are threatened with violence at the polls	59	24	14	3
<b>Causes for concern:</b>				
The media provides fair coverage of all candidates	28	31	34	7
Opposition candidates are prevented from running for office	50	30	15	6
Voters are bribed	33	30	31	6
Votes are counted fairly	23	34	36	8

Figure 6: **Fear of Violence or Intimidation**



Participants were asked: 'During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?'

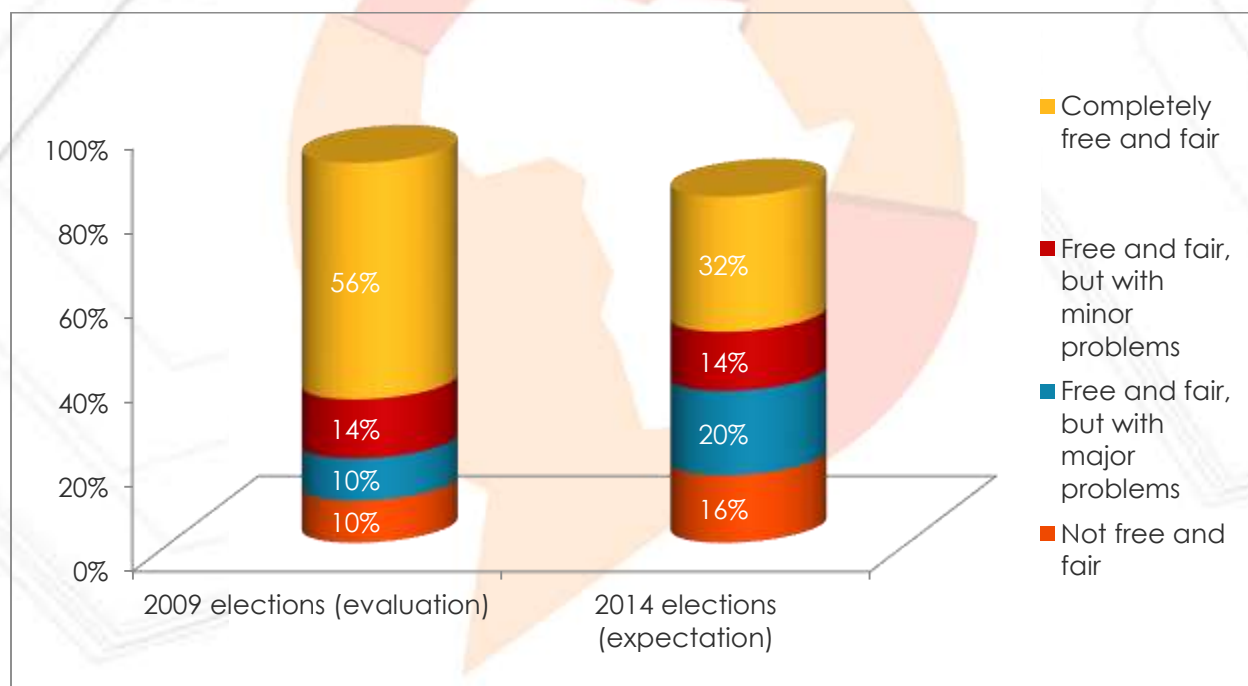
But there are also some causes for concern:

- Just one in three Malawians think the media 'often' or 'always' provide fair coverage of all candidates, while 31% say only 'sometimes', and 28% say 'never' (Table 1)
- Just 15% say opposition candidates are 'often' or 'always' prevented from running for office, but 30% believe this happens at least 'sometimes', though 50% say it is 'never' a problem (Table 1)
- Malawian are also divided on the prevalence of electoral bribery: 31% think voters are 'often' or 'always' bribed, 30% say they sometimes are, and 33% think this never occurs (Table 1)
- Of greatest concern, only one in three (36%) say that votes are 'often' or 'always' counted fairly, compared to 34% who say 'sometimes' and 23% who say 'never' (Table 1)

As a result, overall confidence in the quality of the elections is relatively low:

- Fewer than half of Malawians (46%) expect the 2014 elections to be either ‘completely free and fair’ or ‘free and fair, but with minor problems’, whereas more than one in three (36%) expect the elections to be seriously flawed. By comparison, when asked (also in 2014) about the quality of the last national election in 2009, 70% reported that those elections were mostly or completely free and fair (Figure 7)<sup>3</sup>. While prospective and retrospective evaluations may not be completely comparable, this difference suggests that Malawians are not expecting the upcoming election to meet the same standard of quality as the 2009 contest.

Figure 7: **Election Quality**  
 | 2009 (evaluation) and 2014 (expectation) |



Participants were asked:

‘On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2009?’ and ‘How free and fair do you expect the general elections of 20 May 2014 to be?’

Note: Both results are from the 2014 survey; results from a question on the 2012 survey about the quality of the 2009 elections were

<sup>3</sup> In 2012, the same question was asked about the quality of the 2009 elections, and the results are very similar to those from the 2014 survey: 69% rated the 2009 election as completely or mostly free and fair, while 21% said it was seriously flawed.

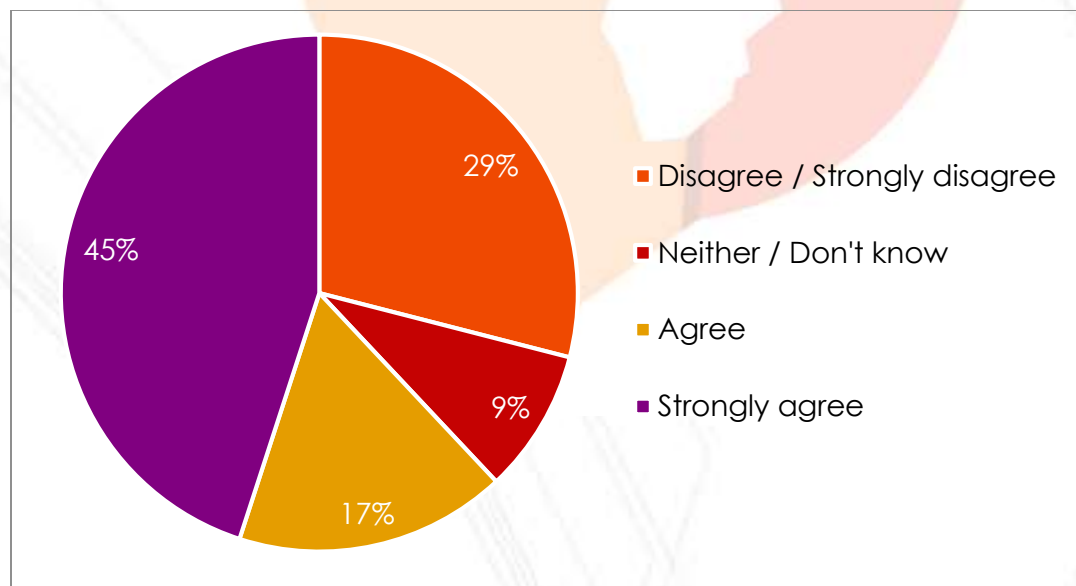


**Key Findings: VOTING INTENTIONS**

Unlike countries in the region that have experienced one-party dominance, Malawi clearly continues to have a competitive party system and a viable opposition:

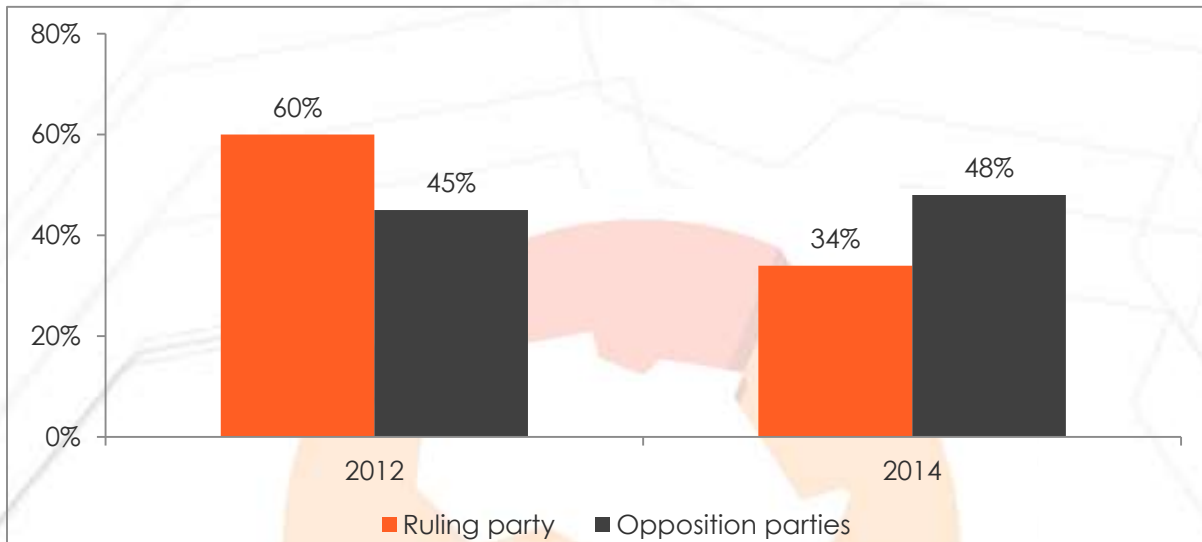
- 62% ‘agree’ or ‘strongly’ agree that the opposition ‘presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country’ (Figure 8)
- Current levels of trust in opposition parties (48%) exceed trust in the ruling party (34%). This is a reversal of fortunes for the ruling party from 2012, when 60% said they trusted the ruling party while 45% trusted the opposition (Figure 9). In this regard, Malawi is exceptional in Africa, where ruling parties were trusted more than opposition parties in 31 or 34 countries during Round 5 (2011-2013)
- 40% say the main difference between the ruling and opposition parties is ‘their economic and development policies’; 28% say the main differences are the attributes of party leaders (11% honesty or integrity, 10% personality, 7% experience); and 14% say the main differences are in party identity (6% region, 5% ethnicity, 3% religion); 8% say there is no difference among the parties (Figure 10)

**Figure 8: Opposition Offers Viable Alternative**



Participants were asked: ‘Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in Malawi presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country.’

**Figure 9: Trust in Ruling and Opposition Parties**  
 | 2012-2014 |



Participants were asked: 'How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: the ruling party; opposition political parties?'

**Figure 10: Most Important Differences Among Political Parties**



Participants were asked: 'Which of the following do you see as the most important difference between the ruling party and opposition parties in Malawi?'

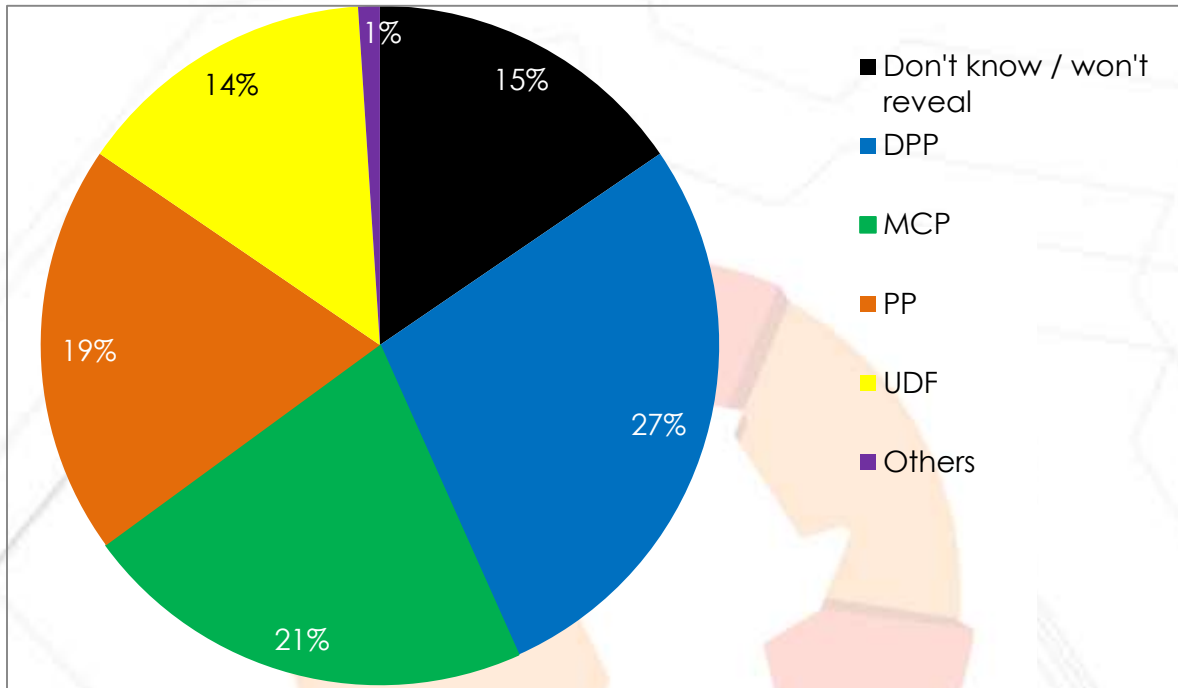
Based on the stated voting intentions of adult Malawians some six to eight weeks before the May 20, 2014 elections, the outcome of the elections is too close to call:

- 15% of Malawians did not report their vote choice, which is larger than the margin between the individual candidates and parties (Figure 11)
- Registration and turnout among young, potential first-time voters is unknown, but could have an influence
- Effects of campaign activities since the survey was conducted are not captured

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) appears to have a slight edge:

- When asked which party's candidate they would vote for 'if the presidential elections were held tomorrow', 27% identified DPP and its presidential candidate, Peter Mutharika, 21% identified the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) led by Lazarus Chakwera, 19% identified the People's Party (PP) of incumbent Joyce Banda, and 14% identified the United Democratic Front (UDF) under Atupele Muluzi; 15% said they did not know how they would vote or refused to reveal their preference (Figure 11)
- Choices in the parliamentary election follow the same patterns: DPP is preferred by 23%, MCP and PP by 18% each, and UDF by 11%, with 18% undecided or refusing to reveal their choice; independent candidates are favored by 8%
- Fully 21% have not stated a preference in the local government elections, almost as many as prefer DPP (23%), and more than stated a preference for MCP (18%), PP (16%) or UDF (12%)

Figure 11: **Voting Intentions, Presidential Election**  
| all respondents |

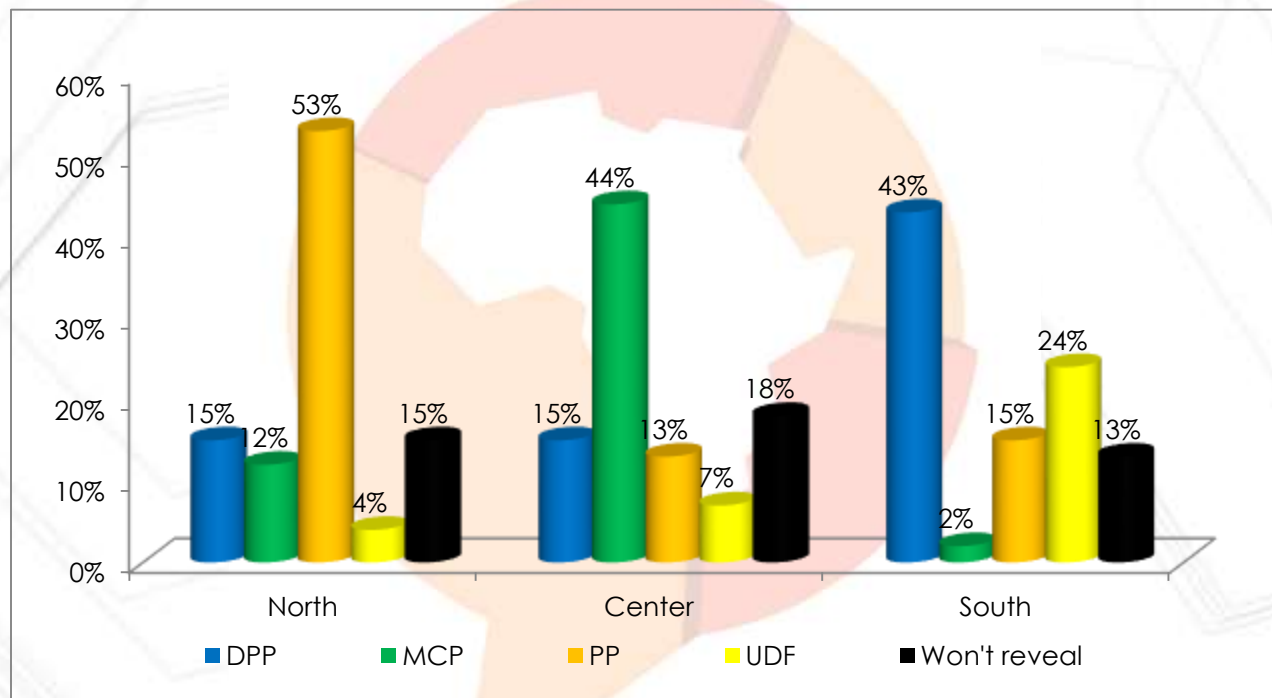


Participants were asked: 'If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?' (Note: Responses shown include all respondents and are not screened or weighted for likely voters.)

Regional differences in voting intentions are stark:

- Malawians in the North strongly favor President Banda’s People’s Party, those in the Central Region are much more inclined to favor the MCP and candidate Chakwera, while Southerners back Mutharika’s DPP and, to a lesser extent, Muluzi’s UDF (Figure 12)

Figure 12: **Voting Intentions in Presidential Election**  
 | by region | all respondents

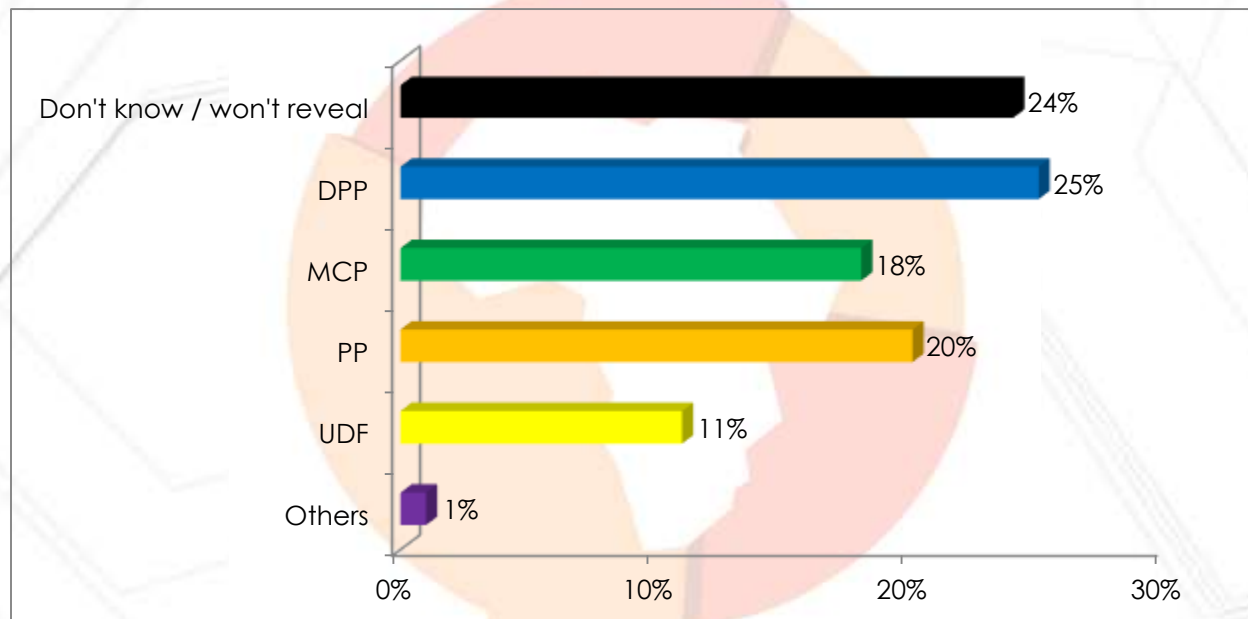


Participants were asked: 'If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?' (Note: Responses shown include all respondents and are not screened or weighted for likely voters.)

But nearly one in four Malawians do not predict a winner in the presidential race:

- When asked who they think will ultimately win the 2014 presidential election, regardless of their own voting intentions, 24% don't know or refuse to speculate, while 25% expect the DPP to win; 20% expect Banda and the PP to prevail, while 18% think the MCP has the upper hand, and 11% believe the UDF has the best chances (Figure 13)

**Figure 13: Popular Expectation of the Outcome, Presidential Election**



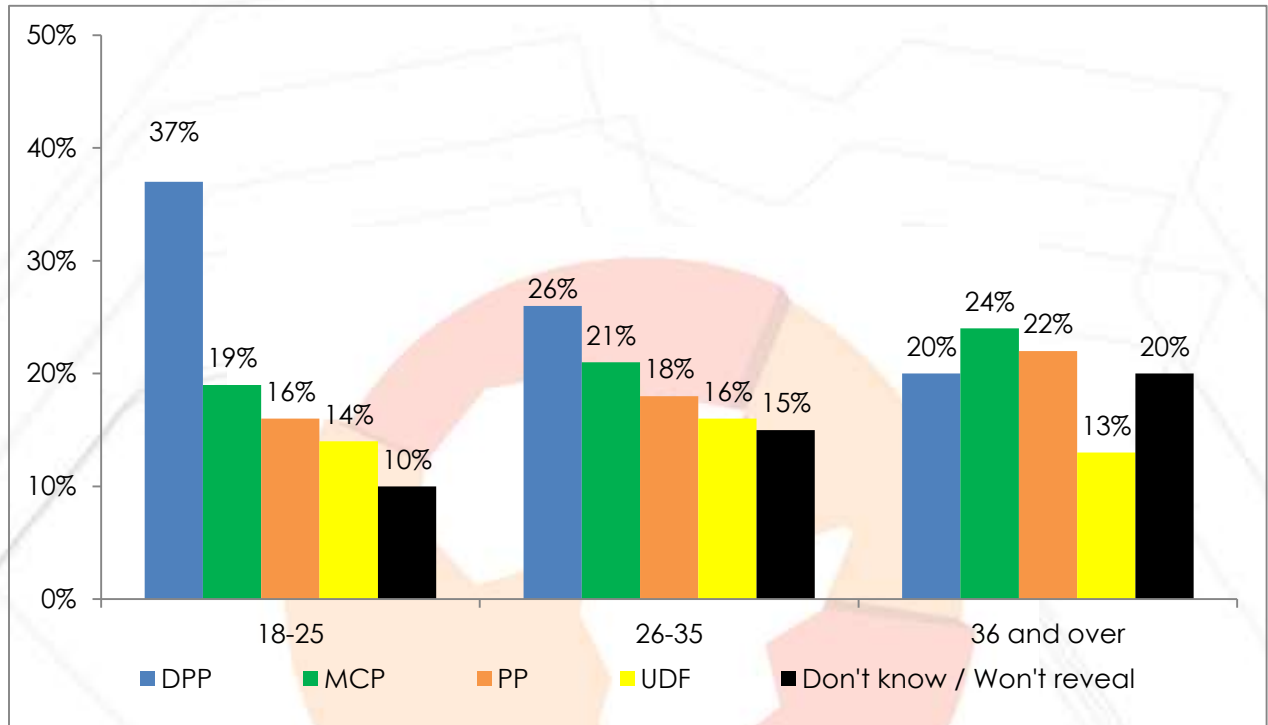
*Participants were asked: 'Regardless of whether or not you will vote, or who you will vote for, which party's candidate do you expect, ultimately, will win the May 2014 presidential election?'*

Unpredictable youth registration and turnout adds to the uncertainty:

- The DPP's support is strongest among young people (Figure 14), but when their typically lower levels of voter registration are taken into account, the DPP's advantage, for example in the presidential race, falls within the margin of sampling error of the Afrobarometer survey

For this reason among others, the election remains too close to call.

Figure 14: **Voting Intentions**  
 | by age |



Participants were asked: 'If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?' (Note: Responses shown include all respondents and are not screened or weighted for likely voters.)

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[www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)

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