

Election quality: Ugandans skeptical of electoral commission, back reforms to gain transparency

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 182 | Thomas Isbell and Francis Kibirige

Summary

Over the past decade, Uganda has emerged as a success story of African development. Economic growth and diversification, relative political stability, and considerable investment in infrastructure have seen the country rise as a regional power (Murray, Mesfin, & Wolters, 2016). But to many international observers, this success is dimmed by the long rule of President Yoweri Museveni and a political system that has been described as "dictatorship light" (Gettleman, 2016). While elections are conducted regularly, many have questioned how free they are. In particular, reports of intimidation and violence have emerged in regard to the 2011 and 2016 general elections, and the participation of opposition politicians has been constrained on questionable grounds (Kaka, 2016; Musisi, 2016; European Union Election Observation Mission to Uganda, 2016; Butagira, 2016). To many observers, development and economic progress have been achieved at the cost of civil liberties and inclusive democratic governance (Suzan, 2017).

Do Ugandans share this view? In particular, how do they perceive the cornerstone of their democracy, their electoral system?

Based on a recent Afrobarometer public-attitude survey, this dispatch finds that Ugandans support choosing leaders through regular, open, and honest elections but express doubts about the quality of their elections. While a majority think the government is doing well in preventing electoral violence, they feel they have to be careful about what they say and how they vote. Fewer than half express trust in the Independent Electoral Commission, and strong majorities support stricter rules to increase the transparency of elections and address misconduct of candidates.

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. Six rounds of surveys were completed between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of 1,200 or 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult, interviewed 1,200 adult Ugandans in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

Key findings

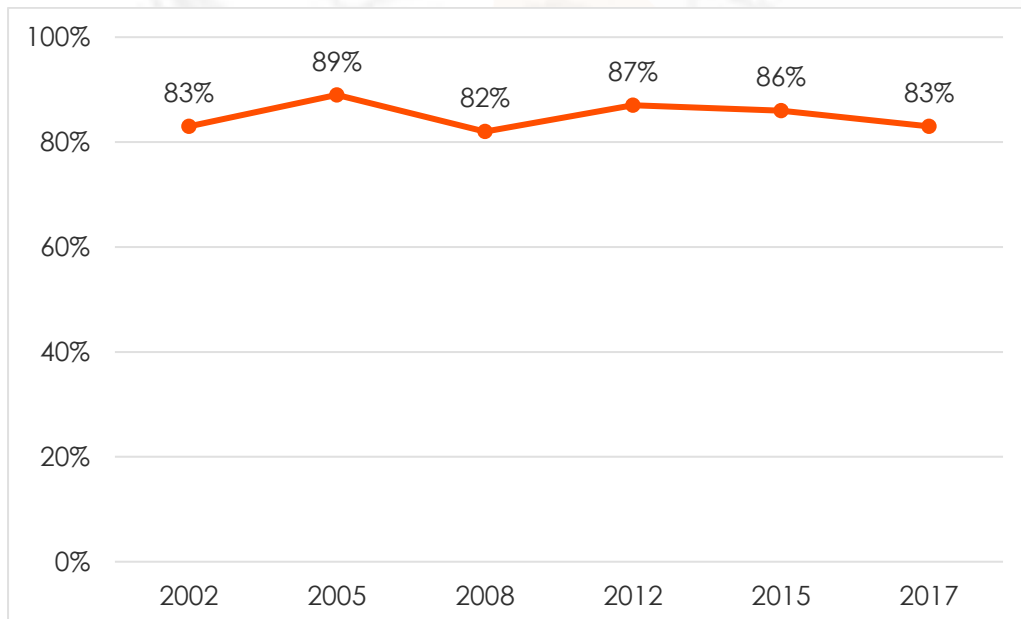
- More than eight in 10 Ugandans (83%) support regular, open, and honest elections as the best way to choose their leaders. This support for elections has remained consistently high since the 2002 survey.

- But fewer Ugandans (61%) believe that the 2016 general election was free and fair, a decline from assessments of the 2012 election.
- While two-thirds (65%) say the government performs well in preventing violence during elections, almost half (48%) of all respondents say they fear “somewhat” or “a lot” becoming victims of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns.
- Two-thirds of citizens feel they “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (65%) and how they vote (64%).
- Only four in 10 Ugandans (42%) say they trust the Independent Electoral Commission “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 54% during the 2015 survey (which was conducted several months into the 2016 election cycle).
- Ugandans widely support electoral reforms to increase the transparency and reliability of the election process and ensure the integrity of candidates.

Support for elections

Since 2002, the share of Ugandans who prefer regular, open, and honest elections as the best way to choose leaders has consistently exceeded 80%, declining marginally to 83% in 2017 from 86% in 2015 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for choosing leaders through elections | Uganda | 2002-2017



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.
 (% of respondents who “agree” or “agree strongly” with Statement 1)

How free and fair are elections?

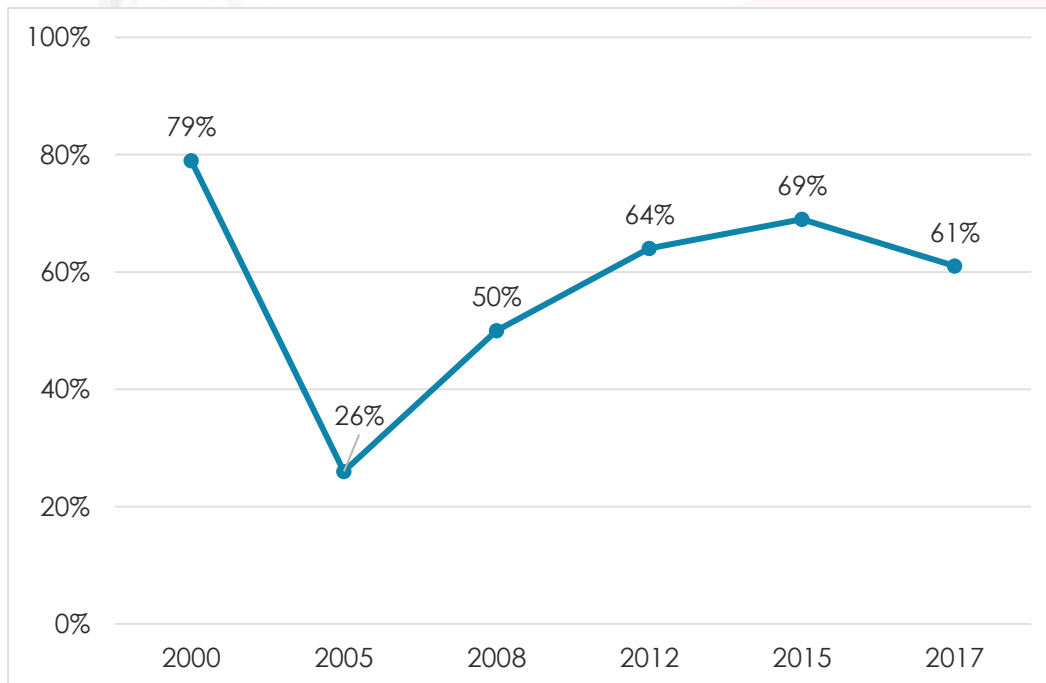
Since the 1996 and 2000 elections conducted under the ruling National Resistance Movement's one-party dispensation, during which political parties existed but were not allowed to operate or field candidates, Uganda's elections have been characterized by growing opposition participation.

Six in 10 Ugandans (61%) say the last national election, in 2016, was “completely free and fair” or “free and fair, but with minor problems.” This is somewhat less positive than 2012 and 2015 survey assessments of the 2011 election (64% and 69%, respectively) (Figure 2).

Ugandans' perceptions of the freeness and fairness of elections have varied considerably, marked by a sharp drop in 2005, when only 26% assessed the 2001 general election as generally free and fair.

Changes implemented since the 2001 contest may have helped improve popular perceptions of election fairness, including the appointment of a new electoral commission and updating of voter rolls in 2005. The latest attempt by the electoral commission to improve the conduct of general elections was a complete overhaul of the national voter register and introduction of biometric identification of voters ahead of the 2016 elections.

Figure 2: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | Uganda | 2017



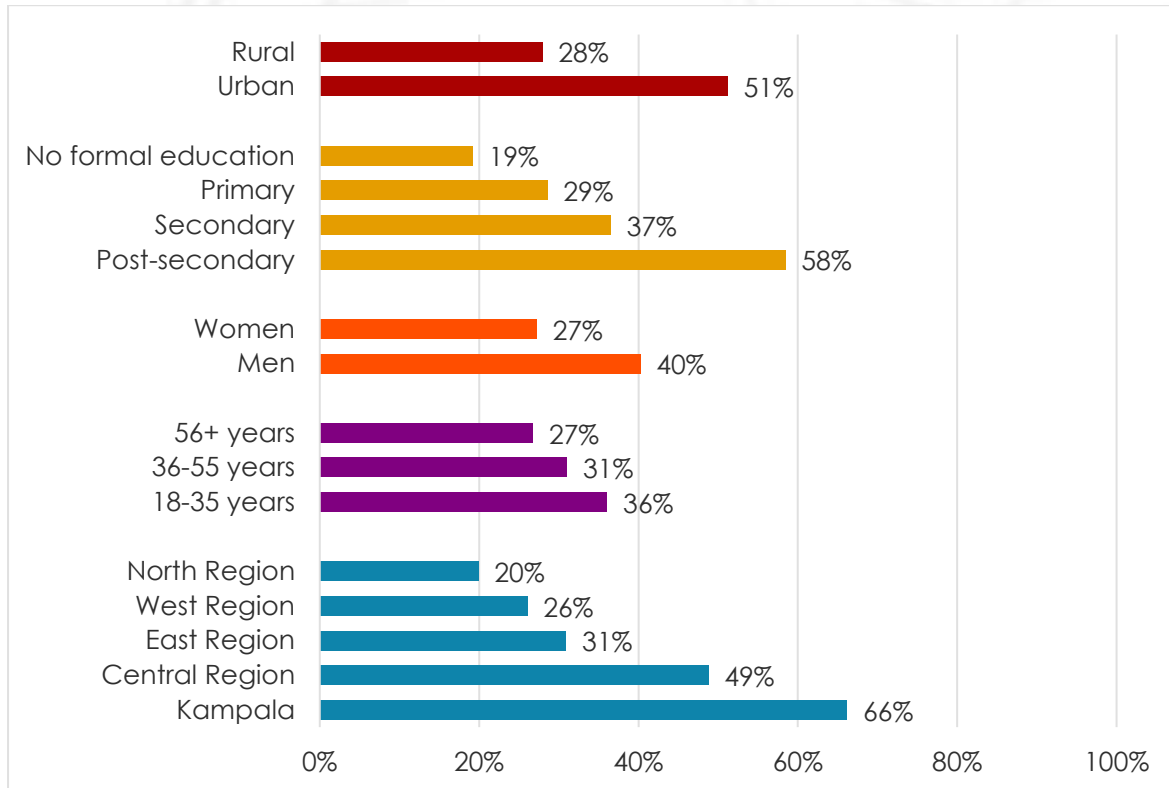
Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [respective year]?*

(% who said “completely free and fair” or “free and fair, but with minor problems”)

Note: This question was not asked in the 2002 survey.

Among the one-third (34%) of respondents who describe the 2016 election as “not free and fair” (21%) or “free and fair with major problems” (13%), certain socio-demographic groups stand out as particularly critical (Figure 3). The best-educated Ugandans are three times as likely as those without formal education (58% vs. 19%) to complain that the elections were not free or had major problems. Urban residents (51%) and men (40%) are more likely to see the election as unfree than rural dwellers (28%) and women (27%). Respondents in Kampala (66%) and Central Region (49%) are two to three times as likely to be critical as those in North Region (20%), and younger respondents are more critical of the election than their elders.

Figure 3: 2016 election not free and fair | by socio-demographic group | Uganda
 | 2017



Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2016?*
 (% who say “not free and fair” or “free and fair with major problems”)

Violence and intimidation during elections

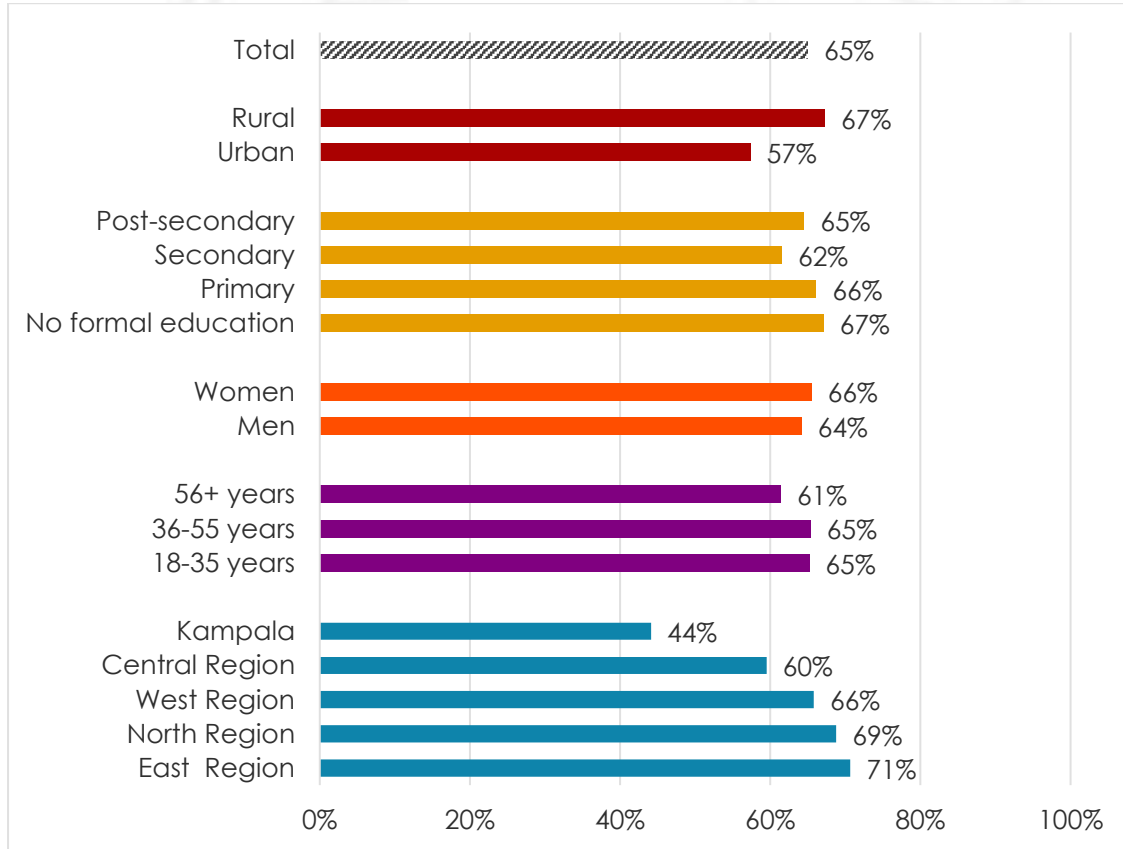
While some groups offer mixed assessments of how free the 2016 election was, two-thirds (65%) of Ugandans think the government is performing well in keeping them free of violence. This may reflect the government’s heavy security deployments during elections, especially in towns, where the police and army conduct joint operations to secure the election and each polling station is staffed by a designated police constable who works hand in hand with other security agencies, representatives of candidates, and election officials.

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Urban residents are less likely than their rural counterparts to praise the government’s performance in preventing election-related violence (57% vs. 67%). This is especially true in Kampala (44%) (Figure 4).

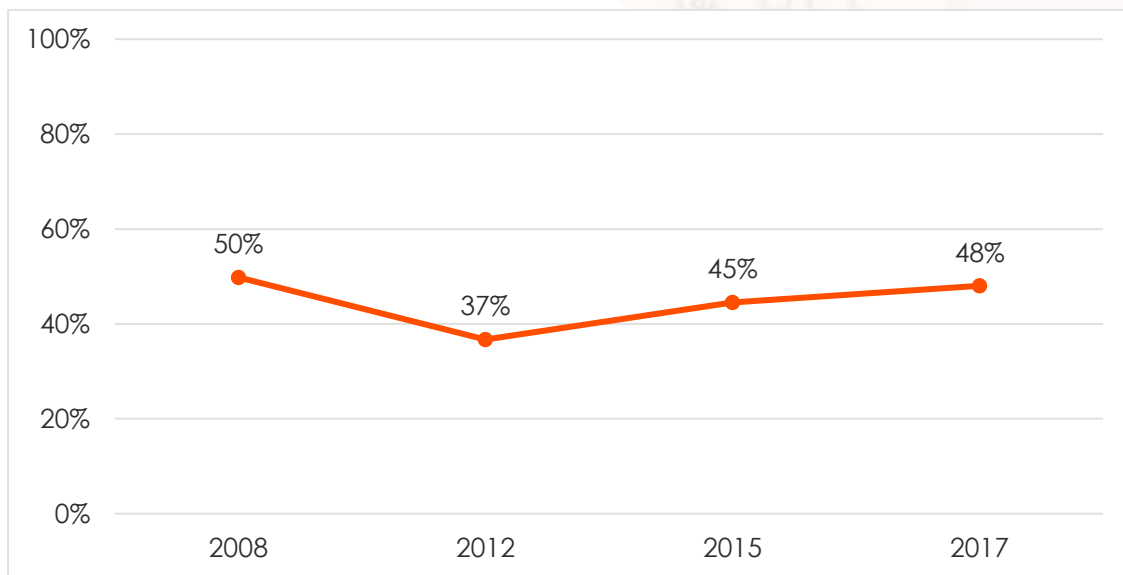
Even so, almost half (48%) of Ugandans say they fear (“somewhat” or “a lot”) becoming victims of violence and intimidation during election campaigns, an increase of 10 percentage points since the 2012 survey (Figure 5). While the political opposition has often blamed fear of violence and intimidation on the ruling party’s electioneering methods, survey responses show that citizens see perpetrators from across the political divide. When asked whom they fear most during elections, respondents are about equally likely to cite opposition party supporters/leaders (16%), ruling party supporters/leaders (16%), and security agents (15%) (Figure 6).

Figure 4: Government performing well at preventing election violence | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2017



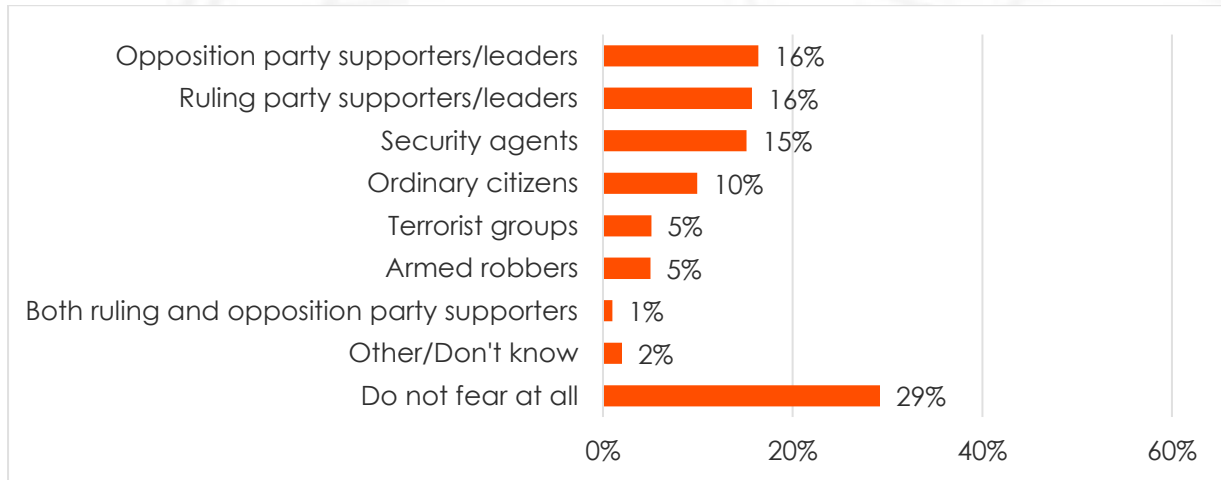
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Preventing political violence during election campaigns? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

Figure 5: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Uganda | 2008-2017



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 6: Most feared perpetrator of political intimidation or violence | Uganda | 2008-2017

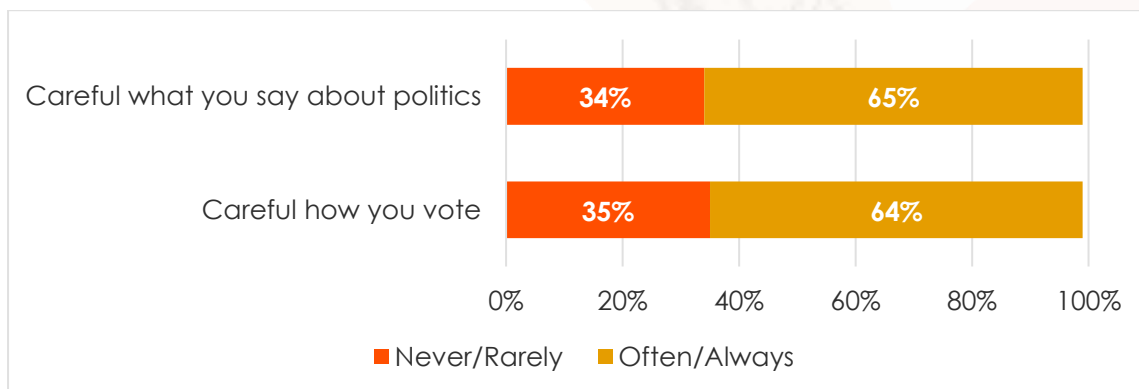


Respondents were asked: Who do you fear most as the perpetrator of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns?

Perhaps born of the fear of intimidation or violence during elections, two-thirds of ordinary Ugandans say they “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (65%) and how they vote (64%) (Figure 7).

With regard to being “careful about how they vote,” often/always is the response of more than six in 10 Ugandans across all key socio-demographic groups with the exception of respondents in Kampala (54%) and Central Region (58%) and those who experience no lived poverty¹ (54%).

Figure 7: Often/always have to be careful about how you talk about politics and how you vote | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country:

- Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?
- Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?

¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

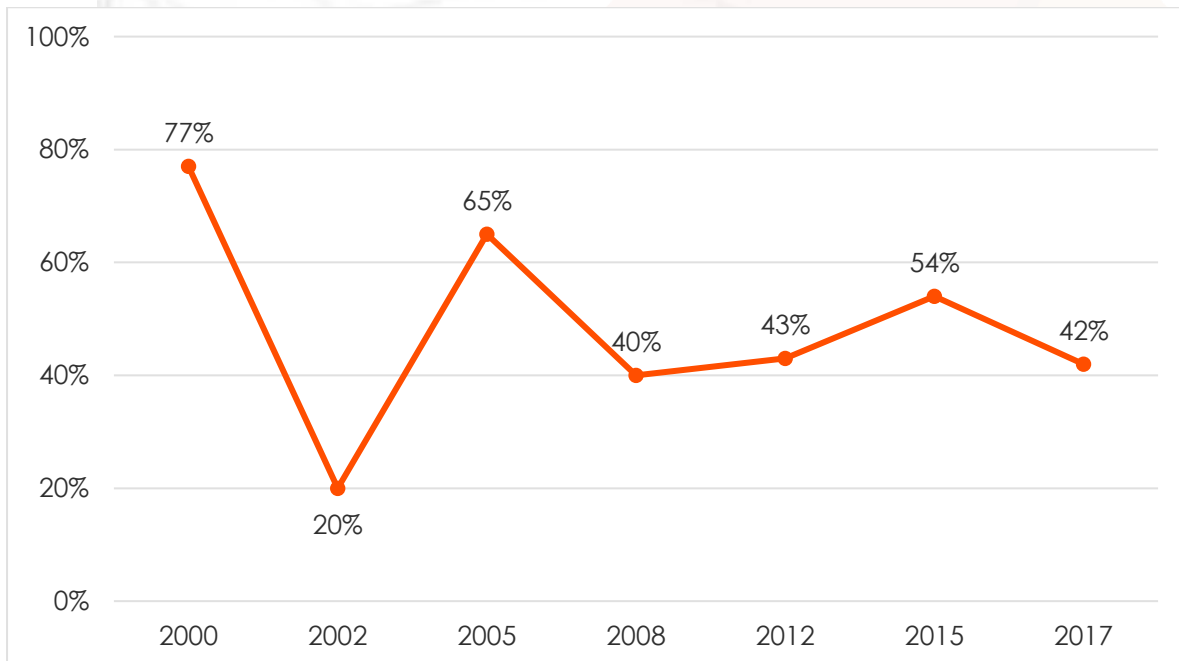
Trust in the electoral commission

One key aspect of citizens' perceptions of election quality is how well they think the national election management body does its job of ensuring transparent and competent elections.

In Uganda, the Independent Electoral Commission has come under heavy criticism for allegedly favouring the ruling NRM party and for procedural failures in the conduct of elections, including mismanagement of the tallying, declaration, and transmission of election results. In all three presidential election petitions filed in the supreme court following the 2001, 2006, and 2016 elections, the electoral commission has been co-accused (Mulenga, 2001; Katureebe, 2007; Katureebe, 2016).

Only four in 10 Ugandans (42%) say they trust the electoral commission "somewhat" or "a lot," a decline of 12 percentage points since the 2015 survey (Figure 8). This is about the same level of trust as in 2008 and 2012, though far lower than peaks in 2000 (77%) and 2005 (65%).

Figure 8: Popular trust in the Independent Electoral Commission | Uganda
 | 2000-2017

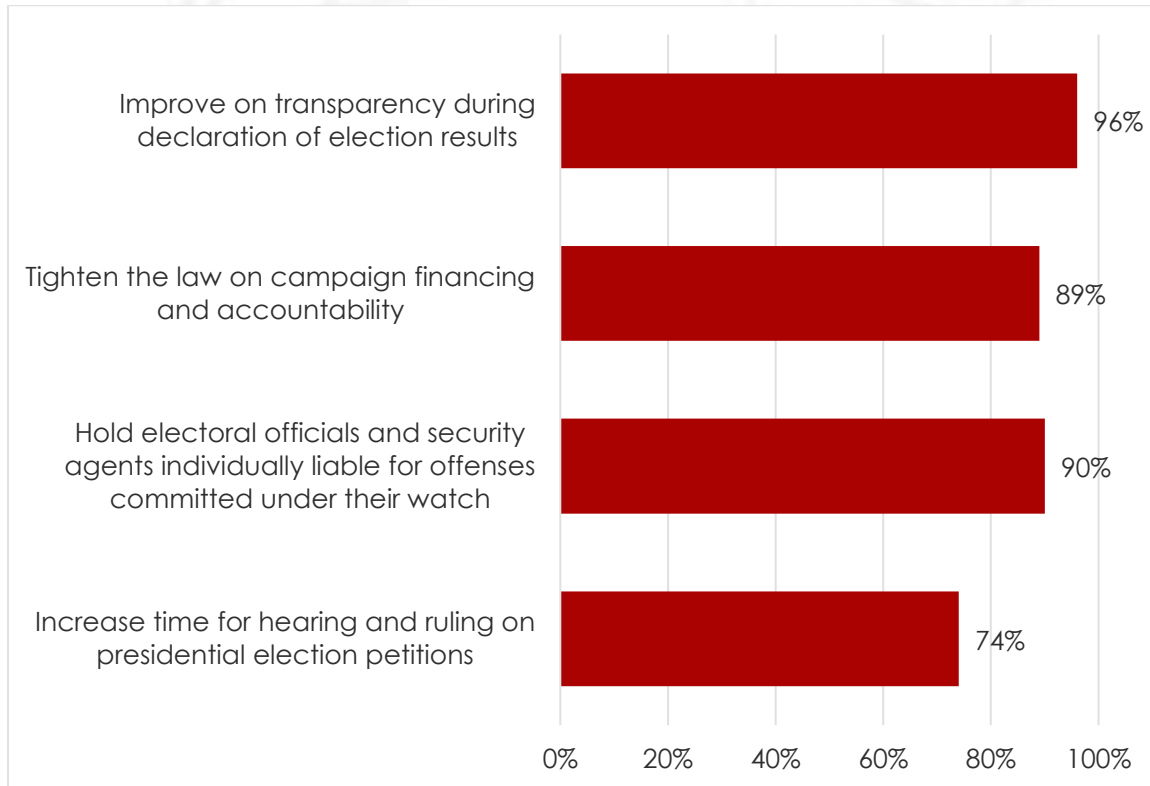


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Uganda Independent Electoral Commission? (% "somewhat" or "a lot")

Support for electoral reforms

In hopes of improving election quality, Ugandans have considered a number of concrete electoral reforms. Almost all Ugandans "agree" or "strongly agree" that transparency in the declaration of election results should be improved (96%) and that the law on campaign financing and accountability should be tightened (89%) (Figure 9). A similar majority (90%) agree that electoral officials and agents should be held individually liable for electoral offenses committed under their watch, while about three in four (74%) say that more time should be given for hearing and ruling on presidential election petitions.

Figure 9: Support for electoral reforms to improve transparency and accountability
 | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked: The quality of Uganda's elections has been described by many stakeholders, including the opposition, ruling party, civil society, media, and voters, as poor due to allegations of election irregularities and mismanagement. I am going to read from a list of proposals aimed at improving the quality of Uganda's elections. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:

- Improve on transparency during declaration of election results.
- Tighten the law on campaign financing and accountability.
- Hold electoral officials and security agents individually liable for all offenses committed under their watch.
- Increase the time within which to complete the hearing of and ruling on presidential election petitions.

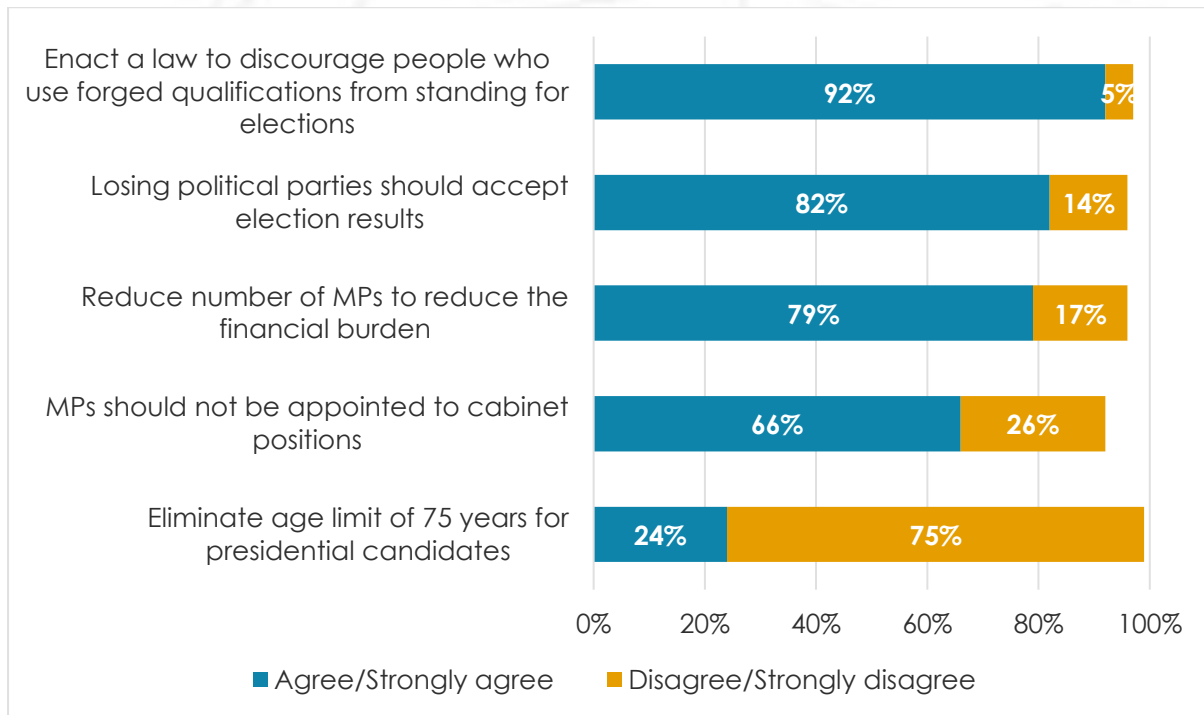
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Moreover, nine out of 10 Ugandans (92%) favour enactment of a law that discourages people who used forged qualifications from standing for elections. A large majority (79%) agree that Uganda should have fewer members of Parliament (MPs) in order to reduce the financial burden, while two-thirds (66%) say MPs should not be appointed to cabinet positions.

Three-fourths (75%) of Ugandans would oppose a controversial proposal to lift the constitution's ban on presidential candidates aged 75 years or older – a change that would allow the 73-year-old incumbent to seek another term in 2021.

And eight of 10 Ugandans (82%) affirm the idea that in the interest of national unity, political parties that lose an election should accept the results even if they disagree with them.

Figure 10: Support for other electoral reforms | Uganda | 2017



Respondents were asked:

1. The quality of Uganda's elections has been described by many stakeholders, including the opposition, ruling party, civil society, media, and voters, as poor due to allegations of election irregularities and mismanagement. I am going to read from a list of proposals aimed at improving the quality of Uganda's elections. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Enact a law to discourage people who use forged qualifications from standing for elections.
2. For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:
 - In the interest of national unity, losing political parties should accept election results even if they disagree with the outcomes.
 - Uganda should reduce the number of MPs in order to reduce the financial burden on the tax payer.
 - Members of Parliament should not be appointed to cabinet positions as this undermines their oversight role.
3. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 - Statement 1: The electoral law stopping any person older than 75 years from running as president in this country should be maintained.
 - Statement 2: Preventing persons older than 75 years from standing for election as president is a form of discrimination and should not be allowed.

Conclusion

Ugandans overwhelmingly support elections, but a sizeable number are critical of their quality, especially among better-educated and urban citizens, and fewer than half trust the electoral commission. By large majorities, Ugandans support reforms to increase transparency of the electoral process and ensure the integrity of candidates. While citizens generally approve of the government's performance in preventing election-related violence, many express fear of falling victim to such violence and say they have to be careful about what they say about politics and how they vote.

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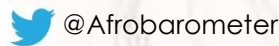
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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, 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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