



Sierra Leoneans strong on democracy, but split on whether dual citizens should participate

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 344 | Lena Thompson

Summary

After an unstable political history of autocratic rule, coups and counter-coups, and a destructive decade-long civil war, Sierra Leoneans want to live in a democracy with elections and multiparty competition, according to findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey.

They are divided, however, on the question of whether people holding dual citizenship should be allowed to participate by voting, and a majority would deny them the right to stand for office.

The political rights of dual citizens became a hotly contested issue and legal quagmire in the run-up to the March 2018 presidential and parliamentary election after the government decided to enforce a provision of the 1991 Constitution that effectively bars dual citizens from holding public office, even though a 2006 amendment to the 1973 Citizens Act recognizes dual citizenship.

This constitutional provision was not enforced in elections in 2002, 2007, and 2012; dual citizens were elected to Parliament, and some were appointed as government ministers. However, ahead of the March 2018 election, the then-ruling All People's Congress (APC) decided to enforce the provision preventing dual citizens from standing as candidates. Sparking what is popularly known as the "two-SIM" controversy (a reference to two-card mobile phones), this was seen by some as a cynical political move to exclude popular opposition candidates, in particular National Grand Coalition leader Kandeh Kollieh Yumkella, from the presidential and parliamentary election (Shaw, 2018).

The newly elected government, led by the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), has committed to reviewing the issue.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Sierra Leone, led by ITASCAP, interviewed 1,200 adult Sierra Leoneans in July 2018. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) and Lena Thompson are responsible for disseminating key findings of the survey. Previous surveys have been conducted in Sierra Leone in 2012 and 2015.

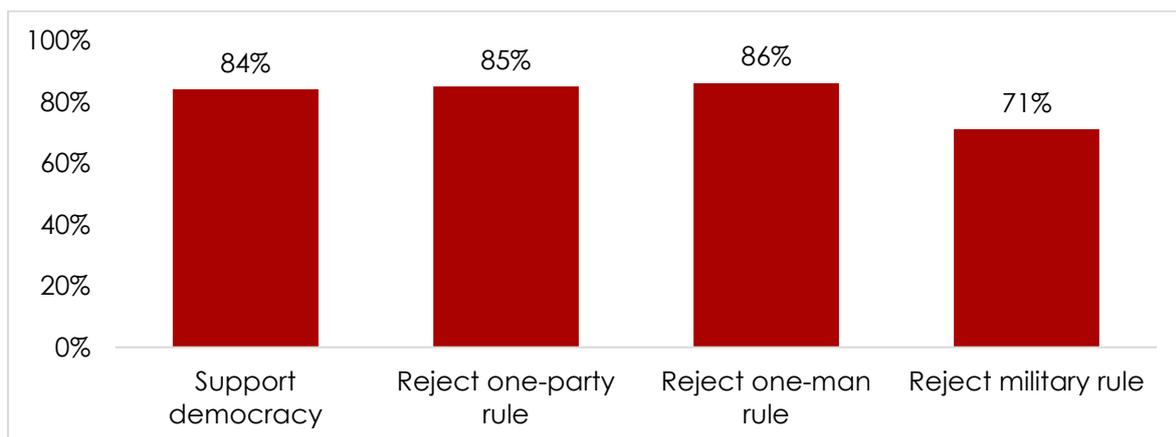
Key findings

- Most Sierra Leoneans hold favourable views of their democracy:
 - Large majorities support democracy (84%) and reject authoritarian alternatives such as one-man rule (86%), one-party rule (85%), and military rule (71%).
 - Three-quarters of Sierra Leoneans describe the country as “a full democracy” (29%) or “a democracy with minor problems” (45%).
 - Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy works in the country.
- Citizens are also largely satisfied with their elections:
 - Close to nine out of 10 respondents (87%) support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
 - Almost three-quarters (73%) say the National Electoral Commission performs its duties in an impartial manner.
 - Eight out of 10 citizens say the 2018 election was “completely free and fair” (55%) or “free and fair with minor problems” (26%).
- But they are split when it comes to the political rights of dual citizens:
 - Half (49%) of Sierra Leoneans say dual citizens should be allowed to vote, but almost as many (45%) disagree.
 - A majority (56%) of Sierra Leoneans say dual citizens should not be allowed to stand for elected office.

Views on democracy

Sierra Leoneans express solid support for democracy. Large majorities prefer democracy over other political systems (84%) and reject authoritarian alternatives such as one-man rule (86%), one-party rule (85%), and military rule (71%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian alternatives | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked:

Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion? (% who choose Statement 1)

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)

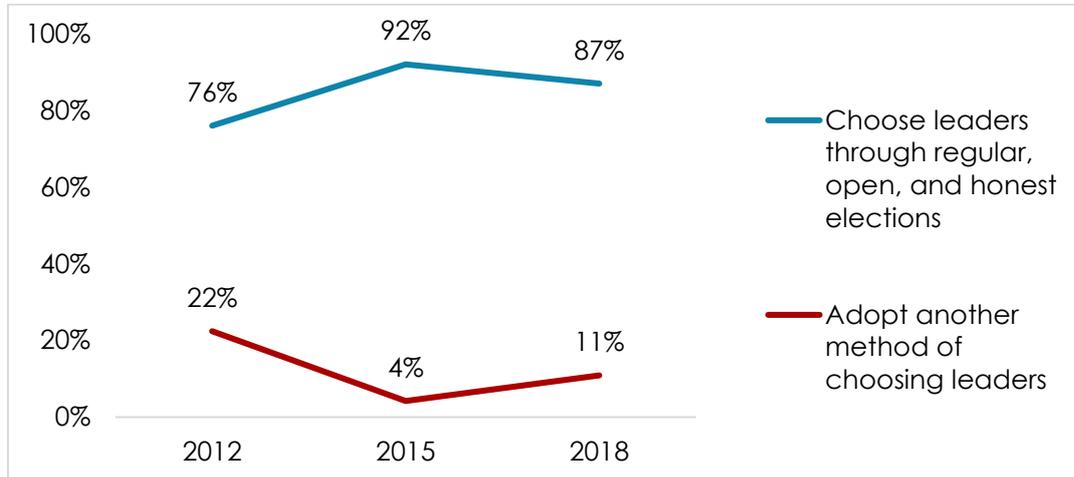
Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

In Afrobarometer surveys since 2012, a large majority of Sierra Leoneans have consistently supported elections as the best way to choose their leaders. Close to nine in 10 citizens (87%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” that political leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections, a marginal decline compared to 2015 (Figure 2).

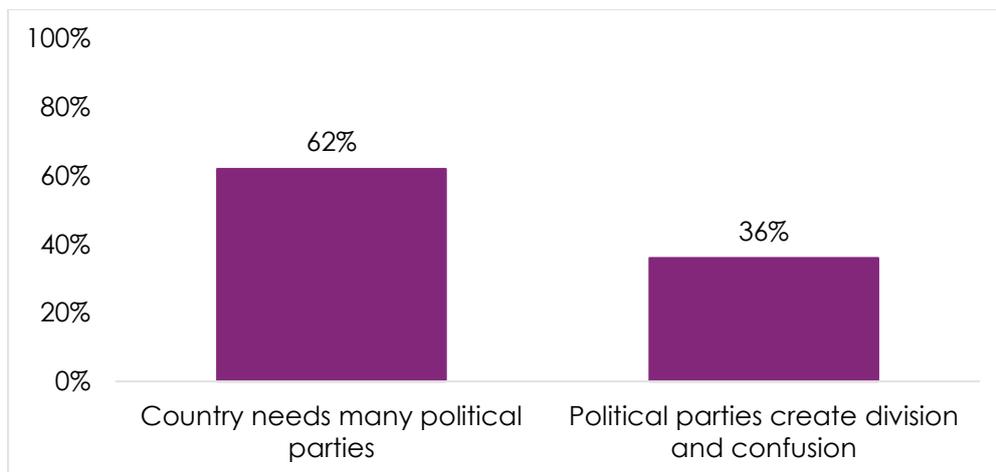
Figure 2: Support for elections | Sierra Leone | 2012-2018



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” with each statement)

In line with their strong rejection of one-party rule, six in 10 citizens (62%) support the view that many political parties are needed to make sure that Sierra Leoneans have real choices in who governs them (Figure 3). One in three (36%) believe it is not necessary to have many political parties in the country as they create division and confusion.

Figure 3: Support for multiparty democracy | Sierra Leone | 2018

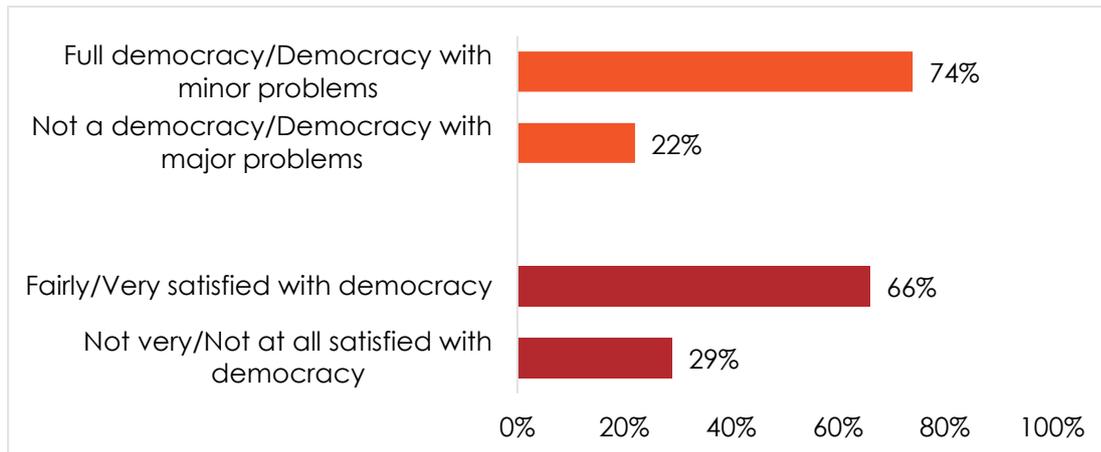


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Sierra Leone.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Sierra Leoneans have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Sierra Leone is a healthy democracy in the eyes of its citizens. Three-quarters of respondents describe the country as “a full democracy” (29%) or “a democracy with minor problems” (45%), while only two in 10 say it is “not a democracy” (6%) or is “a democracy with major problems” (16%) (Figure 4).

Two-thirds (66%) of citizens say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy works in the country.

Figure 4: Assessment of the country’s democracy | Sierra Leone | 2018

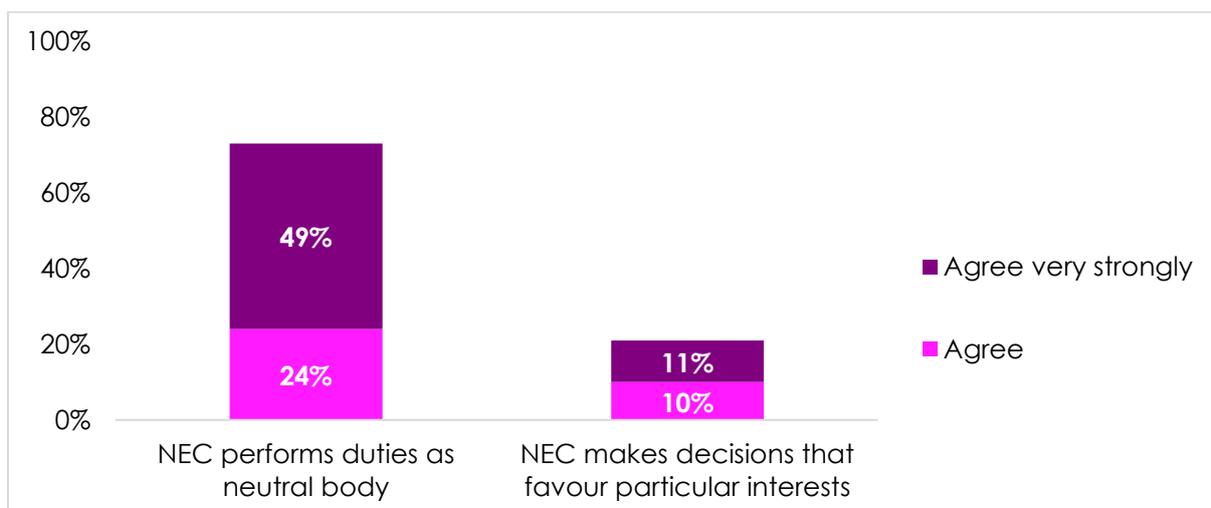


Respondents were asked:

*In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Sierra Leone today?
 Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Sierra Leone?*

Sierra Leoneans exhibit high confidence in the work of the National Electoral Commission (NEC). Almost three-quarters (73%) believe that the NEC performs its duties as “a neutral body guided only by law,” including almost half (49%) who “agree very strongly” with this view. Two in 10 (21%) say the electoral commission makes decisions that favour particular interests (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Is the National Electoral Commission neutral? | Sierra Leone | 2018

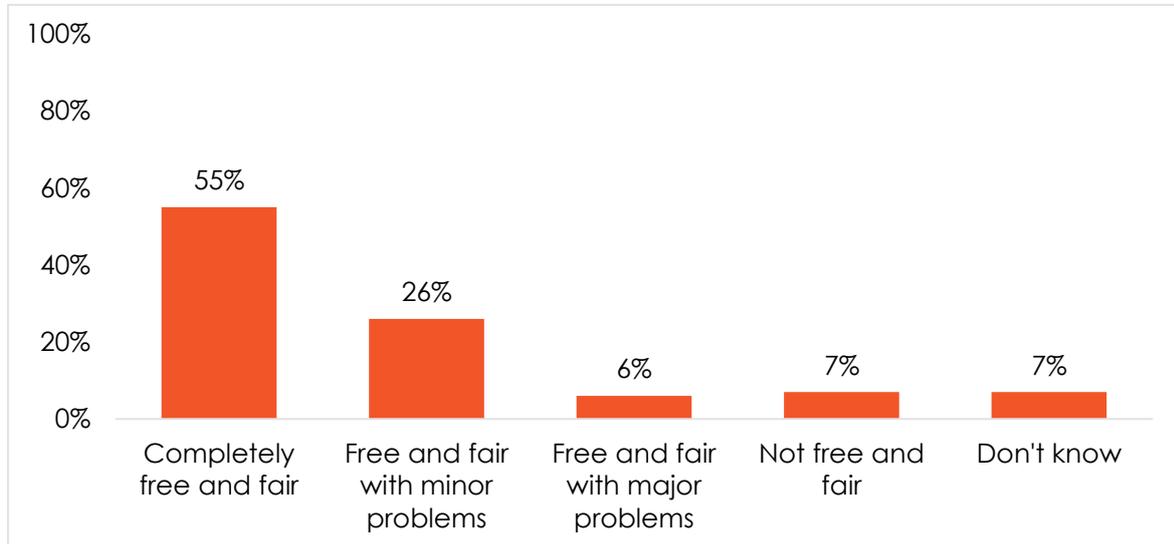


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

*Statement 1: The National Electoral Commission, or NEC, performs its duties as a neutral body guided only by law.
 Statement 2: The National Electoral Commission, or NEC, makes decisions that favour particular people, parties, or interests.*

Eight in 10 citizens say the 2018 election was “completely free and fair” (55%) or “free and fair with minor problems” (26%). Only one in 10 describe it as “free and fair with major problems” (6%) or “not free and fair” (7%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Freeness and fairness of most recent election | Sierra Leone | 2018



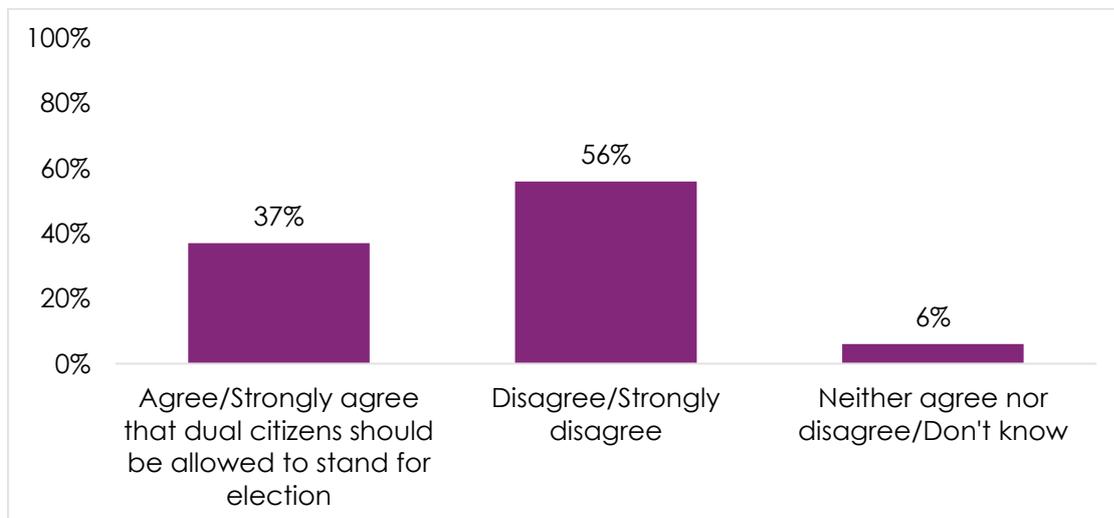
Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2018?

Should dual citizens be allowed to vote and stand for election?

In the wake of the 2018 election dispute over the participation of dual citizens, the newly elected SLPP government has committed to reviewing the issue. But a majority (56%) of Sierra Leoneans say that dual citizens should not be allowed to stand for election (Figure 7). Close to four in 10 (37%) think they should be allowed to run for office.

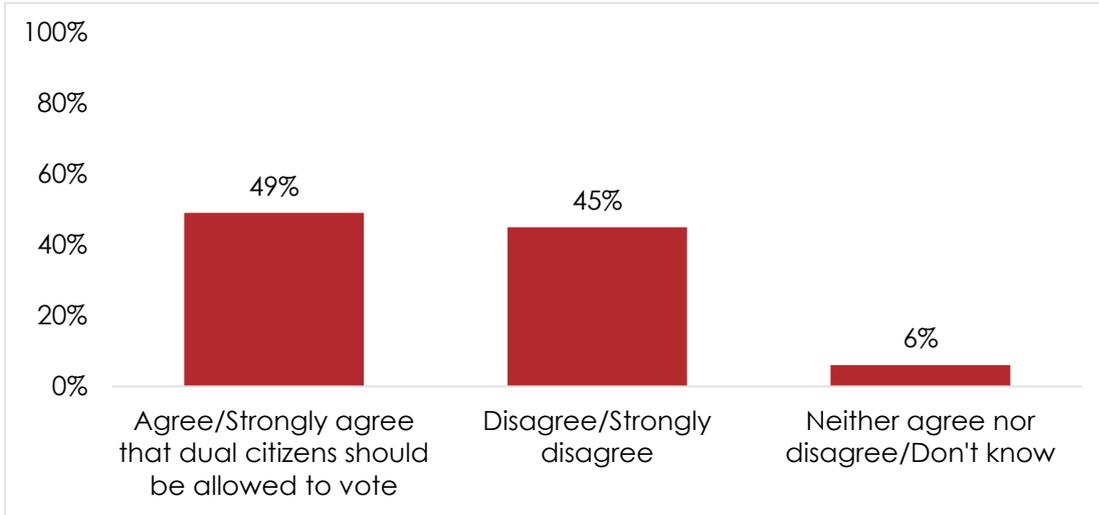
Citizens are more evenly divided on whether dual citizens should be allowed to vote – 49% say they should, while 45% think otherwise (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Should dual citizens be allowed to stand for election? | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to stand for elected office during elections in this country?

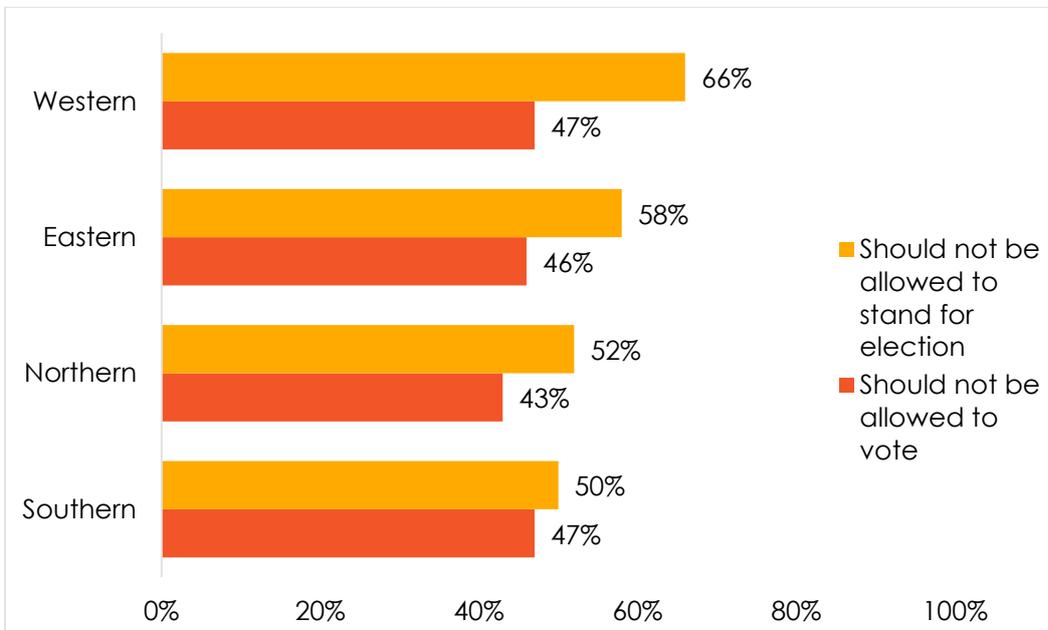
Figure 8: Should dual citizens be allowed to vote? | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to vote in general elections in this country?

The call for dual citizens not to be allowed to stand for political office is more pronounced in the Western and Eastern regions (66% and 58%, respectively) and is weakest in the South (50%) and North (52%) (Figure 9). But views on whether dual citizens should be allowed to vote are similar across regions.

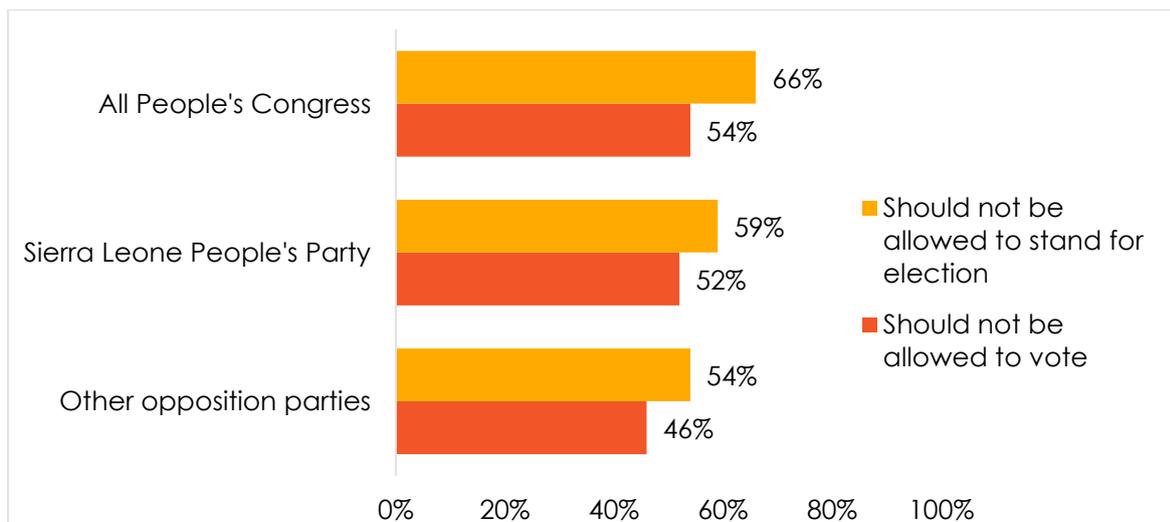
Figure 9: Dual citizens should not be allowed to vote or stand for election
 | by region | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
 Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to vote in general elections in this country?
 Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to stand for elected office during elections in this country?
 (% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with each statement)

Despite the newly elected government's promise to review the law governing electoral participation by dual citizens, few members of Parliament have publicly expressed support for the proposed review (Mansaray, 2020). Perhaps not surprisingly, the opinion that dual citizens should not be allowed to stand for election is more widely shared by Sierra Leoneans who "feel close to" the APC (66%), but it also the majority view among adherents of the SLPP (59%) and of other parties (54%) (Figure 10). Opposition to allowing dual citizens to vote shows a similar pattern among supporters of the APC (54%), SLPP (52%), and other parties (46%).

Figure 10: Dual citizens should not be allowed to vote or stand for elections
 | by political party affiliation | Sierra Leone | 2018



Respondents were asked:

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements:

Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to vote in general elections in this country?

Persons that hold citizenship of Sierra Leone and that of another country should be allowed to stand for elected office during elections in this country?

(% who "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with each statement)

Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If "yes":) Which party is that? (Figure excludes respondents who say they do not feel close to any political party.)

Conclusion

The Afrobarometer Round 7 survey in Sierra Leone shows strong support for and satisfaction with the country's democracy, including support for multiparty competition and high confidence in the neutrality of the National Electoral Commission. But citizens are split on whether dual citizens should be allowed to vote, and a majority say they should not be allowed to stand for elected office. Opposition to electoral candidacies by dual citizens is widespread among all political parties. This issue of dual citizens' political rights – the two-SIM controversy – should be clarified in time for the next elections in 2023.

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References

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan 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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 344 | 20 February 2020