

# Double standard? Ugandans see vote buying as ‘wrong and punishable,’ vote selling less so

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 415 | Ronald Makanga Kakumba**

## Summary

Buying and selling votes is illegal in Uganda, punishable by up to three years in prison and/or a fine, according to the Parliamentary Elections Act (Government of Uganda, 2005). Analysts argue that voter bribery fosters a broader environment of corruption that impedes economic development, political accountability, and the provision of public goods (Stokes, 2005; Robinson & Verdier, 2013; Khemani, 2015).

Even so, many observers say that some Ugandan politicians provide money and goods to voters and target gifts to constituents who are likely to reciprocate with their votes. According to the Electoral Commission’s (2011) report to Parliament on the 2010/2011 elections, bribery and commercialization of elections were among the main concerns that election observers raised. The Democracy Monitoring Group (2011), a consortium of four civil society organizations, described vote buying in Ugandan elections as “pervasive.”

How do ordinary Ugandans see the exchange of incentives for votes?

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey suggest that vote buying is not uncommon in Uganda. While a majority of Ugandans view it as “wrong and punishable” for candidates or political party officials to give out money or gifts in exchange for votes, fewer condemn voters who accept money in return for their votes. The proportion of citizens who think it is “not wrong at all” for voters to accept money has almost tripled over the past decade.

In fact, one in three Ugandans say they were personally offered incentives such as food, a gift, or money in return for their votes in the 2016 elections.

As Uganda heads toward the 2021 general elections, these findings point to a need for more voter-education campaigns as well as stronger implementation of laws against voter bribery.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Ugandans in September-October 2019. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2017, along with pre- and post-election surveys in 2010 and 2011.

## Key findings

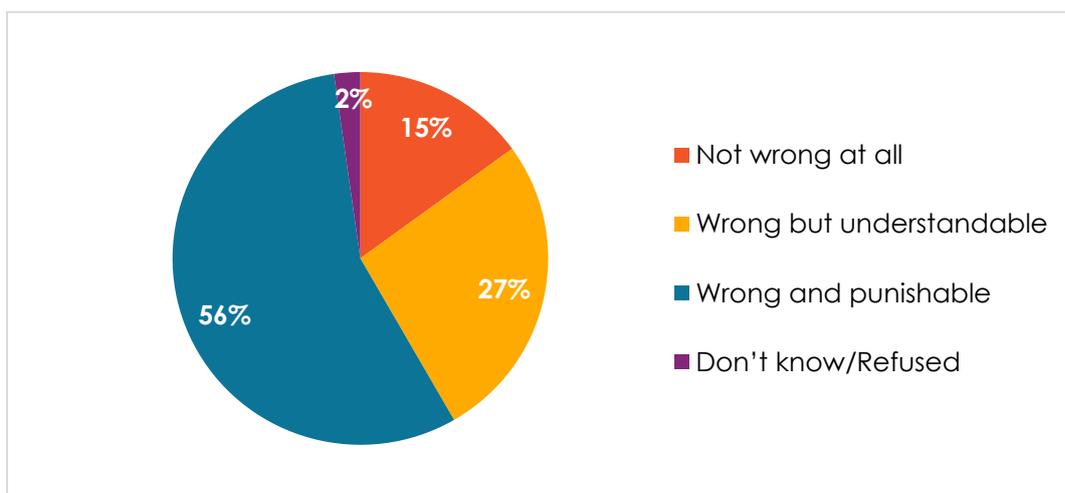
- A majority (56%) of Ugandans say it is “wrong and punishable” for candidates or political party officials to offer money in return for a vote, a 7-percentage-point increase from 2010. One in four (27%) consider the practice “wrong but understandable.” Only 15% say it is “not wrong at all.”
- However, only about four in 10 (39%) consider it “wrong and punishable” for voters to receive money in return for their votes. The proportion of respondents who say it is “not wrong at all” for voters to accept money increased by 15 percentage points between 2010 and 2019, from 9% to 24%.
- One-third (34%) of Ugandans say they were offered incentives such as gifts, money, or food in return for their votes in the 2016 election. Less educated and poor citizens are more likely to report being offered voting incentives than their more educated and better-off counterparts.
- Among 34 African countries surveyed in 2011/2013, Uganda recorded the highest percentage of respondents (41%) who said they were offered voting incentives.
- In 2015, half of Ugandans said voters are “always” (31%) or “often” (19%) bribed in the country’s elections. A quarter (25%) said voter bribery occurs “sometimes,” while only 18% said voters are “never” bribed.

## Is it wrong? Vote buying vs. vote selling

A majority (56%) of Ugandans say it is “wrong and punishable” for a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote (Figure 1). Another one in four (27%) consider it “wrong but understandable,” while only 15% say it is “not wrong at all.”

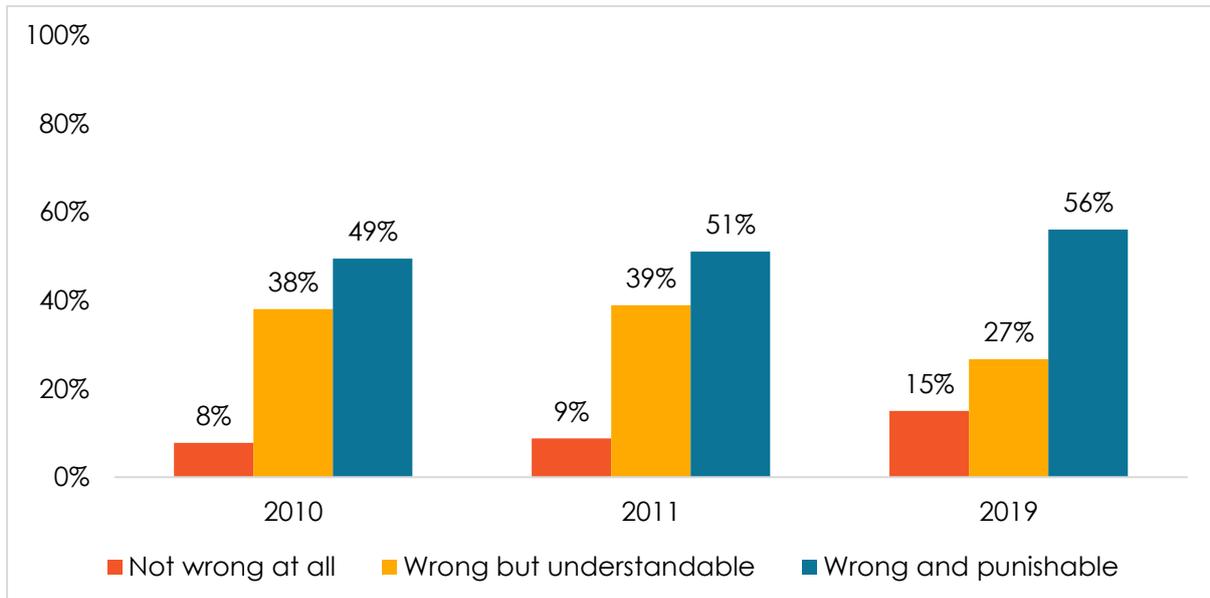
Over the past decade, the proportion of citizens who say it is “wrong and punishable” for a candidate or political party official to offer money in return for a vote has increased by 7 percentage points, from 49% in 2010 to 56%, while the share of those who consider the practice “wrong but understandable” declined by 11 percentage points, from 38% in 2010 to 27% in 2019 (Figure 2).

**Figure 1: Wrong to offer money in return for vote?** | Uganda | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** In some places in Uganda, candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their vote. Do you think it is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote?

**Figure 2: Wrong to offer money in return for vote? | Uganda | 2010-2019**

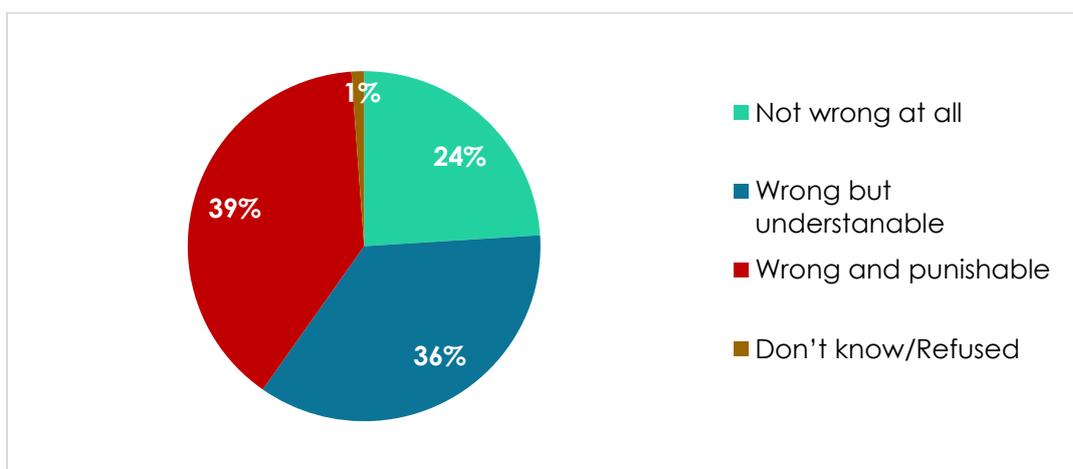


**Respondents were asked:** In some places in Uganda, candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their vote. Do you think it is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote?

But even though a majority of Ugandans disapprove of vote buying by politicians, only about four in 10 (39%) say it is “wrong and punishable” for voters to accept money in return for their votes. More than one-third (36%) say it is “wrong but understandable” for voters to accept money, and about one-fourth (24%) consider vote selling “not wrong at all” (Figure 3).

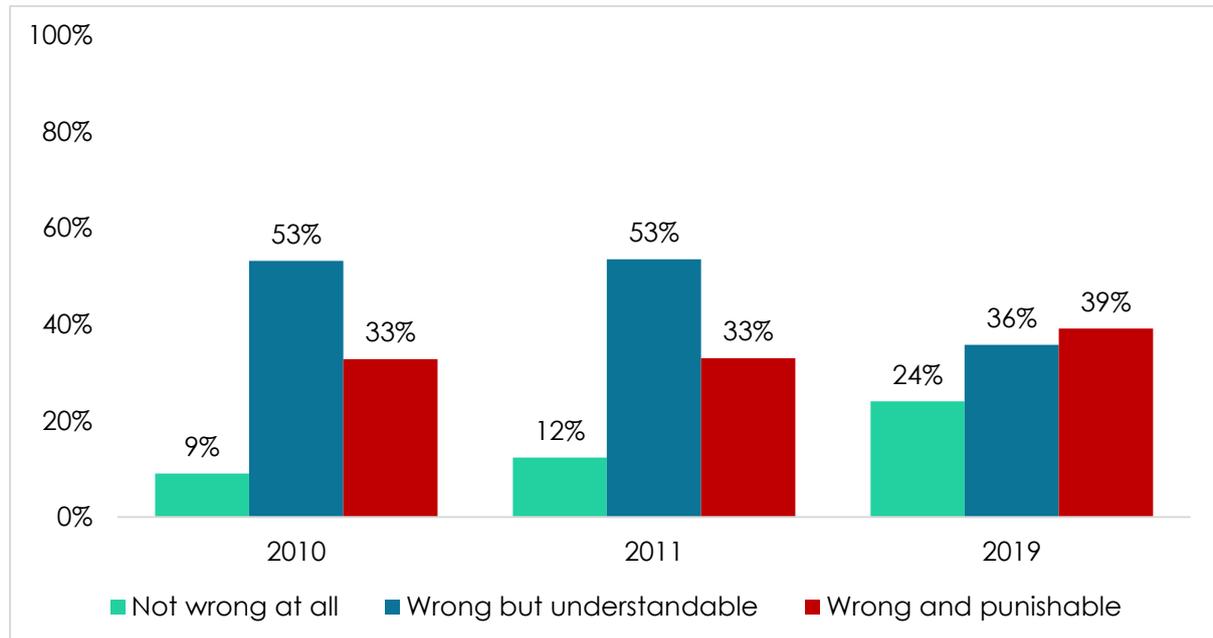
Between 2010 and 2019, the proportion of citizens who say it is “not wrong at all” for voters to accept money in return for their vote increased by 15 percentage points, from 9% to 24% (Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Wrong to accept money in return for vote? | Uganda | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** In some places in Uganda, candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their vote. Do you think it is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a voter to accept money in return for his or her vote?

**Figure 4: Wrong to accept money in return for vote? | Uganda | 2010-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** *In some places in Uganda, candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their vote. Do you think it is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a voter to accept money in return for his or her vote?*

The more negative view of vote buying by politicians than of vote selling by voters holds across almost all major socio-demographic groups, reaching a 26-percentage-point gap in urban areas (61% vs. 35%) (Figure 5).

With respect to vote buying, urban residents (61%), men (59%), economically better-off individuals<sup>1</sup> (59%-62%), and citizens with secondary (60%) or post-secondary (64%) education are more likely than their counterparts to say it is unlawful and punishable for a candidate or political party official to offer money in return for a vote. Respondents with no formal education are particularly likely to consider the practice “wrong but understandable” (36%) or “not wrong at all” (26%) (not shown).

Across different age groups and political party affiliations,<sup>2</sup> there is little difference in how citizens perceive politicians offering electoral handouts.

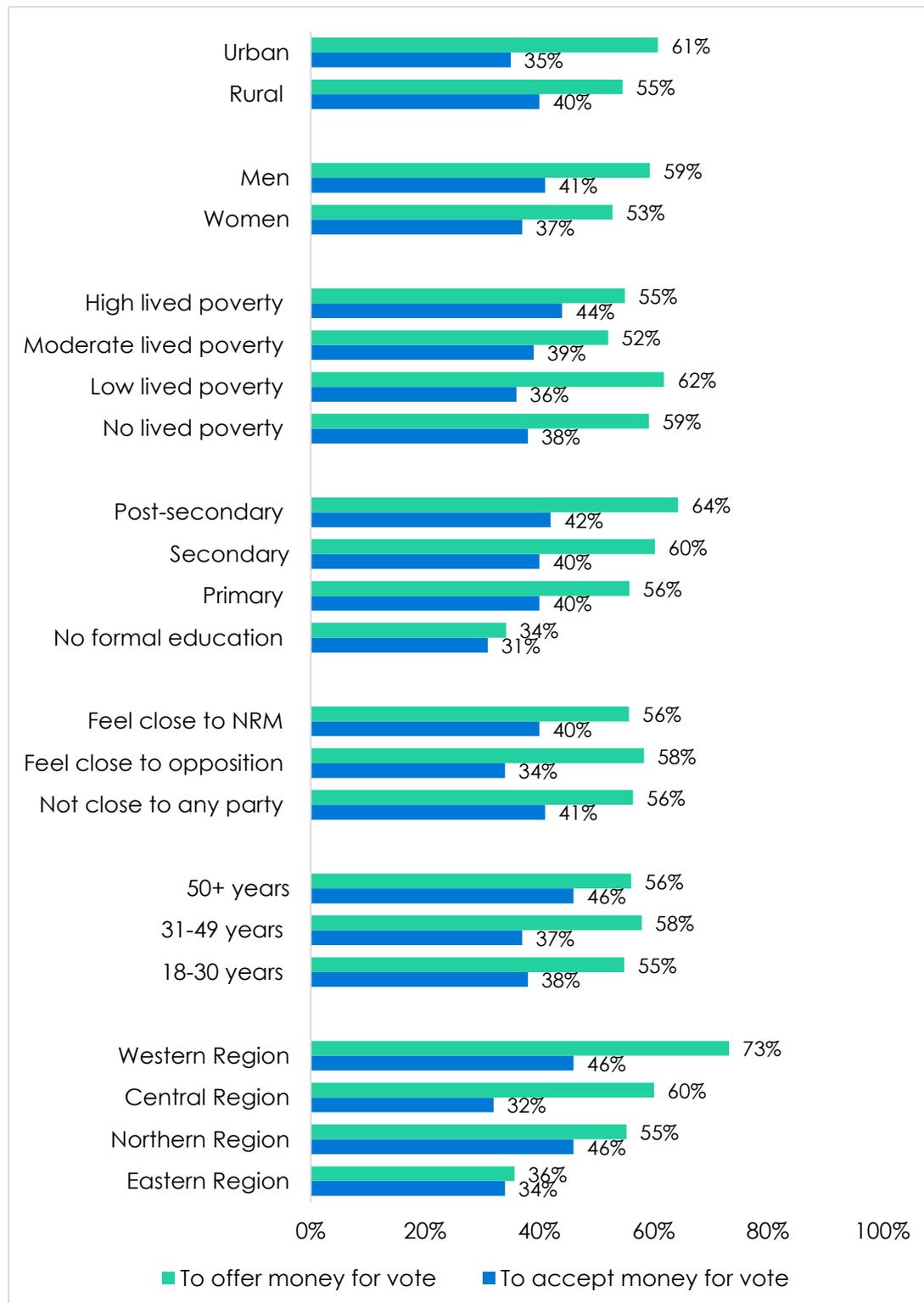
Almost three-fourths (73%) of residents in the Western Region disapprove of paying for votes – twice as many as in the Eastern Region (36%).

When it comes to vote selling, rural residents, men, the poorest citizens, more educated respondents, and older people are somewhat more likely to disapprove, but differences and patterns are less pronounced than for attitudes toward vote buying.

<sup>1</sup> 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 (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

**Figure 5: 'Wrong and punishable' to offer/accept money in return for vote**  
 | by socio-demographic group and region | Uganda | 2019

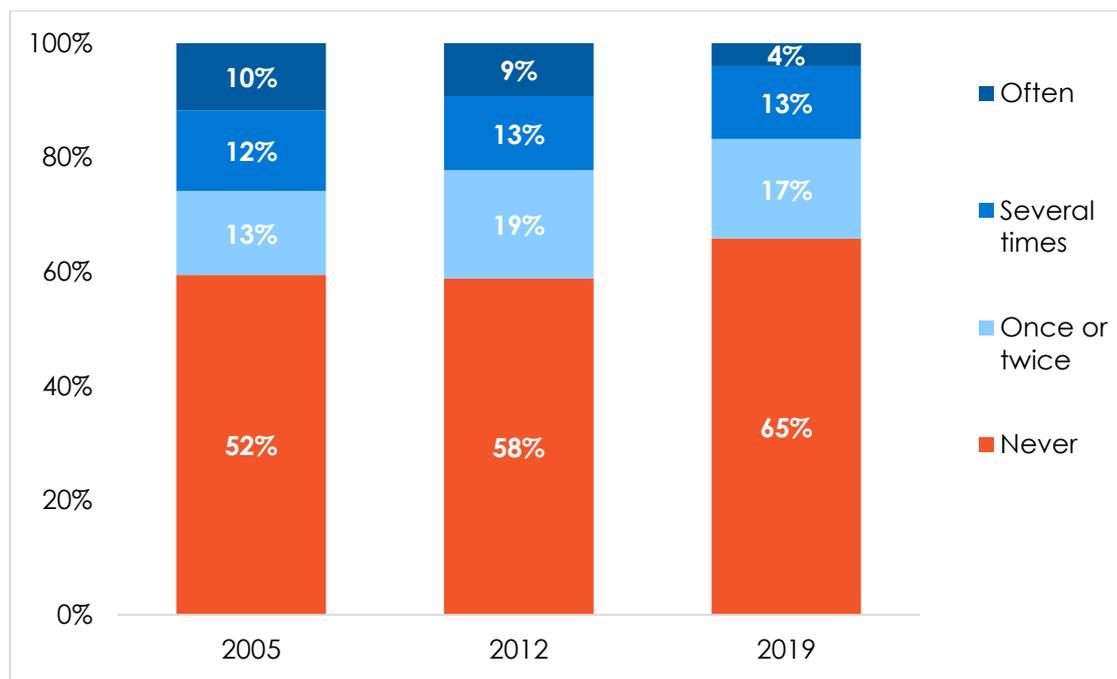


**Respondents were asked:** In some places in Uganda, candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their vote. Do you think it is not wrong at all, wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable: For a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote? For a voter to accept money in return for his or her vote? (% who say "wrong and punishable")

## Citizens' experience of voter bribery in Uganda

To gauge citizens' experience with voter bribery, Afrobarometer has asked in several survey rounds, "During the last national election in [20XX], 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?" In 2019 in Uganda, one-third (34%) of respondents say they were offered election incentives at least once during the 2016 election, down from 41% during the 2011 election (reported in the 2012 survey) and about the same as in the 2001 election (35%, reported in the 2005 survey) (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: Offered voting incentive during last election? | Uganda | 2005-2019**



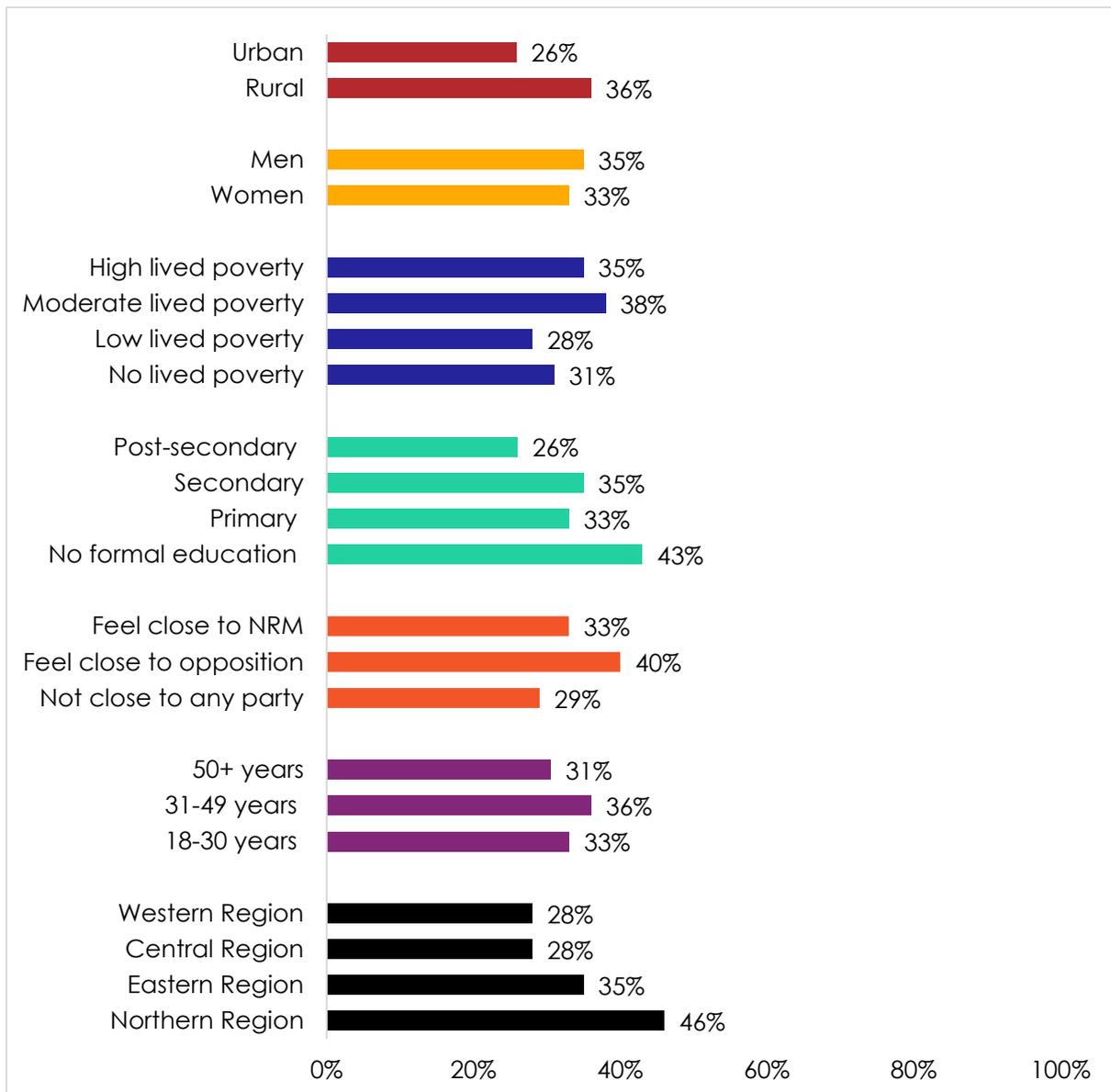
**Respondents were asked:** During the last national election in [20XX], how often, if ever, did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, a gift, or money, in return for your vote?

In the 2016 election, the self-reported experience of being offered incentives in exchange for one's vote was significantly more common among the least educated (43%) than among the most-educated citizens (26%), as well as among rural residents (36%) compared to urbanites (26%) (Figure 7). Opposition supporters (40%) are more likely to report being offered incentives to vote than are ruling-party supporters (33%) or non-partisans (29%).

The poorest (35%) and moderately poor (38%) are more likely than the moderately well-off (28%) and the wealthy (31%) to report being offered election incentives. Across regions, this experience was most common among residents of the Northern Region (46%).

These results suggest that citizens living in poverty are more often targeted with voting incentives than better-off people, although the differences are not very large. In the view of Stokes (2009), "poor people are risk-averse and hence value more highly a bag of goodies in hand today than the promise of redistributive public policy tomorrow." The differences by respondents' education are in line with literature on electoral clientelism suggesting that low education levels make people more vulnerable to vote buying (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007).

**Figure 7: Was offered voting incentive during last election** | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2019

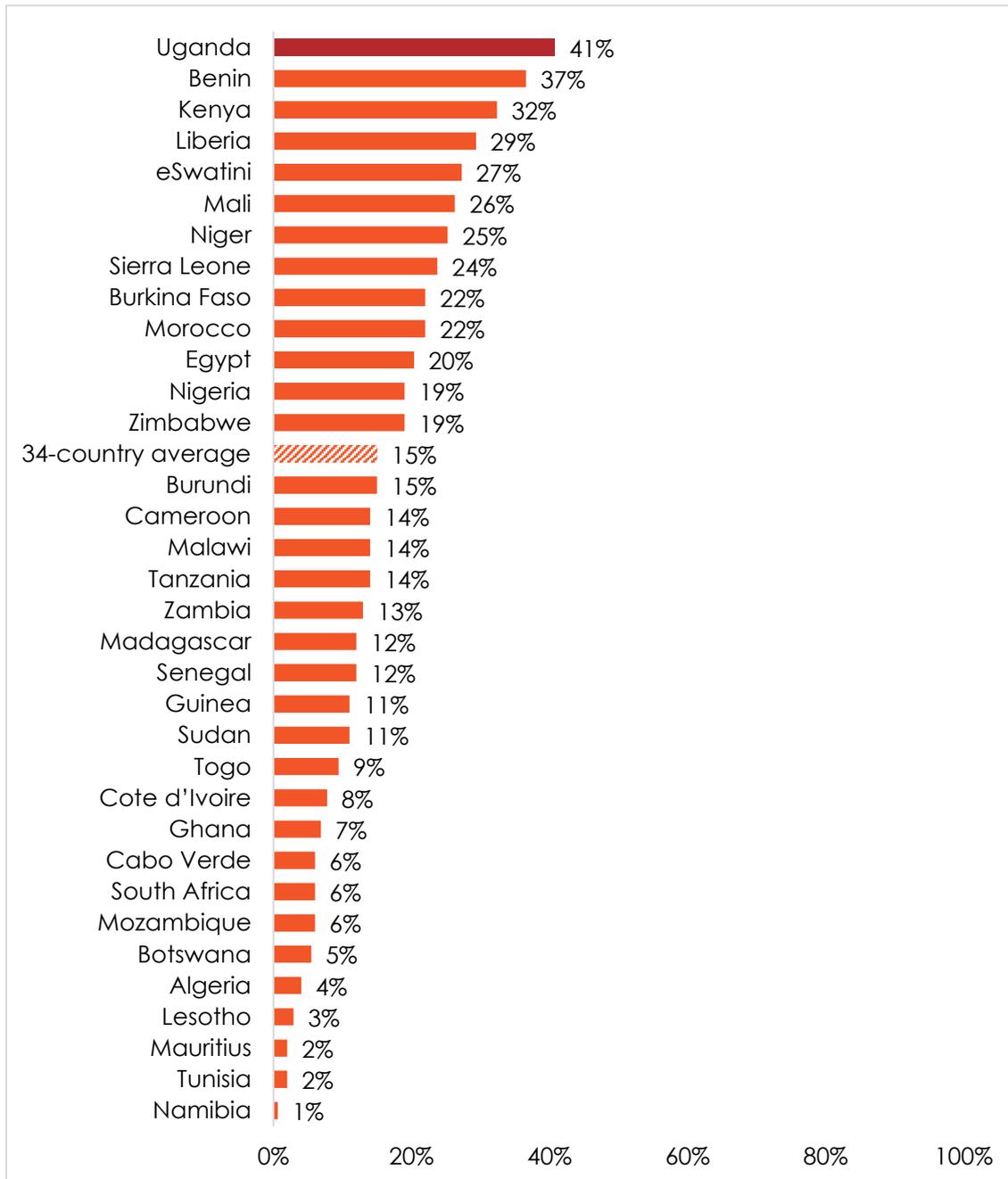


**Respondents were asked:** *During the last national election in 2016, how often, if ever, did a candidate or someone from a political party offer you something, like food, a gift, or money, in return for your vote? (% who say “once or twice” or “several times” or “often”)*

Countries vary widely in citizens' experience of voter bribery. The last time Afrobarometer asked this question across its full country sample, in 34 countries in Round 5 (2011/2013), Uganda recorded the largest proportion of respondents who said they were offered voting incentives such as food, a gift, or money at least once in the previous national election (41%), followed by Benin (37%), Kenya (32%), and Liberia (29%) (Figure 8).

In contrast, fewer than one in 20 citizens reported this experience in Namibia (1%), Tunisia (2%), Mauritius (2%), Lesotho (3%), and Algeria (4%).

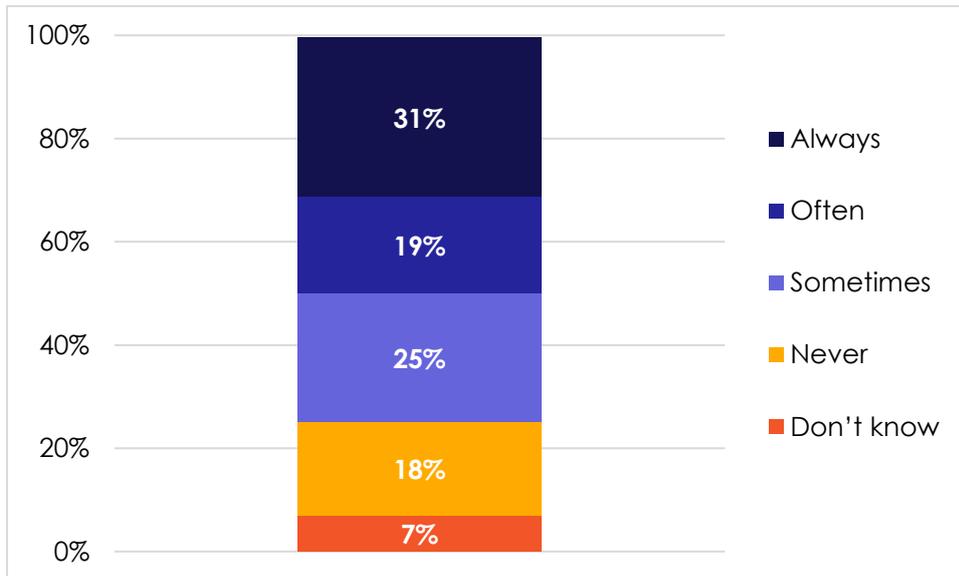
**Figure 8: Was offered voting incentive during last election** | 34 countries | 2011/2013



**Respondents were asked:** *During the last national election in [20XX], 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," "a few times," or "often")*

Another data point from 2015 confirms the idea that vote buying is not an uncommon occurrence in Uganda. Half of Ugandans said voters are "always" (31%) or "often" (19%) bribed in the country's elections. A quarter (25%) said this occur "sometimes," while only 18% said voters are "never" bribed (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: How often are voters bribed?** | Uganda | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Voters are bribed?*

## Conclusion

Despite its illegality, vote buying appears to be a fairly common practice in Uganda, personally experienced by a significant share of the population during election periods. While few citizens assert that voter bribery is “not wrong at all,” Ugandans are quicker to blame politicians for offering bribes than they are to blame voters for accepting them. This may reflect an understanding that ordinary people – especially poor people – may value “a bag of goodies in hand” (Stokes, 2009) more highly than policy promises from the campaign trail.

As Uganda heads toward the 2021 general elections, these findings suggest a need for more specific and directed voter education against vote buying, as well as stronger implementation of laws on voter bribery.

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**Ronald Makanga Kakumba** is a research associate for Hatchile Consult Limited, the Afrobarometer national partner in Uganda. Email: makanga.ronnie@gmail.com

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs 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.

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