

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

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 551¹ | 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 recognised 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 institutionalised 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 2019/2021 Afrobarometer data from 34 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 Bhoojedor (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.

¹ An earlier version of this dispatch, based on data from 18 countries surveyed before the COVID-19 pandemic forced a pause in Round 8 fieldwork, was published as Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 425.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 8 surveys were completed in 18 countries between August 2019 and March 2020 before fieldwork was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys in 16 more countries between October 2020 and July 2021 completed the 34-country round. (See Appendix Table A.1 for a list of countries and fieldwork dates.)

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.²

This 34-country analysis is based on 48,084 interviews. 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 34 countries, fewer than half (44%) of Africans say that elections work well to enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want. About the same proportion (42%) believe that their elections work well to ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the views of voters, on average across 22 countries where this question was asked ([Figure 1](#)).
 - Countries vary widely in their views of the efficacy of elections in enabling voters to hold their elected leaders accountable. In the Gambia, where Adama Barrow defeated long-standing President Yahya Jammeh in the 2016 elections, 85% of citizens say elections work well to enable voters to remove non-performing leaders. Large majorities agree in Ghana (69%) and Sierra Leone (64%), countries where opposition candidates won the presidency in 2016 and 2018, respectively. But majorities agree even in Tanzania (72%), where the incumbent won in 2020, and in Uganda (58%), which has elected the same president for more than three decades. In contrast, in Gabon, where two generations of the Bongo family have been in power since 1967, only 14% think elections serve this function well ([Figure 2](#)).
 - Across 19 countries surveyed regularly since 2008/2009, the belief that elections function poorly in enabling voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want has risen by 6 percentage points, from 41% to 47% ([Figure 3](#)).
 - More educated citizens are less likely to affirm the efficacy of elections (39% of those with post-secondary qualifications vs. 47%-48% of those with only primary schooling or no formal education), as are urban compared to rural residents (41% vs. 47%) ([Figure 4](#)).

² The weighted Mozambique Round 8 sample is nationally representative except that it excludes rural Cabo Delgado, comprising 6.3% of the adult population of Mozambique. Insecurity and resulting difficulties in obtaining necessary fieldwork clearances prevented Afrobarometer from collecting sufficient data in this area.

- On average, three-quarters (75%) of Africans say they want to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, including 51% who feel “very strongly” about this issue ([Figure 5](#)).
 - Support for elections exceeds two-thirds of the population in 27 of the 34 countries, including 90% in Liberia, 88% in the Gambia, and 87% in Benin and Sierra Leone. Lesotho is the only country where fewer than half (40%) endorse elections as the best way to choose leaders ([Figure 6](#)).
 - Across 30 countries surveyed regularly since 2011/2013, support for elections has declined by 8 percentage points over the past decade, from 83% to 75%. Lesotho, where citizens have little trust in political leadership (Malephane, 2022), records the largest decline (-23 percentage points), followed by Tunisia (-21 points), South Africa (-20 points), and Malawi (-18%).³ Only Sierra Leone shows significantly stronger support for elections than a decade ago (+11 points) ([Figure 7](#)).
 - While differences by demographic group are small, support for elections is highest among citizens with no formal education (79%) and older citizens (78% of those aged 56 and above) ([Figure 8](#)).
- More than six out of 10 Africans (63%) endorse multiparty competition as necessary to give voters real choices, while 35% say the presence of many parties just creates division and confusion. Opposition to multiparty competition is the majority view in just three countries, Senegal (53%), Tunisia (59%), and Lesotho (62%) ([Figure 9](#)).
 - On average, support for multiparty competition has been stable across the 30 countries surveyed regularly since 2011/2013, increasing by just 1 percentage point. But three countries experienced double-digit declines, including a remarkable 34-point drop in Lesotho. At the other extreme, four countries recorded double-digit increases in support for having many parties, led by a 24-point rise in Eswatini, where citizens took to the streets in June 2021 to call for democratic reforms, including unbanning political parties (Dlamini, 2021) ([Figure 10](#)).
- Participation in elections is almost as high as support for elections: Almost three-fourths (71%) of Africans (excluding those who would have been too young to vote) say they voted in the most recent national 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 (89%), Liberia (88%), Mauritius (87%), and Guinea (87%) stand out with high self-reported voting rates, while fewer than half of Sudanese (39%) and Cameroonians (43%) say they cast their ballots ([Figure 12](#)).
 - Men (74%) and rural residents (76%) are more likely than women (69%) and urbanites (66%) to report having voted. Young adults (63%) are considerably less likely to vote than their elders (79%-83%). And citizens with at least a secondary education (67%-68%) are less likely to say they voted than those with less schooling (74%-77%) ([Figure 13](#)).

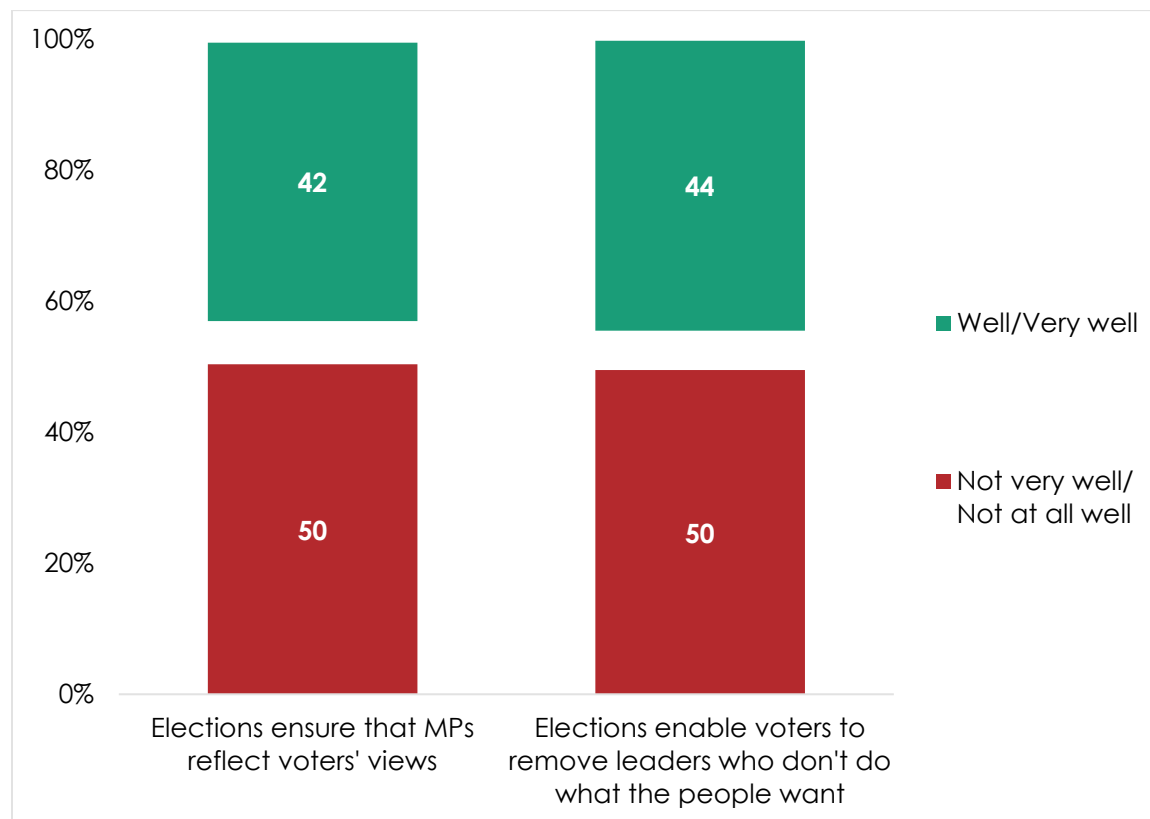
³ Malawi data were collected in November-December 2019, i.e. after the disputed May 2019 presidential election (which was later annulled) and before the June 2020 rerun.

- Almost nine out of 10 Africans (87%) say they feel “somewhat” or “completely” free to vote for candidates of their choice without feeling pressured, including clear majorities in every country ([Figure 14](#)).
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Africans say their country's most recent national election was free and fair (either “completely” or “with minor problems”). About three in 10 say it had “major problems” (13%) or was “not free and fair” (16%) ([Figure 15](#)). These assessments have varied little across the 30 countries that have been tracked since 2011 ([Figure 16](#)).
 - Citizens overwhelmingly describe their most recent election as generally free and fair in Tanzania (91%), Burkina Faso (86%), Liberia (83%), Ghana (82%), and Botswana (81%). Only 19% of citizens agree in Sudan, where turmoil since the last election in 2015 has repeatedly led to the postponement of elections. Assessments of election quality are also fairly bleak in Malawi (41% free/fair, referring to the May 2019 election) and in Gabon (31%), where 2016 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. About one in five say that people voted more than once (21%), that they feared becoming a victim of political violence or intimidation (19%), and that they were offered food, a gift, or money in exchange for their vote (19%). One in four respondents (25%) 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%), Malawi (57%, referring to the May 2019 election), and Sudan stand out, while fewer than one in 10 citizens make this complaint in Namibia (9%), Ghana (9%), Botswana (6%), Cabo Verde (6%), Burkina Faso (6%), and Tanzania (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 | 34 countries* | 2019/2021



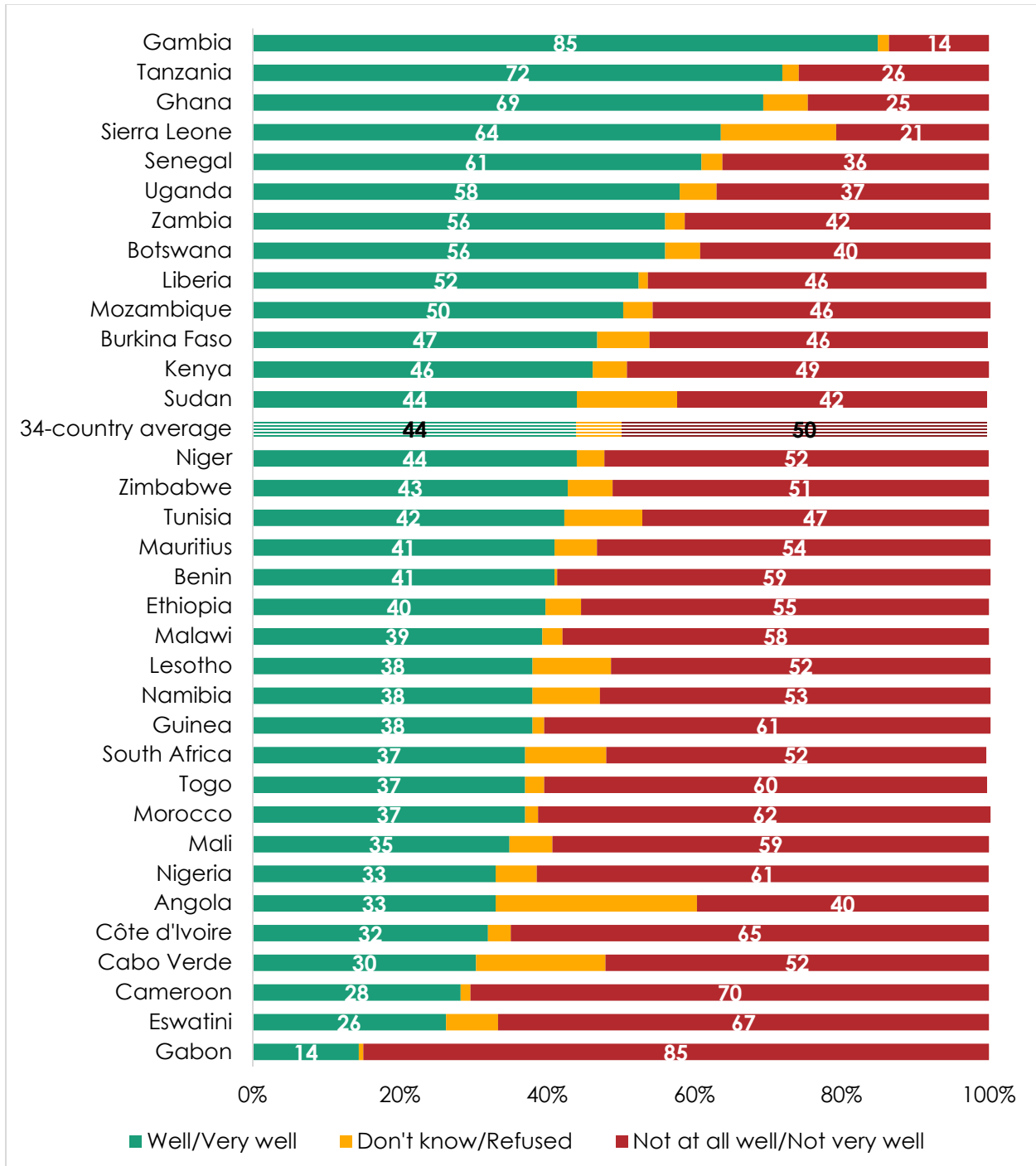
Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections:

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?

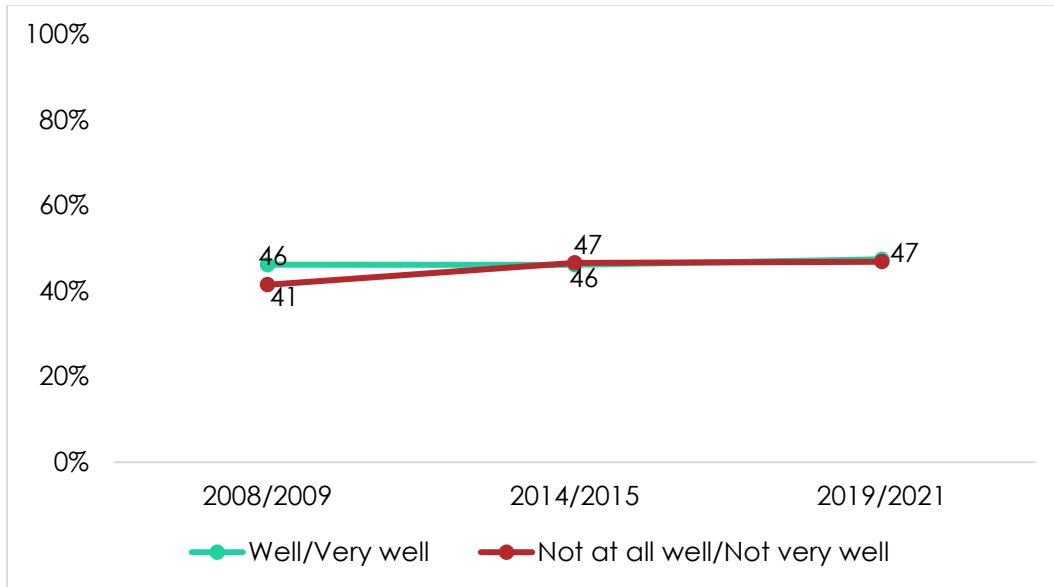
* The question about MPs was asked in only 22 countries: Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Tunisia, and Uganda.

Figure 2: Do elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders? | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



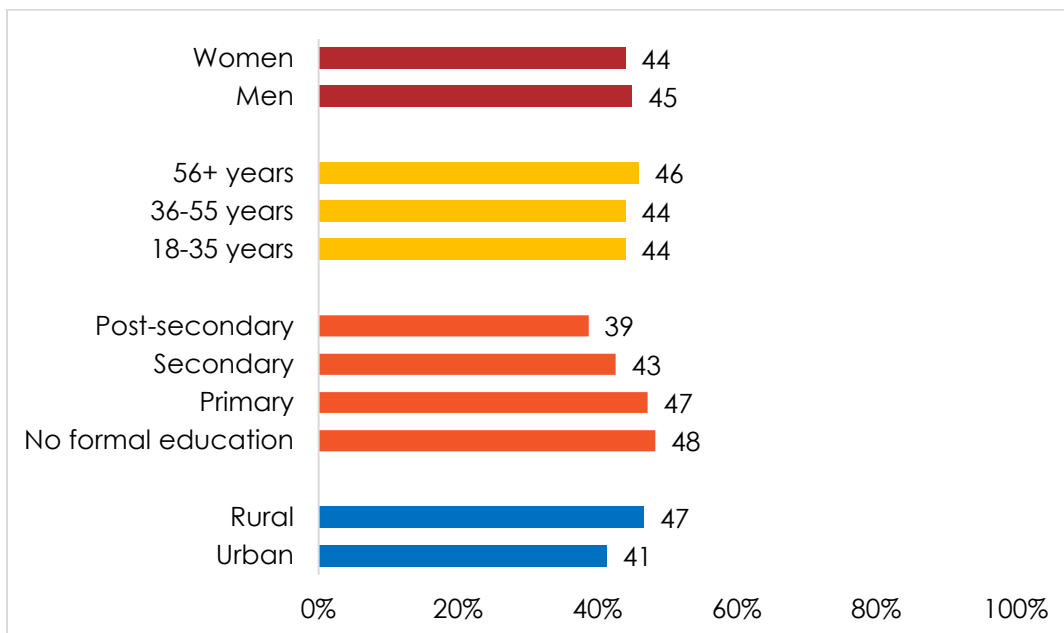
Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Figure 3: Do elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders? | 19 countries
 | 2008-2021



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?

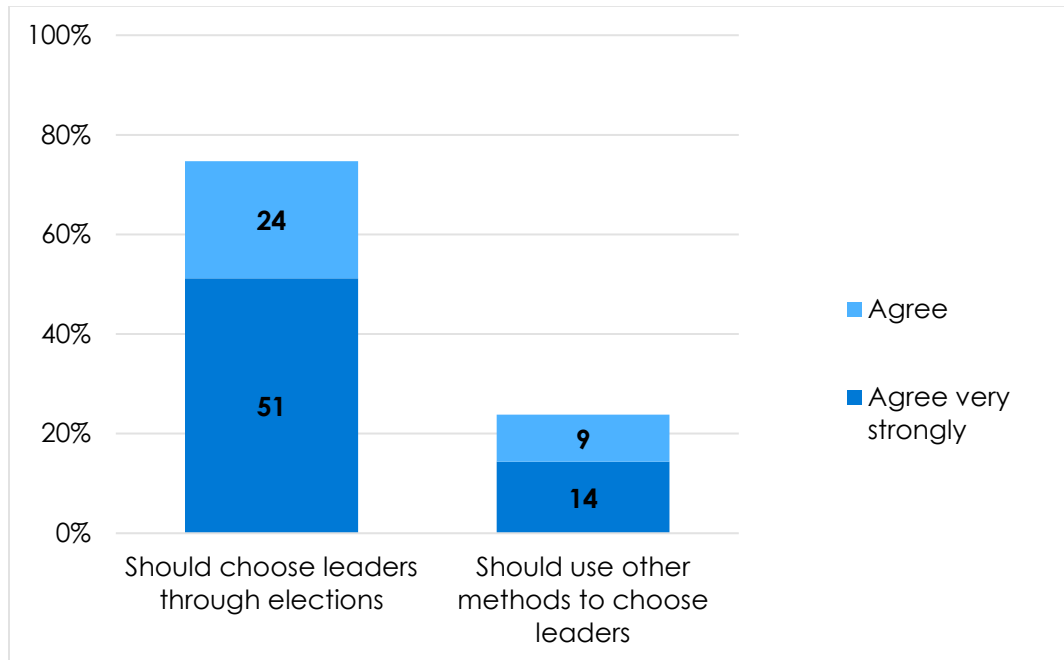
Figure 4: Elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders | by demographic group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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

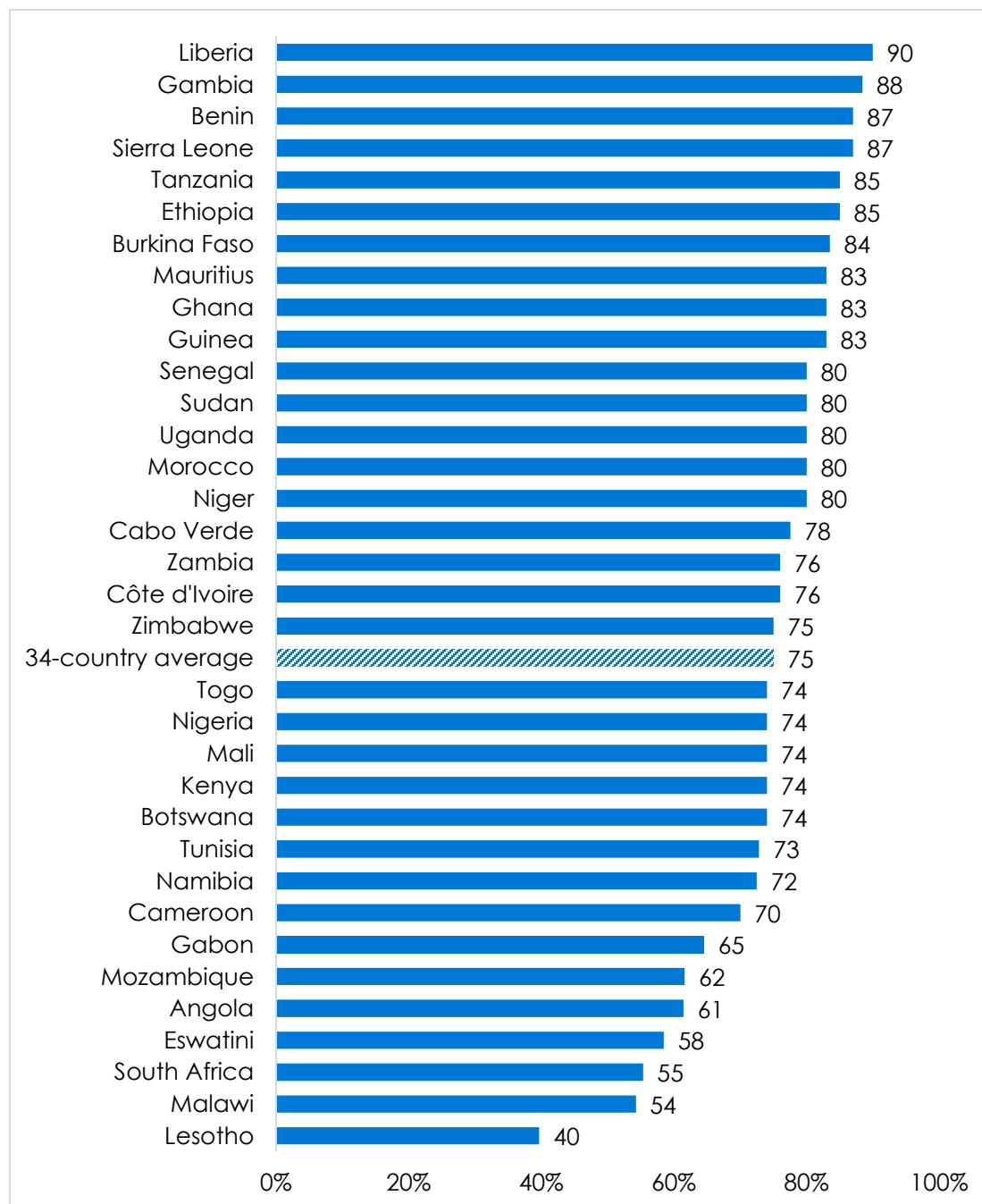
Figure 5: Support for elections | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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.

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Figure 6: Support for elections | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 | 30 countries | 2011-2021

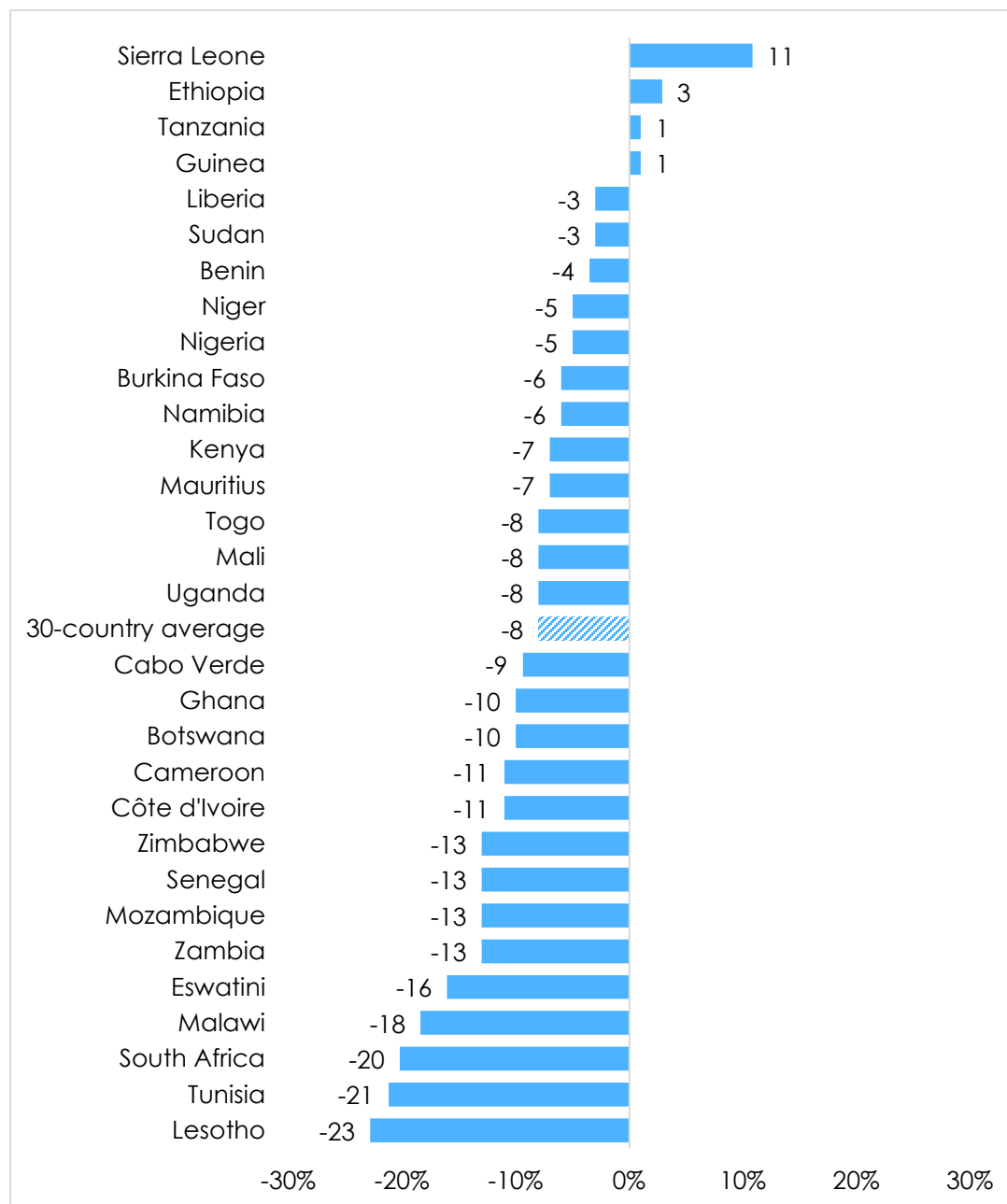
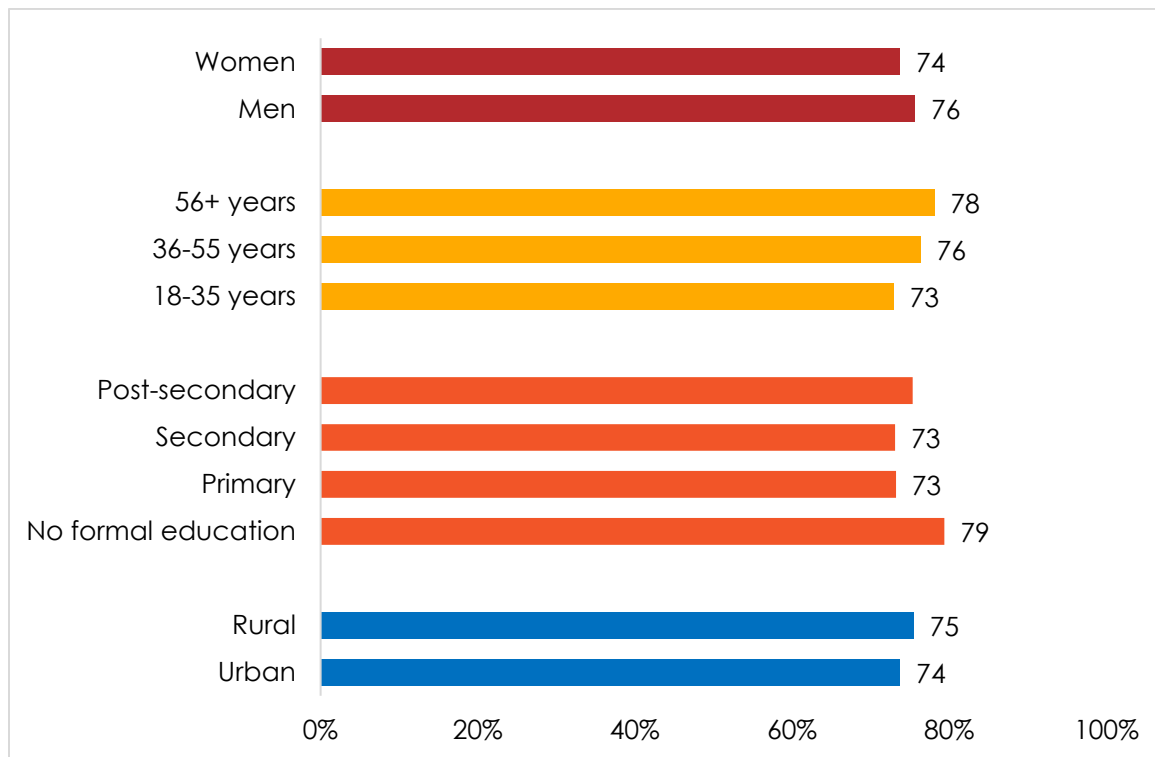


Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that leaders should be chosen through elections.

Figure 8: Support for elections | by demographic group | 34 countries | 2019/2021



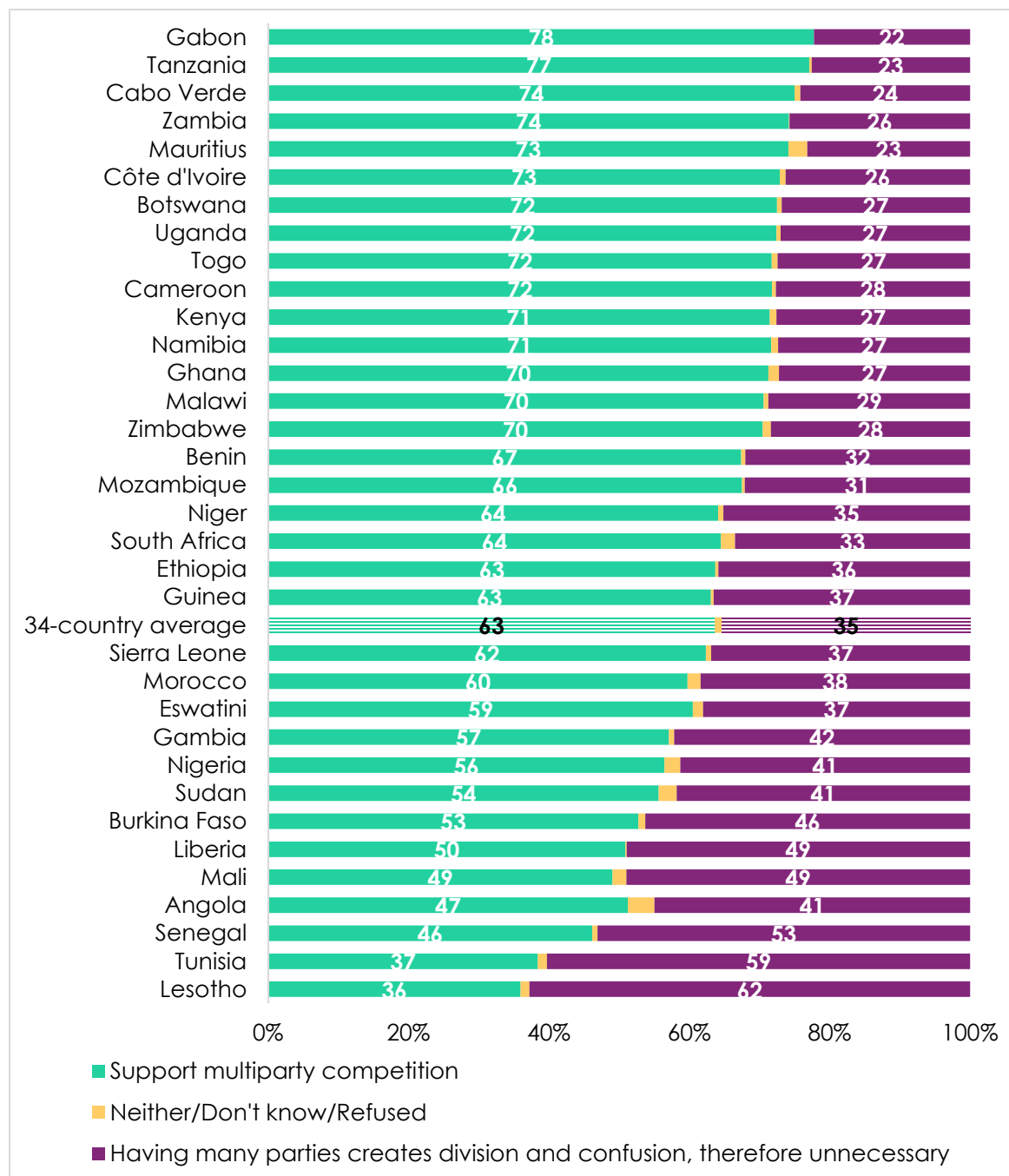
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Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

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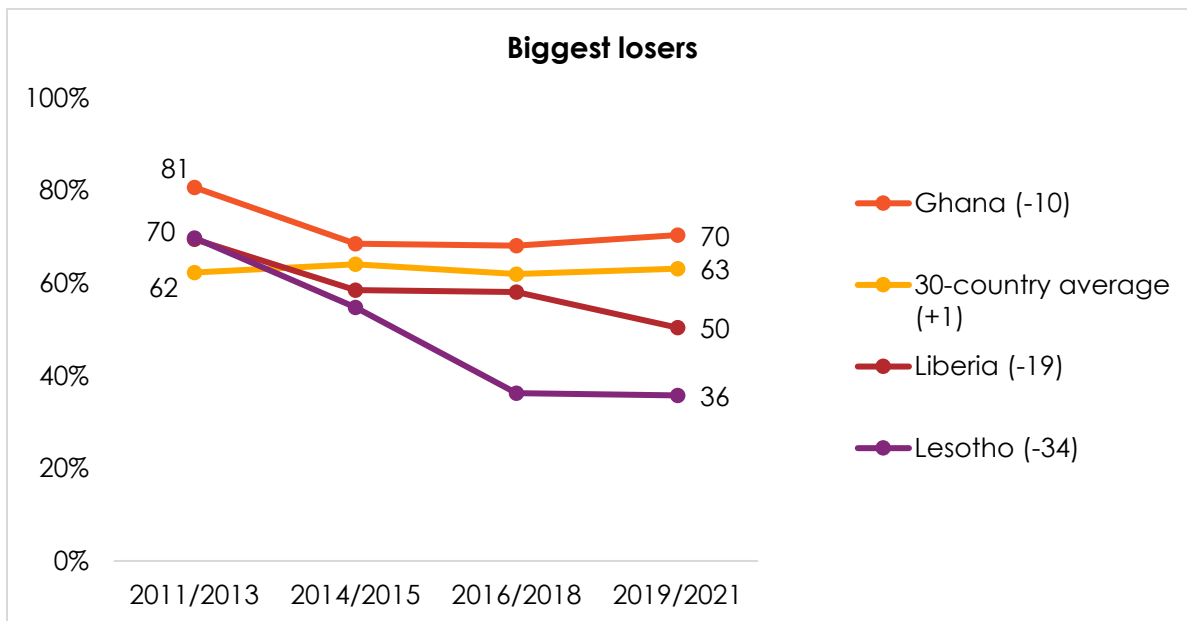
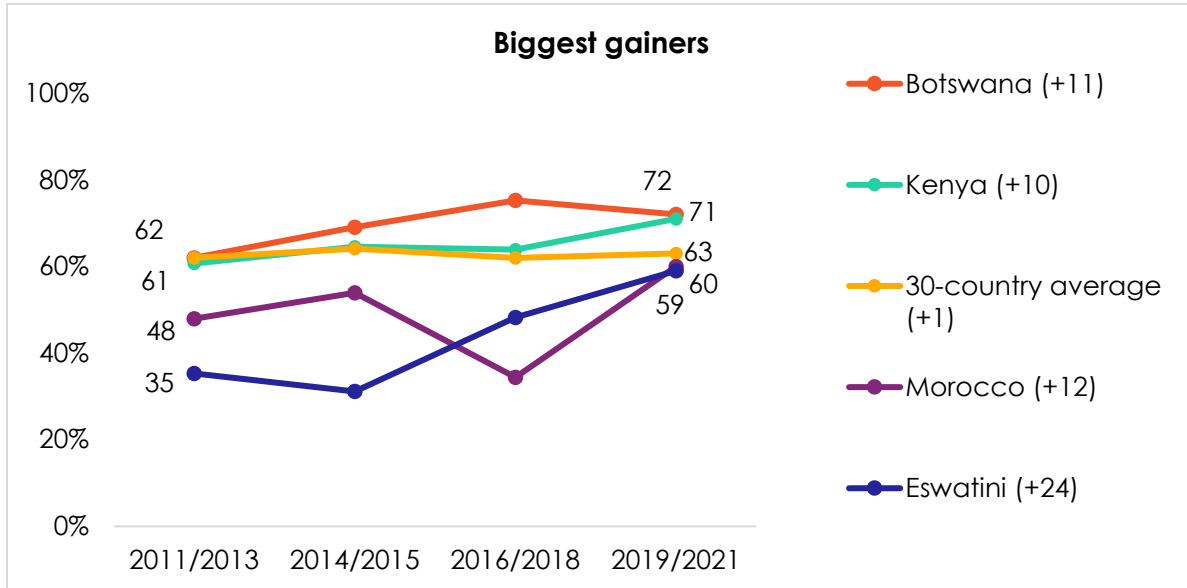
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through elections)

Figure 9: Support for multiparty competition | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 "strongly agree" with each statement)

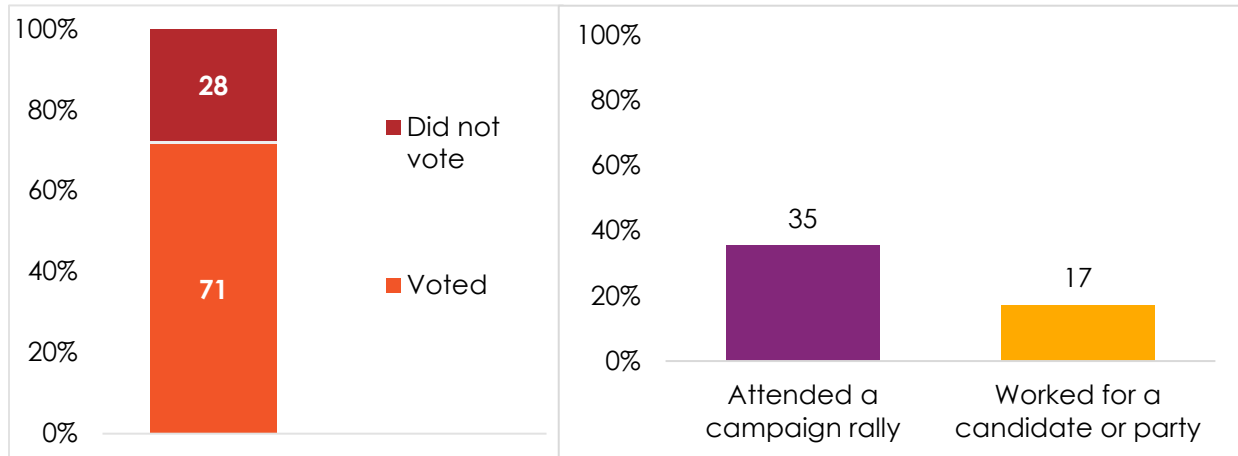
Figure 10: Support for multiparty competition | biggest gainers and losers | 2011-2021



(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that many political parties are needed to make sure that citizens have real choices in who governs them)

Participation in elections

Figure 11: Participation in electoral processes | 34 countries | 2019/2021

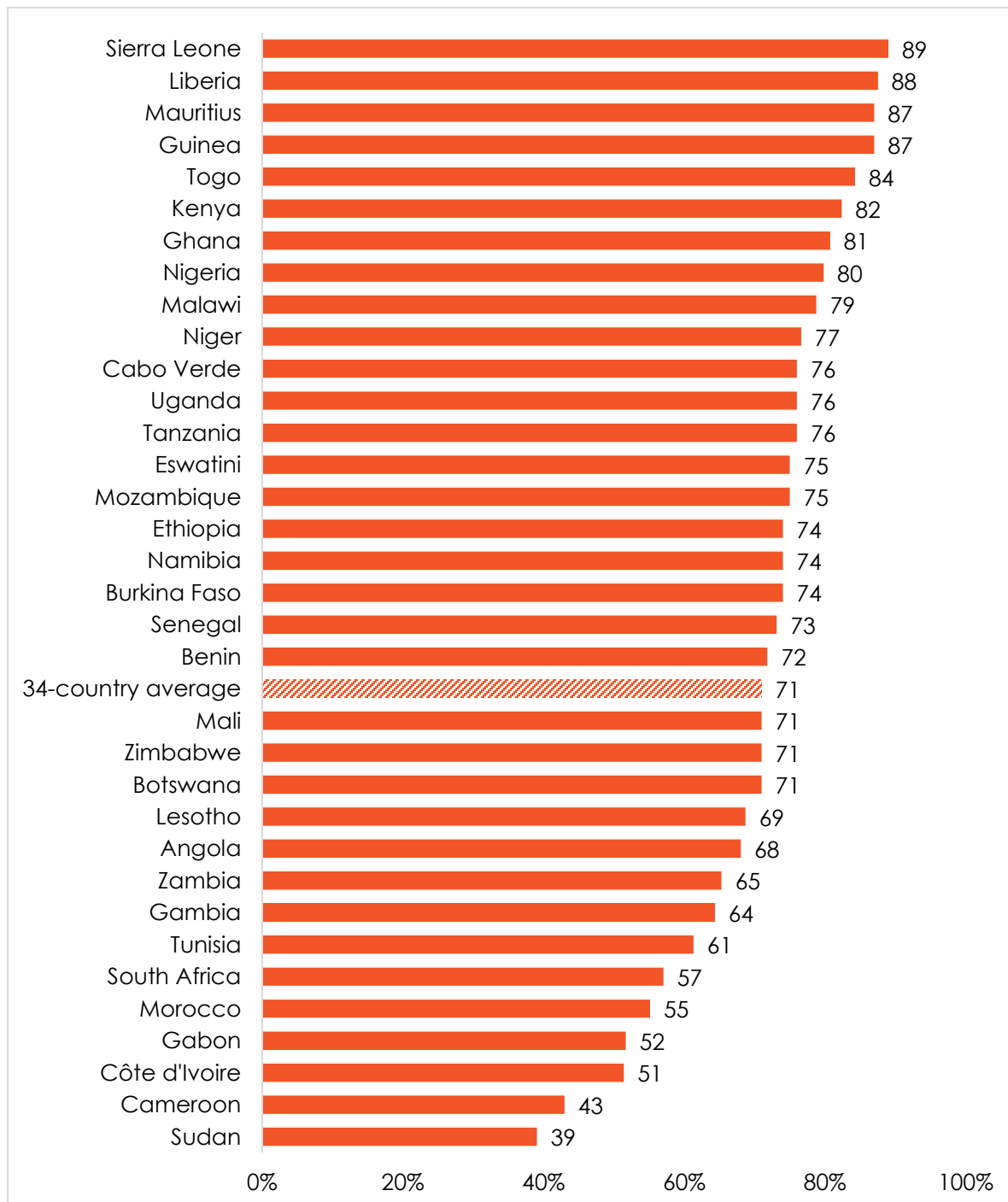


Respondents were asked:

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.)

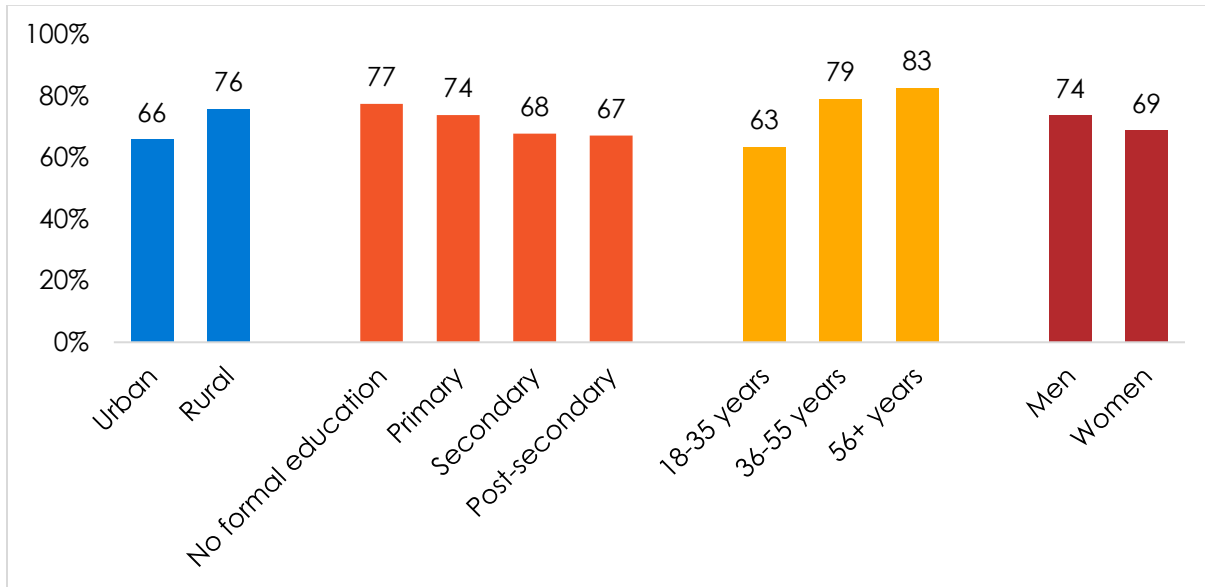
Thinking about the last national election: Did you attend a campaign rally? Did you work for a candidate or party?

Figure 12: Voted in most recent election | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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.)

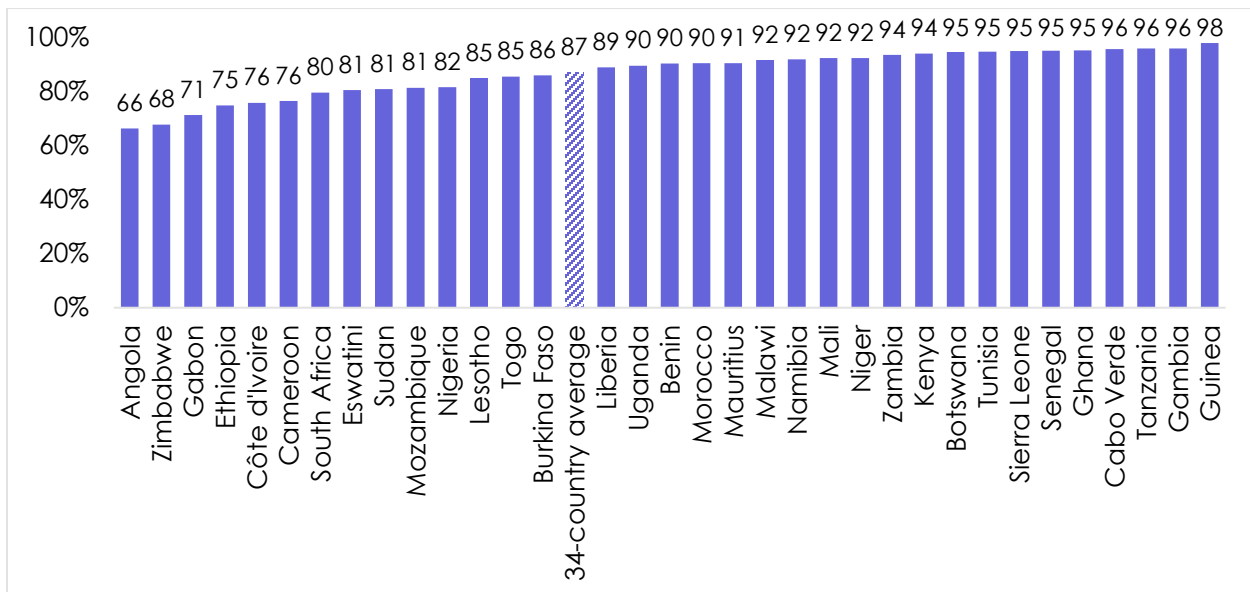
Figure 13: Voted in most recent election | by demographic group | 34 countries
| 2019/2021



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.)

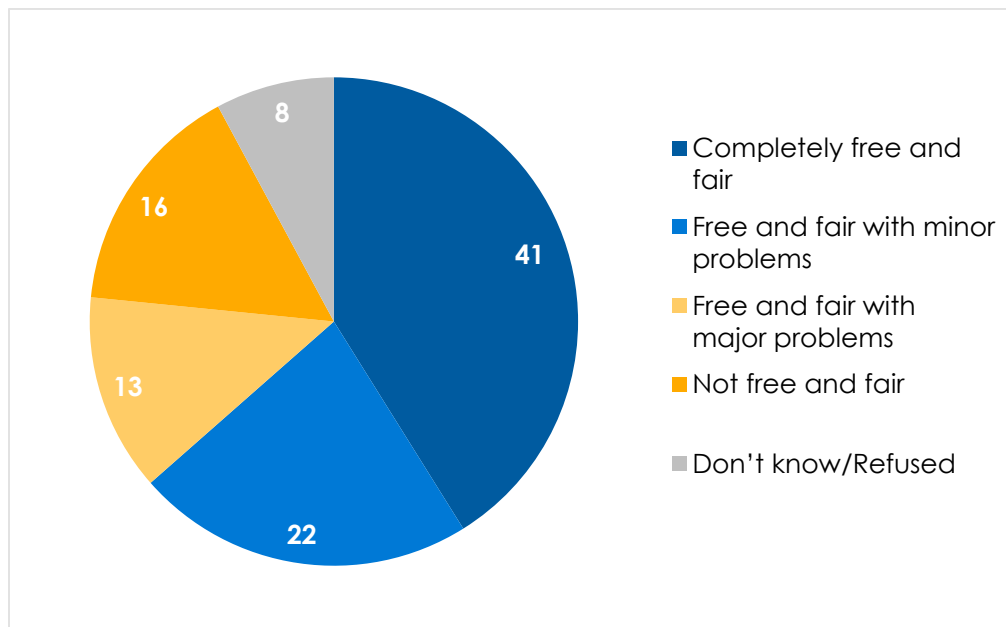
Quality and legitimacy of elections

Figure 14: Free to vote without pressure | 34 countries | 2019/2021



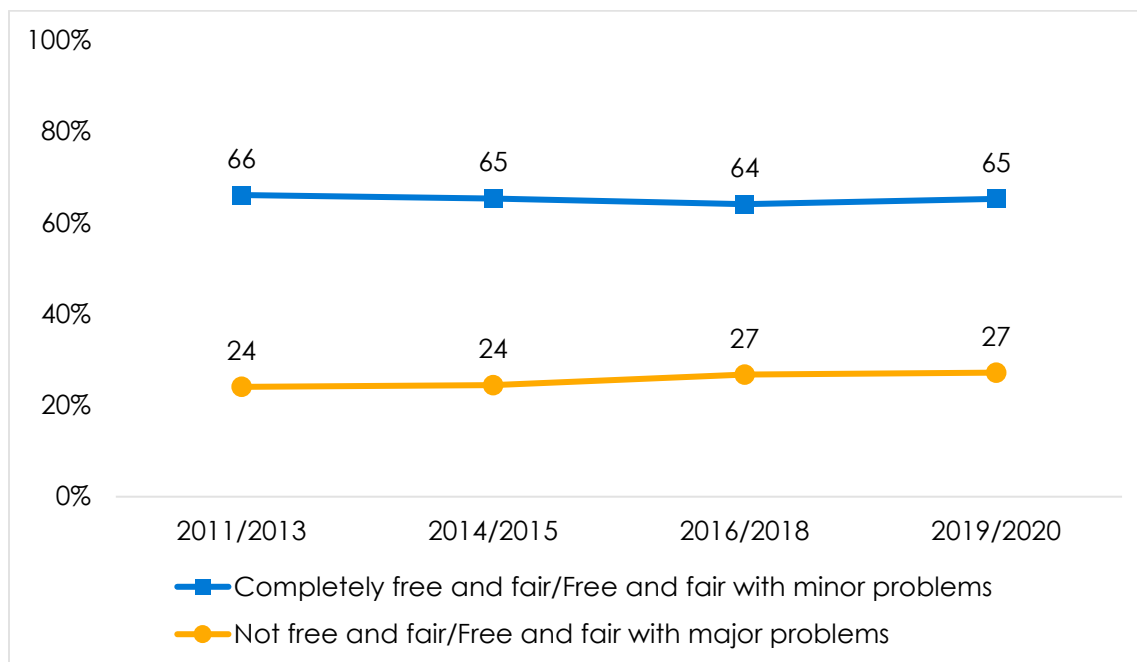
Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (% who say "somewhat free" or "completely free")

Figure 15: How free and fair was the most recent election? | 34 countries | 2019/2021



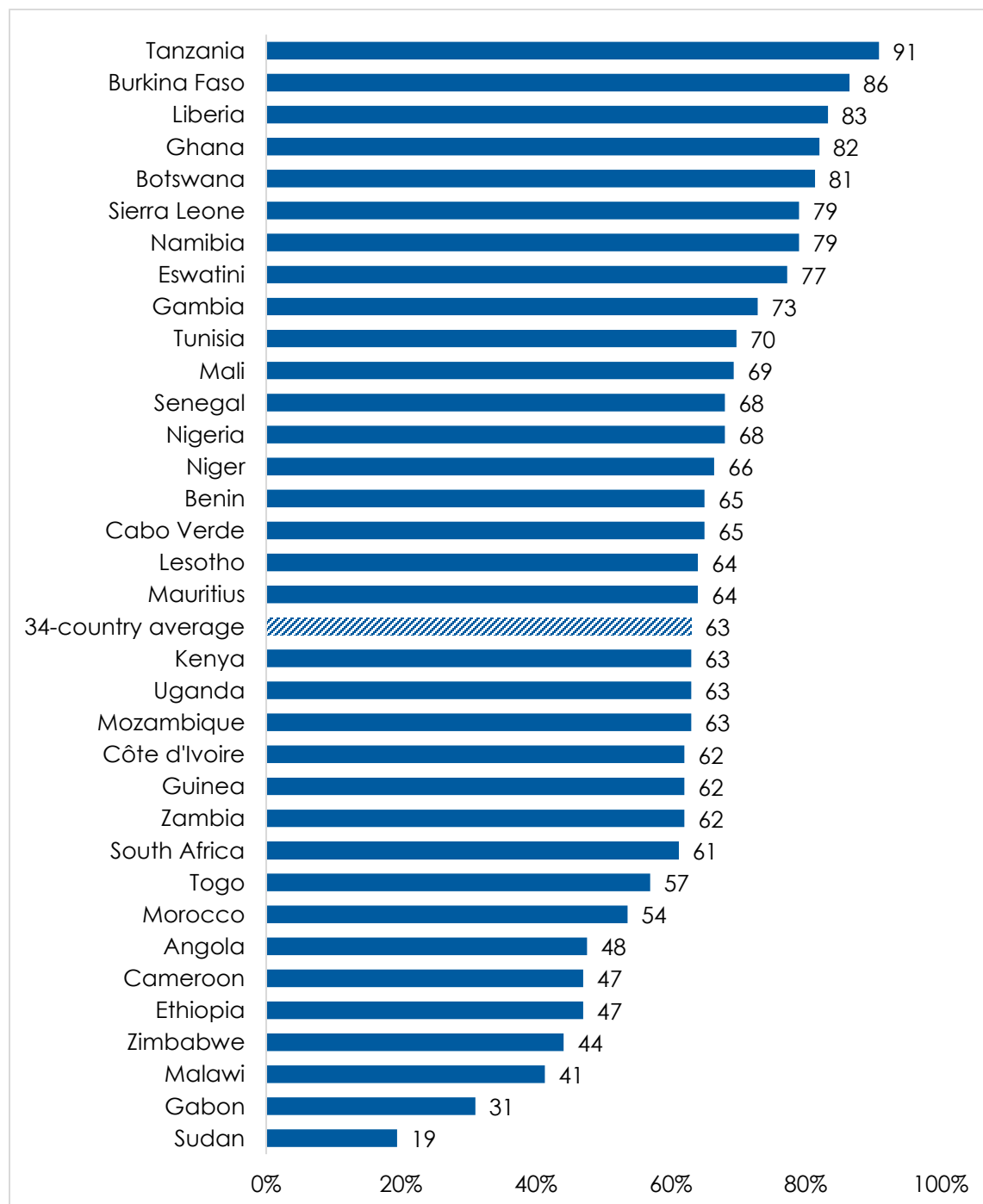
Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

Figure 16: How free and fair was the most recent election? | 30 countries | 2011-2021



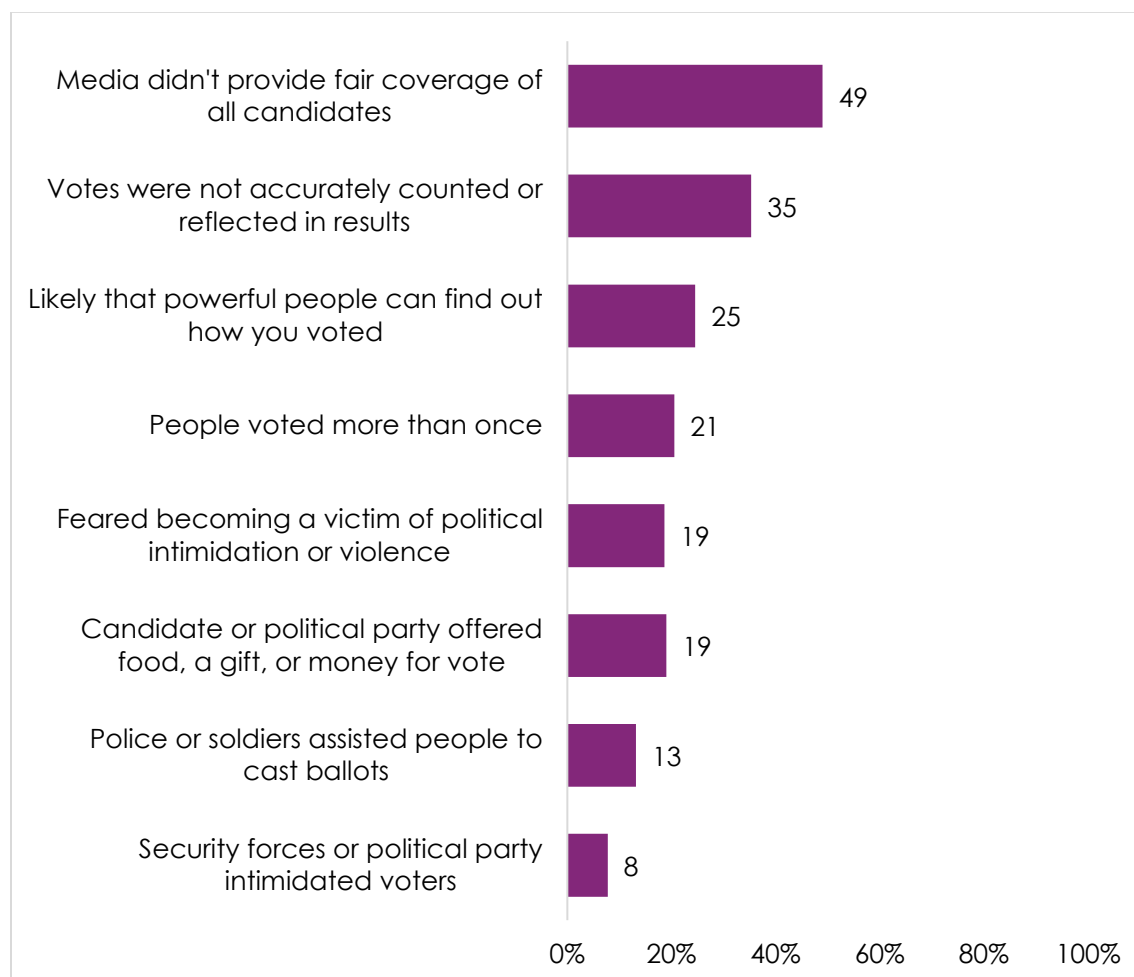
Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

Figure 17: Most recent election was free and fair | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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 | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



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")

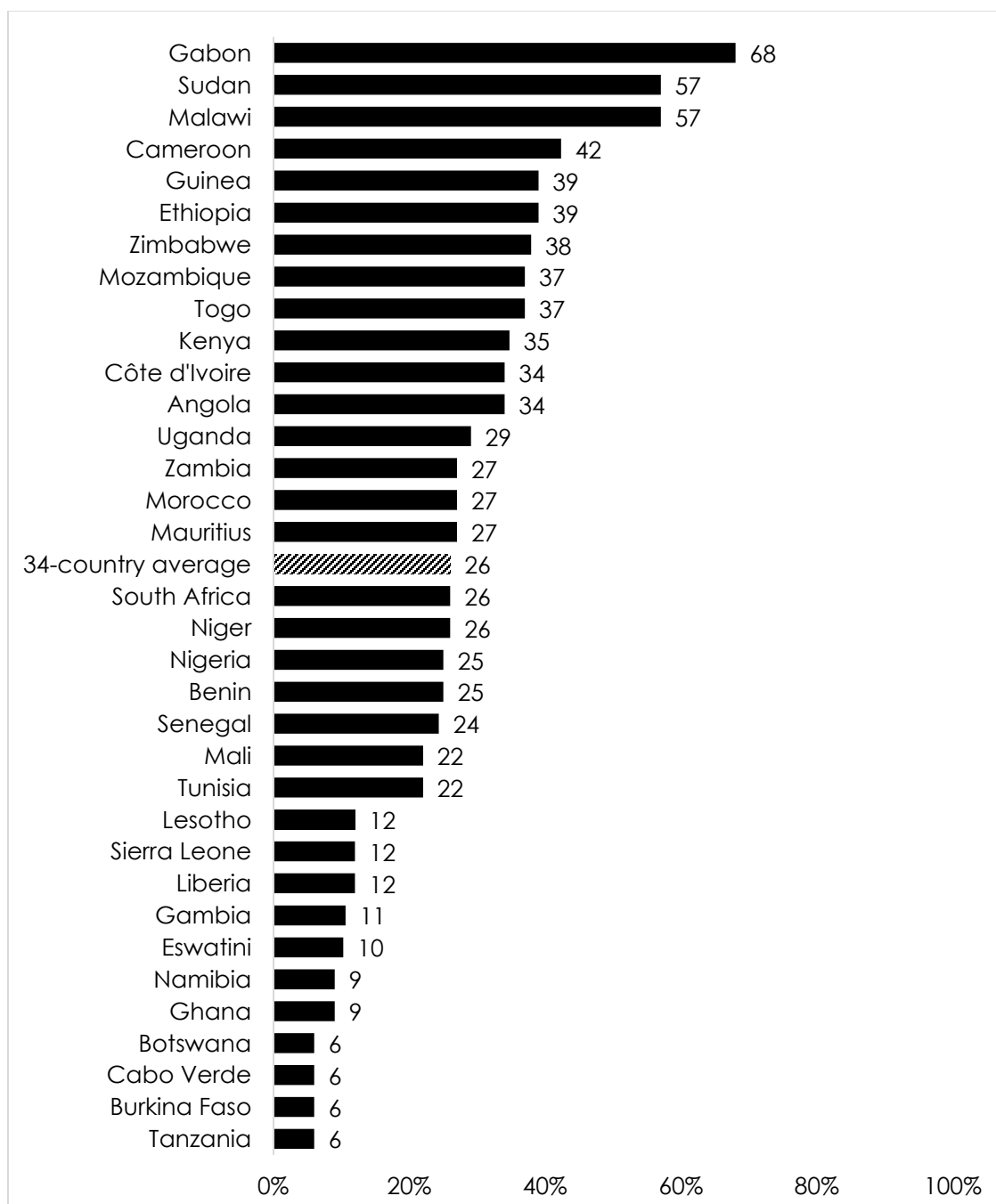
How much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

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 | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021



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 | 34 countries
 | 2019/2021

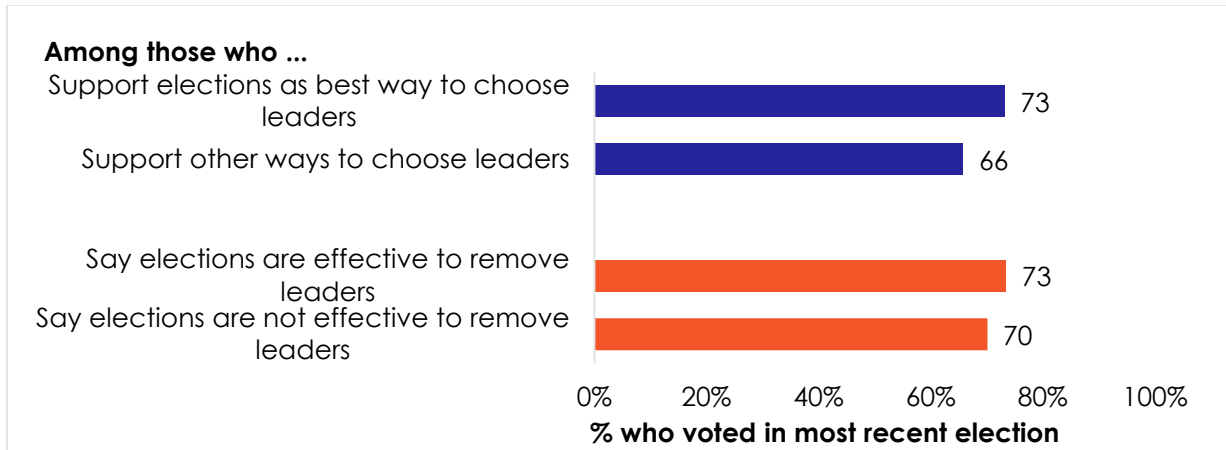
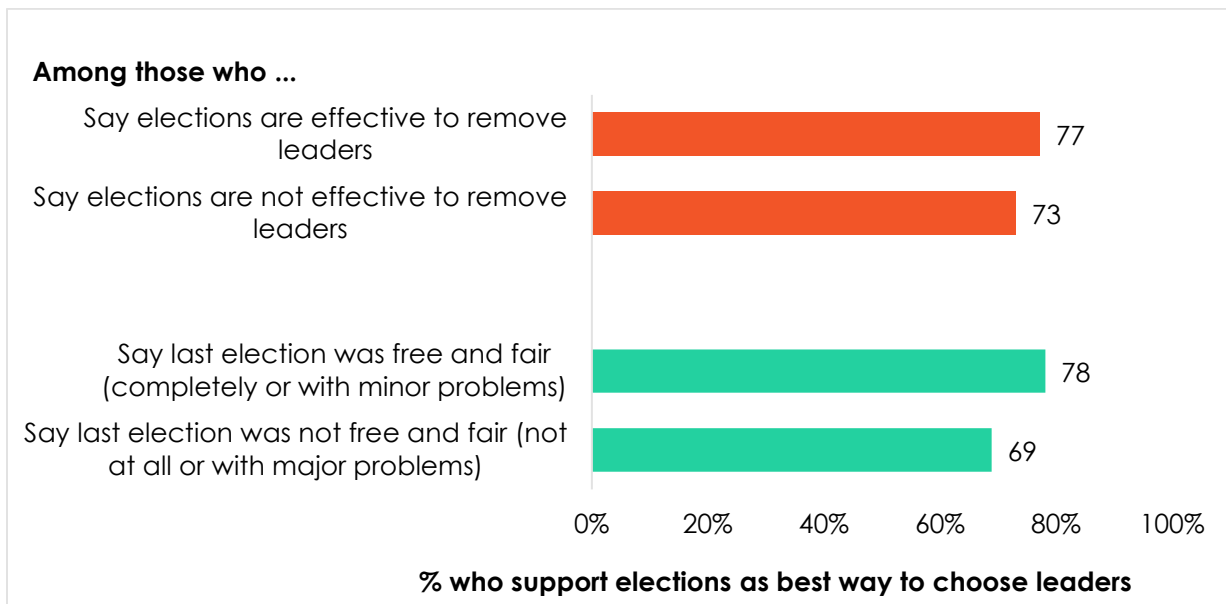


Figure 20b: Support for elections | by views on elections | 34 countries | 2019/2021



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	Round 8 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Angola	Nov.-Dec. 2019	N/A
Benin	Nov.-Dec. 2020	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Botswana	July-August 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Burkina Faso	Dec. 2019	2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Cabo Verde	Dec. 2019	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2017
Cameroon	Feb.-March 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Côte d'Ivoire	Nov. 2019	2013, 2014, 2017
Eswatini	March-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Ethiopia	DDc. 2019-Jan. 2020	2013
Gabon	Feb. 2020	2015, 2017
Gambia	Feb. 2021	2018
Ghana	Sept.-Oct. 2019	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Guinea	Nov.-Dec. 2019	2013, 2015, 2017
Kenya	August-Sept. 2019	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016
Lesotho	Feb.-March 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Liberia	Oct.-Dec. 2020	2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Malawi	Nov.-Dec. 2019	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Mali	March-April 2020	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Mauritius	Nov. 2020	2012, 2014, 2017
Morocco	Feb. 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Mozambique	May-July 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018
Namibia	August 2019	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Niger	Oct.-Nov. 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Nigeria	Jan.-Feb. 2020	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017
Senegal	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014, 2017
Sierra Leone	March 2020	2012, 2015, 2018
South Africa	May-June 2021	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2018
Sudan	Feb.-April 2021	2013, 2015, 2018
Tanzania	Feb.-March 2021	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017
Togo	Dec. 2020-Jan. 2021	2012, 2014, 2017
Tunisia	Feb.-March 2020	2013, 2015, 2018
Uganda	Sept.-Oct. 2019	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, 2017
Zambia	Nov.-Dec. 2020	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014, 2017
Zimbabwe	April-May 2021	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017

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