

Nigerians want competitive elections but don't trust the electoral commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 598 | Raphael Mbaegbu and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

On 25 February 2023, Nigeria will conduct its seventh general election since the nation returned to democracy in 1999. Ensuring a free, fair, and credible contest among 18 political parties competing in 774 local government areas, 18,818 electoral wards, and 176,846 polling units represents an enormous challenge, especially in a country riven by insecurity (Mefor, 2023; Asadu, 2023; Yusuf, 2023; Independent National Electoral Commission, 2023).

While Nigeria's previous elections may have deepened democratic practices and maintained civilian rule, they have also frequently been characterised by problems such as low voter turnout due to insecurity, hate speech, and allegations of ballot-box snatching, vote buying, and other forms of cheating (Yakubu & Habib, 2023).

The 2023 election will be the first under the country's 2022 Electoral Act, a new legislative framework that gives the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) the authority to determine how people go about voting and how election results are announced. The law also legalises technological innovations such as an electronic voter enrolment device, a voter accreditation system combining fingerprint and face biometrics to verify a voter's identity on Election Day, and a results-viewing portal (Acheme, 2022).

All of these may influence the perceived credibility of the upcoming election, but perhaps the most important factor will be how freely and safely voters feel they can cast their votes for the candidates of their choice.

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that while most Nigerians support elections as the best way to choose their leaders and want to see competition among multiple parties, sizable minorities have doubts about the quality of their elections, and few trust the institution responsible for ensuring a free and fair election.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 5 and 31 March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

- Most Nigerians (71%) support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- A similarly clear majority (69%) say Nigeria needs many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice, a 13-percentage-point rebound from 2020.
- But large majorities say elections do not work well to enable voters to remove leaders who don't do what the people want (77%) or to ensure that National Assembly members reflect voters' views (70%).
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of citizens say that in general, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another rather than having one party continuously govern the country.
 - More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents say that once an election is over, the losing side should accept defeat and cooperate with the government to help it develop the country, rather than monitoring and criticising it.
- A majority (56%) of respondents say the last national election, in 2019, was generally free and fair, but almost four in 10 (38%) believe otherwise.
- Roughly one in three citizens say they feared intimidation or violence during the 2019 election (32%) and consider it likely that powerful people can find out how they vote (37%).
- Only 23% of Nigerians say they trust the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) "somewhat" or "a lot," while more than three-fourths (78%) express "just a little" or no trust at all in the election-management body.
 - Trust in the INEC has declined by 12 percentage points since 2017.

Views on elections

About seven in 10 Nigerians (71%) endorse elections as the best method for choosing leaders (Figure 1). Support for elections has remained consistently high over two decades of Afrobarometer surveys.

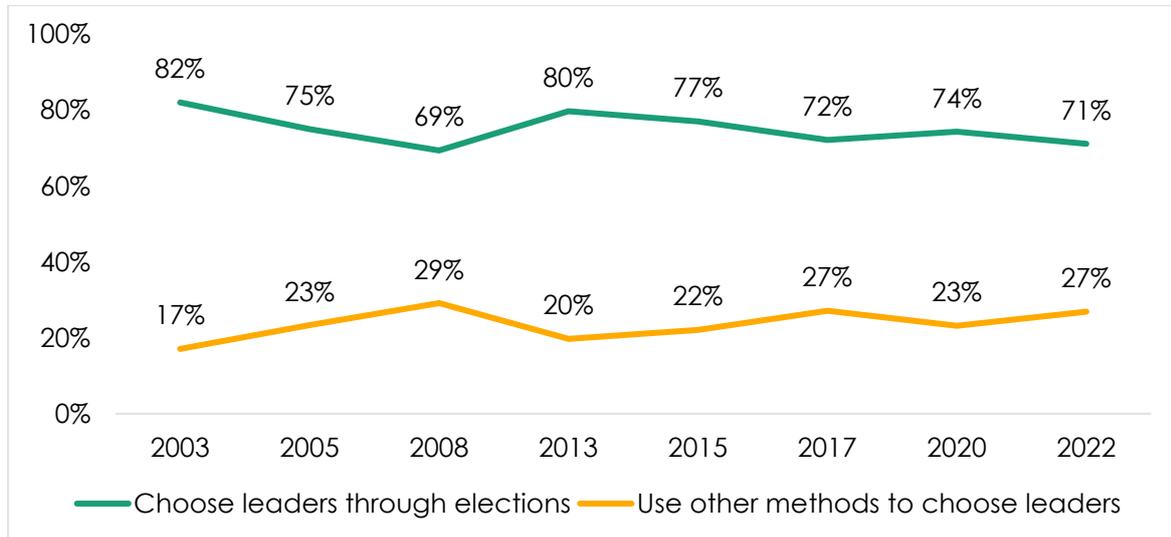
Although support for elections is strong across all key demographic groups, it is more widespread among older respondents (78%) and citizens with post-secondary education (74%) than among their younger and less educated counterparts (Figure 2).

Similarly, most Nigerians believe in multiparty competition. More than two-thirds (69%) of respondents say many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them, while only 29% say that political parties create division and confusion and the country would be better off not having many of them (Figure 3).

Support for multiparty competition increased from 56% in 2020, regaining its 2017 standing. This position is more common among the poorest¹ citizens (74%) and rural residents (73%) than among better-off citizens (61%) and urbanites (64%) (Figure 4).

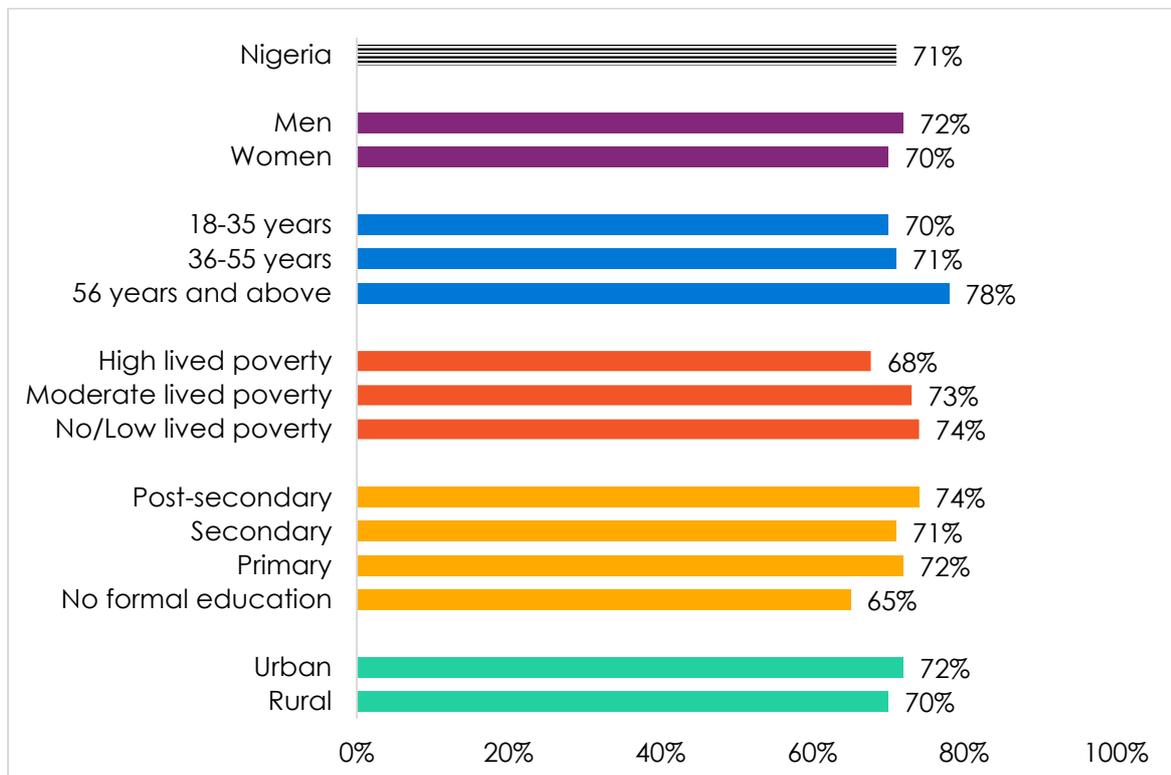
¹ Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes & Patel (2022).

Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Nigeria
 | 2003-2022



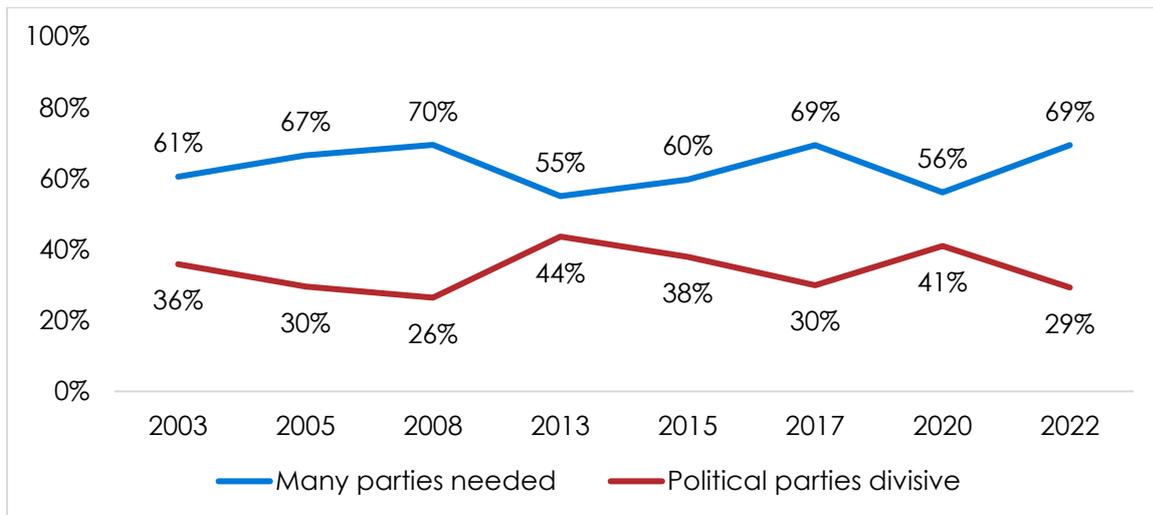
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

Figure 2: Support elections as the best way to choose leaders | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



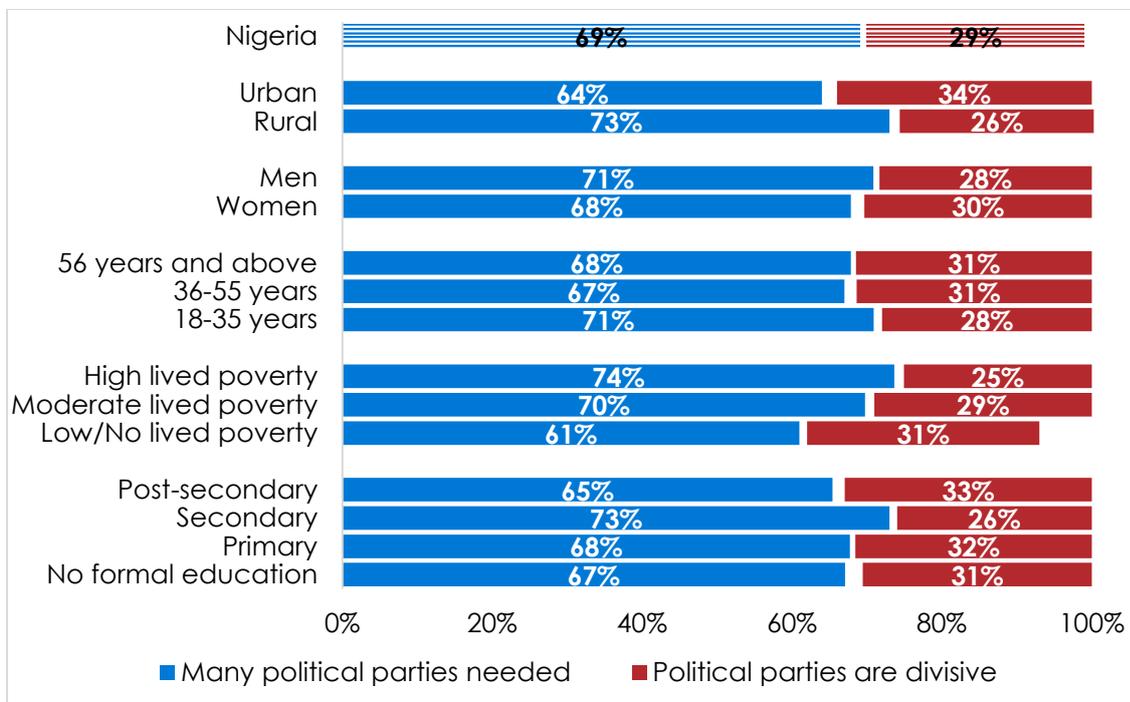
% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections

Figure 3: Support for multiparty competition | Nigeria | 2003-2022



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 Nigeria.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Nigerians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

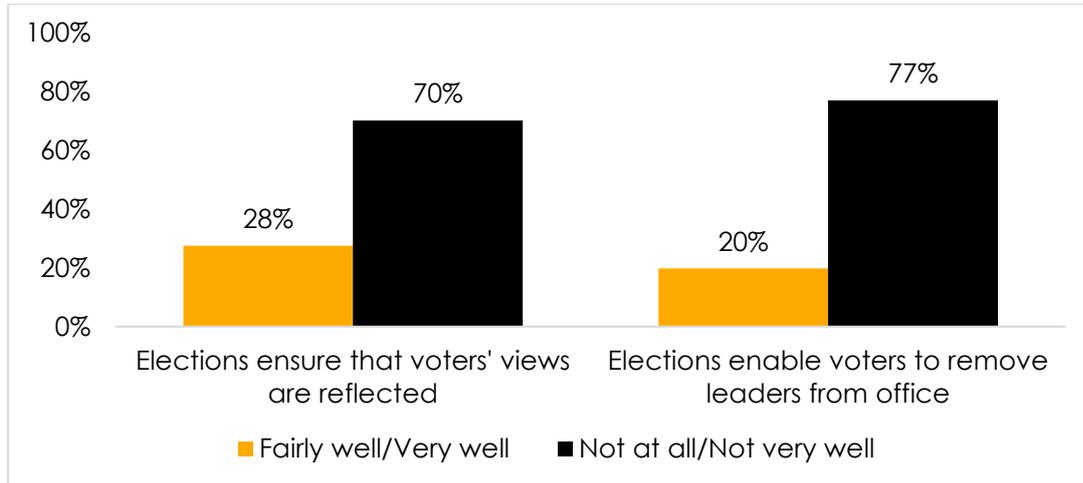
Figure 4: Support for multiparty competition | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



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 Nigeria.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Nigerians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Despite strong support for elections in which multiple parties square off, most Nigerians do not believe that elections work very well to ensure that voters' views are reflected in the National Assembly (70%) or to enable voters to remove leaders from office who don't do what the people want (77%) (Figure 5).

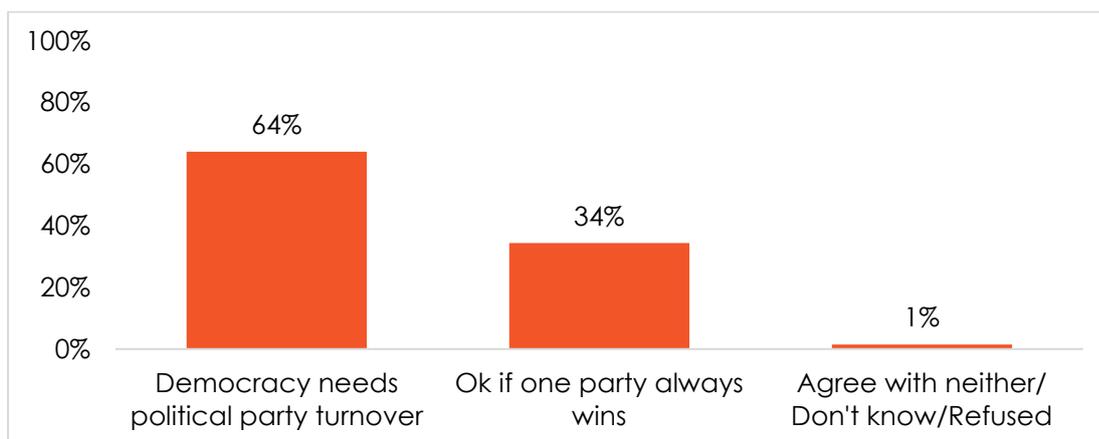
Figure 5: Efficacy of elections | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: Thinking about how elections work in practice in this country, how well do elections: Ensure that representatives to the National Assembly reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

But Nigerians do believe in change at the top. Speaking in general (rather than about the 2023 election), almost two-thirds (64%) say that in a democracy, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another. One-third (34%) disagree, saying that as long as a government is elected by the people in a free and fair election, it doesn't matter if one party always wins and continuously governs the country (Figure 6).

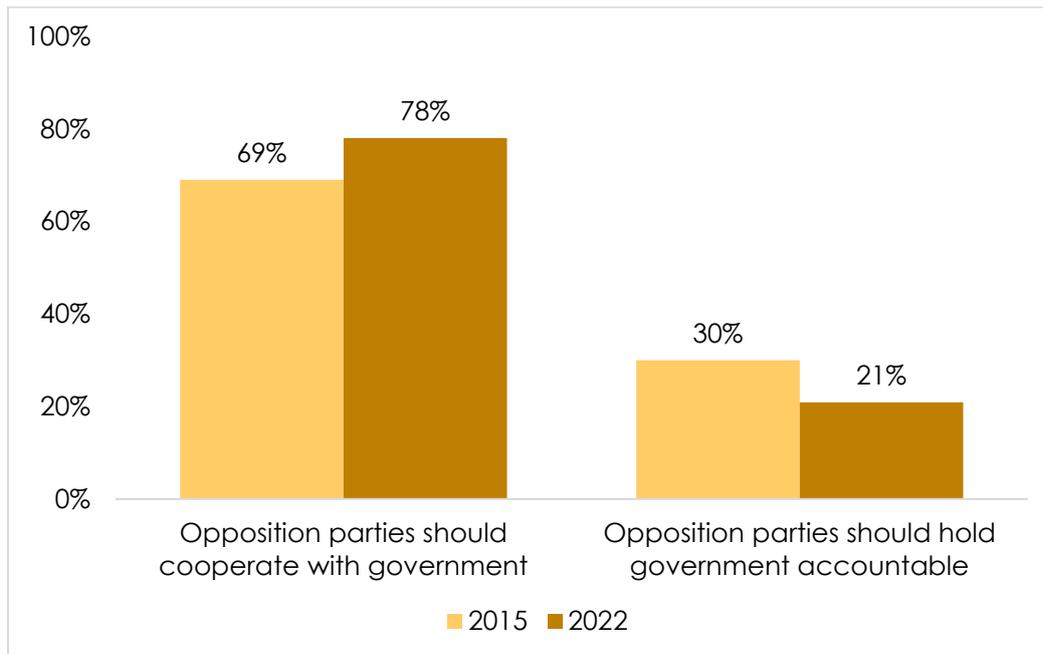
Figure 6: Support for political power change | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: In a democracy, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another.
 Statement 2: In a democracy, as long as a government is elected by the people in a free and fair election, it doesn't matter if one party always wins and continuously governs the country.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with each statement)

And what is the role of the losing side in an election? More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents say that after losing an election, opposition parties should cooperate with the government to help it develop the country. Only 21% want the opposition to focus instead on monitoring and criticising the government in order to hold it accountable (Figure 7). Support for opposition parties to cooperate with the government has increased by 9 percentage points since 2015.

Figure 7: Role of opposition parties after elections | Nigeria | 2015-2022



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.
 Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Participation in the 2019 election

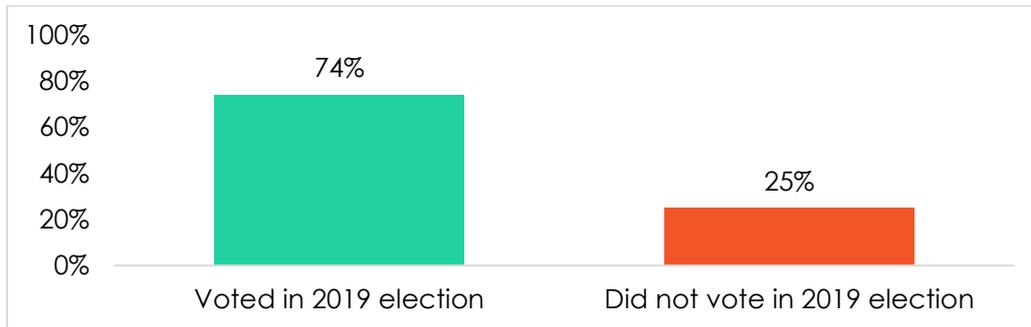
In Nigeria, as many as support elections also claim to vote in them. Excluding those who were too young to vote in 2019, about three-fourths (74%) of respondents say they voted in the

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most recent national election, while a quarter (25%) say they did not vote (Figure 8). These numbers are vastly different from official voter turnout reported by the INEC (36% of registered voters), perhaps reflecting widespread belief in the social norm that good citizens *should* vote.

Self-reported voting rates are considerably lower among young respondents (68%), women (66%), and urban residents (68%) than among older respondents (82%-87%), men (82%), and rural residents (79%) (Figure 9).

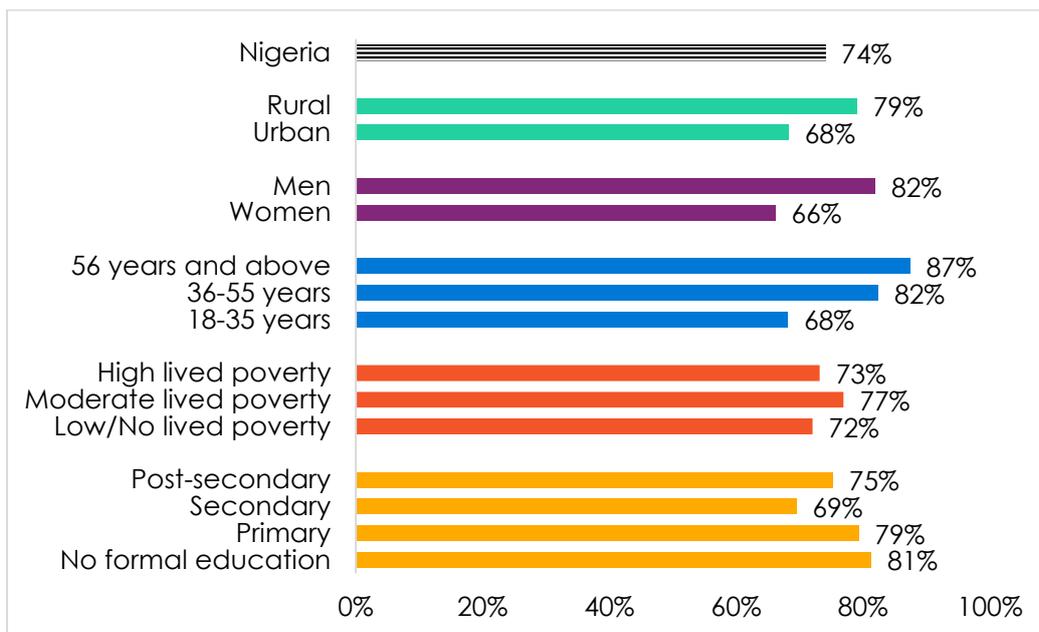
Figure 8: Participation in the 2019 election | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked:

People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? In the last national election, held in 2019, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2019 are excluded.)

Figure 9: Voted in 2019 | by demographic group | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: In the last national election, held in 2019, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2019 are excluded.)

Election quality

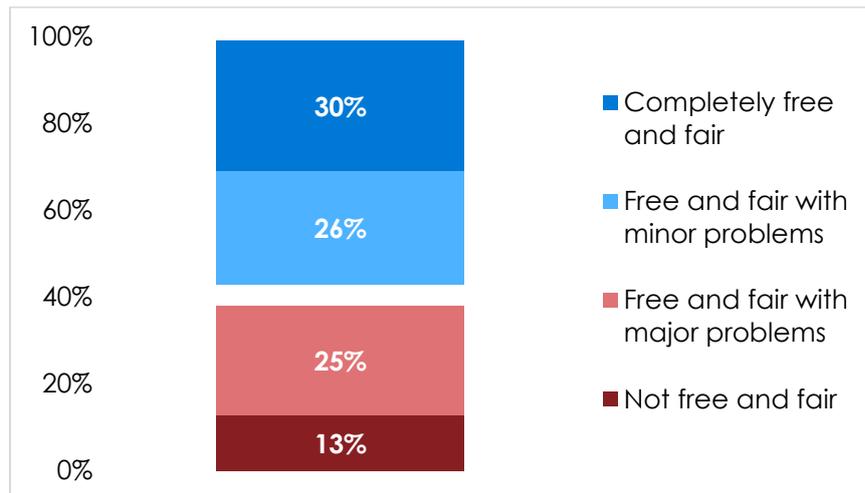
How good are Nigeria's elections? Do citizens consider them free and fair and feel safe casting their ballots?

A majority (56%) of Nigerians describe the 2019 election as having been free and fair, including 30% who say it was "completely free and fair." About four in 10 (38%) say it was either "free and fair with major problems" (25%) or "not free and fair" (13%) (Figure 10).

Among supporters of the ruling party, two-thirds (67%) say the election was generally free and fair, but even among respondents who say they "feel close" to the political opposition, more than half (53%) agree (Figure 11).

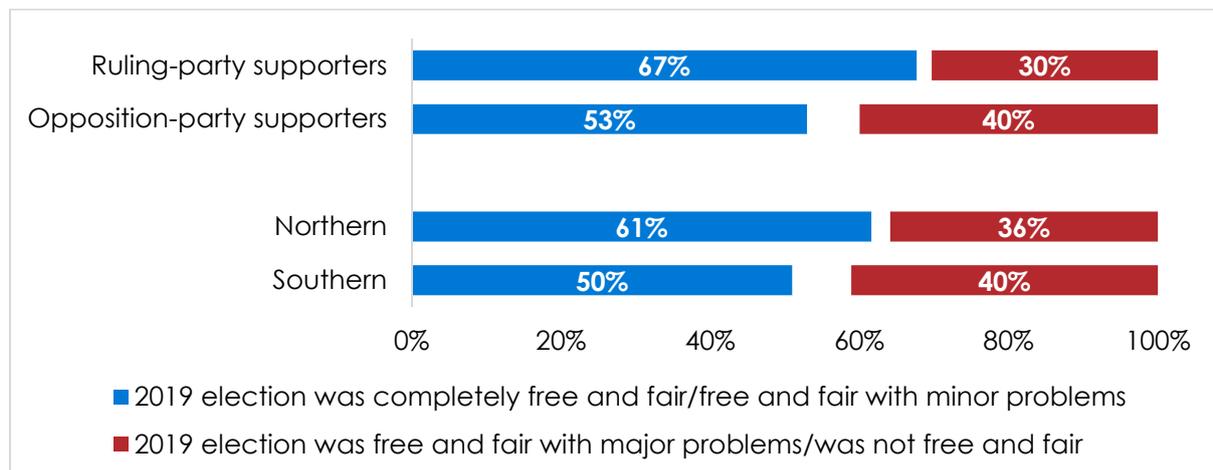
And by geographic zone,² residents in the northern states are more likely than their southern counterparts to say the last election was “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems” (61% vs. 50%). Some negative assessments in the South may be a reaction to an electoral dispute in Imo state in which the Supreme Court, finding that 236,600 votes had been unlawfully excluded, installed the original fourth-place finisher as the state’s governor nine months after the election (Business Day, 2020).

Figure 10: Freeness and fairness of 2019 election | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2019?

Figure 11: Freeness and fairness of 2019 election | by party affiliation and zone | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked:

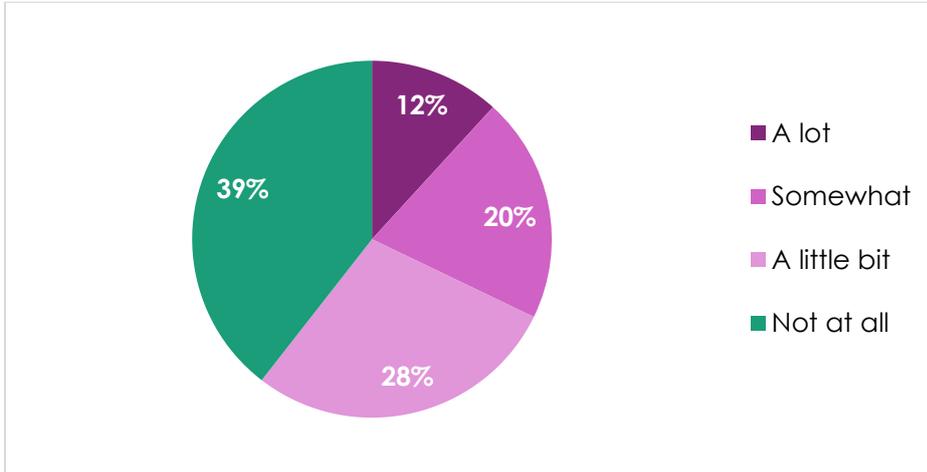
Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?

On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2019? (% who say “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems”)

² Northern states: FCT Abuja, Benue, Plateau, Niger, Nassarawa, Kwara, Kogi, Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Taraba, Yobe, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Sokoto, Jigawa, Zamfara, Kebbi
 Southern states: Abia, Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Rivers, Delta, Bayelsa, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Oyo, Ekiti

In terms of a safe election environment, about one-third of respondents say they feared political intimidation or violence “a lot” (12%) or “somewhat” (20%) during the last national election, while 28% report “a little bit” of fear. About four in 10 (39%) say they did not fear intimidation or violence “at all” (Figure 12).

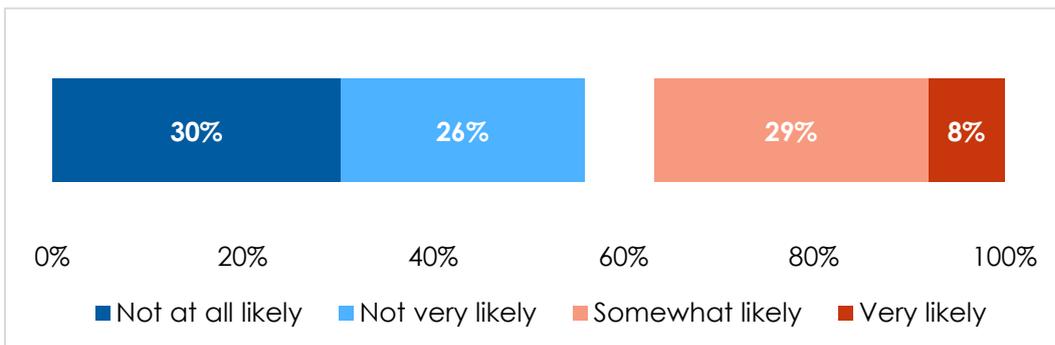
Figure 12: Fear of intimidation or violence in 2019 election | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in 2019, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

A majority of Nigerians express confidence in ballot secrecy, saying it is “not very likely” (26%) or “not at all likely” (30%) that powerful people can find out how they voted. But almost four in 10 (37%) consider it “somewhat likely” or “very likely” that their ballots are not secret (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Can powerful people find out how you voted? | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: 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?

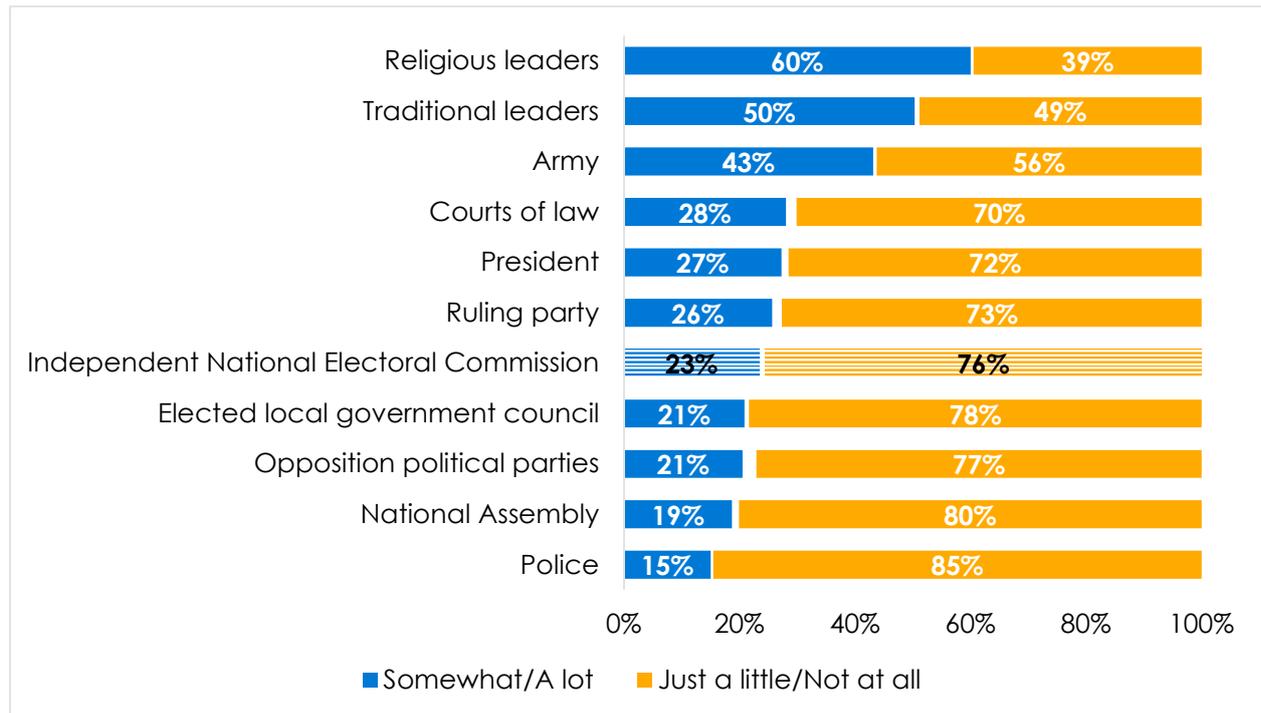
Trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission

In addition to reservations about election quality, one red flag for Nigeria's upcoming elections is citizens' weak trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC): Only 23% of citizens say they trust the institution “somewhat” or “a lot,” while more than three-fourths (76%) say they trust the electoral body “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 14). This places the INEC well behind religious leaders (60%), traditional leaders (50%), and the army (43%) in popular trust, though ahead of the police (15%) and the National Assembly (19%).

Trust in the INEC has been fairly weak throughout the past two decades, and has declined by 12 percentage points since 2017 (Figure 15).

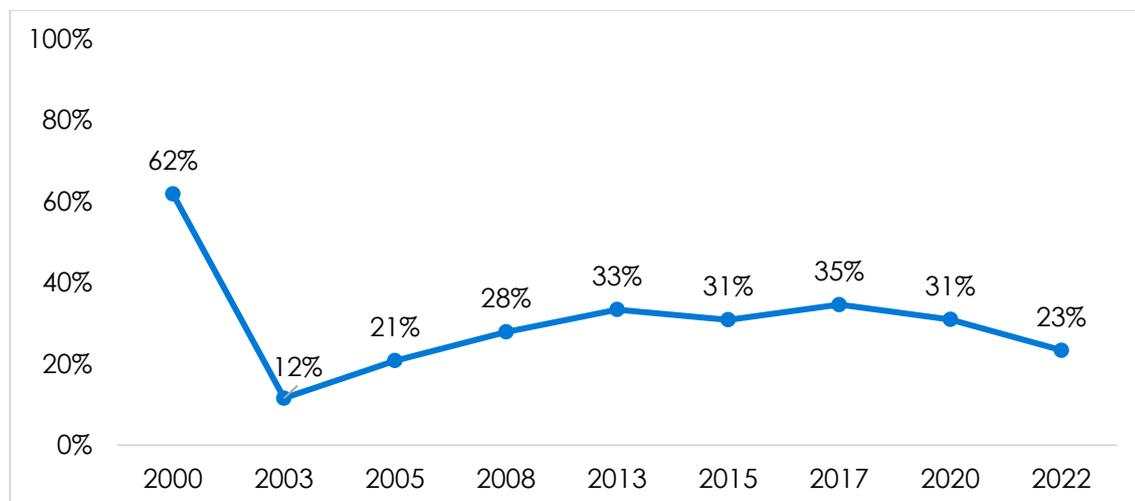
Even supporters of the ruling party are in the minority in expressing trust in the INEC (38%), though they are more likely to do so than opposition party adherents (20%) (Figure 16). And in the southern states, only 12% say they trust the INEC; 62% say they don't trust it "at all."

Figure 14: Popular trust in the electoral commission and other state institutions
 | Nigeria | 2022



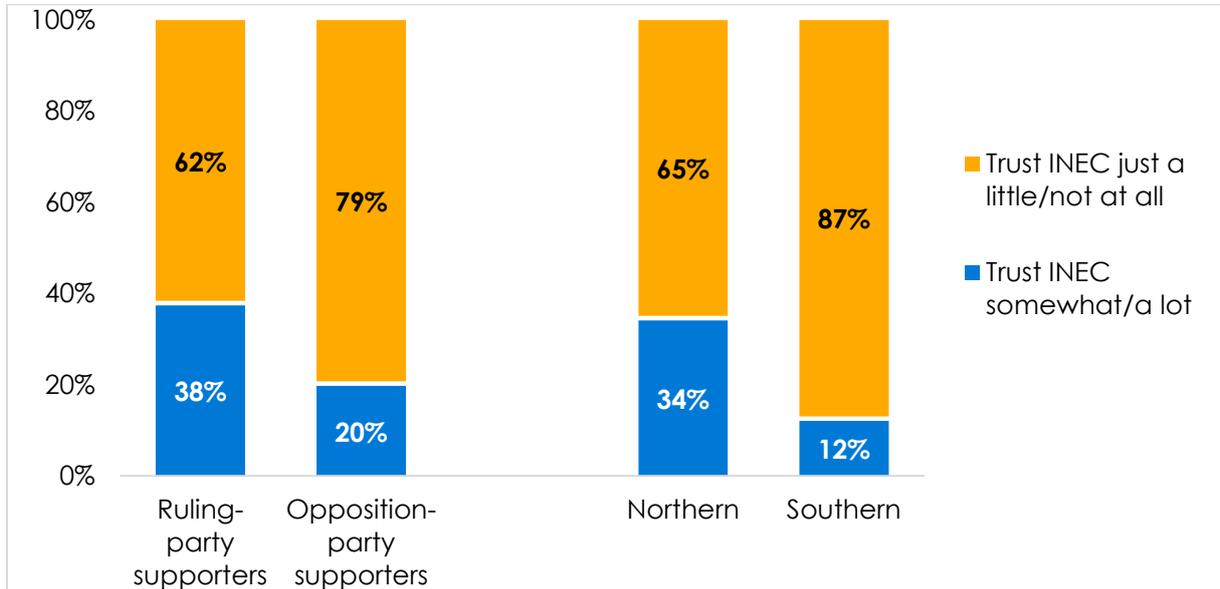
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 15: Trust the electoral commission somewhat/a lot | Nigeria | 2000-2022



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

Figure 16: Popular trust in the electoral commission | by party affiliation and zone
 | Nigeria | 2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)?

Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Nigerians value elections and multiparty competition. Yet large majorities doubt that elections work well to ensure that their views are represented and to enable them to vote a non-performing leader out of office.

Importantly, a majority – even among opposition supporters – consider the 2019 to have been free and fair. But substantial numbers disagree, feared violence last time around, and are not confident that their ballots are really secret. The use of new technologies in 2023 adds an element of uncertainty even as these tools, it is hoped, make the process more efficient.

Popular trust in the INEC is a central issue, and distrust is a major concern, especially in the southern states. The upcoming election is an opportunity for the electoral management body to regain the trust of the electorate by proving itself independent, credible, and competent.

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Raphael Mbaegbu is head of social research at NOI Polls. Email: rmbaegbu@noi-polls.com.

Maame Akua Amoah Twum is Afrobarometer communications coordinator for anglophone West Africa and North Africa. Email: maameakua@afrobarometer.org.

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.

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