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Liberians want fair and competitive elections, but mistrust elections commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 705 | Oscar Bloh and Maame Akua Amoah Twum

Summary

Liberians will head to the polls on 10 October 2023 to elect a president, 15 senators, and 73 members of the House of Representatives. This will mark the fourth cycle of presidential and legislative elections since the end of the country's devastating civil war in 2003. The National Elections Commission (NEC) has granted accreditation to 1,030 individuals to vie for the 88 seats in the National Legislature (National Elections Commission, 2023a, b).

Incumbent President George Weah is seeking a second six-year term (Africanews, 2023). Among the 19 other candidates competing for the same position, only two are women, even though women comprise 50% of registered voters (National Elections Commission, 2023c, d).

While the election promises to be competitive, the campaign has been largely peaceful. Most political parties have signed the Farmington River Declaration 2023 committing to a nonviolent electoral process as the country seeks to strengthen its fragile democracy through peaceful, inclusive, free, fair, and transparent elections (United Nations, 2023).

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that Liberians overwhelmingly support elections as the best way to choose their leaders even though a majority don't think they ensure that their views will be represented. Most citizens describe the last presidential election as generally free and fair, but few trust the institution responsible for ensuring a high-quality 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. Nine rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 42 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys (2021/2023) cover 39 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Liberia, led by the Center for Democratic Governance, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Liberians between 15 August and 7 September 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008, 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2020.

Key findings

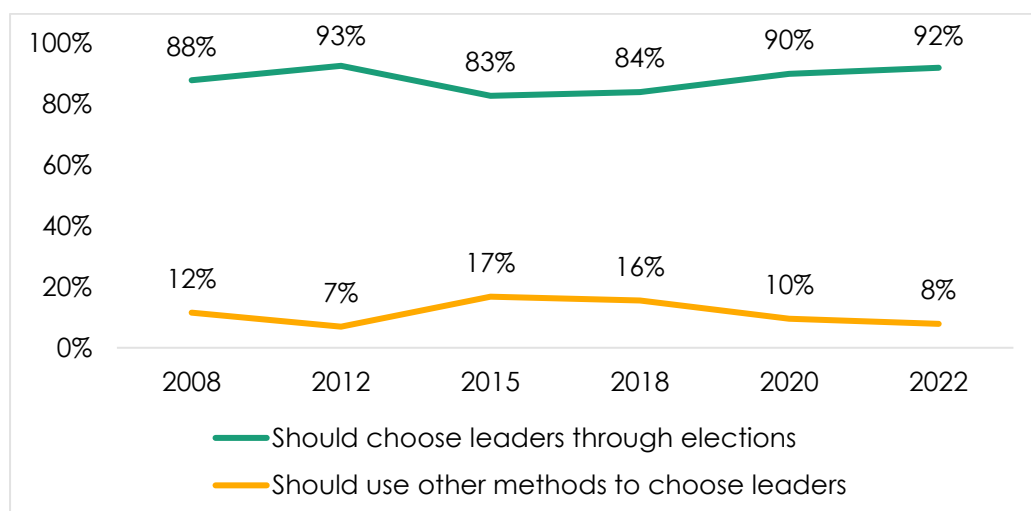
- An overwhelming majority (92%) of Liberians support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- About six in 10 (59%) say Liberia needs many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice, a 9-percentage-point rebound from 2020.

- Majorities say elections do not work well to ensure that members of the House of Representatives (61%) and senators (60%) reflect the views of voters. But more than half (55%) say elections do enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want.
- In general (not regarding the 2023 election), seven in 10 citizens (71%) say 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-quarters (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 focus on monitoring and criticising the government to hold it accountable.
- Most citizens (85%) say the last national election, in 2017, was generally free and fair.
- About one in five citizens (21%) say they feared intimidation or violence during the 2017 election, and one-fourth (25%) consider it likely that powerful people can find out how they vote.
- Only 34% of Liberians say they trust the National Elections Commission (NEC) “somewhat” or “a lot,” while about two-thirds (65%) express “just a little” or no trust at all in the election-management body.
 - Trust in the NEC has declined by 10 percentage points since 2018.

Views on elections

More than nine out of 10 Liberians (92%) endorse elections as the best method for choosing their leaders. Support for elections has remained consistently high over more than a decade of Afrobarometer surveys (Figure 1).

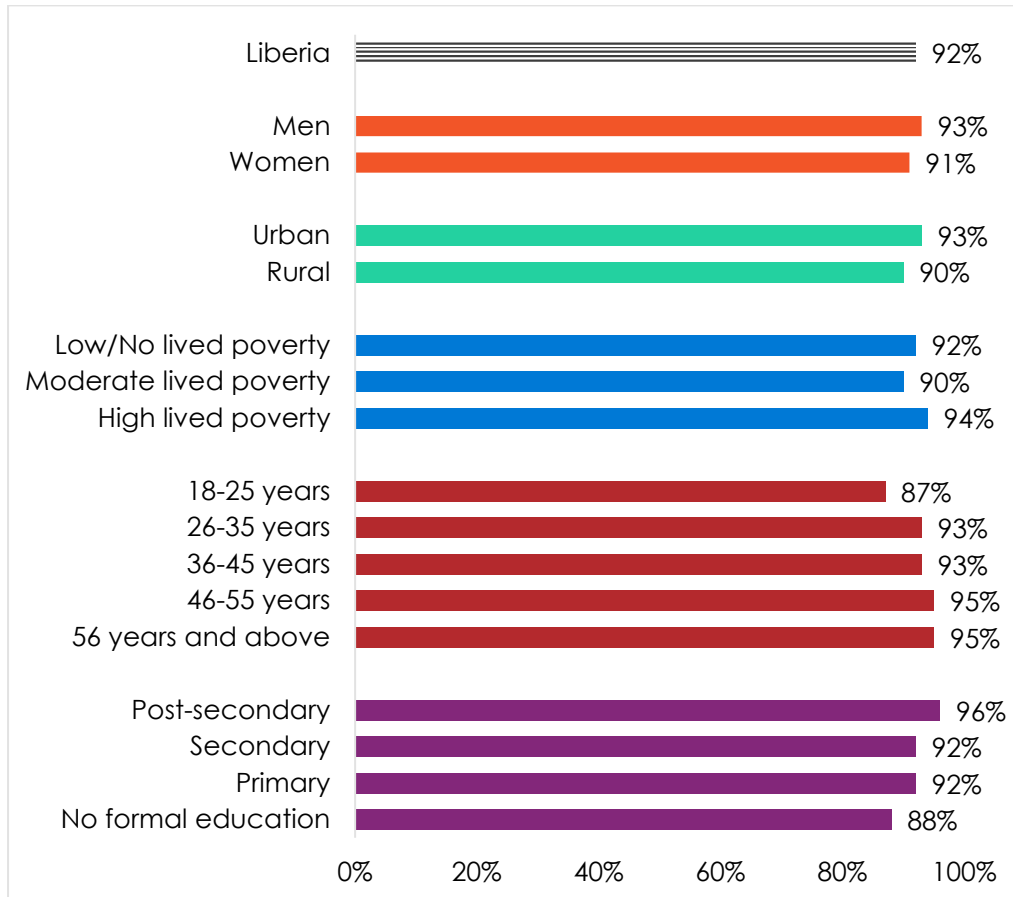
Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Liberia
 | 2008-2022



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)

While support for elections is strong across all key demographic groups, it is particularly widespread among citizens with post-secondary education (96%) and older respondents (95%) (Figure 2).

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



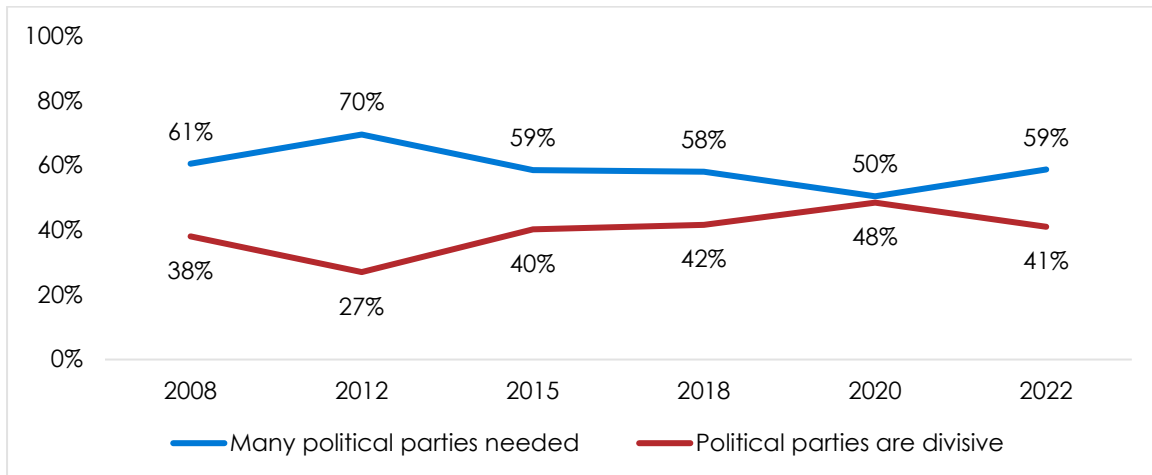
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 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" with Statement 1)

A somewhat weaker majority (59%) endorse multiparty competition, agreeing that "many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them." But a sizeable minority (41%) instead 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 dropped by 20 percentage points between 2012 (70%) and 2020 (50%) before rebounding in the most recent survey.

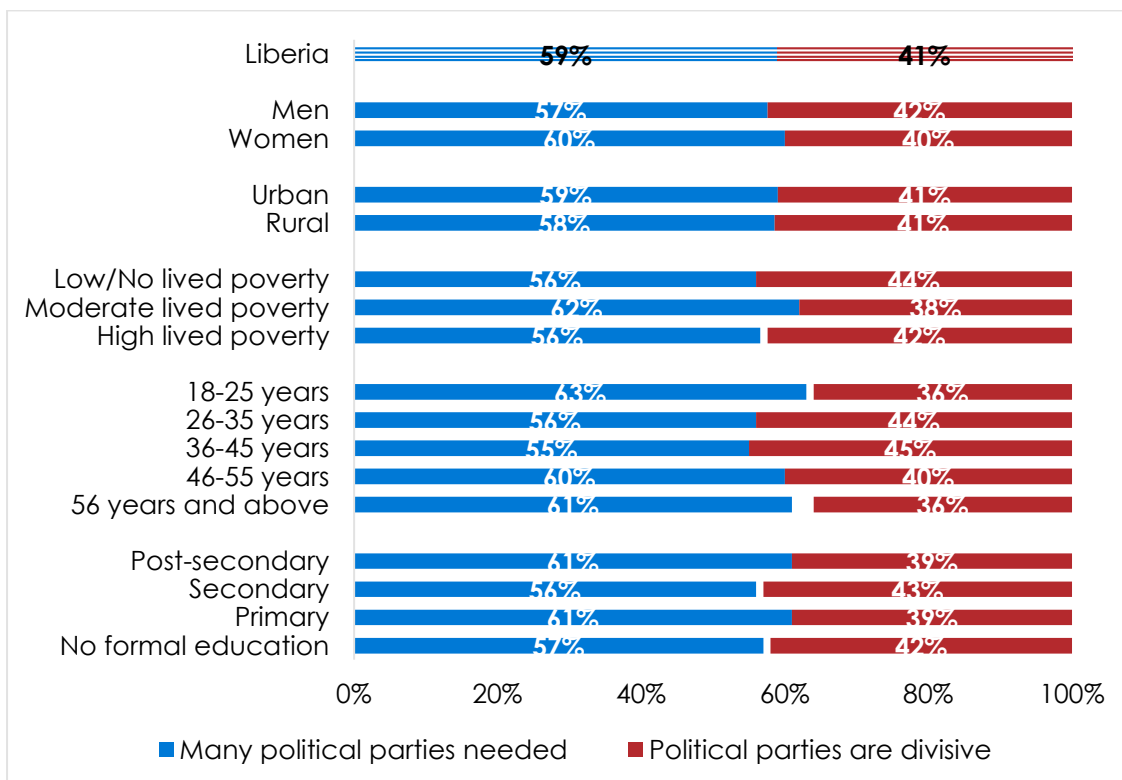
This view is fairly consistent across key demographic groups. It is slightly more common among the youngest respondents (63%) than among their elders (55%-61%) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Views on multiparty competition | Liberia | 2008-2022



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

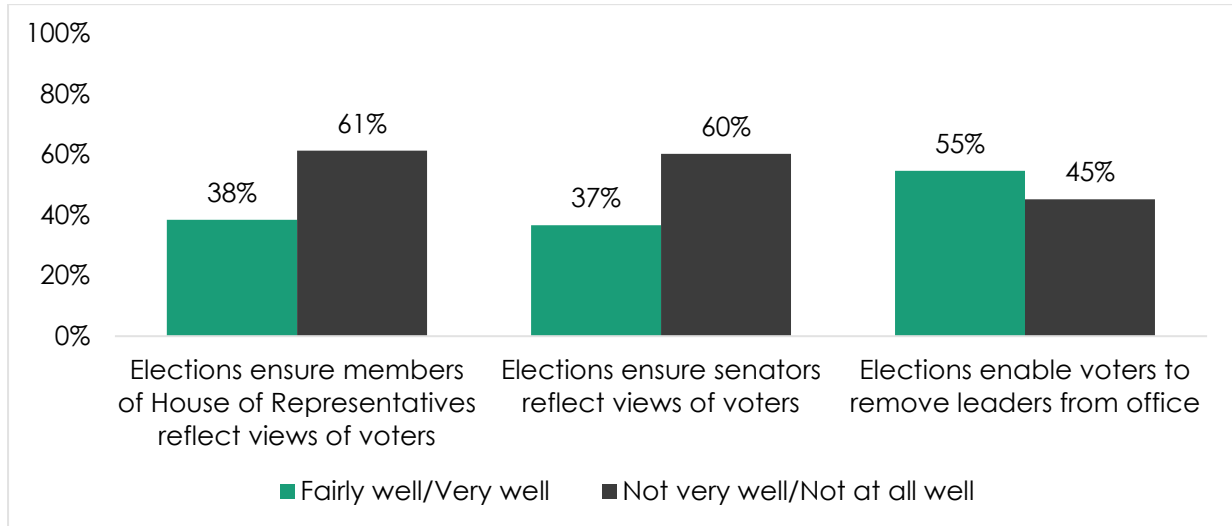
Figure 4: Views on multiparty competition | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022



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

Despite strong support for elections and multiple parties, majorities say elections do not work well to ensure that members of the House of Representatives (61%) and senators (60%) reflect the views of voters. But a slim majority (55%) say elections do enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want (Figure 5).

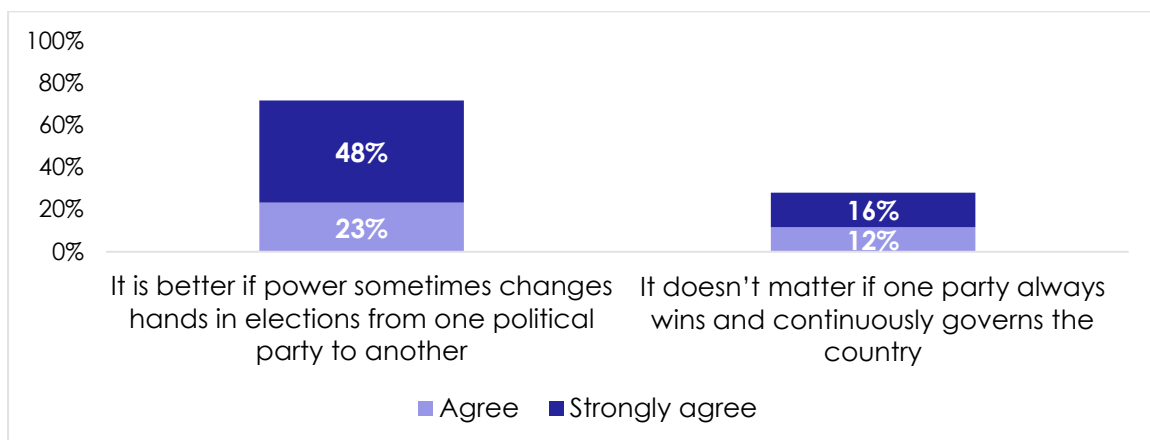
Figure 5: Efficacy of elections | Liberia | 2022



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

In general (rather than with regard to the 2023 election), seven in 10 citizens (71%) say that in a democracy, it is better if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another. Fewer than three in 10 (28%) disagree, endorsing the view 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).

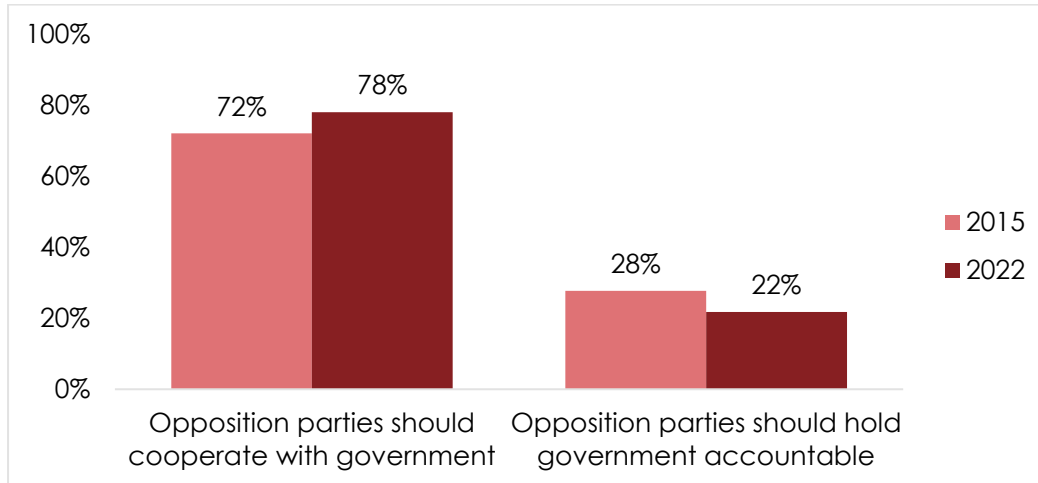
Figure 6: Support for political power change | Liberia | 2022



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.

And what role should opposition parties play after an election? More than three-quarters (78%) of respondents say that after losing an election, opposition parties should cooperate with the government to help it develop the country. Only 22% want the opposition to focus on monitoring and criticising the government in order to hold it accountable (Figure 7). The preference for cooperation over accountability has increased by 6 percentage points since 2015.

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

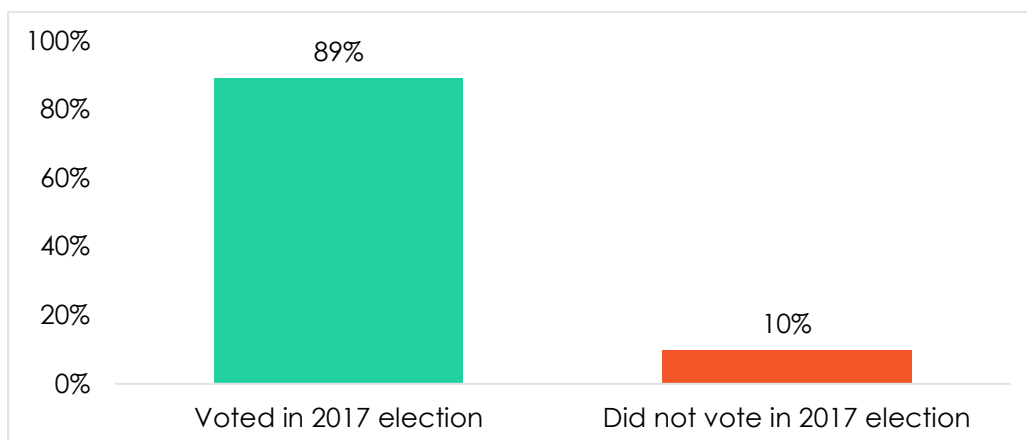


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.
 Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should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

Participation in the 2017 election

Liberians love to vote. Excluding those who were too young to vote in 2017, almost nine in 10 respondents (89%) say they voted in the most recent national election, while only 10% say they did not vote (Figure 8).

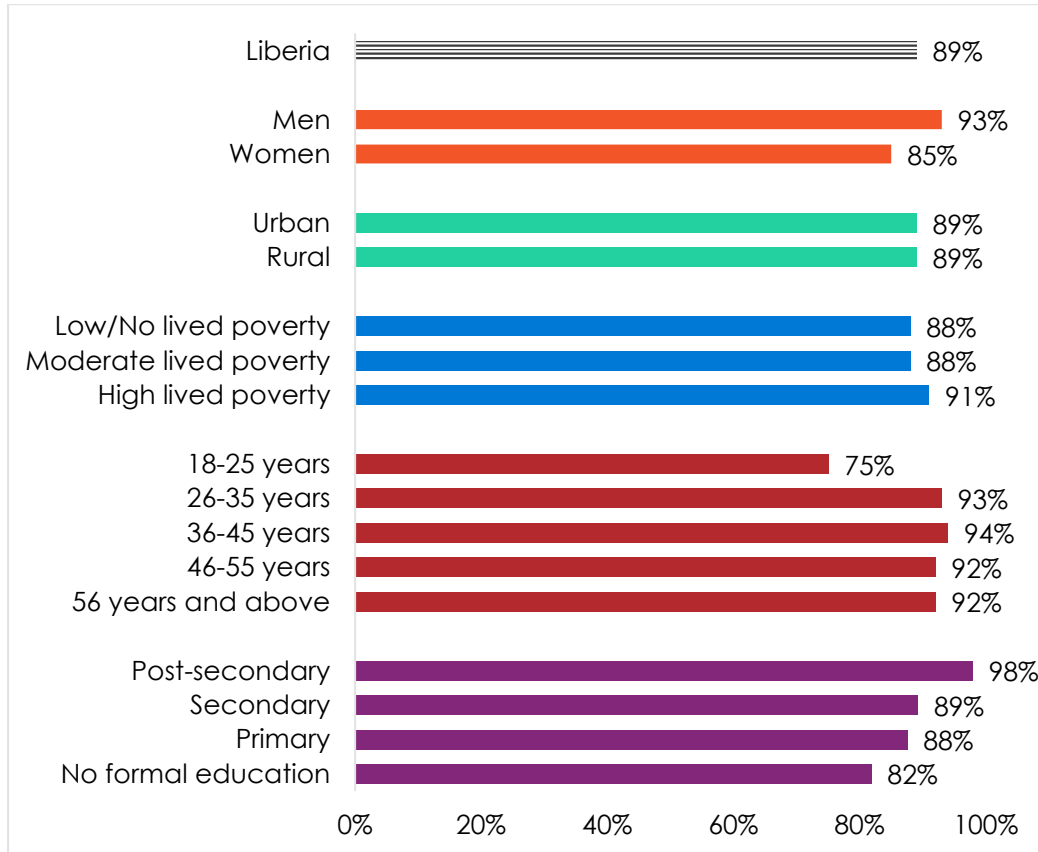
Figure 8: Self-reported participation in the 2017 election | Liberia | 2022



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 2017, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2017 are excluded.)

Self-reported voting rates are considerably lower among young respondents (75% of 18- to 25-year-olds), those with no formal education (82%), and women (85%) than among older respondents (92%-94%), citizens with primary education or more (88%-98%), and men (93%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Voted in 2017 | by demographic group | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: *In the last national election, held in 2017, 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 2017 are excluded.)*

Election quality

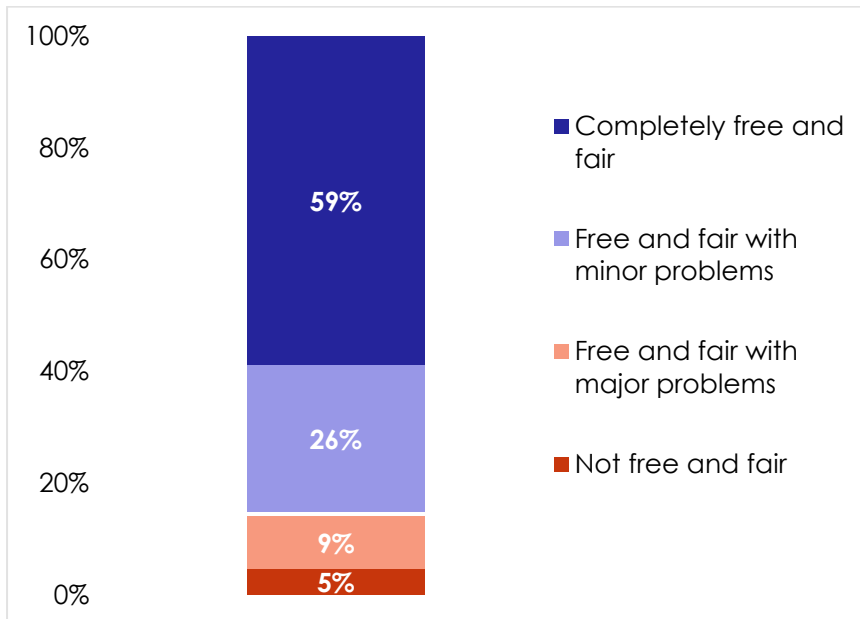
Elections can be considered good or bad based on how free and fair they are and how safe citizens feel in casting their ballots. How do Liberians assess their elections?

A large majority (85%) of survey respondents describe the 2017 election as having been “completely free and fair” (59%) or “free and fair with minor problems” (26%). Only 14% say it had “major problems” (9%) or “was not free and fair” (5%) (Figure 10).

Among supporters of the ruling party, an overwhelming 92% say the election was generally free and fair, but even among respondents who say they “feel close” to the political opposition, more than three-quarters (78%) agree (Figure 11).

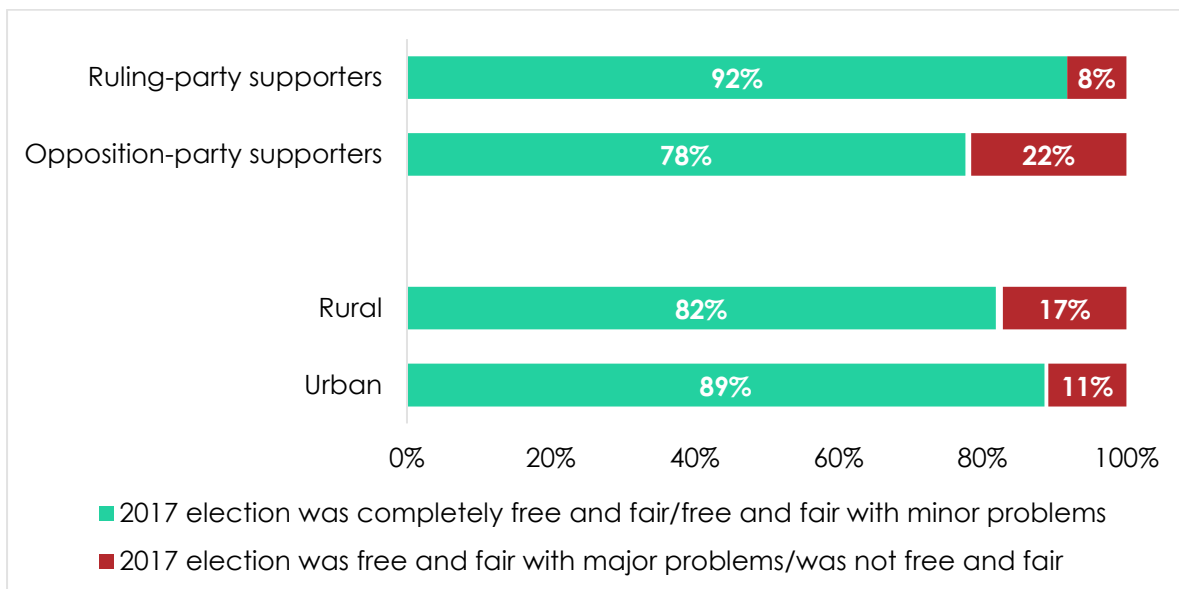
And by location, urban residents are more likely than rural residents to say the last election was “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems” (89% vs. 82%).

Figure 10: Freeness and fairness of 2017 election | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2017?*

Figure 11: Freeness and fairness of 2017 election | by party affiliation and rural-urban location | Liberia | 2022



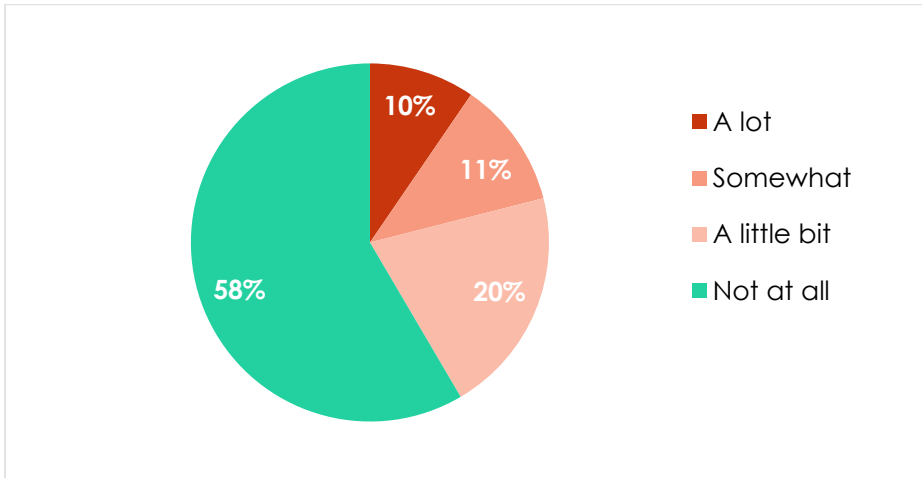
Respondents were asked:

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 2017?

In terms of a safe election environment, about one in five respondents (21%) say they feared political intimidation or violence “a lot” (10%) or “somewhat” (11%) during the last national election, while 20% report “a little bit” of fear. A majority (58%) say they did not fear intimidation or violence “at all” (Figure 12).

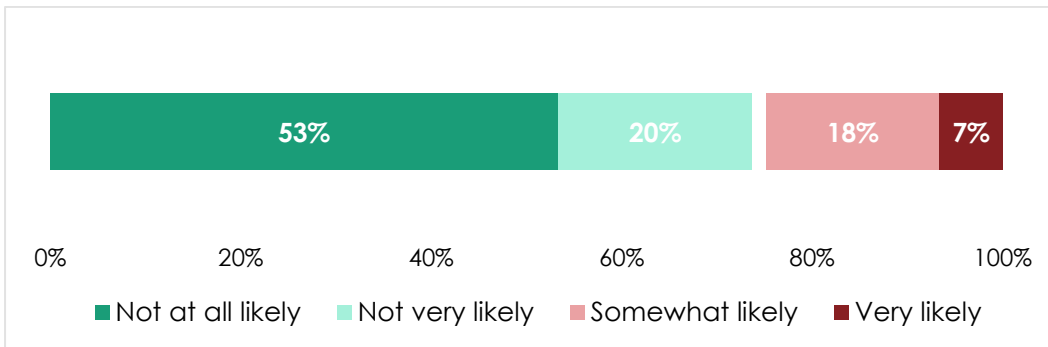
Figure 12: Fear of intimidation or violence in 2017 election | Liberia | 2022



Respondents were asked: During the last national election campaign in 2017, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

In addition, about three-quarters (74%) of Liberians express confidence in ballot secrecy, saying it is “not very likely” (20%) or “not at all likely” (53%) that powerful people can find out how they voted.¹ But a quarter (25%) consider it “somewhat” or “very” likely that their ballots are not secret (Figure 13).

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



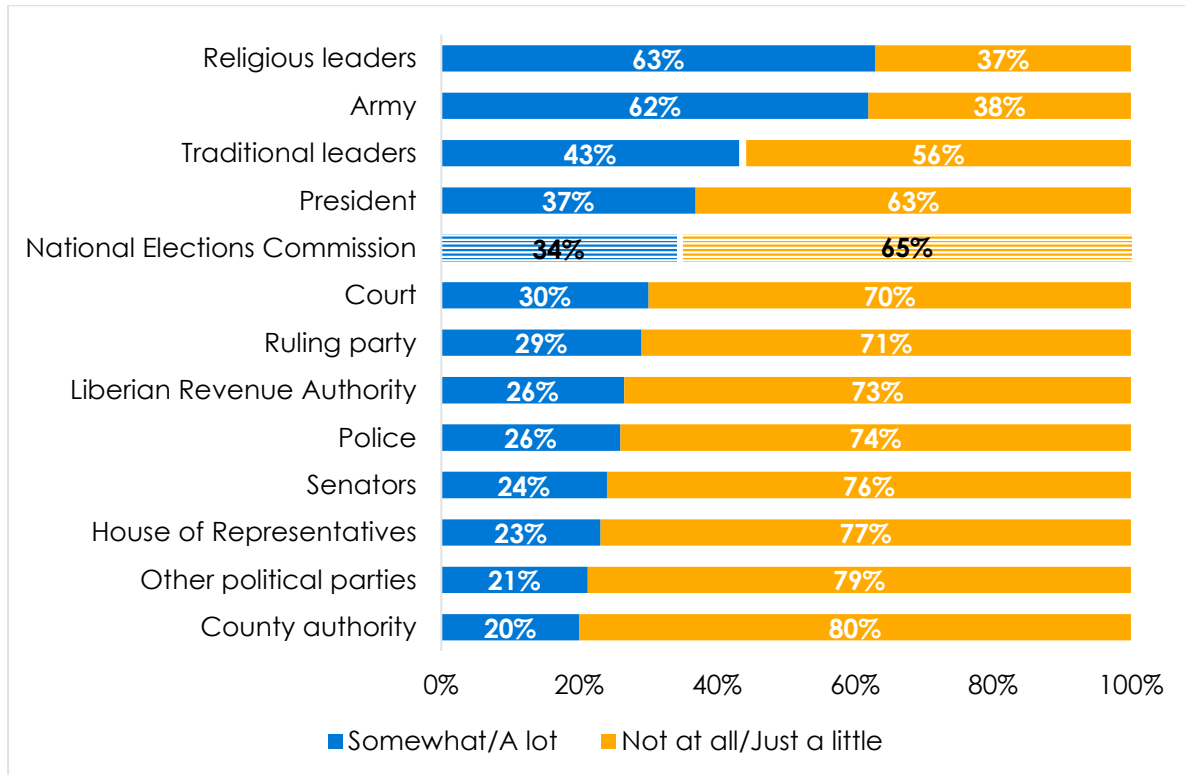
Respondents were asked: How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country?

Trust in the National Elections Commission

Despite citizens' positive ratings of election quality, confidence in the institution mandated to conduct Liberia's upcoming election is somewhat weak: Only one-third (34%) of respondents say they trust the National Elections Commission (NEC) “somewhat” or “a lot,” while two-thirds (65%) say they trust the electoral body “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 14). This places the NEC behind religious leaders (63%), the army (62%), traditional leaders (43%), and the president (37%) in popular trust, though ahead of the courts, political parties, legislators, and police, among others.

¹ Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories reported in the text may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories shown in figures (e.g. 20% “not very likely” and 53% “not at all likely” sum to 74%).

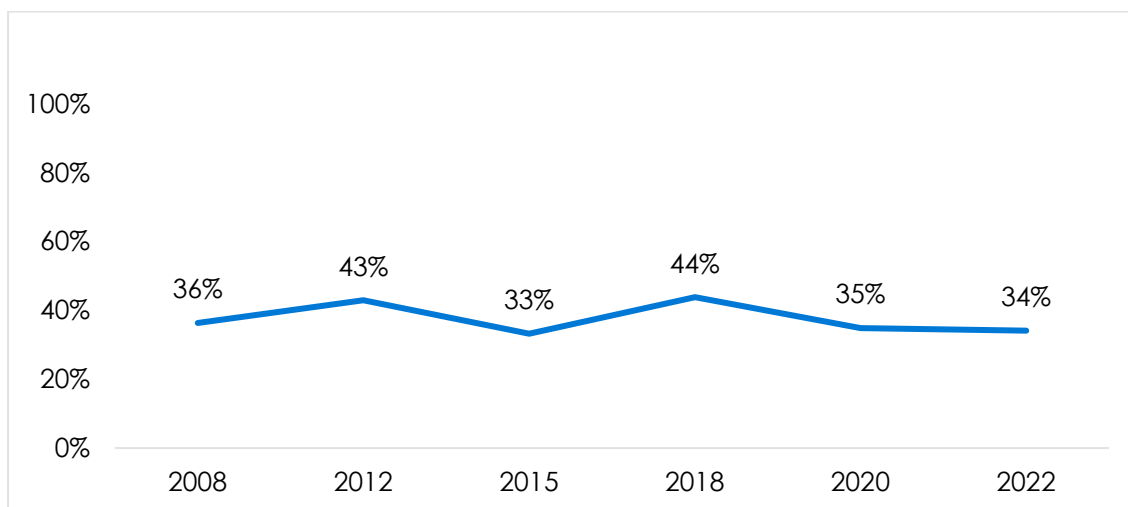
Figure 14: Popular trust in the National Elections Commission and other institutions and leaders | Liberia | 2022



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

Trust in the NEC has been fairly weak over the past 14 years, peaking at 44% in 2018 and dropping 10 percentage points since then (Figure 15).

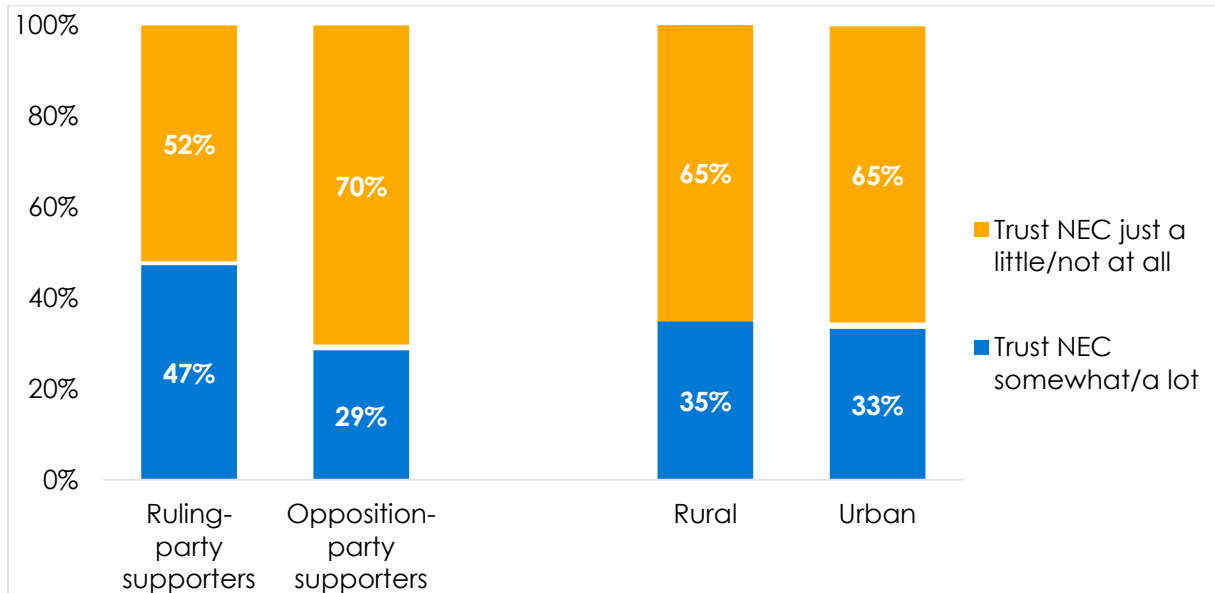
Figure 15: Trust the National Elections Commission somewhat/a lot | Liberia | 2008-2022



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

Even among supporters of the ruling party, fewer than half (47%) express trust in the NEC, though they are more likely to do so than opposition-party adherents (29%) (Figure 16). Urban and rural residents see eye to eye when it comes to trust in the NEC.

Figure 16: Popular trust in the National Elections Commission | by party affiliation and rural-urban location | Liberia | 2022



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

Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Liberians want to choose their leaders through high-quality elections featuring multiple parties. Majorities say that the last presidential election, in 2017, was generally free and fair, that they didn't fear violence or intimidation, and that they are confident that their ballots are secret.

Even so, popular trust in the National Elections Commission remains stubbornly low. As such, 2023 presents another opportunity for the NEC – along with the media, security agencies, domestic and international election observers, and voters – to demonstrate that they are up to their jobs.

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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.

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