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Ahead of 2024 polls, Mauritians value political competition, unsure about electoral commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 873 | Asafika Mpako and Stephen Ndoma

Summary

Rallies and other campaign activities are in full swing as Mauritius approaches its 13th general election since independence on 30 November (News Moris, 2024).

The last general election, held in 2019, was marred by allegations of numerous irregularities, including voters' names not appearing on the voters' roll, inexperienced staff deployed to manage electoral processes, marked ballots abandoned outside counting centres, and unaccounted-for computers found in counting centres. In several trips to the courts, none of these allegations was ever proved, though doubts about the legitimacy of the election lingered in some people's minds (Kasenally, 2020).

In one court case, opposition candidate Surendra Dayal argued that Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth's victory was obtained through bribery and undue influence. In 2021, the Supreme Court of Mauritius ruled in favour of Jugnauth, a finding upheld two years later by the final court of appeal in the United Kingdom (Reuters, 2023).

As Mauritians prepare to vote again five years later, how do they see their elections, multiparty competition, and the integrity of the balloting process?

The most recent Afrobarometer survey findings show that most Mauritians value elections and multiparty competition and feel free to vote as they wish. Slimmer majorities consider their last election to have been largely free and fair and express confidence in ballot secrecy. But citizens are divided on whether the Electoral Commission of Mauritius can be trusted.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Nine survey rounds in up to 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Round 10 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult, interviewed a nationally representative sample of 1,200 adult Mauritians between 24 April and 11 May 2024. 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 Mauritius in 2012, 2014, 2017, 2020, and 2022.

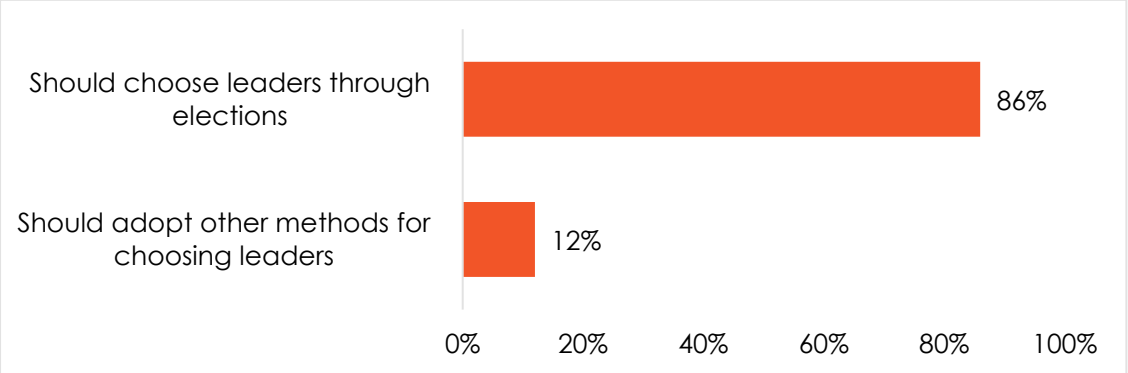
Key findings

- An overwhelming majority of Mauritians (86%) support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- Almost seven in 10 citizens (68%) say Mauritius needs many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice in who governs them.
    - A healthy majority (62%) say it is better in a democracy if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another. But one-third (32%) believe that as long as a government is chosen in a free and fair election, it doesn't matter if one party always wins.
- Two-thirds (68%) of citizens 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 holding it accountable.
- A slim majority (55%) of respondents say the 2019 election was largely free and fair. Only 3% say they feared intimidation or violence "somewhat" or "a lot" during the campaign.
- Nearly nine in 10 citizens (88%) say they feel "somewhat free" or "completely free" to vote for the candidates of their choice without feeling pressured, and more than half (54%) consider it unlikely that powerful people can find out how they voted.
- Views on the Electoral Commission of Mauritius are mixed: Close to half (48%) of Mauritians say they trust the institution "somewhat" or "a lot," but almost as many (43%) say they trust it "just a little" or "not at all."

Views on elections

Almost nine out of 10 Mauritians (86%) see regular, open, and honest elections as the best method for choosing political leaders. Only 12% think other methods for choosing the country's leaders should be adopted (Figure 1). Support for elections is strong across key demographic groups.

Figure 1: Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Mauritius | 2024



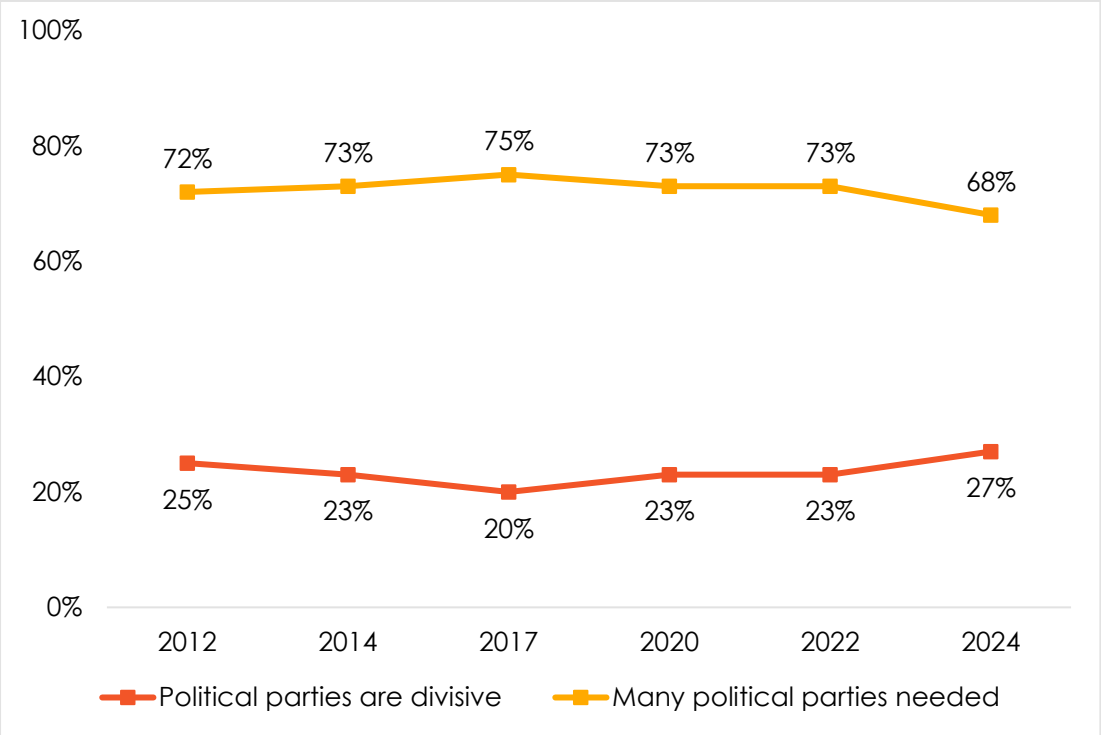
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Similarly, most Mauritians believe in multiparty competition. More than two-thirds (68%) of citizens say many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them, while 27% instead believe that political parties create division and the country would be better off not having many of them (Figure 2). Support for multiparty competition has remained fairly stable over the past decade.

The preference for party competition is more common among rural residents than urbanites (71% vs. 65%) and is particularly strong among respondents experiencing moderate or high lived poverty[1] (78%, compared to 67% among better-off citizens). It is less pronounced among older respondents (63%) and those with primary schooling or less (62%) (Figure 3).

A majority of Mauritians also like to see change at the top, and in fact political power has rotated among the country's three largest parties over the years (Freedom House, 2024). More than six in 10 survey respondents (62%) say it is better in a democracy if power sometimes changes hands in elections from one political party to another (Figure 4). About one-third (32%) disagree, arguing that it doesn't matter if the same party always wins elections so long as the elections are free and fair.

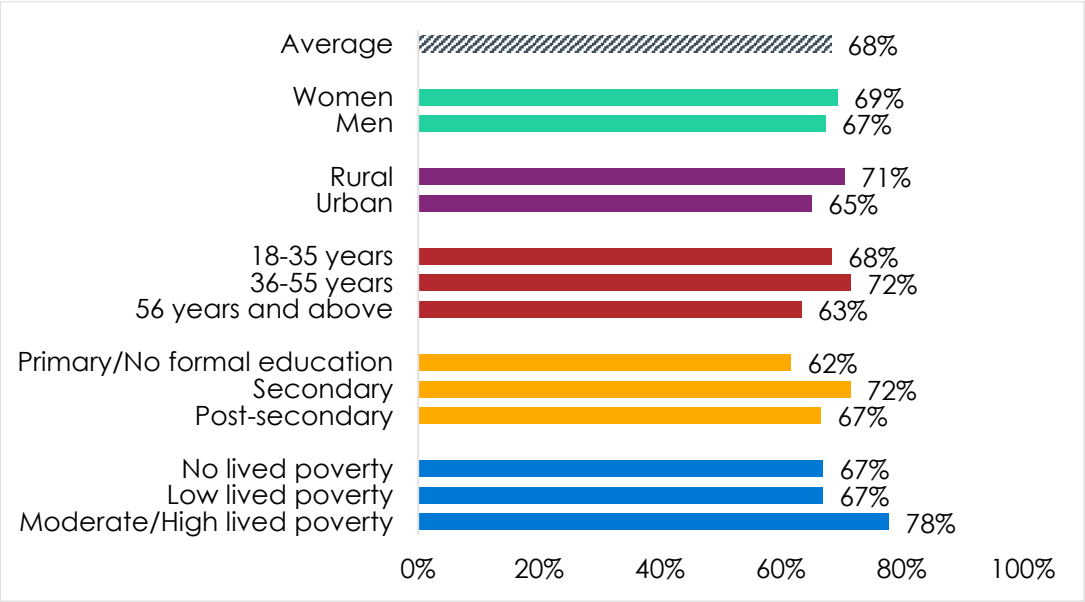
Figure 2: Support for multiparty competition | Mauritius | 2012-2024



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 Mauritius.
Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Mauritians have real choices in who governs them.

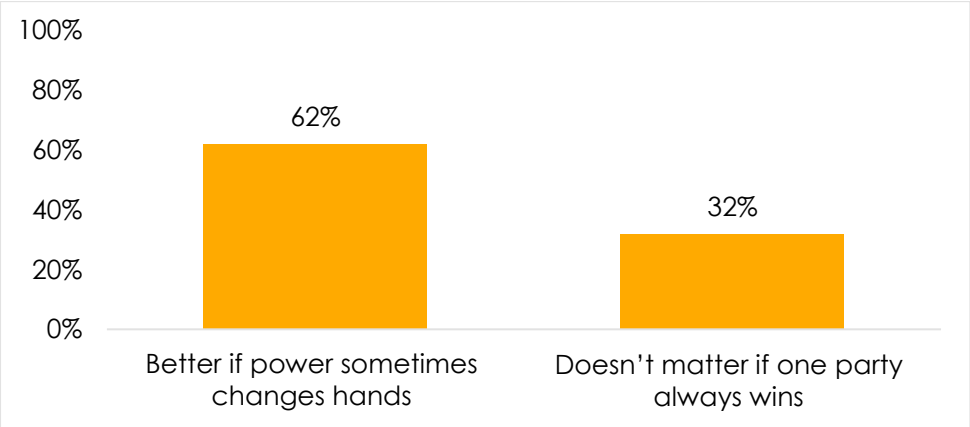
[1] Afrobarometer's Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents' levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the past year. For more on lived poverty,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

Figure 3: Support for multiparty competition | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2024



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 Mauritius.
Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Mauritians have real choices in who governs them.
(% who agree with Statement 2)

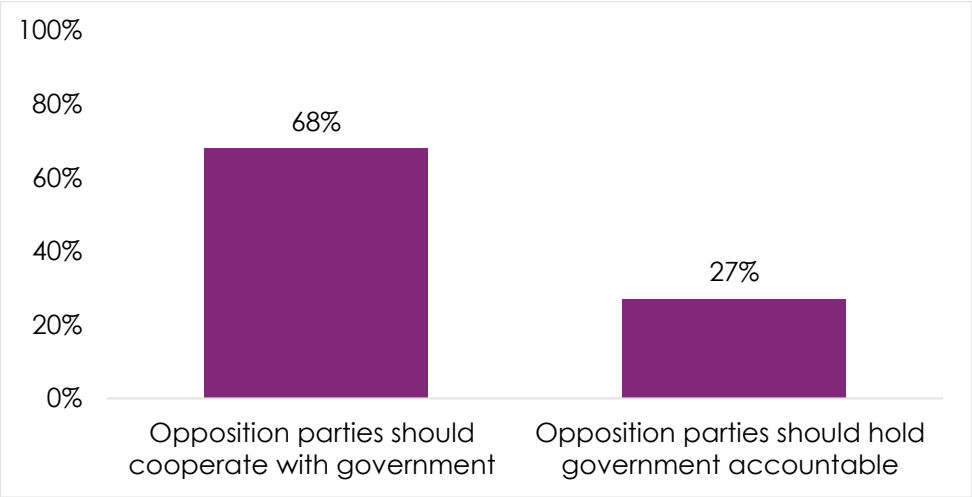
Figure 4: Electoral turnover in a democracy | Mauritius | 2024



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.

As for the role of the losing side in an election, about two-thirds (68%) of respondents say opposition parties should cooperate with the government to help it develop the country (Figure 5). Only 27% think the opposition should instead prioritise holding the government accountable by monitoring and criticising its actions.

Figure 5: Role of opposition parties after elections | Mauritius | 2024



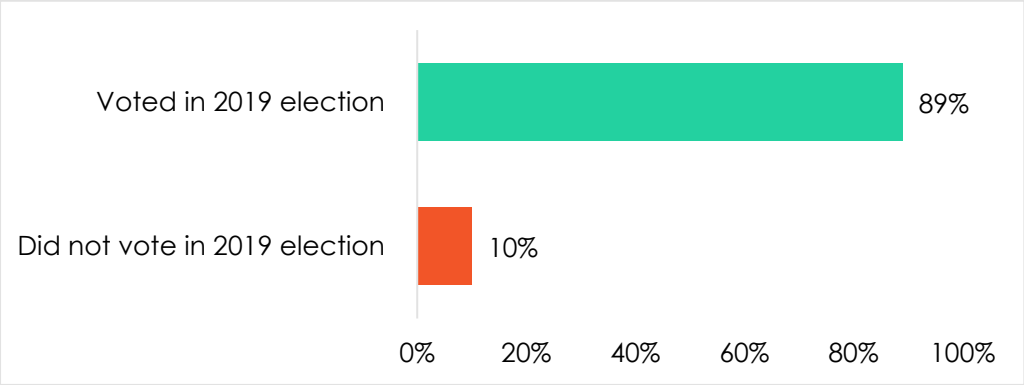
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
Statement 1: After losing an election, opposition parties should monitor and criticise the government in order to hold it accountable.
Statement 2: Once an election is over, opposition parties and politicians should accept defeat and cooperate with government to help it develop the country.

Voting in the 2019 election

Not only is support for elections strong in Mauritius, but electoral turnout is high as well. Excluding respondents who were too young to vote in 2019, about nine out of 10 respondents (89%) say they voted in the last national election (Figure 6). While this is higher than official voter turnout reported by the Electoral Commission of Mauritius (77% of registered voters) (Africanews, 2019; Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2024), both numbers suggest Mauritians' widespread belief in the power of the vote.

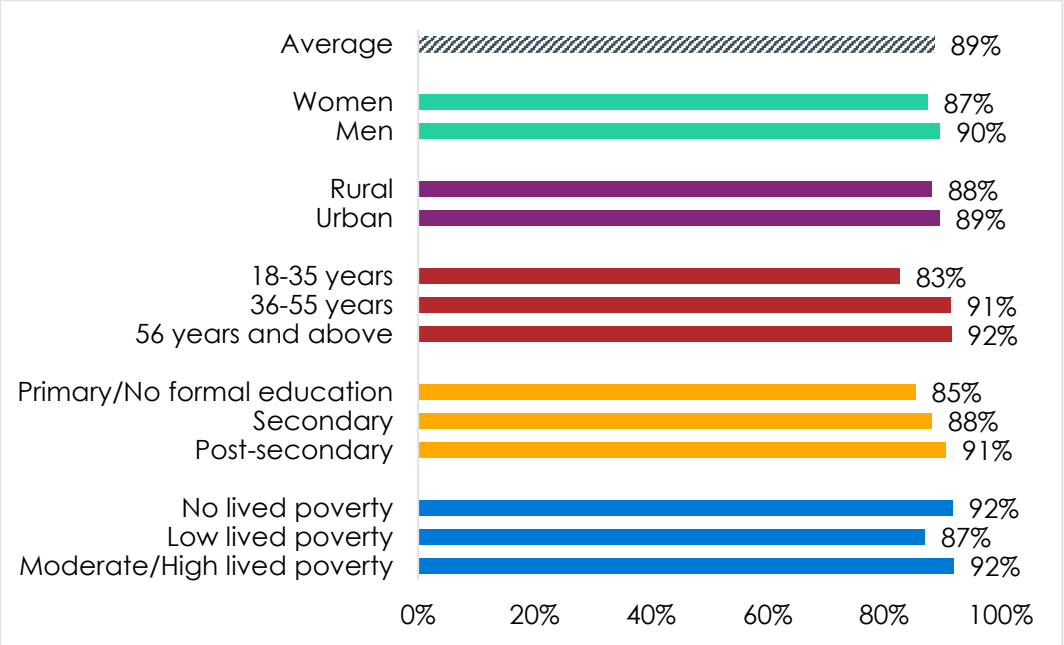
Self-reported voting rates are notably lower among young respondents (83% of those aged 18-35 years, compared to 91%-92% among their elders) (Figure 7). Rates increase as respondents' level of education rises, ranging from 85% among those with primary education only or no formal education to 91% among those with post-secondary qualifications. The wealthiest and poorest Mauritians are equally likely to say they voted (both 92%).

Figure 6: Voting in the 2019 election | Mauritius | 2024



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.)*

Figure 7: Voted in the 2019 election | by demographic group | Mauritius | 2024



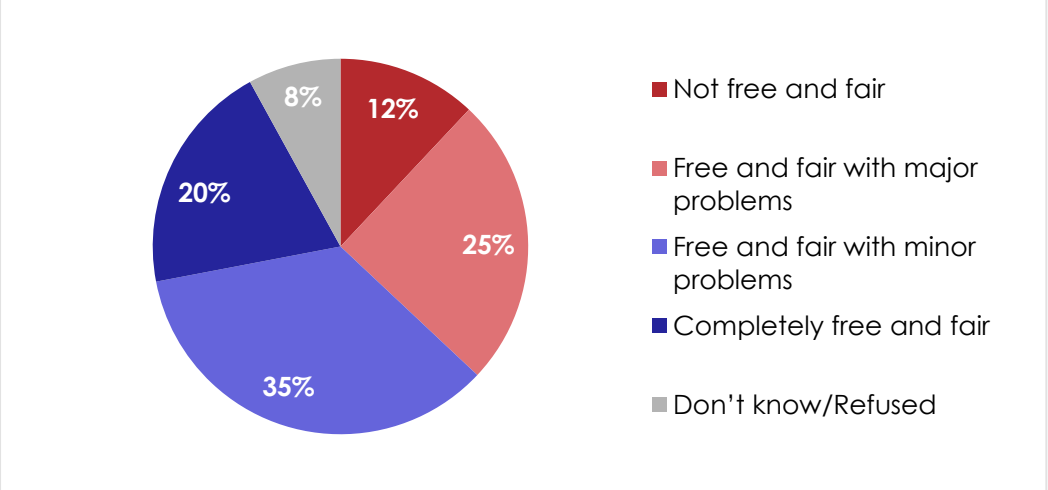
Respondents were asked: *In the last national election, held in 2019, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Respondents who were too young to vote in 2019 are excluded.)*

Election quality

How good are Mauritius' elections? Do citizens consider them free and fair, and do they feel safe casting their ballots?

More than half (55%) of Mauritians describe their 2019 election as having been largely free and fair: One-fifth (20%) say it was "completely free and fair," while a further 35% consider it "free and fair with minor problems" (Figure 8). But nearly four in 10 Mauritians (37%) label the election either "free and fair with major problems" (25%) or "not free and fair" (12%).

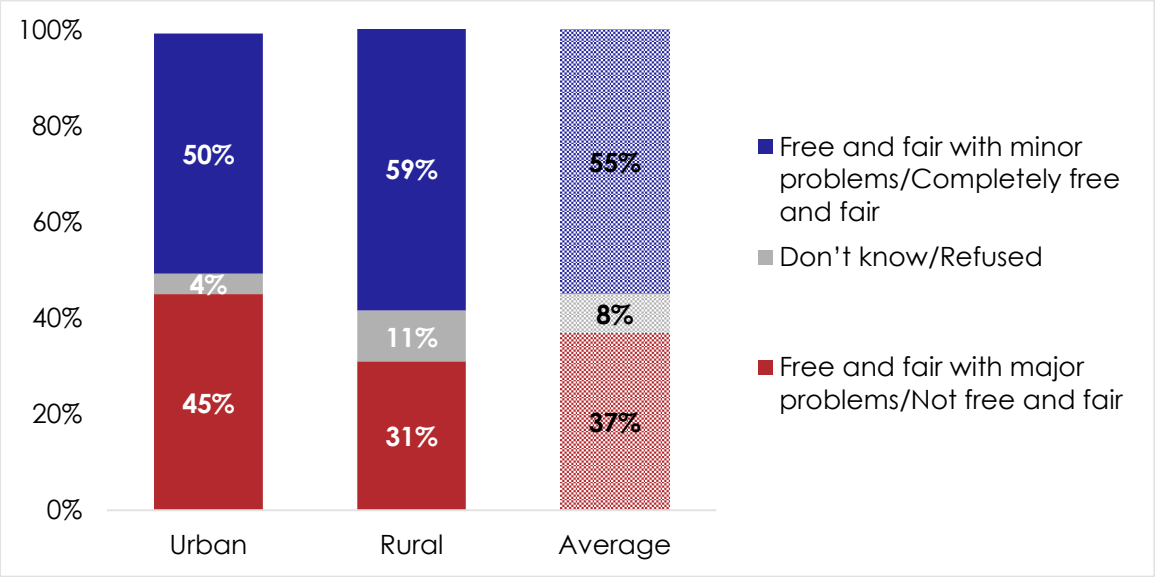
Figure 8: Freeness and fairness of 2019 election | Mauritius | 2024



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

Rural residents are more likely than their urban counterparts to say the last election was generally free and fair (59% vs. 50%) (Figure 9). This may reflect the ruling party's traditional strength in rural areas (North Africa Journal, 2024).

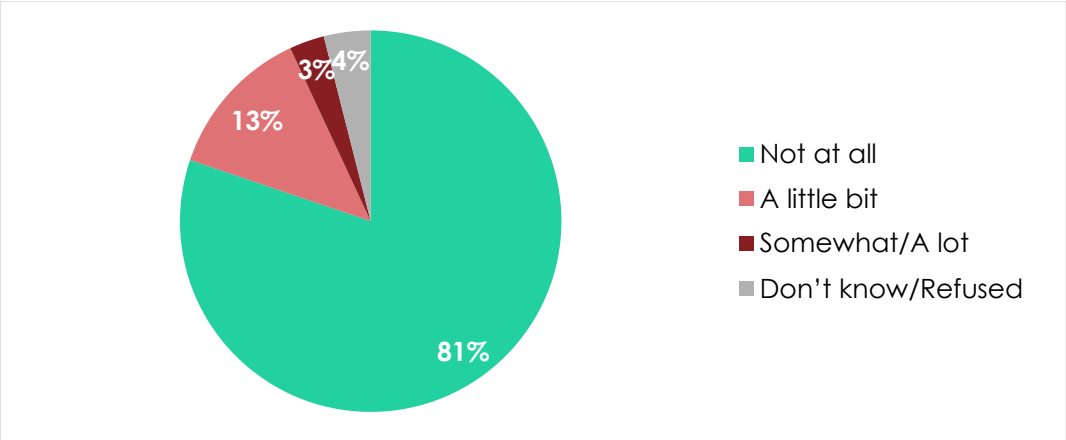
Figure 9: Freeness and fairness of 2019 election | by urban-rural location | Mauritius | 2024



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

With regard to a safe election environment, only 3% of respondents say they feared political intimidation or violence "somewhat" or "a lot" during the last national election, while 13% report "a little bit" of fear (Figure 10). The vast majority (81%) report having no fear of intimidation or violence.

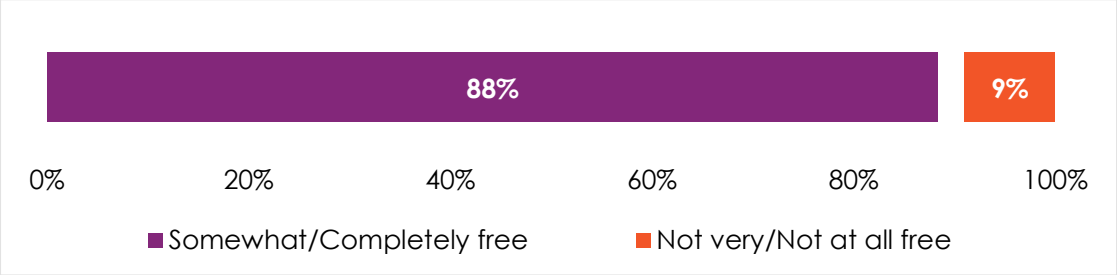
Figure 10: Fear of intimidation or violence in 2019 election | Mauritius | 2024



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?*

Nearly nine in 10 Mauritians (88%) say they are free to vote as they please without feeling pressured, while only 9% report feeling "not very free" or "not at all free" (Figure 11).

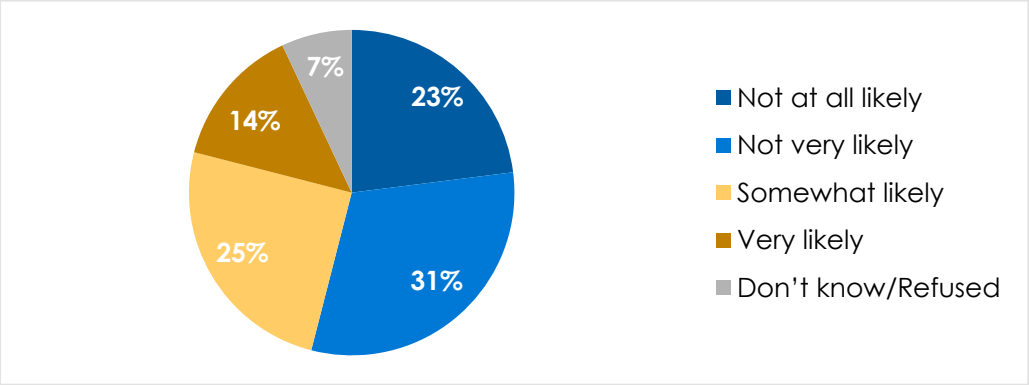
Figure 11: Freedom to choose whom to vote for | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*

A slim majority (54%) of citizens express confidence in ballot secrecy, saying it is "not very likely" (31%) or "not at all likely" (23%) that powerful people can find out how they voted (Figure 12). But about four in 10 survey participants (39%) consider it "somewhat likely" (25%) or "very likely" (14%) that their ballots are not secret.

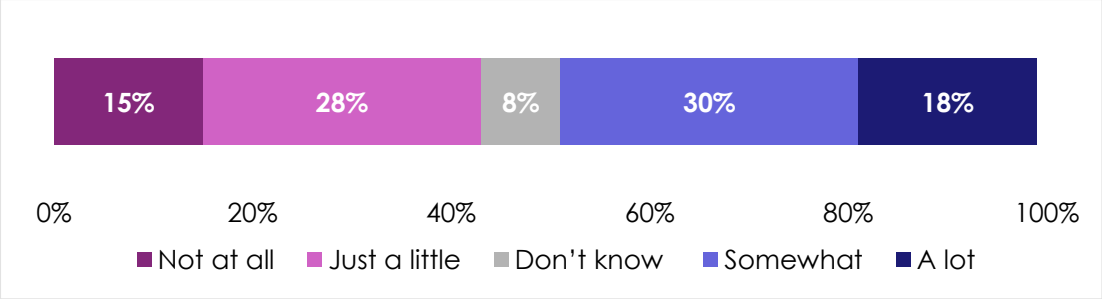
Figure 12: Can powerful people find out how you voted? | Mauritius | 2024



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?*

Public perceptions that an election is legitimate depend in part on trust in the electoral commission. Views on the Electoral Commission of Mauritius are mixed: Close to half (48%) of citizens say they trust the institution "somewhat" (30%) or "a lot" (18%), while almost as many (43%) trust it "just a little" (28%) or "not at all" (15%) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Trust in Electoral Commission of Mauritius | Mauritius | 2024



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust the Electoral Commission of Mauritius, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

Conclusion

Survey findings show that most Mauritians stand behind elections as the best method for choosing their leaders and want to see competition among multiple parties. Most also say they feel free to vote for the candidates of their choice and do not worry about political intimidation or violence.

But far slimmer majorities express confidence that the country's last election in 2019 was free and fair and that their ballots are secret. And views on the Electoral Commission of Mauritius are decidedly mixed, with similar shares of the population indicating trust and mistrust in this crucial institution.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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