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

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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 Bhoojedhur (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.

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. [1]

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

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[1] 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.

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).

- 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%).[2] 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

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[2] 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.

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).

● 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
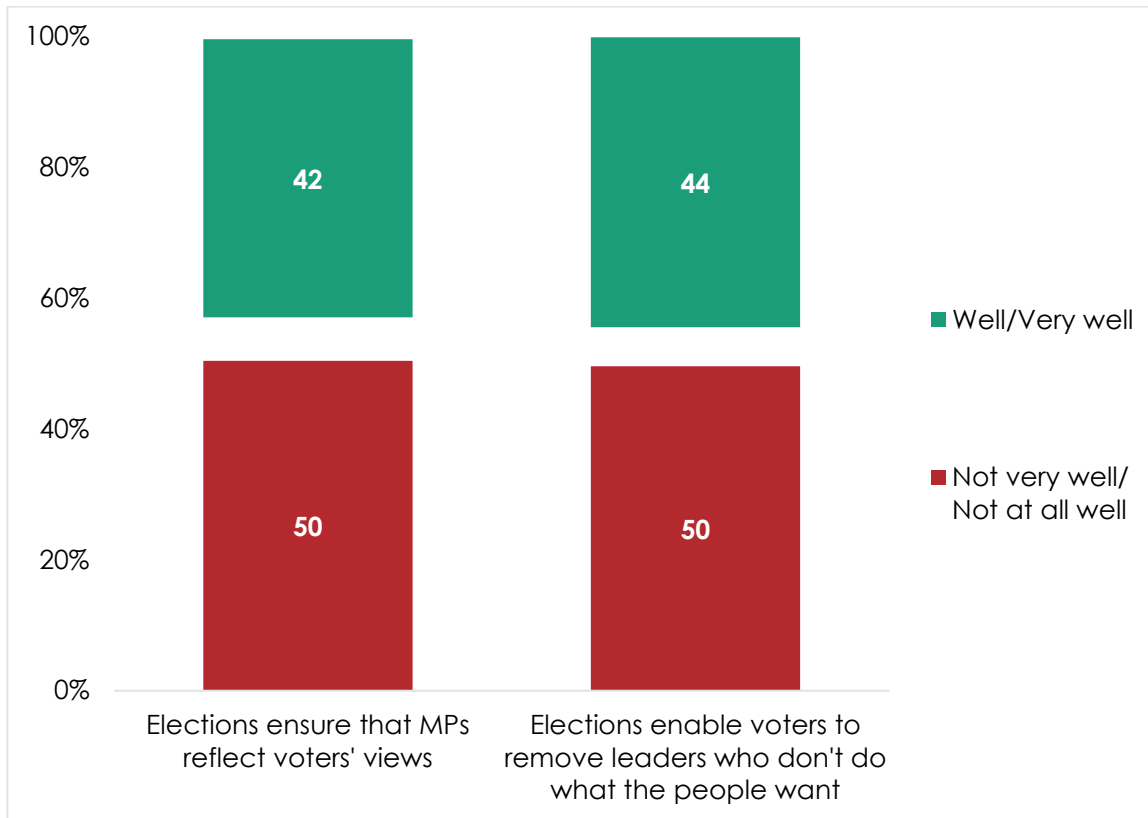
Respondents were asked: *Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections:*
Ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the views of voters?
Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?
* The question about MPs was asked in only 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

Country	Well/Very well	Don't know/Refused	Not at all well/Not very well
Gambia	85		14
Tanzania	72		26
Ghana	69		25
Sierra Leone	64		21
Senegal	61		36
Uganda	58		37
Zambia	56		42
Botswana	56		40
Liberia	52		46
Mozambique	50		46
Burkina Faso	47		46
Kenya	46		49
Sudan	44		42
34-country average	44		50
Niger	44		52
Zimbabwe	43		51
Tunisia	42		47
Mauritius	41		54
Benin	41		59
Ethiopia	40		55
Malawi	39		58
Lesotho	38		52
Namibia	38		53
Guinea	38		61
South Africa	37		52
Togo	37		60
Morocco	37		62
Mali	35		59
Nigeria	33		61
Angola	33		40
Côte d'Ivoire	32		65
Cabo Verde	30		52
Cameroon	28		70
Eswatini	26		67
Gabon	14		85

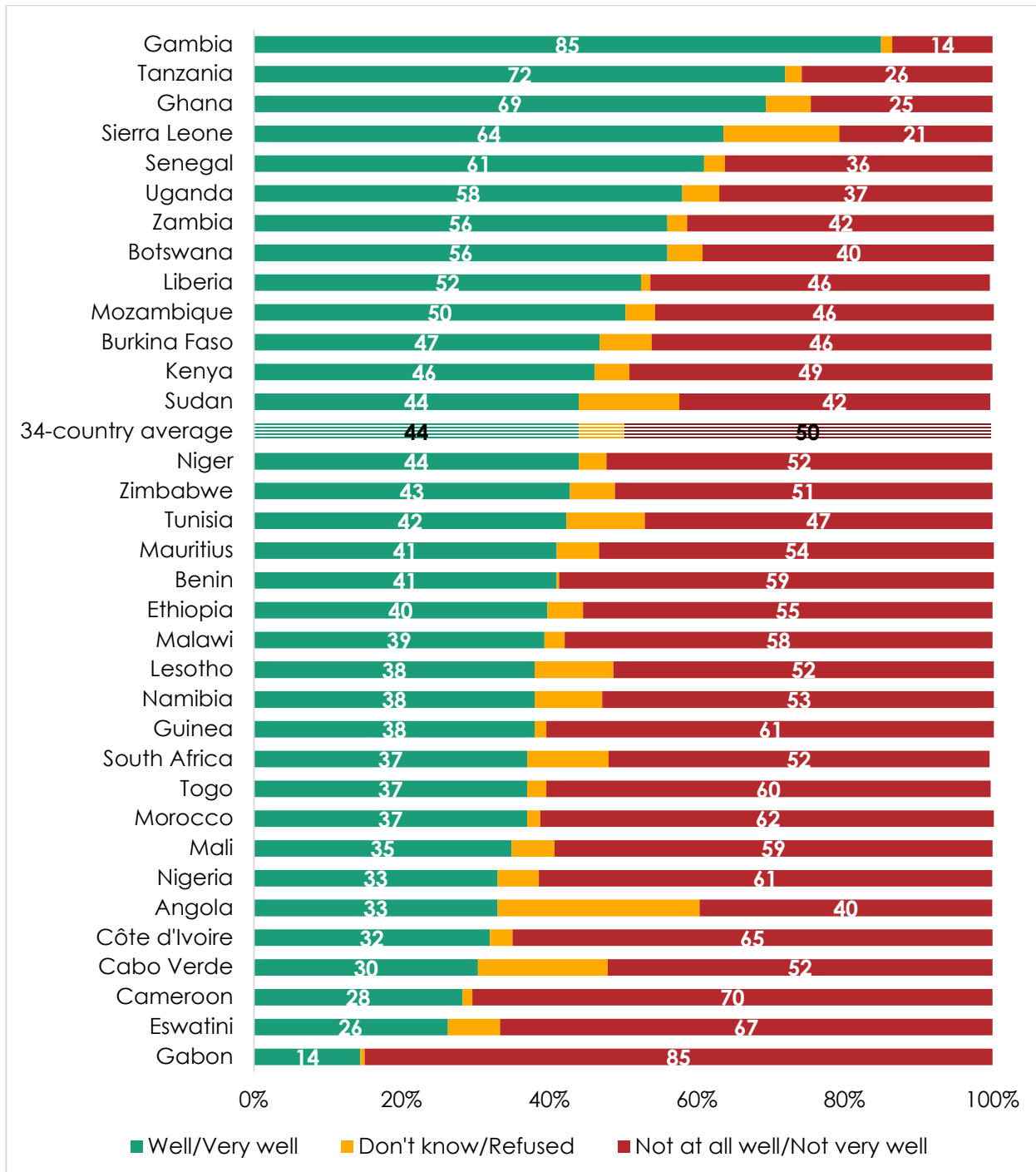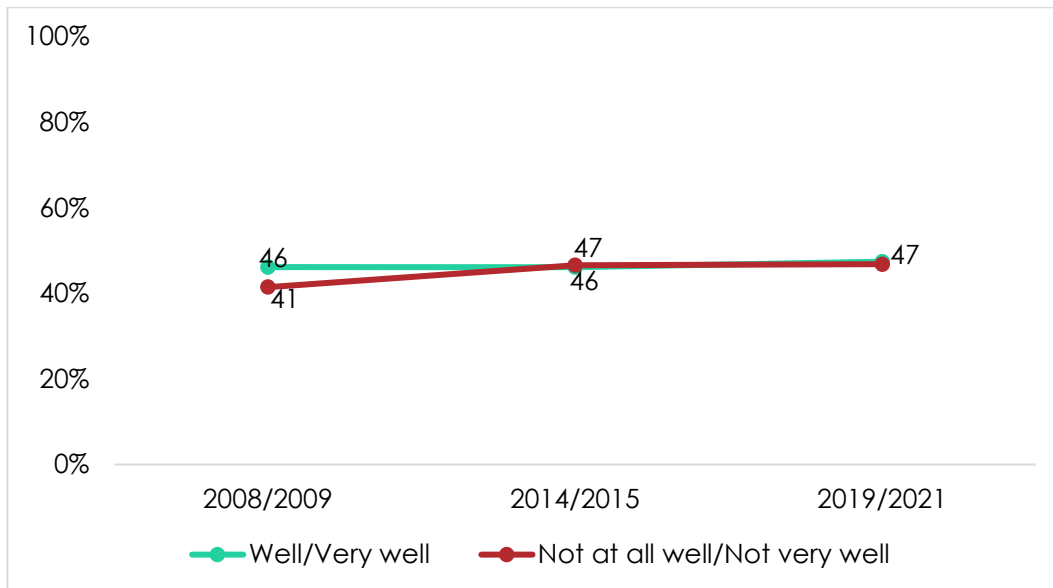*Respondents were asked:* *Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?*

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
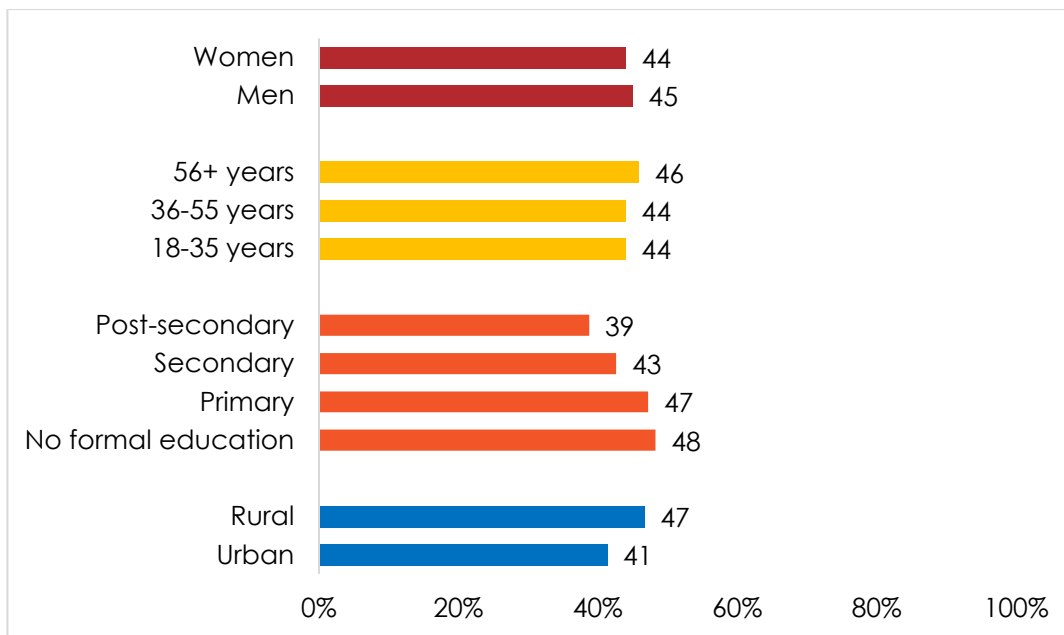

Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? (% who say "well" or "very well")

Support for elections

Figure 5: Support for elections | 34 countries | 2019/2021
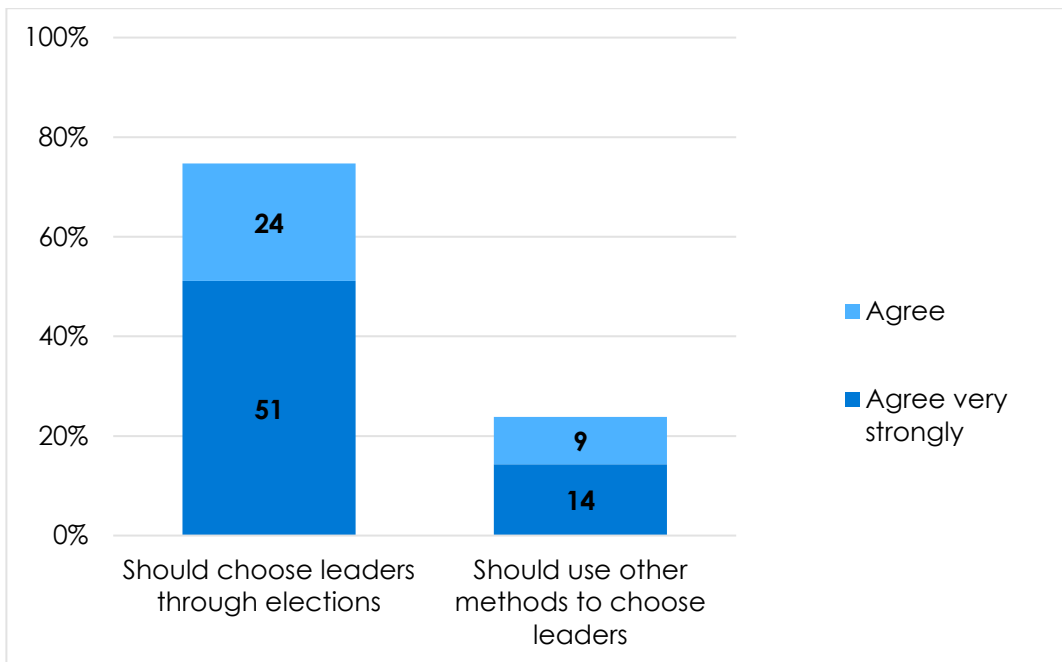
Respondents were asked: *Which of the following statements is closest to your view?*
Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

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

Country	Value
Liberia	90
Gambia	88
Benin	87
Sierra Leone	87
Tanzania	85
Ethiopia	85
Burkina Faso	84
Mauritius	83
Ghana	83
Guinea	83
Senegal	80
Sudan	80
Uganda	80
Morocco	80
Niger	80
Cabo Verde	78
Zambia	76
Côte d'Ivoire	76
Zimbabwe	75
34-country average	75
Togo	74
Nigeria	74
Mali	74
Kenya	74
Botswana	74
Tunisia	73
Namibia	72
Cameroon	70
Gabon	65
Mozambique	62
Angola	61
Eswatini	58
South Africa	55
Malawi	54
Lesotho	40

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
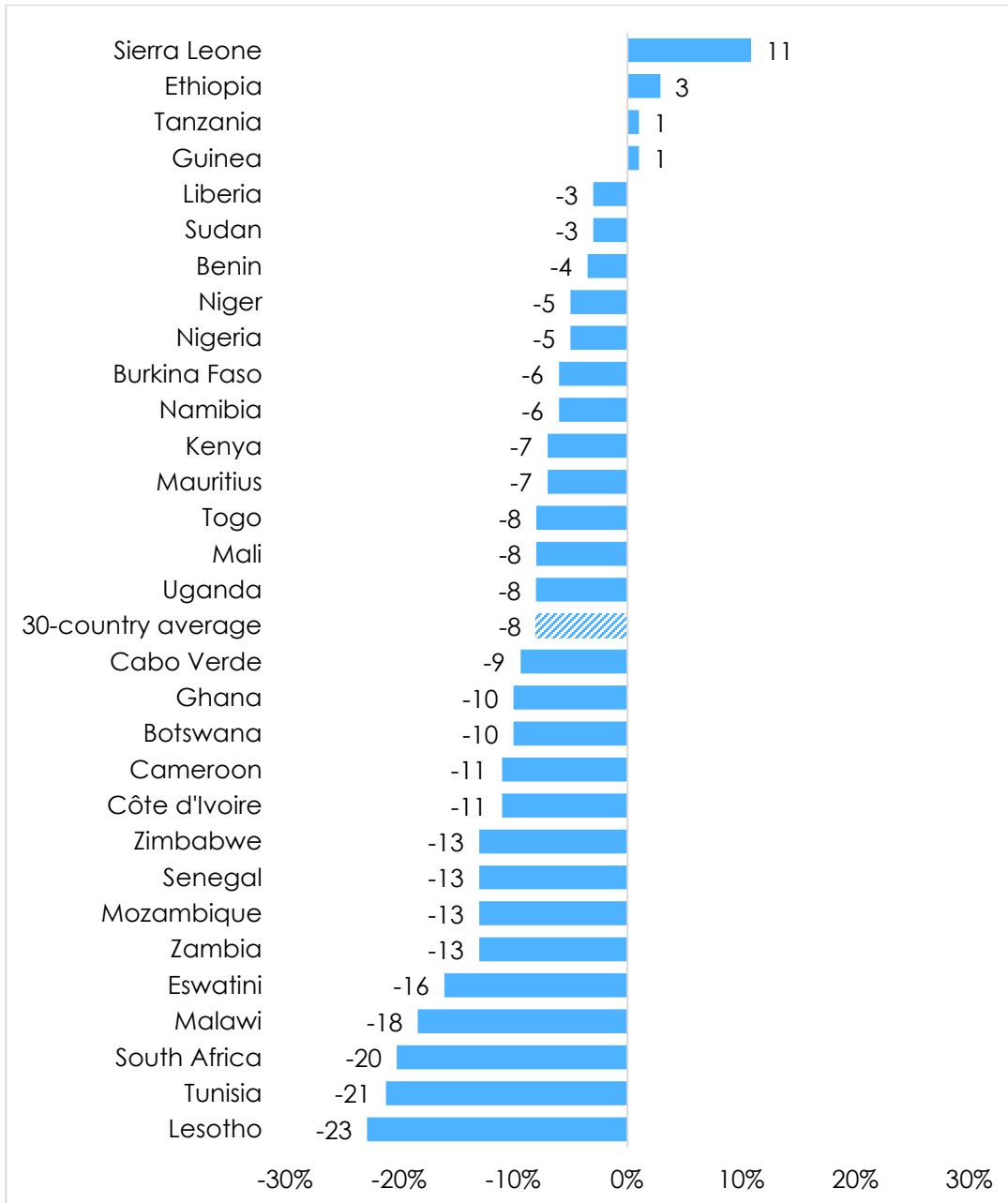
Figure shows change, in percentage points, between survey rounds in 2011/2013 and 2019/2021 in the proportion of respondents who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through elections.
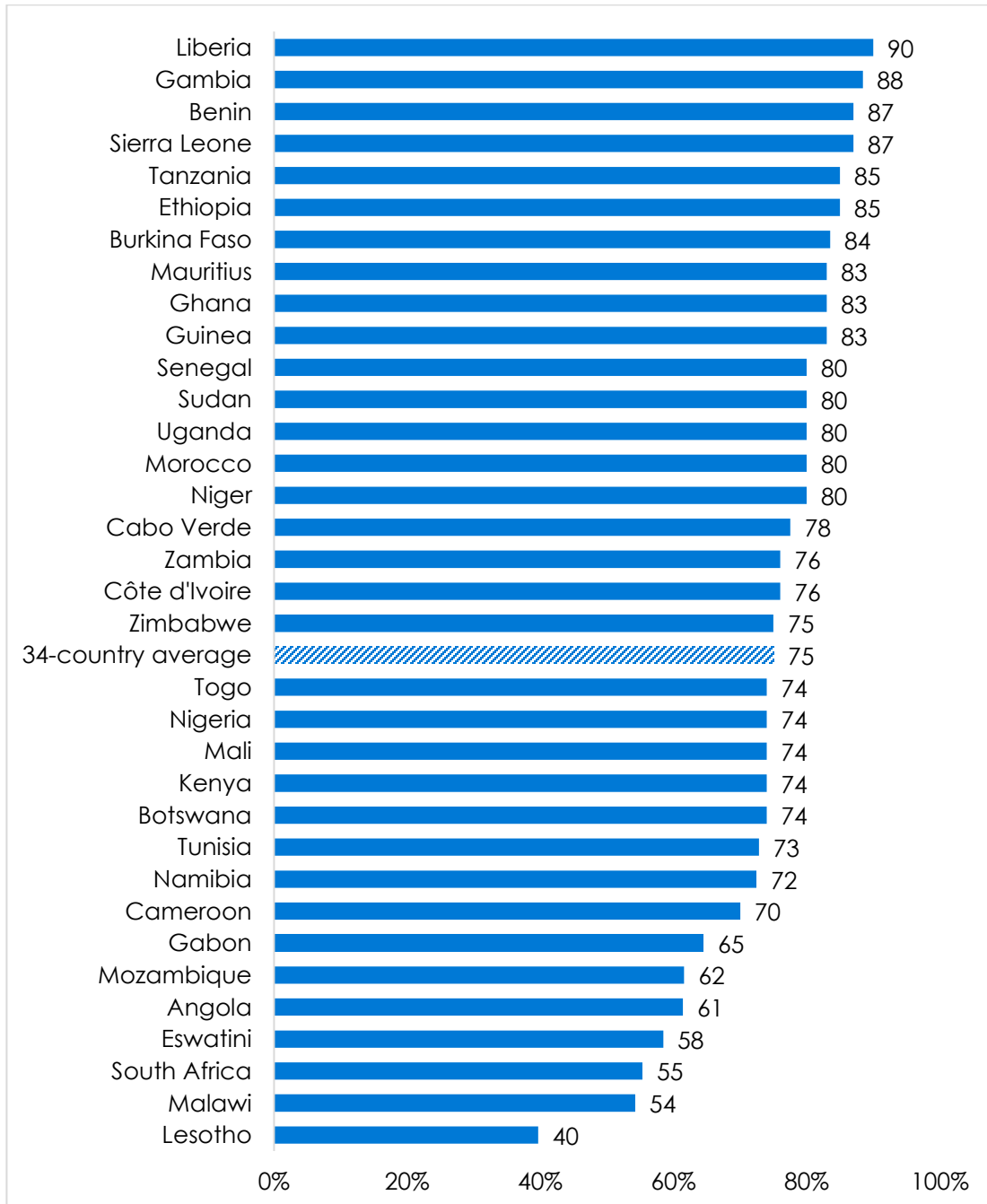
Figure 8: Support for elections | by demographic group | 34 countries | 2019/2021

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)

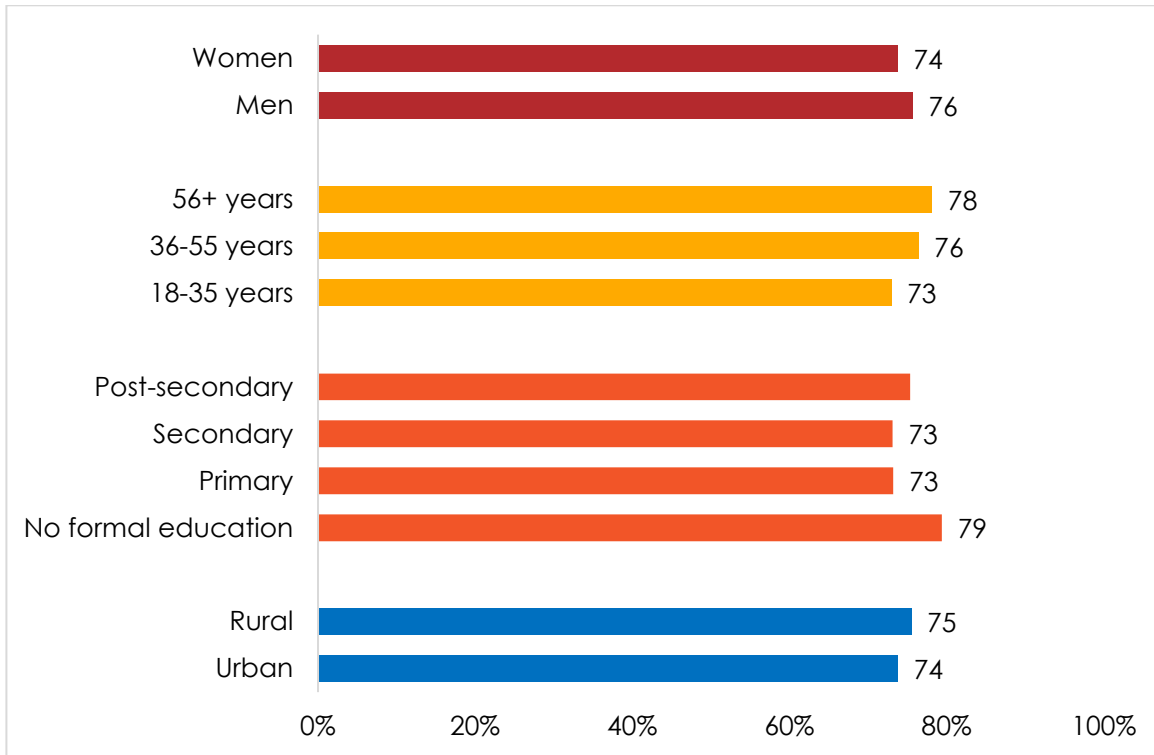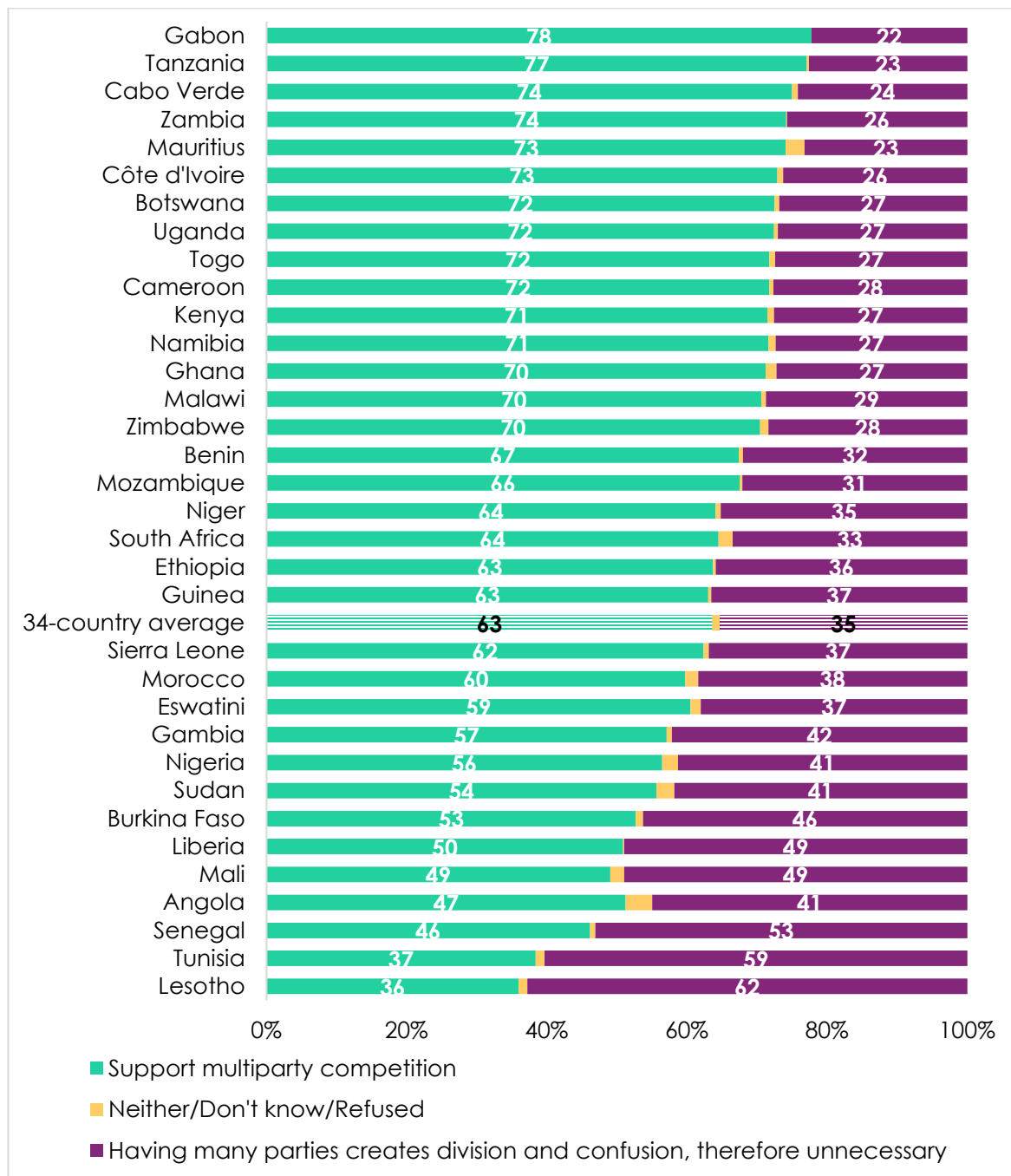**Figure 9: Support for multiparty competition | 34 countries | 2019/2021**

Country	Support multiparty competition	Neither/Don't know/Refused	Having many parties creates division and confusion, therefore unnecessary
Gabon	78		22
Tanzania	77		23
Cabo Verde	74		24
Zambia	74		26
Mauritius	73		23
Côte d'Ivoire	73		26
Botswana	72		27
Uganda	72		27
Togo	72		27
Cameroon	72		28
Kenya	71		27
Namibia	71		27
Ghana	70		27
Malawi	70		29
Zimbabwe	70		28
Benin	67		32
Mozambique	66		31
Niger	64		35
South Africa	64		33
Ethiopia	63		36
Guinea	63		37
34-country average	63		35
Sierra Leone	62		37
Morocco	60		38
Eswatini	59		37
Gambia	57		42
Nigeria	56		41
Sudan	54		41
Burkina Faso	53		46
Liberia	50		49
Mali	49		49
Angola	47		41
Senegal	46		53
Tunisia	37		59
Lesotho	36		62

■ Support multiparty competition
■ Neither/Don't know/Refused
■ Having many parties creates division and confusion, therefore unnecessary

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)
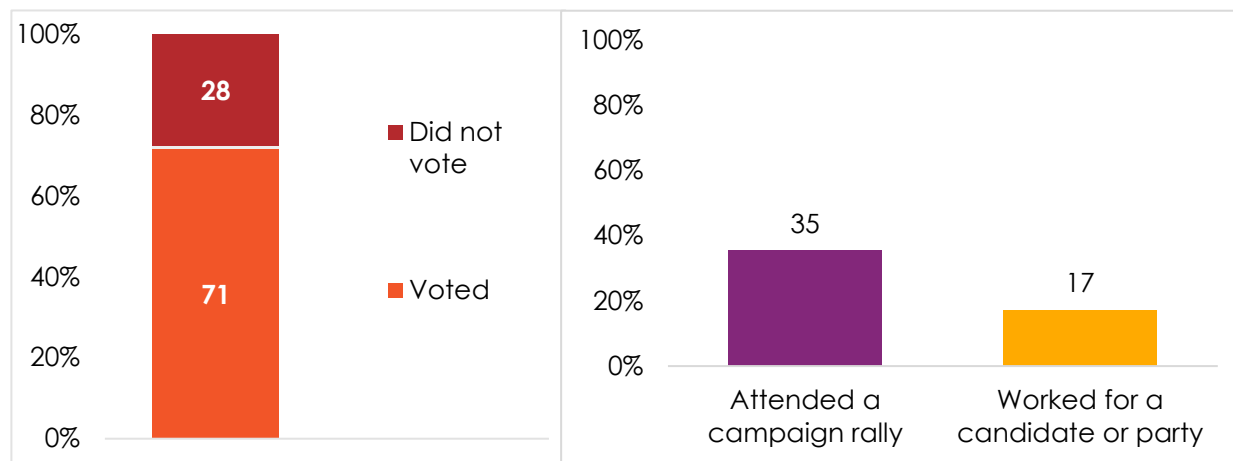
Figure 10: Support for multiparty competition | biggest gainers and losers | 2011-2021
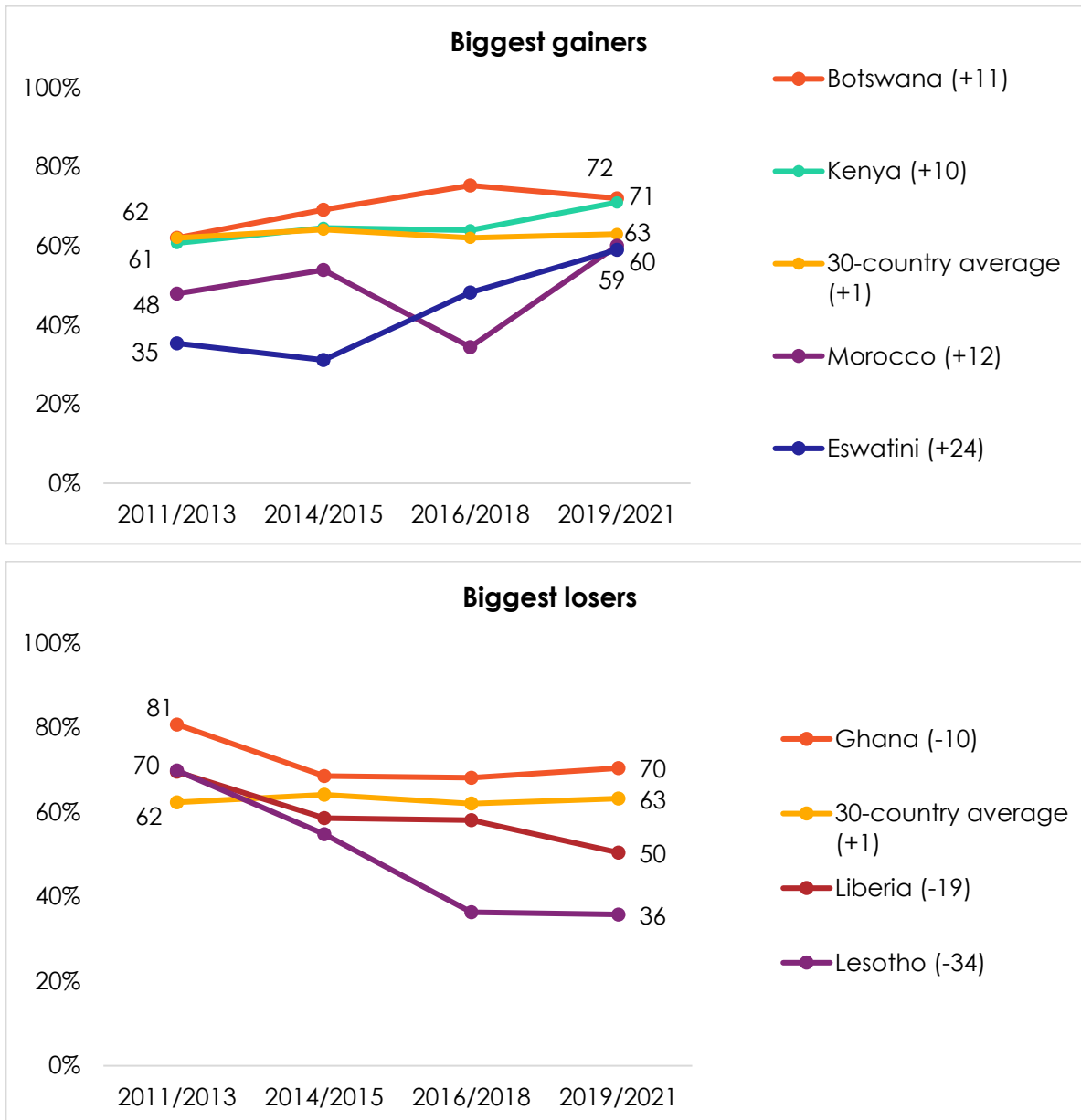
(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that many political parties are needed to make sure that citizens have real choices in who governs them)

Participation in elections

Figure 11: Particpation 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
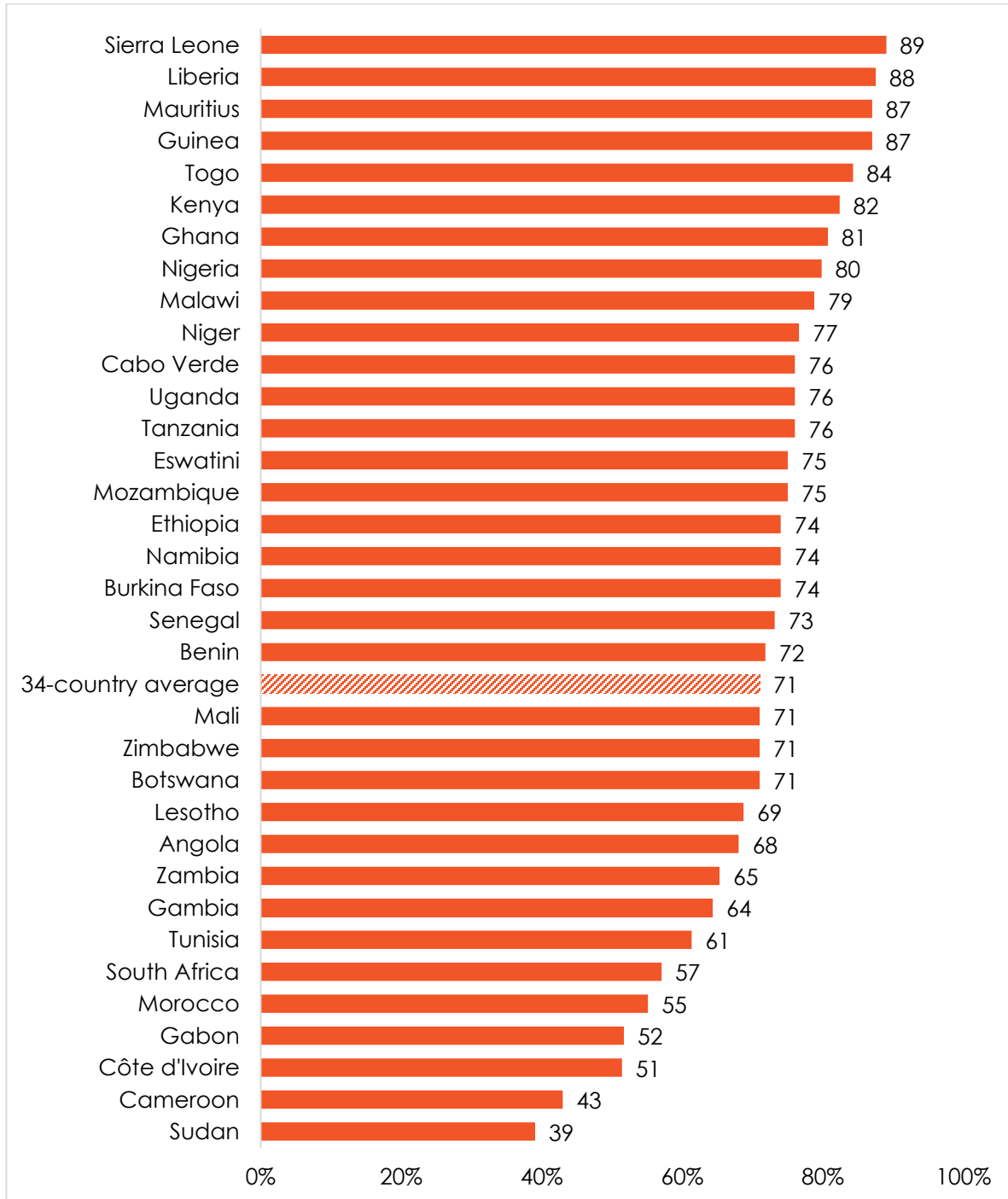
Country	%
Sierra Leone	89
Liberia	88
Mauritius	87
Guinea	87
Togo	84
Kenya	82
Ghana	81
Nigeria	80
Malawi	79
Niger	77
Cabo Verde	76
Uganda	76
Tanzania	76
Eswatini	75
Mozambique	75
Ethiopia	74
Namibia	74
Burkina Faso	74
Senegal	73
Benin	72
34-country average	71
Mali	71
Zimbabwe	71
Botswana	71
Lesotho	69
Angola	68
Zambia	65
Gambia	64
Tunisia	61
South Africa	57
Morocco	55
Gabon	52
Côte d'Ivoire	51
Cameroon	43
Sudan	39

***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
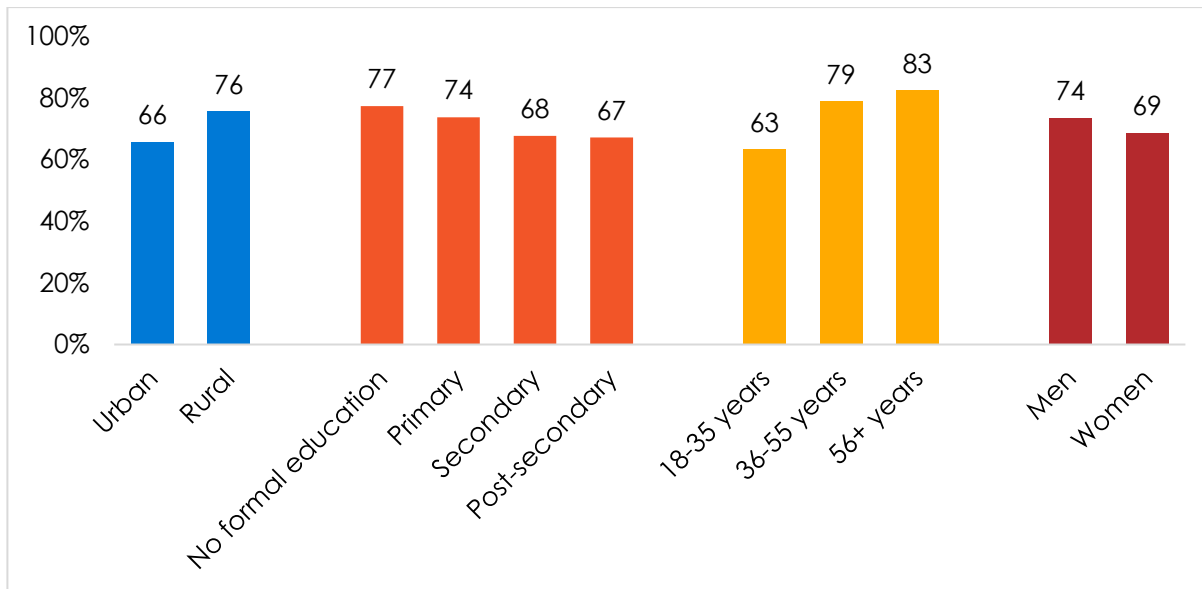

Respondents were asked: *In the last national election, held in [20XX], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted) (Note: Respondents who were too young to vote in the last national election are excluded.)*
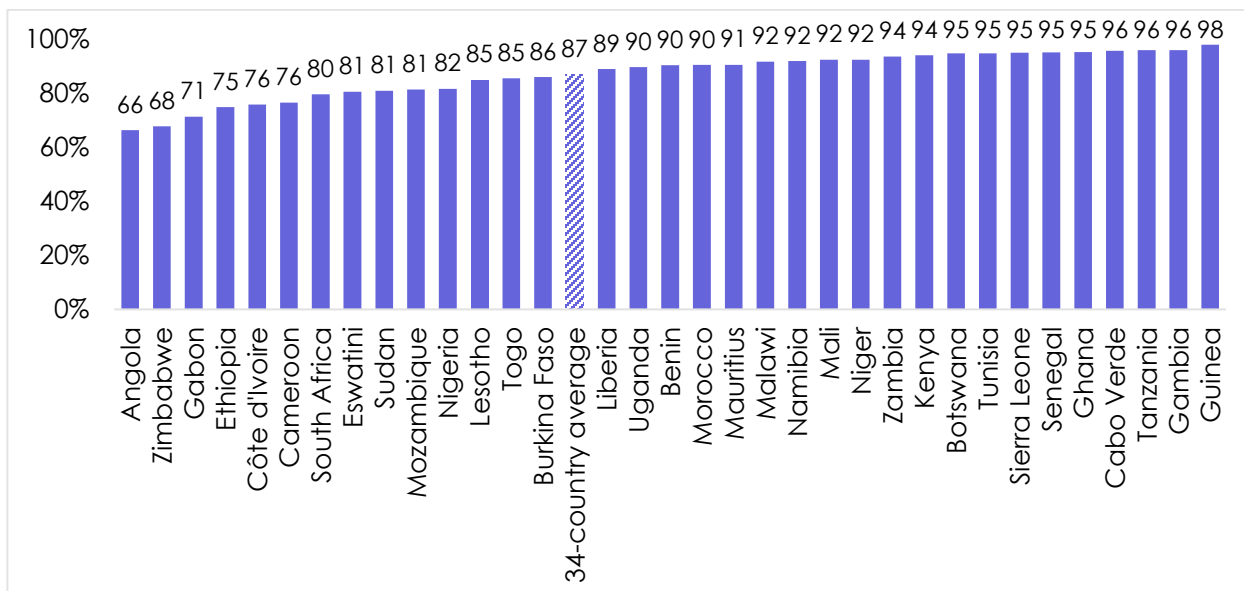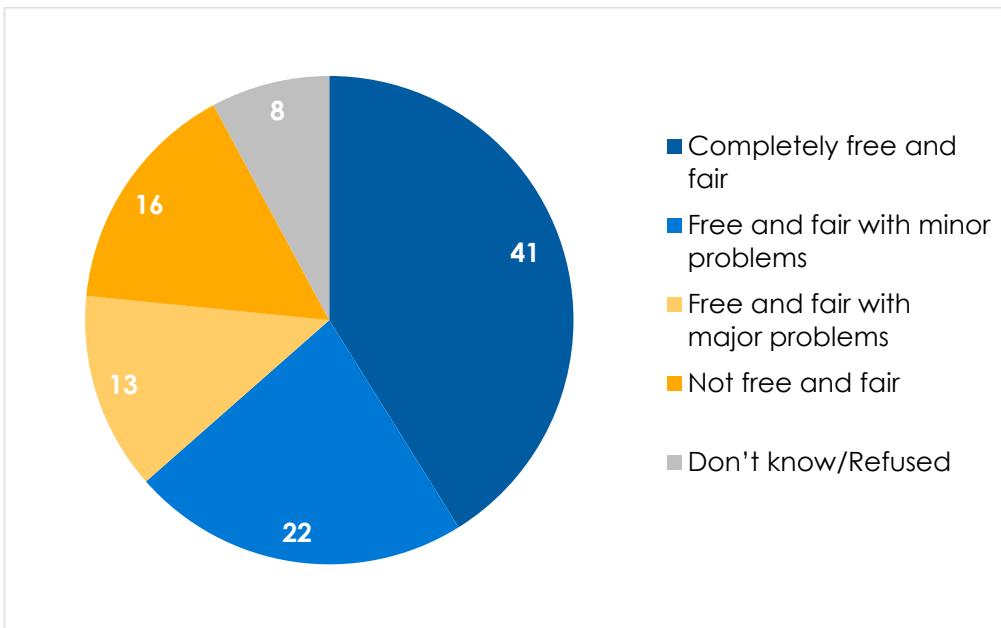
Quality and legitimacy of elections

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

Legend:
- ■ Completely free and fair
- ■ Free and fair with minor problems
- ■ Free and fair with major problems
- ■ Not free and fair
- ■ Don't know/Refused

Pie values: 41, 22, 13, 16, 8

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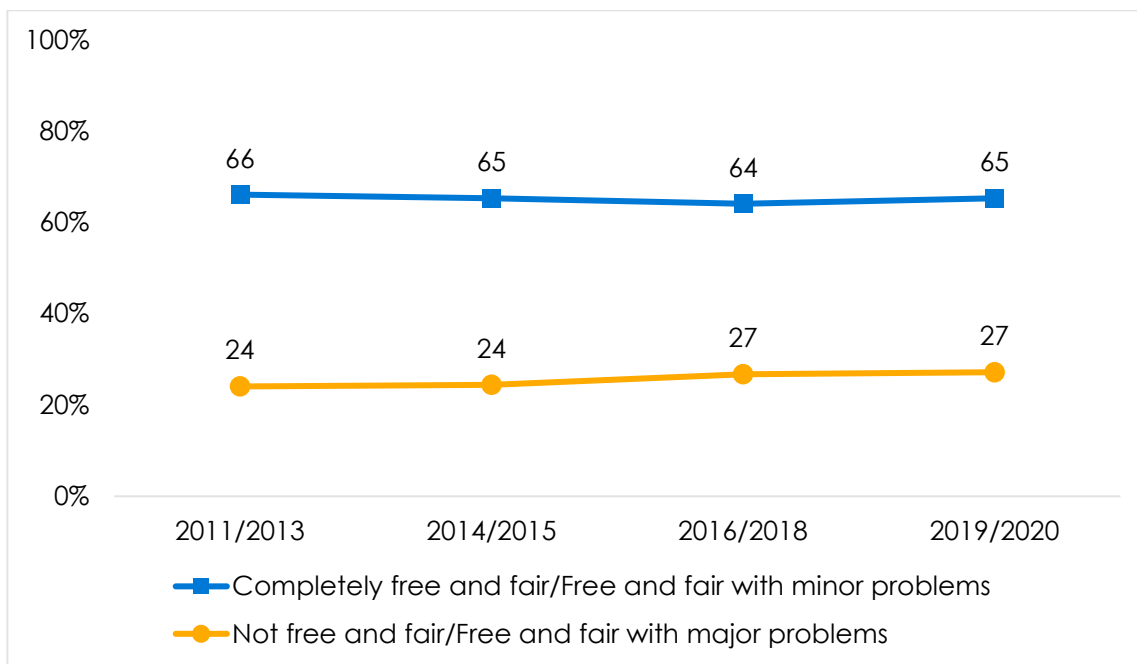
Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

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

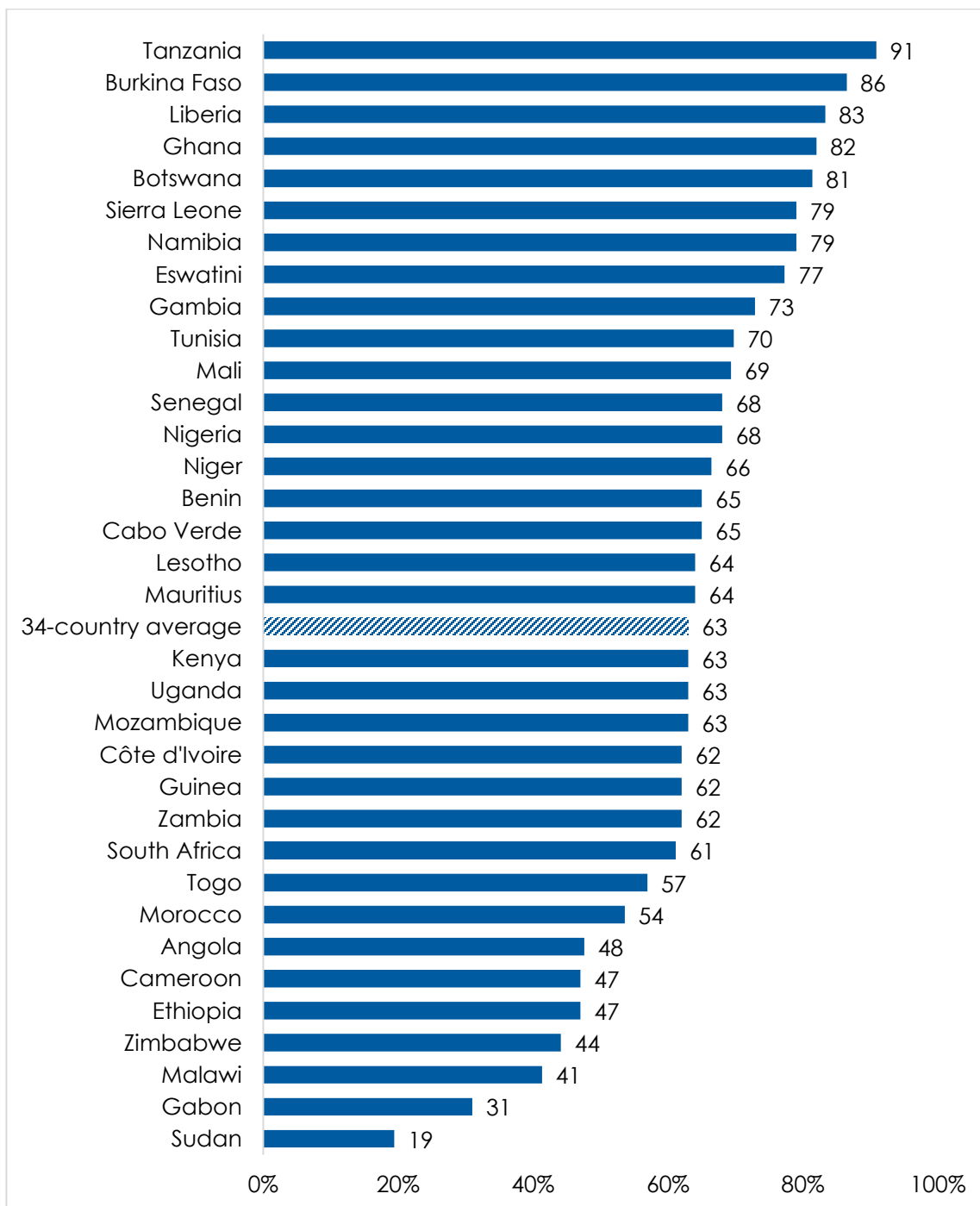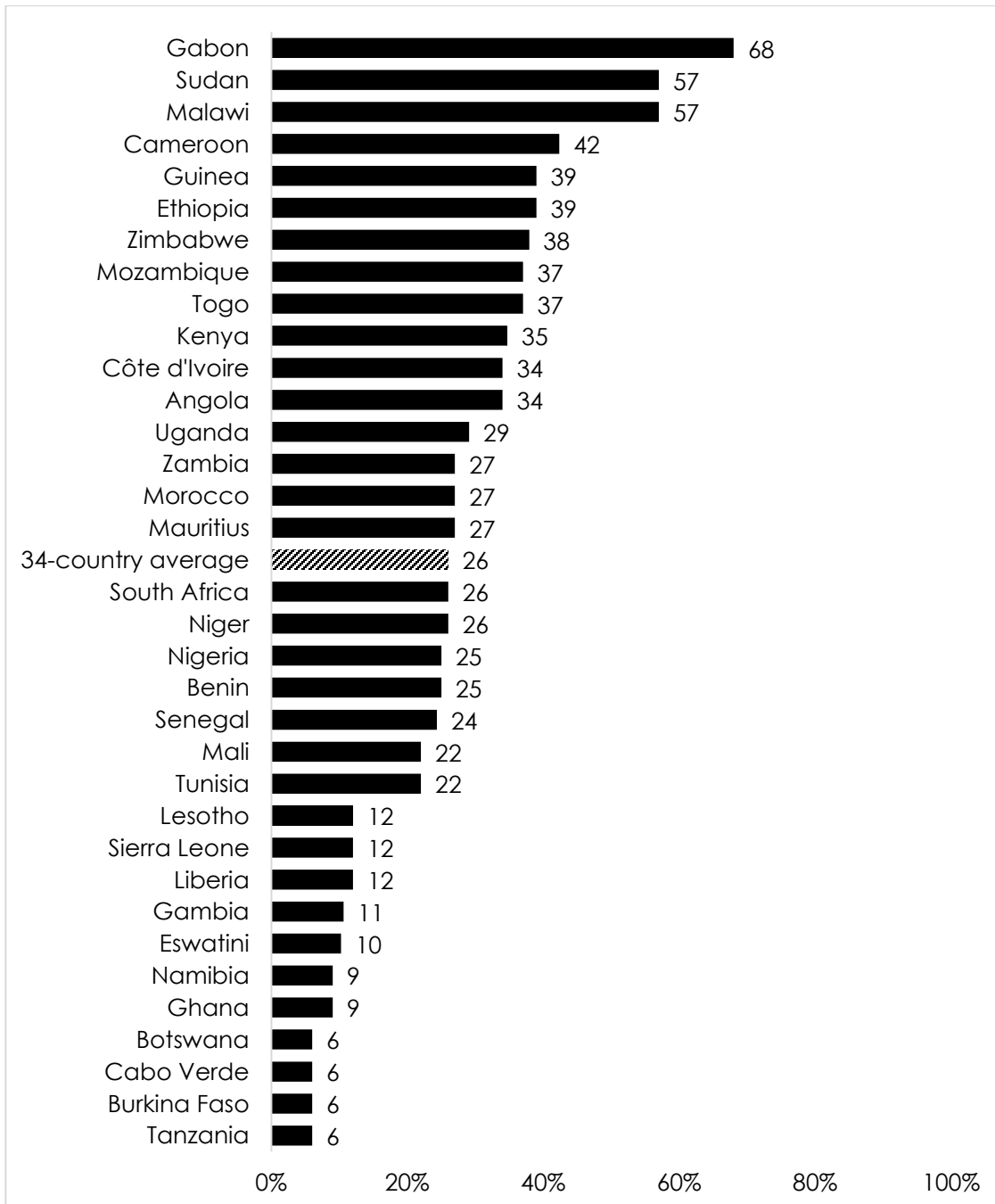| Country	Value
Tanzania	91
Burkina Faso	86
Liberia	83
Ghana	82
Botswana	81
Sierra Leone	79
Namibia	79
Eswatini	77
Gambia	73
Tunisia	70
Mali	69
Senegal	68
Nigeria	68
Niger	66
Benin	65
Cabo Verde	65
Lesotho	64
Mauritius	64
34-country average	63
Kenya	63
Uganda	63
Mozambique	63
Côte d'Ivoire	62
Guinea	62
Zambia	62
South Africa	61
Togo	57
Morocco	54
Angola	48
Cameroon	47
Ethiopia	47
Zimbabwe	44
Malawi	41
Gabon	31
Sudan	19

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
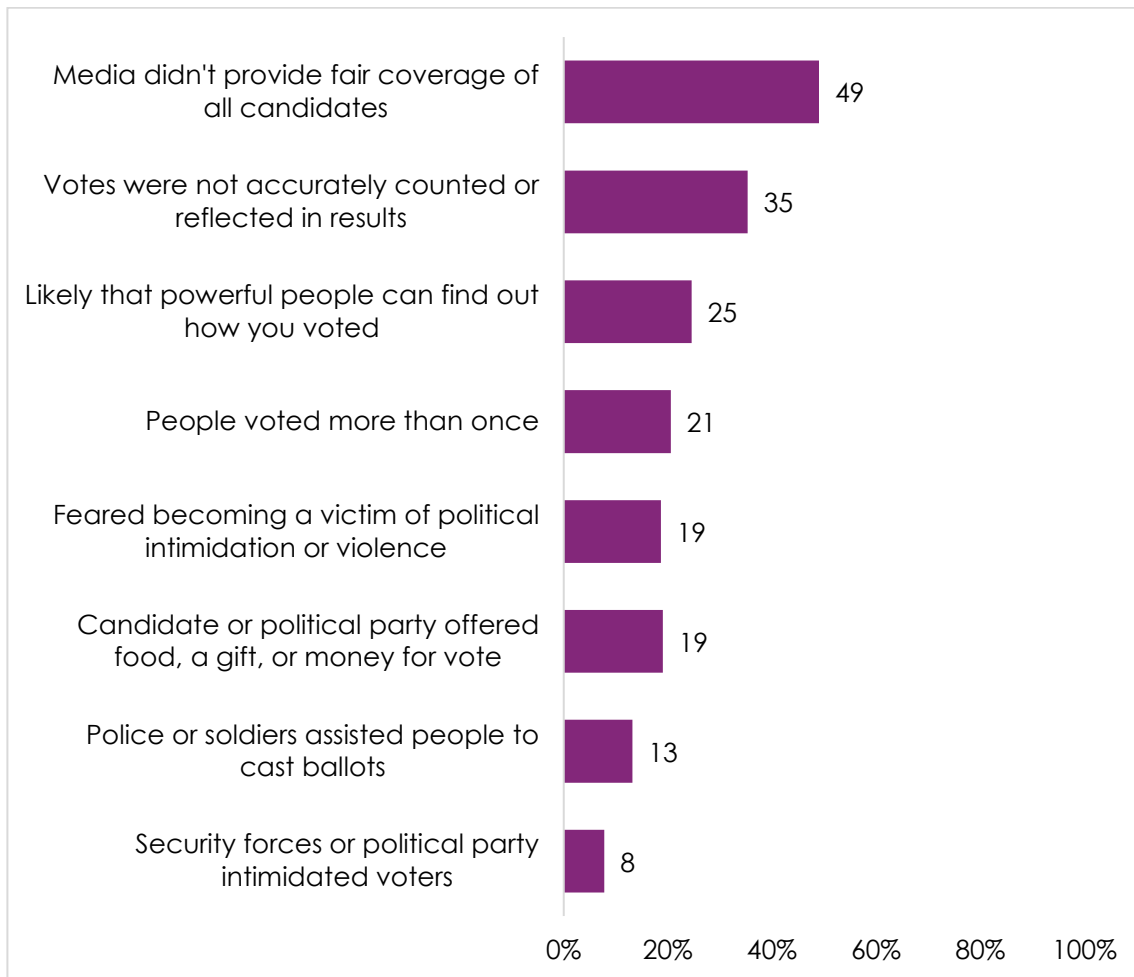
Respondents were asked: During the last national election, in [20XX]:
How often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates? (% who say "never" or "sometimes")
How often did each of the following things happen: People's votes were not accurately counted or not fairly reflected in the results? (% 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

Country	Value
Gabon	68
Sudan	57
Malawi	57
Cameroon	42
Guinea	39
Ethiopia	39
Zimbabwe	38
Mozambique	37
Togo	37
Kenya	35
Côte d'Ivoire	34
Angola	34
Uganda	29
Zambia	27
Morocco	27
Mauritius	27
34-country average	26
South Africa	26
Niger	26
Nigeria	25
Benin	25
Senegal	24
Mali	22
Tunisia	22
Lesotho	12
Sierra Leone	12
Liberia	12
Gambia	11
Eswatini	10
Namibia	9
Ghana	9
Botswana	6
Cabo Verde	6
Burkina Faso	6
Tanzania	6

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
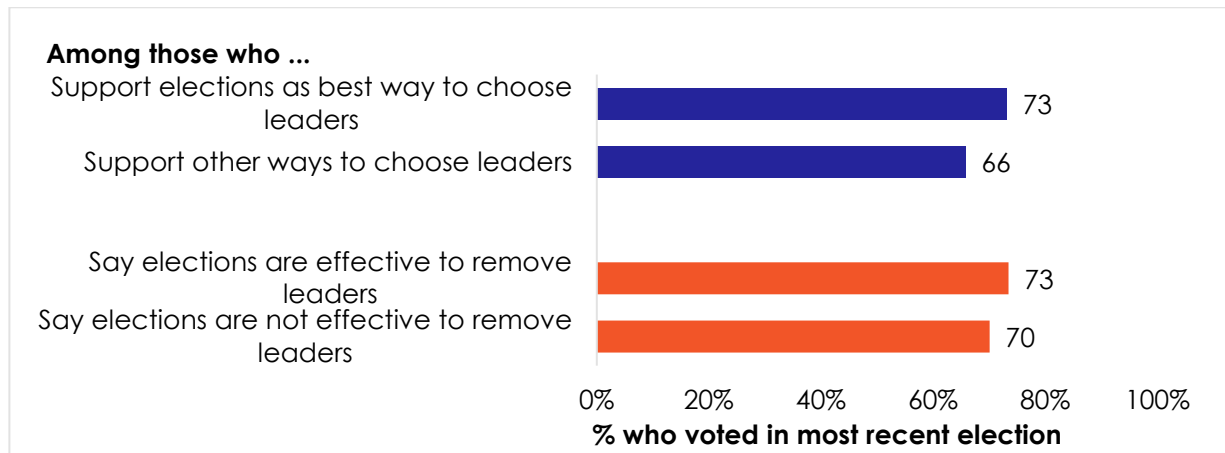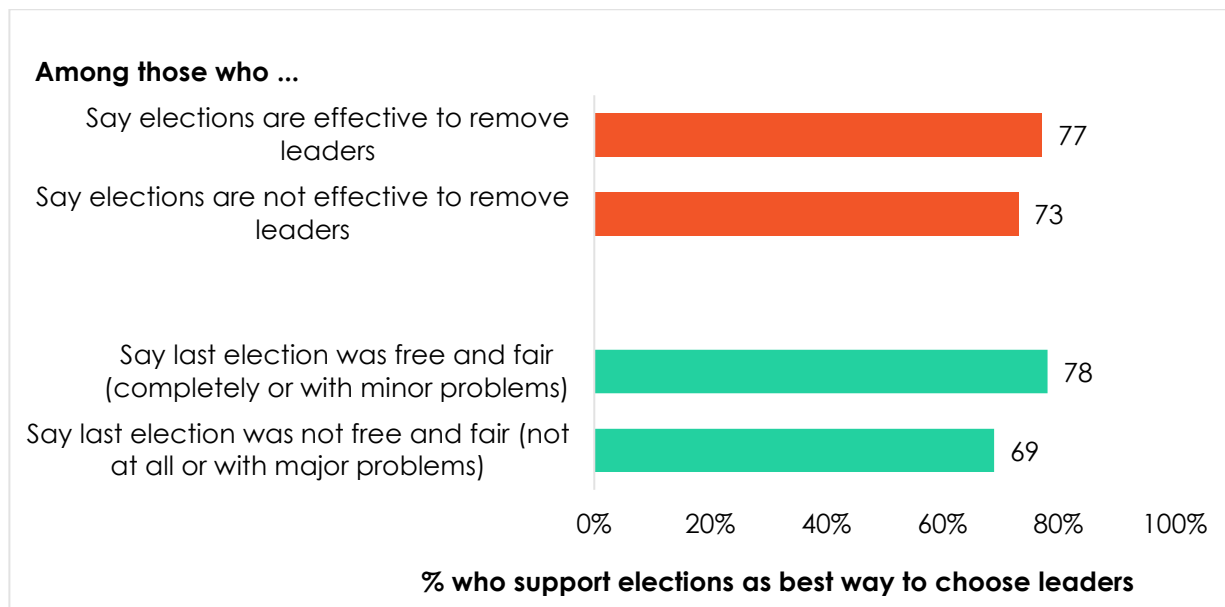

Among those who ...

Support elections as best way to choose leaders	73
Support other ways to choose leaders	66
Say elections are effective to remove leaders	73
Say elections are not effective to remove leaders	70

% who voted in most recent election

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

Among those who ...

Say elections are effective to remove leaders	77
Say elections are not effective to remove leaders	73
Say last election was free and fair (completely or with minor problems)	78
Say last election was not free and fair (not at all or with major problems)	69

% who support elections as best way to choose leaders

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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About Data for Governance Alliance

The Data for Governance Alliance is a four-year project that promotes data-based advocacy and engagement between pan-African civil society organisations (CSOs) and African Union organs. The project is led by Afrobarometer with partners, including CDD Ghana, the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Nairobi, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and Laws.Africa. The project is funded by the European Union.

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