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Most Togolese mistrust electoral commission, would prefer non-partisan, technical alternative

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 274 | Thomas Isbell and Hervé Akinocho

Summary

Since August 2017, Togo has been shaken by waves of protests by a coalition of opposition parties known as C14 demanding constitutional, institutional, and electoral reforms resulting in parliamentary and local elections as well as a constitutional referendum in a more consensual atmosphere (Togo Times, 2018). The success of such an electoral marathon would depend in part on how much the various stakeholders trust the institutions involved in the electoral process, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI in French). As might be expected, a battle ensued for control of the CENI, whose members represent political parties as well as civil society and the administration, ultimately leading the C14 to boycott the CENI and the parliamentary elections conducted on 20 December 2018 (Atlantic Infos, 2018; Lemask, 2018; Déguénon, 2018; RFI, 2018a, 2018b; Togosite.com, 2018; Digitalcongo.net, 2018).

Public trust in the electoral commission has been an ongoing issue as past elections have been marked by disputed results and charges of CENI bias (Vampouille, 2010; lemonde.fr, 2015; togotribune.com, 2018).

Findings from Afrobarometer's most recent survey in Togo show that popular trust in the electoral commission is low, and while citizens support elections as the best means for choosing leaders, perceived election quality has decreased. Most Togolese – even those who trust the electoral commission – say a non-partisan, technical electoral commission would work better.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and results of Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being disseminated. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Togo, led by the Center for Research and Opinion Polls (CROP), interviewed 1,200 adult Togolese in November 2017. 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 Togo in 2012 and 2014.

Key findings

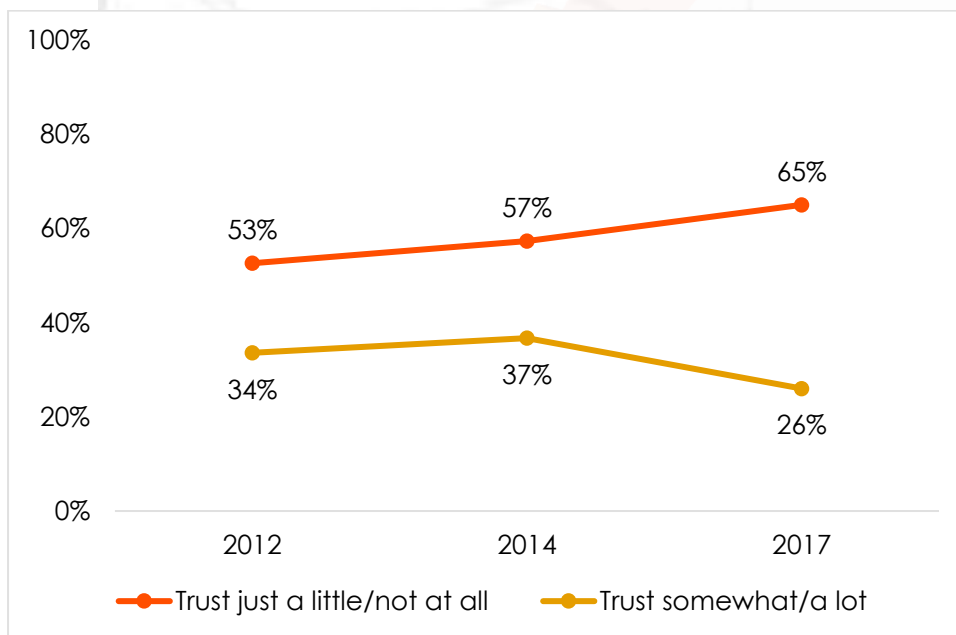
- Only one in four Togolese (26%) say they trust the Independent National Electoral Commission "somewhat" or "a lot," an 11-percentage-point drop since 2014. Urban residents, the most educated, and the poorest citizens express the least trust in the commission.

- Only four in 10 citizens (40%) say the most recent national election was generally free and fair, a 21-point decline from 61% who felt that way in 2014.
- While three-fourths (74%) of Togolese voice support for choosing leaders through elections, the share who say that alternative methods could be explored has risen from 16% in 2012 to 25% in 2017.
- More than seven in 10 Togolese (73%) say that a non-partisan, technical electoral commission would be better equipped for managing and proclaiming election results. Even citizens who say they trust the existing “political” commission strongly favour a non-partisan version.

Declining trust in the electoral commission

Only one in four Togolese (26%) say they trust the IEC “somewhat” or “a lot,” a decline from 37% in 2014. The proportion of citizens who say they trust the commission “just a little” or “not at all” has climbed by 12 percentage points since 2012, to 65% (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trust national electoral commission | Togo | 2012-2017

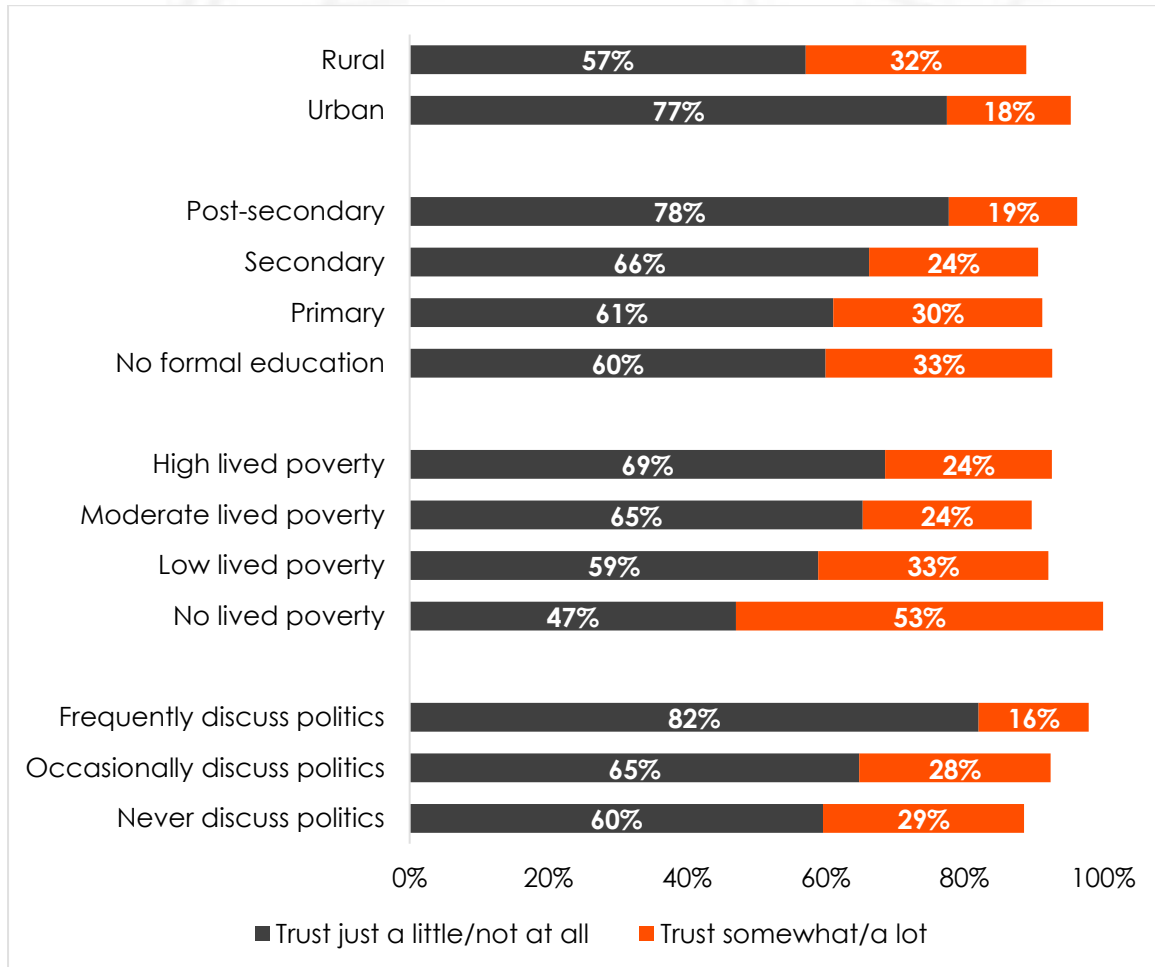


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)?

Low or no trust in the electoral commission is especially prevalent among urban residents (77%), the most educated (78% of Togolese with post-secondary education), and citizens who experience moderate (65%) or high (69%) levels of lived poverty.¹ Citizens who say they frequently discuss political matters with friends and family are also more likely to mistrust the commission (82%) than those who talk about politics only occasionally (65%) or never (60%) (Figure 2).

¹ Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: “Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?”

Figure 2: Trust national electoral commission | by socio-demographic group | Togo
 | 2017



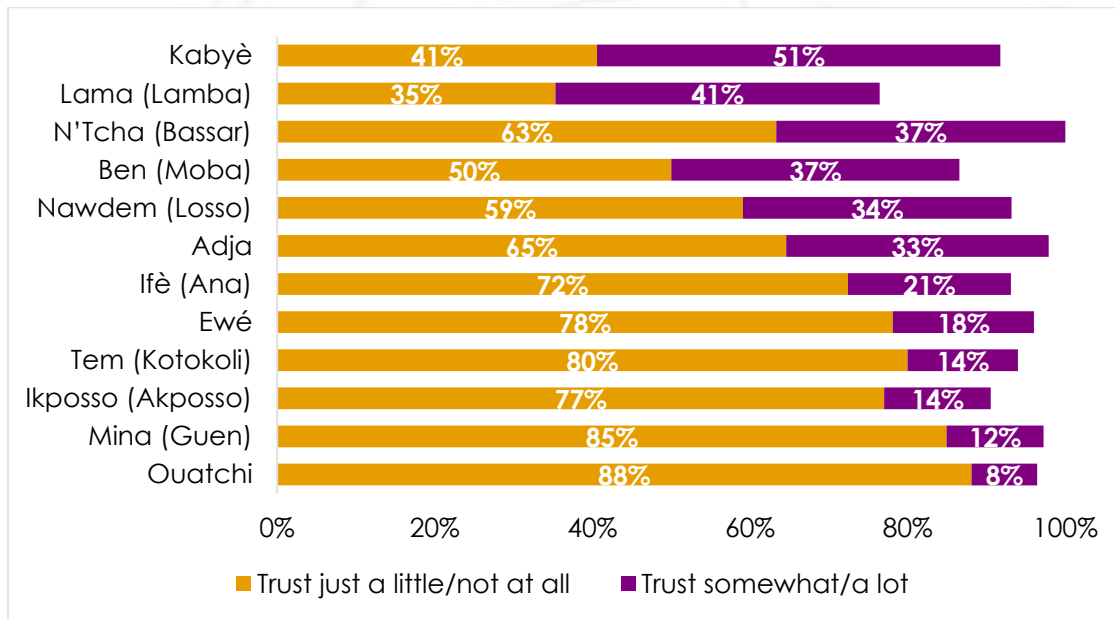
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)?

Trust in the electoral commission varies considerably by ethnic group and by how respondents feel their ethnic group is treated by the government. Ethnicity has been highly salient and politically polarized in Togo's modern history as a legacy of ethnic clientelism by the former German colonialists. In particular, the politically and economically dominant Ewé group and the Northern Kabrai groups competed for power in politics and the military apparatus during the first decades of independence (Horowitz, 2001).

It is important to note that breaking down survey responses by ethnic group requires analyzing small sub-samples, producing results with very large margins of error. Thus, except for the Ewé and Kabyè (the dominant group among the northern Kabrai), reported percentages should be considered indicative and interpreted with caution. With this caveat in mind, the data suggest that trust in the IEC is highest among Togolese from the Kabyè (51%) and Lama (41%) ethnic groups, while mistrust is highest among respondents from the Ikposso (77%), Ewé (78%), Tem (80%), Mina (85%), and Ouatchi (88%) groups (Figure 3).

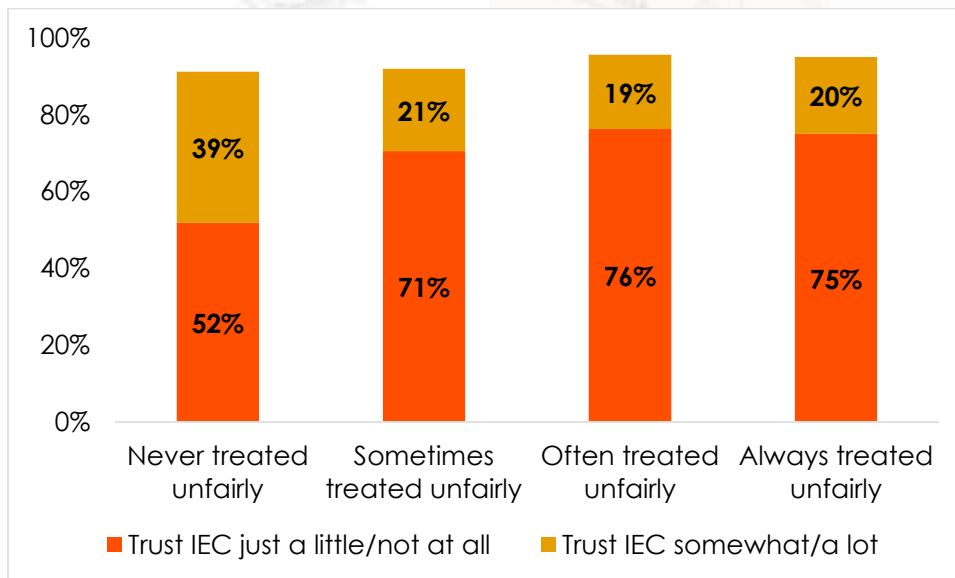
Respondents who say their ethnic group is "never" treated unfairly by the government are more likely to trust the IEC "somewhat" or "a lot" (39%) than those who believe their ethnic group is "sometimes," "often," or "always" treated unfairly (19%-21% trust the IEC) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Trust national electoral commission | by ethnic group | Togo | 2017



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

Figure 4: Trust national electoral commission | by treatment of ethnic group | Togo | 2017

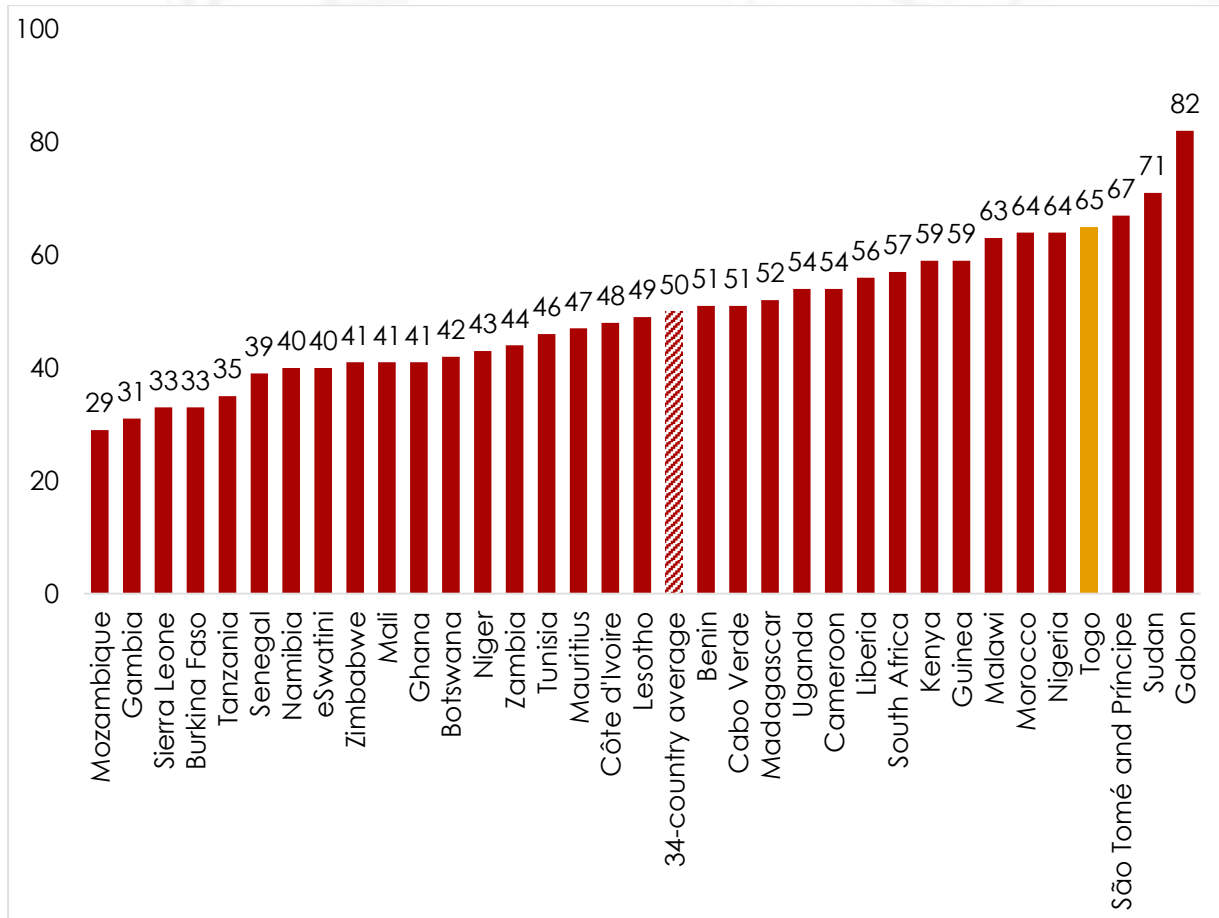


Respondents were asked:

- How often, if ever, are [members of your ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government? –
- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)?

Compared to 33 other countries in Africa surveyed in 2016/2018, Togo ranks fourth in popular mistrust in the national electoral commission, behind Gabon (82%), Sudan (71%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (67%) (Figure 5). Togolese are twice as likely to express little or no trust in their electoral commission as Mozambicans (29%), Gambians (31%), Sierra Leoneans (33%), and Burkinabè (33%).

Figure 5: Low or no trust in national electoral commission (%) | by country
 | 34 countries | 2016/2018



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

How free and fair are elections?

One factor that may affect how much citizens trust the electoral commission is their assessment of how well the commission performs in ensuring free and fair elections. In Togo, the population's evaluations of elections have worsened in recent years. In 2017, only four in

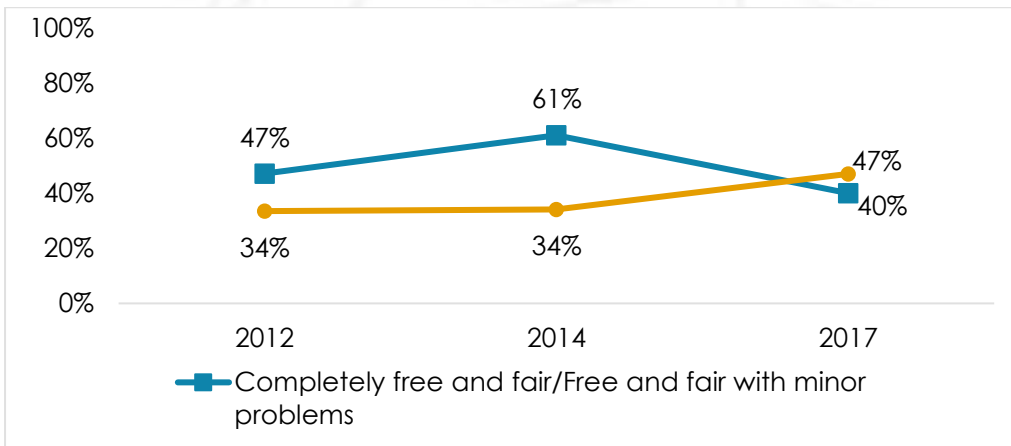
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10 respondents (40%) say the last national election (the 2015 presidential contest) was "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," a 21-percentage-point decline from 61% who felt that way in 2014 about the 2013 parliamentary election. Almost half (47%) of Togolese citizens now see the last national election as "not free

and fair" or "free and fair with major problems" (Figure 6).

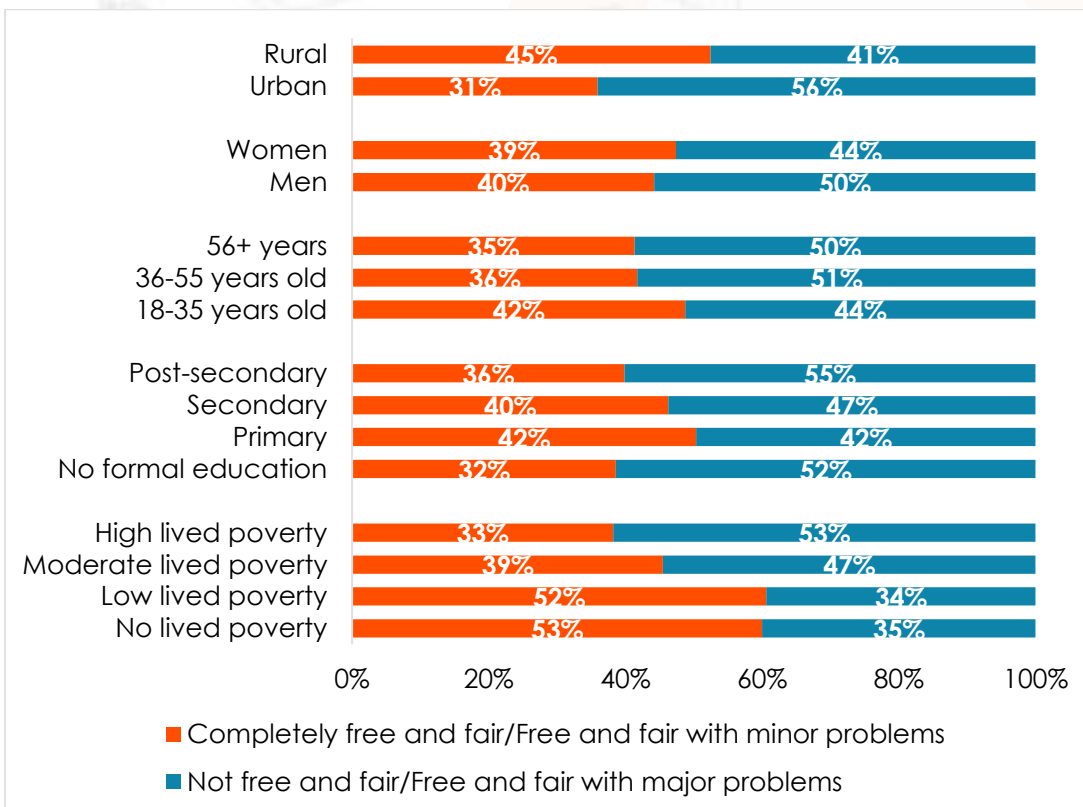
Rural residents are more likely than urbanites to judge the last election as generally free and fair (45% vs. 39%), as are young respondents (42% of those aged 18-35) compared to their elders (35%-36%) (Figure 7). Poorer respondents are more critical of the most recent election than their better-off counterparts.

Figure 6: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | Togo | 2012-2017



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

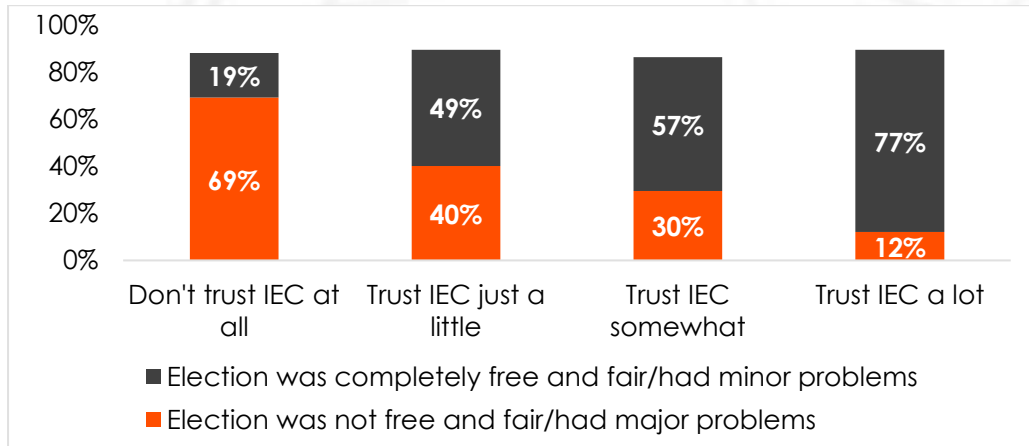
Figure 7: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | by socio-demographic group | Togo | 2017



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2015?

As might be expected, citizen perceptions of election quality seem to align to some extent with trust in the electoral commission. For example, among those who trust the IEC “a lot,” more than three-fourths (77%) see the last election as generally free and fair. But among those who don’t trust the IEC at all, only 19% say the election was free and fair (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | by trust in the electoral commission | Togo | 2017

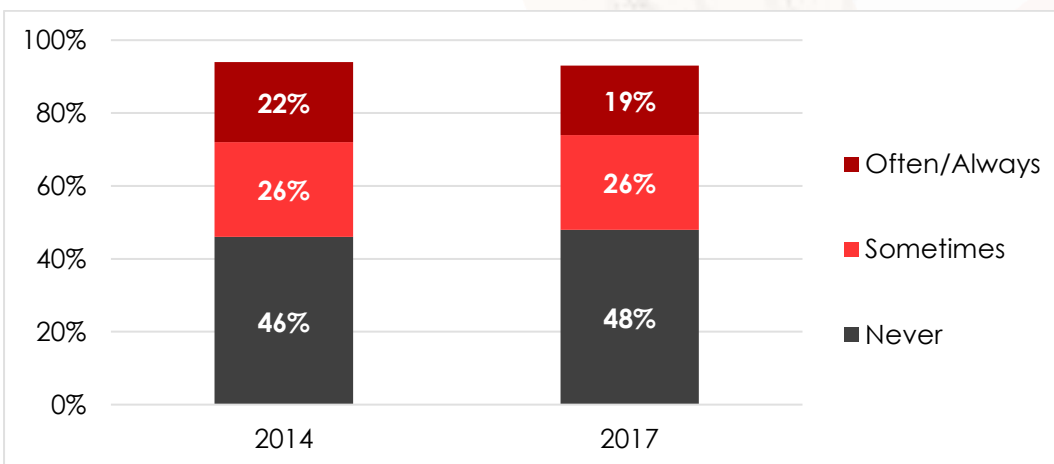


Respondents were asked:

- How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC)?
- On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2015?

In line with their mixed appraisals of election quality, almost half of Togolese say that opposition candidates are at least "sometimes" prevented from running. One in five respondents (19%) say this is "often" or "always" the case, in addition to 26% who say it happens "sometimes" (Figure 9). These views have not changed significantly since the previous survey in 2014.

Figure 9: Opposition prevented from running in elections | Togo | 2014-2017

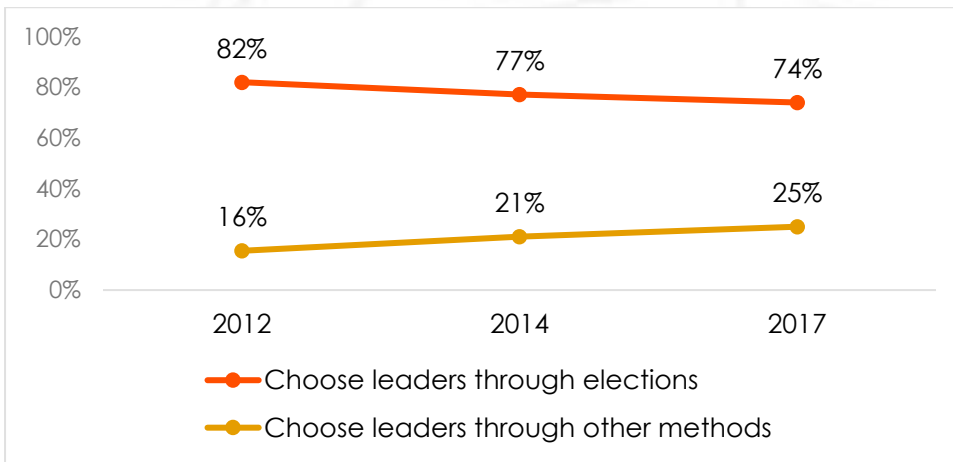


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, during this country's elections how often are opposition candidates prevented from running for office?

Support for elections as the best way to choose leaders

Despite weak popular trust in the electoral commission and mixed reviews of election quality, three out of four Togolese (74%) still say regular, open, and honest elections are the best way to choose the country's leaders. But support for elections has declined somewhat over the past five years, from 82% in 2012, while the proportion of citizens who think that other methods for selecting leaders might be preferable has increased from 16% to 25% (Figure 10).

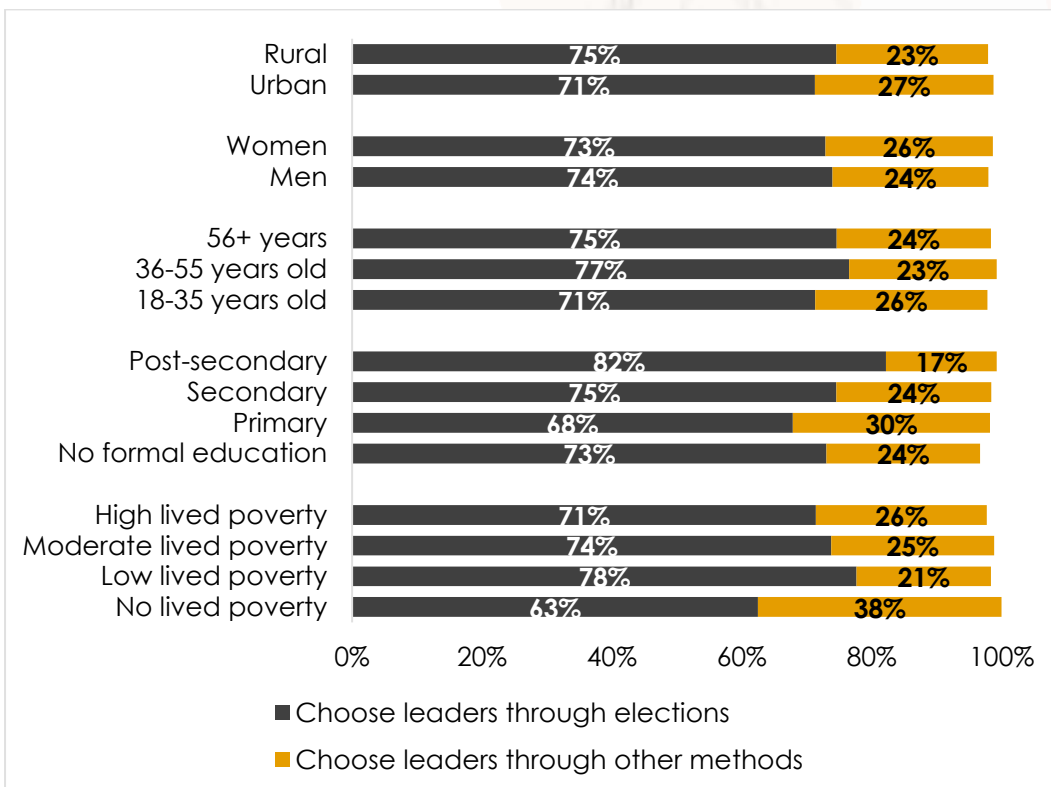
Figure 10: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods | Togo | 2012-2017



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" with each statement)

The popular preference for elections is strong across key socio-demographic groups, with above-average support among citizens with post-secondary education (82%) and below-average support among the wealthiest (63%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods | by socio-demographic group | Togo | 2017



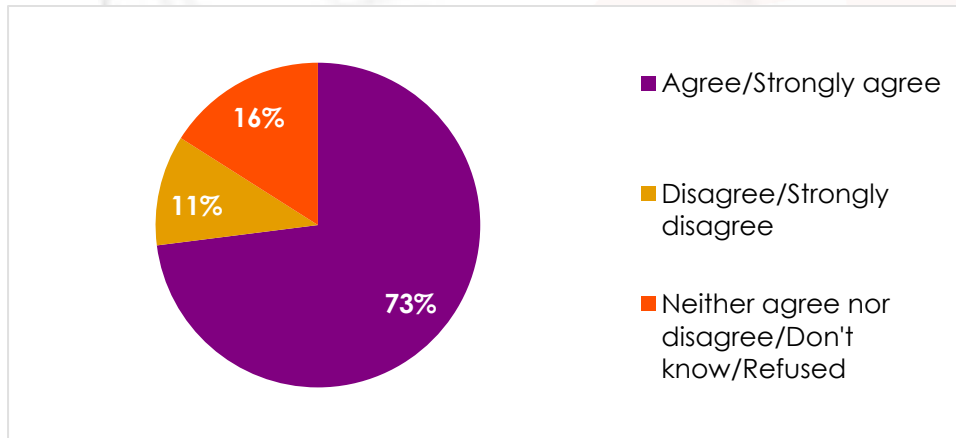
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Support for a non-partisan, technical electoral commission

One way to improve the IEC's performance, and thus perhaps the quality of Togo's elections, may be to change the way the commission is constituted. In place of a commission made up of 17 members representing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary political parties as well as civil society and the administration, a large majority (73%) of Togolese say that a non-partisan, technical electoral commission would be better suited for organizing and proclaiming election results (Figure 12).

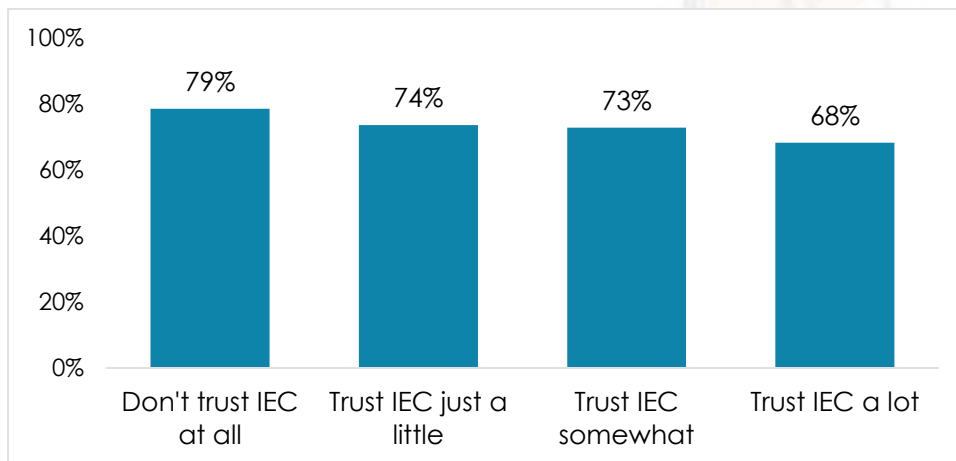
Regardless of how much they trust the existing national electoral commission, at least two-thirds of Togolese say that a non-partisan, technical IEC would be better at managing and announcing election results. Approval of such a non-political and technical alternative is highest among those who say they don't trust the electoral commission at all (79%), but even those who trust the electoral commission "a lot" widely support a non-partisan alternative (68%) (Figure 13).

Figure 12: Would a non-partisan, technical electoral commission be better? | Togo | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree with the following statement, or haven't you heard enough to say: In Togo, a technical electoral commission made up of technocrats with no affiliation with any political party would be better for the organization and proclamation of election results?

Figure 13: Non-partisan, technical CENI would be better | by trust in the electoral commission | Togo | 2017



(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that a technical CENI would be better)

Conclusion

Alongside a steep decline in popular trust in the electoral commission, fewer citizens than in the past see their most recent national election as free and fair. And while elections still have majority support as the best way to choose leaders, this support has weakened as well. Overall, a large majority of Togolese say that a non-partisan, technical electoral commission would be better at managing and announcing election results.

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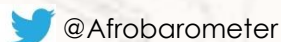
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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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