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Nigerians support elections and multiparty competition but mistrust electoral commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 275 | Thomas Isbell and Oluwole Ojewale

Summary

Nigeria's upcoming elections may be as momentous as they are mammoth: More than 20,000 candidates from 91 registered political parties will square off in presidential, gubernatorial, and parliamentary contests that observers hope will strengthen the country's democracy and ensure economic development and peace (Gana, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2018). All eyes will be on the presidential race pitting incumbent Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) against former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The elections will take place in an atmosphere of widespread security concerns and considerable uncertainty regarding the status of pending electoral legislation (Guardian, 2018; Akinwale, 2018). The two leading political parties continue to accuse each other of planning to subvert the electoral process, and rancorous debate surrounds the president's refusal to assent to an amended Electoral Act calling for the use of electronic smart card readers to authenticate permanent voter cards, the use of central servers to audit and confirm local election results, and the capping of election expenses (Vanguard, 2017; Umoru, Agbakwuru, & Yakubu, 2018).

This analysis of Afrobarometer survey data collected in 2017 does not focus on the campaign or who will win but instead sheds light on the attitudes and perceptions of ordinary Nigerians with regard to elections and government performance in key policy areas. Findings show that Nigerians strongly support elections and party competition but offer mixed assessments of the quality of their elections and largely mistrust the electoral commission. On issues they identify as the most important problems the government should address – including unemployment, management of the economy, and poverty – their evaluations of the government's performance are negative – though less negative than in 2015.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and findings from Round 7 surveys (2016/2018) are currently being released. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer national partners in Nigeria, CLEEN Foundation and Practical Sampling International, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 26 April and 10 May 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Nigeria in 1999, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2012, and 2015.

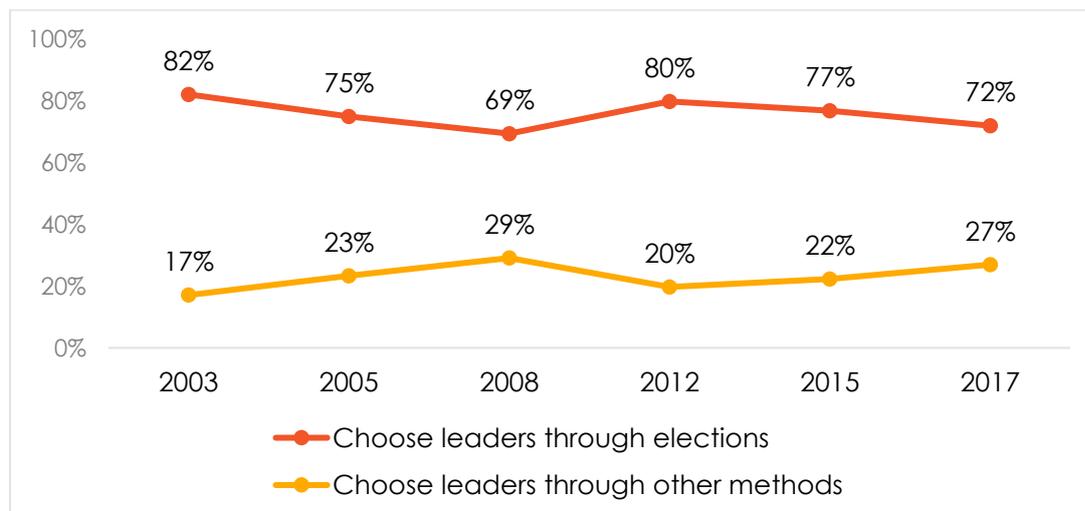
Key findings

- Seven in 10 Nigerians (72%) support elections as the best way to choose leaders, and almost nine in 10 (88%) stand by election results, affirming that citizens must obey the government regardless of which party they voted for.
- More than two-thirds (69%) of Nigerians believe in having many political parties to ensure that voters have a real choice, a 14-percentage-point increase since 2012.
- Two-thirds (67%) of respondents say the last national election (in 2015) was generally free and fair.
- But Nigerians express mixed views on other aspects of election quality. As of 2017, one-third (33%) said they feared election-related violence or intimidation “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 51% in 2015. But three-fourths (75%) say people “often” or “always” have to be careful about how they vote, and a majority say opposition candidates are at least “sometimes” prevented from running, including one in five (21%) who say this happens “often” or “always.”
- Moreover, just one-third (35%) of Nigerians say they trust the Independent National Electoral Commission “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- In terms of issues that may be pertinent to voters, unemployment is the most important problem that Nigerians want their government to address, followed by management of the economy and poverty. On all three issues, popular ratings of government performance are negative – though slightly better than in 2015.

Nigerians support elections and legitimacy of election winners

Seven in 10 Nigerians (72%) support elections as the best way to choose their leaders, while about one in four (27%) say that other methods should be adopted. Over the years, support for choosing leaders through elections has gradually declined from 82% recorded in 2003 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Choose leaders through elections vs. other methods | Nigeria | 2003- 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

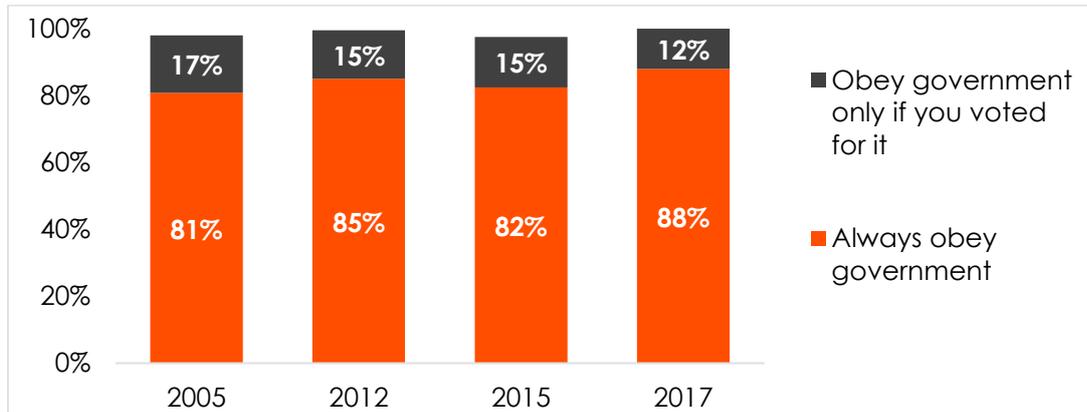
Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

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)

Nigerians also strongly affirm the binding nature of elections. Since 2005, more than eight in 10 survey respondents have consistently said that people must always obey the government, even if they didn't vote for it (Figure 2). In 2017, only one in eight respondents (12%) assert that it is not necessary to follow the laws of a government for which one did not vote.

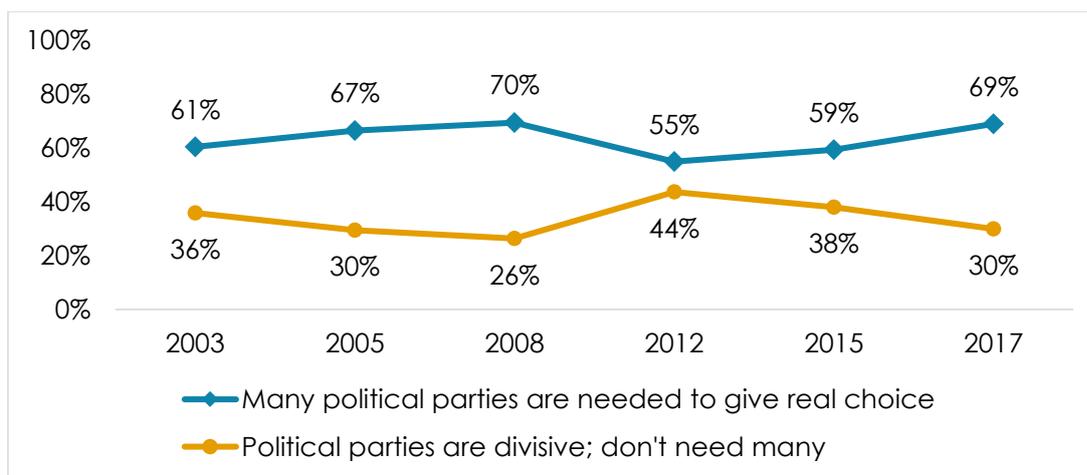
Figure 2: Obey government always vs. only if you voted for it | Nigeria | 2005-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is important to obey the government in power, no matter who you voted for.
 Statement 2: It is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that you did not vote for.
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

While some observers might quake at the prospect of 91 political parties vying for election, a strong majority of Nigerians say that many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have a real choice in who governs them. More than two-thirds (69%) support multiparty competition, up from 55% five years earlier, while 30% instead believe that political parties create division and confusion and Nigeria doesn't need many of them (Figure 3). Popular support for having many political parties has been on a steady rise over the years except for a 15-percentage-point drop in 2012.

Figure 3: Political parties divisive vs. many parties needed | Nigeria | 2003-2017



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 "agree very strongly" with each statement)

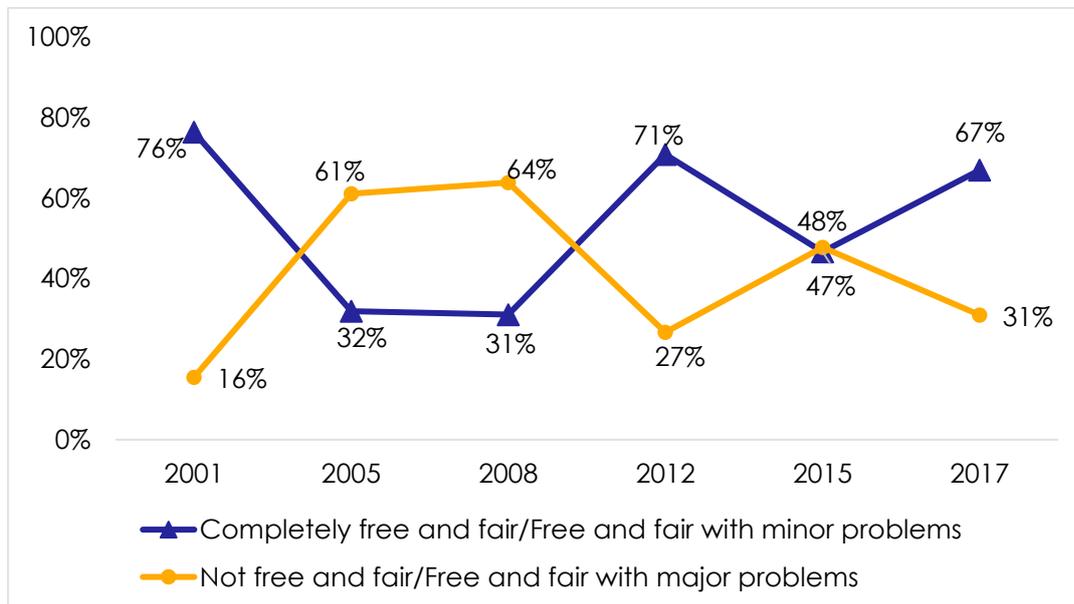
Quality of elections

While support for elections is strong, citizens' evaluations of the freedom and fairness of past national elections have fluctuated greatly (Figure 4). In 2017, two-thirds (67%) say that the most recent national election (the 2015 general election) was "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," vs. 31% who see it as having been "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems."

The general election of 2011 was also widely seen as generally free and fair (71%) in the Afrobarometer survey that followed in 2012, but by the time of the 2015 survey, only about half (48%) still perceived the 2011 election that way.

And only about three in 10 respondents saw the general election of 2003 (32% in the 2005 survey) and the general election of 2007 (31% in the 2008 survey) as generally free and fair.

Figure 4: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | Nigeria | 2001-2017



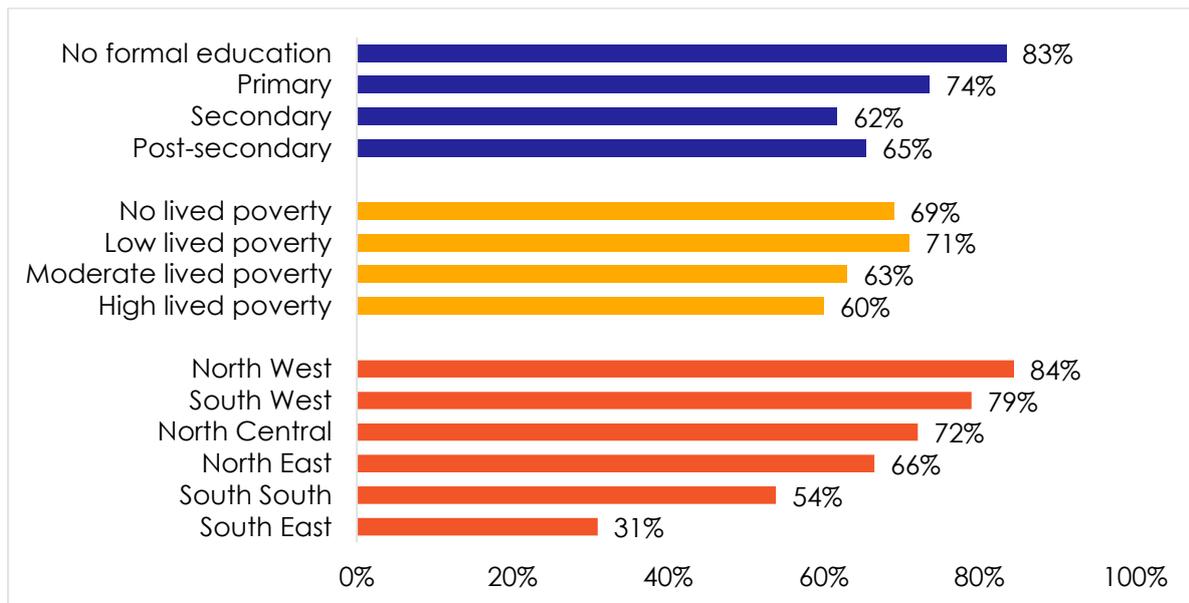
Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20xx]?*

But even regarding the 2015 election, views differ significantly depending on respondents' education and economic levels and zone of residence (Figure 5). Nigerians with secondary (62%) or post-secondary (65%) education are less likely to see the election as free and fair than their less-educated compatriots (74% of those with primary schooling, 83% of those with no formal education). At the same time, those who are economically better off are somewhat more likely to assess the 2015 election as generally free and fair (69%-71% among those with no or low lived poverty,¹ compared to 60%-63% of those with moderate or high lived poverty).

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, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

By geographic zone, more than three-fourths of residents in North West (84%) and South West (79%) – home states of the current president and vice president, respectively, and major centers of support for the ruling party – see the election as having been “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems,” compared to only 31% in South East.

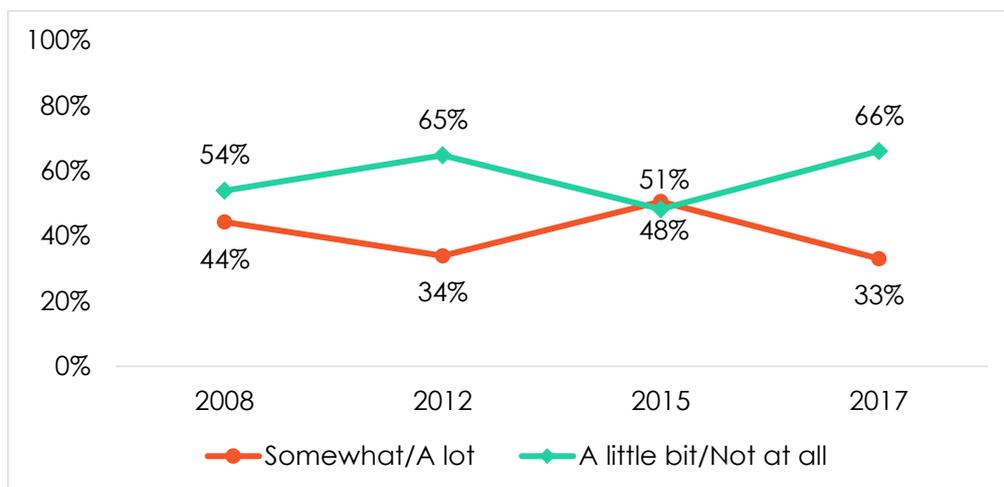
Figure 5: Last national election was free and fair | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2015? (% who say “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems”)

Compared to 2015, fewer Nigerians said in mid-2017 that they feared violence or intimidation during elections (Figure 6). One-third (33%) of respondents said they were “somewhat” or “a lot” afraid in 2017, about the same level of fear expressed in 2012 and down from 48% in 2015.

Figure 6: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Nigeria | 2008-2017

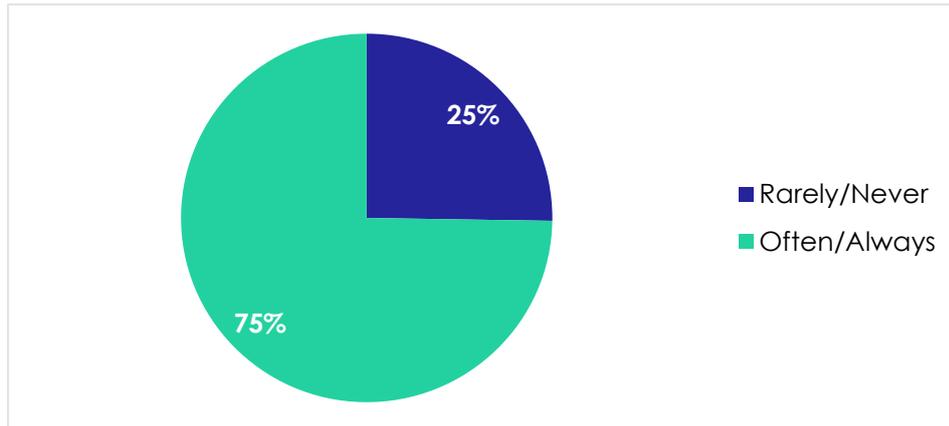


Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Nonetheless, three out of four Nigerians say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about how they vote (Figure 7).

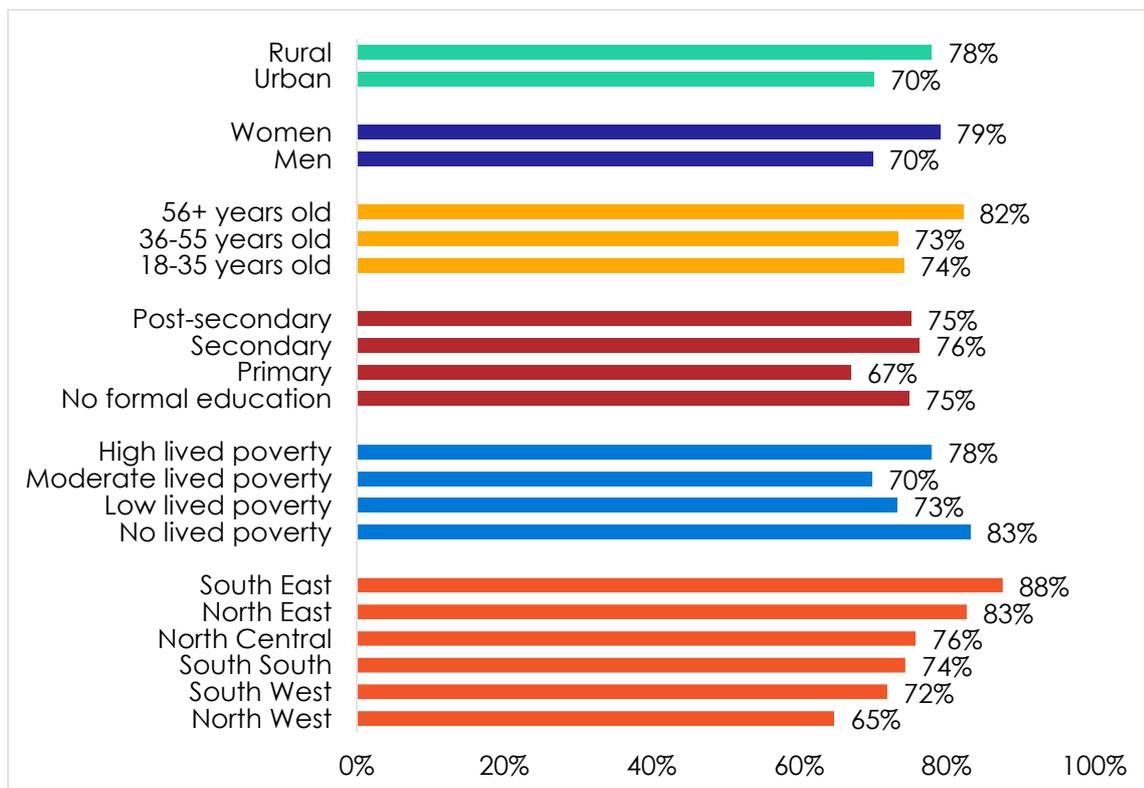
Rural residents (78%), women (79%), older Nigerians (82% among those aged 56 or older), and the economically best-off respondents (83%) are most likely to say that people have to be careful about how they vote (Figure 8). Comparing across geographic zones, this view is most common in South East (88%) and North East (83%).

Figure 7: How often have to be careful about how you vote | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?

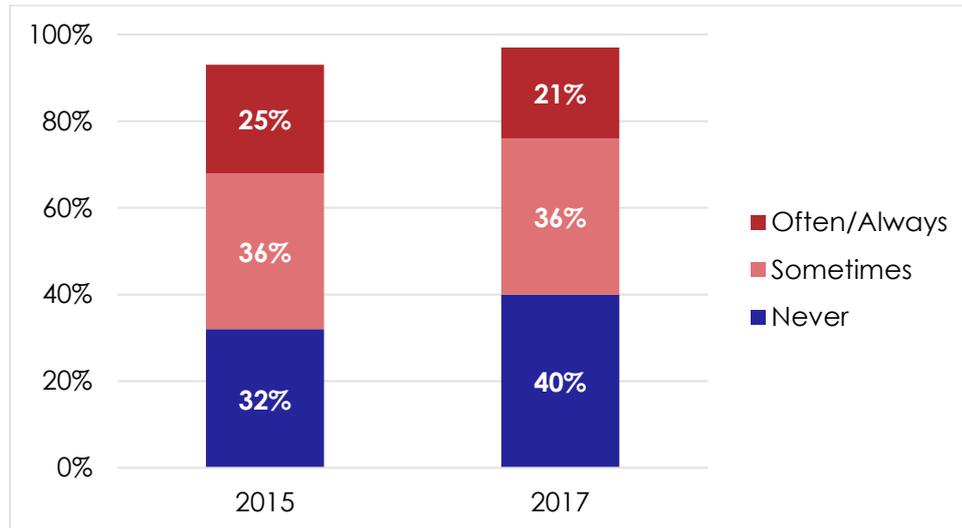
Figure 8: How often have to be careful about how you vote | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election? (% who say “often” or “always”)

In addition, a majority (57%) of Nigerians say that opposition candidates are at least “sometimes” prevented from running in elections, including one in five (21%) who say this happens “often” or “always” (Figure 9). The proportion of respondents who say the opposition is “never” prevented from running grew from 32% in 2015 to 40% in 2017.

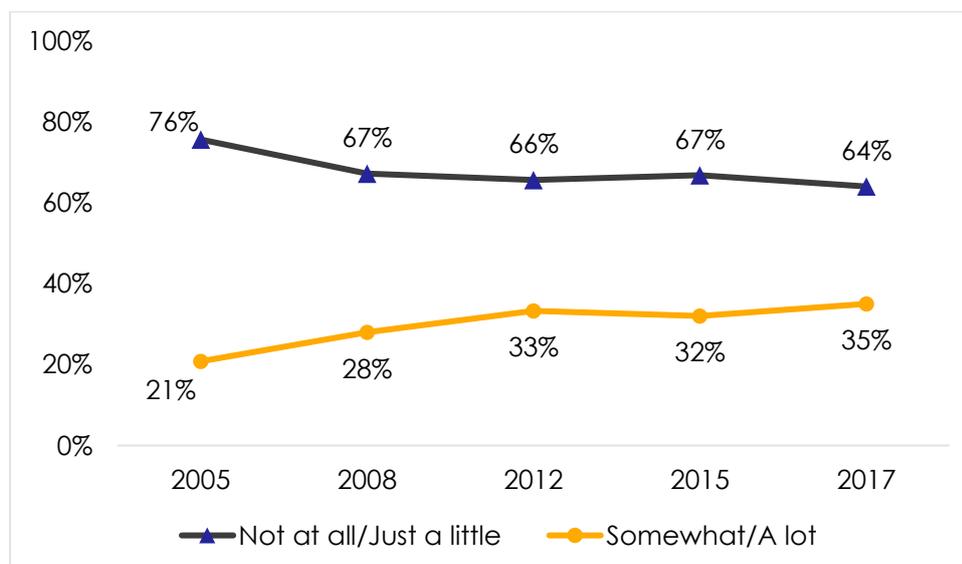
Figure 9: How often is the opposition prevented from running? | Nigeria | 2015-2017



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

While offering mixed assessments on several indicators of election quality, a strong majority of Nigerians share a lack of trust in the entity charged with the management of elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Only about one in three citizens (35%) say they trust the INEC even “somewhat,” while almost two-thirds (64%) say they trust it “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 10). Popular trust in the electoral commission has been fairly steady for the past five years after a decline from 76% in 2005.

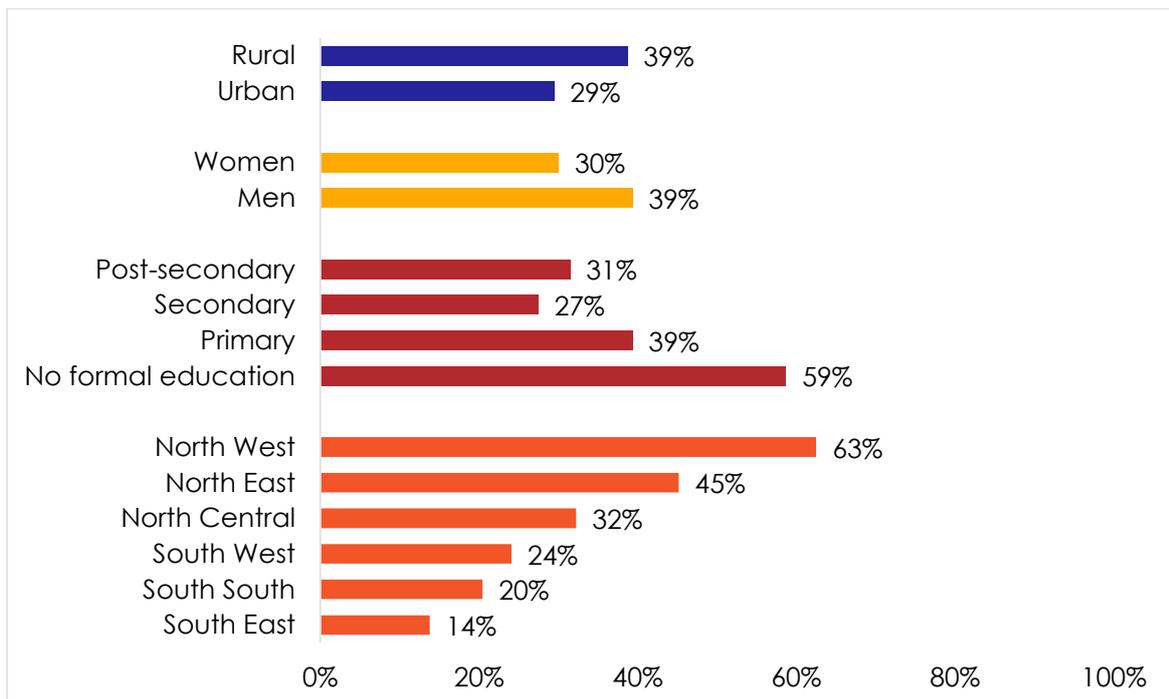
Figure 10: Trust national electoral commission | Nigeria | 2005-2017



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)?

Trust in the electoral commission is more commonly reported by rural residents (39%), men (39%), and those with no formal education (59%) (Figure 11). North West is the only zone where a majority (63%) express trust in the INEC, followed by 45% in North East, while fewer than one in four respondents say they trust the commission even “somewhat” in South East (14%), South South (20%), and South West (24%). These regional differences again perhaps reflect Nigeria’s identity politics, as the INEC chairman is from the president’s own ethnic group and region, an appointment that critics say invites perceptions of favouritism (Punch, 2018).

Figure 11: Trust national electoral commission | by socio-demographic group
 | Nigeria | 2017



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)? (% who say “somewhat” or “a lot”)

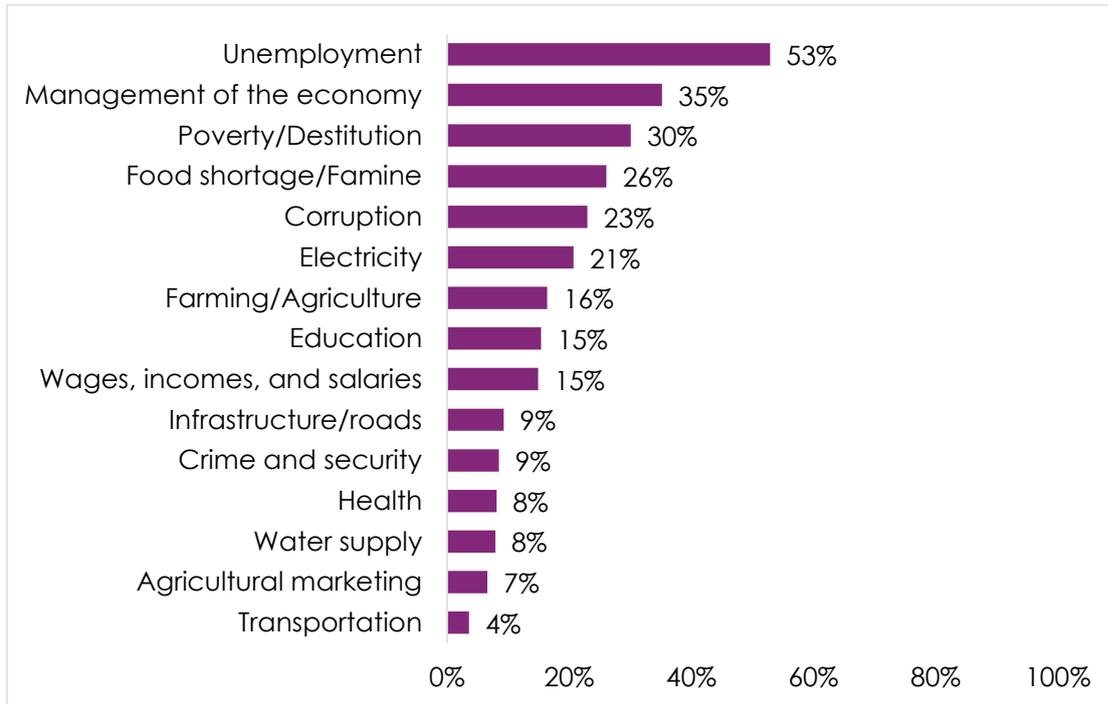
What Nigerians might be looking for in candidates and party tickets

As we have seen, despite their widespread distrust of the electoral commission, most Nigerians want elections and multiparty competition. What might they be likely looking for during the election campaigns?

When they were asked in 2017 what they consider the most important problems that the government should address, the most frequently cited priority was unemployment (mentioned by 53% of citizens as one of up to three responses allowed) (Figure 12). Management of the economy and poverty were next, cited by 35% and 30%, respectively. About one in four mentioned food security (26%) and corruption (23%).

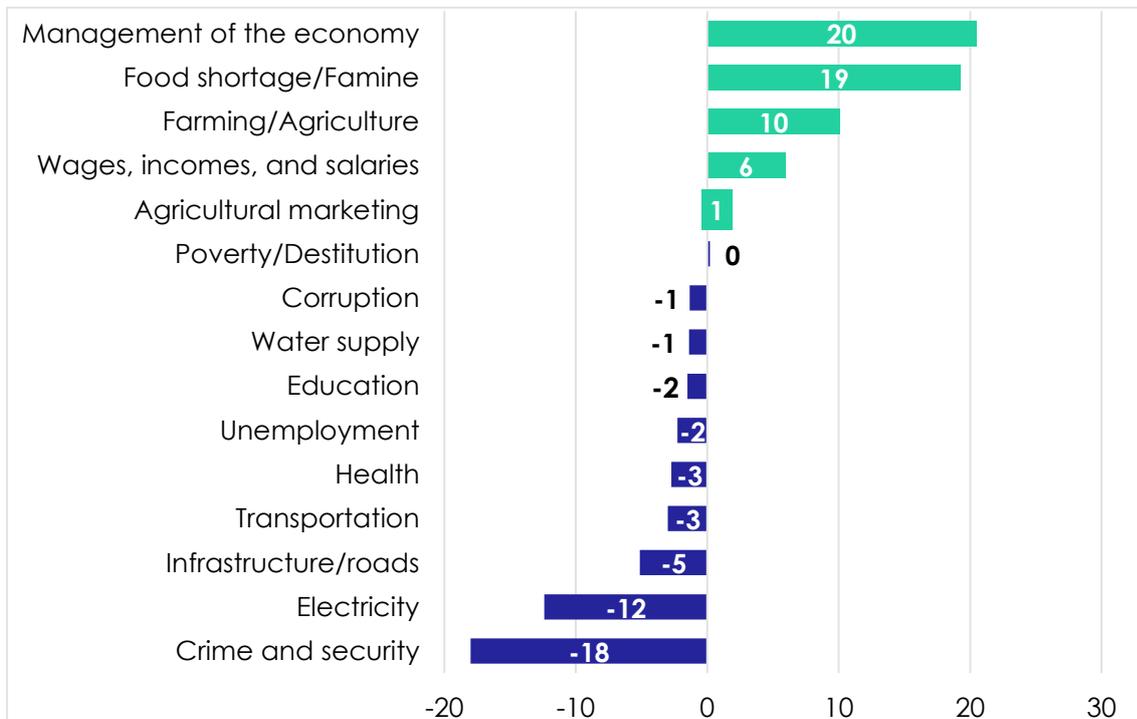
Compared to citizens’ rankings of the most important problems in the 2015 survey, management of the economy (+20 percentage points), food shortage (+19), farming (+10), and wages (+6) have increased in priority for Nigerians (Figure 13). Conversely, fewer Nigerians say crime and security (-18 percentage points), electricity (-12) and infrastructure (-5) are among the most important issues for government to address.

Figure 12: Most important problems that government should address | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Up to three responses per person)*

Figure 13: Change in citizen rankings of most important problems, 2015 to 2017 (percentage points) | Nigeria

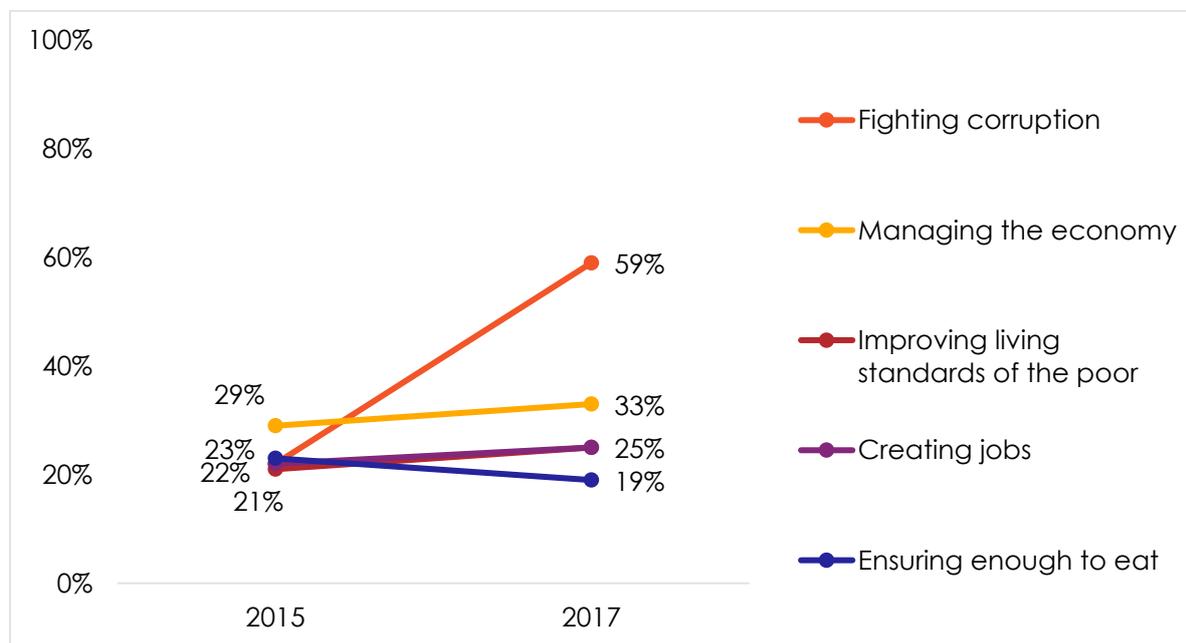


Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Figure shows the difference, in percentage points, between % who cite each problem as one of up to three priorities in 2017 compared to 2015.)*

On several of these problems identified by citizens' as high priorities, Afrobarometer asked respondents how well they think the government is handling them (Figure 14). In four out of five key areas, one-third or fewer of respondents said in 2017 that the government was performing "fairly well" or "very well": managing the economy (33%), improving living standards of the poor (25%), creating jobs (25%), and ensuring that everyone has enough to eat (19%). Yet on three of these (all except food security) these poor marks were modest improvements over citizens' 2015 assessments.

One exception to the negative evaluations was the fight against corruption, an issue on which a majority (59%) of Nigerians said the government was doing a good job – almost three times as many as approved of government efforts in 2015.

Figure 14: Government performance on important problems | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly well" or "very well")

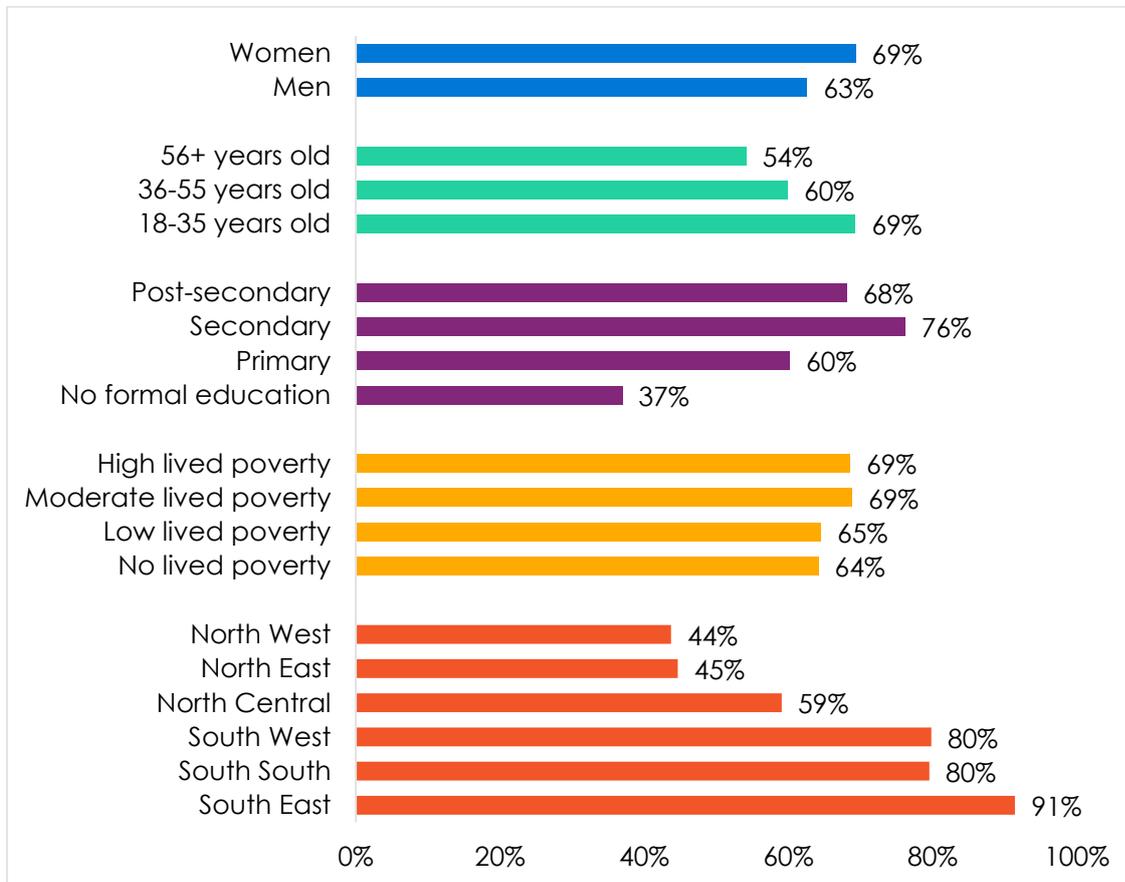
When it comes to economic management, younger Nigerians were more critical of the government's performance than their elders: 69% of 18- to 35-year-olds said it was doing "fairly badly" or "very badly," compared to 60% of 36- to 55-year-olds and 54% of those over age 55 (Figure 15).

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Respondents with secondary schooling (76%) or post-secondary qualifications (68%) were more likely than their less-educated counterparts to disapprove of the government's performance on the economy, as were women (69%) compared to men (63%).

Differences across levels of lived poverty were minor, while geographic zones showed strong variation, ranging from disapproval by fewer than half of residents in North West (44%) and North East (45%) to more than nine out of 10 (91%) in South East.

Figure 15: Poor government performance on managing the economy
 | by socio-demographic group | Nigeria | 2017



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the economy? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Conclusion

Nigerians clearly stand behind elections, multiparty competition, and the legitimacy of election winners to rule. But their assessments of the quality of their elections are mixed: While most see the 2015 election as having been generally free and fair, that wasn't the case for all past elections. Fear of election-related violence and intimidation decreased between 2015 and 2017 but still affects a sizeable part of the population, and most citizens say they must be careful about how they vote. Most strikingly, only about one-third of Nigerians trust the entity charged with ensuring that the country's 2019 elections are free and fair.

Candidates looking to score points with voters might take note of the issues that citizens want their government to focus on: job creation, economic management, and poverty – all areas where the people expect more than they have gotten in the past.

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