

Despite concerns about electoral commission and conflict, Mauritians value open elections

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 327 | Sadhiska Bhoojedhur and Thomas Isbell

Summary

During the first weekend of October, the Mauritian prime minister dissolved Parliament and called a general election for November 7 – a surprise announcement that left both the electoral commission and political parties scrambling (Weekly, 2019).

The current government has claimed several high-visibility successes, including the launch of the Metro Express light-rail public transport system, the elimination of some university fees for students, the introduction of minimum salary compensation and a negative income tax, and the inauguration of a sports complex (Duymun, 2018; Seegobin, 2019). But critics point to persistent challenges such as unemployment, corruption, and weaknesses in delivering health care, education, and other public services (Duymun, 2018).

In light of the upcoming election, this dispatch uses Afrobarometer survey data from 2012-2017 to explore popular attitudes toward elections among ordinary Mauritians. We find that while Mauritians overwhelmingly feel that their last national election was free and fair, their trust in the electoral commission has declined sharply. Nonetheless, most citizens support elections as the best way to choose their leaders and want multiparty competition to ensure that voters have real choices.

Citizens' priorities for government action, as of late 2017, were unemployment, poverty, and crime – issues on which the government's performance received poor marks.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer heads a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mauritius, led by StraConsult Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Mauritians in October 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 Mauritius in 2012 and 2014.

Key findings

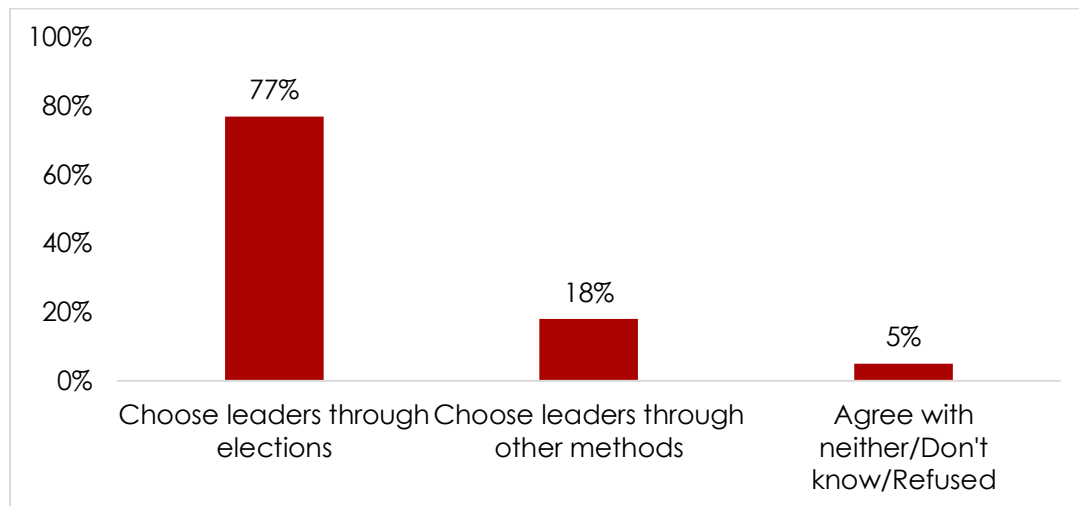
- Most Mauritians say that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections (77%) and that many parties are needed to give voters a real choice (75%). However, more than four in 10 citizens (44%) say party competition “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict.

- Nine out of 10 Mauritians (90%) say the most recent national election, in 2014, was generally free and fair. But only half (49%) say they trust the electoral commission “somewhat” or “a lot” – a sharp drop from 78% in 2012.
- As of late 2017, Mauritians cited unemployment, poverty, and crime as the most important problems that government should address. On all three issues, only a minority of citizens approved of the government’s performance.

Mauritians widely support elections and multi-party competition

More than three-fourths (77%) of Mauritians believe that regular, open, and honest elections are the best way to choose their leaders, while fewer than one in five (18%) favour other methods (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Support for choosing leaders through elections | Mauritius | 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.

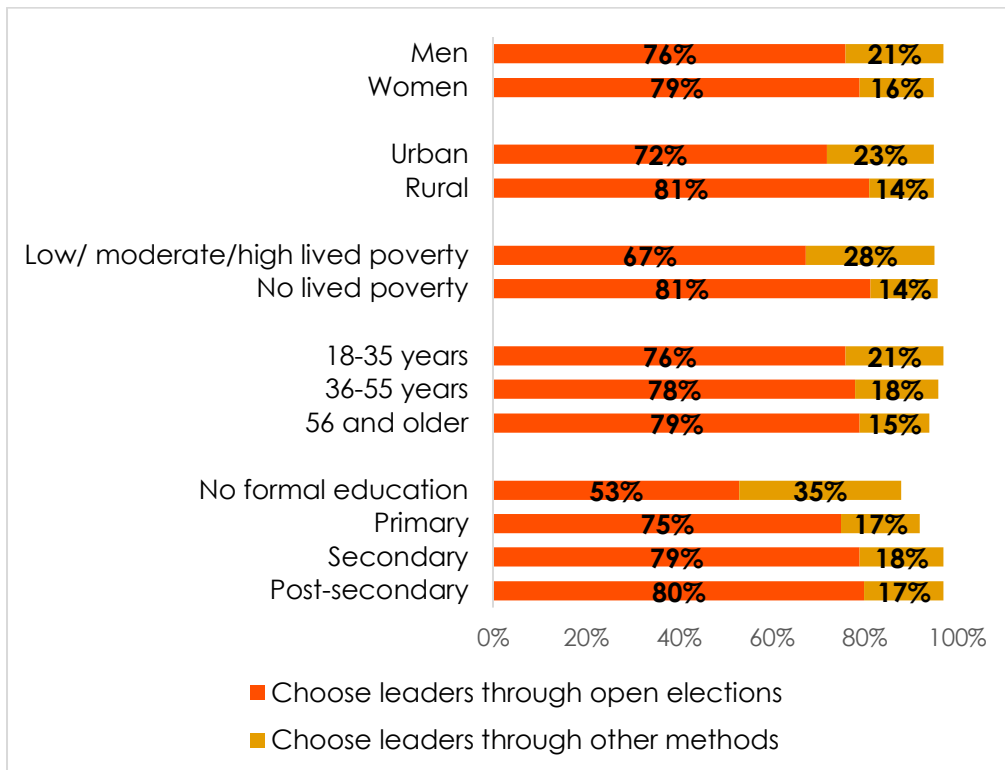
(% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Support for elections is higher among rural residents (81%) than urbanites (72%), and the economically best-off citizens are more likely to support elections (81%) than those who experienced high, moderate, or low “lived poverty”¹ (67%) (Figure 2). We find little difference by age group and gender, but Mauritians with no formal education are considerably more open to choosing leaders means other than elections (35%) than their more educated counterparts (17%-18%).

A similar three-fourths majority (75%) endorse multiparty competition, saying many parties are needed to give voters a real choice. One in five (20%) say political parties create division and confusion, and Mauritius doesn’t need many of them (Figure 3).

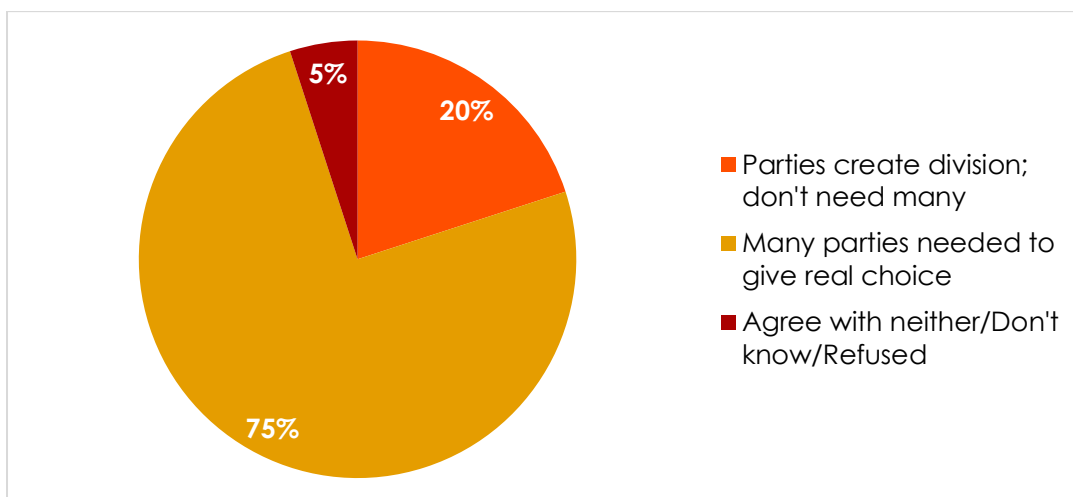
¹ Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Figure 2: Support for choosing leaders through elections | by socio-demographic group | Mauritius | 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 "strongly agree" with each statement)

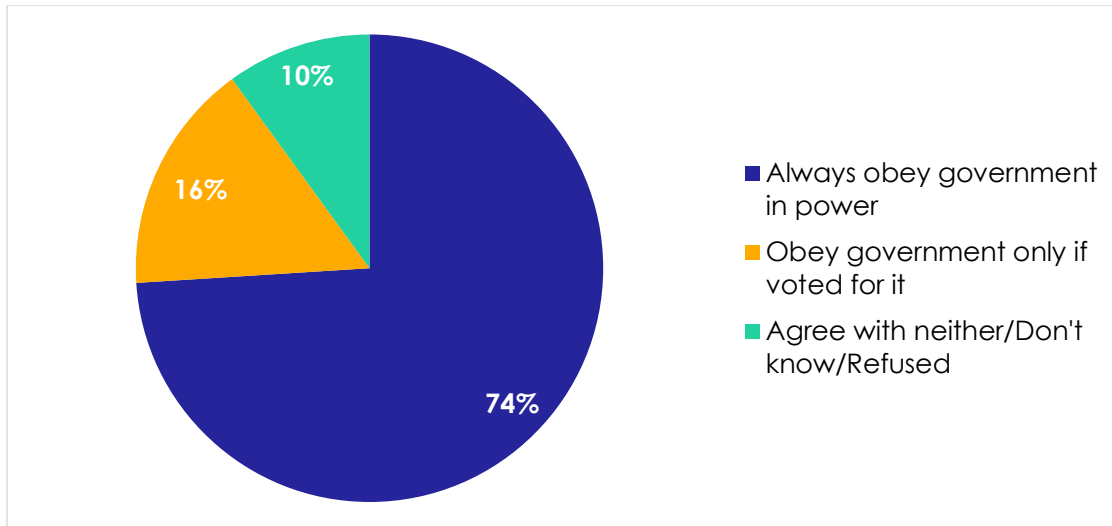
Figure 3: Views on multiparty competition | Mauritius | 2017



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

Regardless of who may come out on top in the upcoming election, three out of four Mauritians (74%) say that one must always obey the elected government (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Obey government | Mauritius | 2017

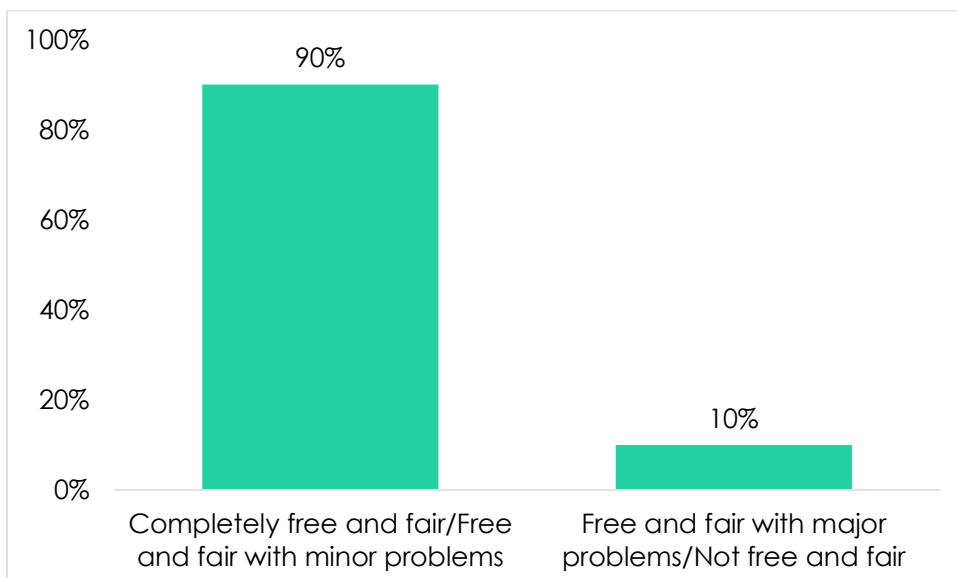


Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is important to obey the government in power, no matter who you voted for.
 Statement 2: It is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that you did not vote for.
 (% who "agree" or "strongly agree"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

Lived experience of election quality

Mauritians are overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of their most recent national election, in 2014. Nine out of 10 (90%) say it was generally free and fair, including 63% who say it was "completely free and fair" (Figure 5).

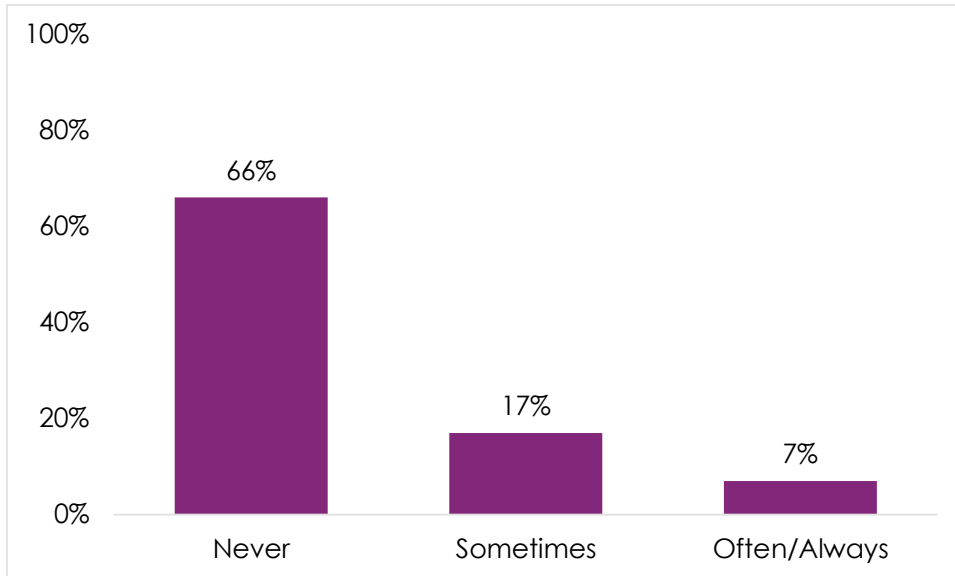
Figure 5: Freeness and fairness of 2014 national election | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2014?

Two in three Mauritians (66%) say opposition candidates are “never” prevented from running in elections. About one in four say this happens “sometimes” (17%), “often” (4%), or “always” (3%) (Figure 6).

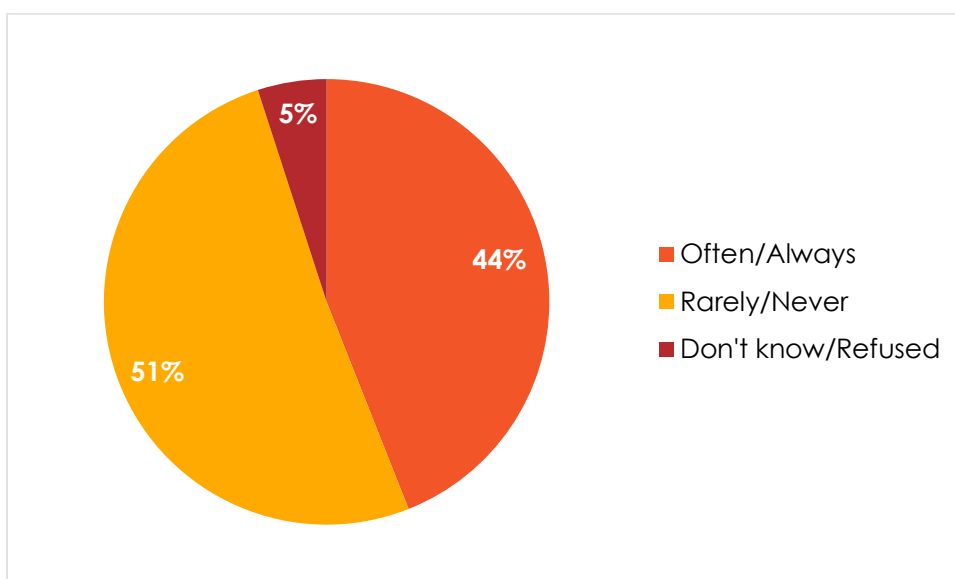
Figure 6: Opposition candidates prevented from running for office | Mauritius | 2017



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

While most Mauritians favour having many political parties, more than four in 10 (44%) say party competition “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict (Figure 7). A slim majority (51%) say such conflict “rarely” or “never” happens.

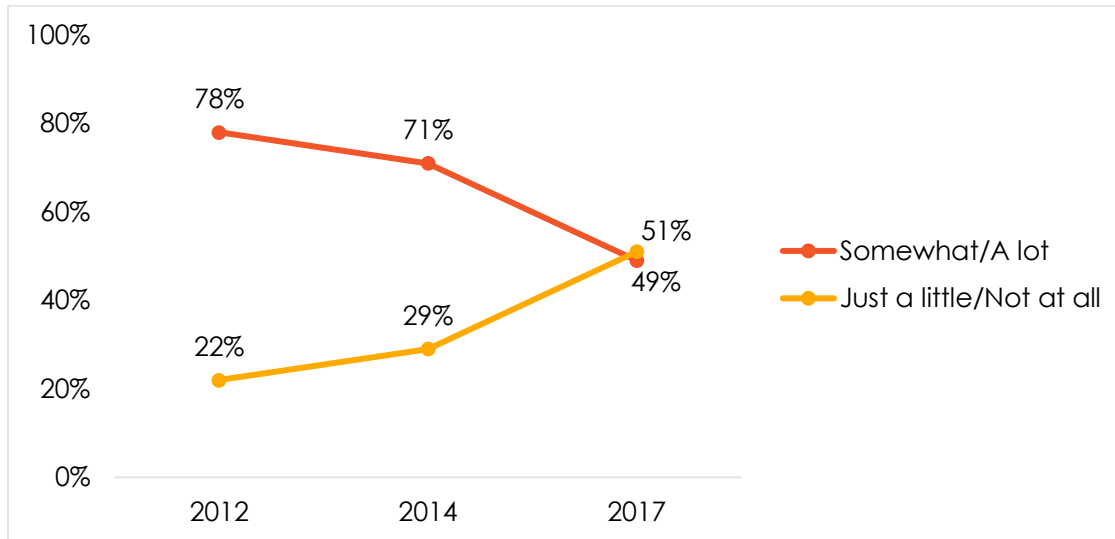
Figure 7: How often does party competition lead to violent conflict? | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?

Despite their positive assessment of the most recent election, only half (49%) of Mauritians say they trust the Electoral Commission “somewhat” or “a lot” – a sharp drop in popular trust from 78% in 2012 and 71% in 2014. The proportion of citizens who say they trust the commission “just a little” or “not at all” has more than doubled, from 22% in 2012 to 51% (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Popular trust in the national electoral commission | Mauritius | 2012-2017

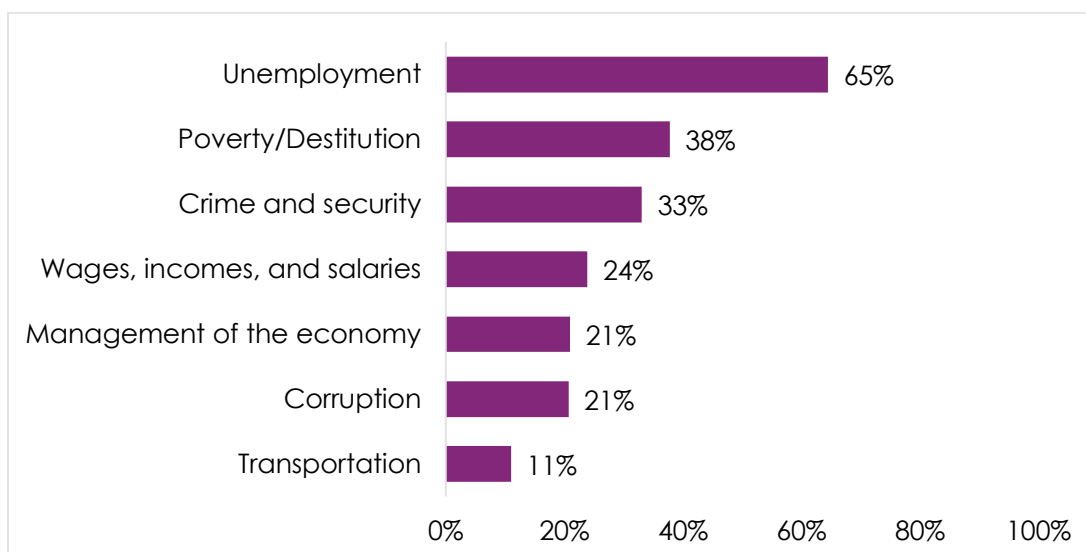


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Electoral Commission?

What voters may be looking for in the upcoming election

When asked what the most important issue is that government should address, Mauritians in late 2017 most commonly pointed to unemployment (cited by 65% as one of their three priorities). Substantial numbers of citizens also emphasize poverty (38%) as well as crime and security (33%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Most important problems for government to address | Mauritius | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that government should address? (Note: Respondents could give up to three responses. Figure shows % of respondents who cite each problem among their three priorities.)

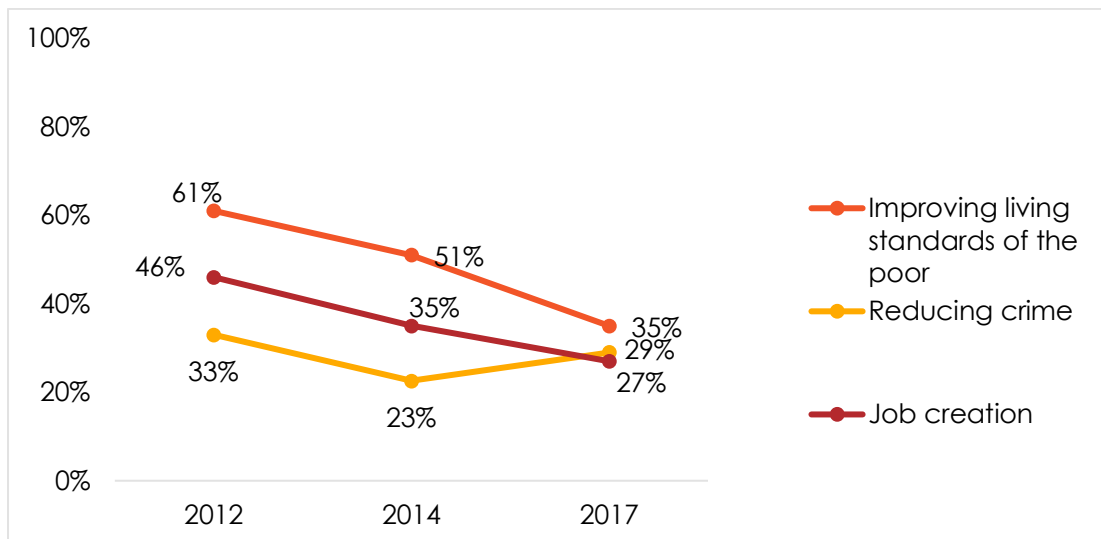
On these priority issues, Mauritians have been giving their government poor marks. While the most recent data are from 2017, responses over a five-year period show a clear negative trend in how citizens feel their government is doing on creating jobs and improving the living standards of the poor (Figure 10).

In the 2012 and 2014 surveys, the government whose performance was being evaluated was a Labour Party-led coalition, while the 2017 data reflect evaluations for the Militant Socialist Movement-led Alliance Lepep coalition. From 2012 to 2017, the share of respondents who said the government was doing “fairly well” or “very well” on job creation dropped from 46% to 27%.

This trend is echoed in how Mauritians evaluate their government's anti-poverty efforts, where approval dropped from 61% in 2012 to 35% in 2017.

On crime reduction, citizens' assessments actually improved modestly between 2014 and 2017 but remains very low, at less than one-third approval (29%).

Figure 10: Government performance on job creation, poverty, and crime | Mauritius | 2012-2017



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: Creating jobs? Improving living standards of the poor? Reducing crime?

Conclusion

Ahead of Mauritius' election, we review the most recent Afrobarometer survey data to explore citizens' attitudes and perceptions regarding elections. We find that most Mauritians support elections and multiparty competition, although a substantial minority believe that

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such competition often leads to violent conflict. Most see the last national election as having been generally free and fair, but even so, only half of Mauritians trust the electoral commission.

With regard to issues that may motivate voters, Mauritians generally emphasize unemployment, poverty, and crime as the

most important problems that government should address. On all three issues, citizens gave the government poor performance evaluations in late 2017.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, heads 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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