



Dispatch No. 330 | 26 November 2019

# Party identification and trust are declining, but Namibians have not lost faith in voting

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 330 | Christiaan Keulder

## Summary

For the sixth time since independence, Namibians are going to the polls to choose a president and members of the National Assembly – in free and fair elections whose outcome has never varied.

Although Namibia uses a closed party-list system with “largest remainders” provisions that optimize parliamentary inclusion even for very small parties, the ruling SWAPO Party has managed to increase its share of votes and parliamentary seats consistently since the founding elections of 1989.

During the last national election, in 2014, SWAPO obtained 80% of votes cast and as a result now holds 77 of the 96 available National Assembly seats. The seat-bearing opposition parties obtained among them only 15% of the vote and 19 seats.

With such a dominant ruling party and weak opposition for such a long time, how do Namibians view their political options? Do they still support a system based on multiple parties? Do they still feel close to the current crop of parties, and do they still trust them? And do Namibians still believe their votes can bring change?

A recent Afrobarometer survey shows that while Namibians value multiparty competition, fewer “feel close to” and trust political parties. But despite these negative trends, most Namibians still believe in their power as voters to bring about positive change.

## Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer heads a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Seven rounds of surveys have been completed in up to 38 countries since 1999. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Namibia, led by Survey Warehouse, interviewed 1,200 adult Namibians in August 2019. 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 Namibia in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

## Key findings

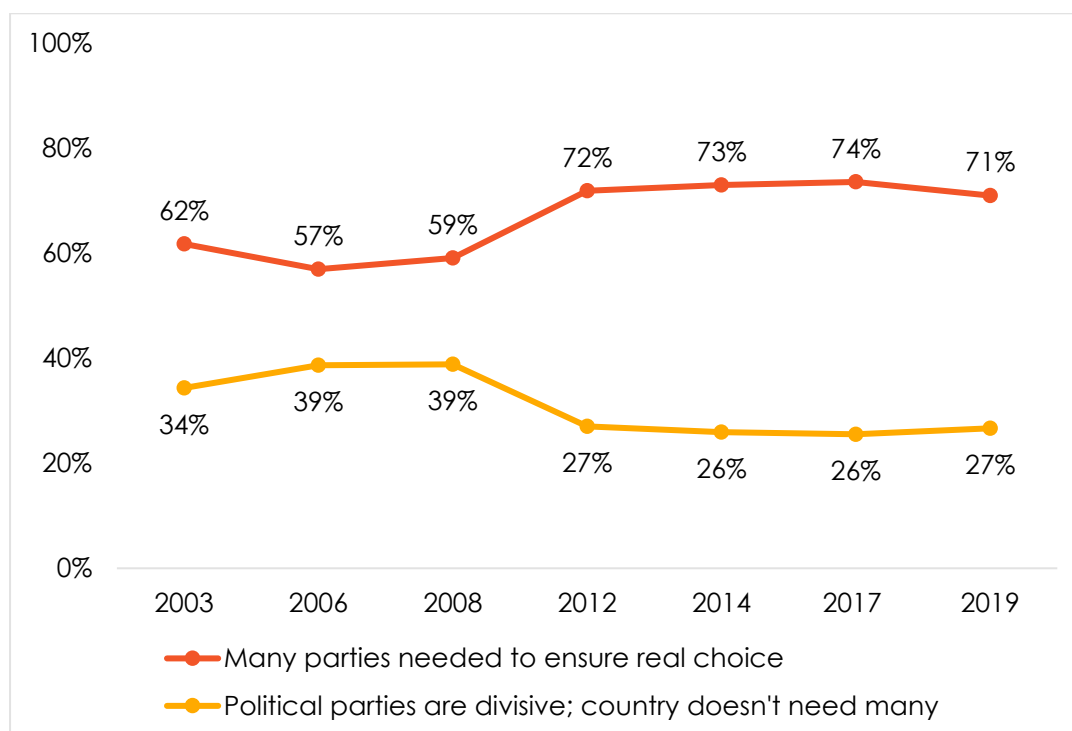
- Namibians want a political system in which multiple parties contest free and fair elections and win the right to form the government. Seven in 10 Namibians (71%) support multiparty competition, and more than eight in 10 (82%) reject one-party rule.
- Identification with a political party is at an all-time low. Only a slim majority (55%) of Namibians of voting age say they “feel close to” a party, down from 80% in 2014. Young Namibians show the lowest levels of partisanship.

- Party affiliation follows the same over-time pattern as perceptions of personal living conditions and economic optimism – peaking in 2014 and dropping sharply since then.
- Popular trust in both the ruling party and opposition parties has declined compared to 2014, though a majority (57%) of Namibians still say they trust SWAPO “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- About two-thirds (64%) of respondents say they voted in the 2014 election, while far fewer report having attended a campaign rally (21%) or worked for a party or candidate (4%).
- Despite downward trends with regard to partisanship and trust, most Namibians still believe that as voters they have the power to elect the right leader to bring about change.

### Support for multiparty competition

Even though Namibia's political opposition has never come close to winning an election, most citizens value having many political parties to ensure that voters have real choices. Support for multiparty competition has been the majority view since 2003, expressed by 71% in 2019 (Figure 1). The view that political parties create division and confusion, and that Namibia thus doesn't need many of them, has been held by about one in four respondents since 2012.

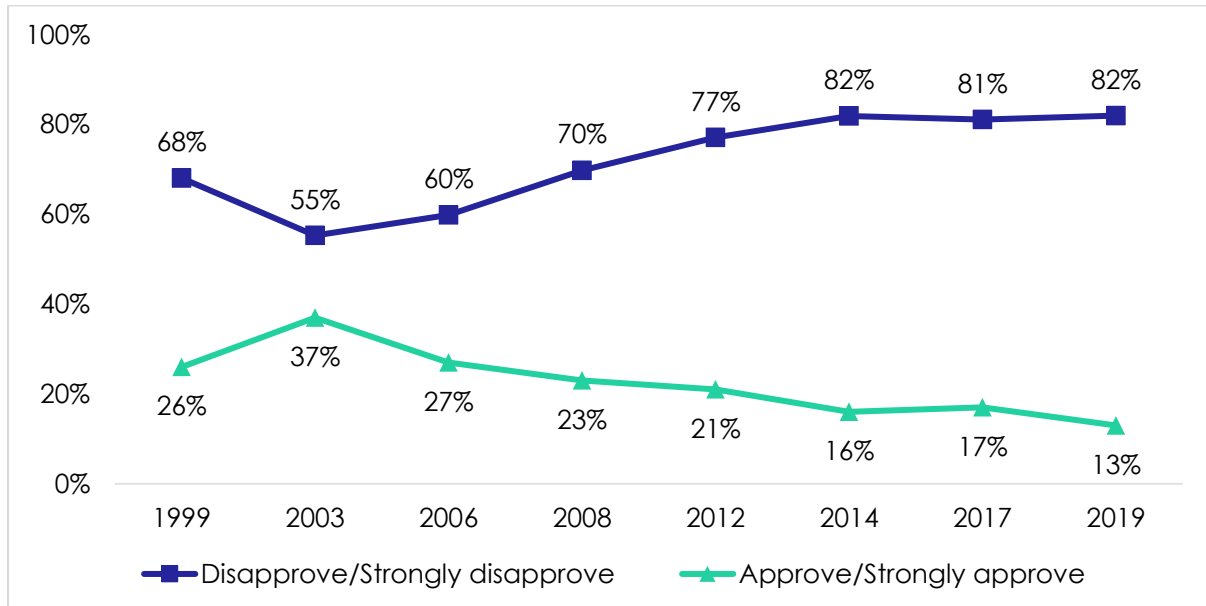
**Figure 1: Support for multiparty competition | Namibia | 2003-2019**



**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 Namibia.  
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Namibians have real choices in who governs them.  
 (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” with each statement)

Namibians overwhelmingly reject one-party rule as an alternative to democratic government. Support for one-party rule peaked in 2003, when 37% of adult Namibians supported such a system of government. Since then it has declined to just 13%. Conversely, rejection of one-party rule as an alternative to democracy has grown from 55% in 2003 to a current high of 82% (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Views on one-party rule | Namibia | 1999-2019**

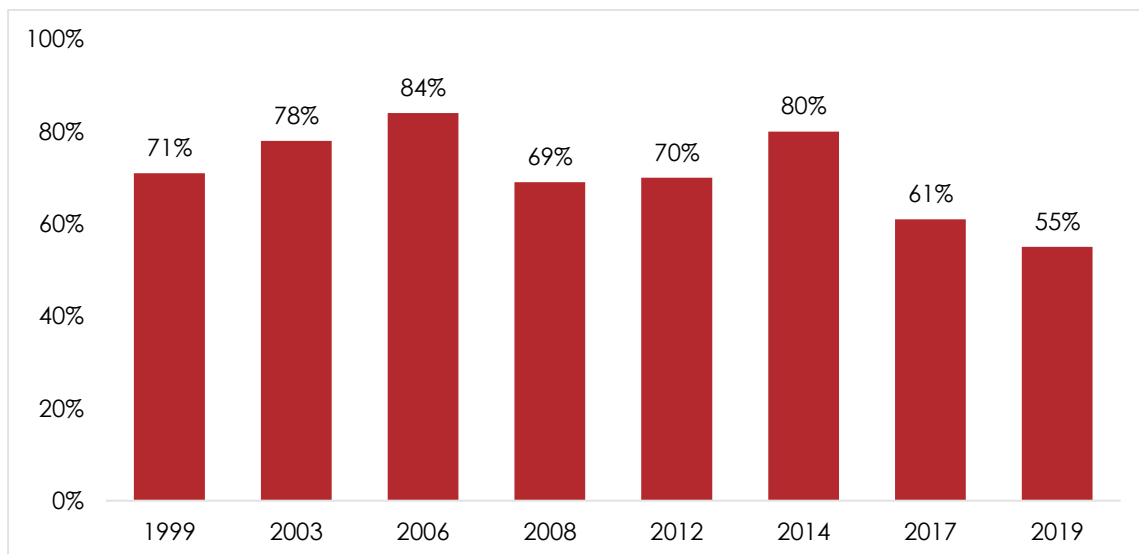


**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?*

### Partisanship

Only a slim majority (55%) of Namibians say they “feel close to” a particular political party – an all-time low in party identification (Figure 3). As recently as 2014, eight out of 10 citizens (80%) identified with a party.

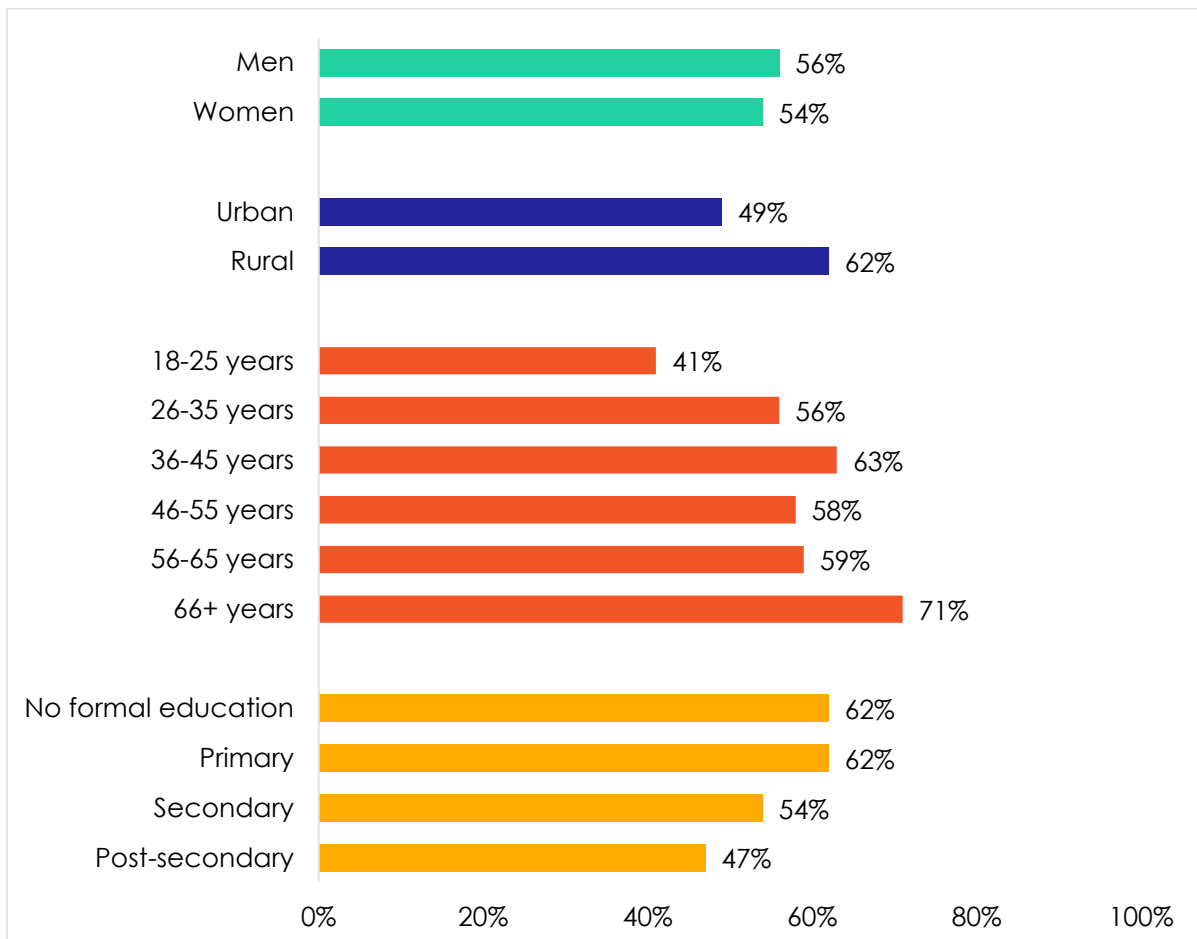
**Figure 3: Feel close to a political party | Namibia | 1999-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** *Do you feel close to any political party? (% who say “yes”)*

Young Namibians show the lowest levels of partisanship: Only 41% of respondents aged 18-25 years say they feel close to a political party, compared to 56% or more among their elders, including 71% of those over age 65. Rural residents and less-educated citizens (62%) are more likely to identify with a party than urbanites (49%) and those with higher education (47% among those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Feel close to a political party** | by socio-demographic group | Namibia | 2019



**Respondents were asked:** Do you feel close to any political party?

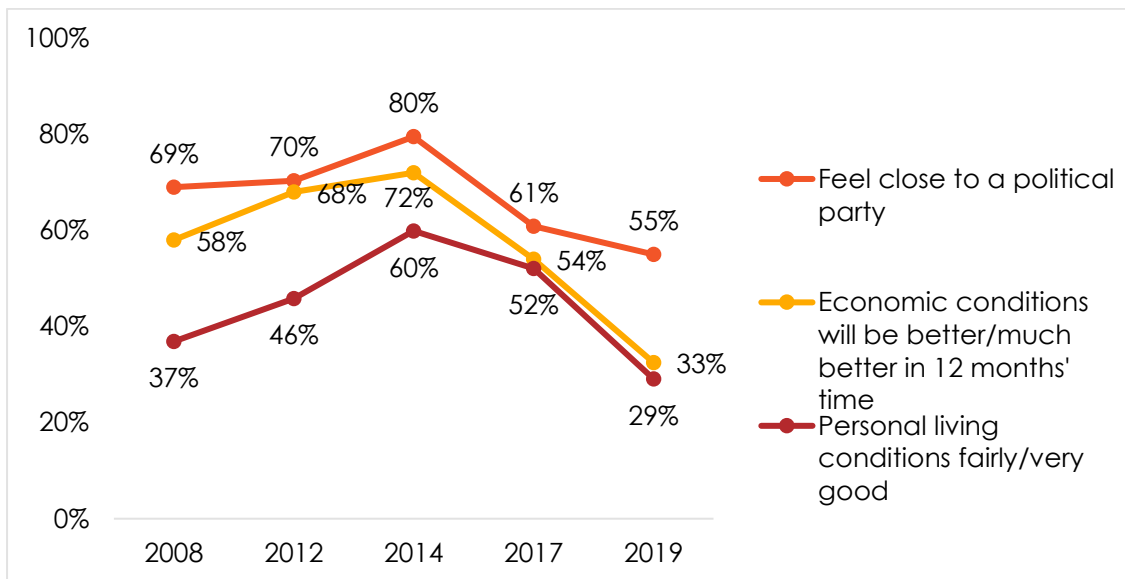
One possible reason – among many – for a decline in identification with political parties may be the struggling economy. Economic turmoil, coupled with a crippling drought, has had a profound effect on ordinary Namibians' financial well-being. It is possible that this economic decline would tend to alienate Namibians from politics, including political parties.

Indeed, the data show that both perceptions of personal living conditions and economic optimism follow a pattern similar to party identification, peaking in 2014 and then declining sharply (Figure 5).

Only three out of 10 Namibians (29%) feel positive about their personal living conditions, a drop of 31 percentage points since 2014. Similarly, compared to 2014, fewer than half as many citizens are optimistic about the economic future of the country (33%, down from 72%).

Over the same period, the proportion of citizens who feel close to a political party has declined by 25 percentage points.

**Figure 5: Personal living conditions, economic optimism, and party identification**  
 | Namibia | 2008-2019



**Respondents were asked:**

*In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions? (% who say "fairly good" or "very good")*

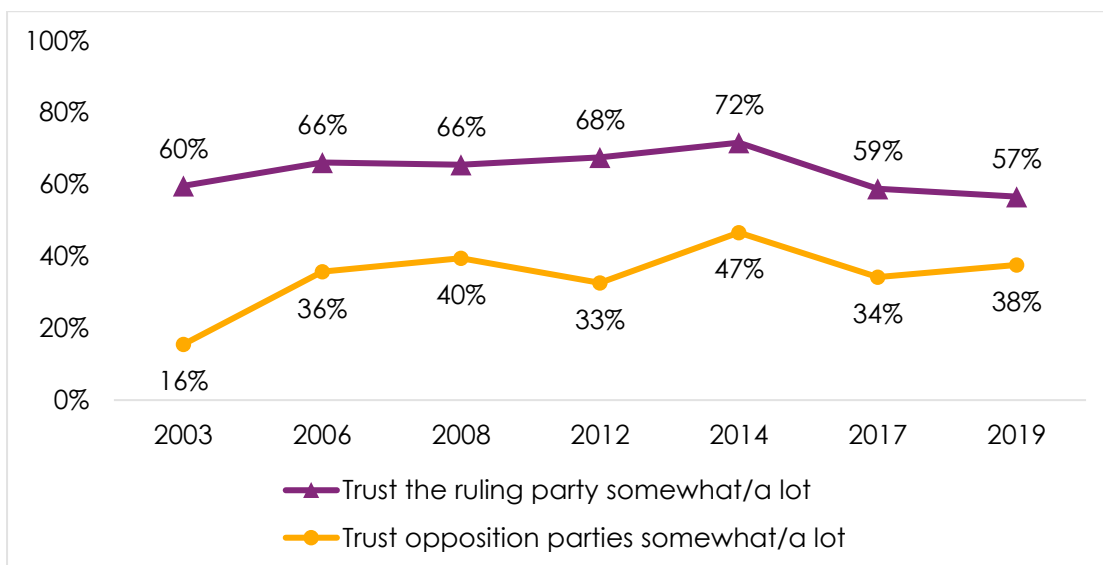
*Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time? (% who say "better" or "much better")*

*Do you feel close to any political party? (% who say "yes")*

**Trust in political parties**

A majority (57%) of Namibians of voting age say they trust the ruling party "somewhat" or "a lot," though this reflects a significant decrease from a peak of 72% in 2014. Trust in the opposition grew fairly steadily between 2003 (16%) and 2014 (47%) but has since decreased to 38% (Figure 6).

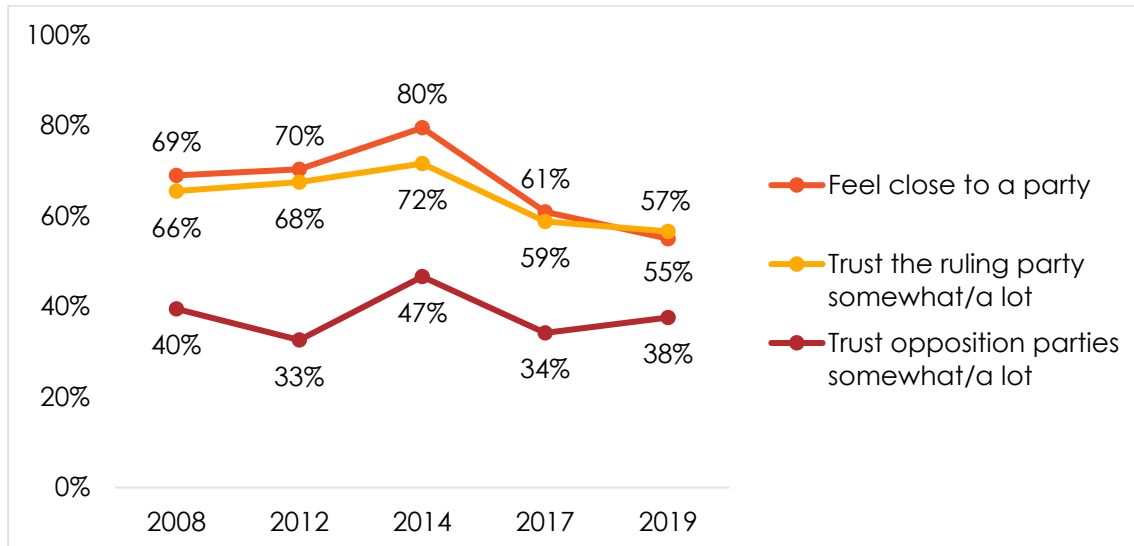
**Figure 6: Trust in political parties** | Namibia | 2003-2019



**Respondents were asked:** *How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The ruling party? Opposition political parties? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")*

As shown in Figure 7 below, party identification and trust in both ruling and opposition parties also follow similar patterns, peaking in 2014 and declining since then.

**Figure 7: Party identification and trust | Namibia | 2008-2019**



**Respondents were asked:**

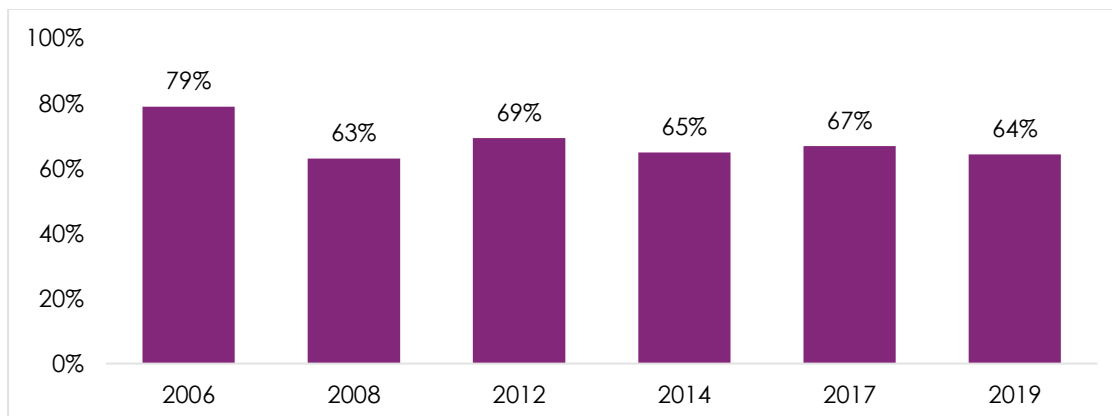
How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The ruling party? Opposition political parties? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")  
 Do you feel close to any political party? (% who say "yes")

**Voter efficacy**

About two-thirds of Namibians of voting age (64% in 2019) typically say they voted in the most recent national election (Figure 8).

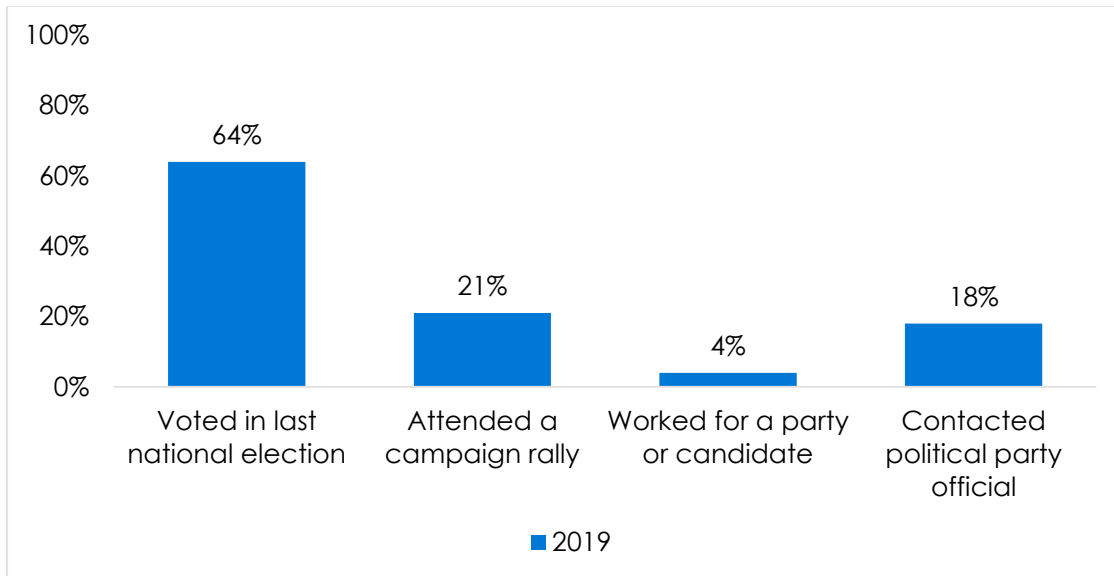
Much smaller proportions report other interactions with political parties (Figure 9). About one in five respondents say they attended a campaign rally (21%) during the 2014 election campaign, while about one in 20 (4%) say they worked for a party or candidate. Fewer than one in five (18%) say they contacted a political party official during the 12 months preceding the survey.

**Figure 8: Voting in the most recent national election | Namibia | 2006-2019**



**Respondents were asked:** People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? 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 in most recent election)

**Figure 9: Participation in the 2014 election | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:**

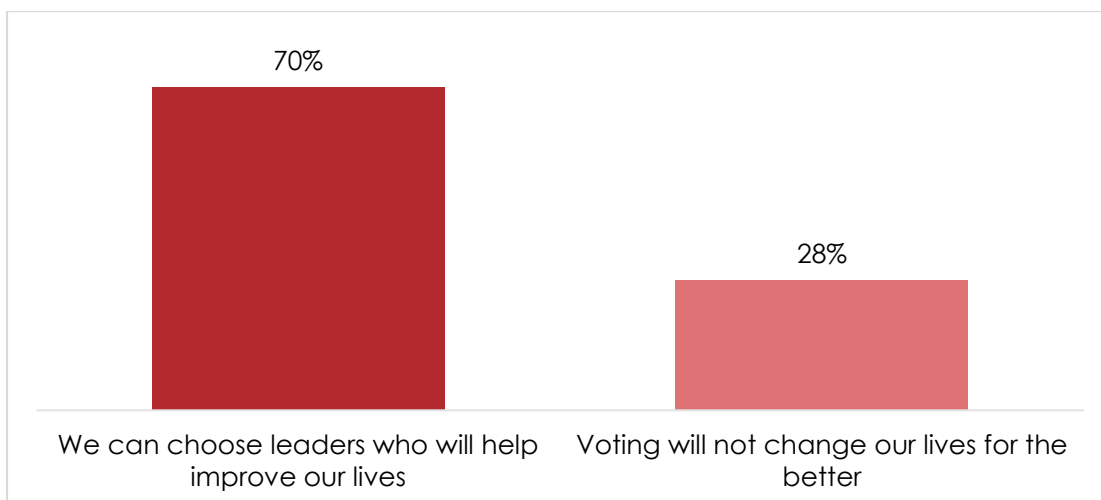
*In the last national election, held in 2014, did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted? (% who say they voted)*

*Thinking about the last national election in 2014: Did you attend a campaign rally? Did you work for a candidate or party? (% who say "yes")*

*During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views: A political party official? (% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")*

Despite their declining levels of closeness to political parties and their limited contact with political parties, Namibians still believe their votes can make a difference. Seven in 10 citizens of voting age (70%) believe that they can use their power as voters to choose leaders who will help improve their lives (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Can voting improve people's lives? | Namibia | 2019**



**Respondents were asked:** Here are two statements about the importance of voting in elections. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

*Statement 1: No matter whom we vote for, our lives will not get better in the future.*

*Statement 2: We can use our power as voters to choose leaders who will help us improve our lives. (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)*

## Conclusion

Namibians' relations with their political parties are changing. This is most visible in the decline of partisanship and trust, which may be related to disenchantment with political leaders' inability to counter economic hardship. Younger citizens feel substantially less close to political parties than their elders, which presents a problem for parties struggling to find strategies to bring them into their fold.

Most Namibians still have faith in their ability, as voters, to change things for the better, but they may need to see effective government action on the economy if that faith is to be kept alive.

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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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 8 has been provided by Sweden, the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace.

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