

Liberia's race to the next presidency: Low trust in electoral commission, fear of violence raise flags

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 158 | Samuel Adusei Baaye and Isaac N. Bortey

Summary

On Liberia's road from warlord rule to democracy, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's decade-long tenure, government investment in public goods, and peaceful 2011 elections stand as milestones. In October, the country faces another critical test – its first post-civil-war democratic leadership transition, in a lively contest that has drawn more than 20 presidential candidates to replace the term-limited incumbent.

If elections are “the indispensable root of democracy” (Annan, 2012, p. 3), they can also be tightropes to walk: A successful, free, and fair election can entrench democratic gains, while a contest marred by irregularities, fraud, or violence can weaken the legitimacy of governments and democratic institutions.

Previous analysis of 2015 Afrobarometer public-opinion survey data from Liberia has shown that the country approaches its pivotal October election with a strong basis of popular faith in democracy, including support for regular and fair elections and multiparty competition (Okuru & Armah-Attah, 2016). While dissatisfaction is high with regard to how democracy is working and how government and the economy are performing (Isbell, 2017), overwhelming majorities of Liberians say they feel free to express their views, including at the ballot box.

Even so, another look at the 2015 data raises some cautionary flags as the election campaign gains momentum, including low levels of popular trust in the National Elections Commission (NEC), significant fear of election-related violence, widespread perceptions that voters are bribed, and doubts about how well elections fulfill their function of representing voters' views and replacing underperforming leaders.

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 more than 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are currently under way (2016/2017). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 adults.

This dispatch reports on findings of the Round 6 survey in Liberia, conducted in May 2015. The Afrobarometer team, led by Practical Sampling International, interviewed 1,200 adult Liberians. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys were conducted in Liberia in 2008 and 2012.

Key findings

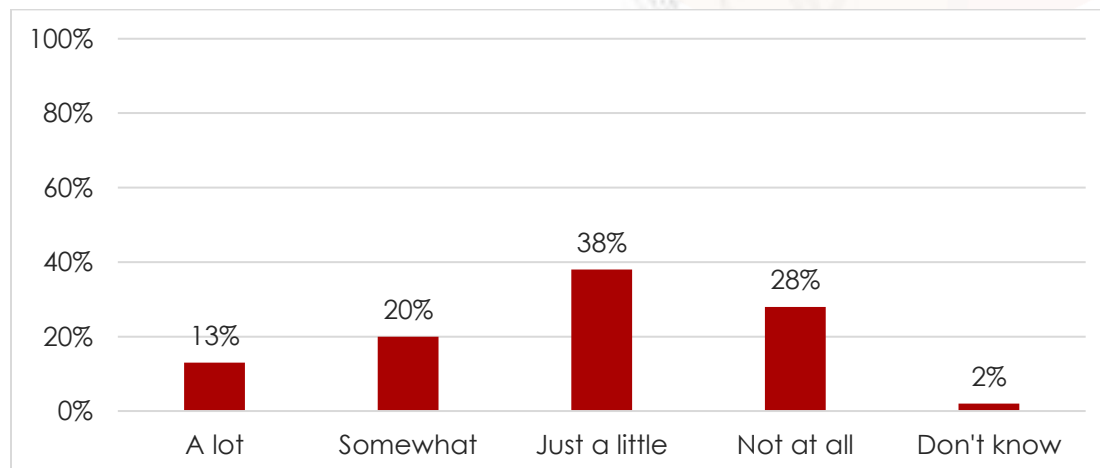
- Only one-third (33%) of Liberians trust the National Elections Commission (NEC) “somewhat” or “a lot.”
- Only one in three Liberians (32%) say they do not fear political violence or intimidation during election periods, and more than half (51%) say that voters are at least “sometimes” threatened with violence at the polls.
- More than eight in 10 Liberians say voters are “sometimes” (39%), often (23%), or “always” (22%) bribed.
- Only one-third (33%) of Liberians believe that elections work well to ensure that members of the House of Representatives reflect voters’ view. About half (47%) say elections enable voters to remove underperforming leaders from office.

Trust in the National Elections Commission (NEC)

Popular trust in the election management body is instrumental in ensuring the credibility and acceptance of election results. Building such trust requires fair and equal treatment of competing parties, transparency in electoral activities, and the management of pre-election anxieties.

In Liberia, only one in three citizens (33%) say they trust the NEC “somewhat” or “a lot,” while almost as many (28%) do not trust the NEC “at all” (Figure 1). Liberians’ level of trust in the NEC is well below the average of 50% across 35 African countries where this question was asked in 2014/2015 (Penar, Aiko, Bentley, & Han, 2016). While this is worrying, it does not presage doom. Ghana set an example in its 2016 elections: While only 37% of Ghanaians said before the election that they trusted the National Electoral Commission “somewhat” or “a lot,” concerted efforts to build its image were part of an election campaign that was widely hailed as successful.

Figure 1: Popular trust in the National Elections Commission (NEC) | Liberia | 2015



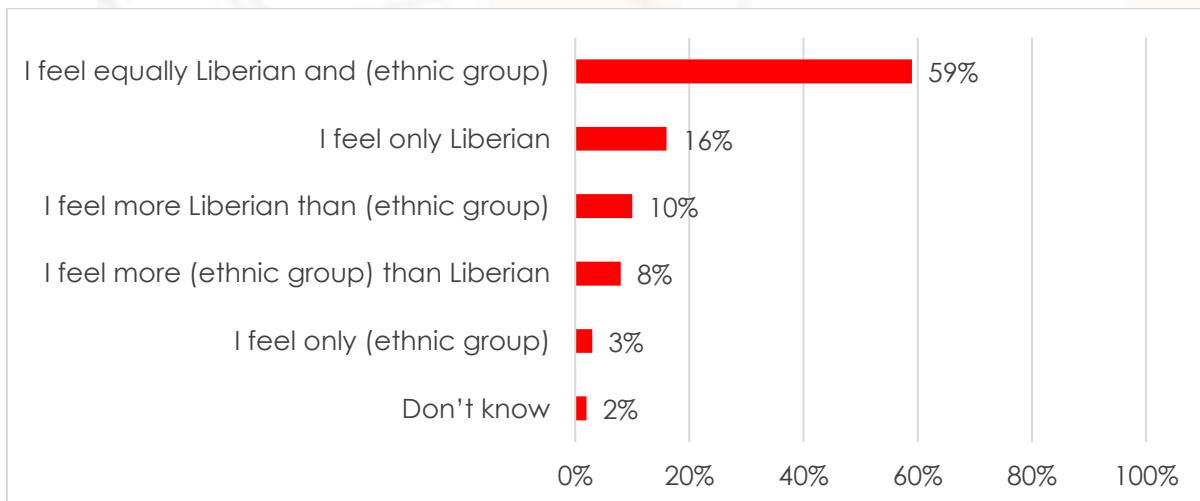
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The National Elections Commission?

The influence of ethnicity

Playing the ethnic card is a frequent strategy employed by African politicians seeking election. According to Diamond (1986), “in ethnically divided societies ... elections ... become not only the vehicle for protecting the general process of capitalist accumulation but also for promoting accumulation by one cultural section of the dominant class in competition with others. Thus, they become a major expression of ethnic conflict.” In March, Liberian writer Jones Williams (2017) warned, “So far, what we have seen and heard from many of the surrogates of the ruling party and other political entities as well as key Liberian presidential candidates is nothing but tribal and identity politics and an artificial divide between who is ‘Congo’ and ‘Congua,’ or who is ‘native’ or a ‘real Liberian.’ “

When asked about their national vs. ethnic identities, a majority (59%) of respondents assign equal importance to their Liberian and their ethnic identities (Figure 2). In addition, about one in four say they feel more attached to their Liberian than their ethnic affiliation (10%) or feel “only Liberian” (16%). Only about one in 10 say they privilege their ethnic over their Liberian identity (8%) or identify only as part of their ethnic group (3%). While these results show a strong national identity, they also suggest significant ethnic identification that could be a factor in people's choice at the ballot box.

Figure 2: Ethnic vs. national identity | Liberia | 2015



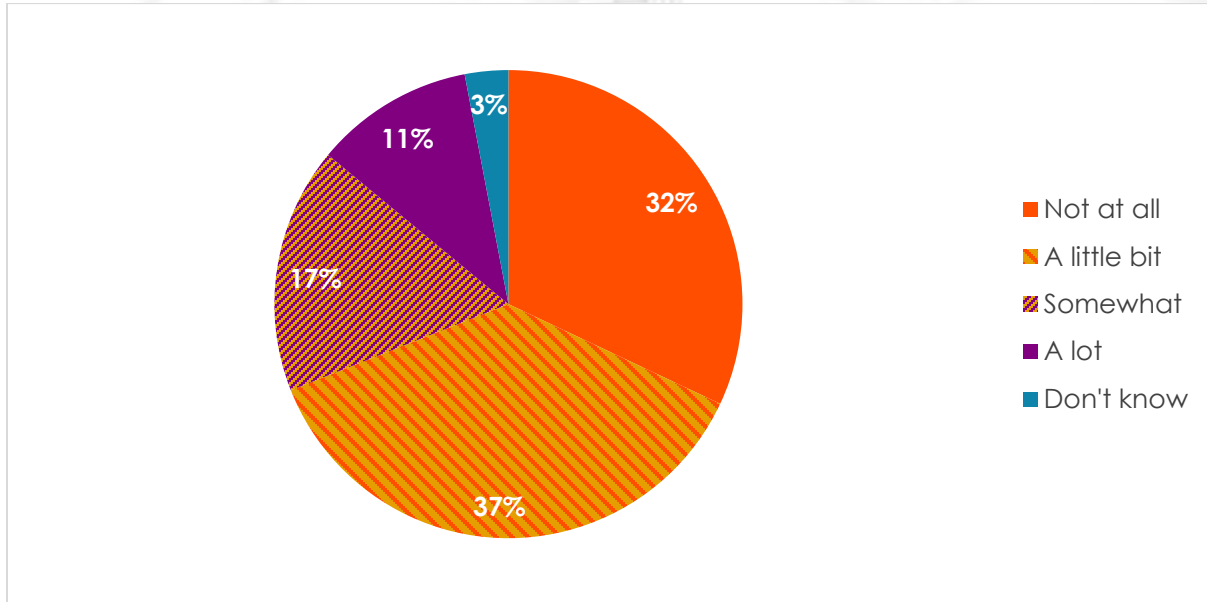
Respondents were asked: Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Liberian and being a _____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?

Electoral violence

While regular elections can contribute to democratic progress, in some countries campaigns may be accompanied by violence and intimidation of candidates and voters (Adolfo, Kovacs, Nyström, & Utas, 2012). In Liberia, only one-third (32%) of respondents say they have no fear at all of becoming a victim of political violence, whilst 37% express “a little bit” of fear, 17% say they are “somewhat” scared, and 11% say they fear political violence “a lot” (Figure 3).

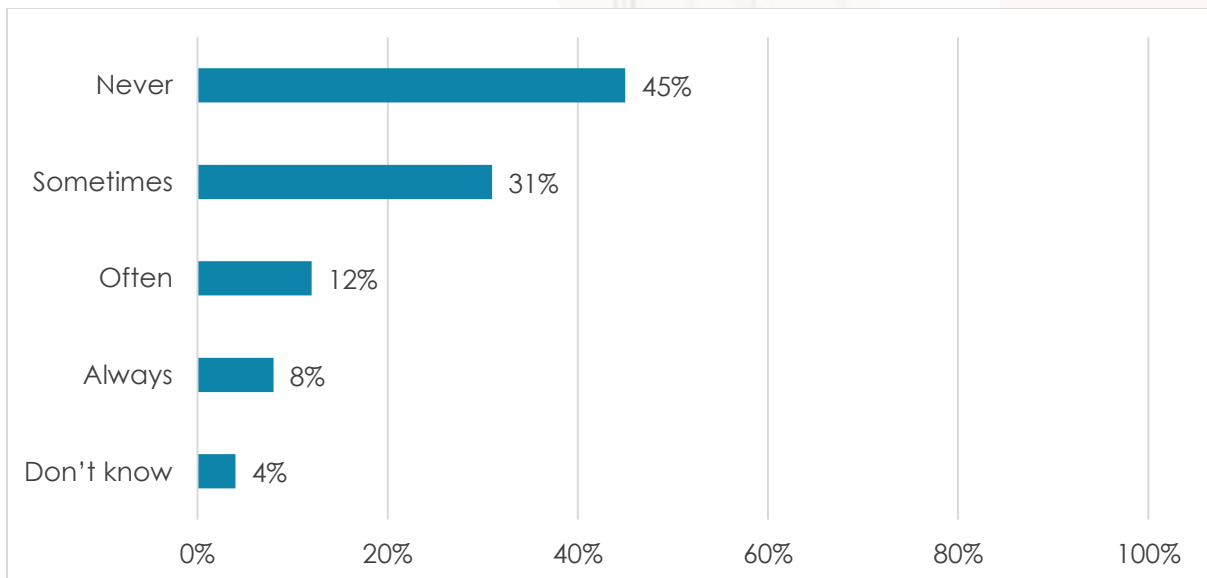
More than half (51%) of respondents say that voters are at least “sometimes” threatened with violence at the polls, including one in five who say this happens “often” (12%) or “always” (8%) (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Liberia | 2015



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

Figure 4: Voters threatened with violence at the polls | Liberia | 2015

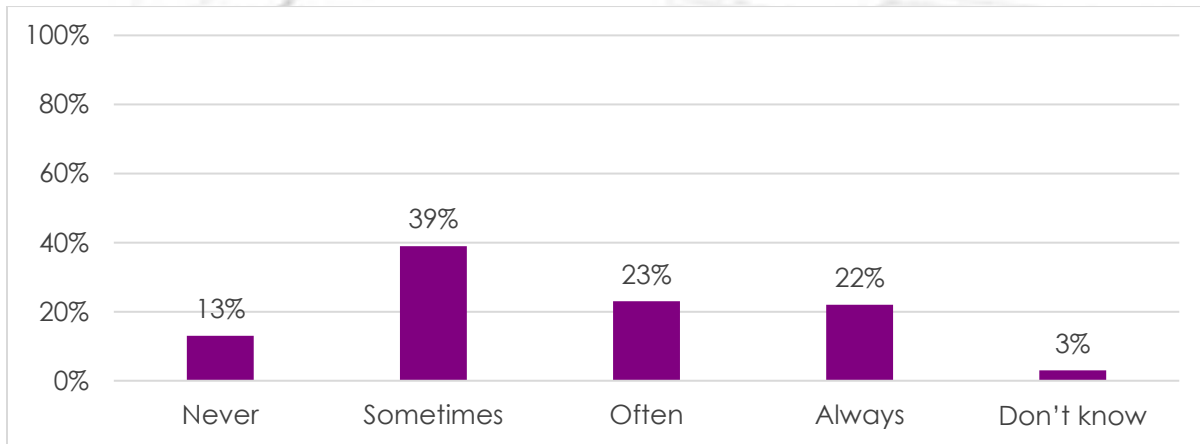


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Voters are threatened with violence at the polls?

Vote-buying

Vote-buying is a particularly common strategy in countries where poverty makes voters vulnerable to the influence of money in politics (Carter Center, 2005). In Liberia, more than eight in 10 respondents say voters are bribed “sometimes” (39%), often (23%), or “always” (22%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: How often are voters bribed? | Liberia | 2015

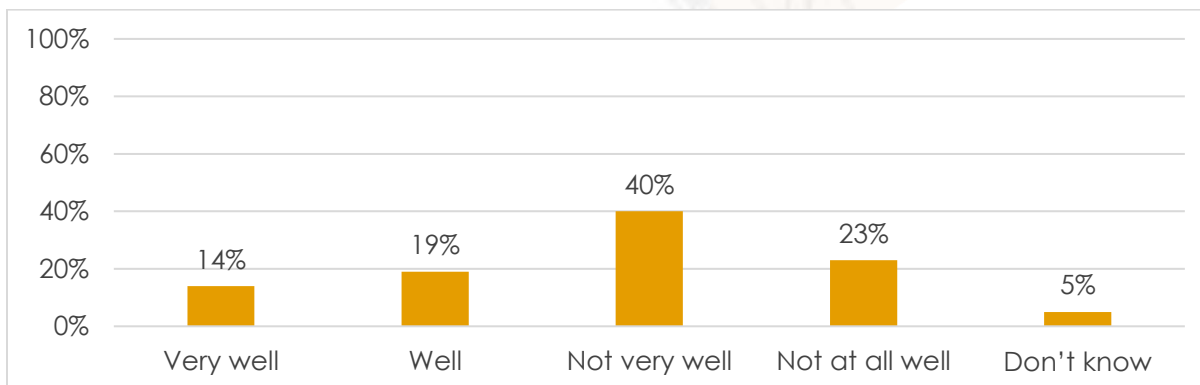


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Voters are bribed?

How well do elections function?

While an overwhelming majority (83%) of Liberians agree that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections (Okuru & Armah-Attah, 2016), they are much less sure that elections actually fulfill their intended functions. Only one-third (33%) of Liberians believe that elections work “well” or “very well” to ensure that members of the House of Representatives reflect voters' views (Figure 6).

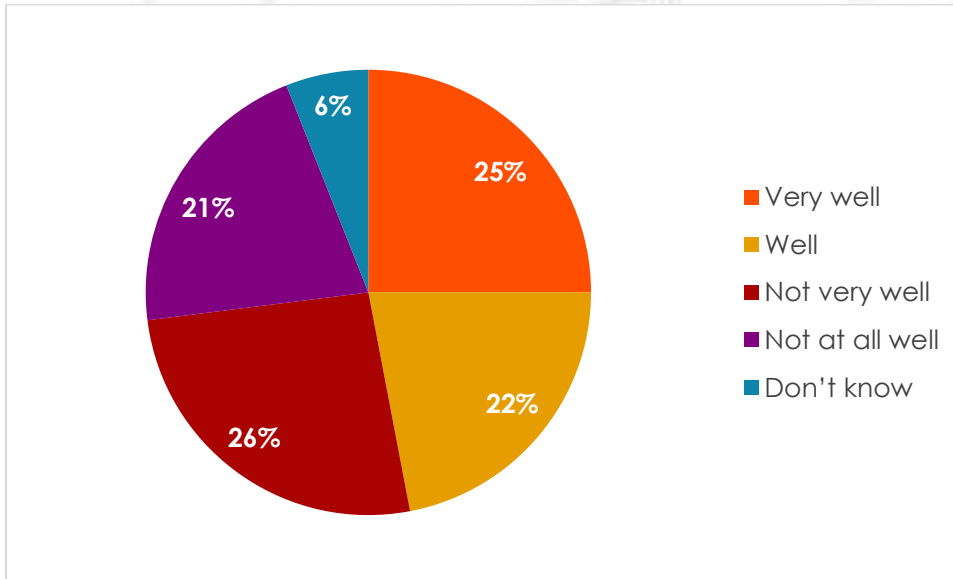
Figure 6: How well elections ensure that voters' views are reflected | Liberia | 2015



Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections ensure that members of the House of Representatives reflect the views of voters?

They are evenly split, at 47% each, on whether elections work well in enabling voters to remove leaders who don't do what their constituents want (Figure 7).

Figure 7: How well elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders | Liberia | 2015



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?

Conclusion

Elections are a complex, fragile, and indispensable part of consolidating a country's democratic gains. As Liberians approach their first post-war electoral leadership transition, a look at 2015 public-attitude data suggests a need for careful attention to evenhandedness and transparency on the part of the National Elections Commission in order to strengthen popular trust in the body that will organize the election and declare the results.

Widespread fear of election-related violence reinforces the need for transparency and fairness, as well as adequate security precautions. And significant ethnic identification by Liberian citizens imposes on candidates and parties an imperative to refuse to exploit identity politics for political gain.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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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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