



Malawians losing confidence in elections, demand reforms

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 148 | Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

The most recent national elections in Malawi (2014) were highly contested, and the results were heavily disputed. Whilst vote counting was in process, then-President Joyce Banda announced that she had nullified the elections and called for new elections because of grave irregularities and allegations of rigging. The Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) conceded that there were serious challenges and that it was prepared for vote recounting, but the High Court of Malawi ordered the MEC to release results within eight days after the last day of voting, as is required by the country's Presidential and Parliamentary Elections Act, effectively precluding a recount.

The controversy surrounding the 2014 elections has ignited momentum for demands for electoral reforms in Malawi. Some reform proposals were recommended by the Malawi Law Commission following the constitutional review process of 2006, but more than a decade later, they have yet to be tabled in Parliament. These include proposals concerning the composition of the MEC, the electoral system, and eligibility criteria for candidates for president and Parliament (Malawi Law Commission, 2007; National Task Force on Electoral Reforms, 2015). Civil society organisations, political parties, and citizen activists are now pushing for legal and administrative reforms to improve both the conduct of elections and the legitimacy of election outcomes.

Amidst this national debate, this dispatch examines the views of Malawians on elections as a way of choosing leaders, on the freeness and fairness of their elections, and on some of the key proposed reforms. According to 2017 Afrobarometer survey results, Malawians are losing confidence in elections. There is widespread support for changes to the process of choosing MEC members, for a minimum educational requirement for candidates for Parliament, and for an age limit of 70 years for presidential candidates.

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 Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2017. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

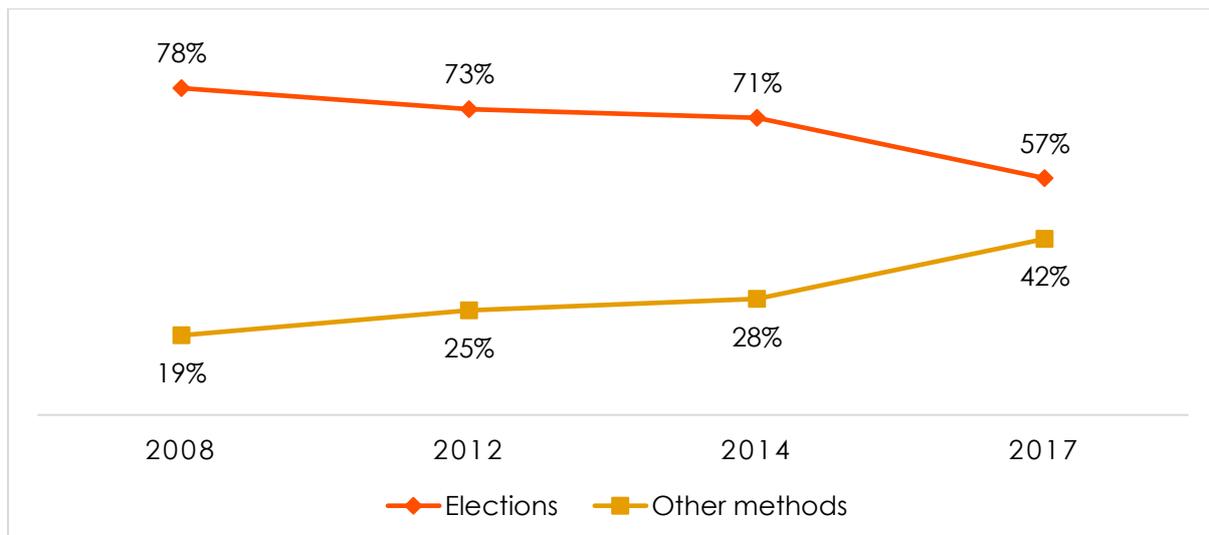
Key findings

- The proportion of Malawians who say elections are the best way of choosing the country's leaders dropped from 71% in 2014 to 57%, continuing a decade-long decline. Four in 10 citizens (42%) now say the country should adopt other methods of choosing leaders because "elections sometimes produce bad results."
- Only one-third (32%) of Malawians say the 2014 general elections were "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems," while a majority (57%) say the elections had "major problems" or were "not free and fair."
- Respondents say low turnout in by-elections is largely due to a combination of factors relating to dissatisfaction with elections and politics in general: lack of interest or voter fatigue (22%), the feeling that voting makes no difference (17%), and the belief that elections are not free and fair (12%).
- Malawians express strong support for three electoral reforms: an age limit of 70 years of presidential candidates (77%), a minimum educational requirement of a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE) for candidates for Parliament (82%), and a revised selection process for MEC members based on applications and interviews rather than political-party nominations and presidential appointments (74%).

Support for elections is waning

An increasing proportion of Malawians thinks the country should adopt methods other than elections for choosing the country's leaders. Support for elections as the best method has been declining for the past decade (from 78% in 2008) but took its steepest drop between 2014 (71%) and 2017 (57%) (Figure 1). Meanwhile, the proportion of citizens who favour other methods of choosing leaders doubled, from 19% in 2008 to 42% in 2017.

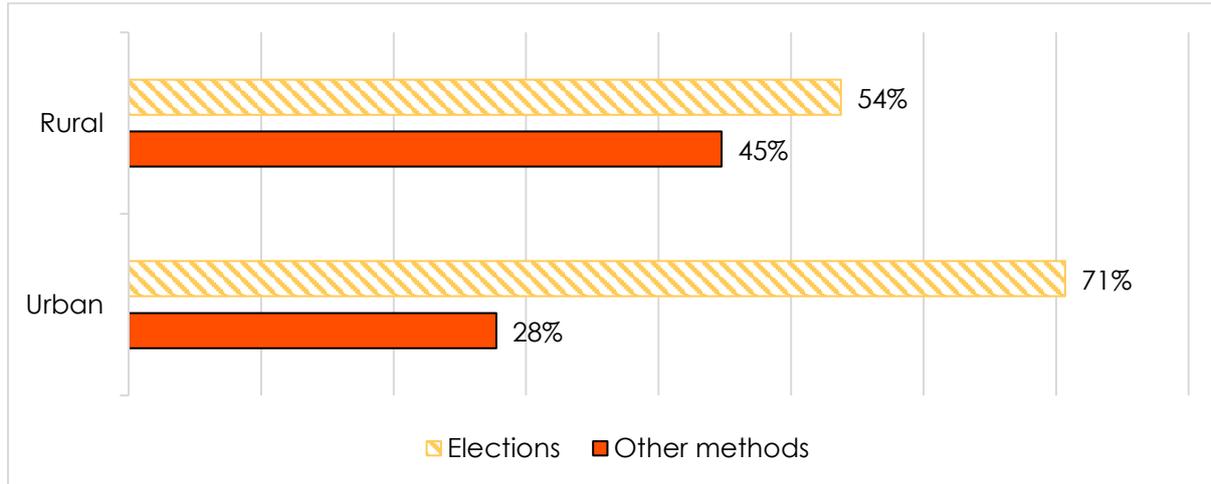
Figure 1: Declining support for elections as the best way to choose leaders | Malawi | 2008-2017



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)

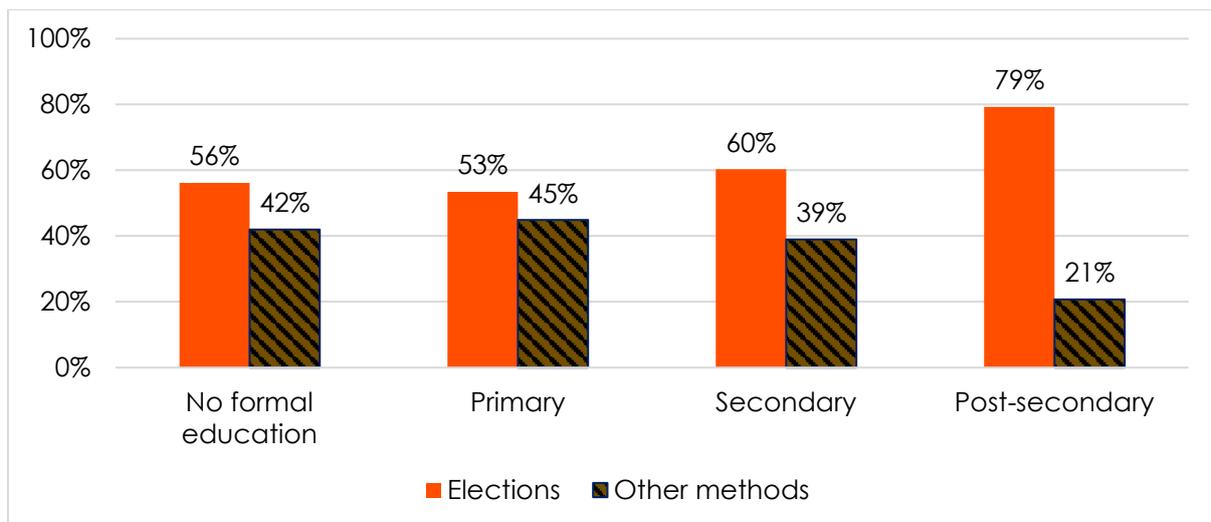
Support for election is considerably stronger in urban areas (71%) than in rural areas (54%) (Figure 2). Support for elections is higher among better-educated Malawians, ranging from 53% of those with primary schooling to 79% among those with post-secondary qualifications (Figure 3). Conversely, only two in 10 people with post-secondary education (21%) think Malawi should look for other methods of choosing leader, while almost half of those with only primary education (45%) prefer the other alternatives.

Figure 2: Support for elections vs. other methods | by urban-rural residence | Malawi | 2017



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Figure 3: Support for elections vs. other methods | by education level | Malawi | 2017

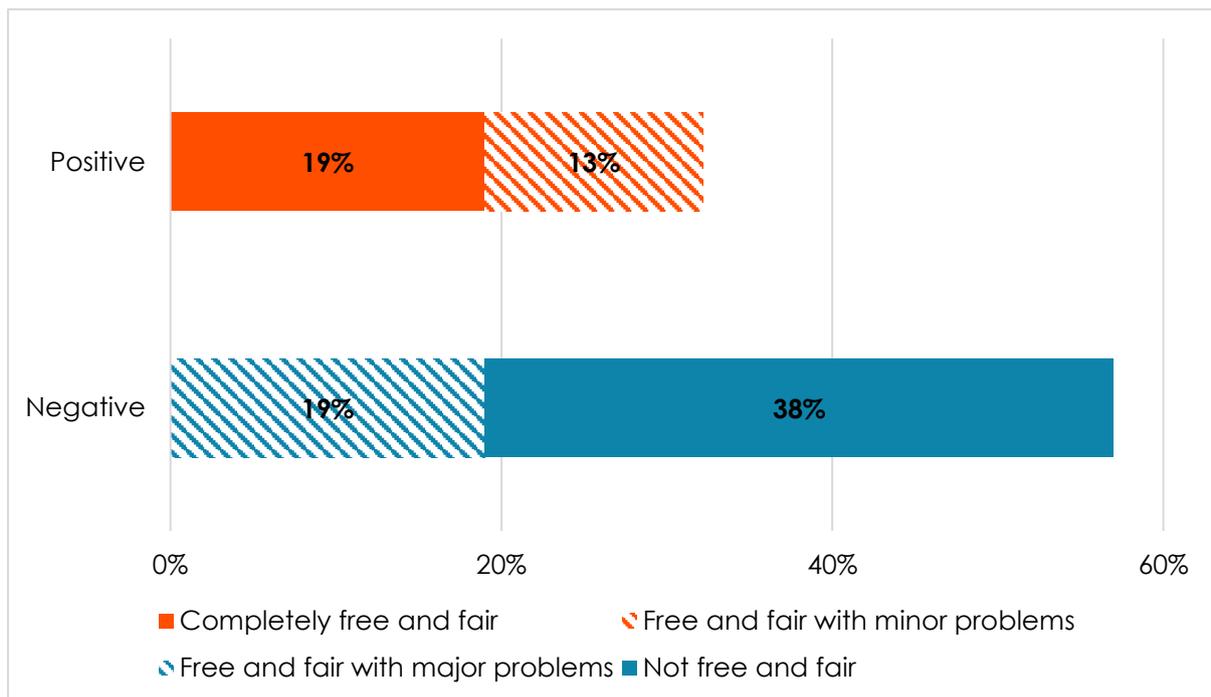


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Dissatisfaction with quality of elections

The decline in popular support for elections may be attributable in part to Malawians' assessments of the quality of elections in the country. Close to six in 10 Malawians feel the last presidential and parliamentary elections in Malawi, held in 2014, were “not free and fair” (38%) or were marred by “major problems” (19%) (Figure 4). In contrast, only about three in 10 say the elections were “completely free and fair” (19%) or “free and fair, but with minor problems” (13%).

Figure 4: Freeness and fairness of 2014 national elections | Malawi | 2017

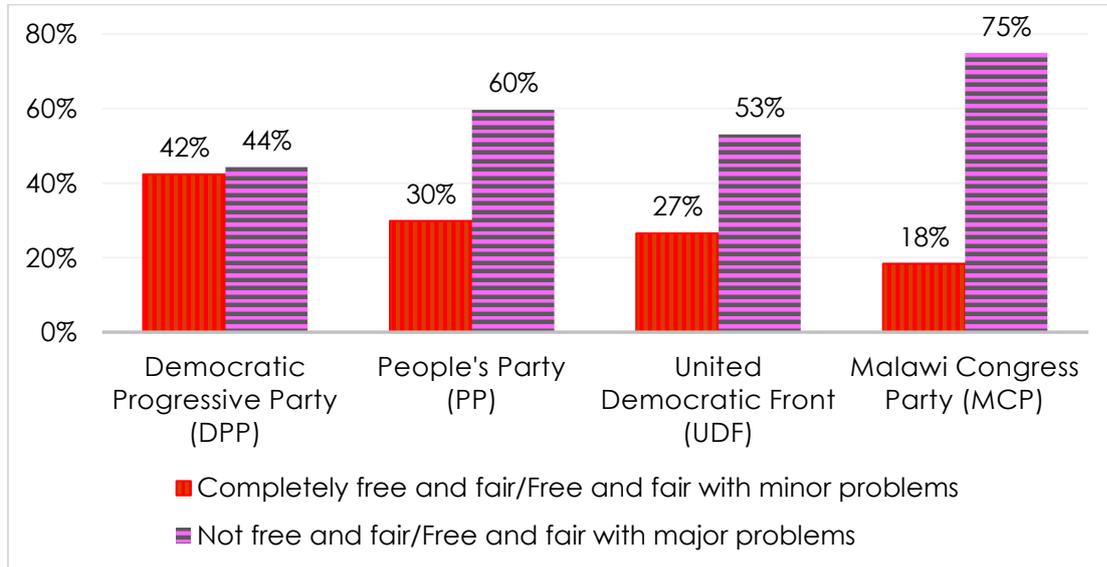


Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2014?*

Perceptions of election quality are often influenced by partisan affiliation, among other factors: Supporters of a winning party are more likely to rate the election as free and fair than those on the losing end (Cantú & García-Ponce, 2015; Craig, Martinez, Gainous, & Kane, 2006). This is true in Malawi, where 75% of Malawi Congress Party (MCP) supporters say the elections were less than free and fair, compared to 44% of supporters of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).¹ (Figure 5). However, the fact that even among self-identified DPP supporters, a plurality find fault with the elections points to widespread acknowledgement that the elections should have been managed better.

¹ Political party affiliation was determined by responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Figure 5: Freeness and fairness of 2014 elections | by political party affiliation
 | Malawi | 2017



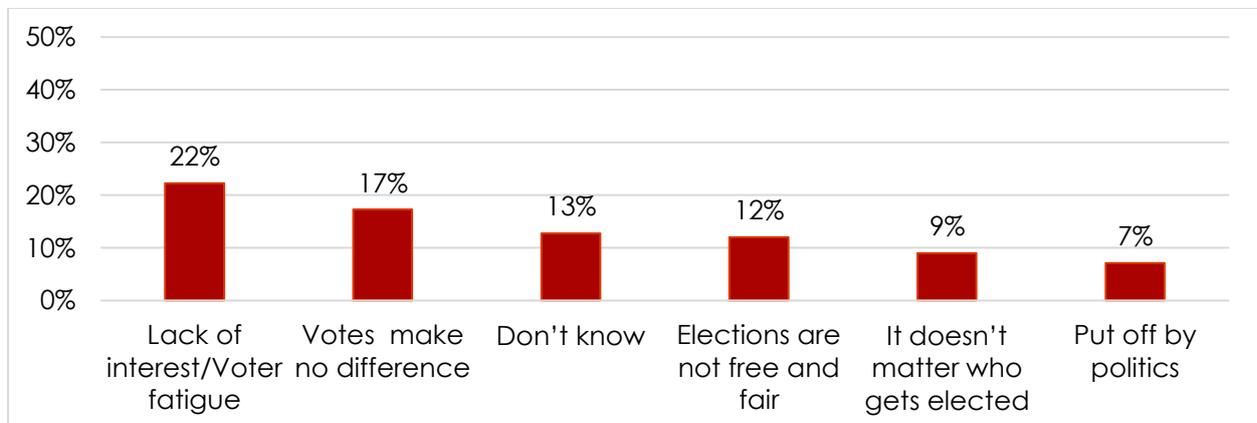
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Voter apathy in by-elections

In December 2015, the chairperson of Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), Justice Maxton Mbendera, decried voter apathy in by-elections and called for research on why people don't turn out to vote (Mkawihe, 2015). This call was repeated in November 2016 by his successor, Justice Jane Ansah, after another round of by-elections in which most of the electorate stayed away (Bisani, 2016).

According to Afrobarometer survey respondents, the leading reason for low turnout in by-elections is a lack of interest or voter fatigue, cited by 22% of the sample (Figure 6). Others say that citizens think their vote makes no difference (17%), that elections are not free and fair (12%), or that it doesn't matter who is elected (9%), while 7% say the public is simply put off by politics in general.

Figure 6: Reasons for low turnout in by-elections | Malawi | 2017

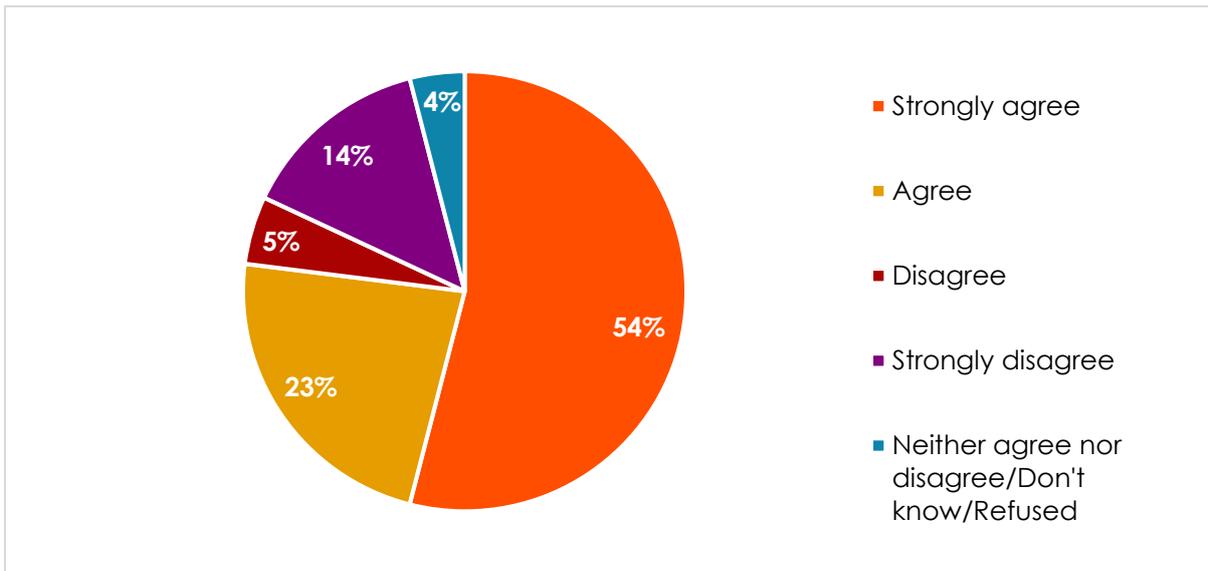


Respondents were asked: The Malawi Electoral Commission recently expressed concern that voter turnout during by-elections is too low. In your opinion, what could be the main reason why most people do not turn out to vote during by-elections?

Popular support for electoral reforms

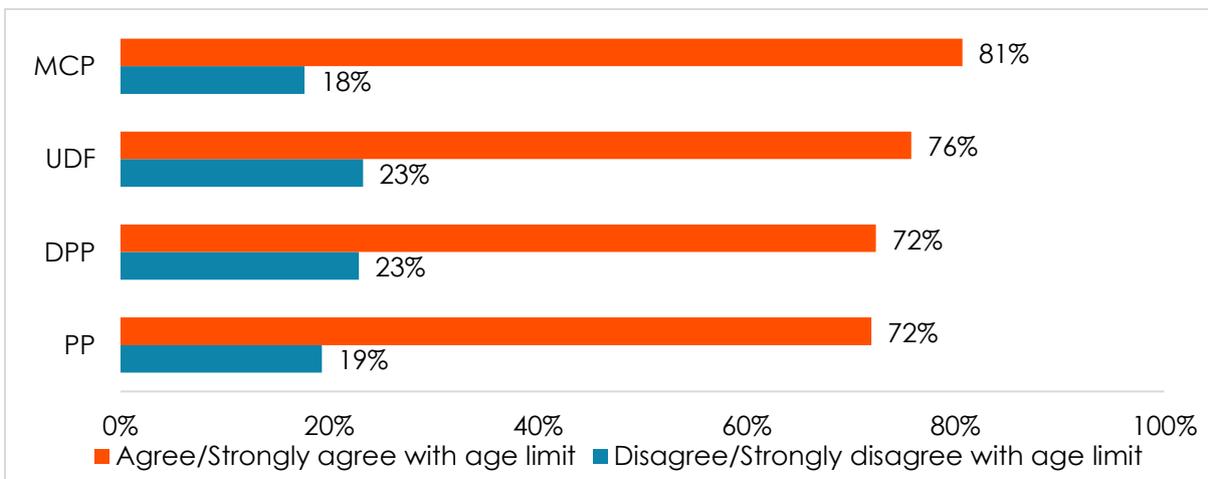
Amidst popular discontent with elections, a number of proposals have been put forward to make elections more meaningful and effective for Malawians. Findings of this survey show that three proposed reforms have unequivocal popular support. More than three-fourths (77%) of Malawians support a proposal that presidential candidates should be no more than 70 years of age (Figure 7). The support is strong across political party lines (Figure 8) regardless of the age of their current leader (including President Peter Mutharika of the DPP, who is 77).

Figure 7: Support for presidential candidate age limit of 70 years | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: A number of suggestions have been made recently aimed at reforming the laws governing how elections are held in this country. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree: The maximum legal age for presidential candidates should be 70 years.

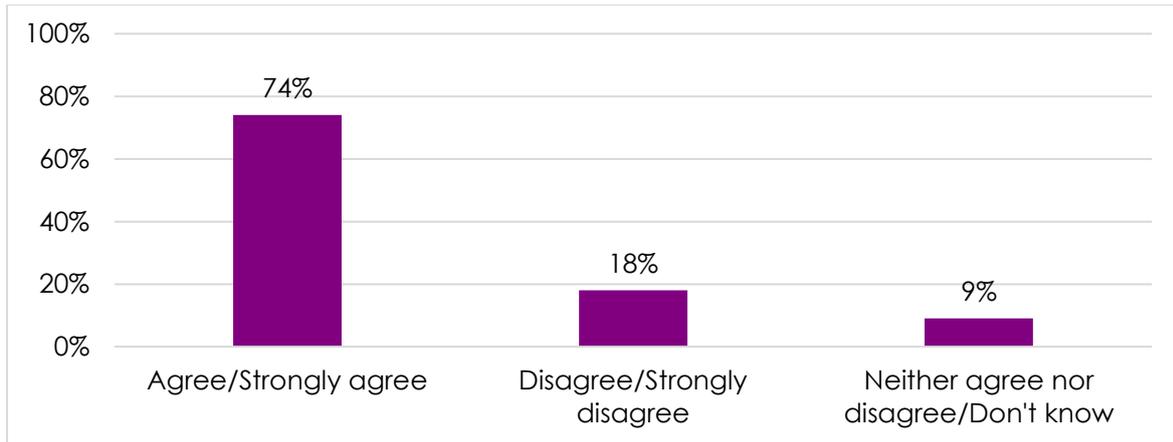
Figure 8: Support for presidential candidate age limit of 70 years | by political party affiliation | Malawi | 2017



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Similarly, there is widespread support for changing the process of constituting the country's elections management body. About three-quarters (74%) of Malawians say commissioners of Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) should be selected from among qualified applicants instead of presidential appointments in consultation with political parties. Only 18% of respondents disagree with this proposal (Figure 9)

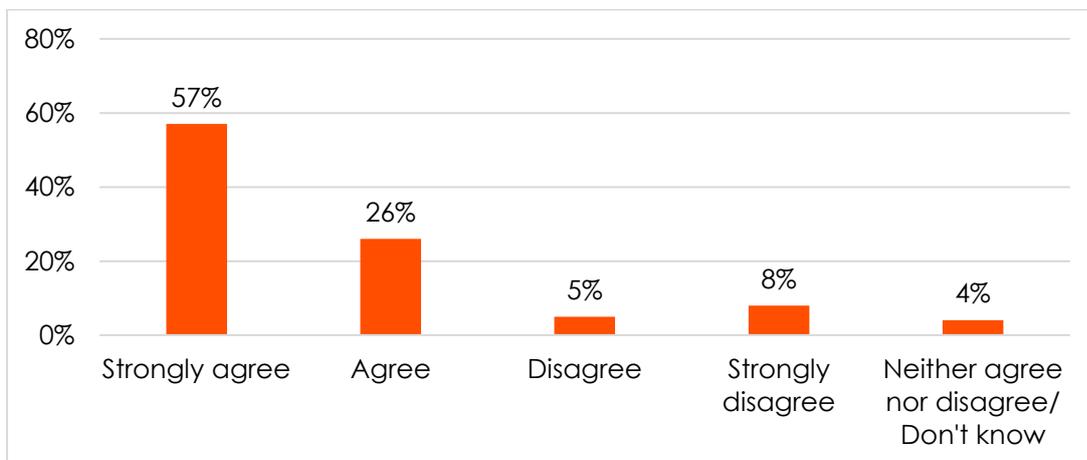
Figure 9: Support for choosing MEC commissioners through applications | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: A number of suggestions have been made recently aimed at reforming the laws governing how elections are held in this country. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree: Members of the electoral commission should be selected from a list of applicants instead of being nominated by political parties.

Likewise, most Malawians think there should be a minimum education qualification of Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), which is the highest secondary school qualification, for those aspiring to serve as members of Parliament. More than four out of five Malawians (83%) support this requirement (including 57% who "agree strongly"), while only 13% disagree (Figure 10).

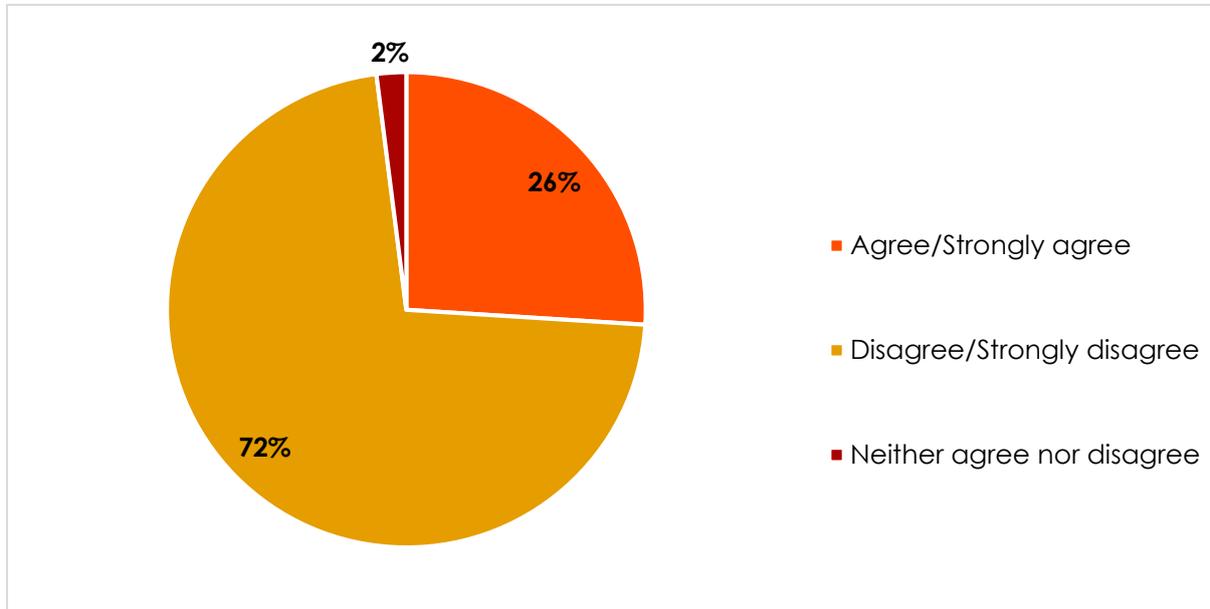
Figure 10: Support for minimum education qualification of MSCE for MP | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: A number of suggestions have been made recently aimed at reforming the laws governing how elections are held in this country. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree: Candidates for Parliament should be required to have a minimum education qualification of an MSCE certificate.

However, most Malawians (72%) reject the idea of making voting compulsory as a solution to voter apathy (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Views on compulsory voting | Malawi | 2017



Respondents were asked: A number of suggestions have been made recently aimed at reforming the laws governing how elections are held in this country. For each of the following proposals, please tell me whether you agree or disagree: In order to increase voter turnout, voting should be made compulsory.

Conclusion

The Survey findings show that the democratic institution of elections is under serious threat in Malawi and there is urgent need to adopt reforms that will restore the trust of the population in elections. Some electoral reform proposals advocated by civil society organisations, political parties, and citizen activists have wide and solid support among the Malawi public.

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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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