

Gone but not forgotten: Most Ugandans want presidential term and age limits reinstated

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 464 | Ronald Makanga Kakumba

Summary

In 2005, the Parliament of Uganda amended the Constitution to remove presidential term limits, allowing incumbents to run for re-election indefinitely (Observer, 2012). In 2017, lawmakers overwhelmingly voted to repeal the presidential age limit requiring that presidential candidates be less than 75 years of age (BBC, 2017). This allowed President Yoweri Museveni, age 76, to claim his sixth consecutive term in the recently concluded elections.

The repeal of the presidential age limit, like the removal of the two-term limit, was met with widespread opposition from civil rights groups, the general public, political opponents, religious leaders, and even some members of the ruling party, who saw it as unconstitutional. Debate in Parliament over this contentious bill sparked such an uproar that the scene devolved into brawls between lawmakers (Telegraph, 2017).

While members of Parliament (MPs) consulted with constituents prior to the amendment, some constituents accused lawmakers of ignoring their opinions (Daily Monitor, 2017). According to a poll commissioned by the Citizens Coalition on Electoral Democracy and Uganda Governance Monitoring Platform before the parliamentary vote, 85% of Ugandans opposed the proposed amendment to eliminate the presidential age limit (Observer, 2017).

In response to legal challenges, the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court upheld the parliamentary action (Xinhuanet, 2018; Independent, 2019).

According to some political analysts, supporting the elimination of the age limit may have cost some MPs their seats. An analysis published in the Daily Monitor (2021) shows that more than half of all MPs who voted in favour of dropping the age limit were defeated in the 2021 elections.

Findings from the Afrobarometer survey show that in contrast to their Parliament's action, most Ugandans support having presidential term limits and age limits in the Constitution. A majority favour a maximum age limit for presidential candidates of between 60 and 75 years and a minimum age limit of between 30 and 40 years.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) cover 34 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Uganda, led by Hatchile Consult, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Ugandans between 31 September and 31 October 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 Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2017.

Key findings

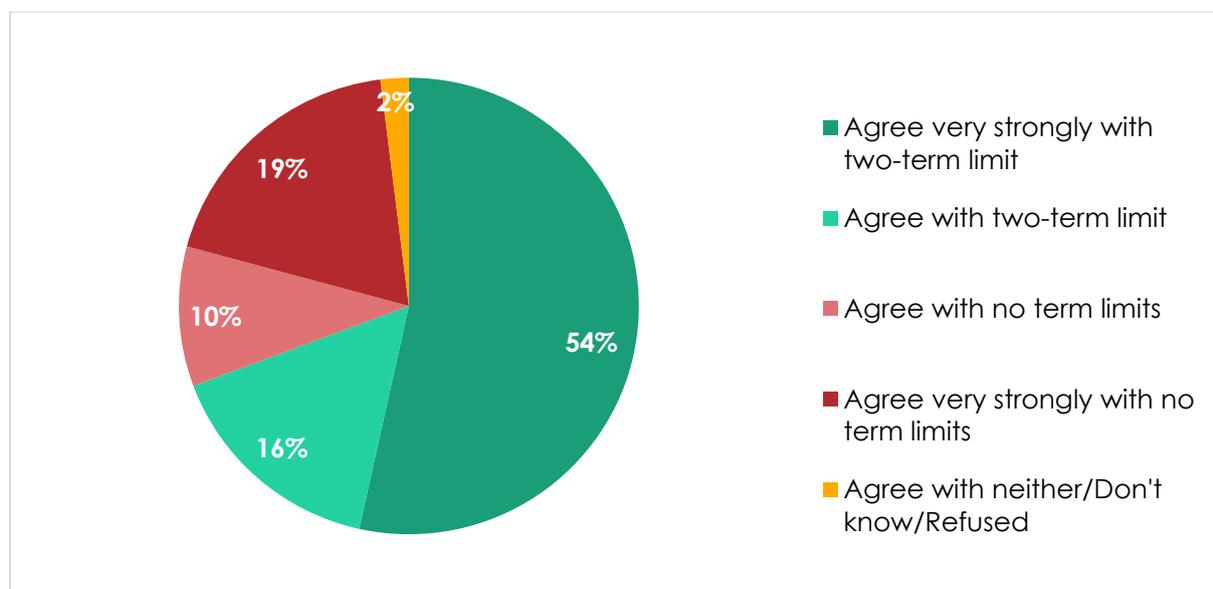
- Contrary to Parliament's removal of presidential term limits, seven in 10 Ugandans (70%) say the Constitution should limit their president to a maximum of two terms. Support for term limits has been consistently high over the past decade.
- An even larger majority (80%) of Ugandans support a maximum age limit for presidential candidates.
 - The most popular choice for a maximum age limit is 70 years (23%), followed by 60 years (14%) and 75 years (12%).
- Similarly, more than eight in 10 Ugandans (84%) support a minimum age for presidential candidates.
 - A majority say the minimum age should be set at 30 years (17%), 35 years (19%), or 40 years (19%).

Majority of Ugandans support presidential two-term limit

According to Afrobarometer's 2019 survey in Uganda, seven in 10 Ugandans (70%) say the Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office, including a majority (54%) who feel "very strongly" about this issue. Only 29% oppose term limits (Figure 1).

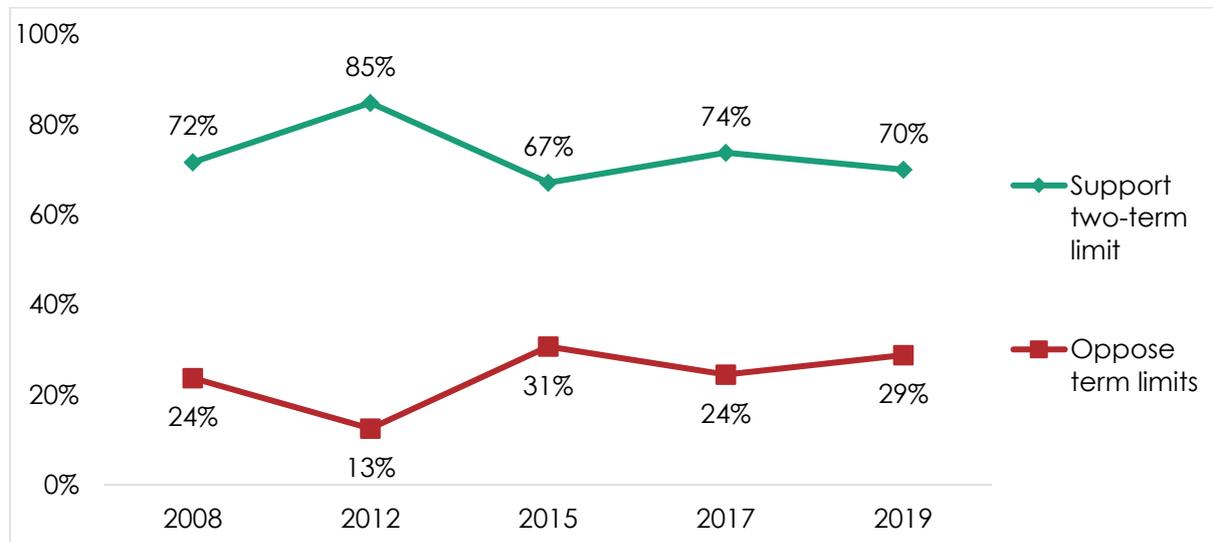
Over the past decade, support for presidential two-term limits has been consistently high, with a peak of 85% in 2012 and a low of 67% in 2015 (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Support for presidential two-term limit | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

Figure 2: Support for presidential two-term limit | Uganda | 2008-2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.
 Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

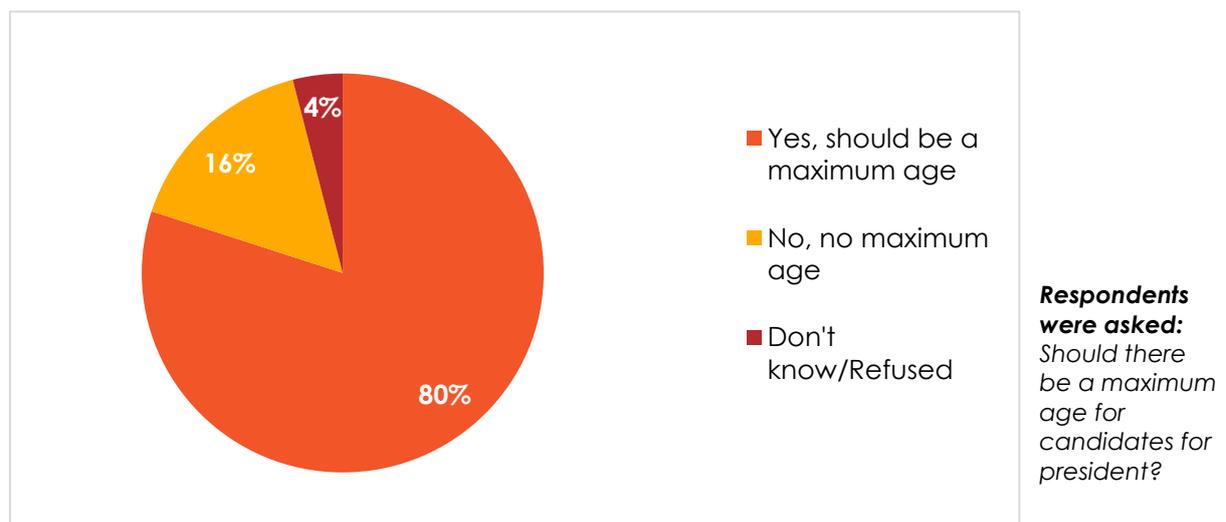
Presidential age limits

Prior to the amendment eliminating the presidential age limit, Article 102(b) of the 1995 Uganda Constitution stated that “a person is not qualified for election as president unless he or she is not less than thirty-five years old and not more than seventy-five years old.” However, in 2017, three-fourths (76%) of members of Parliament voted to remove the age-limit provision.

Maximum age for presidential candidates

According to the 2019 Afrobarometer survey, eight in 10 Ugandan citizens (80%) want an upper age limit to be reinstated in the Constitution. Only 16% of those polled are opposed to an upper age limit (Figure 3).

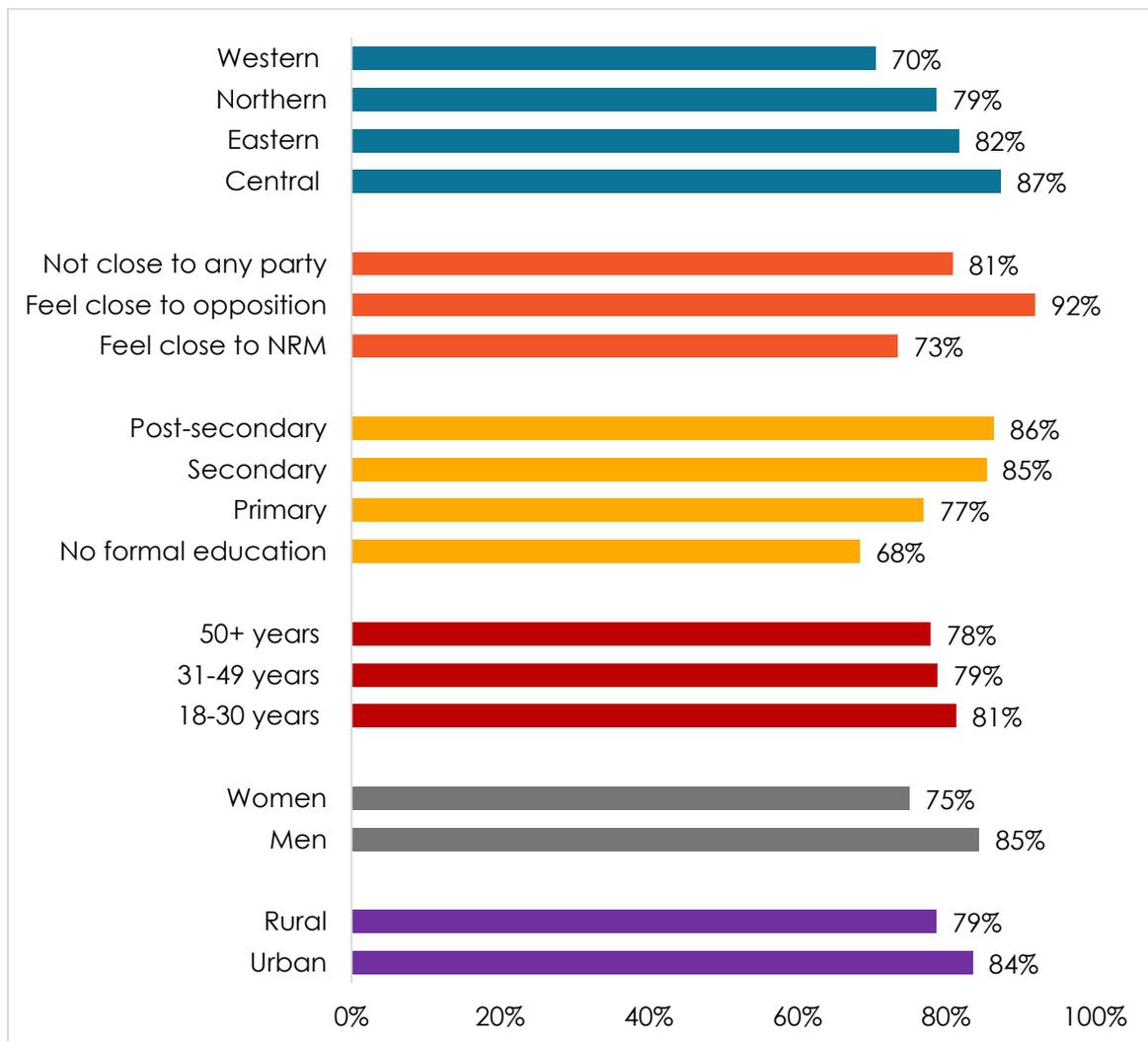
Figure 3: Support for maximum age for presidential candidates | Uganda | 2019



Across demographic groups, support for a maximum age for presidential aspirants is higher among opposition supporters (92%), residents of the Central region (87%), better-educated citizens (85%-86%), men (85%), and urban residents (84%) than among their counterparts (Figure 4).

Even among supporters of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM), nearly three-quarters (73%) support having an upper age limit for presidential candidates, despite the fact that the decision to lift the age limit allowed their presidential candidate, President Museveni, to run for re-election in 2021.

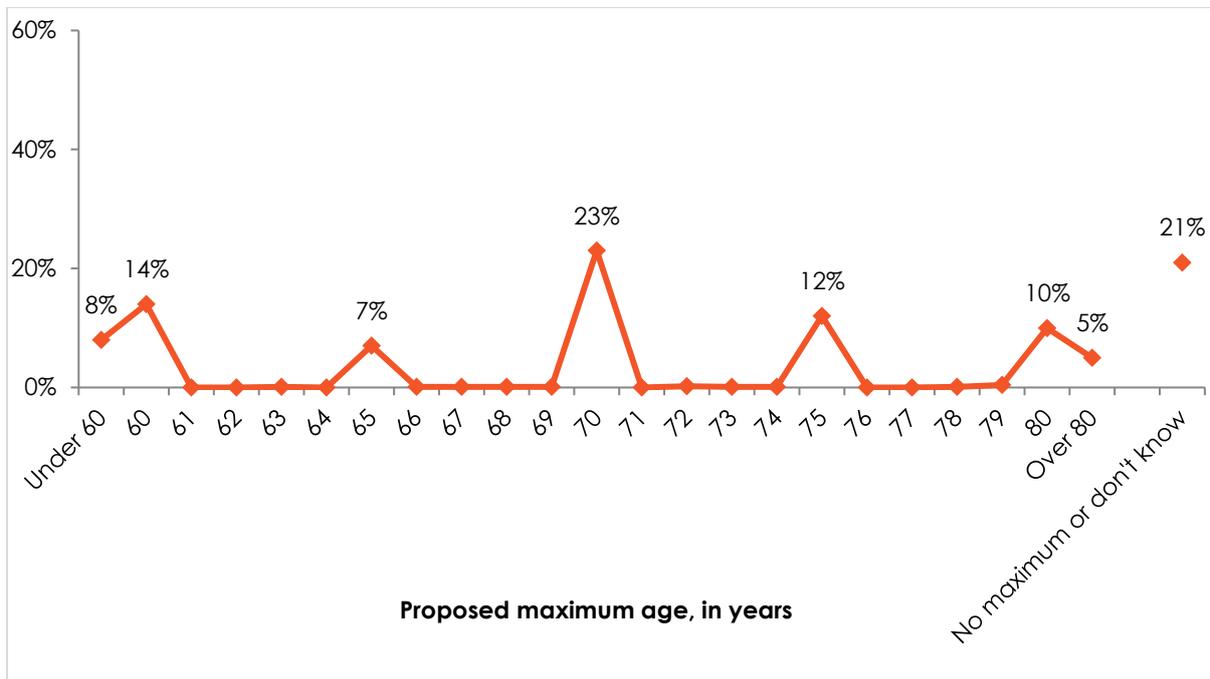
Figure 4: Support for maximum age for presidential candidates | by demographic group | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president? (% who say "yes")

According to the Afrobarometer survey, a majority (57%) of Ugandans would prefer a maximum age between 60 and 75 (Figure 5). The most popular choice is age 70 (23%), followed by age 60 (14%) and age 75 (12%). One in 10 (10%) would set the age limit at 80, while 5% would set it higher.

Figure 5: Preferred maximum age for presidential candidates | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Should there be a maximum age for candidates for president? [If yes:] What should the maximum age be?

Minimum age for presidential candidates

The 2017 amendment also reduced the age requirement for presidential candidates from 35 to 18 years, though this part of the age-limit change drew relatively little attention. As a result of the amendment, Uganda saw its youngest presidential candidate ever, aged 24, compete in the presidential race in 2021.

A large majority (84%) of Ugandans believe there should be a minimum age limit for candidates running for the presidency (Figure 6). Except among residents of the Northern region (69%), more than eight in 10 respondents across major demographic groups support a minimum presidential age limit. This preference is especially strong among older citizens (92% of those aged 50 or above) (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Support for a minimum age for presidential candidates | Uganda | 2019

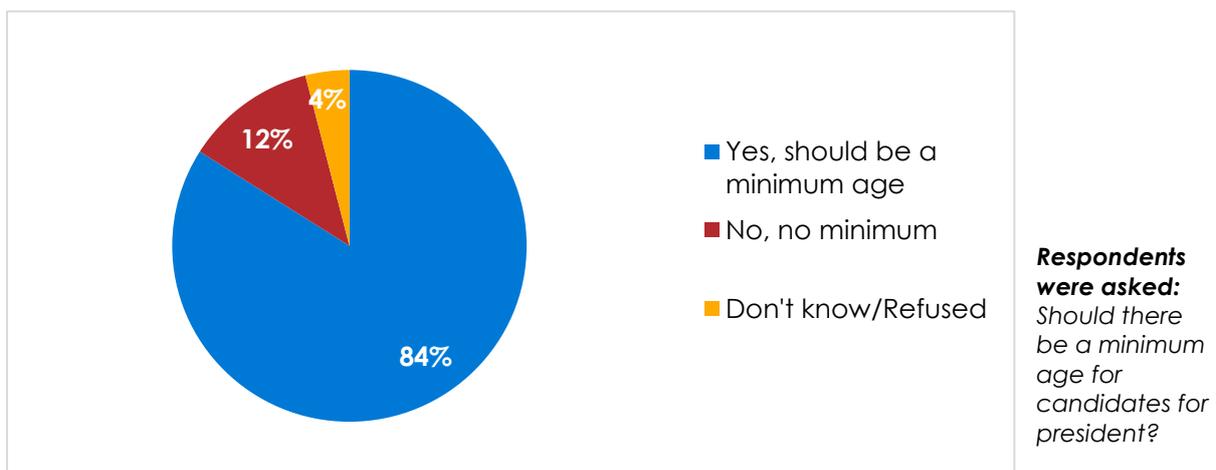
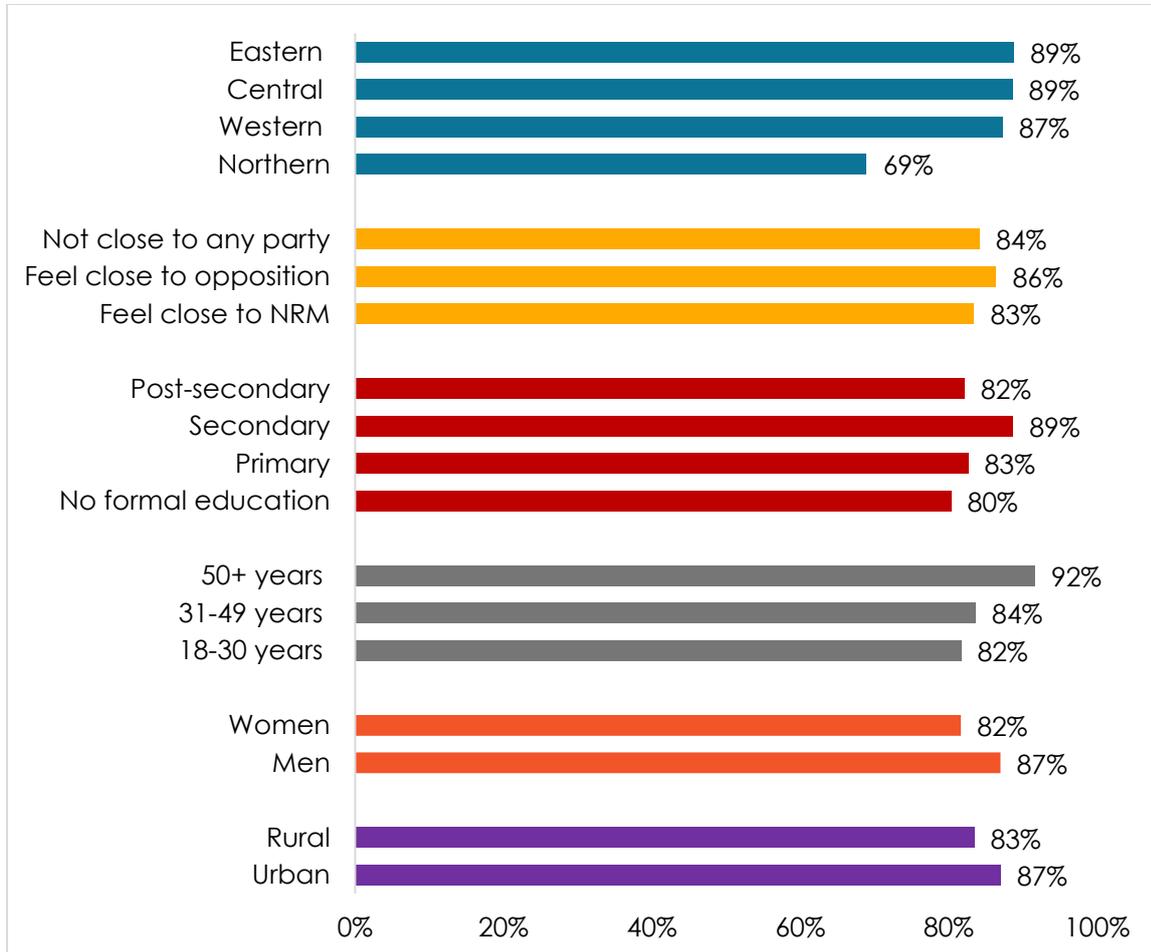


Figure 7: Support for minimum age for presidential candidate | by demographic group | Uganda | 2019

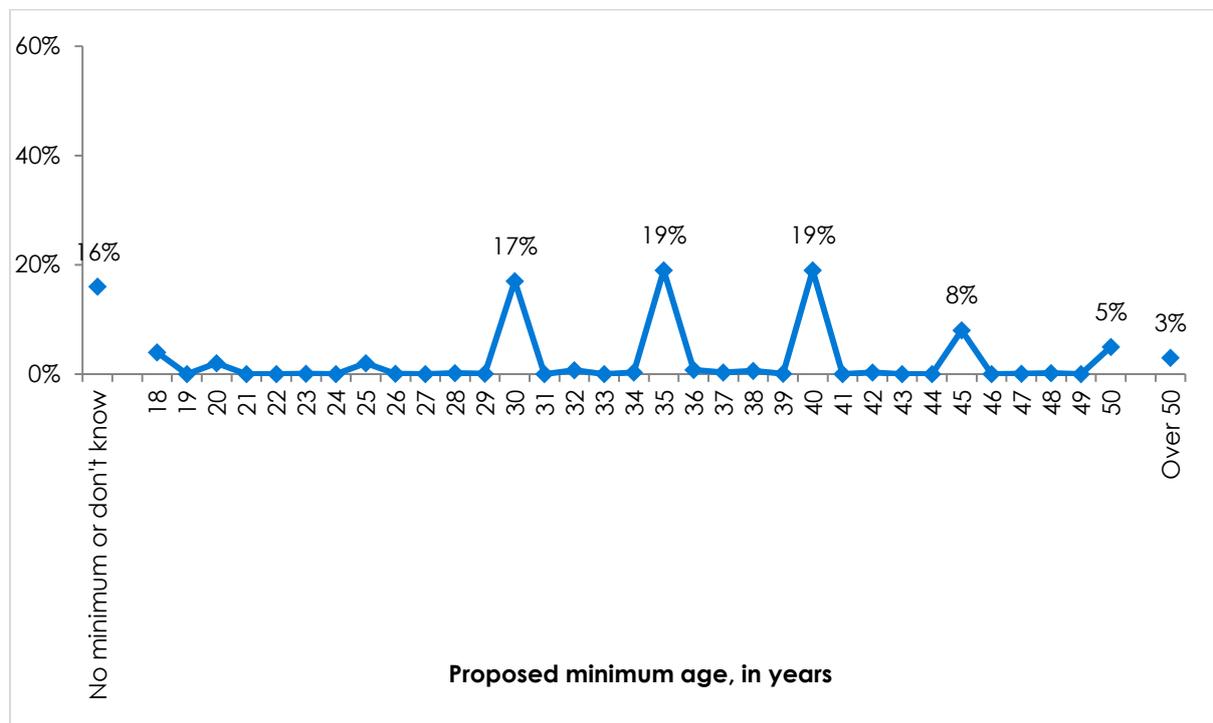


Respondents were asked: Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president? (% who say "yes")

A majority (58%) of Ugandans think the minimum age should be set at 30 years (17%), 35 years (19%), or 40 years (19%) (Figure 8). Only 9% would set the limit below age 30 (in addition to 16% who would set no limit or who say they "don't know"), while 17% would set it above age 40.

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Figure 8: Preferred minimum age for presidential candidates | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: Should there be a minimum age for candidates for president? [If yes] What should the minimum age be? (Respondents who say "No, no minimum" are excluded from analysis)

Conclusion

Contrary to constitutional amendments enacted in 2005 and 2017, a majority of Ugandans want a presidential two-term limit and a presidential age limit to be reinstated. The most widely favoured proposals would set the lower age limit at between 30 and 40 years and the upper age limit at between 60 and 75 years.

For lawmakers, these findings point to a need for a broad-based national consensus when constitutional amendments are considered. This will help maintain confidence in a country's electoral process and political system and avoid fueling conflict.

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