

Nigerians' grim outlook points to high stakes in competitive elections

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 600 | Peter M. Lewis

Summary

Nigeria's 2023 elections – federal polls in February and state polls in March – come at a precarious time for the nation. Recurring economic recessions have arisen from turbulent petroleum markets, the COVID-19 pandemic, and unstable economic management. These economic travails are shadowed by worsening domestic insecurity aggravated by multiple insurgencies, intensifying local conflicts, and seemingly uncontrolled banditry (Igwe, 2020). Many Nigerians are appalled at the deteriorating national situation.

President Muhammadu Buhari, having served the two terms allowed by the Constitution, is not running for re-election. The ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) is backing Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the former Lagos governor, from the Southwest. The opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), which held a national majority from 1999 to 2015, is fielding former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, from the Northeast. Both are seasoned politicians from the political establishment in the Fourth Republic.

However, the field in this election cycle has been disrupted by the candidacy of Peter Obi, a former governor in the Southeast who is running an "outsider" campaign under the banner of the Labour Party (LP). Minor-party candidates typically have little traction in Nigeria, but Obi's campaign has galvanised a segment of the public, especially youth, and some observers see a path to victory for this insurgent candidacy. Apart from the large enthusiastic rallies for Obi in many parts of the country, some early domestic polls have suggested a surprising plurality in favour of this contender.

The Afrobarometer network does not conduct polling on specific candidates. However, data from the most recent survey round in Nigeria (March 2022) reflects some important shifts in the mood and affiliations of the Nigerian public. Citizens are overwhelmingly gloomy in their assessments of the country's overall direction, the national economy, their personal living conditions, and the government's performance on crime and violence, and affiliation with the two major political parties is on a rapid decline. These findings suggest a broad desire for change and a widening political field.

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. Eight rounds of surveys have been conducted in up to 39 countries since 1999. Round 9 surveys are being completed in early 2023. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

The Afrobarometer team in Nigeria, led by NOIPolls, interviewed a nationally representative, random, stratified probability sample of 1,600 adult Nigerians between 5 and 31 March 2022. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-2.5 percentage

points at a 95% confidence level. Previous standard surveys were conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2020.

Key findings

On the state of the nation:

- Nigerians are acutely pessimistic about national conditions. Nine in 10 citizens (89%) feel the country is going “in the wrong direction,” the most negative assessment in more than a decade.
- Many of these concerns are rooted in the economy. Only about one in 10 Nigerians (11%) regard the country’s economy as performing well, and the share who see their personal living conditions as bad has doubled since 2017, to 72%. Although Nigerians are inclined to hold out optimism on the economy, this is increasingly strained.

On government performance:

- Not surprisingly, worsening national conditions are reflected in downbeat views of democratic performance. Satisfaction with the way democracy is working in Nigeria has met an all-decade low (21%).
- Government performance in containing conflict and stemming crime also receives historically low levels of approval (23% and 21%, respectively).
- This negative view is mirrored in assessments of the president. At 32%, approval of presidential performance is the lowest in 10 years (across two administrations), with a stunning drop of 22 percentage points since 2020.
- Although Nigerians are discouraged with government performance, a consistently large majority prefer democracy to any other political system, and most Nigerians affirm elections as the best method for selecting and replacing leaders (Mbaegbu & Twum, 2023).

On trust in major institutions:

- Trust in the presidency has reached a nadir (27%), marking the lowest point in President Buhari’s term.
- Trust in the ruling party is also low (26%), reflecting a consistently skeptical view by the public.

On political party affiliation:

- There has been a remarkable erosion of traditional political partisanship in Nigeria. In 2015, on the cusp of that year’s pivotal election, two-thirds (67%) of Nigerians expressed attachment to a political party, and more than three-fourths of those were aligned with one of the two major parties. In 2022, six in 10 Nigerians (58%) say they do not “feel close” to any particular political party. This suggests a large pool of uncommitted voters in 2023.

On the political stance of youth:

- Declining affiliation with the major parties is especially evident among younger voters. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of voters aged 35 or younger say they have no party preference, compared with 51% of voters over age 35. Younger voters are “up for grabs,” though they could also be simply disengaged.

- In other areas, however, younger voters are largely in step with the overall national mood. We find that the specific views of youth – on most of the questions reported here – differ marginally, or not at all, from the national average.

A restive election

In the run-up to the 2023 election cycle, a new spirit of contestation in Nigeria has been driven by popular discontent. As President Buhari completes his final term in office, APC candidate Tinubu has squared off against the PDP's Abubakar. However, the choice between these establishment contenders has been disrupted by Obi's insurgent campaign under the LP banner. His candidacy has heightened the drama and uncertainty of the election. Obi's campaign, promising better governance, has the hallmarks of a crusading movement, with large crowds at rallies, effusive support from a vocal youth base, and the "Obidient" label claimed by his supporters.

Nigerians have long grappled with economic turbulence, corruption, regional polarisation, and political violence, yet the stakes of the 2023 election seem especially vital. When Buhari was first elected in 2015, defeating incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan of the long-dominant PDP, it marked a watershed in Nigeria's electoral politics. For the first time, a sitting president was replaced in an election and the opposition ousted the ruling party at the federal level.

The electoral upset of 2015 came about through converging crises and dissatisfaction with leadership (Lewis & Kew, 2015). The Boko Haram insurgency in northeastern Nigeria heightened public anxieties about domestic security as other areas of conflict and crime were growing. The abrupt decline in global oil prices in 2014 quickly reverberated through Nigeria's petroleum-reliant economy. Official corruption was perceived to be worsening and intolerable. Buhari, a retired general who had briefly led a military government in the 1980s, was regarded by many as a reform candidate who could restore some equilibrium. He was

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broadly popular in the northern states, with a reputation for integrity and an enthusiastic youth following. Many voters hoped he would stem corruption, restore some domestic security, and stabilise the economy.

For a large swath of Nigerians, these hopes have not been fulfilled. Especially during Buhari's second term, economic drift has

been shadowed by an alarming rise in crime and violence on a national scale. Along with the Boko Haram jihadist movement, a rival insurgency has grown from the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), which currently ranges over a large territory in northeastern Nigeria. Oil theft and armed activities continue to be endemic in the southern Niger Delta. Conflicts between herding groups and settled farmers in central and northern Nigeria have greatly intensified. In the face of these challenges, internal security has virtually collapsed, leaving a broad space for armed robbery, kidnapping, and other violent crimes (Nextier, 2022).

A substantial majority of Nigerians believe that politicians and the party establishment have failed to provide effective leadership or stable governance. This popular mood is clearly focused on political elites, and not on the democratic system. As reported in Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 598 (Mbaegbu & Twum, 2023), most Nigerians feel that democracy is the best type of government, and they value elections as the mechanism for choosing and replacing leaders. However, the public is deeply discouraged by the quality of governance and the direction of the country.

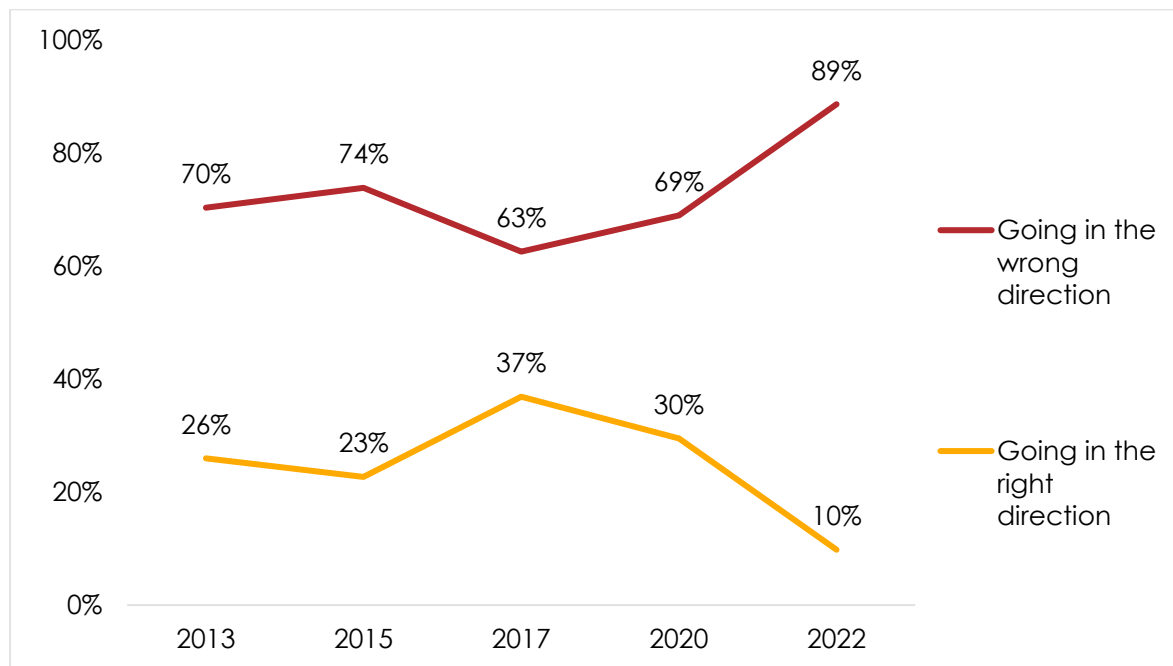
The apparent three-way presidential contest is unfolding against this background. Given the timing and focus of Afrobarometer surveys, there is no current data on the popularity of candidates or the likely outcome of the elections. But we can reflect on some dramatic developments in Nigeria's political climate: plummeting confidence in established leadership, widespread pessimism about the national prospect, and a large-scale defection (especially among youth) from alignments with the leading political parties. This potentially leaves open space for the “outsider” campaign represented by Peter Obi.

Whether these factors lead to another political turning point will only be seen in the election outcome. It is possible that the powers of incumbency – including national organisations and large “war chests” – will enable the major parties to prevail. It is also possible that the enthusiasm of “Obidients” on the streets will not channel into participation at the polls. However, it is equally conceivable that Obi's draw could provide for victory or force a presidential runoff. And even if defeated, the reform impulse could gain momentum in future elections.

The pessimistic mood

Nigerians express the most negative views of the country's conditions in more than a decade. Regarding the general direction of the country, just 10% of Nigerians feel that the county is going “in the right direction,” while an unprecedented 89% say it is on the wrong path (Figure 1).

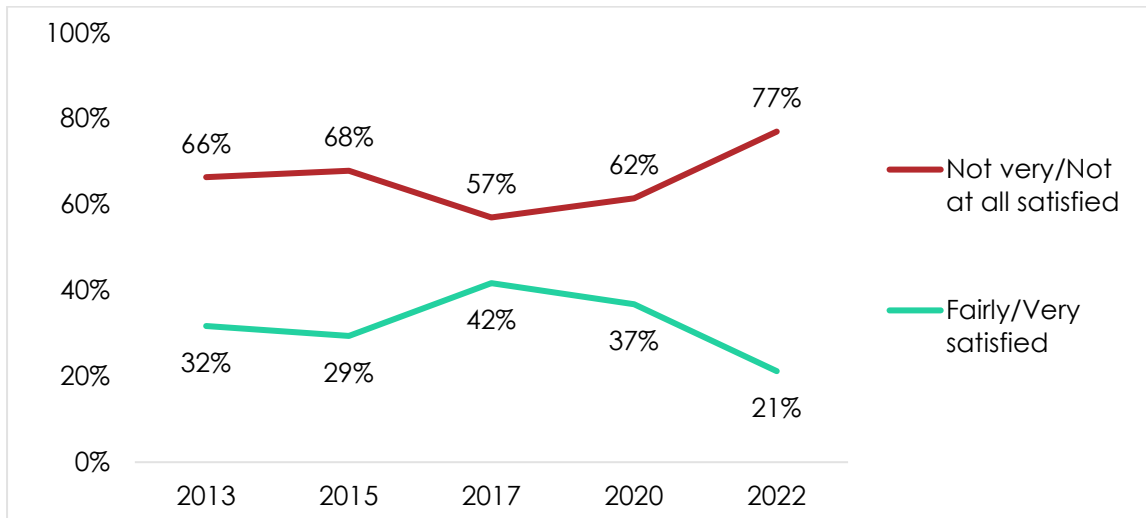
Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?*

This dour assessment is echoed in overall satisfaction with democratic performance (Figure 2). Just one in five Nigerians (21%) are satisfied with “the way democracy works,” an all-time low since Afrobarometer started its surveys in the country in 2000.

Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy | Nigeria | 2013-2022

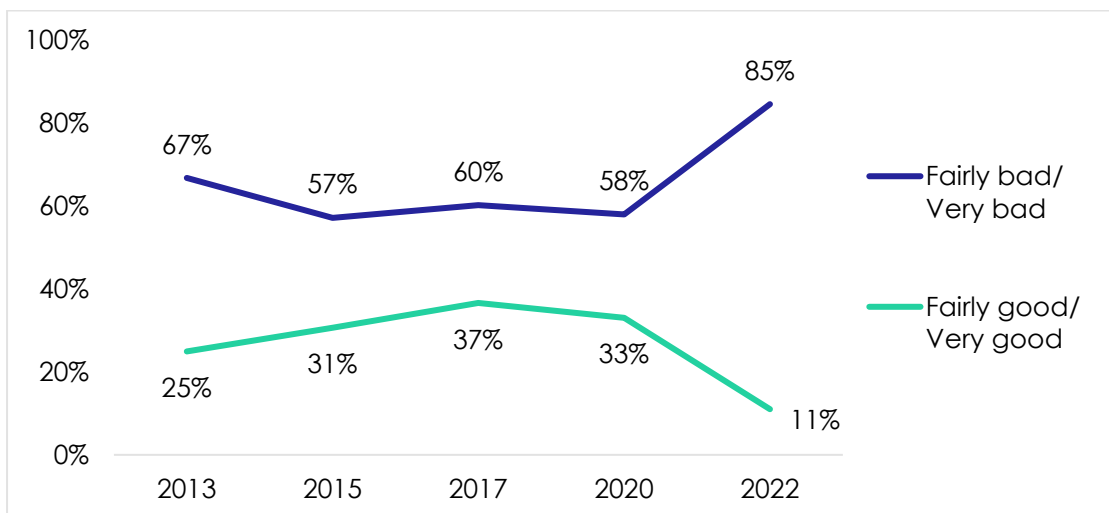


Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Nigeria?

A weak economy and deteriorating security

Two of the leading issues in the public eye are the state of the economy and the increasingly precarious security situation in the country.¹ On the economy, Nigerians offer very negative assessments of the country's general economic condition as well as of their own personal circumstances. Some 85% view the national economy as being in a bad state, the worst evaluation recorded since 2000 (Figure 3). Nigerians are inclined to remain optimistic even in hard times, but this outlook is clearly strained (Figure 4): Only about half (49%) can see the possibility of improvement over the next year, another all-time low.

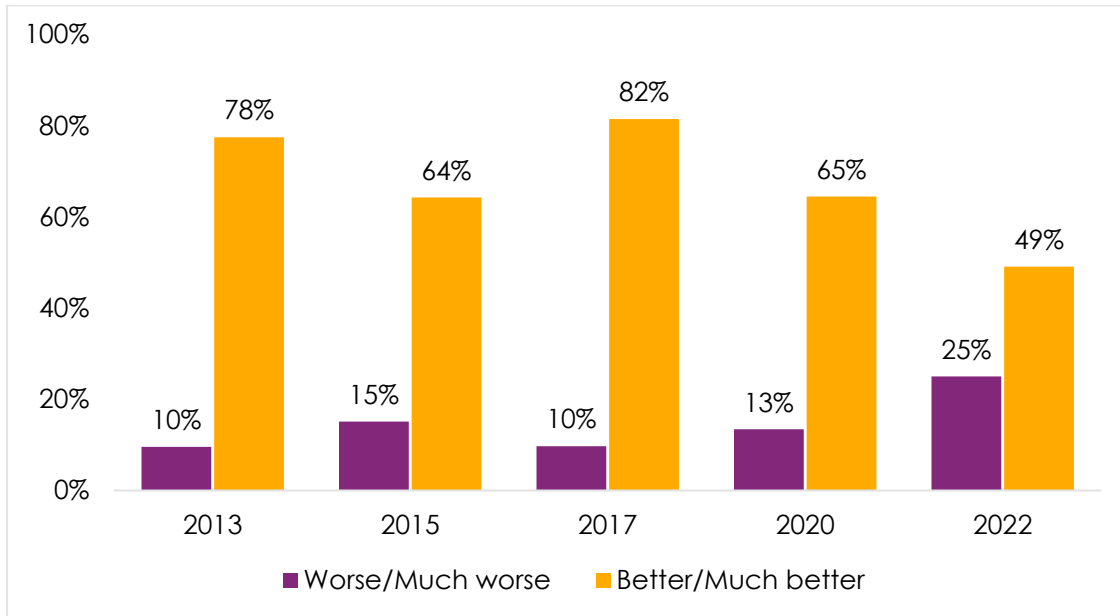
Figure 3: Country's economic condition | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?

¹ In the Round 9 Nigeria survey, respondents most often named crime and security (19%) as the leading problem facing the country, followed by management of the economy (14%). Overall, economy-related issues (economic management, unemployment, poverty, wages) totaled 34%.

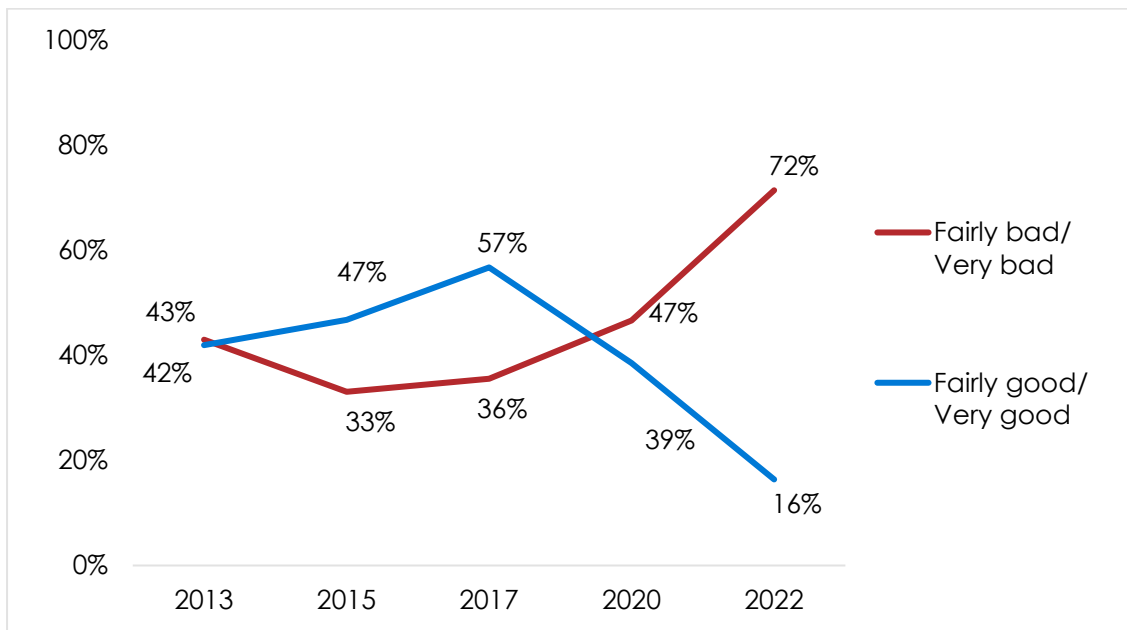
Figure 4: Country's economy in 12 months | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

These general views of economic health clearly mirror the lived experience of many Nigerians. The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and another recession have likely aggravated hardships. During Buhari's first term, 57% regarded their living conditions as relatively good, but positive assessments have since plummeted to just 16%, and 72% now see their personal conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad" (Figure 5).

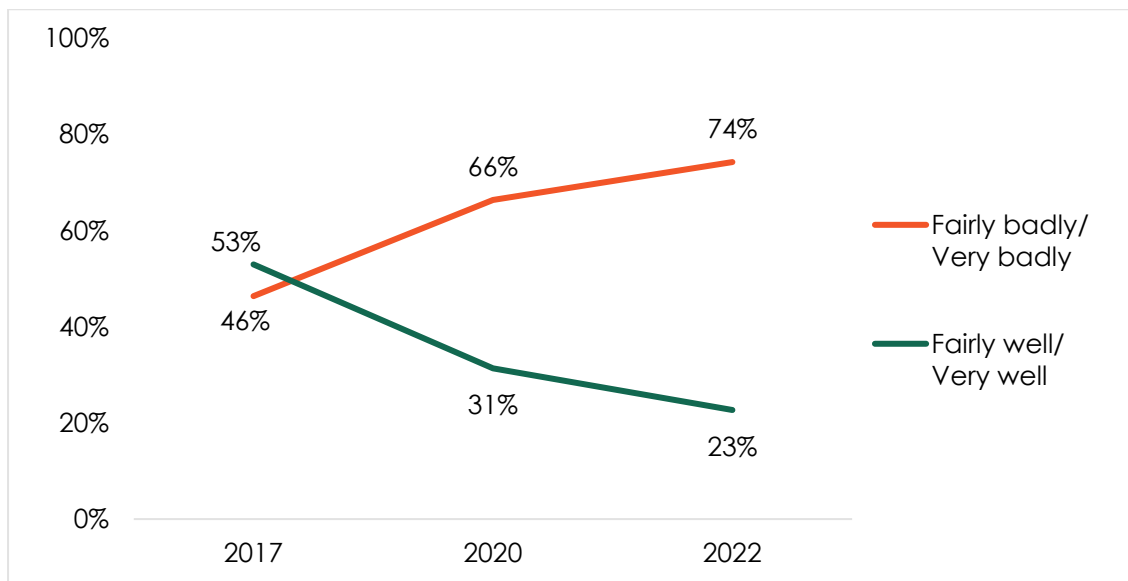
Figure 5: Personal living conditions | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?

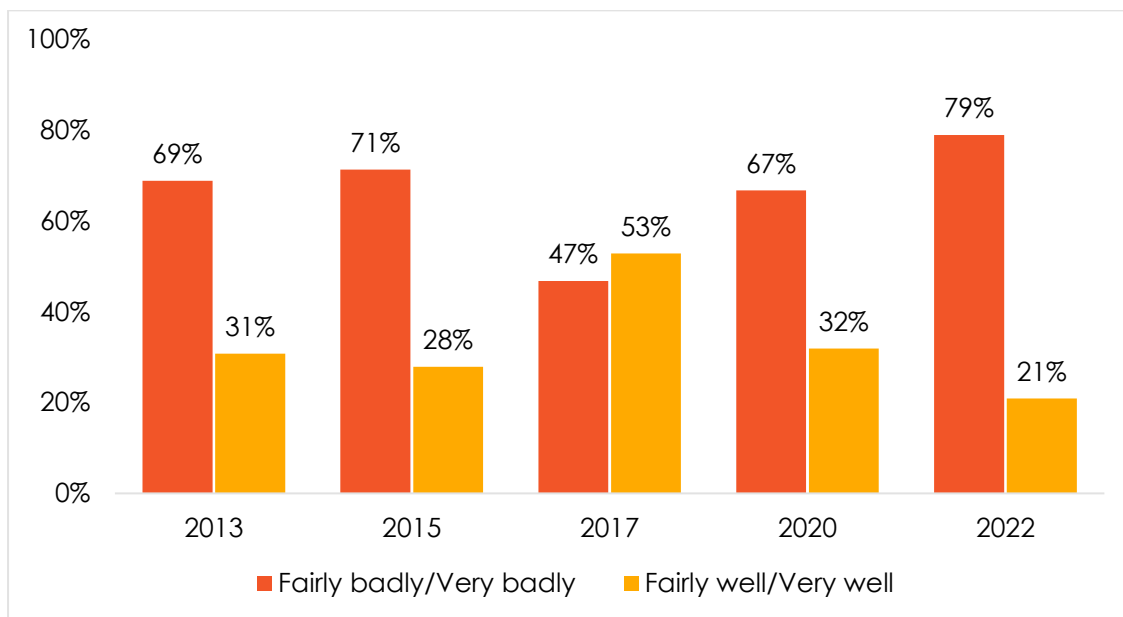
Violent conflicts throughout the country present acute problems for Nigerians, along with crime and insecurity in communities. In the last few years, assessments of government performance in these areas have declined sharply. About three-fourths (74%) of the public believe that the government is doing a poor job of managing violent conflict (Figure 6), a sharp reversal of the balanced assessments recorded in 2017. Regarding crime, just one in five Nigerians (21%) believe the government is doing relatively well at enforcing community security (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Government performance on preventing or resolving violent conflict
 | Nigeria | 2017-2022



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters: Preventing or resolving violent conflict?

Figure 7: Government performance on reducing crime | Nigeria | 2013-2022

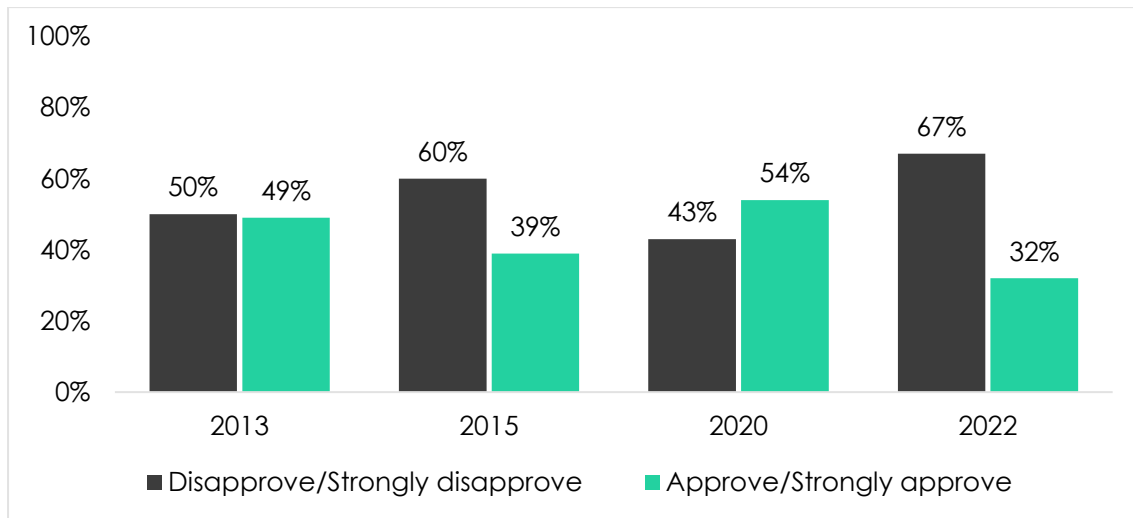


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters: Reducing crime?

Critical views of leadership and political parties

With the public holding such negative views of national conditions and government performance, it is not surprising that many citizens are critical of the president. Approval ratings of presidential performance have dropped sharply, showing a decline of 22 percentage points just since 2020. In the most recent survey, presidential approval is “underwater” by 35 points (Figure 8).

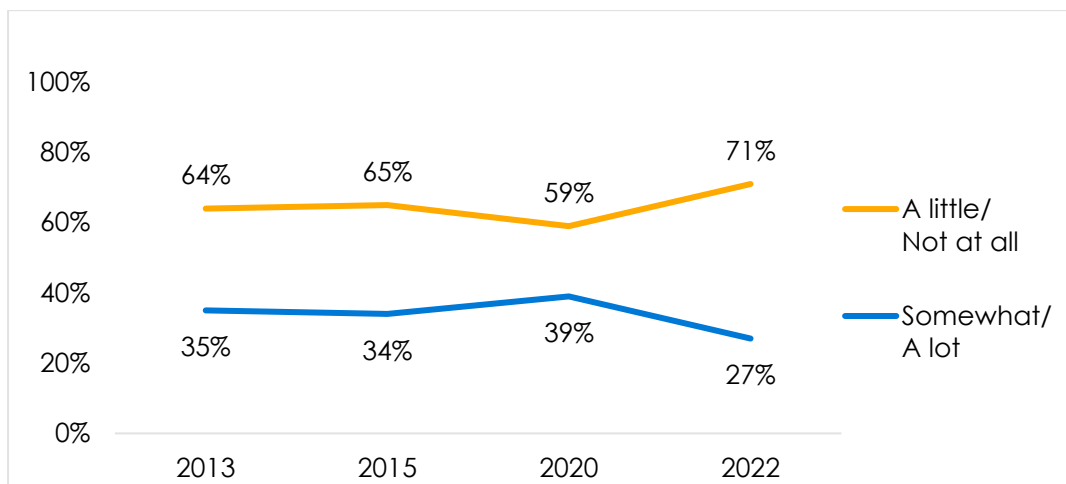
Figure 8: Assessments of presidential performance | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months: The president?

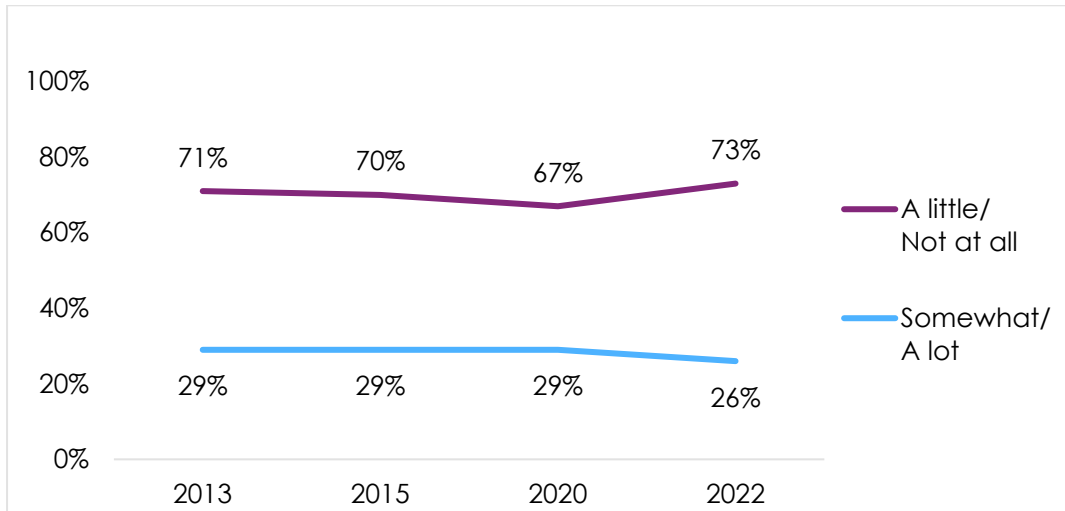
Discouraged perceptions of leadership performance are echoed in low levels of trust. Little more than a quarter (27%) of Nigerians say they trust the president “somewhat” or “a lot,” a decline of 12 percentage points since 2020 (Figure 9). Trust in the ruling APC party has remained consistently low, currently standing at just 26% (Figure 10). It should be noted that similarly low levels of institutional trust were expressed during the previous administration, when the PDP held power.

Figure 9: Trust in the president | Nigeria | 2013-2022



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following: The president?

Figure 10: Trust in the ruling party | Nigeria | 2013-2022



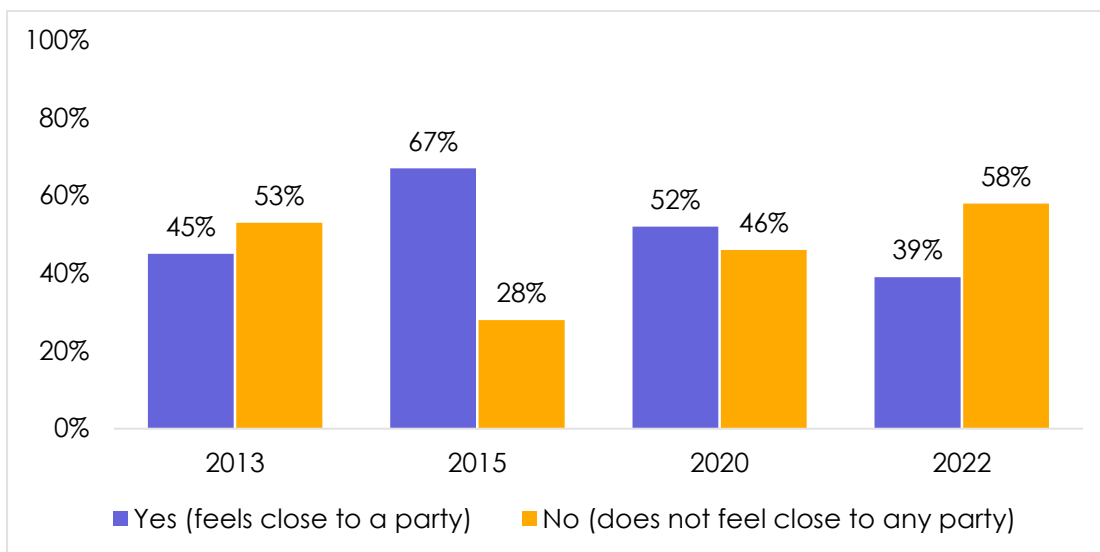
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following: The ruling party?

Declining party affiliation

Recent surveys indicate a rapidly declining attachment to the major establishment political parties, the APC and the PDP. Afrobarometer surveys regularly ask citizens whether they “feel close to any particular political party.” Among those answering “Yes,” more than three-quarters go on to name one of the two leading parties as their affiliation.

Responses to the affiliation question have shifted dramatically during the current administration. On the eve of the watershed 2015 election, two-thirds of Nigerians said they felt close to a political party, a level unmatched in the Fourth Republic. This reflected high levels of attachment to the new (then-opposition) APC party as well as the then-incumbent PDP. But self-reported affiliation with a political party has since fallen by 28 percentage points, and currently fewer than four in 10 Nigerians (39%) express a commitment to these political forces (Figure 11).

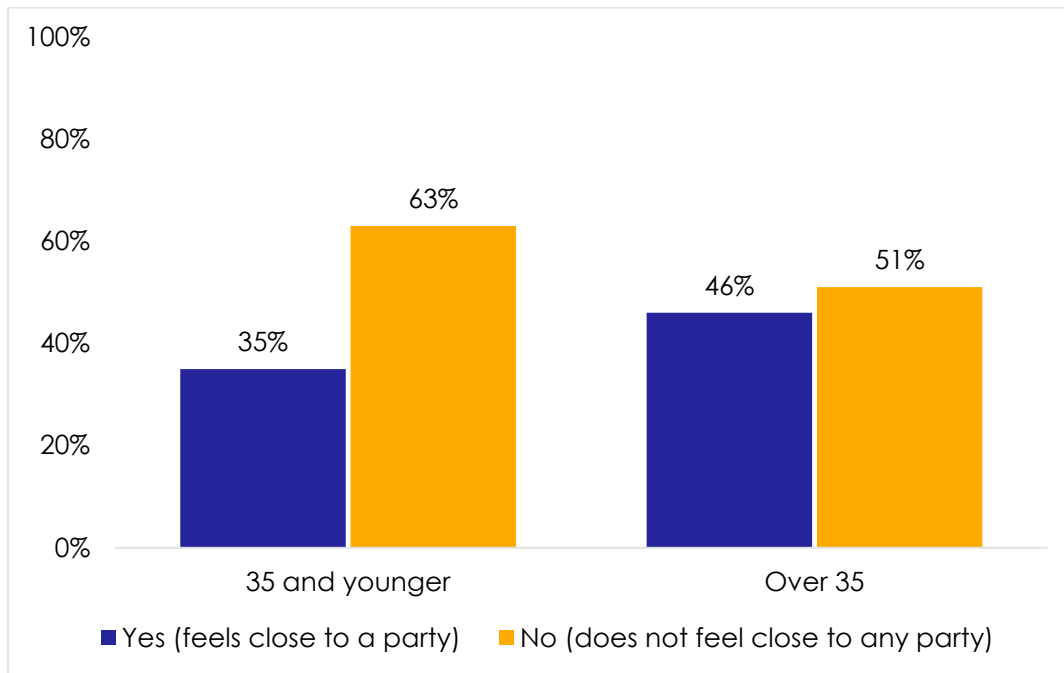
Figure 11: Political party affiliation | Nigeria | 2013-2022



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

The decline of party affiliation is even more pronounced among younger citizens: Little more than a third (35%) of 18- to 35-year-olds feel close to a party (Figure 12). Among respondents over age 35, nearly half (46%) express an affiliation. The most recent survey was in early 2022, prior to Obi's candidacy, when the Labour Party was seen as a small regional party with only a few elected officials. The Round 9 survey reflects a substantial distancing of voters from the political party establishment prior to election season.

Figure 12: Party affiliation | by age group | Nigeria | 2022



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

A new juncture?

At this writing there is a great deal of uncertainty and expectation surrounding Nigeria's 2023 elections. Different tracking polls and state-level analyses of party strength offer various perspectives on the possible outcome (Adekaiyaoja, 2023). Recent surveys by Afrobarometer, covering a nationally representative random sample of Nigerians, help to understand the current mood of voters and the associations of the voting public. A large majority of Nigerians are discouraged by national problems and concerned about their own livelihoods and security. While the public is not disillusioned by the democratic system, many people are downbeat about political leaders and the party establishment. A substantial number of voters, especially among the youngest cohorts, do not feel close to either of the traditionally dominant parties.

This reveals a broad desire for change and a widening political field. The mood is reflected in the electricity about the new "third force" candidate. It remains to be seen whether this will translate to another pivotal election that will upset the dominant political equilibrium. It is conceivable that the Labour Party could achieve a first-round victory, though many observers are skeptical. More likely possibilities include a first-round win for one of the leading parties, a runoff in which the insurgent candidate gains an advantage, or a second-round win for a dominant party. Enthusiasm on the streets translated to a big win for Buhari/APC in 2015, but the current groundswell can only yield results if voters get to the polls. The Independent National Electoral Commission has reported unprecedented voter registration,

with a voters' roll of nearly 93.5 million. About 40% of those registered are under age 35, a large pool of potentially change-minded voters (Olurounbi & Munshi, 2023).

Regardless of the results in 2023, the spirit of change may have lasting effects in subsequent elections and social movements. Nigeria seems to be at an inflection point that could reshape the political landscape in the years to come.

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