



Malawians see declining quality of elections, express little trust in the electoral commission

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 341 | Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

Last May, Malawians went to the polls for their sixth national election since the country returned to multiparty democracy in 1994. The outcome was the most disputed election result in their history, marked by legal challenges, six months of court hearings covered live on leading radio stations, and an unprecedented series of public demonstrations led by the civil-society Human Rights Defenders Coalition demanding the resignation of commissioners of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) (Sabola, 2019; Nyondo, 2019; Chiuta, 2019).

Nine months later, public debate over the presidential contest rages on, fueled anew by a Constitutional Court ruling this week striking down the MEC's declaration that President Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) won re-election with 38.57% of the vote. His closest challengers, Lazarus Chakwera of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP, 35.41%) and Saulos Chilima of the United Transformation Movement (UTM, 20.24%), had asked the court to annul the electoral results, claiming they were rigged.

Findings of a new national survey by Afrobarometer suggest that a majority of Malawians share serious concerns about the 2019 election. As of late last year, only a minority said the election was generally free and fair, and citizens overwhelmingly said it was worse in quality than previous elections.

In line with research showing that election quality is often assessed through partisan lenses – with the winners inclined to applaud and the losing side to condemn (Cantú & García-Ponce, 2015) – evaluations in Malawi differed sharply by respondents' political-party affiliation. But their assessments went beyond blind party loyalties, as even DPP supporters were more likely to see election quality as deteriorating than as improving.

Among concerns about various aspects of the electoral process, the major shortcoming cited by a majority of respondents was a faulty declaration of results by the MEC, which was widely perceived as lacking impartiality and trustworthiness.

In line with the argument that voters' views of electoral processes and outcomes shape their support for political systems (Esaiasson, 2011), support for elections as the best method for choosing Malawi's leaders was at its lowest point ever recorded.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans' experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are being conducted in 2019/2020. 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 November and December 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 Malawi in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

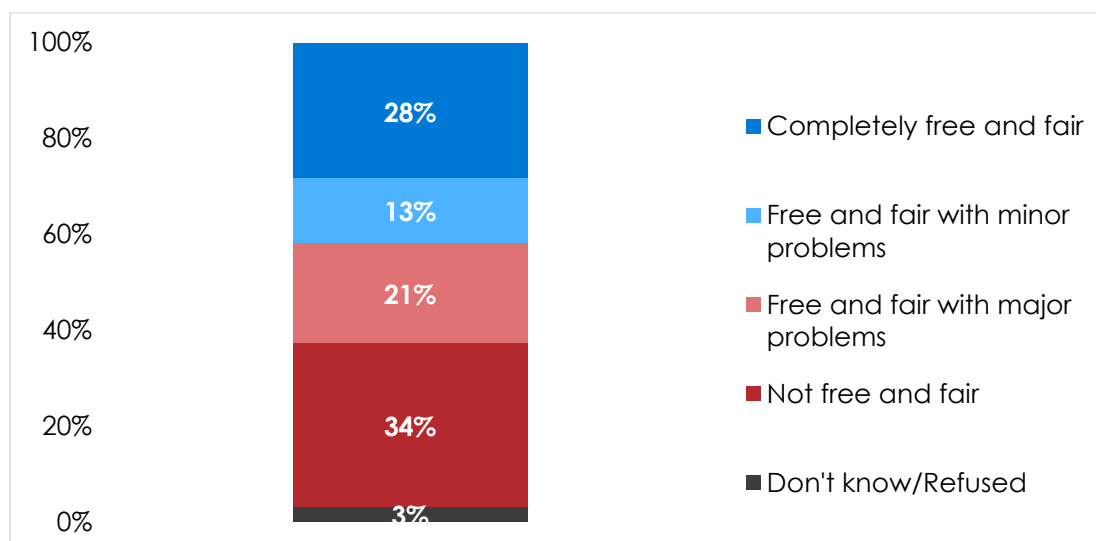
Key findings

- As of late 2019, a majority (55%) of Malawians said the May 2019 election fell short of being free and fair. Among supporters of the political parties of the major presidential challengers, more than three-fourths said the election was “not free and fair” or had “major problems.”
- Almost three-fourths (73%) of Malawians said the 2019 election was worse in quality than previous elections. Even among supporters of the ruling DPP, more saw a decline in election quality than an improvement (50% vs. 41%).
- Looking at the electoral process, about three out of 10 Malawians expressed concerns about media fairness, fear of political intimidation or violence, and ballot secrecy. Smaller proportions reported irregularities such as voters who cast multiple ballots and interference by security agents. But a majority (57%) pointed to the MEC's declaration of the election results as faulty.
- Only four in 10 Malawians (40%) saw the MEC as impartial, and only one in three (34%) said they trust the commission “somewhat” or “a lot.” Citizens' views differed sharply by political-party affiliation, but overall, the MEC ranked last among key public institutions on both of these indicators.
- Popular support for elections as the best way to choose leaders was at its lowest level (55%) since Afrobarometer began tracking this indicator.

Quality of 2019 election

To a majority (55%) of Malawians, the quality of the 2019 election was questionable. One in three respondents (34%) said the election was “not free and fair,” while an additional 21% said it was “free and fair with major problems.” Just four in 10 (41%) thought the election was either “completely free and fair” or suffered only from “minor problems” (Figure 1).

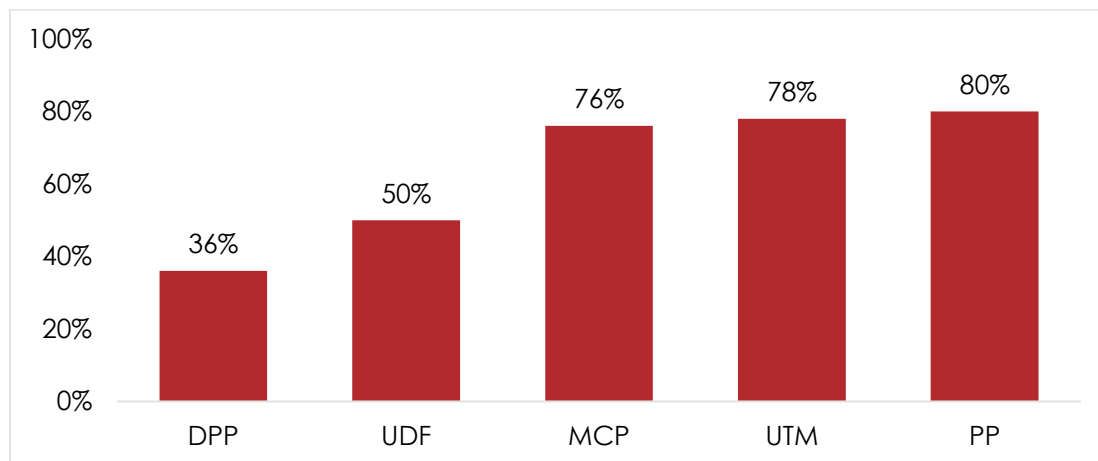
Figure 1: Freeness and fairness of 2019 election | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2019?

When disaggregated by political-party affiliation,¹ the results show a clear divide between supporters of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), whose candidate was declared the election winner, and those of opposition parties. More than three-fourths of adherents of the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) (76%), United Transformation Movement (UTM) (78%), and Peoples Party (PP) (80%) said the election was not free and fair or had major flaws. Fewer than half as many DPP supporters (36%) said the election fell short of standards – though that still represents a substantial number of critics even on the winning side (Figure 2).

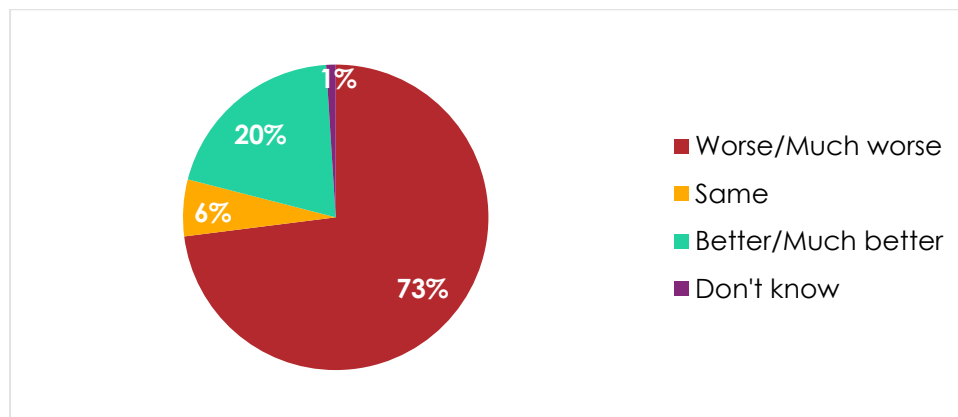
Figure 2: 2019 election less than free and fair | by party affiliation | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2019? (% who said “not free and fair” or “free and fair with major problems”)

Asked to compare the 2019 election to previous electoral contests, almost three-fourths (73%) of Malawians said the 2019 election was worse in quality, including a majority (54%) who considered it “much worse.” Only one in five (20%) said it was better than previous elections (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Quality of 2019 election compared to previous ones | Malawi | 2019

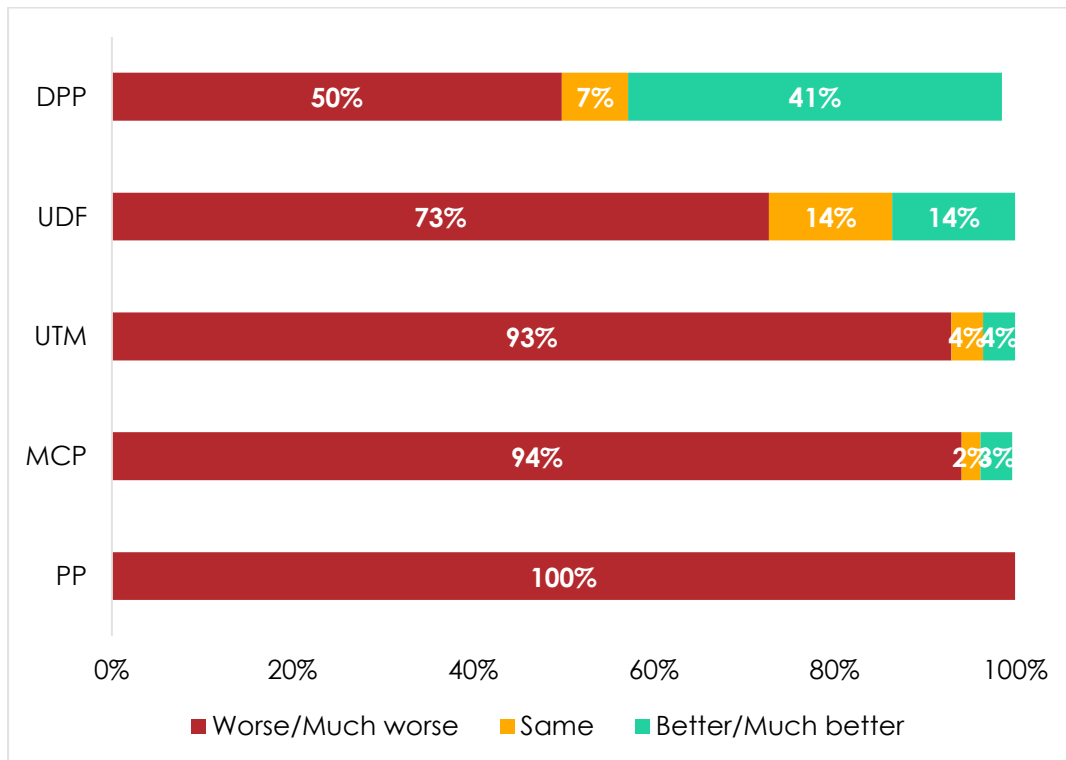


Respondents were asked: Compared with previous elections in Malawi that you are aware of, would you say that the quality of the May 2019 tri-partite elections was better, the same, or worse?

¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

Again, these assessments were sharply divided by party lines. More than nine out of 10 opposition supporters said the election was worse, compared to five out of 10 (50%) of their DPP counterparts. Notably, even among DPP supporters, more thought election quality declined than thought it improved (41%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Quality of 2019 election compared to previous ones | by party affiliation
 | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Compared with previous elections in Malawi that you are aware of, would you say that the quality of the May 2019 tri-partite elections was better, the same, or worse?

Where did the 2019 election go wrong?

Zooming in on the electoral process, survey responses showed significant concerns about the electoral environment in 2019, especially the validity of the MEC's declaration of the election results.

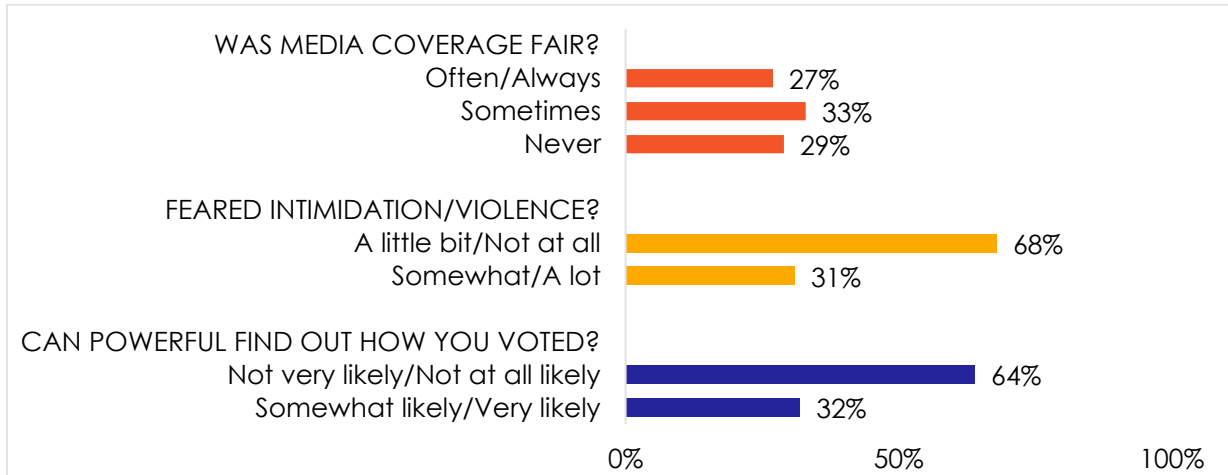
Political environment and playing field

Only about one in four Malawians (27%) said the media "often" or "always" provided fair coverage of electoral candidates. About the same proportion (29%) said this was "never" the case, while one in three (33%) said media coverage was "sometimes" fair (Figure 5).

Three in 10 (31%) said they feared ("somewhat" or "a lot") becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during the 2019 election season, while more than two-thirds said they feared this "a little bit" (15%) or "not at all" (54%).

Almost two-thirds (64%) said they believe their vote is secret, but one in three (32%) said they think it is "somewhat likely" or "very likely" that powerful people can find out how they voted.

Figure 5: Electoral environment: media fairness, freedom from intimidation/violence, ballot secrecy | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

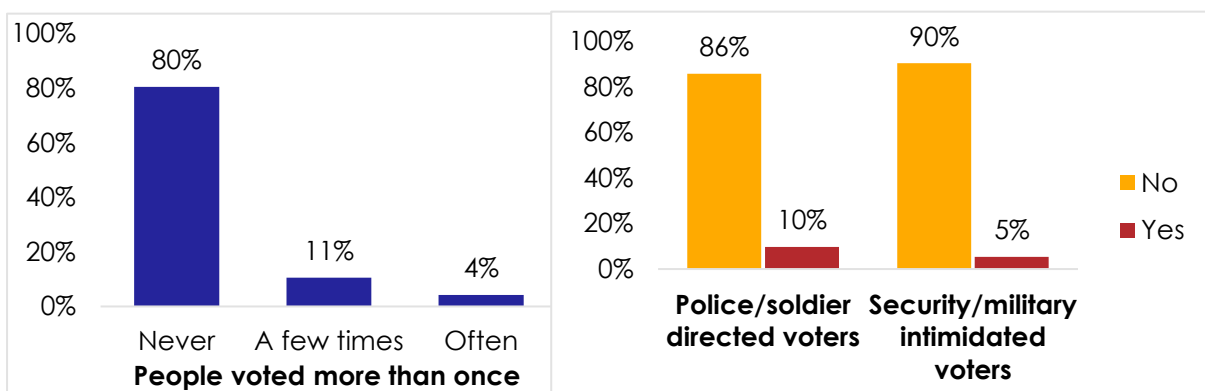
During the last national election campaign in 2019, how often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates?
 During the last national election campaign in 2019, how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?
 How likely do you think it is that powerful people can find out how you voted, even though there is supposed to be a secret ballot in this country?

Polling

Concerning Election Day, four out of five Malawians (80%) said no voters cast ballots more than once, although about one in seven respondents said this happened “a few times” (11%) or “often” (4%) (Figure 6).

Similarly, about one in 10 respondents (10%) said they saw police officers or soldiers (rather than designated election officials) guiding voters in casting their ballots, and about one in 20 (5%) said they witnessed soldiers or other security agents intimidating voters.

Figure 6: Irregularities on Election Day | Malawi | 2019



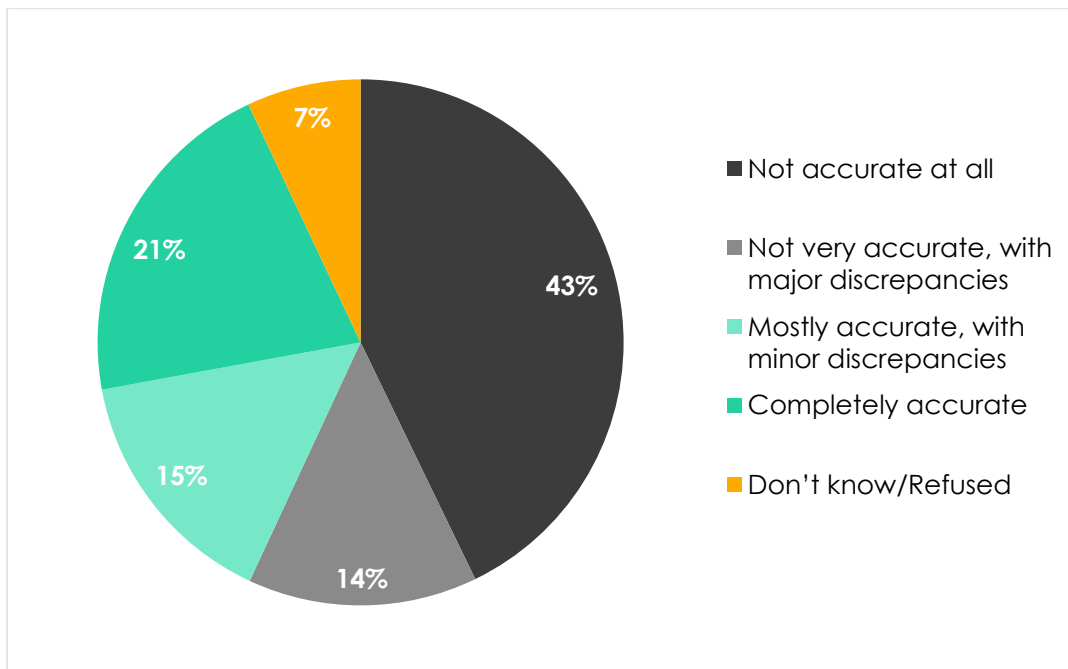
Respondents were asked:

In the last national election in 2019, how often did each of the following things happen: People voted more than once?
 During the last national election in 2019, did you witness: Police or soldiers, rather than election officials, assisting some people to cast their ballot? Anyone from the security forces or a political party trying to intimidate voters?

Declaration of results

One of the issues under dispute in the courts of law has been whether the results announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission correspond to the actual vote count and therefore the voice of the electorate. When asked about this, a majority (57%) of Malawians said they believe the announced results are not an accurate reflection of the vote count, while only 36% endorsed the declared result (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Accuracy of declaration of election results | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: With regard to the last national election in 2019, to what extent do you think the results announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission accurately reflected the actual results as counted?

Perceptions of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC)

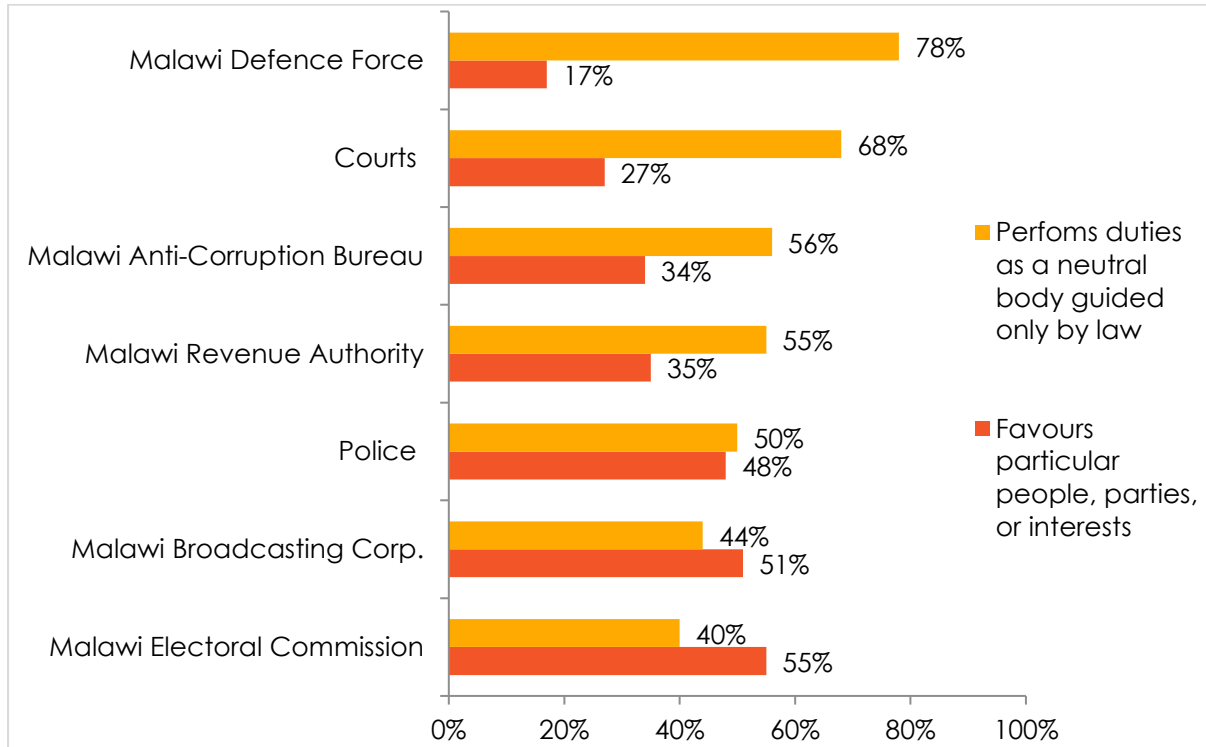
Citizens' doubts about the election were reflected in their perceptions of the MEC, which was seen as less impartial and was less trusted than other key public institutions.

Only four out of 10 Malawians (40%) said the MEC does its job "as a neutral body, guided only by law," whereas a majority (55%) said it makes decisions that "favour particular people, parties, or interests." Almost twice as many citizens saw the Malawi Defence Force as unbiased (78%), followed by the courts (68%), the Anti-Corruption Bureau (56%), and the Malawi Revenue Authority (55%) (Figure 8).

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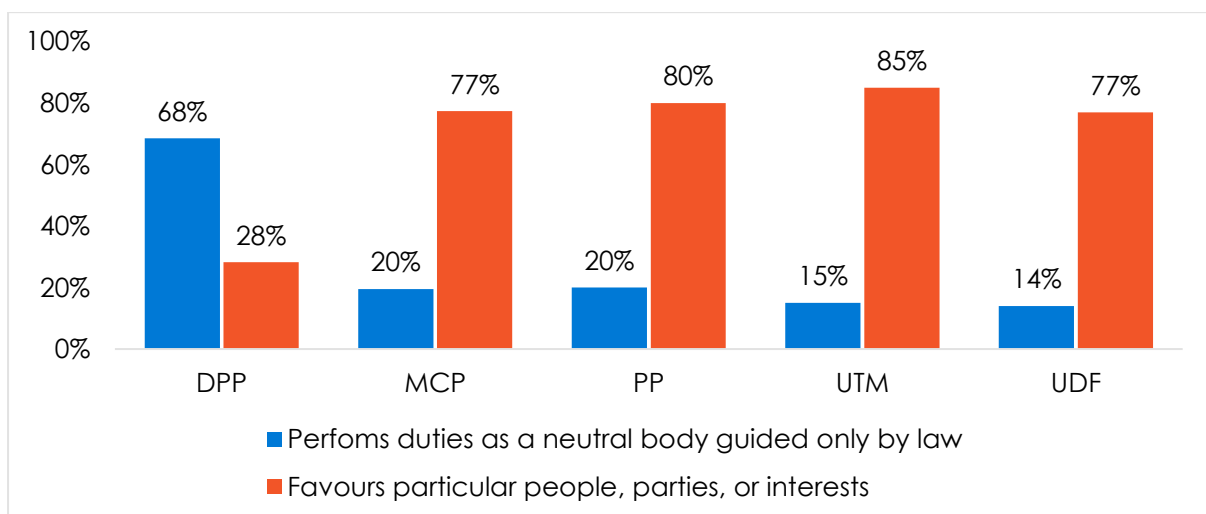
On this point, too, Malawians were sharply divided by political-party affiliation. While more than two-thirds (68%) of DPP sympathizers said the MEC is neutral, no more than one in five supporters of opposition parties agreed (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Neutrality of electoral commission and other state institutions | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: It is sometimes said that some government departments and agencies perform their duties and functions as neutral bodies, guided only by law, while others make decisions that favour particular people, parties or interests. For the following organizations, please tell me whether you think they perform their duties as a neutral body, guided only by law, or would you say they make decisions that favour particular people, parties, or interests?

Figure 9: Neutrality of electoral commission | by party affiliation | Malawi | 2019

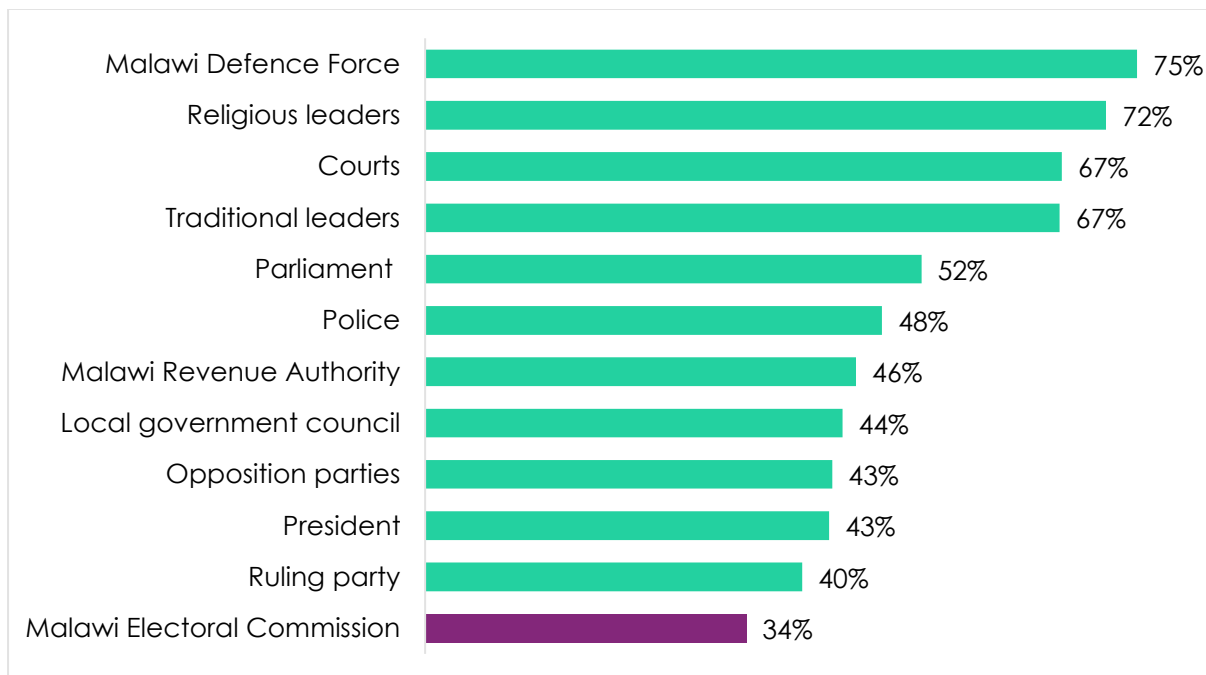


Respondents were asked: It is sometimes said that some government departments and agencies perform their duties and functions as neutral bodies, guided only by law, while others make decisions that favour particular people, parties or interests. For the following organizations, please tell me whether you think they perform their duties as a neutral body, guided only by law, or would you say they make decisions that favour particular people, parties, or interests?

Perceptions of MEC partiality were mirrored in people's trust in the commission: Only one-third (34%) of Malawians said they trust the MEC "somewhat" or "a lot." This is the lowest level of popular trust in key state institutions that were assessed (Figure 10) – significantly lower even than the trust enjoyed by ruling and opposition political parties.

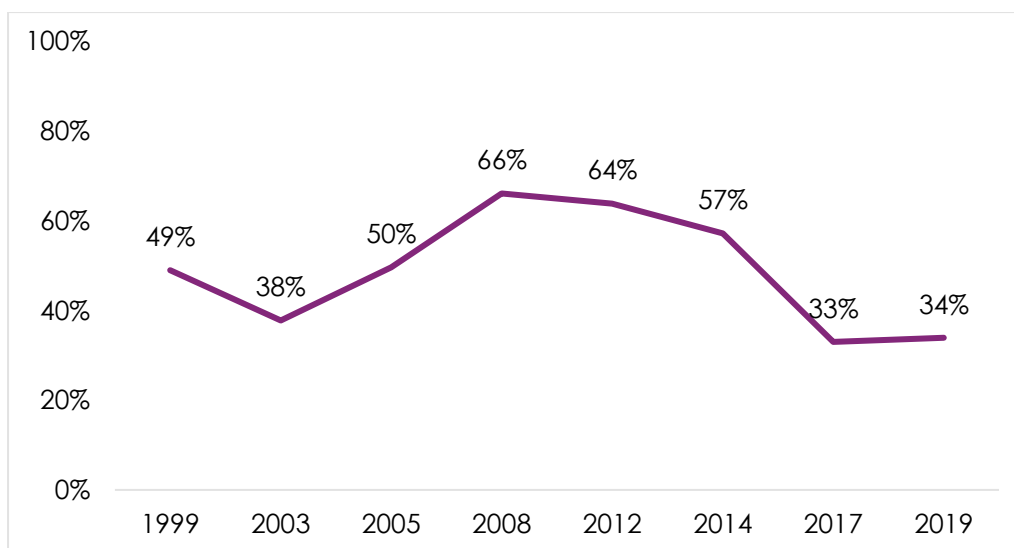
Popular trust in the MEC has declined by about half since 2008 (66%) and failed to recover from the battering it took after the disputed 2014 election (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Popular trust in the electoral commission and other state institutions
 | Malawi | 2019



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

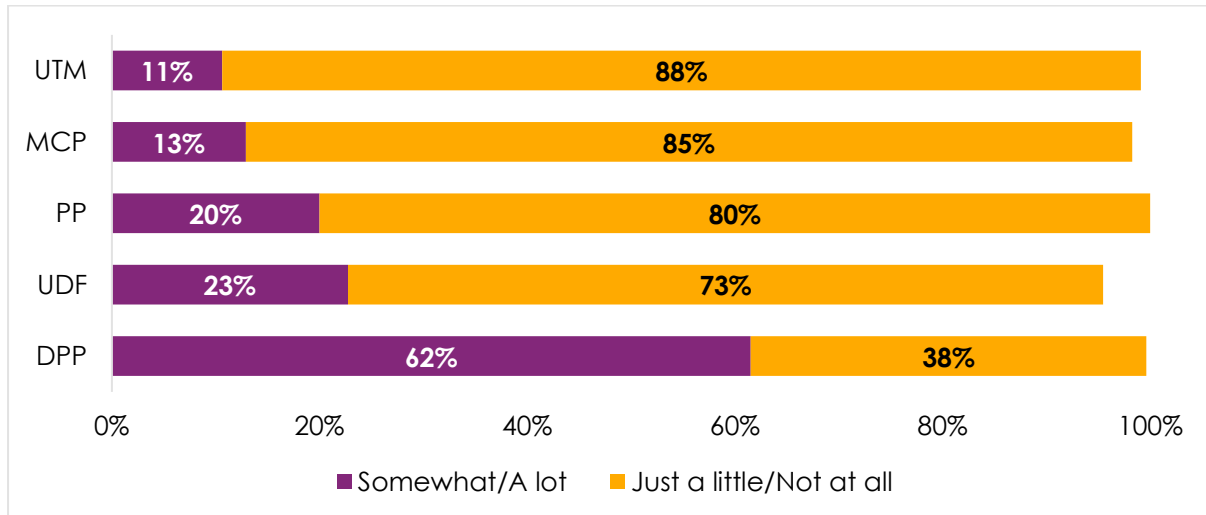
Figure 11: Trend in popular trust in the electoral commission | Malawi | 1999-2019



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

The political-party divide was evident here as well. While trust ranged from just 11% (UTM) to 23% (UDF) among opposition supporters, a majority (62%) of DPP sympathizers expressed trust in the MEC. Once more, however, it is remarkable that almost four out of 10 DPP supporters (38%) also said they trust the commission “just a little” or “not at all” (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Trust in the electoral commission | by party affiliation | Malawi | 2019



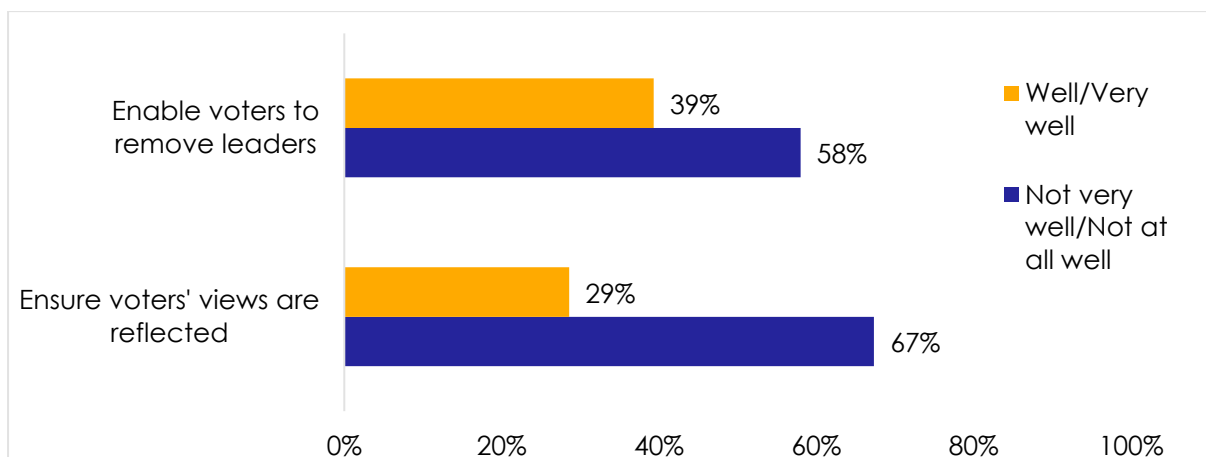
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Consequences for elections as an institution

Do citizens' evaluations of election quality and electoral institutions affect their views of elections as an institution of democracy?

When asked how well elections enable voters to remove leaders they deem unworthy of another mandate, almost six out of 10 respondents (58%) said they fulfill this function “not very well” or “not at all well” (Figure 13). Similarly, about two-thirds (67%) said elections are not ensuring that citizens' views are represented in Parliament.

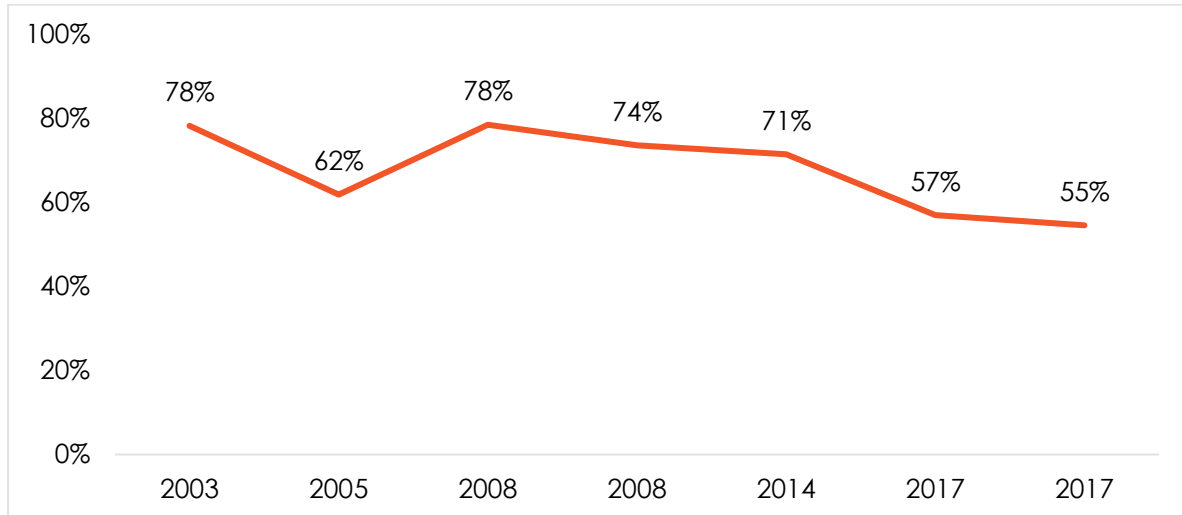
Figure 13: Elections as a tool for removing leaders and representing voters' views | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections: Ensure that representatives to Parliament reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Furthermore, support for elections as the best method of choosing leaders was at its lowest level (55%) since Afrobarometer began tracking this indicator in 2003 (Figure 14). Partisan differences were less pronounced on this question. While fewer than half of UDF (36%) and UTM (47%) adherents indicated support for elections, majorities endorsed elections among sympathizers of the MCP (52%) and PP (60%) as well as the DPP (60%) (Figure 15). This is notable because it suggests that losing elections hasn't swayed MCP and PP supporters away from supporting elections as the best way to choose the country's leaders.

Figure 14: Support for elections | Malawi | 2003-2019



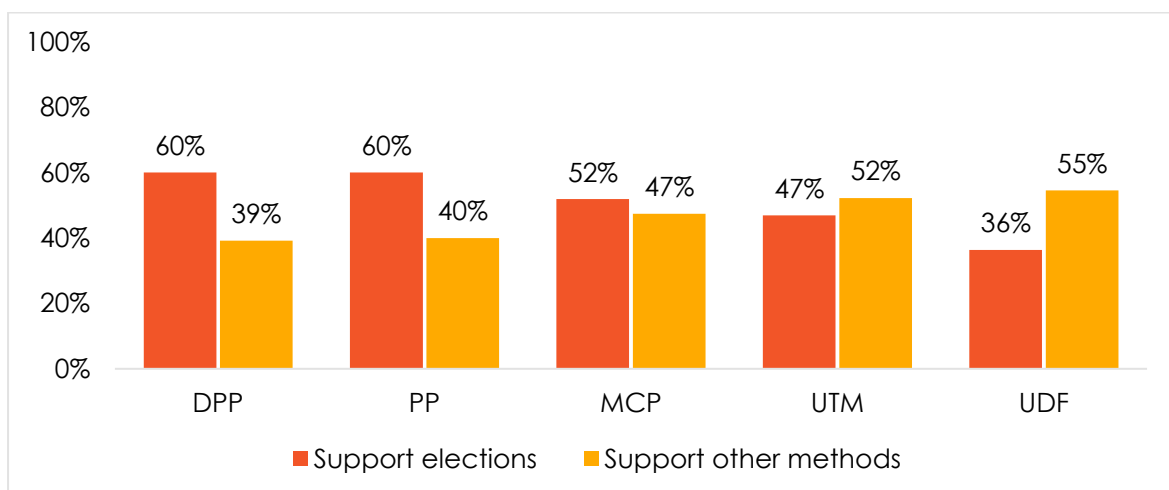
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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 "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with Statement 1)

Figure 15: Support for elections | by party affiliation | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

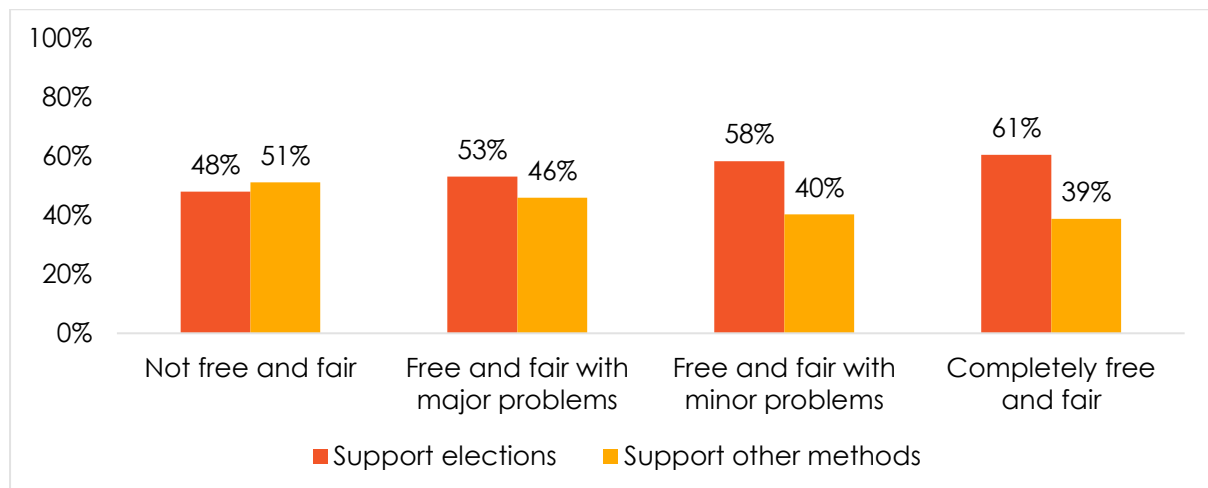
Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

(% who "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with each statement)

Not surprisingly, Malawians who considered the 2019 election generally free and fair were more likely to favour elections over other ways of choosing leaders. Among respondents who considered the election to have been “completely free and fair,” 61% supported elections in general, compared to just 48% among those who said the 2019 contest was “not free and fair” (Figure 16).

Figure 15: Support for elections | by views on election quality | Malawi | 2019



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.

On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2019?

Conclusion

As established by evidence from elsewhere, election winners tend to assess electoral integrity more positively than the losing side. This is clearly the case in Malawi. However, even among victorious ruling-party sympathizers, a significant proportion agreed with their opposition counterparts that the quality of elections has deteriorated. With regard to the 2019 election, the declaration of results was identified as a key area of concern. More broadly, the Malawi Electoral Commission was regarded as more partial and less trustworthy than any other key state institution.

Ultimately, these survey findings suggest that declining election quality may be undermining public support for elections, which is one of the pillars of democracy. This is a clear call for redemption of the electoral process and the Malawi Electoral Commission.

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