

Election fatigue? Half of Basotho want a different way to choose leaders

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 309 | Libuseng Malephane

Summary

Transparent, free, and fair elections are a cornerstone of a functioning democracy. But can there be too much of a good thing?

Lesotho has had three general elections in the past six years (in 2012, 2015, and 2017). Each failed to produce an outright winner and resulted in a coalition government. During the same period, the number of parties contesting elections grew sharply while voter turnout decreased.

Afrobarometer's most recent survey in Lesotho shows a dramatic drop in popular support for elections: Basotho who prefer "other methods" now outnumber those who think elections are the best way to choose their country's leaders.

One important factor may be the country's electoral system. After violent protests against the election results of 1998, Lesotho switched from a first-past-the-post system (FPTP, in which the candidate who receives the most votes wins) to a two-ballot mixed member proportional system (MMP, in which parliamentary seats are apportioned in accordance with the percentage of votes that a political party receives). After the 2007 election result was contested, the electoral model was again amended to a one-ballot MMP system, which remains in place. While this system is designed to ensure fair representation in line with voters' preferences, critics blame it for the inability of any one party to win power outright, resulting in coalition governments.

Just before beginning its winter recess in June, the National Assembly received a motion of no confidence in Prime Minister Thomas Thabane, raising the possibility of another early election should the motion succeed (MNN Centre for Investigative Journalism, 2019).

Here, too, Afrobarometer survey findings point to clear popular preferences: Most Basotho think coalition governments don't work very well and would favour switching back to a majoritarian electoral system.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer directs a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries.

Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples. The Afrobarometer team in Lesotho, led by Advision Lesotho, interviewed 1,200 adult Basotho in November-December 2017. 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 Lesotho in 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- Fewer than half (48%) of Basotho support elections as the best way to choose their leaders, a drop of 25 percentage points from 73% in 2014. This is the lowest level of support for elections among 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018.
- Support for multiparty competition has likewise dropped sharply, from 55% in 2014 to 36% in 2017.
- Two-thirds (66%) of Basotho want their electoral system to switch back from the current mixed member proportional system to a majoritarian system.
- After three elections that have resulted in coalition governments, three-quarters (76%) of Basotho say coalition governments are more unstable and have more difficulty getting things done than one-party governments.

Declining support for elections

Basotho have had considerable experience with elections in recent years. In general elections in 2012, 2015, and 2017, the number of political parties seeking parliamentary seats grew from 18 to 27 while voter turnout declined from 50% to 46% (Table 1).

Table 1: General elections | Lesotho | 2012-2017

Election year	Number of parties contesting elections	Number of parties winning seats	Voter turnout
2012	18	12	50.04%
2015	23	10	46.61%
2017	27	12	46.37%

Sources: Independent Electoral Commission (2018a, b) and IDEA (2019)

Citizens have had few complaints about the quality of their elections: Eight out of 10 respondents (79%) in the 2017 survey consider the 2017 election to have been free and fair, including 62% who say it was “completely free and fair.”

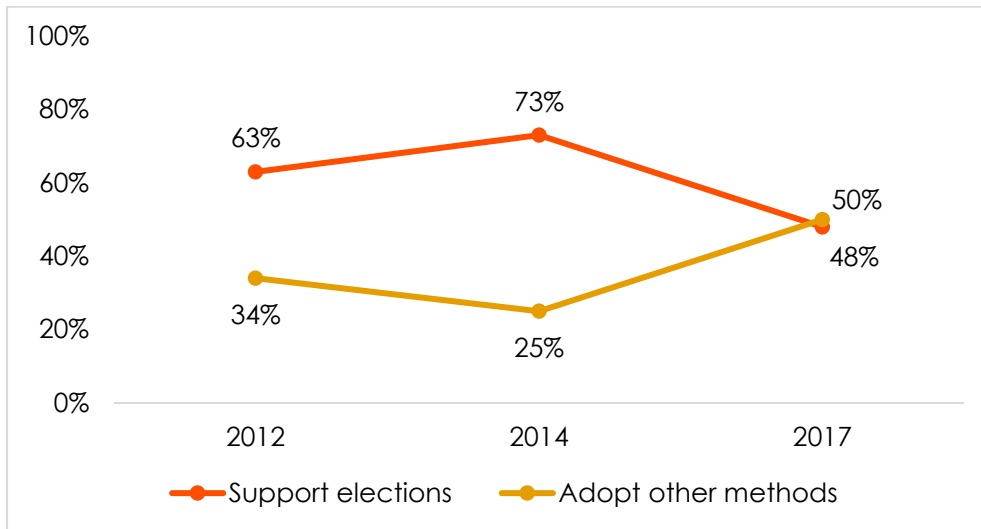
Nonetheless, the proportion of Basotho who support regular and open elections as the best way to choose leaders has decreased by 25 percentage points, from about three-fourths (73%) in 2014 to below half (48%). Fully half (50%) of citizens say they would prefer adopting “other methods” to pick their leaders (Figure 1).

Support for elections is particularly low among the youngest Basotho: 41% among those aged 18-25 years and 45% among those aged 26-35. Rural (47%) and peri-urban (42%) residents are somewhat less supportive of elections than their urban counterparts (52%). But political-party affiliation¹ makes no difference on this question: Ruling coalition party supporters (50%) are not significantly more in favour of elections than opposition party adherents (49%) (Figure 2).

Among 34 African countries that Afrobarometer surveyed in 2016/2018, Lesotho expresses the lowest level of support for elections, far below the average of 74% (Figure 3).

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?”

Figure 1: Support for elections | Lesotho | 2012-2017



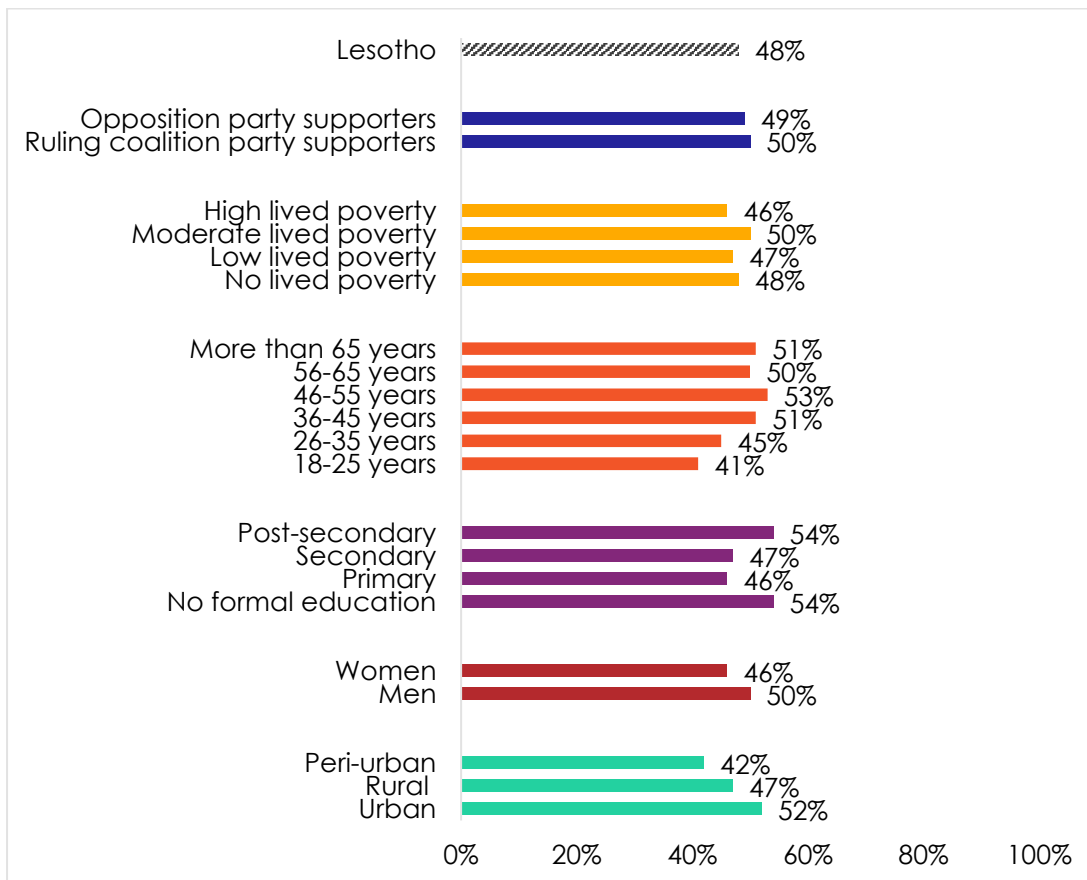
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

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.

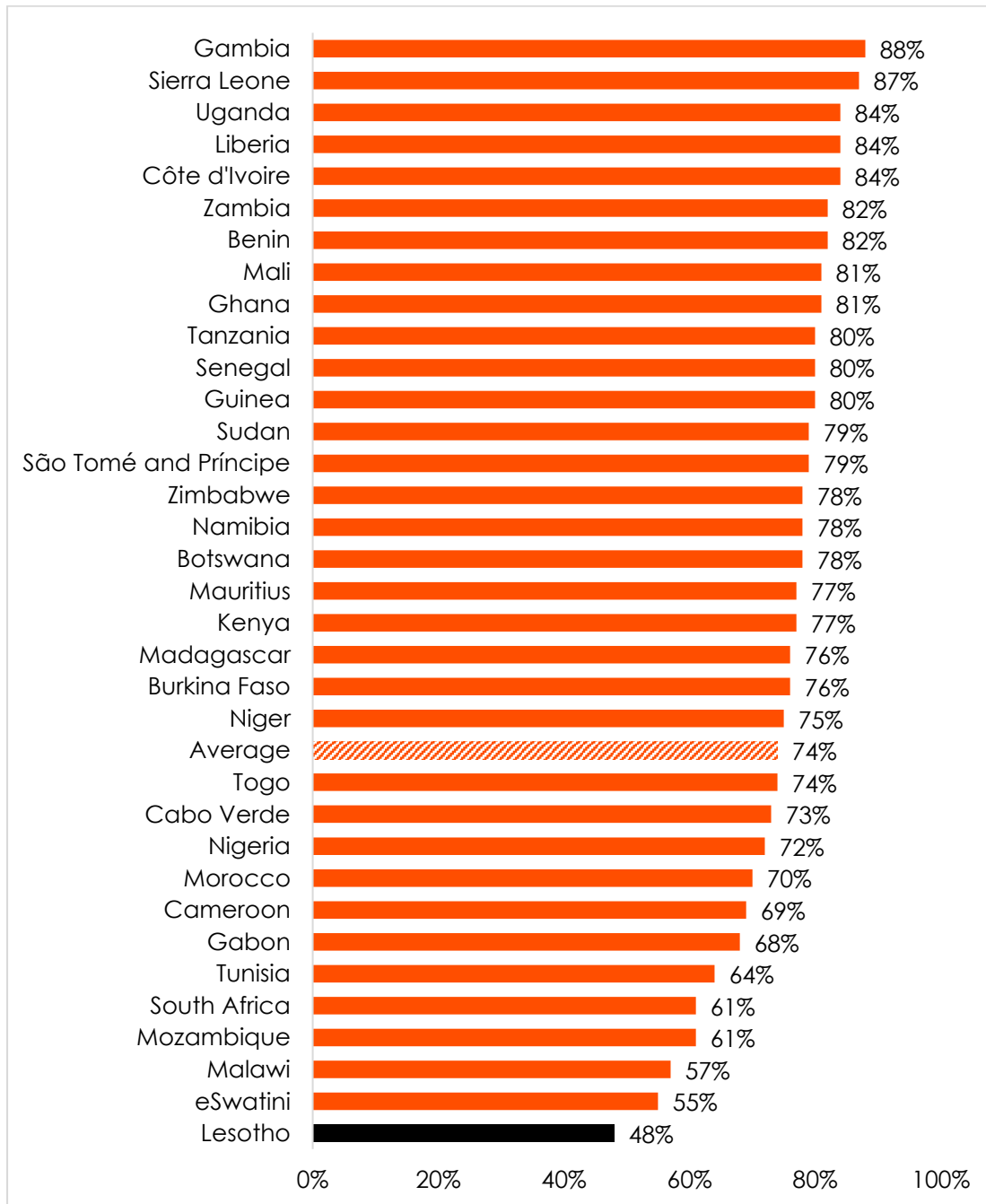
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 2: Support for elections | by socio-demographic group | Lesotho | 2017



% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that Lesotho should choose its leaders through regular, open, and honest elections

Figure 3: Support for elections | 34 countries | 2016/2018



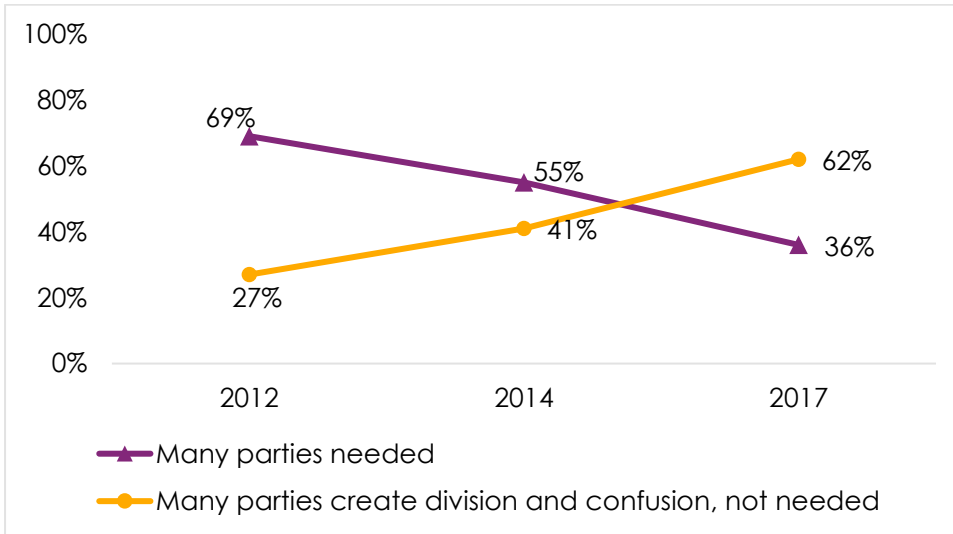
% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that their country should choose its leaders through regular, open, and honest elections

Drop in support for multiparty competition

Alongside elections, multiparty competition has also lost favour among Basotho. Only a little more than one-third (36%) of citizens now say that many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have real choices, down by about half from 69% in 2012. More than six in 10 (62%) agree – including 58% who "agree very strongly" – that many political parties create division and confusion and are not needed (Figure 4).

Again Lesotho ranks near the bottom among 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018, far below the average of 63% who support having many parties (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Views on multiparty competition | Lesotho | 2012-2017



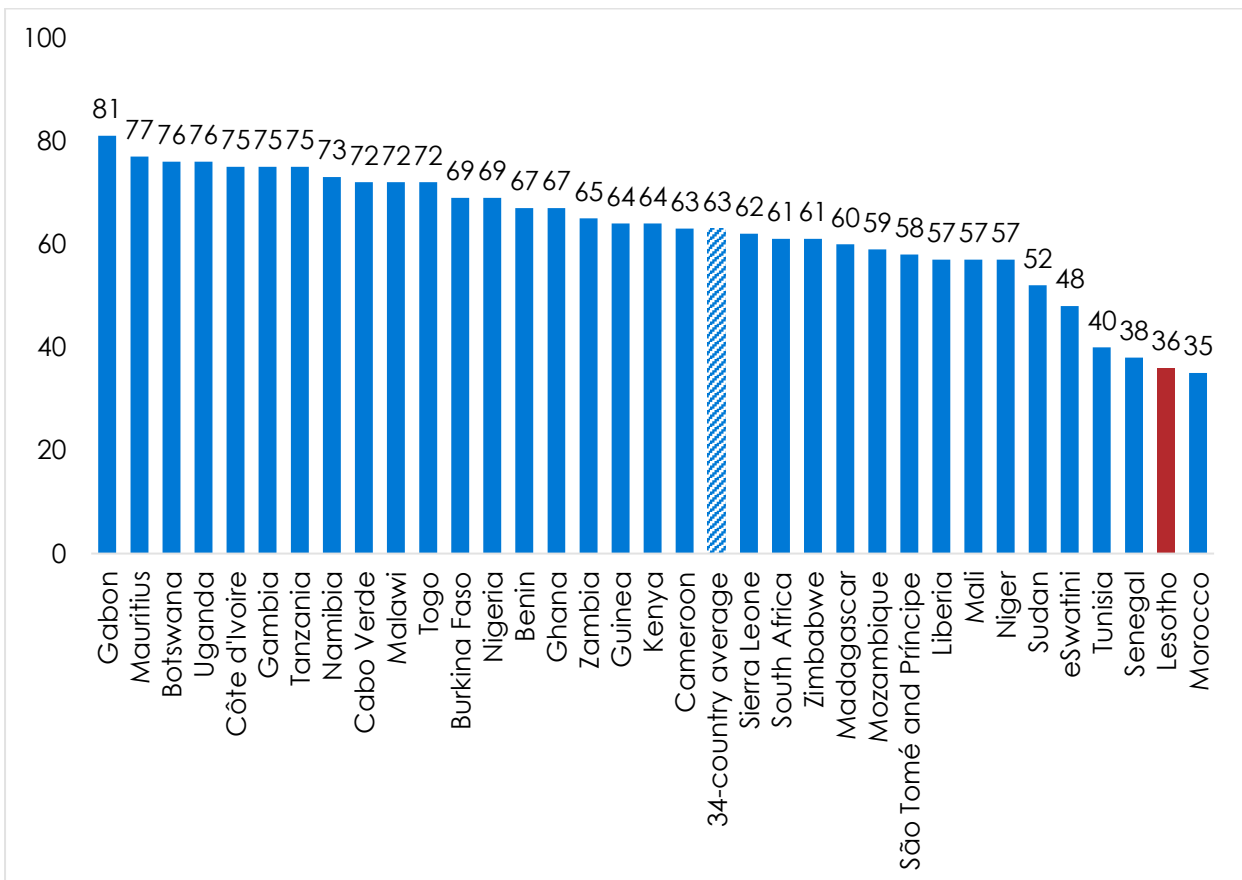
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Lesotho.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Basotho have real choices in who governs them.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 5: Support for multiparty competition (%) | 34 countries | 2016/2018



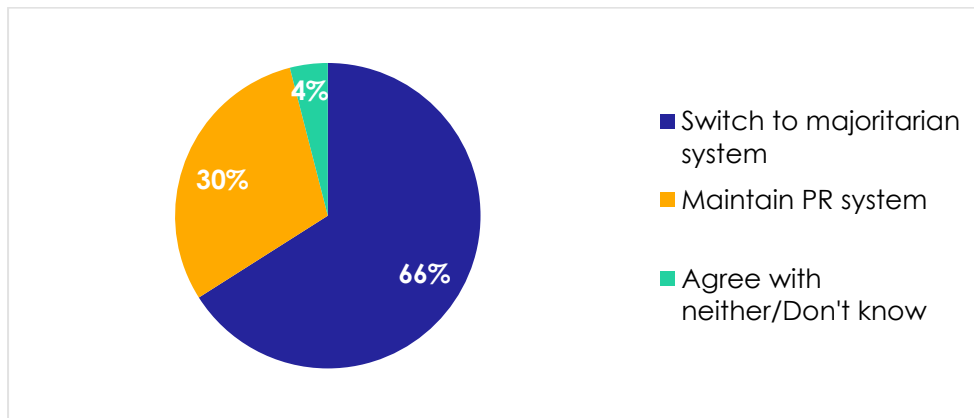
% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that many political parties are needed to make sure that Basotho have real choices in who governs them.

Electoral system and coalition government

Lesotho's experiment with the mixed member proportional (MMP) electoral system has not been a success in citizens' eyes, according to Afrobarometer survey results. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents say they would prefer to switch back to a majoritarian system, while only three in 10 (30%) like the current way of electing leaders (Figure 6).

Similarly, while a majority (62%) of Basotho see coalition governments as better than one-party governments at allowing different views to be presented, most say they function less well (62%), have more difficulty getting things done (76%), and are more unstable (76%) (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Change or maintain the electoral system? | Lesotho | 2017



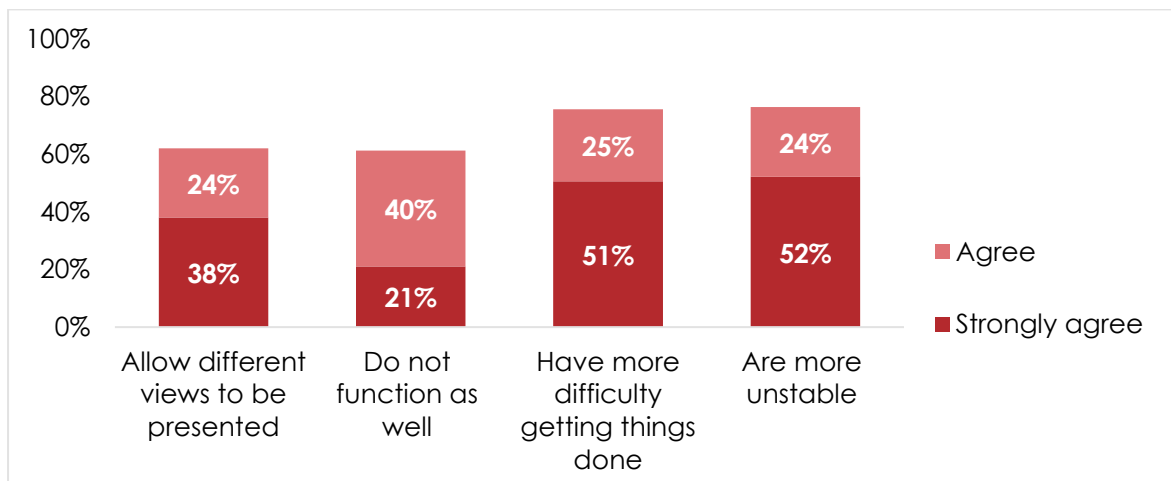
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The country's current political system based on proportional representation should be retained, even though it often produces coalition governments.

Statement 2: It would be better for the country to always have one party in power, so Lesotho should switch to a majoritarian system of government.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 7: Views on coalition governments | Lesotho | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

- Coalition governments are more effective than one-party governments in allowing different views to be presented in government.
- Coalition governments have more difficulty than one-party governments in making decisions and getting things done.
- Coalition governments cannot function just as well as one-party governments.
- Coalition governments are more unstable than one-party governments.

Conclusion

More political parties and more elections seem to have produced voter fatigue rather than stable government in Lesotho. While the introduction of the mixed member proportional electoral system was expected to improve the representation of voters in Parliament, in citizens' eyes it seems to have led to political fragmentation and made it very difficult to have one party winning the seat majority required to form a government.

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References

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 was provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 309 | 23 July 2019