



Malawians' voting intentions point to a closely contested presidential election

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 363 | Joseph J. Chunga

Summary

On 3 February 2020, the High Court of Malawi, sitting as a Constitutional Court, nullified presidential elections held in May 2019 and ordered new elections within 150 days (Republic of Malawi, 2020). On 8 May, the Supreme Court of Appeal rejected an appeal by President Peter Mutharika and the Malawi Electoral Commission (Mkandawire, L., 2020), setting the stage for fresh presidential polls by 2 July.

A highlight of both courts' decisions concerned the definition of the word "majority" in Section 80(2) of the Constitution, which stipulates the proportion of votes a candidate needs in order to be declared the winner. The courts ruled that the correct interpretation is that a presidential candidate will be declared duly elected if he or she polls at least 50%+1 of the votes cast (Chiuta, 2020). This was a departure from previous elections, in which the candidate with the most votes ("first past the post") was declared the winner.

In apparent reaction to this ruling, realizing that it is difficult for individual parties to attain the set threshold, political parties have moved to forge alliances. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has renewed its alliance with the United Democratic Front (UDF), which had fallen off before the May 2019 elections (Njalam'mano, 2020). The main opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) has formed the Tonse ("all of us") Alliance with the UTM party and seven smaller parties (Malekezo, 2020). Leaders on both sides claim they are set for a landslide victory (Chilunga, 2020; Mkandawire, M., 2020).

In this fast-moving political landscape, Afrobarometer does not have data that would allow it to predict election results. But voting intentions expressed in November-December 2019 – before the court rulings and the latest party alliances – suggest a stiff contest in the making, as the DPP and MCP were in a dead heat. One-fifth of respondents did not declare an intention to vote for a particular party, suggesting that the deciding votes may still be up for grabs.

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan 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 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 Malawi, led by the Centre for Social Research at the University of Malawi, interviewed 1,200 adult Malawians in November-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 in Malawi were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

- As of late 2019, the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and opposition Malawi Congress Party (MCP) were locked in a tie, each with 32% of Malawians saying they would vote for them in a presidential election. The UTM and United Democratic Front (UDF) trailed with 12% and 2%, respectively, while 22% of respondents did not declare a voting intention or said they would not vote.
 - The MCP had a slight edge among urban residents, and the UTM led among highly educated Malawians. The DPP and MCP dominated across all age groups.
- Malawians' voting intentions continued to show strong regional patterns. The DPP led in the Southern region (59%), followed distantly by the UTM (8%) and MCP (4%). In the Central region, the MCP predominated (55%) over the DPP (11%) and UTM (10%). The North was more heavily contested, with 46% for the MCP, 32% for the UTM, and 14% for the DPP.
- Respondents who saw the country as heading in the wrong direction were about half as likely to say they would vote for the ruling DPP (28%) as those who saw the country as headed in the right direction (58%).
- An analysis of respondents who did not declare an intention to vote for a particular party suggests that young people, less-educated people, and residents of the Southern and Central regions may be the most promising targets for parties looking to increase their vote count.

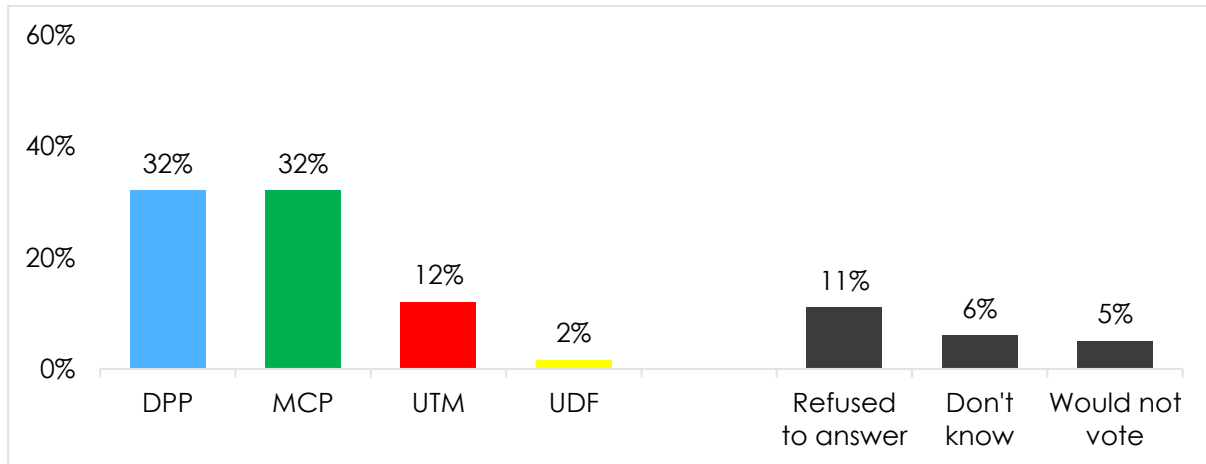
DPP and MCP in a dead heat?

In late 2019, Afrobarometer asked respondents which party's candidate they would vote for if presidential elections were held the following day. In responses, the ruling DPP and opposition MCP were tied at 32%. The UTM came a distant third (12%), followed by the UDF (2%). More than one-fifth (22%) of respondents refused to answer (11%), said they did not know how they would vote (6%), or said they would not vote (5%) (Figure 1).

With the formation of the DPP-UDF alliance and the Tonse Alliance led by the MCP and UTM, the political landscape has changed. Those forming an electoral alliance may expect voters to support the alliance candidate, but some voters may not like the alliance candidate or have some other reason to prefer to vote for another candidate or abstain, leading to a loss of votes for the alliance partners (Banerjee & Mukherjee, 2019). If we ignore these realities and assume that a) the voting intentions expressed in late 2019 above held in the actual election and b) voters supported the candidate representing the alliance to which their party belongs, the MCP-UTM alliance would poll 44% (32% MCP + 12% UTM) vs. 34% for the DPP-UDF alliance (32% DPP + 2% UDF).

However, we do not know whether voting decisions might be affected by the way alliances have been forged. Moreover, in addition to the unknown factor of those who refused or were unable to declare a voting intention, we do not know how many respondents are actually registered to vote and are likely to vote, which are key variables in projections of election outcomes.

Figure 1: Voting intentions in a presidential election | Malawi | 2019

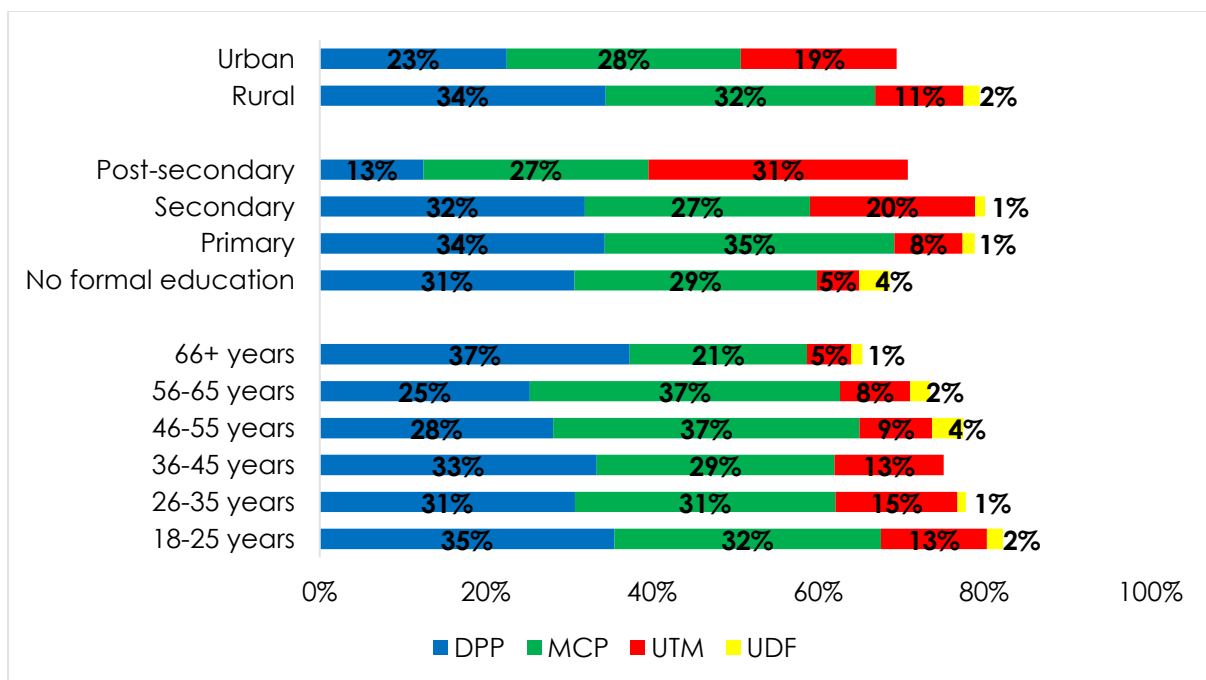


Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

While UTM and UDF campaigns have worked to appeal to young voters (Faiti, 2020; Sangala, 2018), survey results show that the MCP and DPP dominated across all age groups. Among first- and second-time voters (aged 18-25 years), 35% indicated they would vote for the DPP and 32% for the MCP, while the UTM and UDF drew only 13% and 2%, respectively (Figure 2).

The MCP would claim more urban votes than the DPP (28% vs. 23%), according to this survey, whereas the DPP and MCP were almost even in rural areas (34% vs. 32%, respectively). The UTM registered its greatest support among Malawians with a post-secondary education (31%), a group where only 13% favoured the DPP. MCP support was solid (27%-35%) across all levels of educational attainment.

Figure 2: Voting intentions in a presidential election | by socio-demographic group | Malawi | 2019

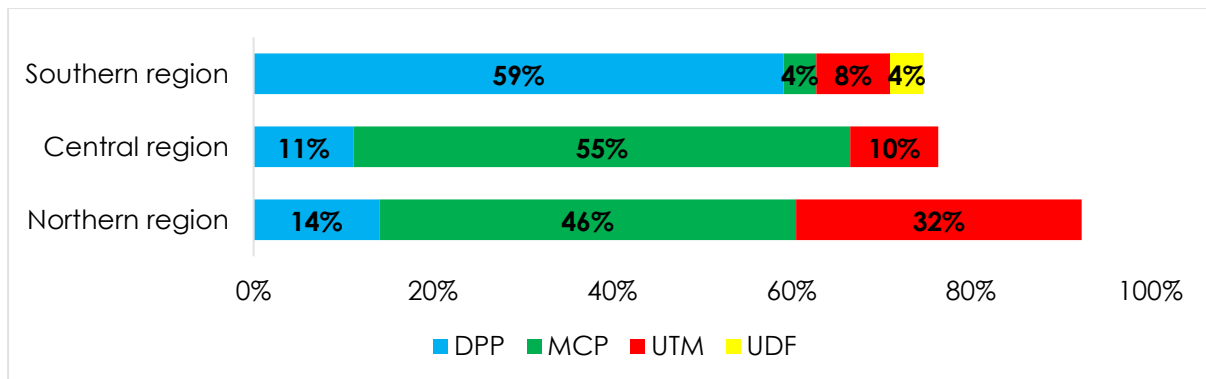


Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Regional preferences persist

One of the most documented themes in Malawi elections is that voting follows regional patterns (Ferree & Horowitz, 2010). This picture seems to persist (Figure 3). In survey responses, the DPP disproportionately controlled the Southern region (59%), with the closest contender claiming just 8% (UTM). A majority (55%) of Central region residents indicated they would vote for the MCP, while the DPP and UTM each canvassed only about one out of 10 respondents. The Northern region was more closely contested, with the MCP at 46%, UTM at 32%, and DPP at 14%.

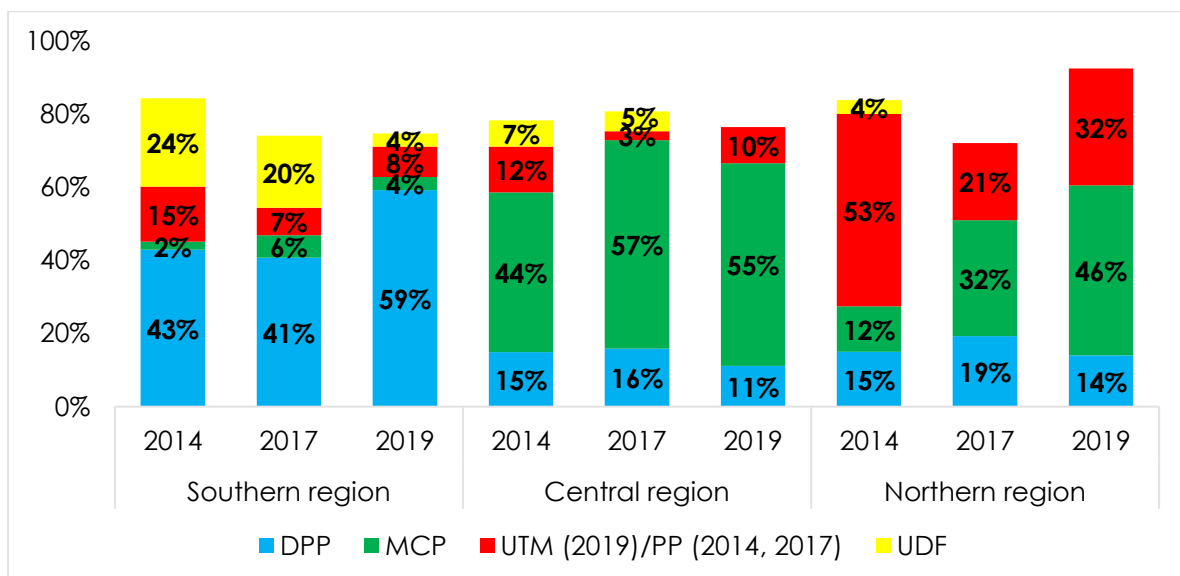
Figure 3: Voting intentions in a presidential election | by region | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Looking at trends, we see notable changes (Figure 4). First, the DPP seems to have strengthened its hold on the Southern region. In Afrobarometer surveys in 2014 and 2017, about four out of 10 respondents in the Southern region said they would vote for the DPP, compared to six out of 10 in 2019. This looks to come at the expense of the UDF, whose share in the Southern region shrank from 24% in 2014 to 4% in 2019.

Figure 4: Voting intentions for presidential candidates | by region | Malawi | 2014-2019



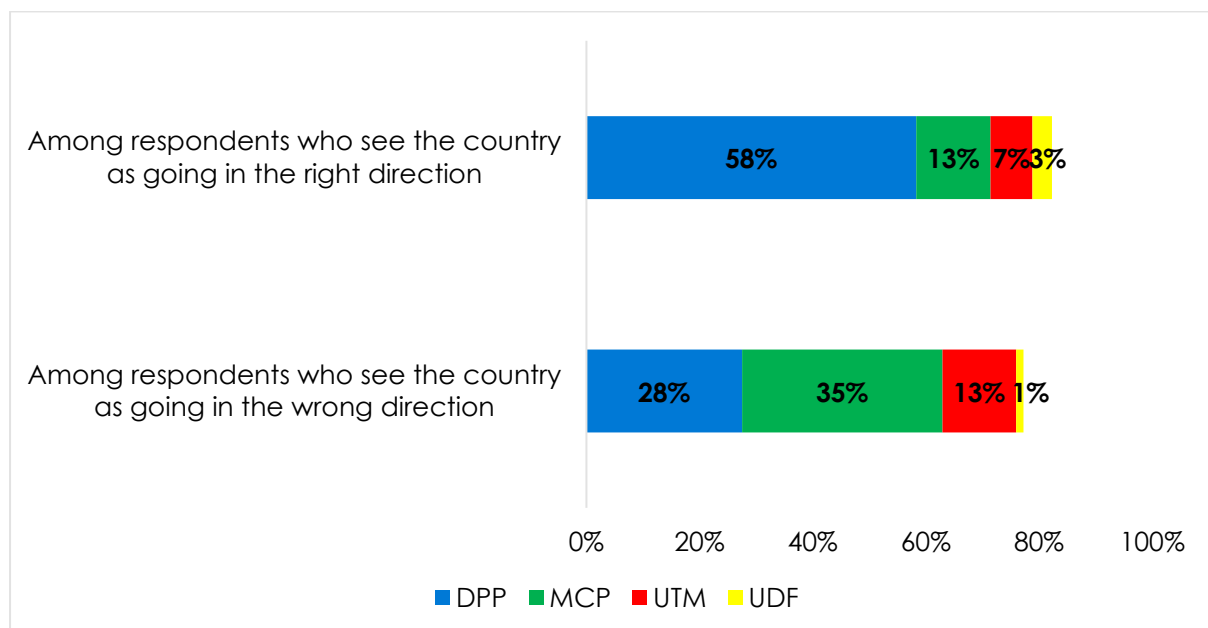
Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

The proportion of would-be MCP voters in the Northern region has steadily increased, from 12% in 2014 to 46% in 2019, apparently at the expense of the People's Party (PP), which dominated voting intentions in the Northern region (53%) in 2014 but declined to 21% in 2017 and finally gave way to the new UTM (32%) and the MCP(46%) in 2019.

Explaining voting choices

The literature suggests that voters tend to blame incumbent leaders or parties when they are dissatisfied with their living conditions and the national economy (Green & Jennings, 2017). In this survey, respondents who saw the country as heading in the wrong direction were only about half as likely to say they would vote for the ruling DPP (28%) as those who saw the country as headed in the right direction (58%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Views on overall direction of the country and voting intentions | Malawi
 | 2019

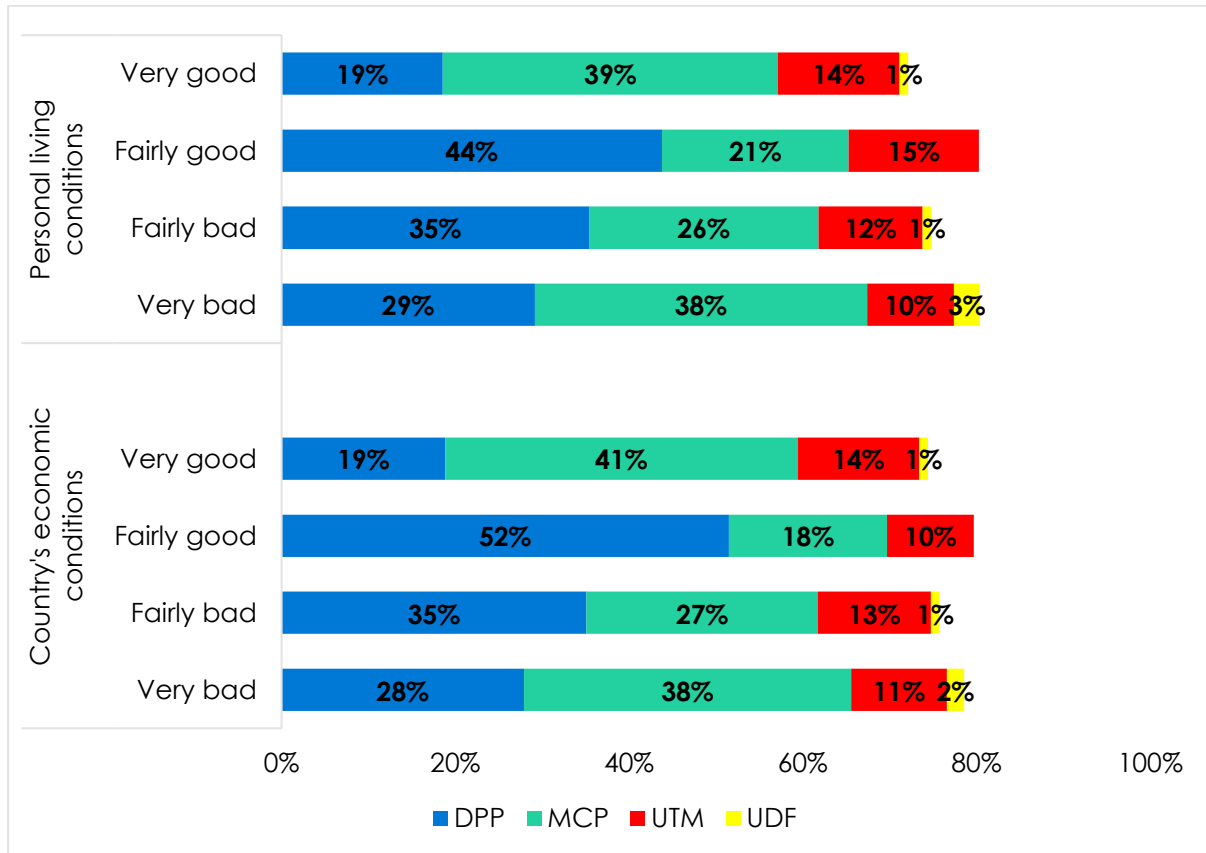


Respondents were asked:

*Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
 If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

However, assessments of the country's general economic condition and personal living conditions do not, by themselves, seem to determine voters' choice between the ruling party and the opposition. For instance, among Malawians who said their personal living conditions were "very good," only one in five (19%) said they would vote for the ruling party. The DPP registered the same low level of support among those who saw the national economy as "very good." And about three in 10 respondents said they would vote for the incumbent even though they considered their personal living conditions and general economic conditions to be "very bad" (Figure 6). More sophisticated analysis would be needed to tease out how economic assessments influence voter choice.

Figure 6: Views on economic conditions and voting intentions | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

*In general, how would you describe: The present economic condition of this country? Your own present living conditions?
 If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Which voters might be up for grabs?

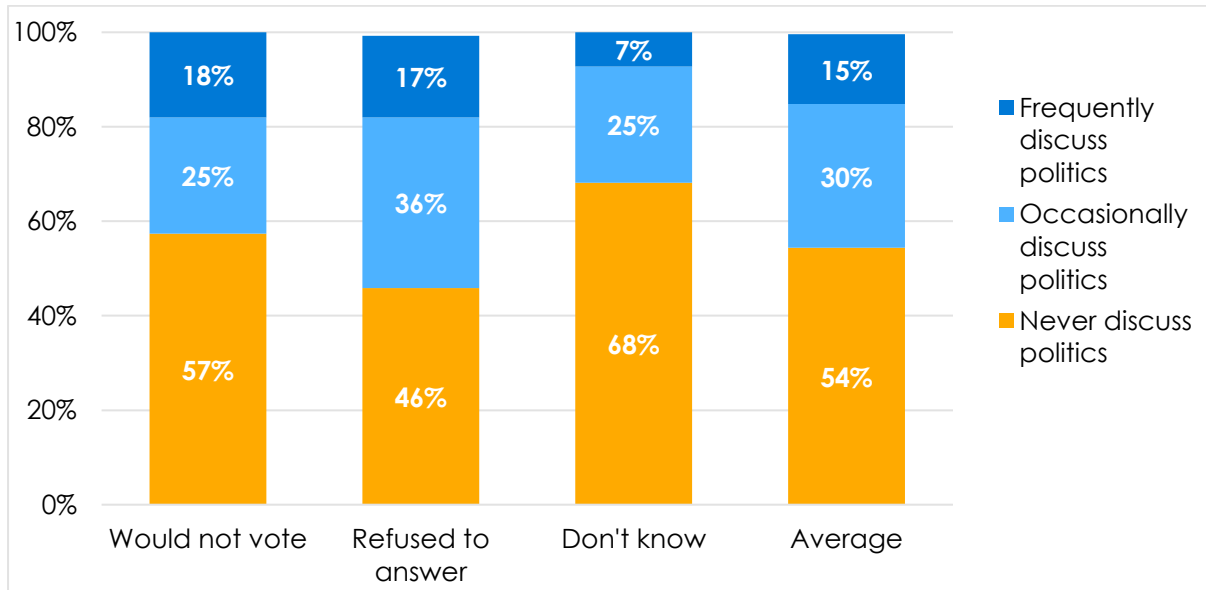
As shown in Figure 1 above, in addition to respondents who lined up with a particular party, more than one in five (22%) did not. These are respondents who said they “don’t know” how they would vote (6%), and thus might be considered up for grabs; those who refused to answer the question (11%), some of whom may be undecided; and those who said they would not vote (5%), some of whom could presumably be motivated, with the right pitch, to go to the polls.

Given their sizeable numbers and the 50%+1 requirement to win, we look at the profile of these respondents, whose choices could determine the ultimate winner in the 2020 presidential election.

Are they apathetic?

Among those who said they don’t know how they would vote, more than two-thirds (68%) said they “never” discuss politics with family and friends. The proportion who never discuss politics is smaller, but still substantial, among those who said they would not vote (57%) and those who refused to answer the question about voting intentions (46%) (Figure 7). This suggests that many may be detached from politics altogether.

Figure 7: How often discuss politics | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

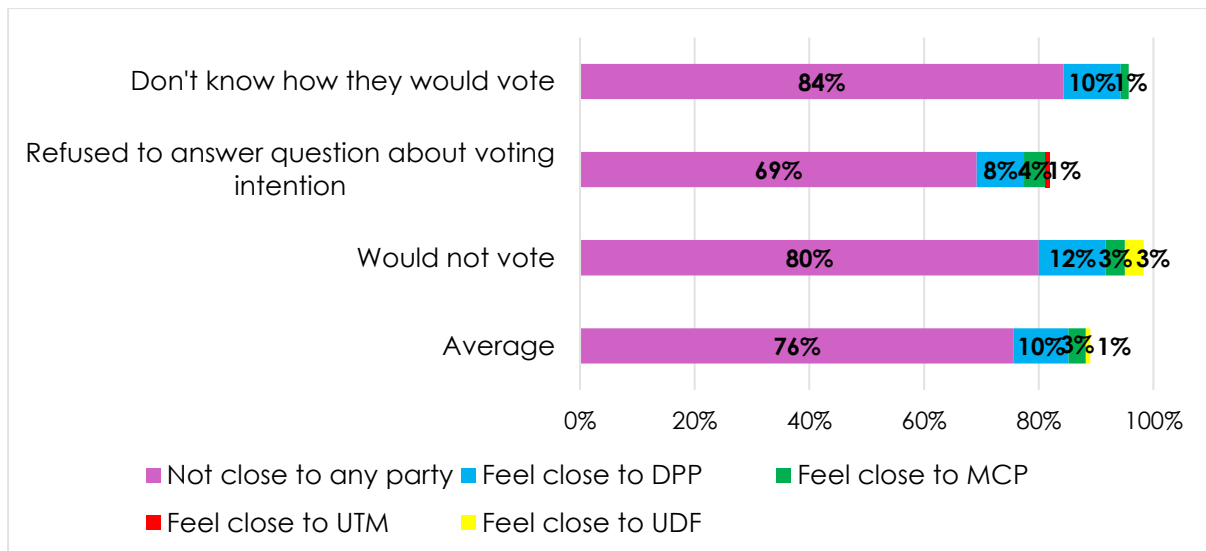
If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for? (This analysis includes only those who said "don't know" or "would not vote" or who refused to answer the question.)

When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

What are their partisan alignments?

When asked whether they feel close to a political party, three-fourths of these respondents said they did not identify with any party. About 10% sympathized with the DPP (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Feel close to a political party? | by voting intention | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

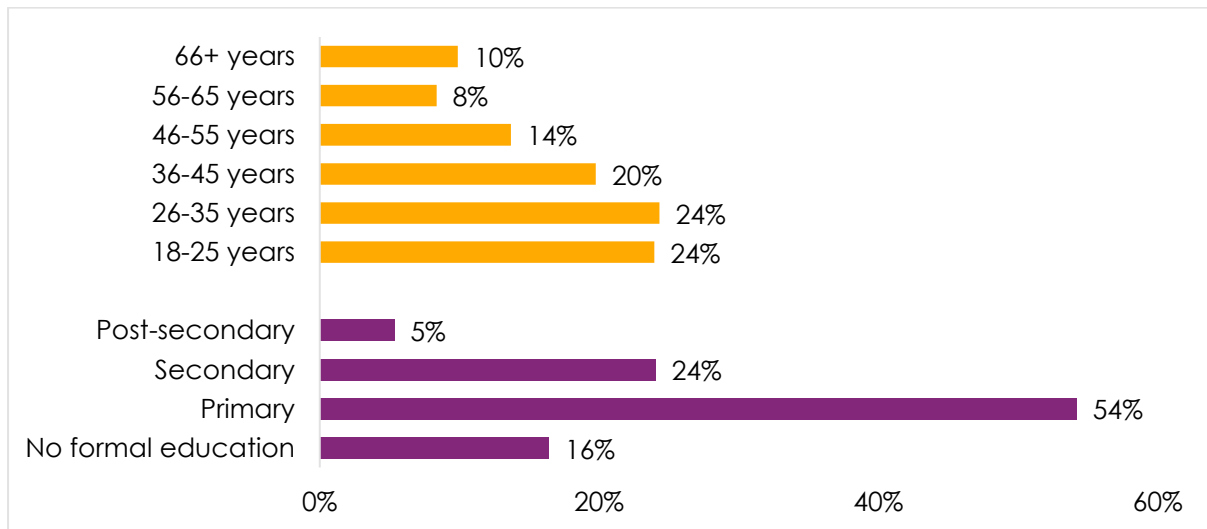
If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for? (This analysis includes only those who said "don't know" or "would not vote" or who refused to answer the question.)

Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If "yes:"] Which party is that?)

What are their social characteristics?

If we lump together the “don’t know,” “wouldn’t vote,” and “refused to answer” respondents, we see that almost half (48%) of these potential targets for party outreach are less than 36 years old. In addition, a large majority have primary schooling (54%) or less (16%) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Social characteristics of respondents who ‘would not vote,’ ‘don’t know,’ or refused to answer | Malawi | 2019

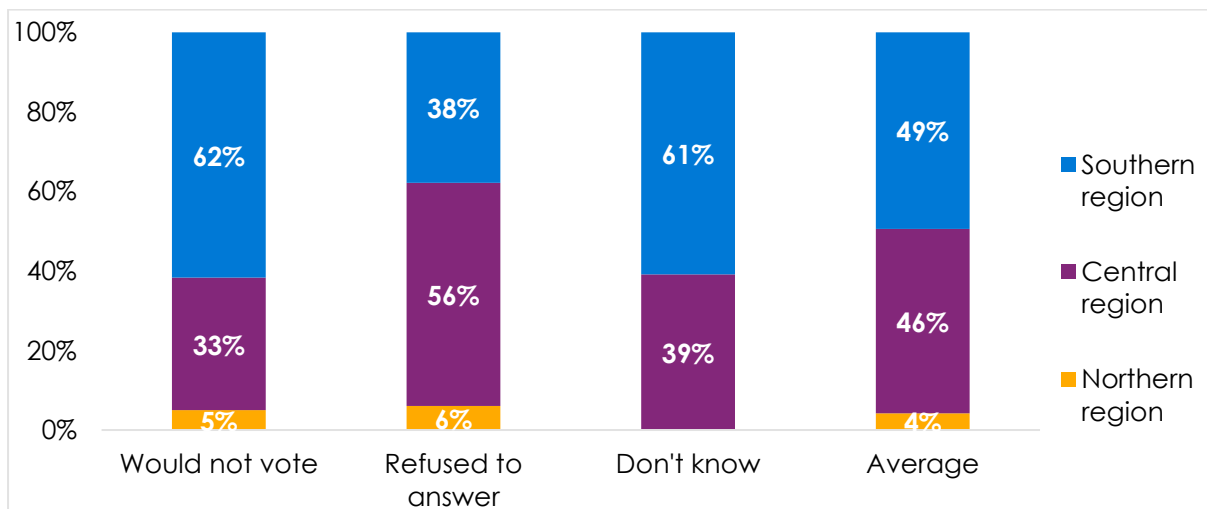


Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for? (This analysis includes only those who said “don’t know” or “would not vote” or who refused to answer the question.)*

Where are they?

Lastly, most of these potential targets for campaign outreach are in the Southern (49%) and Central (46%) regions, while only 4% are in the Northern region (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Regions of residence | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party’s candidate would you vote for? (This analysis includes only those who said “don’t know” or “would not vote” or who refused to answer the question.)*

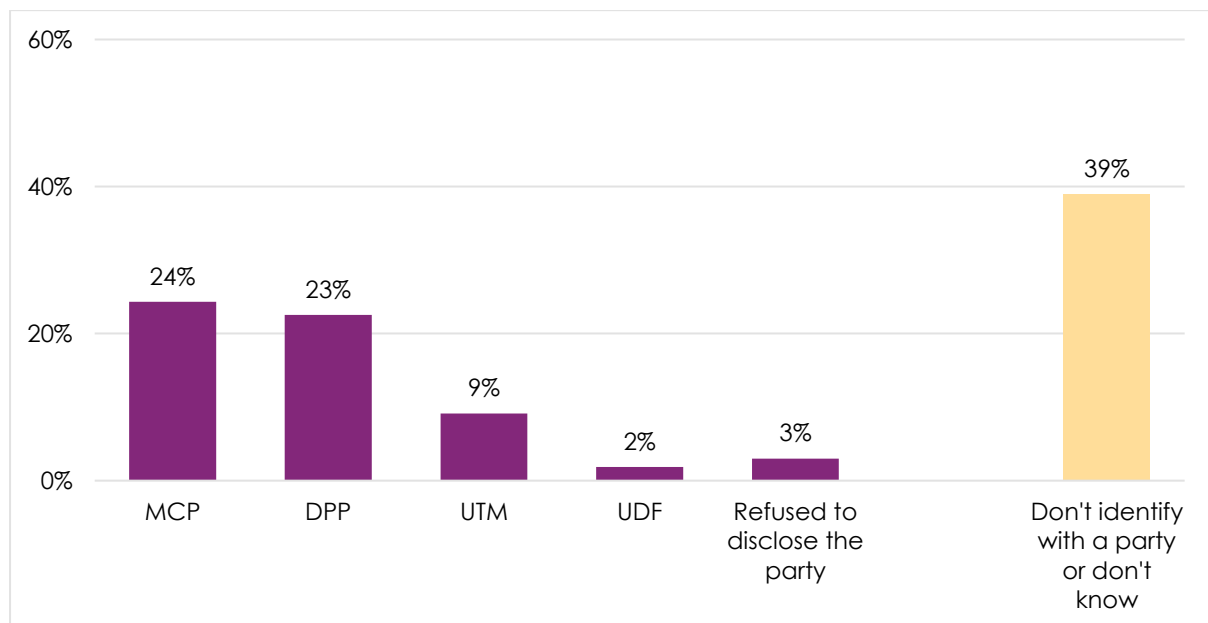
Possible implications

While some citizens may be apathetic and may never vote (as indeed one in 20 indicated in their responses), this analysis suggests that campaigns that appeal to young people, less-educated people, and residents of the Southern and Central regions may improve their odds of gaining votes. The fact that most of these respondents do not feel close to any political party suggests that all parties have a shot at convincing them.

Party affiliation and voting choices

Finally, do people who sympathize with a particular party in fact vote for that party's presidential candidate? More than six in 10 survey respondents (61%) said they "feel close to" a certain party. The MCP (24%) and DPP (23%) were about equally popular, trailed by the UTM (9%) and UDF (2%) (Figure 11). Other parties, not reported here, drew less than 1% of respondents.

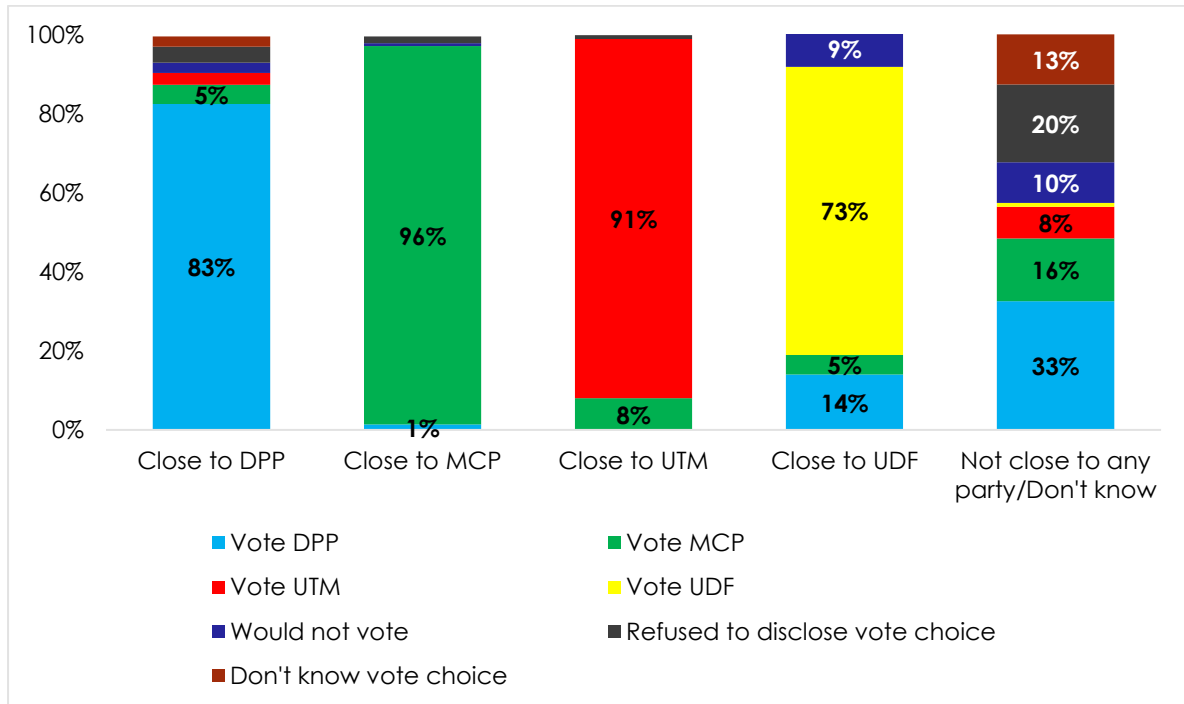
Figure 11: Feel close to a political party | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party? (if "Yes") Which party is that?

When it comes to declaring their voting intentions in a presidential election, most Malawians stay loyal to their political parties. More than nine out of 10 MCP (96%) and UTM (91%) sympathizers said they would vote for their party's candidate. The MCP looks to benefit most from defecting voters, with 5% of DPP, 5% of UDF, and 8% of UTM sympathizers indicating they would vote for the MCP candidate. Among those who said they do not feel close to any party (or "don't know" whether they do), the DPP would pull twice as many votes (33%) as the MCP (16%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Party affiliation and choice of presidential candidate | Malawi | 2019



Respondents were asked:

*Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If "yes":] Which party is that?
 If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?*

Conclusion

For a country where credible opinion polls are rare, Afrobarometer survey findings from late 2019 provide insights into Malawi's electoral politics ahead of a rerun of its May 2019 presidential election. It is clear that the election will be highly competitive as parties aligned in two opposing alliances work to attain the required new threshold of 50%+1. Their ability to appeal to the one-fifth of respondents who, as of late 2019, were undeclared voters or declared nonvoters may determine who edges past the finish line.

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