

Elections in Uganda: A better mechanism for accountability than for representation?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 417 | Ronald Makanga Kakumba

Summary

Elections play a crucial role in every democratic system of government as a mechanism for producing a legislature that is representative of the policy preferences of the electorate (Thomassen, 2014), linking citizens' priorities to the behavior of their policy makers (Powell, 2000). By the same logic, elections enable voters to select leaders and hold them accountable for their performance in office. In other words, the electoral process determines who should stay in office, who should be thrown out of office, and who should replace those who are thrown out (Harrop & Miller, 1987).

Concretely, elections should produce leaders who represent and respond to voters' views, as well as a government that serves both ruling-party and opposition supporters equitably. Where elections do not accomplish these tasks, they cannot be described as successful.

Since 1995, Uganda has been conducting regular presidential, parliamentary, and local government elections every five years. However, most of these elections have been marred by claims of voter bribery (Kakumba, 2020) and other irregularities. In the 2016 elections, for example, more than one-third of the parliamentary results were disputed in courts of law. Since 2001, four presidential elections have been contested in court, including a 2011 case that touched off a deadly wave of walk-to-work protests (Citizen's Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda, 2018), and in more than three decades, no election has produced a change in presidential power in Uganda.

Despite persistent challenges in Uganda's elections, the most recent Afrobarometer survey indicates that Ugandans are gaining confidence in their elections as tools for holding non-performing leaders accountable. At the same time, most citizens don't think their elected leaders listen to what they have to say, and only half see their elections as ensuring that their views are reflected in policy decisions.

As Ugandans prepare to go to the polls again in January, how they perceive the impact of voting, the responsiveness of their elected leaders, and the efficacy of elections may help determine voter turnout and, feeding a virtuous or vicious circle that comes around every five years, build or undermine voter confidence in the electoral system.

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, and Round 8 surveys are currently underway. 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 in September-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 standard surveys were conducted in Uganda in 2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015, and 2017, along with pre- and post-election surveys in 2010 and 2011.

Key findings

- A majority (58%) of Ugandans say that elections work “well” or “very well” as a mechanism to ensure that voters can hold non-performing leaders accountable, an increase from 47% in 2015.
- A growing share of Ugandans say voters are responsible for making sure that MPs and the president do their jobs, though about half of citizens still say the responsibility for holding MPs and the president accountable rests with someone other than voters.
- Only half (49%) of Ugandans think that elections ensure that MPs reflect voters' views, a decline from 56% in 2005.
- Large majorities of Ugandans say their MPs (85%) and local government councillors (72%) “never” or “only sometimes” listen to what their constituents have to say.
- More than four in 10 Ugandans (44%) say that at least “sometimes,” communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences. This perception is strongest among opposition supporters (58%), residents in the Central (54%) and Eastern (50%) regions, urbanites (51%), and young citizens (50%).

Do elections ensure accountability?

A majority (58%) of Ugandans say that elections work “well” or “very well” as mechanisms to ensure that voters can hold non-performing leaders accountable by voting them out of office (Figure 1). Only 37% say elections do a poor job on this count. The proportion of citizens who see elections as performing this function well increased by 11 percentage points between 2015 and 2019, from 47% to 58% (Figure 2).

This perception finds support in the substantial number of Ugandan members of Parliament (MPs) who are not re-elected. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, for example, only 96 of 231 legislators who held direct seats in the 9th Parliament were re-elected to the 10th Parliament, an attrition rate of 58.4%, up from 55% and 53% in 2011 and 2006 parliamentary elections, respectively. Of the 112 female MPs who held reserved seats for women in the 9th Parliament, only 48 retained their seats, an attrition rate of 57.1% (Forum for Women in Democracy, 2016; Independent News, 2015).

Figure 1: Do elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders? | Uganda | 2019

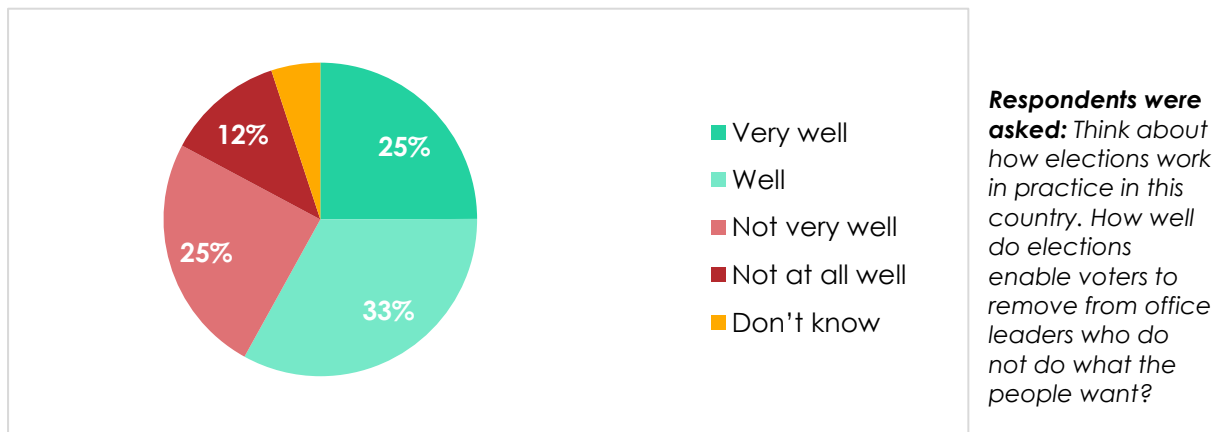
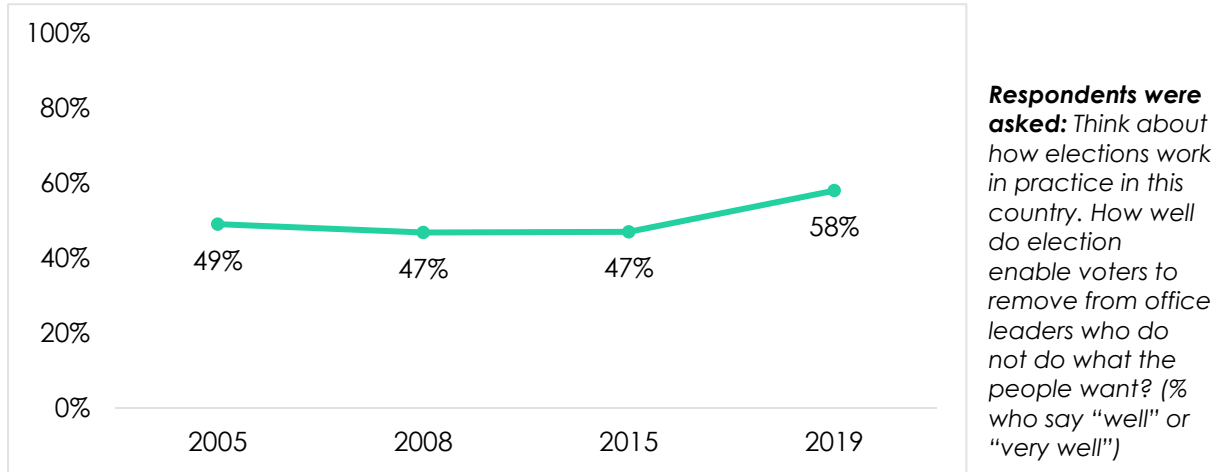


Figure 2: Elections enable voters to remove non-performing leaders | Uganda
 | 2005-2019

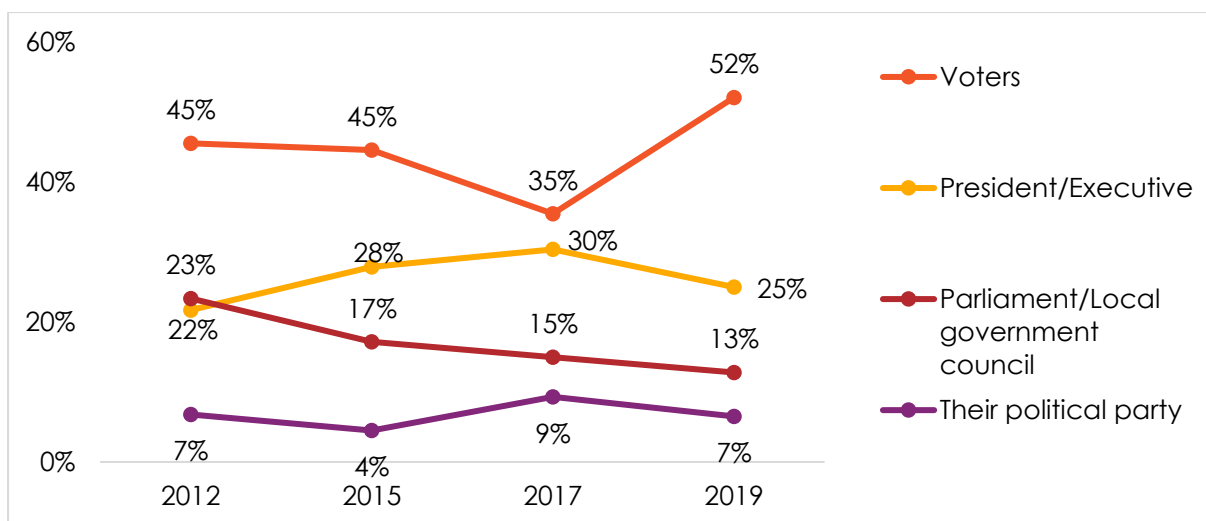


Survey results suggest that Ugandans have become somewhat more aware that it is the voters' responsibility to hold MPs and the president accountable. Asked who should be responsible for making sure that MPs do their jobs, a slim majority (52%) of respondents assign this task to the voters, an increase of 7 percentage points from 45% in 2012 and 2015 (Figure 3). The increase is steeper (17 points) compared to 2017 after a 10-point drop between 2015 and 2017. The proportion of citizens who say that holding MPs accountable is the responsibility of Parliament or the local government council declined from 23% in 2012 to 13% in 2019.

Similarly, the share of respondents who say it is the voters' responsibility to make sure the president does his job increased by 7 percentage points, from 35% in 2012 to 42% in 2019 (Figure 4).

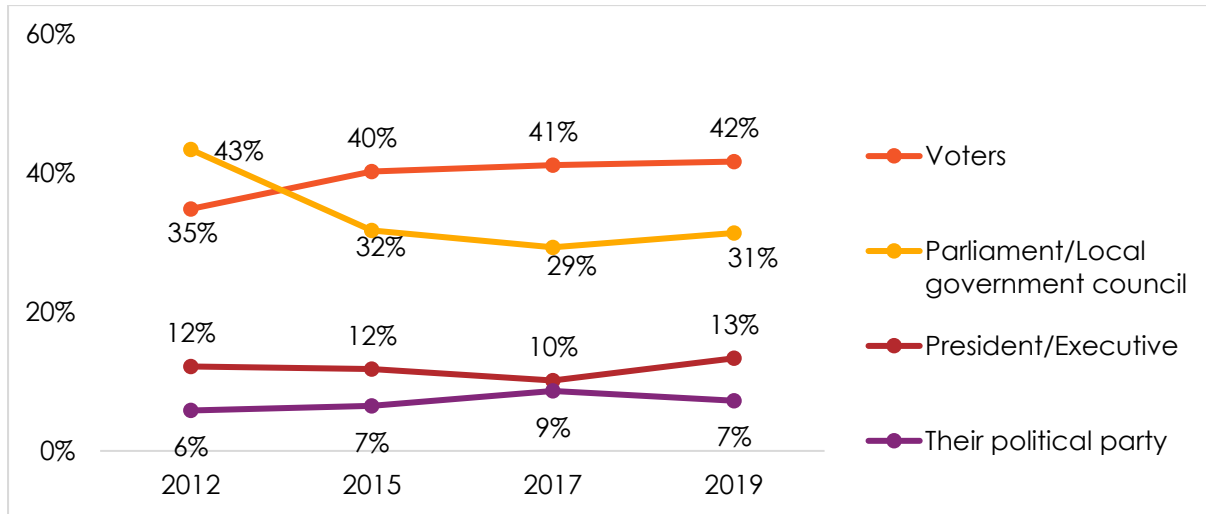
Despite this trend, about half of Ugandans still say the responsibility for holding MPs and the president accountable rests with someone other than the voters.

Figure 3: Who should make sure MPs do their jobs? | Uganda | 2012-2019



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, members of Parliament do their jobs?

Figure 4: Who should make sure president does his job? | Uganda | 2012-2019



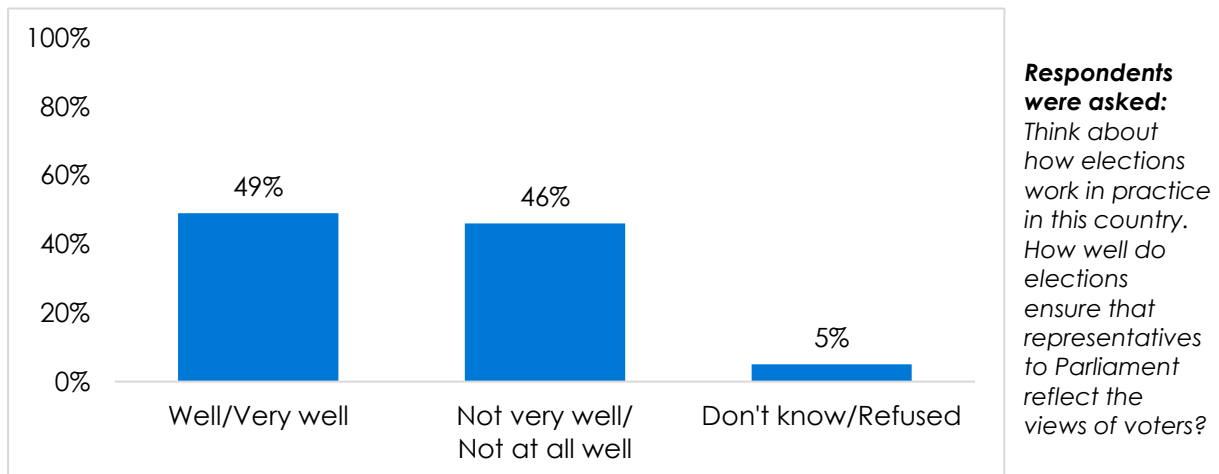
Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president does his job?

Do elections ensure representation?

While a majority of Ugandans say their elections enable voters to hold leaders accountable, only half (49%) say they ensure that MPs reflect voters' views (Figure 5). The proportion of citizens who say elections function "well" or "very well" to ensure voters' views are reflected has held steady for the past decade, though at a lower level than in 2005 (56%) (Figure 6).

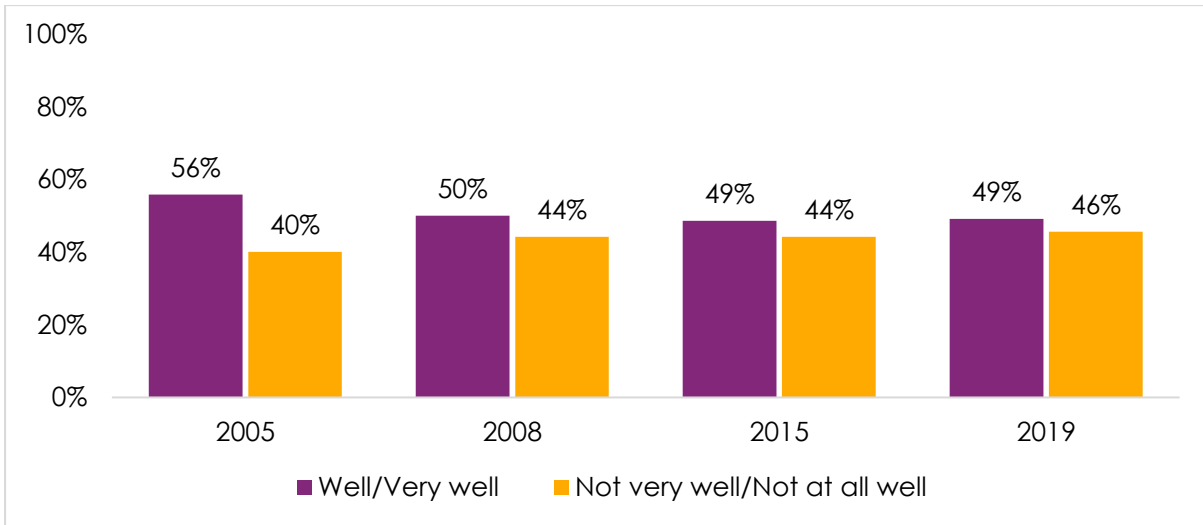
Across key socio-demographic groups, citizens with secondary or post-secondary education (43%), urban residents (39%), respondents in the middle age range (44% among 31- to 49-year-olds), and supporters of opposition political parties¹ (45%) are least convinced that elections function well as a tool for ensuring representation. Residents in Central (32%) and Eastern (42%) regions are significantly more skeptical than their counterparts in Western (63%) and Northern (65%) regions (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Do elections ensure voters' views are reflected? | Uganda | 2019



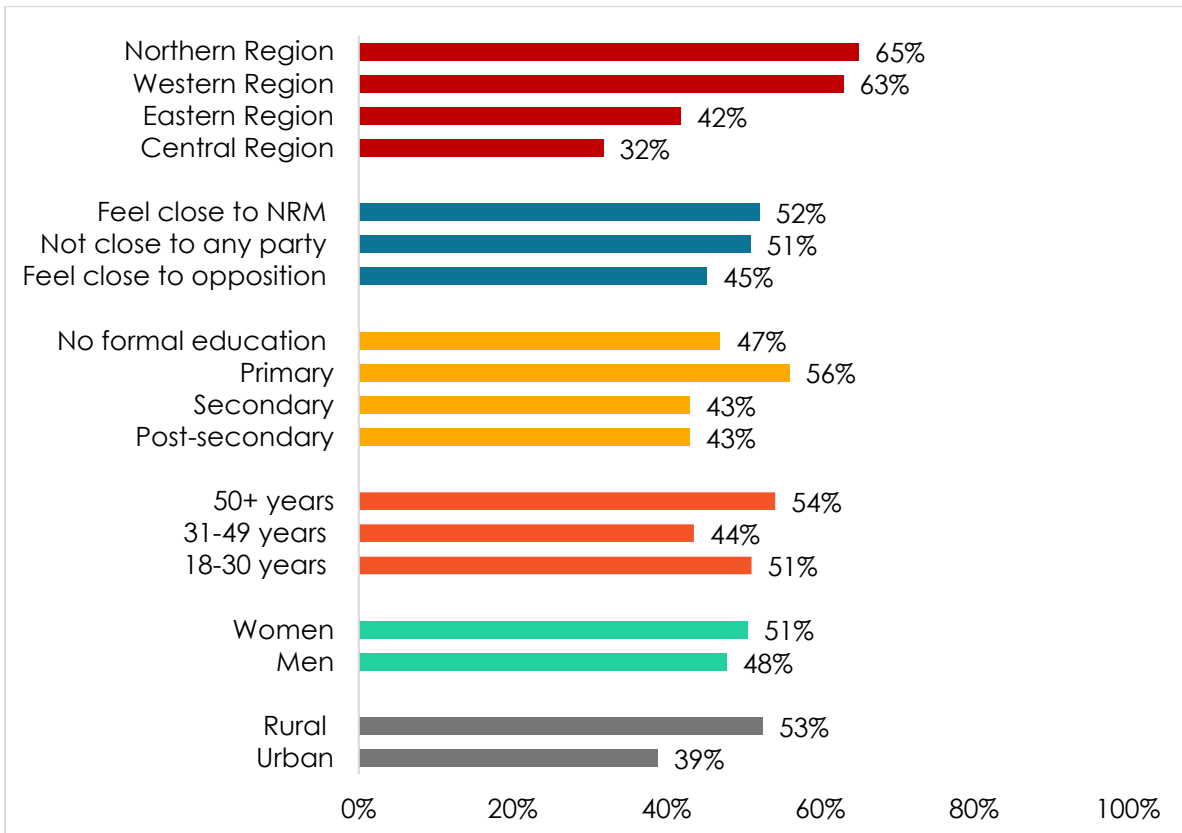
¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, "Do you feel close to any particular political party?" and, if yes, "Which party is that?"

Figure 6: Do elections ensure voters' views are reflected? | Uganda | 2012-2019



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?

Figure 7: Elections ensure voters' views are reflected | by socio-demographic group | Uganda



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? (% who say "well" or "very well")

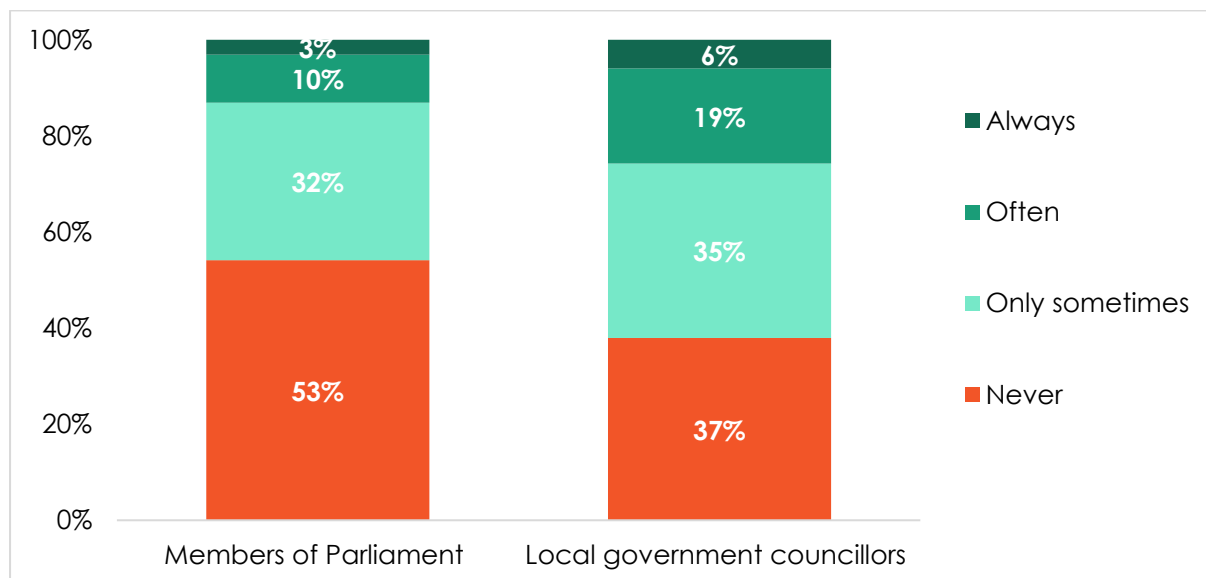
Do elected leaders listen to their constituents' views?

The essence of representative democracy is that elected leaders relay the demands and grievances of their constituencies to the center of policy-making processes. When elected leaders reach out to their constituencies and take time to listen and give feedback, the cycle of representation is completed. But Afrobarometer results suggest that reality falls short of this ideal scenario.

Most Ugandans say their elected representatives do not listen to their constituents. Almost nine out of 10 respondents say MPs “never” (53%) or “only sometimes” (32%) do their best to listen to what ordinary people have to say (Figure 8). Local government councillors fare only a little better: Almost three-fourths of respondents say they “never” (37%) or “only sometimes” (35%) listen.

Figure 8: Do MPs and local government councillors listen to their constituents?

| Uganda | 2019



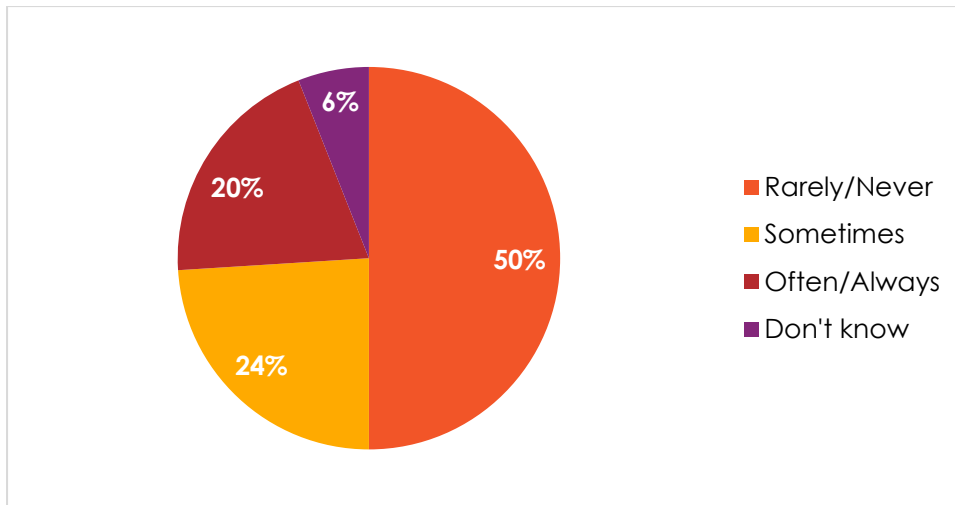
Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors?

Voter choice and consequences

For citizens who don't think their elected officials listen to them and who aren't convinced that elections ensure that their views are represented, insult may be added to injury if they feel punished for voting “the wrong way.” More than four in 10 Ugandans (44%) say that at least “sometimes,” communities that don't vote for the ruling National Resistance Movement party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects. Only about one-third (33%) say such communities “never” suffer negative consequences (Figure 9).

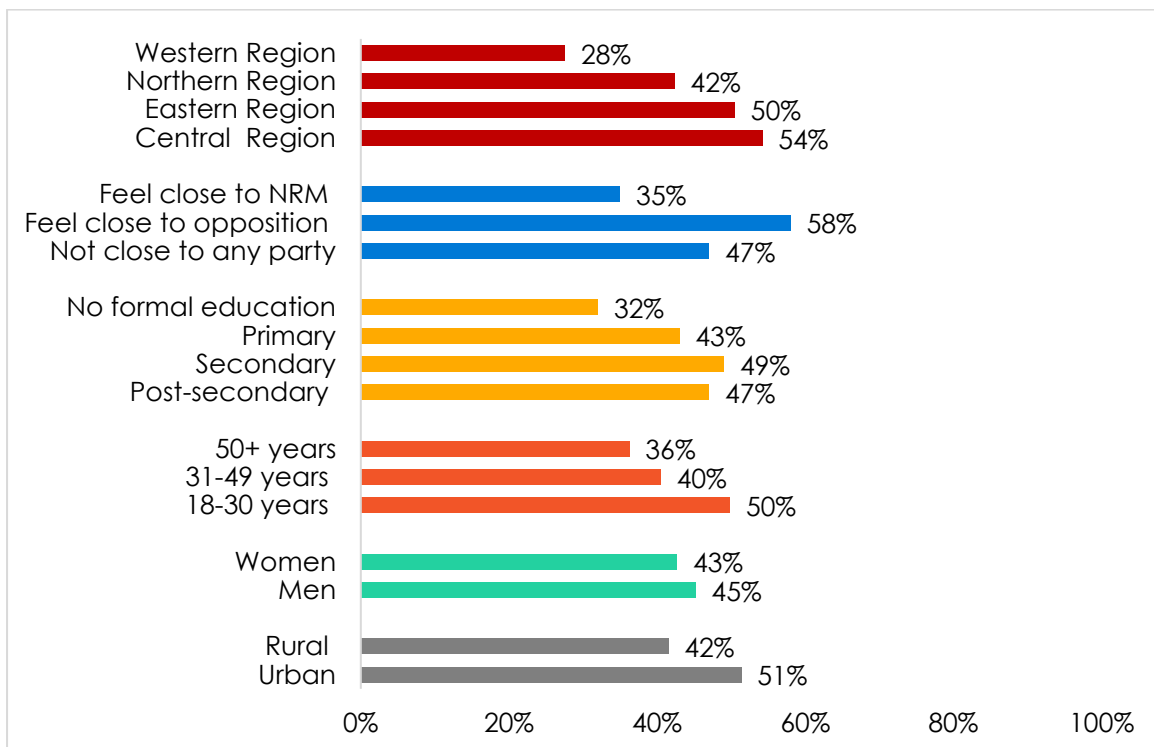
As might be expected, opposition supporters (58%) are significantly more likely than NRM adherents (35%) to say that communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences (Figure 10). Respondents who live in urban areas, where opposition support is stronger, are more likely than rural residents to agree (51% vs. 42%). This perception is also more common among youth (50%) and residents in the Central (54%) and Eastern (50%) regions than among older respondents (36%-40%) and residents in the Western (28%) and Northern (42%) regions.

Figure 9: Negative consequences for vote against the ruling party? | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects?

Figure 10: Negative consequences for vote against the ruling party | by socio-demographic group | Uganda | 2019



Respondents were asked: How often do you think that communities that do not vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences, such as lack of government support for local services or development projects? (% who say "sometimes" or "often" or "always")

Conclusion

Whereas a majority of Ugandans say voting is a good mechanism for holding leaders accountable, only about half of them see elections as ensuring that people's views are

represented. Moreover, most citizens say their elected officials rarely listen to what ordinary people have to say. And a substantial proportion think that communities that don't vote for the ruling party suffer negative consequences as a result.

As Ugandans prepare to go to the polls again in January, how they perceive the impact of voting, the responsiveness of their elected leaders, and the efficacy of elections may help determine voter turnout and, feeding a virtuous or vicious circle that comes around every five years, build or undermine voter confidence in the electoral system.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is 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.

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