



Nigeria heads for closest election on record

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 11 | Nengak Daniel, Raphael Mbaegbu, and Peter Lewis

Summary

Nigerians will go to the polls on 14 February to elect their president and national legislators to four-year terms, followed two weeks later by elections for many governors and state assemblies. The presidential election will be Nigeria's fifth since the return to democracy in 1999. In an Afrobarometer survey conducted two months before the elections, we find a highly competitive political field, with much uncertainty about the prospects for credible and peaceful polls and about the outcome of the elections. While most Nigerians look forward to voting and believe that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is prepared, many also express uncertainty about the likely integrity of the vote count and concerns about their personal security during highly competitive elections.

The campaign environment remains fluid, but as of December 2014, Afrobarometer survey findings suggest that the race between the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and its main challenger, the All Progressives Congress (APC), is too close to call.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

Fieldwork for Afrobarometer Round 6 fieldwork in Nigeria was conducted by Practical Sampling International (PSI) in collaboration with the CLEEN Foundation. PSI interviewed 2,400 adult Nigerians between 5 and 27 December 2014.¹ The sample covered 33 of Nigeria's 36 states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). It was not possible to conduct interviews in three states in the North East zone – Adamawa, Borno, and Yobe – due to unrest in the region, so substitutions of sampling units were made from neighbouring states in the same zone. Thus, each of the country's zones is represented in proportion to its share of the national population. A sample of this size yields results at the national level with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% at a 95% confidence level. Previous Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted in Nigeria in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2012.

Key findings

- Nigerians are generally dissatisfied with current economic conditions and the government's performance on key issues. Three-quarters (74%) say their country is headed in the wrong direction in 2014, up from 70% in 2012.
- 80% say they are free to vote as they choose, although 50% express significant concern about political intimidation or violence in the current election environment, a dramatic increase from 34% just two years ago.

¹ For 80 cases, supplementary interviews were conducted on 18 and 19 January 2015.

- Nigerians hold mixed views of the INEC. Almost two-thirds (64%) believe the INEC is “ready to hold credible free and fair elections,” but overall trust in the institution is limited, with only 32% saying they trust the INEC “somewhat” or “a lot.” Only 23% believe that elections are “often” or “always” determined by a fair count of votes.
- Nigerians are ready for the election, with 78% expressing an intention to vote. But the outcome remains too close to call, especially given the fluidity of the current election environment: The PDP and the APC are neck and neck, with each party favoured by 42% of likely voters.

National context

Nigeria's 2015 elections take place at a challenging time. An insurgency has destabilized several states in northern Nigeria; oil prices have fallen, leading to declining public revenues and hampering economic growth; and major corruption allegations have captured public attention. The formation of a united opposition party, the APC, from a cluster of smaller parties has shifted the competitive landscape, presenting a serious challenge to the ruling PDP.

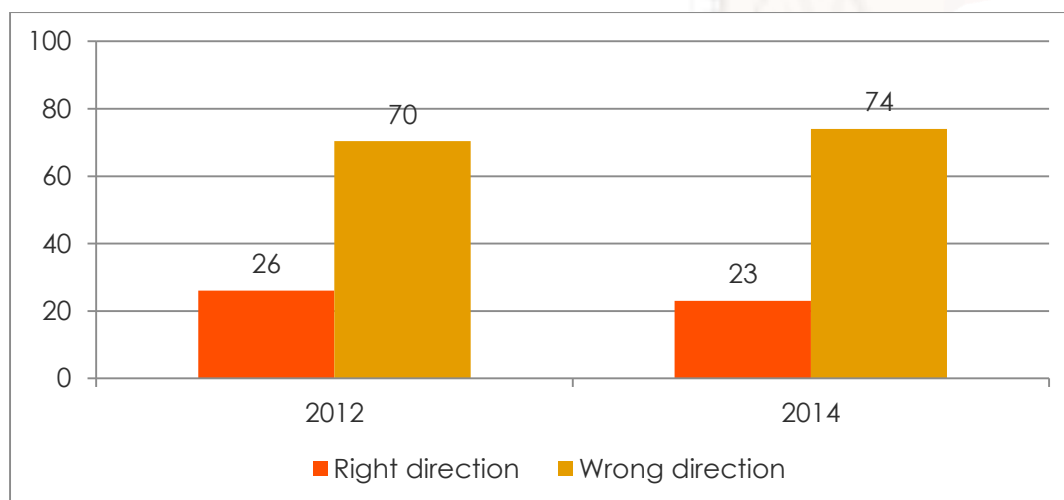
The quality of elections is also under scrutiny. Following flawed elections in 1999, 2003, and 2007, the 2011 elections showed marked improvement in organisation, although they were marred by significant violence. In a close, contentious, and fluid political field, there is urgent need for the electoral authorities and political parties to ensure reliable and peaceful polls.

Do Nigerians have confidence in the electoral authorities and the quality of the electoral process? How motivated are voters to participate in the elections? Does the opposition present a viable alternative? And just how polarized is the electorate? These are some of the pressing questions as Nigeria approaches a momentous election.

The public mood in Nigeria is generally pessimistic, although the government gets mixed marks:

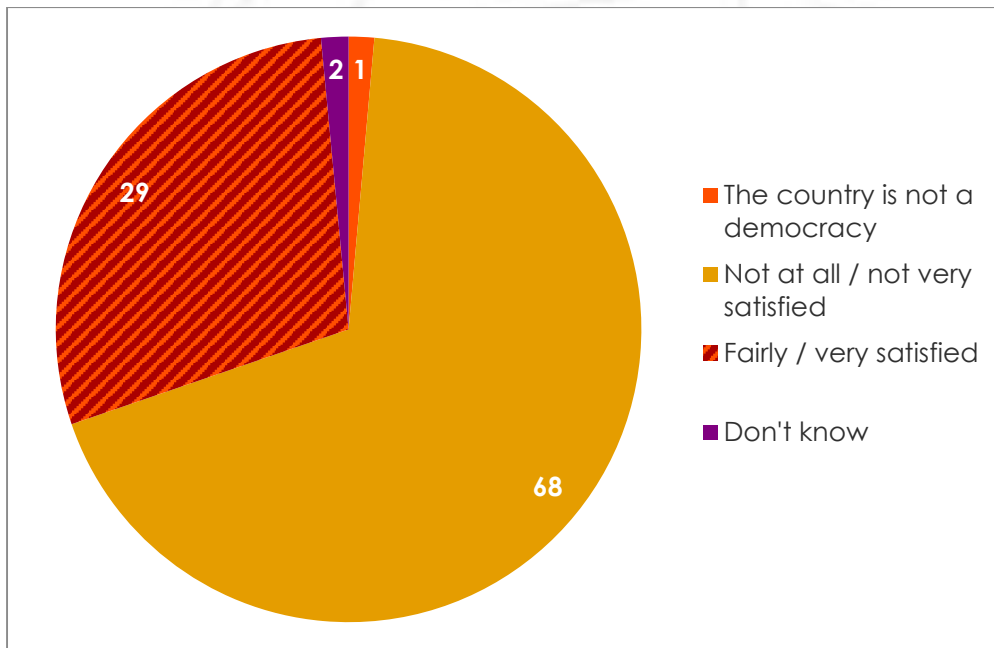
- 74% of Nigerians say the country is going “in the wrong direction,” a modest increase from two years ago (Figure 1).
- Only 29% of Nigerians are satisfied with “the way democracy works in this country” (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Overall direction of the country | 2012-2014



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

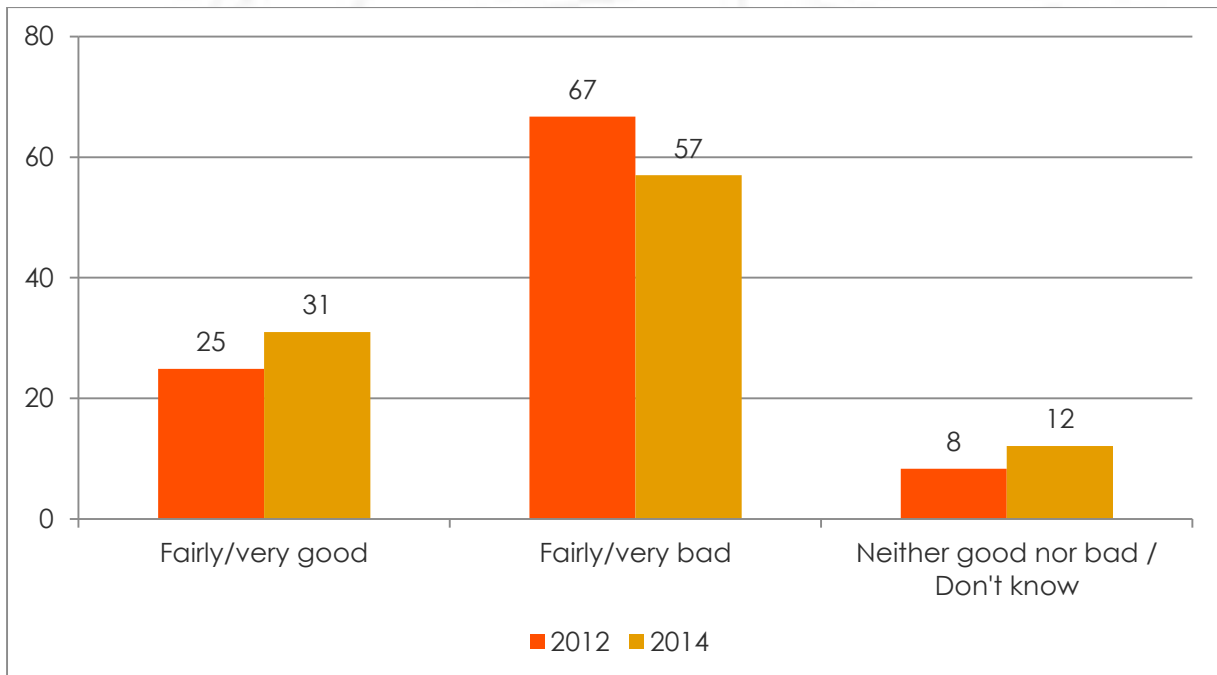
Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy | 2014



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

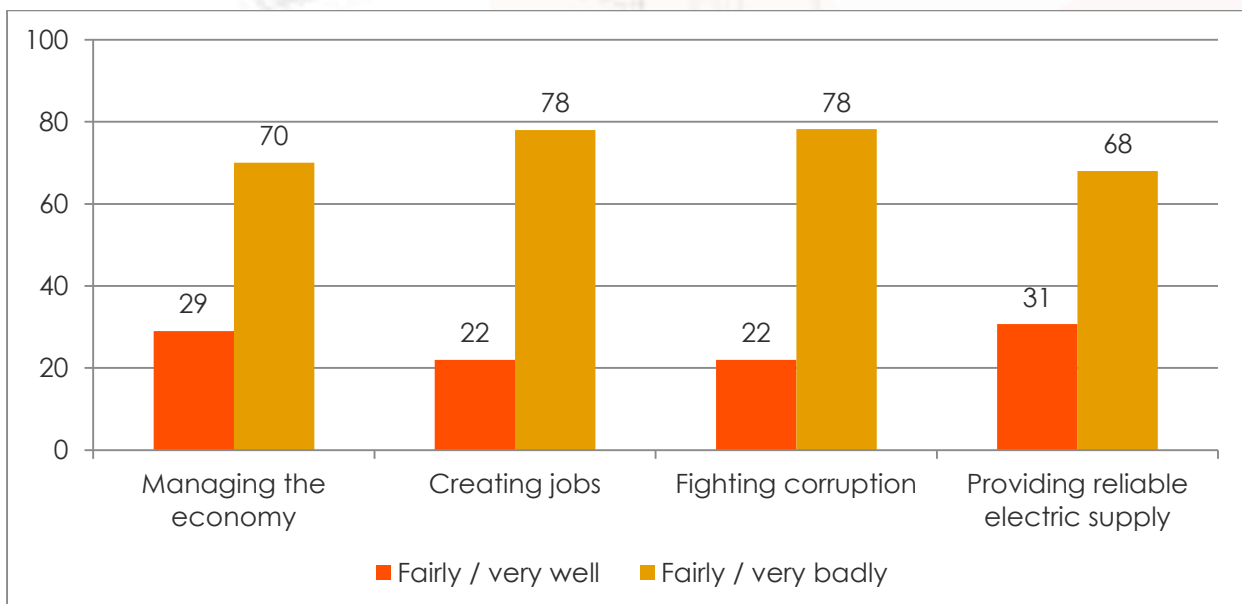
- Nigerians rate economic conditions in 2014 to be somewhat better than in 2012, but still generally poor (Figure 3). In the current survey, 57% assess the economic conditions of the country as “fairly bad” or “very bad,” while 70% believe the government is doing a poor job of managing the economy, and 78% say the same about the government's job-creation efforts (Figure 4). More than three-fourths (78%) say the government is handling the fight against corruption badly, and 68% rate efforts to provide a reliable electricity supply negatively.
- 51% of Nigerians believe the government has responded inadequately to the insecurity caused by armed extremists, compared to 49% who offer a positive assessment (Figure 5).
- On a more positive note, 94% of Nigerians credit the government with a strong response to the Ebola outbreak.

Figure 3: Condition of the national economy | 2012-2014



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

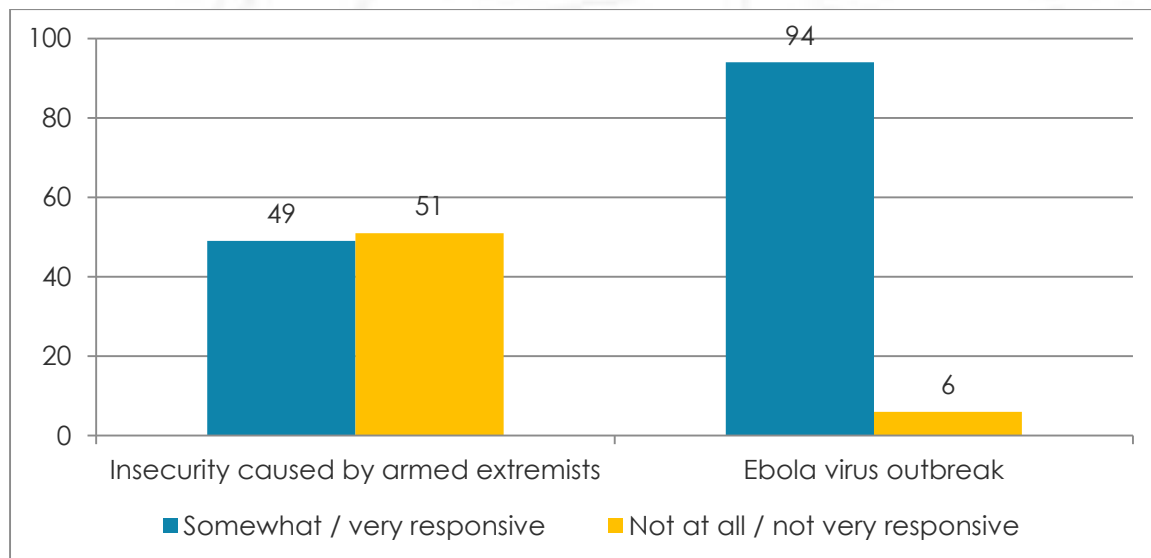
Figure 4: Government handling of key issues and priorities | 2014



Respondents were asked: *How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (%)²*

² Due to rounding, reported percentages may not always add up to 100%.

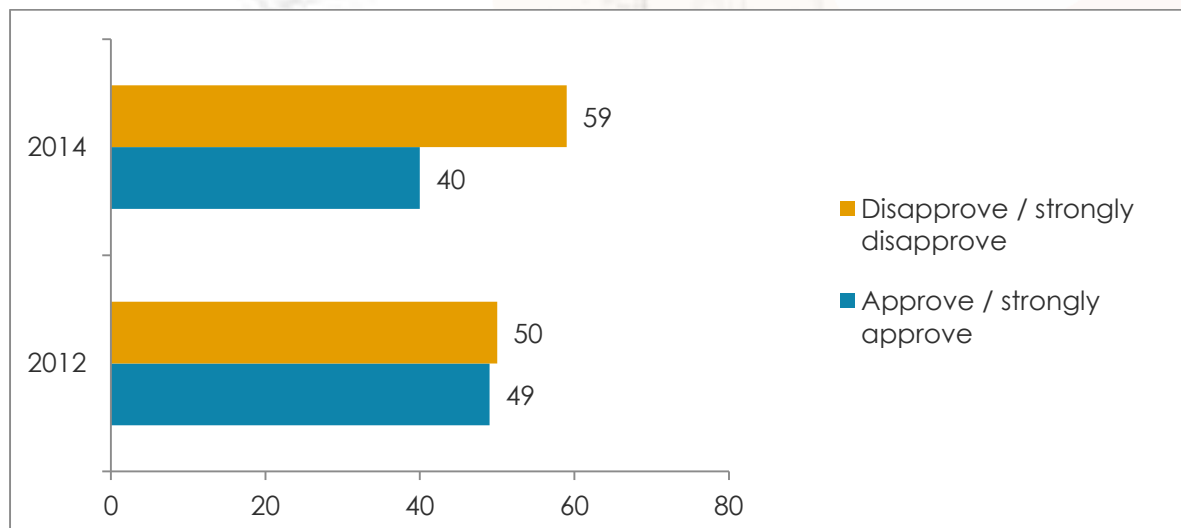
Figure 5: Government responsiveness to national emergencies | 2014



Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how responsive do you think the federal government has been to the following emergencies? (%)*

- President Jonathan's approval rating in the current poll is 40%, down from 49% in 2012 (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Approval of presidential performance | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: *Do you approve or disapprove of the way that President Goodluck Jonathan has performed his job over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough to say? (%)*

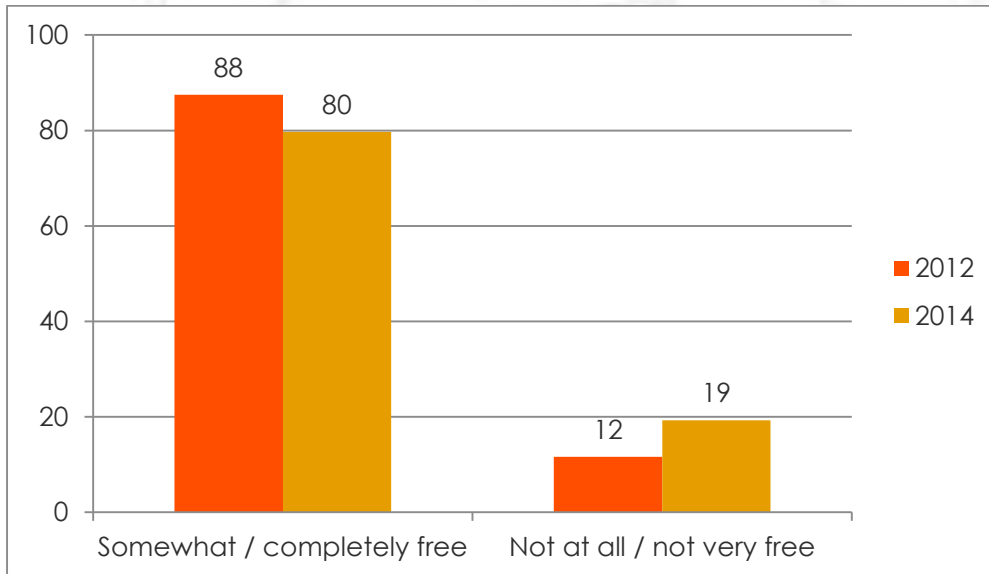
Election environment

While Nigerians remain committed to elections as the best system for selecting their leaders, they have mixed feelings about the effectiveness of elections in practice.

- Nigerians retain a strong commitment (77%) to elections as the best system for choosing leaders, down only slightly from the previous survey (80%).

- Moreover, a large majority (80%) express confidence in their freedom to vote as they choose, although this is down from 88% who said the same in 2012 (Figure 7).

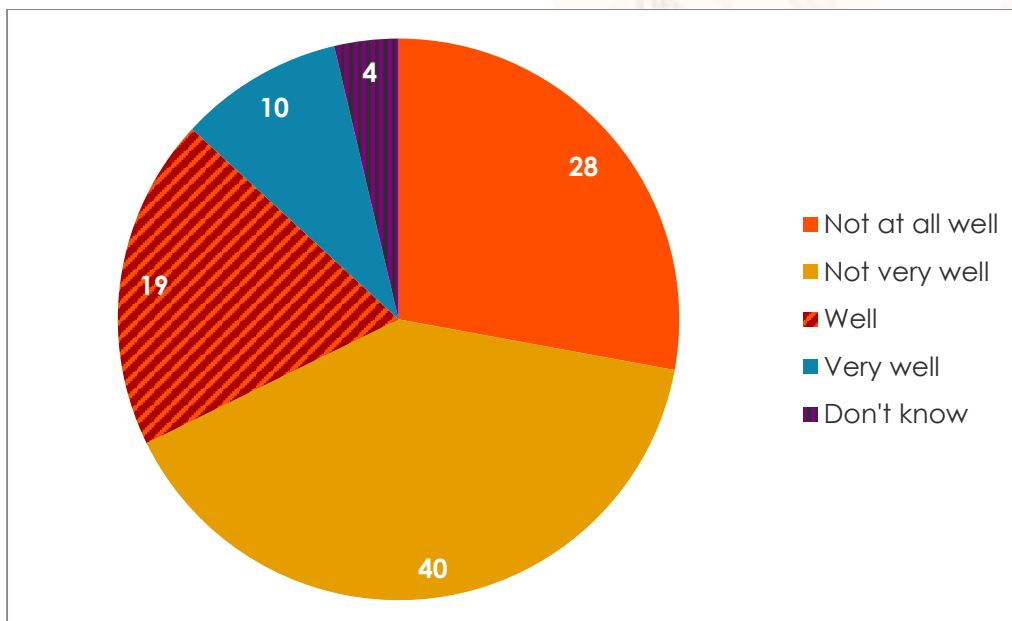
Figure 7: Freedom to vote as you choose | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured? (%)

- In practice, however, they have significant criticisms and concerns about elections in Nigeria. Two-thirds (68%) of Nigerians lack confidence in elections as a means to “enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want” (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Election efficacy | 2014



Respondents were asked: How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want? (%)

- Moreover, only 23% of Nigerians believe that elections are “often” or “always” determined by a fair count of votes, and just 35% consider that there is “often” or “always” fair media coverage of campaigns (Table 1).
- A majority see electoral bribery as a problem, with 57% saying this happens frequently.

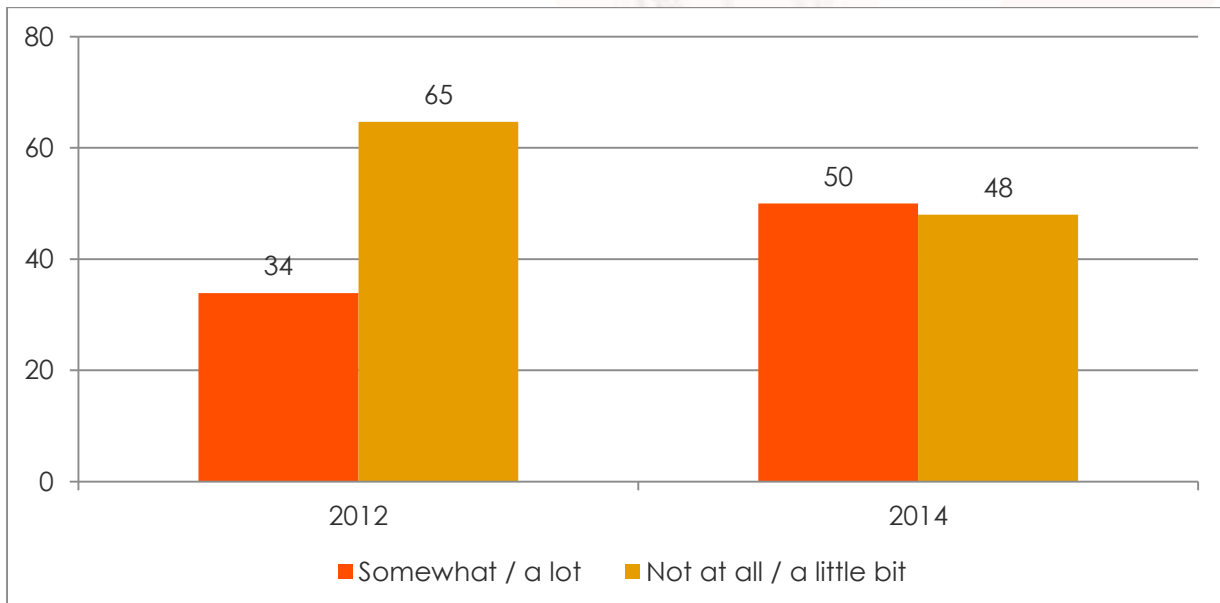
Table 1: Evaluations of the election environment | 2014 | %

<i>In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections:</i>	Never	Sometimes	Often/Always	Don't know
<i>Voters are offered genuine choice in the elections</i>	17	46	33	5
<i>Voters are threatened with violence at the polls</i>	14	46	34	6
<i>The media provides fair coverage of all candidates</i>	13	46	35	6
<i>Opposition candidates are prevented from running for office</i>	32	36	25	8
<i>Voters are bribed</i>	6	34	57	4
<i>Votes are counted fairly</i>	23	52	23	3

Note: Due to rounding, reported percentages may not add up to 100%.

- Nigerians are very concerned about security, as 50% express some fear of political intimidation or violence in the current situation. This has increased dramatically from 34% just two years ago (Figure 9).

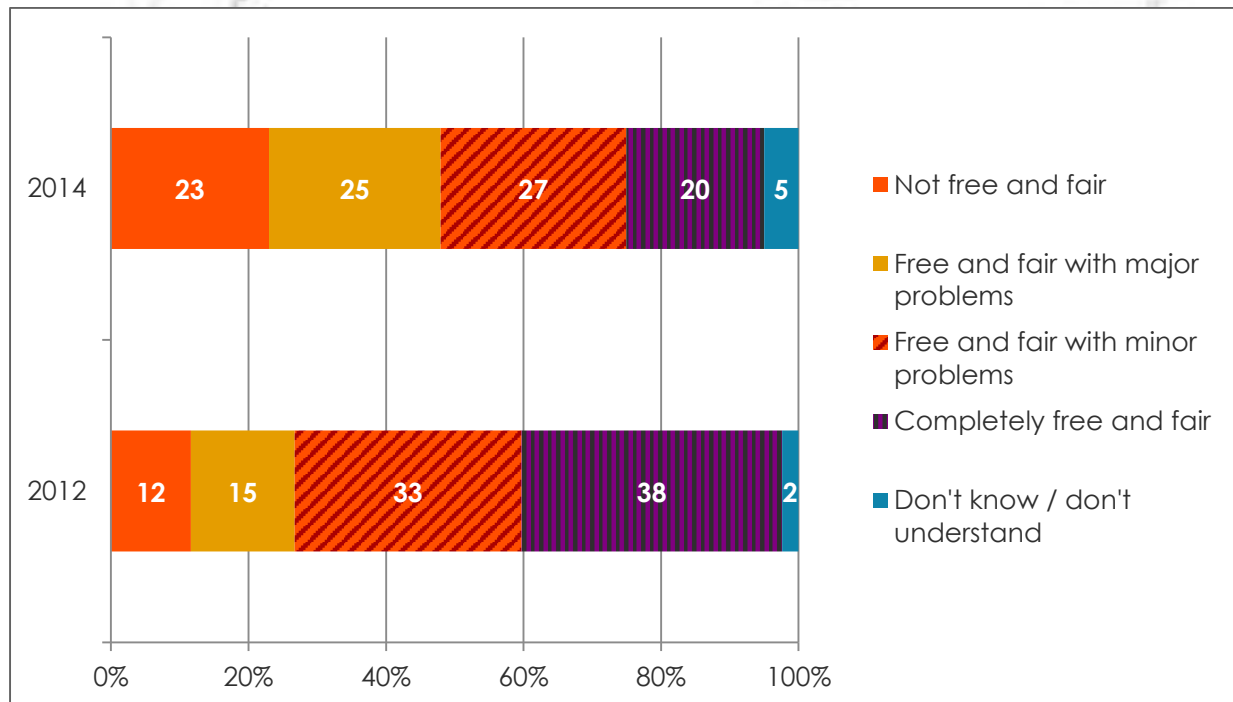
Figure 9: Fear of political intimidation or violence | 2012-2014



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (%)

- Concerns about election credibility are also reflected in assessments of the previous election. Many analysts regarded the 2011 elections as a major improvement over previous polls, and initially, Nigerians seemed to agree. In the 2012 survey, 71% rated the 2011 elections as mostly or completely free and fair. However, when they look back from 2014, confidence in the quality of the 2011 polls has dropped to just 47%. This may reflect greater public ambivalence about the overall conduct of elections, including several that have been held since 2011.

Figure 10: Assessments of quality of the 2011 election | 2012-2014



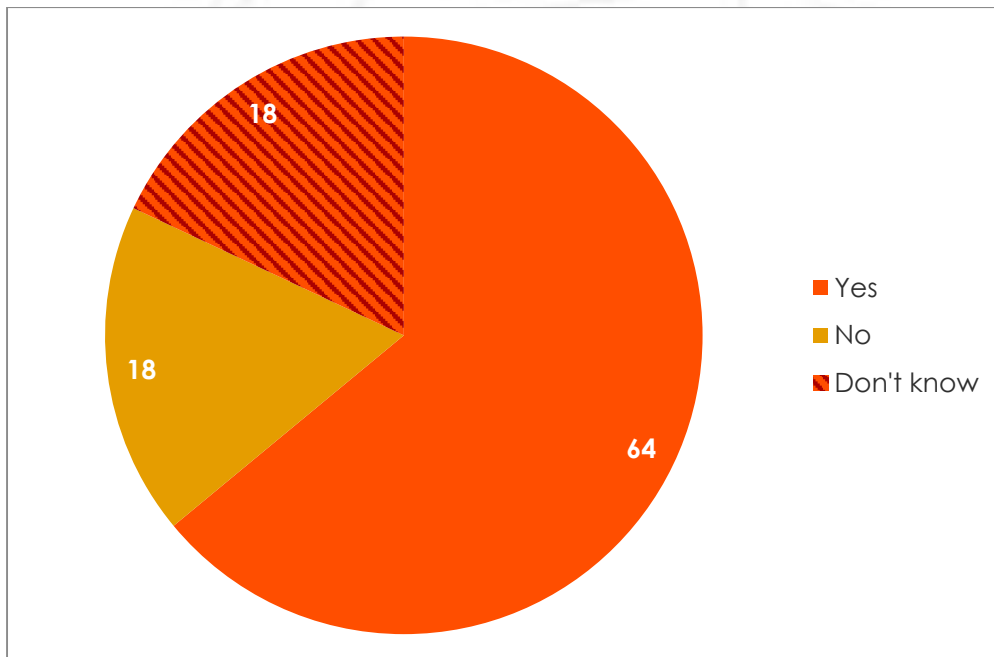
Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2011? (%)*

INEC and election preparedness

Nigerians' views of the INEC seem almost contradictory, with survey respondents expressing confidence in its preparedness but a weak level of trust in the institution.

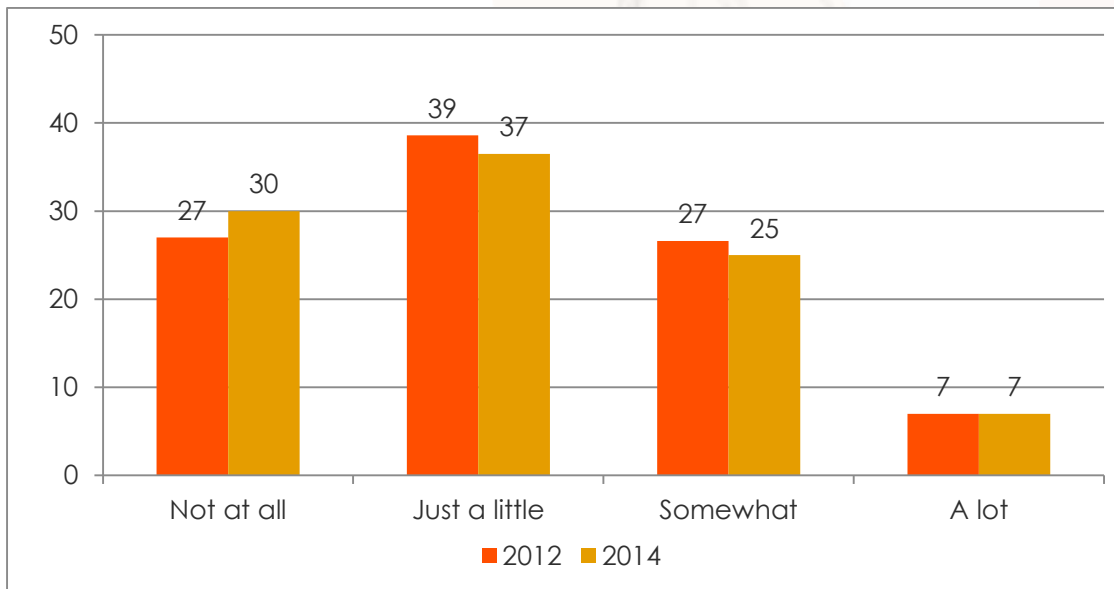
- About two-thirds (64%) of Nigerians believe that the INEC is "ready to hold credible free and fair elections" (Figure 11), while 18% say the commission is not ready and 18% are undecided – perhaps due in part to the fact that distribution of voters' cards is still not completed. In a question asked in 2012 but not in 2014, 67% rated the INEC as a "neutral body," while 31% said the INEC "makes decisions that favour particular people, parties or interests."
- Overall, however, there is limited trust in the commission, with only 32% of Nigerians saying they trust the INEC "somewhat" or "a lot" (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Is the INEC ready for elections? | 2014



Respondents were asked: Concerning the forthcoming 2015 elections, do you think that the Independent National Electoral Commission, or INEC, is ready to hold credible free and fair elections? (%)

Figure 12: Trust in the INEC | 2012-2014



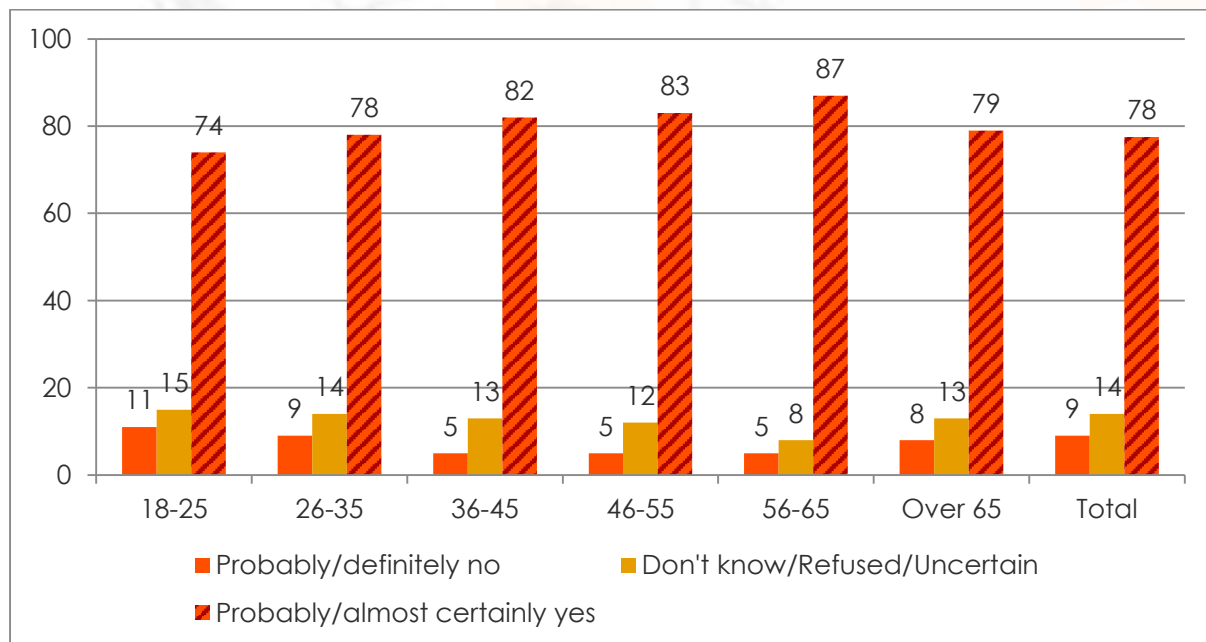
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust the Independent National Electoral Commission, or INEC, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (%)

Voter engagement

Nigerians are broadly engaged in public affairs and believe strongly in the value of voting. While a large majority of citizens expect to vote in the February elections, there are significant variations by age, gender, and location.

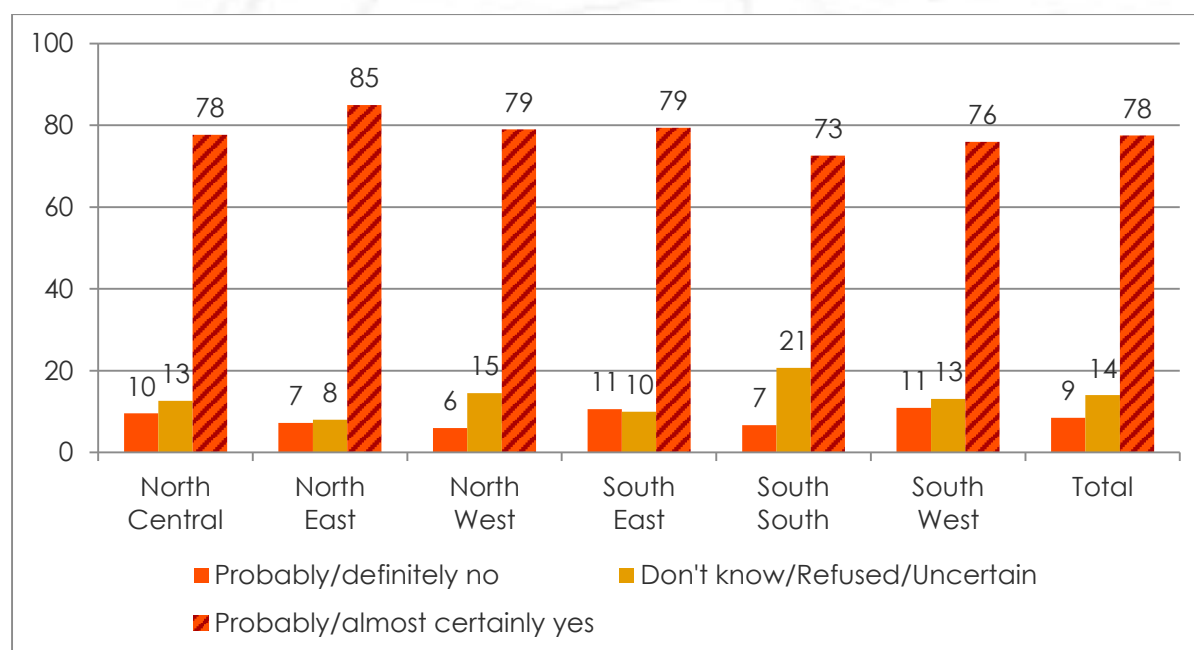
- Six of 10 Nigerians (60%) say they are interested in public affairs, and 83% discuss politics at least occasionally. Nigerians also see voting as an essential part of their political system, with 81% affirming that this is something citizens should always do in a democracy.
- By a similar margin – 78% – Nigerians express an intention to vote in the 2015 elections. The intention to vote increases with age. Fully 87% of those aged 56-65 say they intend to vote, compared to 74% among 18- to 25-year olds (Figure 13). Men are more likely (83%) than women (73%) to plan on voting.
- Voting intentions also vary across zones. At one end of the spectrum, citizens in the North East are highly motivated, with 85% saying they intend to vote (Figure 14). However, some voters in this insecure region seem certain to be disenfranchised due to takeover of territory by insurgents or population displacement. By comparison, 73% of citizens in South South express an intention to vote, the lowest level among the six zones.

Figure 13: Planning to vote, by age | 2014



Respondents were asked: *Do you intend to vote in the forthcoming 2015 elections? (%)*

Figure 14: Planning to vote, by zone | 2014

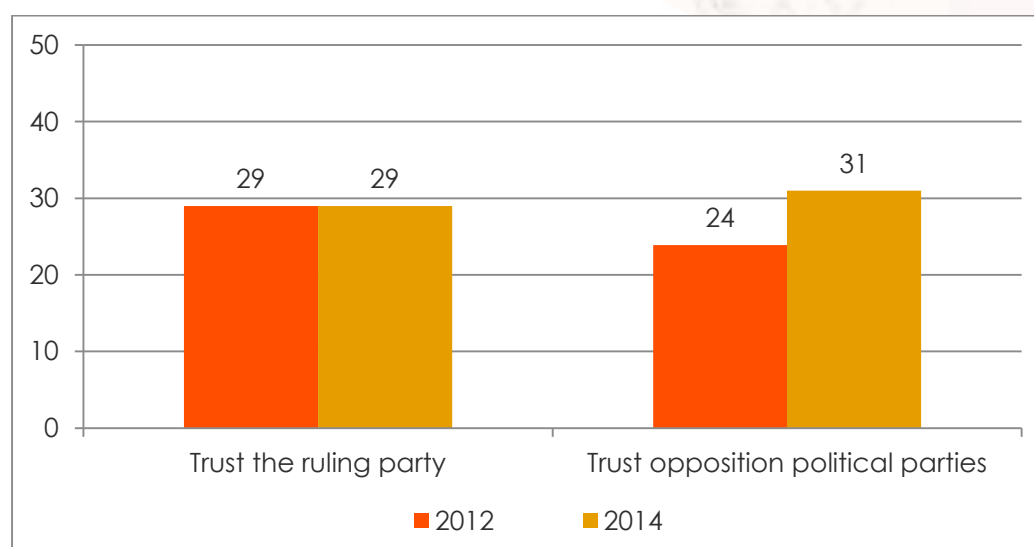


Party evaluations

Trust in political parties remains low among Nigerians, although the opposition has attracted some confidence from the public. Citizens broadly perceive a two-way choice between the ruling party and the main opposition party. On many issues, party preferences for incumbents and challengers are almost evenly balanced.

- Nigerians express growing trust in opposition parties. Compared with the 2012 survey, trust in opposition parties has risen from 24% to 31%, while trust in the ruling party has remained unchanged at 29% (Figure 15).

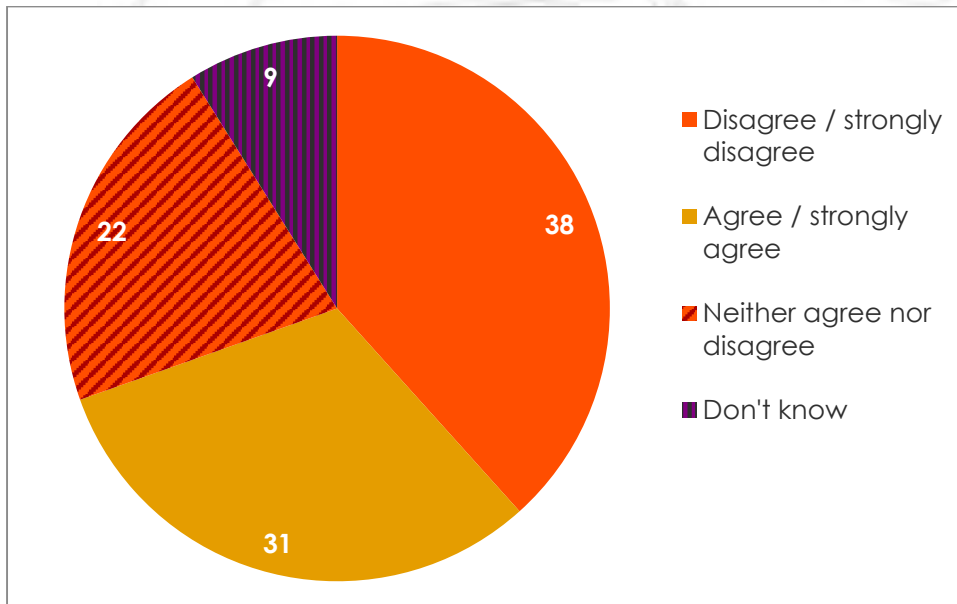
Figure 15: Trust in ruling and opposition parties | 2012-2014



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

- About one-third (31%) of Nigerians believe the political opposition offers a “viable alternative vision and plan for the country,” but 38% disagree, and 31% are ambivalent (Figure 16).

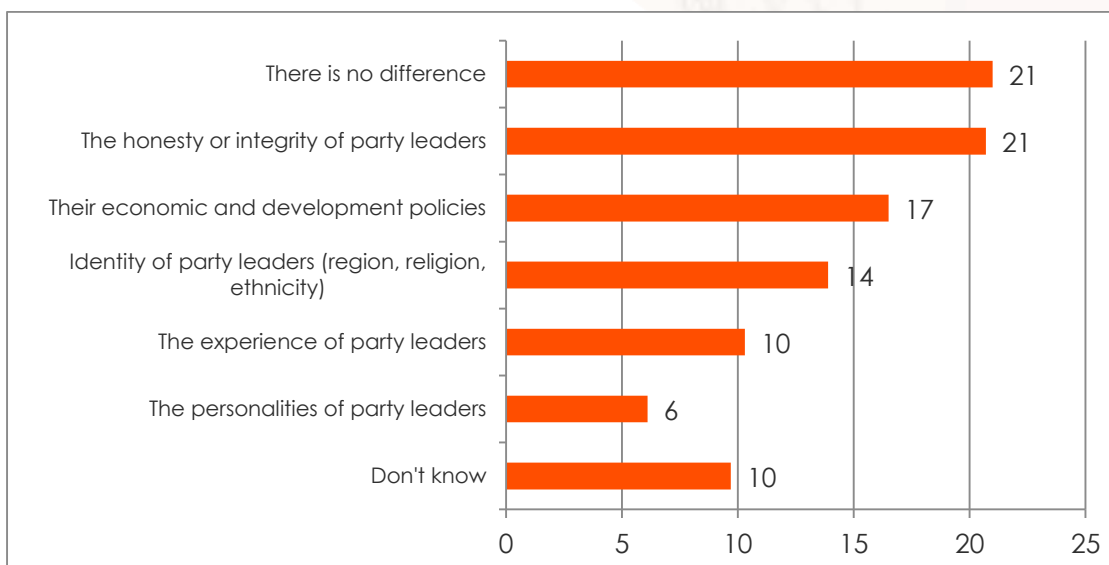
Figure 16: Opposition offers viable alternative | 2014



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in Nigeria presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country? (%)

- A large majority – 68% – say there are important differences between the ruling and opposition parties, with differences in the integrity or honesty of party leaders cited most frequently (21%), followed by contrasts in economic and development policies (17%). Just 14% attribute the main distinctions to the religious, ethnic, or regional identities of party leaders or members (Figure 17).

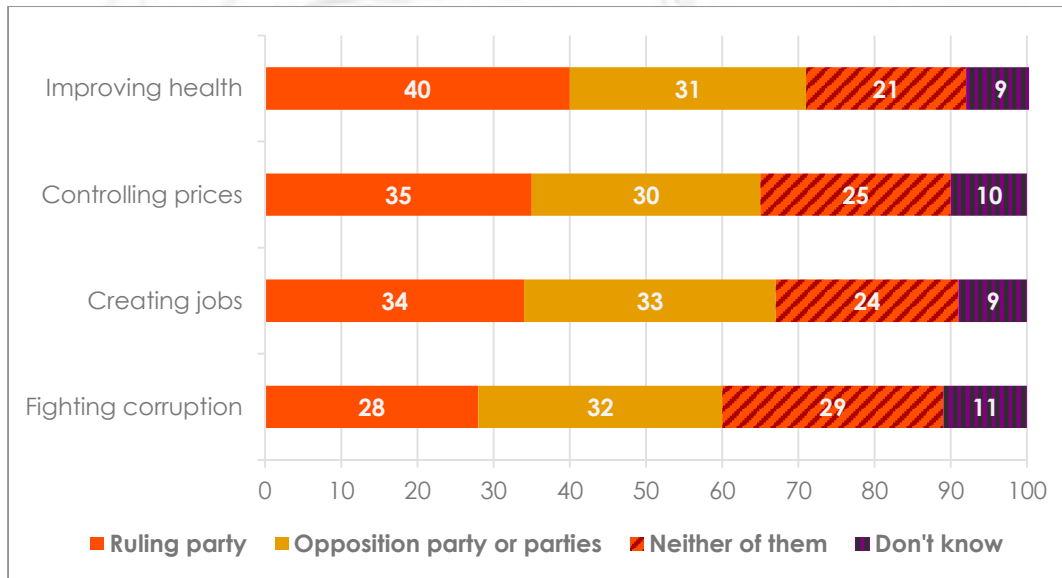
Figure 17: Differences between ruling and opposition parties | 2014



Respondents were asked: Which of the following do you see as the most important difference between the ruling party and opposition parties in Nigeria? (%)

- Nigerians are almost evenly split on the question of which party would do best in managing critical issues. Citizens favour the ruling party in managing health and controlling prices while slightly preferring the opposition for fighting corruption (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Most capable party | 2014



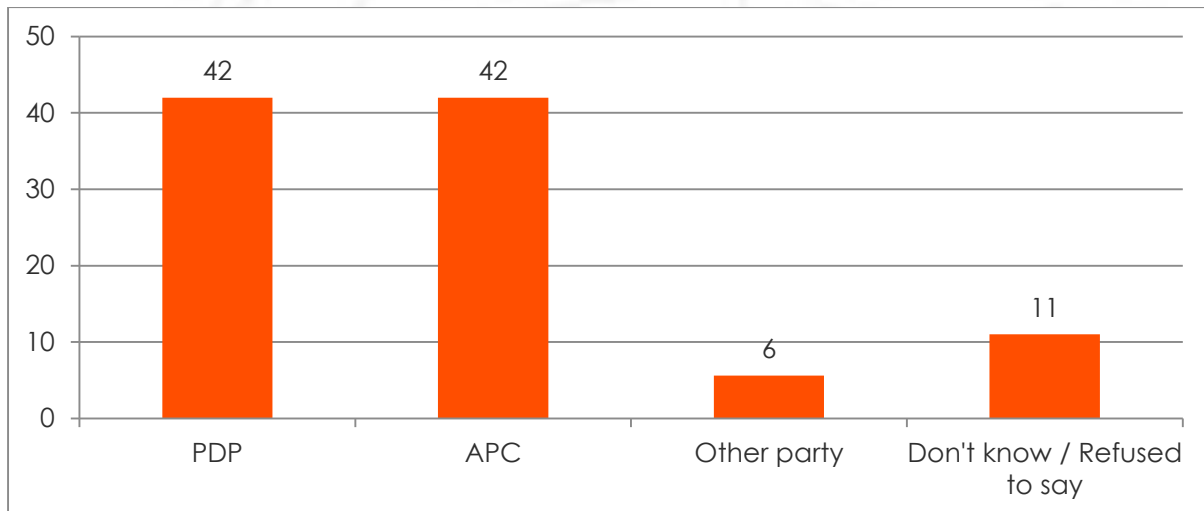
Respondents were asked: Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (%)

Voting intentions

The Afrobarometer Round 6 survey was conducted in December 2014. The results presented here offer a snapshot of voter attitudes just before the presidential campaigns went into full swing. Elections are fluid moments, and voter perceptions can vary widely during a campaign season. This survey reflects views and partisan preferences as expressed approximately two months before the planned Election Day of 14 February 2015. As in any close contest, however, small shifts in partisan preferences in the closing days of the campaign could swing the election in the direction of either party.

- Based on the expressed preferences of likely voters, the presidential race is too close to call. Among all respondents, 39% say they expect to vote for the PDP, while 38% say they will vote for the APC. Among likely voters (those saying they will probably or almost certainly vote, as shown in Figures 13 and 14), the vote is evenly divided: 42% express a preference for the ruling PDP, and 42% favour the opposition APC (Figure 19). In addition, 6% lean toward other parties, and 11% were undecided or refused to answer.

Figure 19: Voting intentions among likely voters, presidential election | 2014



Respondents were asked: *If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for? (% of likely voters; due to rounding, reported percentages may not add up to 100%)*

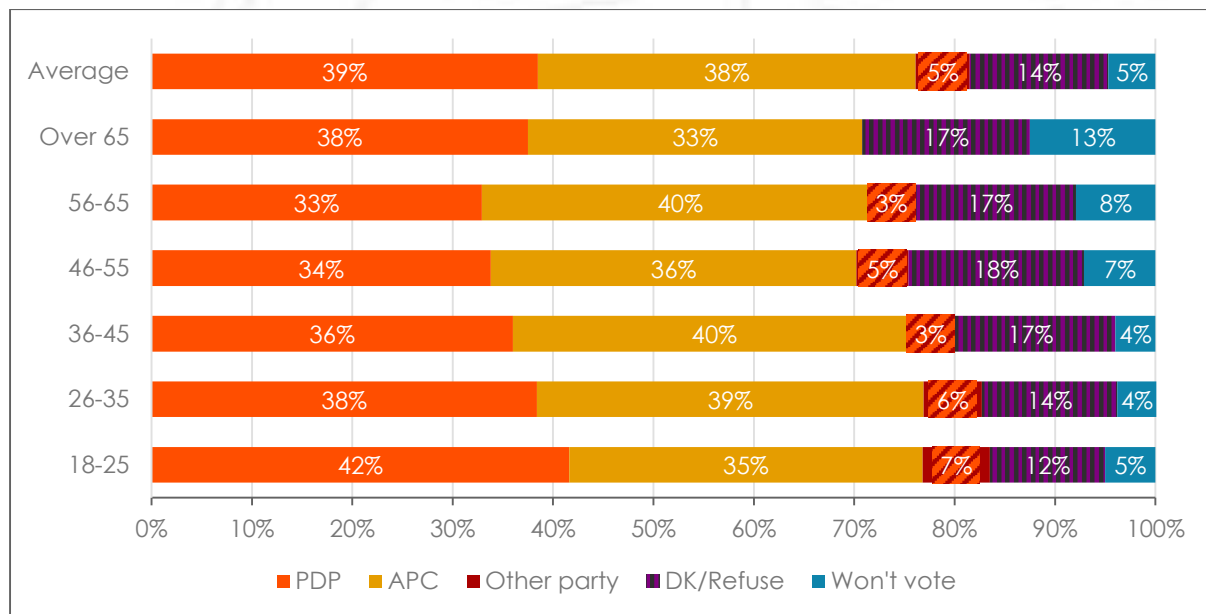
- Nigerians anticipate a close race. When asked their expectation of the outcome, 40% predicted a win for the PDP, while 38% expected the APC to prevail. The difference in these estimates is within the survey's margin of sampling error.

Bases of party support

Concerns about the polarization of the Nigerian electorate are partially supported by the partisan profiles of the leading political parties. While differences in party preference across gender and age group are moderate and not sharply defined, distinctions across the country's six zones show much wider gaps. The two major parties have distinct bases of support.

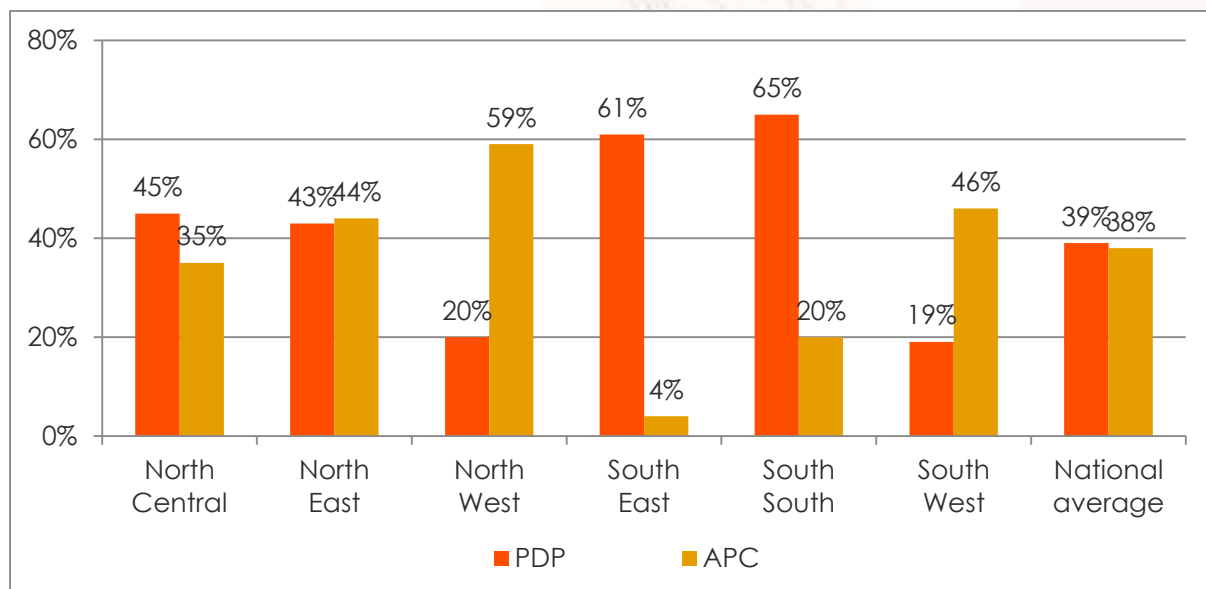
- The two major parties show only minor differences in the age and gender composition of their supporters. Among all eligible voters, the youngest age cohort, those 18-25 years, favours the PDP over the APC (42% to 35%) (Figure 20), as does the oldest, those above 65, who favour the PDP by 38% to 33% over the APC. In contrast, voters aged 36-45 and those aged 56-65 reveal slight preferences for the APC. For other age groups, differences are less than the margin of error.
- Among men, the parties have almost even support (39% for PDP vs. 40% for APC), while women slightly prefer the PDP (38% vs. 35% for the APC).

Figure 20: Presidential voting intentions by age (all respondents) | 2014



- Much more substantial differences are evident across the country's geopolitical zones (Figure 21). A preponderance of citizens express support for the PDP in the North Central (45% for PDP/35% for APC), South East (61% PDP/4% APC), and South South (65% PDP/20% APC). The APC is favoured in the North West (59% APC/20% PDP) and South West (46% APC/19% PDP) zones, while those in the North East are evenly divided between the two parties (43% PDP/44% APC).

Figure 21: Presidential voting intentions by zone (all respondents) | 2014



Conclusion

The general election of 2015 is on track to be the most competitive in Nigeria's history, based on the preferences of citizens and likely voters expressed in a nationwide Afrobarometer survey in December 2014. Large majorities of Nigerians support elections as the mechanism for choosing their leaders, have confidence in their ability to vote as they choose, and intend to go to the polls. A sizeable majority believe that the INEC is adequately prepared to manage the polls, but many citizens also lack confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and express concerns about security and intimidation around the elections.

Amidst public perceptions of an uneven government response to the critical challenges facing the country, Nigerians are roughly evenly divided in their preference for the ruling party and the main opposition challengers. Support for the opposition is at the highest level recorded in any Afrobarometer survey, and at the least, the challengers are set to make their strongest showing since the restoration of multiparty elections in 1990. There are, however, sharp differences in party support across the country's zones. And most importantly, the campaign environment is fluid and highly competitive. As such, the race remains too close to call.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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