

Citizen perspectives and experiences participating in the 2025 elections

Summary

This brief presents citizens' perspectives and experiences across key stages of the electoral process, including voter registration, election campaigns, voting, and the announcement of final results. The analysis draws on two nationally representative pre-election surveys conducted by the Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR) in July and August 2025 with 2,400 adult Malawians each, complemented by a post-election telephone survey of 305 consenting respondents from the pre-election samples to capture voters' experiences and perceptions after the elections.

The findings indicate high levels of citizen participation and generally positive experiences throughout the electoral process. A large majority of adult Malawians reported being registered to vote, with most finding the registration process straightforward. Citizen engagement during the campaign period was also notably strong; over half of eligible voters attended political rallies, and nearly 70% closely followed the campaign. Participation and interest were higher among men and older adults compared to women and youth. Importantly, fears of political intimidation or violence were lower during the campaign than in the pre-campaign period, suggesting a more peaceful electoral environment than initially expected. The findings also show broad support for using technology to transmit election results, though this support varied by region, residence, and education level, highlighting the need for targeted communication to build trust and understanding around technological innovations in elections.

Post-election telephone survey results reveal high voter turnout among participants and largely positive voting experiences. Most voters reported short waiting times and expressed strong confidence in the secrecy of their ballots. Perceptions of electoral integrity were notably high: the vast majority viewed the 2025 elections as free and fair and trusted that the results announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) accurately reflected the voters' will. Assessments of the MEC's performance were overwhelmingly positive, particularly regarding security at polling stations and the commission's efforts to ensure that citizens could vote without fear or intimidation. However, a notable minority expressed dissatisfaction with the time taken to announce final election results, despite these being released within the legally mandated timeframe.

The findings emphasize the importance of maintaining neutrality in law enforcement, ensuring the impartiality of MEC officials and polling center staff, and intensifying voter education campaigns to uphold free and fair elections.

Introduction

Voting is the most recognizable and common form of political participation, serving as a crucial link between citizens' preferences and policymakers' actions (Powell, 2000). They empower citizens to select representatives who address their needs and hold accountable those leaders who do not perform effectively. Further, competitive elections are closely associated with strong democracy (Afrobarometer, 2025).

Across Africa, elections remain the preferred method for choosing leaders, and citizens value their right to vote. In the most recent Afrobarometer surveys conducted in 38 countries between 2024 and 2025, nearly three quarters (74%) of African citizens expressed support for choosing leaders through regular, open, and honest elections. For Malawi, the comparable figures were 69%.

However, concerns about declining electoral integrity and reduced trust in election-management bodies have grown over the past decade (Akinochi, 2024). These trends pose risks to democratic stability, as evidenced by the recent surge of coups in parts of West Africa. When elections fail to meet citizens' expectations, dissatisfaction with democratic practices and distrust in governments formed through these elections are likely to increase (M'Cormack-Hale & Dome, 2022). Furthermore, this disillusionment may undermine citizens' motivation to participate in the electoral process, threatening democratic survival on the continent.

Given the intricate relationship between elections and democracy, measuring democracy often involves considering citizens' perspectives and experiences in the electoral process (Elklit and Reynolds, 2005). Therefore, it is essential to understand citizens' views and experiences during the electoral process, including voter registration, voting for candidates and parties, and contesting for office.

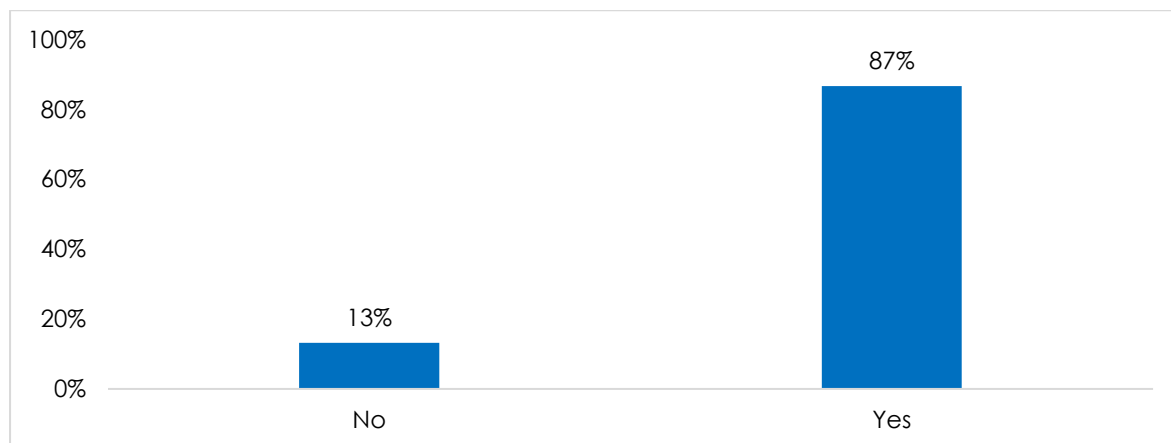
To achieve this, the Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR), with support from its partners, conducted two nationally representative pre-election surveys two months before Malawi's general election on 16 September 2025. These surveys gathered citizens' perspectives and experiences related to activities leading up to the elections, such as voter registration and election campaigns, and assessed their expectations regarding the integrity of the upcoming elections. To capture citizens' experiences with the voting process, IPOR also conducted a post-election telephone survey with 305 participants drawn from the pre-election survey who consented to be contacted again for a follow-up interview. It is important to note that the views of these 305 participants are not representative of all adult Malawians and should not be overgeneralized. Therefore, the interpretation of the findings from the post-election telephone survey is limited to the respondents alone. Despite this limitation, these experiences provide valuable insights into the voting process.

Key findings

Participation and experiences with the registration process

A significant majority of adults, 87%, indicated that they were registered to vote in the 2025 general elections (Figure 1). This figure is notably higher than the official voter registration data from the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC), which revealed that only about two-thirds of eligible voters had registered. This discrepancy is not unexpected, as responses to this question may be influenced by social desirability bias. Many citizens are likely to claim they registered to vote, even if they did not, as being registered is viewed as a more responsible and desirable civic duty. Among a few (13%) who did not register, many of them (23%) cited lack of a national identity card as the main reason they failed to register.

Figure 1: Proportion of registered voters in the 2025 election

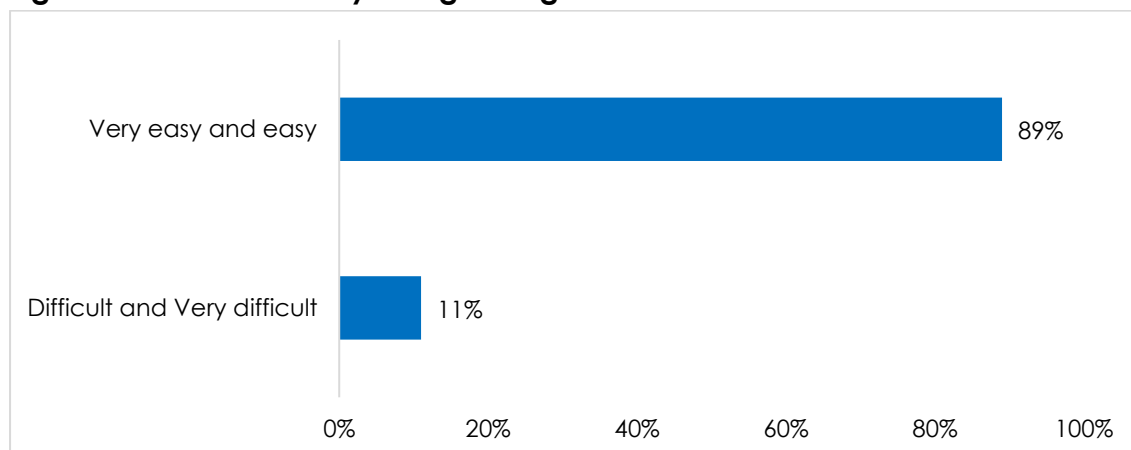


Respondents were asked: Are you registered to vote in the upcoming 2025 elections?

Source: IPOR Pre-election survey, July 2025

Nearly nine in ten (89%) of registered voters found the registration process easy or very easy. However, 11% of Malawians reported that the process was difficult or very difficult, indicating an opportunity for improvement.

Figure 2: Ease or difficulty of registering to vote



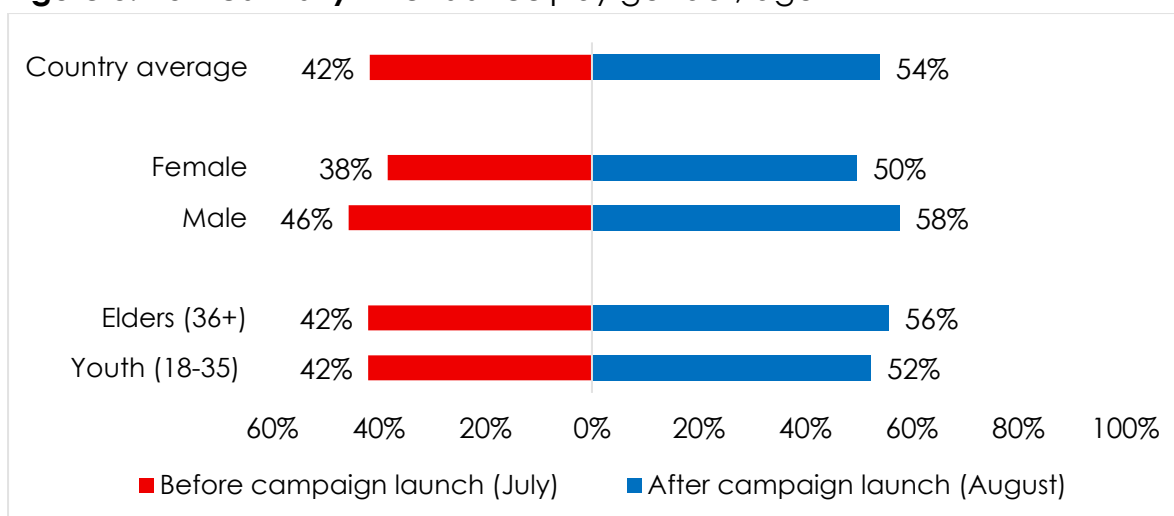
Respondents were asked: How easy or difficult was the registration process at the voter registration centre? (Source: IPOR pre-election survey, July 2025)

Citizen participation in election campaign

Overall, most Malawians were engaged and informed during the campaign and electoral process. More than half (54%) reported attending a political rally or event, with higher attendance among men (58%) compared to women (50%), and among older adults (56%) aged over 35 compared to the youth (52%) aged 18-35 (Figure 3).

Political rally attendance saw a significant increase after the official campaign launch, rising from 42% before the launch to 54% afterward. This increase was consistent for both men and women, though it was slightly more pronounced among older adults than among the youth.

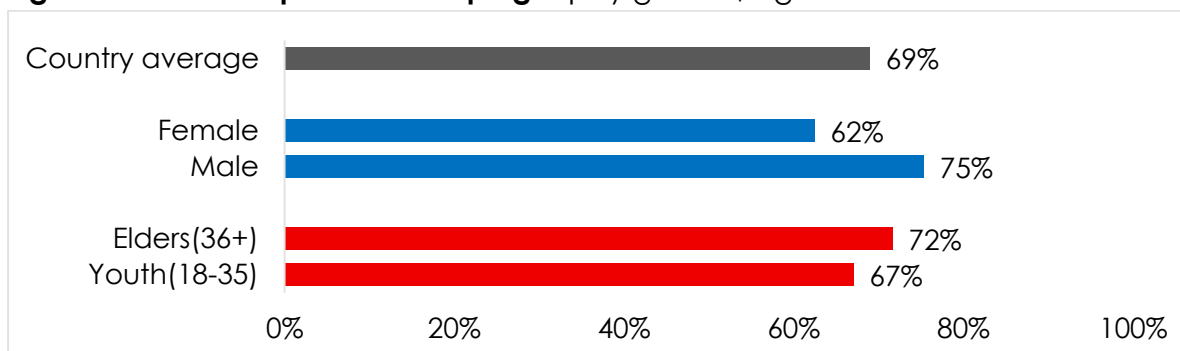
Figure 3: Political Rally Attendance | by gender, age



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance? **Attended a political rally or event?** (Source: IPOR pre-election survey, July and August 2025)

Over two-thirds (69%) of Malawians followed the political campaigns closely. Interest in political campaigns was higher among older adults (72%) compared to the youth (67%) and higher among men (75%) compared to women (62%) (Figure 4).

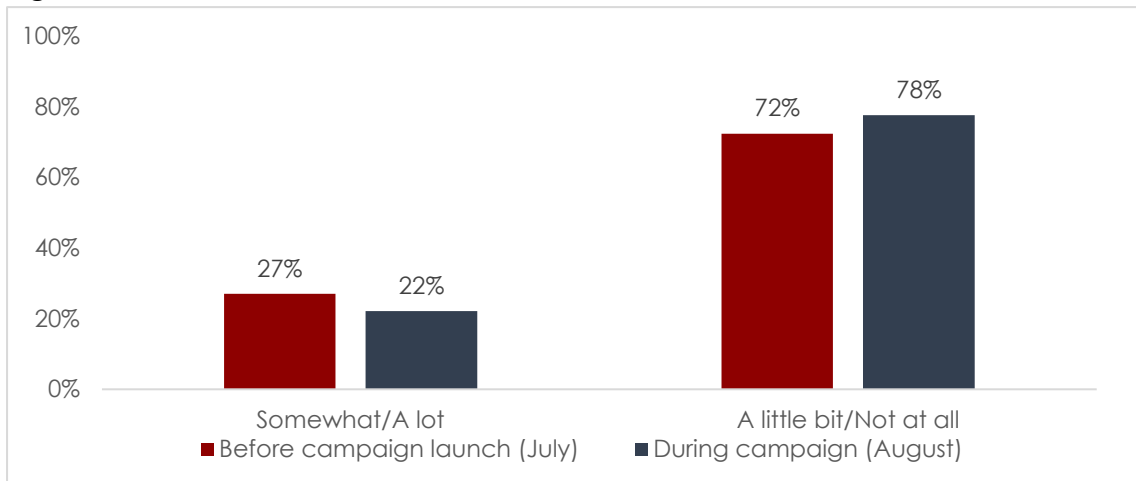
Figure 4: Interest in political campaigns | by gender, age



Respondents were asked: How closely are you following the political campaigns for the forthcoming general elections? Source: IPOR pre-election survey, August 2025

The pre-election surveys further examined concerns about political intimidation and violence during the election campaign. As shown in Figure 5, the findings indicate that a majority of Malawians (78%) did not fear becoming victims of political intimidation or violence during the campaign. The level of concern was lower during the campaign (22%) compared to the pre-campaign period (27%). This suggests that the campaigns were more peaceful than Malawians had anticipated prior to their onset.

Figure 5: Fear of Political Intimidation and Violence

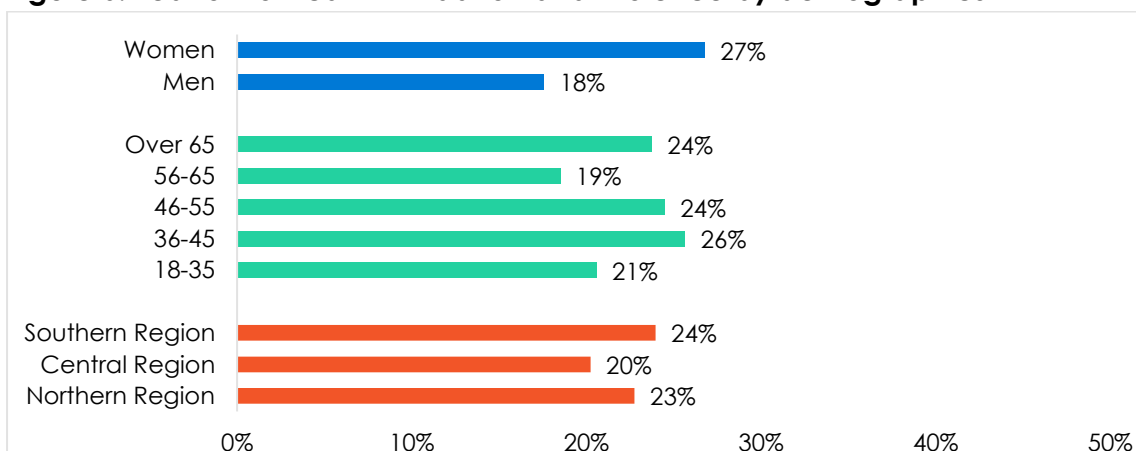


Respondents were asked: *During the campaigns for the forthcoming 2025 elections, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence*

Source: *IPOR pre-election survey, August 2025*

Fear of political intimidation or violence was higher among women (27%) than men (18%) (Figure 6). Younger individuals aged 18-35 (21%) were less fearful of becoming victims of political intimidation or violence during the election campaigns compared to those aged 36-45. Regional differences were also apparent, with citizens from the central region (20%) expressing less fear of political intimidation or violence than those in the Southern (24%) and Northern regions (23%).

Figure 6: Fear of Political Intimidation and Violence by demographics

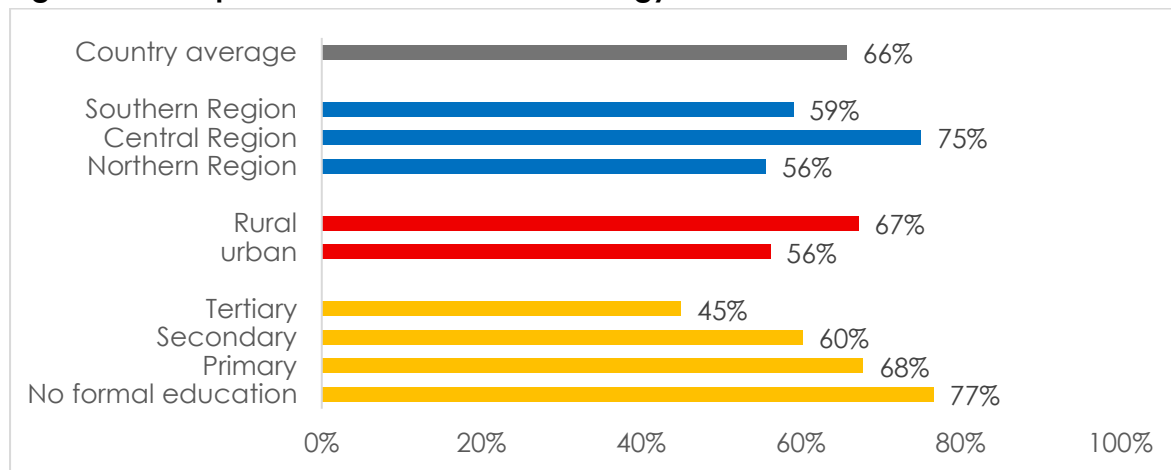


Respondents were asked: *During the campaigns for the forthcoming 2025 elections, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence. (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")* **Source:** *IPOR pre-election survey, August 2025*

The survey also evaluated citizens' opinions on the MEC's electoral reform, specifically the adoption of technology for transmitting election results from polling centres to the main tally centre. As shown in Figure 7, approximately two-thirds of eligible voters either somewhat or strongly supported the use of technology for this purpose. Acceptance of technology was notably higher in the Central region (75%) compared to the Northern (56%) and Southern regions (59%).

Interestingly, urban residents exhibited less trust in technology than their rural counterparts, with 67% of rural residents supporting its use compared to just 56% of urban residents. Additionally, more educated individuals tend to be somewhat hesitant about using technology for transmitting election results, with only 45% of those holding post-secondary qualifications in favour, compared to 68% of individuals who completed only primary education.

Figure 7: Acceptance of the use of technology to transmit elections results



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statements? Malawi Electoral Commission should use technology to transmit election results from the polling centres to the main tally centre. (Figure 7 presents % who somewhat or strongly agrees) Source: IPOR pre-election survey I, July 2025)

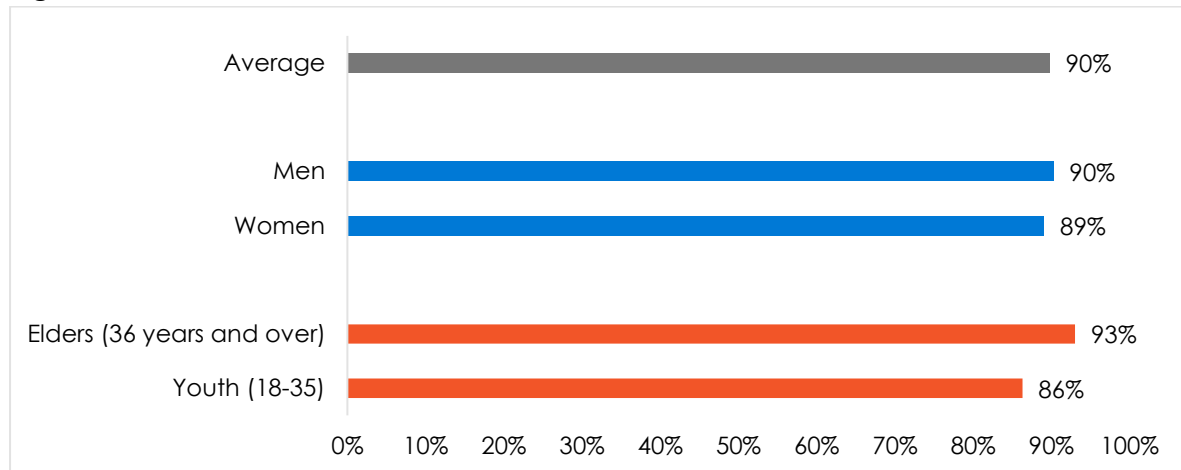
Citizens' perspectives and experience with the voting process

As highlighted above, IPOR conducted a post-election telephone survey with 305 adult participants from the pre-election surveys who had consented to be contacted for a follow-up interview after the election. The sample comprised 185 men and 119 women aged 18 and older. Among the 305 participants, 55 were from the Northern region, 129 from the Central region, and 120 from the Southern region. 146 were in the youth category (18-35 years) and 158 were older adults (36 years and over). It is important to emphasize that the results of this telephone survey do not represent all adult Malawians given the small sample size and self selection bias embedded in telephone surveys; they only reflect the views of those surveyed.

Citizens' participation in the voting

Overall, 90% of respondents reported voting in the previous election on September 16, 2025 (Figure 8). The voting patterns revealed no significant differences by gender. However, a slightly higher percentage of older adults (93%) aged 36 and over voted compared to the youth (86%) aged 18 to 35. Among those who did not vote, the majority cited a lack of registration as the reason. Only one respondent indicated that he did not vote because his name was missing from the voters' register, despite being registered.

Figure 8: Voter turnout in the 2025 elections

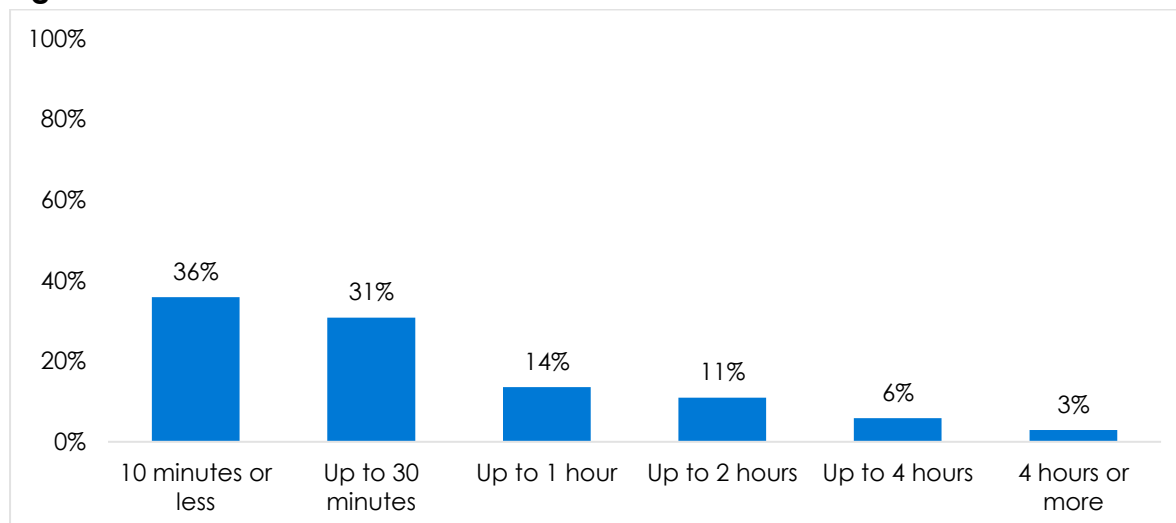


Respondents were asked: *People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they decided not to vote, or they were unable to go. How about you? Did you vote in the national election held on 16 September 2025*

Source: *IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025*

When asked how long it took to cast their ballot, two thirds of voters (67%) reported that it took 30 minutes or less, with 36% stating it took no more than 10 minutes (Figure 9). Fewer than 10% of voters indicated that it took 4 hours or more to vote. This suggests that the voting process was both easy and fast, likely due to the efficiency of polling station staff.

Figure 9: Time taken to vote

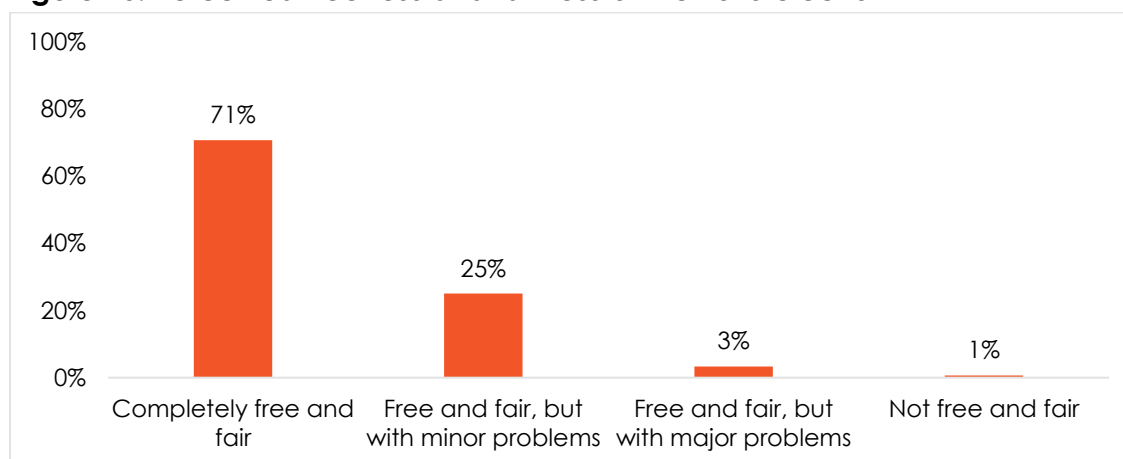


Respondents who voted were asked: *Approximately how long did you wait in line before being able to vote? [Select lowest category that applies, e.g. a response of “15 minutes” would be coded as 2=Up to 30 minutes]* **Source:** *IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025*

Confidence in Electoral Integrity and Processes

Overall, nearly three-fourths (71%) of the post-election telephone survey participants believe that the 2025 election was completely free and fair, while a quarter (25%) consider it free and fair but with minor issues (Figure 10). In contrast, only 4% of participants felt that the election was not free and fair or had major problems. This suggests that the Malawi Electoral Commission effectively ensured the election's credibility.

Figure 10: Perceived freeness and fairness of the 2025 election



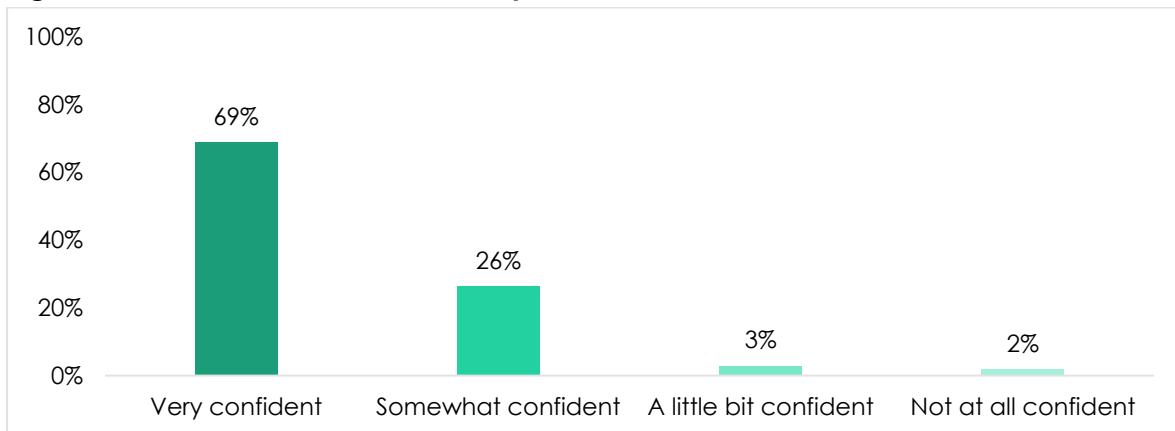
Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the 2025 election? Was it: [Read out options]*

Source: *IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025*

Over two-thirds of post-election survey participants who had voted in the 2025 elections expressed strong confidence in the secrecy and confidentiality of their votes, while 26% reported being somewhat confident (Figure 11). In contrast, only 5%

of respondents felt that their votes were not secret. This reflects positively on the polling staff's performance.

Figure 11: Confidence in the secrecy of the vote

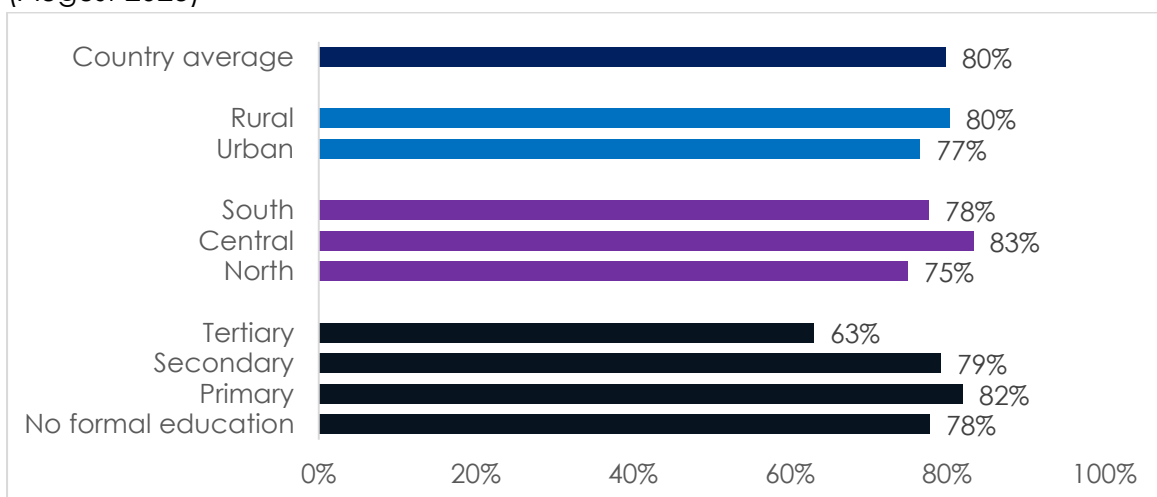


Respondents who voted were asked: How confident were you that your vote was secret?

Source: IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025

A month before the 16 September 2025 elections, a large proportion of Malawians (80%) had expressed confidence that the Malawi Electoral Commission would announce results that would truly mirror the wishes of voters (Figure 12). When disaggregated by locality, slightly more rural Malawians (80%) professed higher levels of trust in MEC to announce true presidential results compared to rural residents (77%). Residents of the central region (83%) although southerners (78% and northerners (75%) were close behind. In terms of education, Malawians with lower levels of education on average had higher levels of trust in MEC to announce correct results while those with higher education tended to be more doubtful.

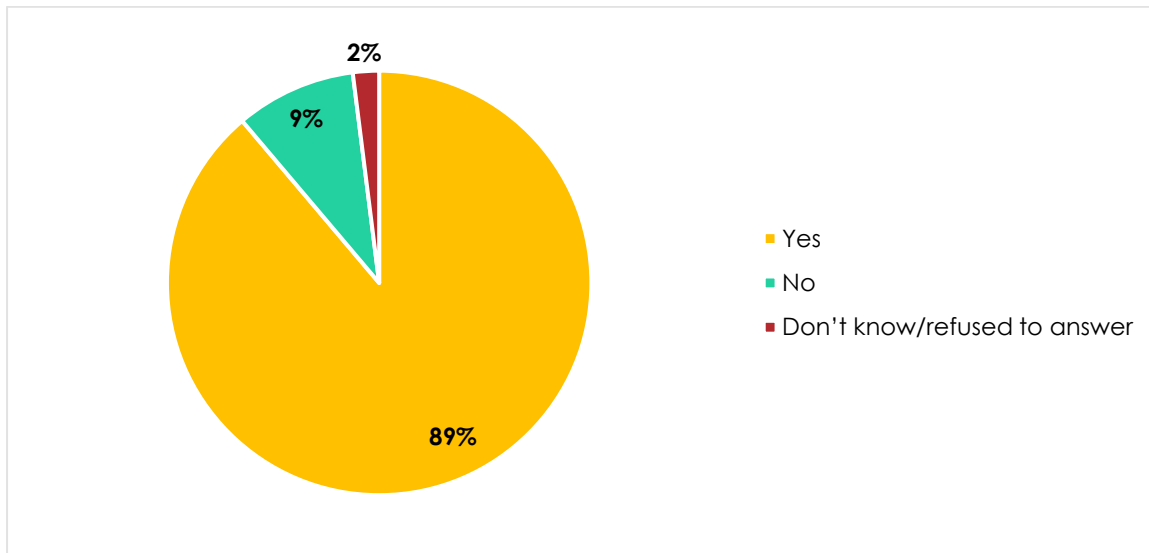
Figure 12: Trust in the validity of Presidential election results | by demographics (August 2025)



Respondents were asked: Do you trust that the presidential election results that will be announced by the MEC will be correct and reflect the ballots cast? (**Note: the figure displays the percentage who have trust**) (Source: IPOR pre-election survey, August 2025)

When the question of credibility of elections was asked a few months after the elections, an even higher proportion of respondents (89%) indicated that they were confident that the results that were announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission accurately reflected the will of voters. Only 9% lacked confidence in the validity of the election results (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Trust in the validity of Presidential election results



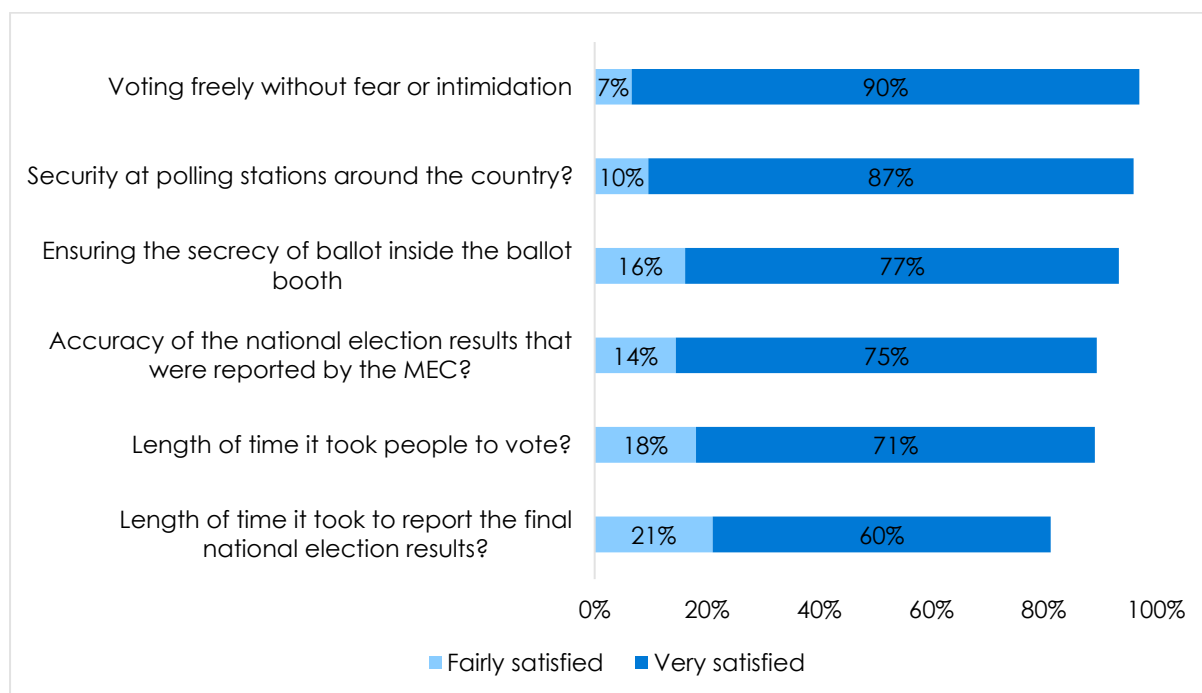
Respondents were asked: Do you trust that the presidential election results that were announced by the MEC were correct and reflected the ballots cast?

Source: IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025

Perspectives on the Performance of the Malawi Electoral Commission

Respondents were asked to evaluate the Malawi Electoral Commission's performance in handling various aspects of the election. The results presented in Figure 14 show that respondents were largely satisfied with all aspects of the elections. Notably, 90% expressed strong satisfaction with the commission's efforts to ensure voters could cast their ballots without fear or intimidation. Additionally, 87% were satisfied with the security provided at polling stations nationwide, reflecting positively on the professionalism of the security agents that were tasked to oversee the voting process. However, a sizeable proportion of survey respondents (21%) were unhappy with the time it took to announce the final election results, despite the commission releasing them within the 8 days mandated by Malawi's electoral laws. Overall, 60% reported being very satisfied with the time it took to report the final national election results.

Figure 14: Performance of the Malawi Electoral Commission



Respondents were asked: *Now, I would like to ask you about how the Malawi Electoral Commission, or MEC, handled some aspects of the election. Please tell me if you are satisfied or dissatisfied with each of the following: [Probe for strength of opinion.]*

Source: *IPOR Post-election telephone survey, January 2025*

Conclusion

The findings from IPOR's pre- and post-election surveys reveal that citizen participation in Malawi's 2025 general elections was notably high, with overall experiences of the electoral process being largely positive. A significant majority of citizens reported being registered to vote, actively engaged with political campaigns, and participating in voting on election day. The registration and voting processes were generally perceived as straightforward, efficient, and well-managed, with most voters experiencing minimal wait times and expressing confidence in the secrecy of their ballots.

Crucially, the electoral environment during the campaign period was more peaceful than many citizens had anticipated. The reduction in fears of political intimidation and violence contributed to ongoing citizen engagement and trust in the electoral process. Post-election findings further indicate strong confidence in the integrity of the 2025 elections, with most respondents viewing them as free and fair, and trusting that the results announced by the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) accurately reflected the voters' intentions.

Voter sentiments indicate that the MEC and law enforcement officers effectively ensured free and fair elections. They provided security at polling stations, allowing citizens to vote without fear or intimidation while maintaining the confidentiality of

votes in the ballot booth. This aligns with the key measures that eligible voters identified in the pre-election survey to guarantee a fair election. The neutrality of law enforcement ranked highest, followed by the prompt resolution of post-election disputes and transparent vote counting (see Figure A1 in the appendix).

However, the study highlights several areas that require attention. Barriers to voter registration, particularly the absence of national identity cards, continue to exclude some eligible citizens. This indicates a need to intensify voter education campaigns to ensure that individuals obtain the necessary documents for voter registration. The registration period for the 2025 election was extended to allow those without national identity cards to visit the National Registration Bureau and acquire the required documents. However, some individuals still failed to register likely due to lack of this information.

While satisfaction with the MEC's performance was high, frustrations regarding the timing and communication of election results remain. Additionally, lower levels of engagement among youth and women during campaigns suggest a need for more inclusive participation strategies.

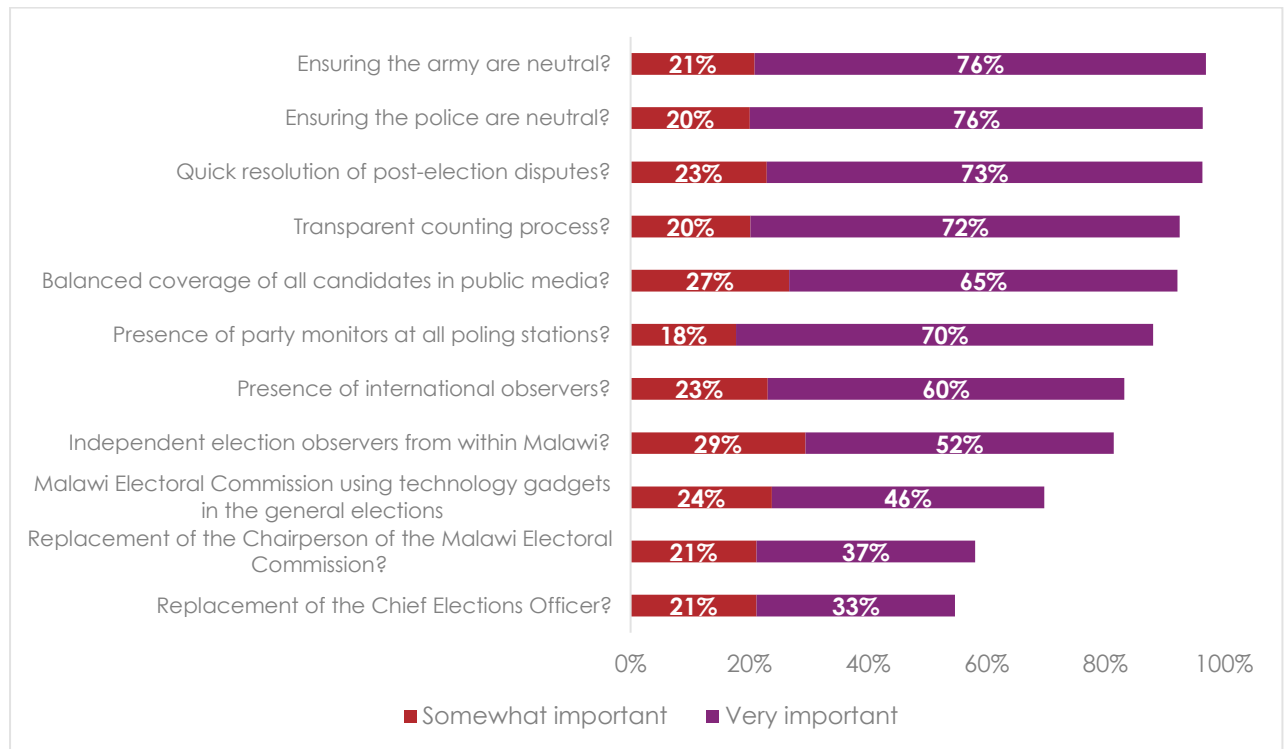
In summary, the findings indicate that Malawi's electoral processes are functioning credibly; however, targeted reforms and investments are essential to enhance inclusivity, transparency, and public confidence in future elections.

References

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Appendix

Figure A1: Important measures to ensure free and fair elections



Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you think each of the following measures will be important or not in ensuring that the 2025 general elections will be free and fair. [Read out options]

Source: IPOR pre-election survey II, August 2025