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INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY, CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC POLICY IN AFRICA

Main findings from the Zambia Election Research Network Round 1 Survey

Zambia Election Research Network

Data were analysed and commentary written for the Zambia Election Research Network by Nicole Beardsworth, Mundia Kabinga, Jeremy Seekings and Michael Wahman.

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Main findings from the Zambia Election Research Network (ZERN) Round 1 Survey

Executive summary

Zambia underwent its third transition of power in 2021, following democratic transitions from ruling to opposition parties in 1991 and 2011. The administration under President Hakainde Hichilema's United Party for National Development (UPND) inherited a country that had undergone a debt default in 2020, was characterised by rampant inflation, and appeared to be experiencing a broad breakdown of the rule of law and assault on democratic institutions.

As the country heads towards the 2026 elections, the Zambia Elections Research Network probed public perceptions of the last four years – including the administration's policy choices and service delivery – and public expectations ahead of the 2026 polls. The survey asked questions about political parties and campaigns, the assessment of national conditions and government performance, institutional trust, and voting intentions. It ran from June to November 2025.

When asked about whether their economic conditions were better or worse than 12 months ago, respondents were split, with 41% reporting that things had gotten worse, while 38% reported that their personal conditions had improved. This mirrors people's perceptions of the broader economy, where answers were similarly polarised.

A majority of our respondents were confident that the 2026 elections would be completely free and fair (51%) and did not fear for their safety (70%), but a significant minority – especially supporters of opposition parties – had concerns about the upcoming polls. While 62% of UPND supporters replied that they expected the elections to be 'completely free and fair', only 36% of opposition party supporters concurred. More than one quarter (28%) of opposition party supporters said either that the elections would not be free and fair or that there would be major problems.

When asked how they planned to vote in the upcoming elections, 55% of respondents reported planning to vote for the president, 13% intended for an opposition party and – notably – 32% didn't know or refused to answer the question. While support for the president is high, there nonetheless remains potential for a strong opposition leader to emerge and capture the substantial proportion of swing voters and reluctant respondents.

At the parliamentary level, just 33% of surveyed people planned to vote for their sitting member of parliament, while 24% would prefer the same party to put forward a different parliamentary candidate. The results were even starker at local government level, with just 15% planning to vote for their councillor, and 33% who wanted the party that holds the seat to put forward a new candidate. This underscores the importance of primary elections in the electoral process.

The Zambian opposition is fragmented but opposition supporters appear to be actively looking for a political home, while partisanship has a clearly important effect on shaping perceptions of politics, the preceding four years and the upcoming elections.

Background and methodology

The Zambia Election Research Network (ZERN) survey is a planned three-wave telephonic panel study of public opinion on the 2026 Zambian election. This briefing paper presents the main findings from Round 1 (R1) of the survey. ZERN is a consortium of researchers, comprising researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of Texas at Austin (UT-Austin), and the University of Witwatersrand, as well as from within Zambia. Ubuntu Research and Rural Development Company in Lusaka was commissioned to carry out the survey on behalf of the consortium.

R1 of the survey established the baseline for ZERN. It covers the long pre-campaign period of almost six months from 24 June to 15 November 2025. The long fieldwork period was necessary as we had established nationally representative sample quotas. Results are not representative of any given time period in the fieldwork period (such as the last weeks of data collection), and public opinion may have evolved during data collection. However, in this particular context, it is important to note that all data were collected after the passing of former president (and opposition leader) Edgar Lungu (5 June 2025) and before Bill 7 was passed by parliament (15 December 2025). Most data were collected prior to the Electoral Commission of Zambia's mass registration drive (13 October to 29 November 2025).

The survey uses a stratified Random Digit Dialling (RDD) sample. All interviews were conducted by trained enumerators from our Lusaka team. The original RDD

sample was provided by Sample Solutions BV in the Netherlands, and telephone lists were stratified based on Zambia's main network providers.

While still unusual in the Zambian context, there is a precedent for telephone surveys in Zambia, such as the World Bank's Household Monitoring Survey (Finn and Zadel, 2020) and the 2021 Zambia Election Panel Study (ZEPS) (Lust et al., 2022). Phone surveys are representative only of respondents with access to mobile phones. According to World Bank data, mobile subscription rates in Zambia were 102% in 2023. This does not imply that every Zambian has access to a mobile phone. Sustained electricity shortages and network issues encountered during the fieldwork period are likely to further skew the representativeness of the sample.

To compensate for the non-randomness of telephone respondents, we employ a stratified sample. The sample is stratified on region, (self-identified) urban/rural residence, and gender. Sample quotas were set to be representative of the national population according to the 2022 Zambia national census. The sample was not stratified on other variables such as education or age.

The final sample size was 1,497 respondents. Despite our quotas, the sample does not match the national population precisely. While the sample is representative in terms of gender, the final sample shows a slight over-representation of urban residents and of residents in Lusaka, while the Copperbelt, Luapula, and Western provinces are under-represented.

To address skewness in the sample, we weight all findings in this report by gender, region, and urban/rural residence. The resultant findings are our best available approximation of national averages. ZERN is a national survey and is not representative at the sub-national (regional) level. For this reason, we refrain from presenting any regional findings. There are, however, other forms of skewness in the data resulting from the telephone sample. For instance, the sample is more highly educated (63% secondary education or higher) and younger (55% under the age of 30) than a typical face-to-face survey sample is. While we do not weight for these variables (in the case of education and poverty, because population averages are uncertain), we disaggregate findings on these variables when we expect important sample-group differences.

ZERN is a first-of-its-kind nationally representative election panel in Zambia. The 2021 ZEPS taught us about developments in Zambian public opinion over the course of an election campaign, but was restricted to the eastern parts of Zambia (i.e. it was not nationally representative). Afrobarometer surveys since 1999 have employed a nationally representative sample, but do not follow the same respondents over time. From this ZERN survey, we will be able to track national and evolving trends during the course of a pivotal period in Zambia's democracy.

Campaign and voting intentions

ZERN asked a battery of questions on the state of the campaign, voters' preparedness for voting, and their voting intentions. Here are some key findings:

- Whilst a majority of our respondents were confident that the 2026 elections would be free and fair, and did not fear for their safety, a significant minority – comprising particularly supporters of the opposition parties – had concerns about the elections.

- The proportion of our respondents who reported that they were registered to vote (Figure 1) is high, and much higher than historical registration and turnout figures. However, self-reported survey responses on registration and voting (intentions) are frequently unreliable, often due to social-desirability bias. The extent to which the ambition to vote will translate to actual voting remains to be seen. The high number of voters claiming that they have already been registered may be due to reporting errors. However, it is also possible that some voters believe wrongly that they are registered. This should be a concern to the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ).

- When it comes to voting intentions, the UPND enjoys strong support (55%) and the (largest opposition) Patriotic Front (PF) appears to have weak support (10%), although it is likely that many of the respondents who refused to tell us how they would vote (32%) resemble PF supporters.

- Whilst President Hichilema and the UPND appear to be heading towards a relatively comfortable re-election, anxieties about the elections (Figures 4 and 5) might reduce turnout and affect perceptions of the legitimacy of the results.

- There is widespread discontent with members of parliament (MPs) and (particularly) councillors; only a minority of voters say that they will vote for their incumbent MP and only a small minority say that they will vote for their incumbent councillor; many say that they will vote for alternative candidates from the same party, which points to the importance of primary elections.
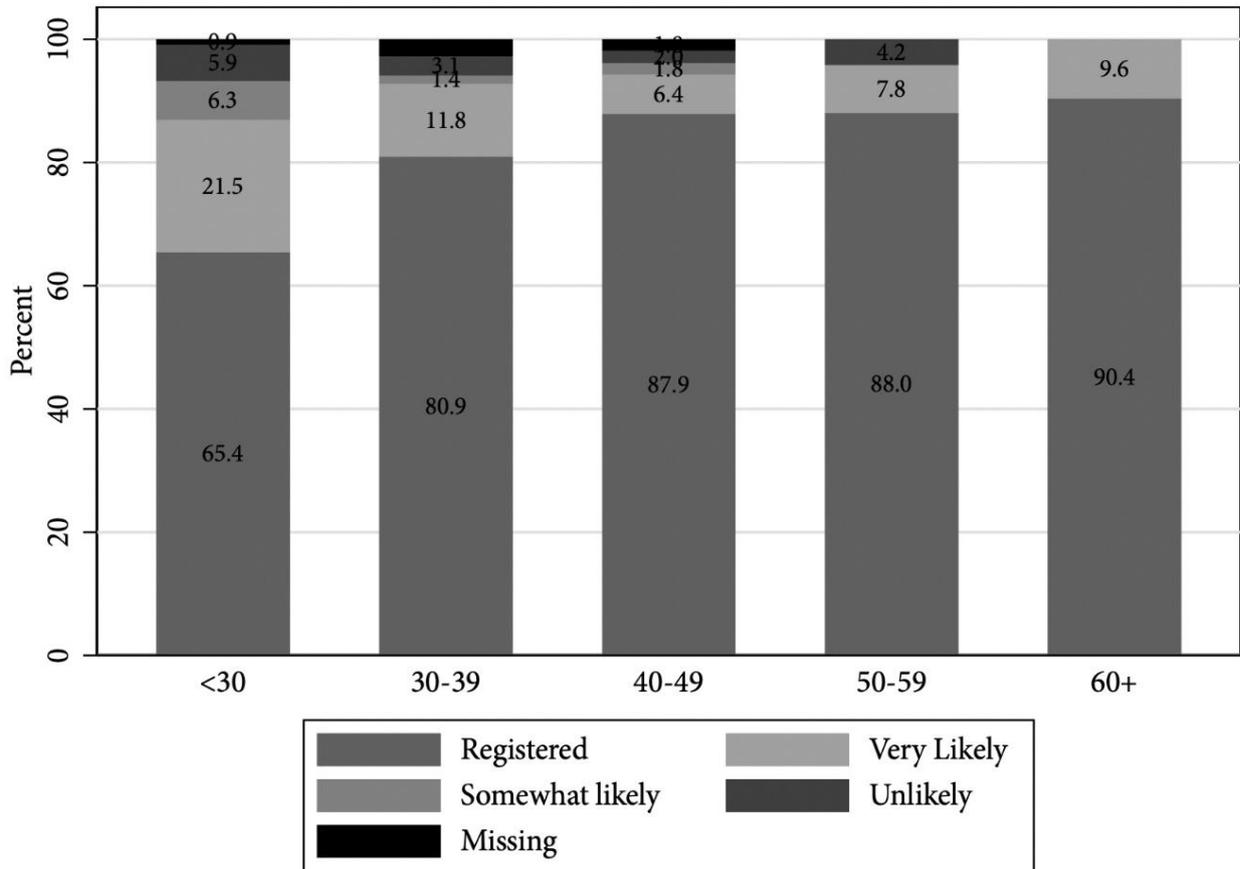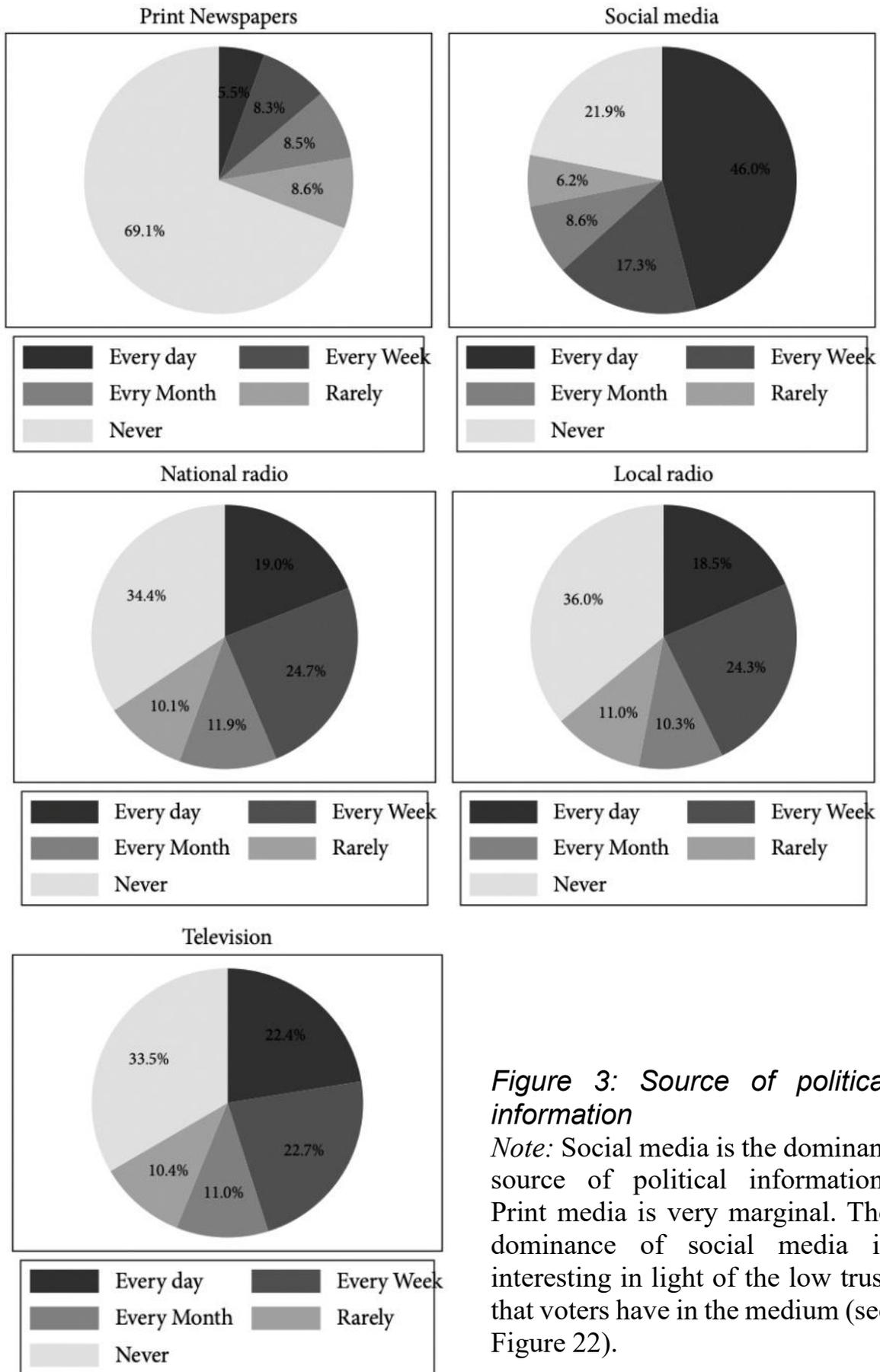
Figure 1: Registration, by age

Note Figure 1: In our sample (weighted using the existing weights), 74% said that they had registered, 16% said that they had not done so but were 'very likely' to do so, 4% said that they had not registered but were 'somewhat likely' to do so. Only 5% said that they had not registered and were unlikely to do so. Registration is lower for younger voters. Implausibly high levels of registration may be due to reporting errors and/or misconceptions about registration.
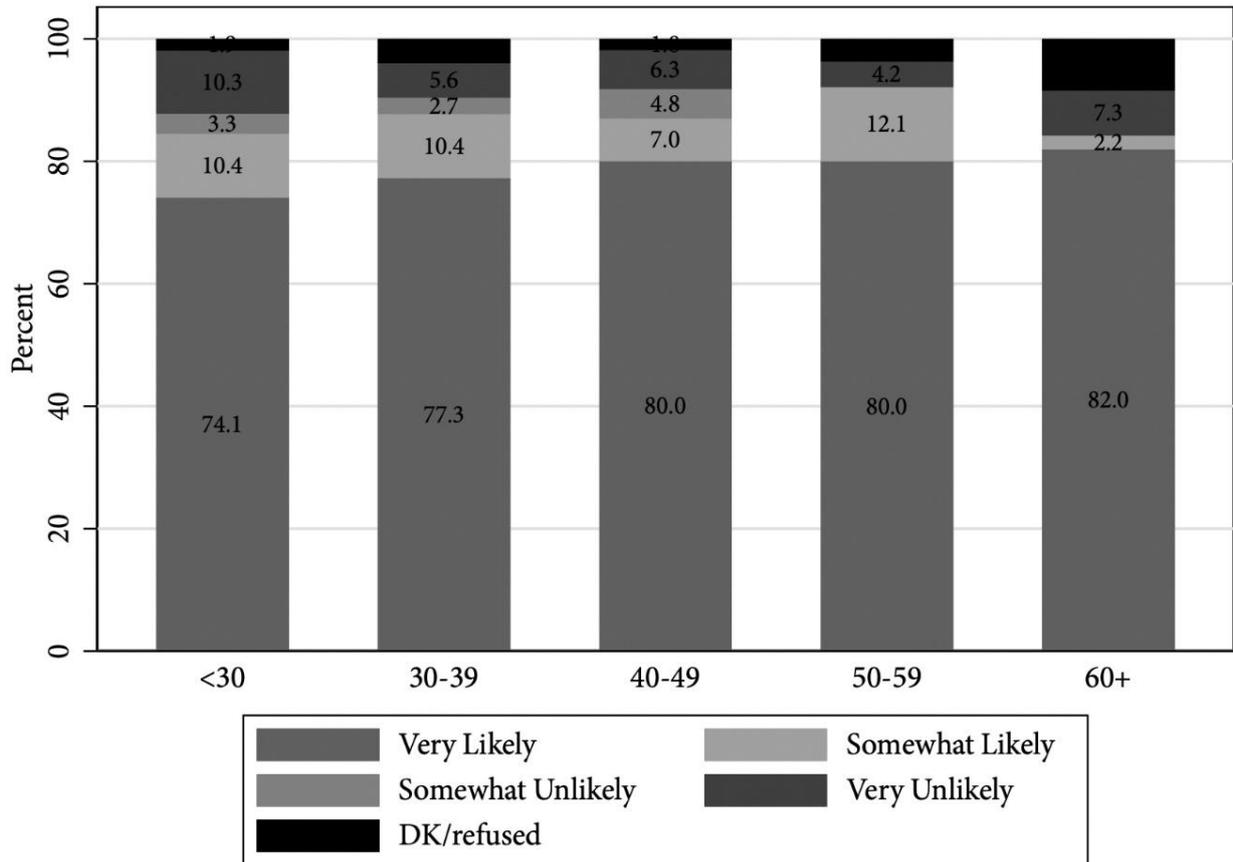
Figure 2: Intention to vote, by age
Note Figure 2: The self-reported likelihood of voting also varies by age, with a high likelihood reported by older respondents. We did not find variations across gender or urban/rural location.
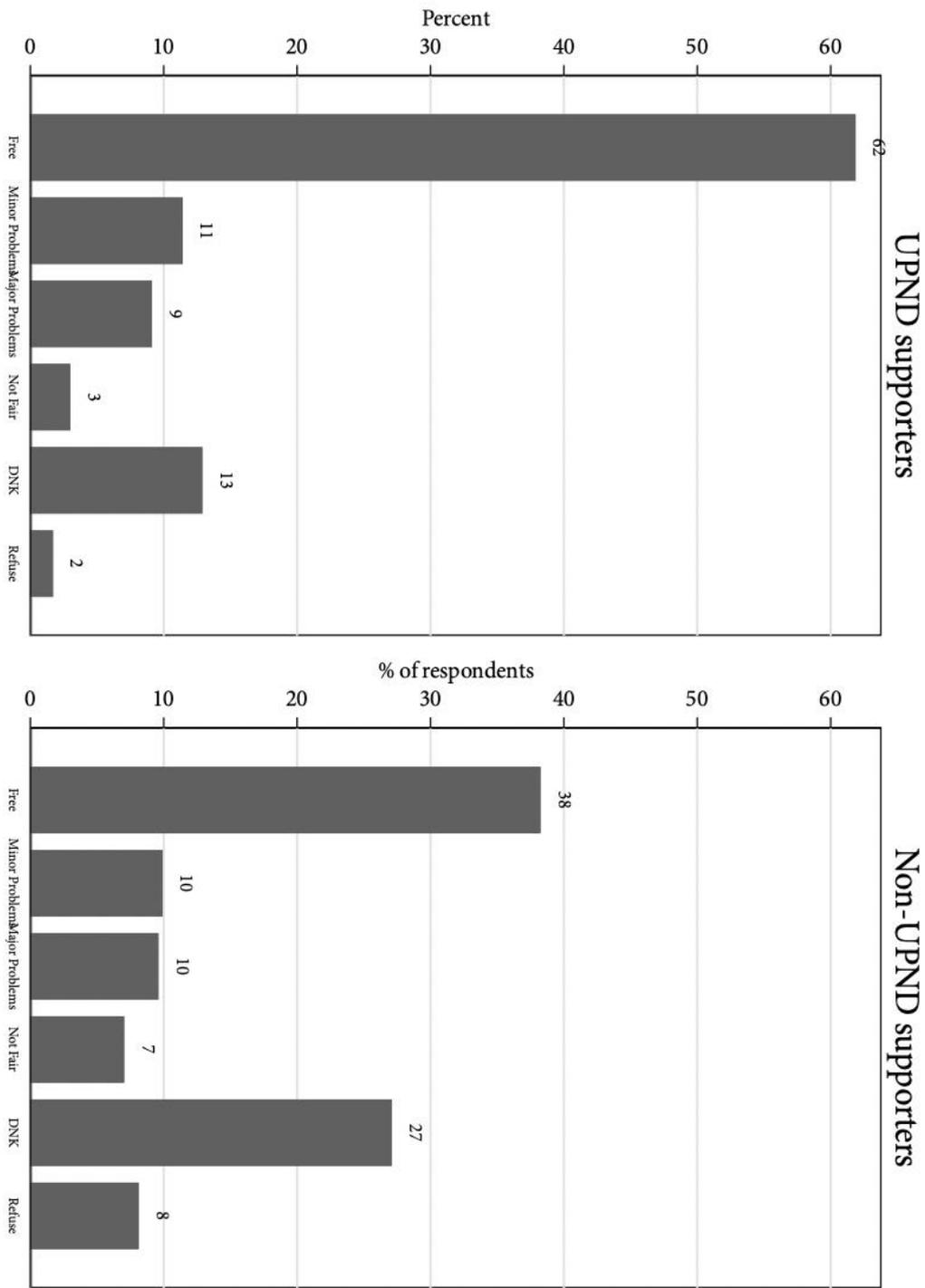
Print Newspapers

5.5%
8.3%
8.5%
8.6%
69.1%

- Every day
- Every Week
- Evry Month
- Rarely
- Never

Social media

21.9%
6.2%
8.6%
17.3%
46.0%

- Every day
- Every Week
- Every Month
- Rarely
- Never

National radio

19.0%
24.7%
11.9%
10.1%
34.4%

- Every day
- Every Week
- Every Month
- Rarely
- Never

Local radio

18.5%
24.3%
10.3%
11.0%
36.0%

- Every day
- Every Week
- Every Month
- Rarely
- Never

Television

22.4%
22.7%
11.0%
10.4%
33.5%

- Every day
- Every Week
- Every Month
- Rarely
- Never

Figure 3: Source of political information

Note: Social media is the dominant source of political information. Print media is very marginal. The dominance of social media is interesting in light of the low trust that voters have in the medium (see Figure 22).
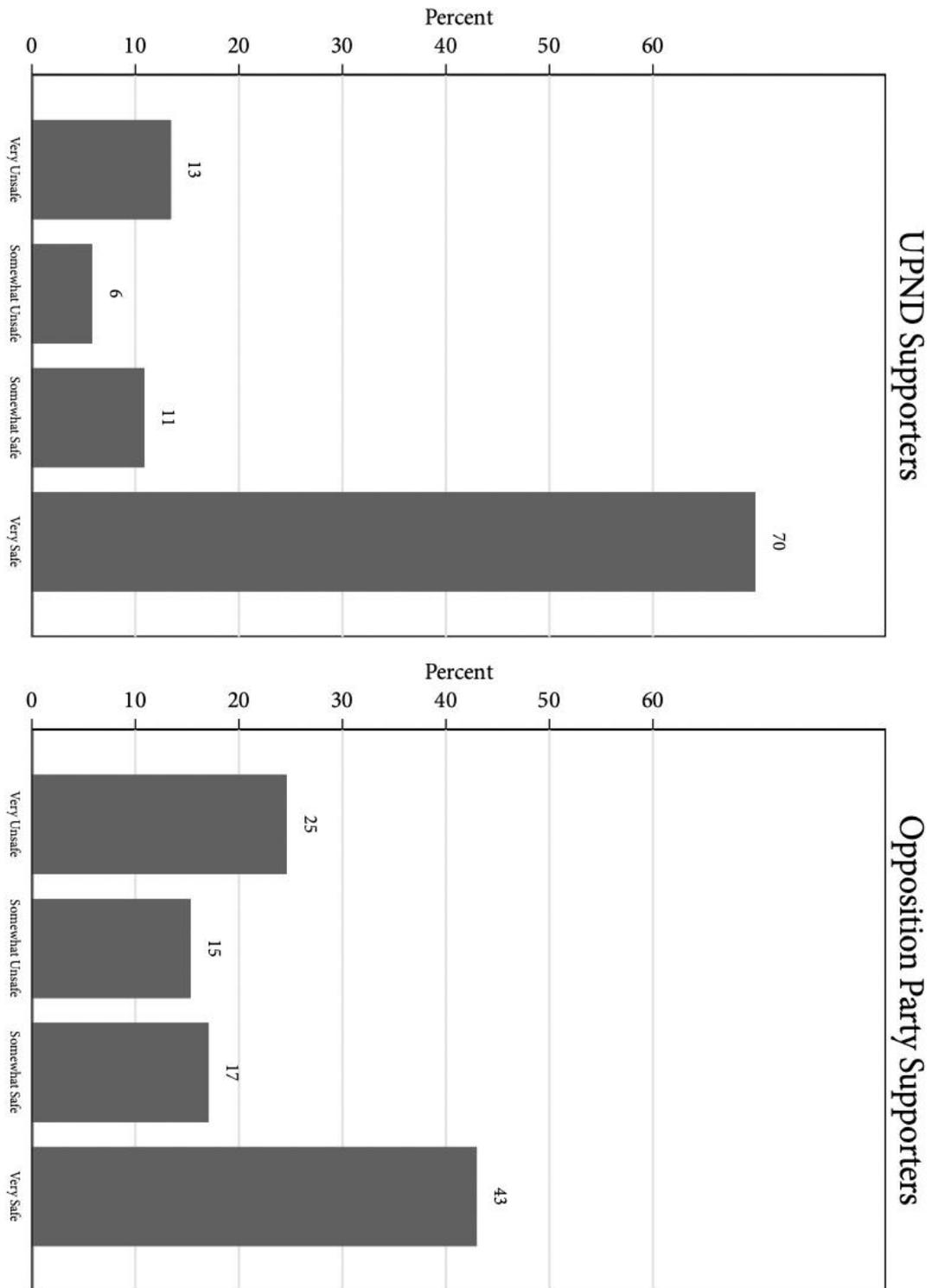
Figure 4: How safe do you feel to engage in political activities in your communities?

Note Figure 4: There were clear differences between UPND and opposition party supporters: Whilst 70% of UPND voters said that they felt 'very safe', only 43% of the supporters of opposition parties said this; less than 20% of UPND voters said that they felt 'very unsafe' or 'somewhat safe', compared to 40% of opposition voters. We find no similar differences by gender or age. High levels of insecurity among opposition voters is a concern for the upcoming election.

Percent (UPND supporters)

Category	Value
Free	62
Minor Problems	11
Major Problems	9
Not Fair	3
DNK	13
Refuse	2

% of respondents (Non-UPND supporters)

Category	Value
Free	38
Minor Problems	10
Major Problems	10
Not Fair	7
DNK	27
Refuse	8

Figure 5: Will the 2026 election be free and fair? (by party)

Note Figure 5: One half of the sample said that they expected the election to be 'completely free and fair'. A total of 25% said that they had concerns: 11% replied 'free and fair with minor problems', 9% replied 'free and fair with major problems' and 5% replied 'not free and fair'. One in five respondents said that they did not know. A small percentage refused to answer. Again, UPND supporters were much more optimistic than PF and other opposition party supporters. Whereas 62% of UPND supporters replied that they expected the elections to be 'completely free and fair', only 38% of opposition party supporters concurred.
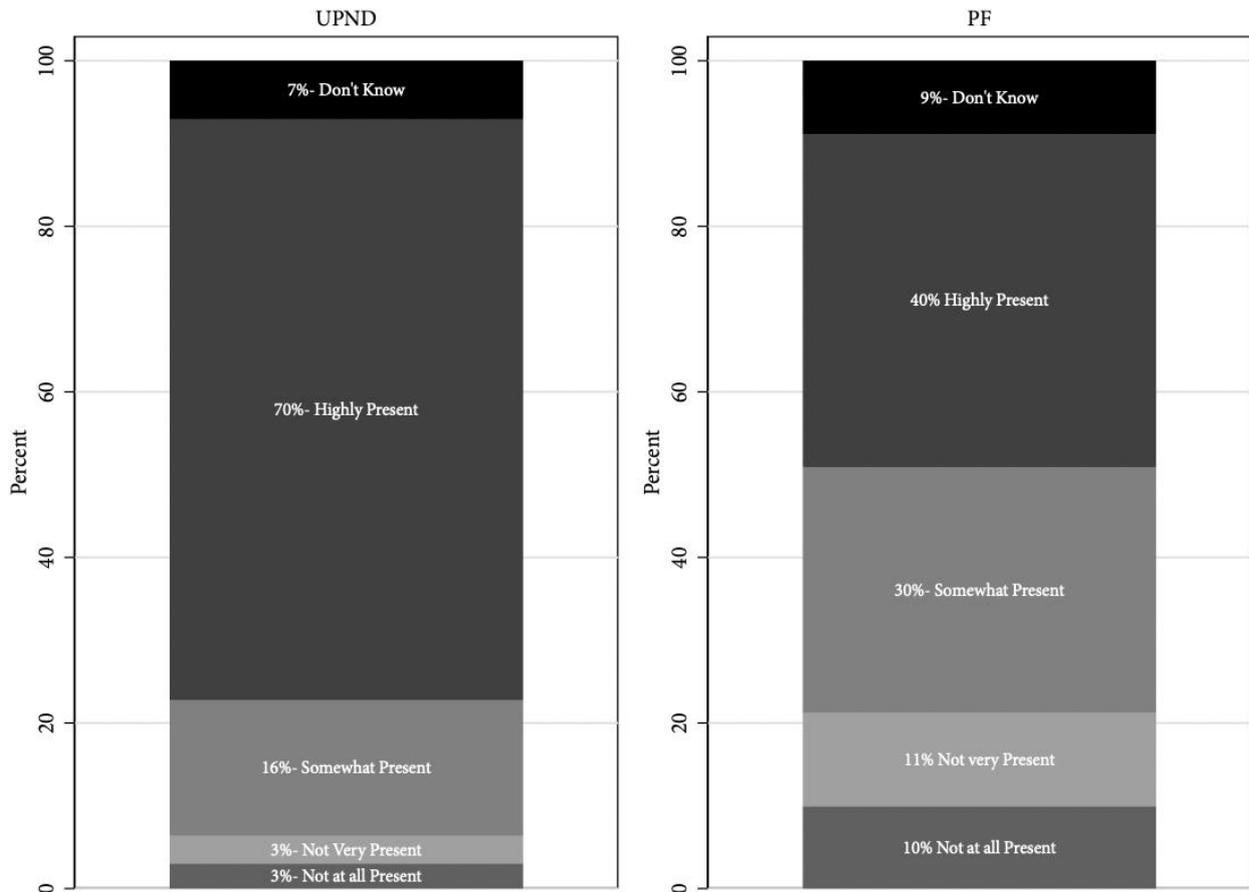
Figure 6: How present are the following parties in your area?
Note: UPND is said to be 'highly present' in the area by 70% of voters. PF is said to be 'highly present' by only 40% of voters. Given the UPND's electoral headstart, opposition parties need more presence to pose a real electoral threat to the ruling party.
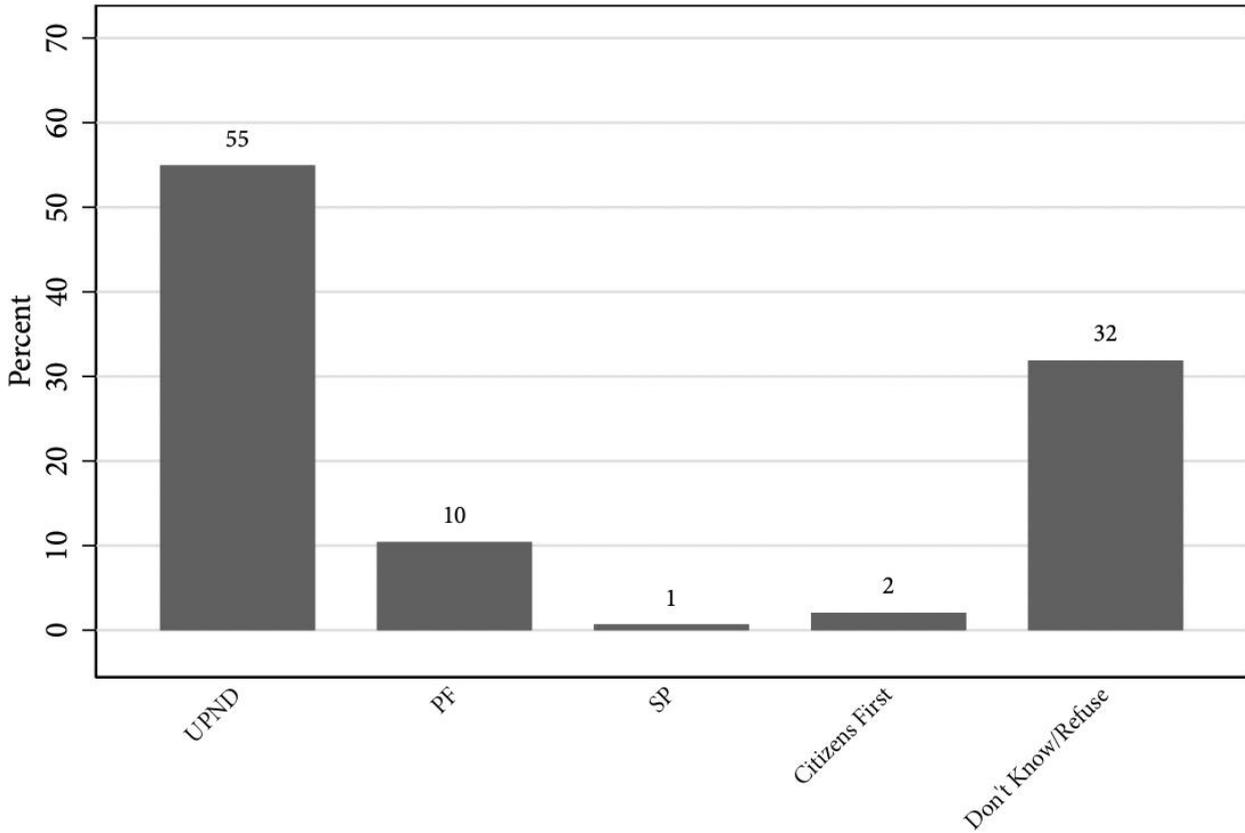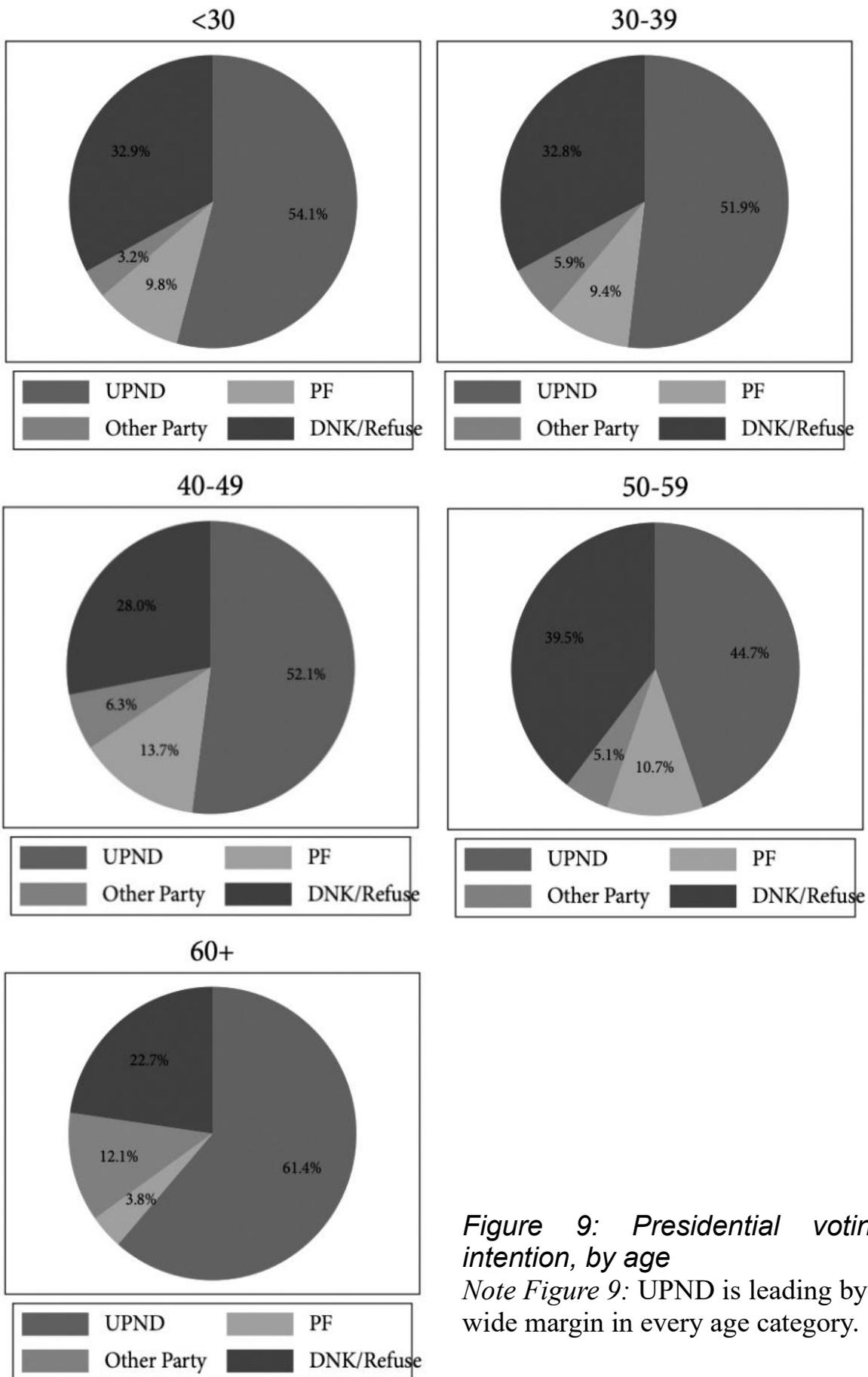
Figure 7: Voting intentions in the presidential election

Note Figure 7: The figure only displays results for parties with 1% of the vote or more. UPND is ahead with 55% of the sample saying they intend to vote for the party's candidate, followed by the PF at 10%. There was negligible reported support for either Citizens First or the Socialist Party (SP). However, the polling is affected by high levels of uncertainty due to the high 'don't know/refuse' category.
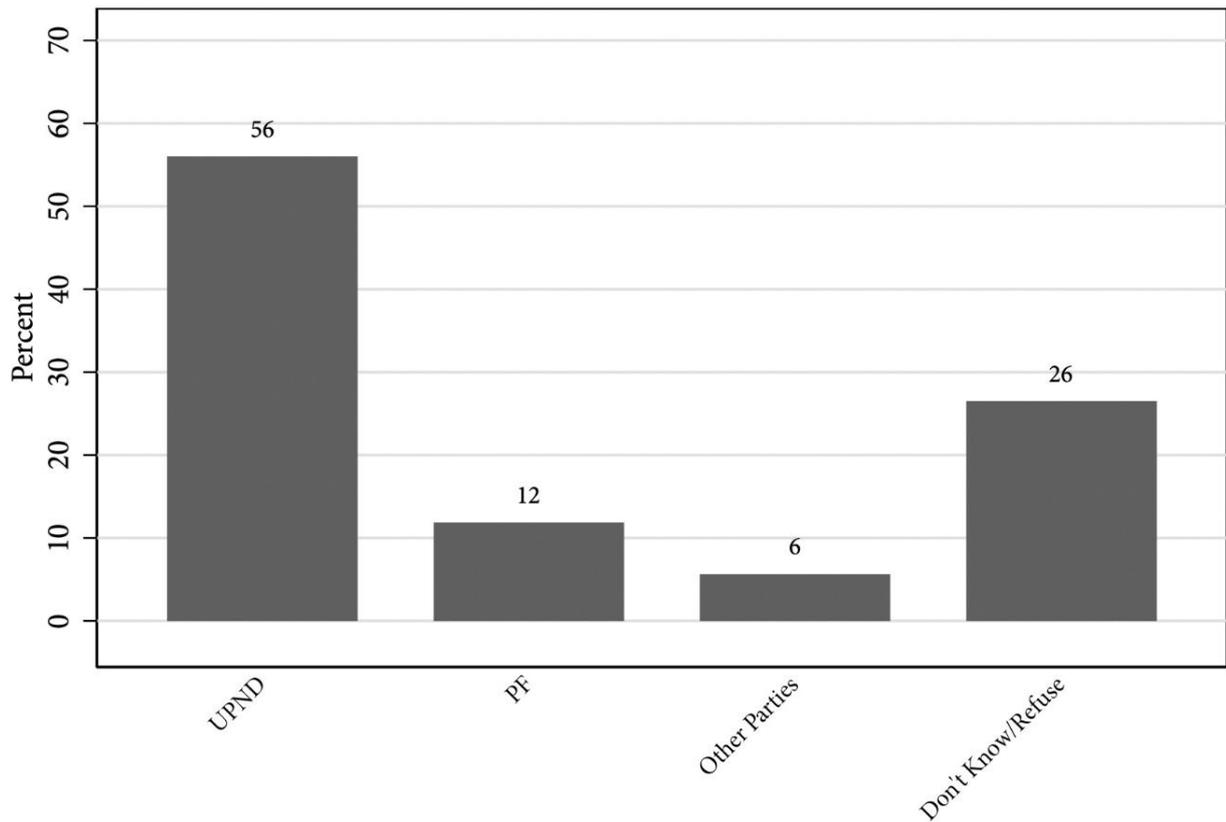
Figure 8: Voting intention in the presidential election (only registered and likely voters)

Note Figure 8: Restricting the analysis to registered and likely voters reduces the share of respondents in the 'don't know/refuse' category. UPND still has a strong advantage.

<30

- 32.9%
- 3.2%
- 9.8%
- 54.1%

	UPND		PF
	Other Party		DNK/Refuse

30-39

- 32.8%
- 5.9%
- 9.4%
- 51.9%

	UPND		PF
	Other Party		DNK/Refuse

40-49

- 28.0%
- 6.3%
- 13.7%
- 52.1%

	UPND		PF
	Other Party		DNK/Refuse

50-59

- 39.5%
- 5.1%
- 10.7%
- 44.7%

	UPND		PF
	Other Party		DNK/Refuse

60+

- 22.7%
- 12.1%
- 3.8%
- 61.4%

	UPND		PF
	Other Party		DNK/Refuse

Figure 9: Presidential voting intention, by age
*Note Figure 9:* UPND is leading by a wide margin in every age category.

13
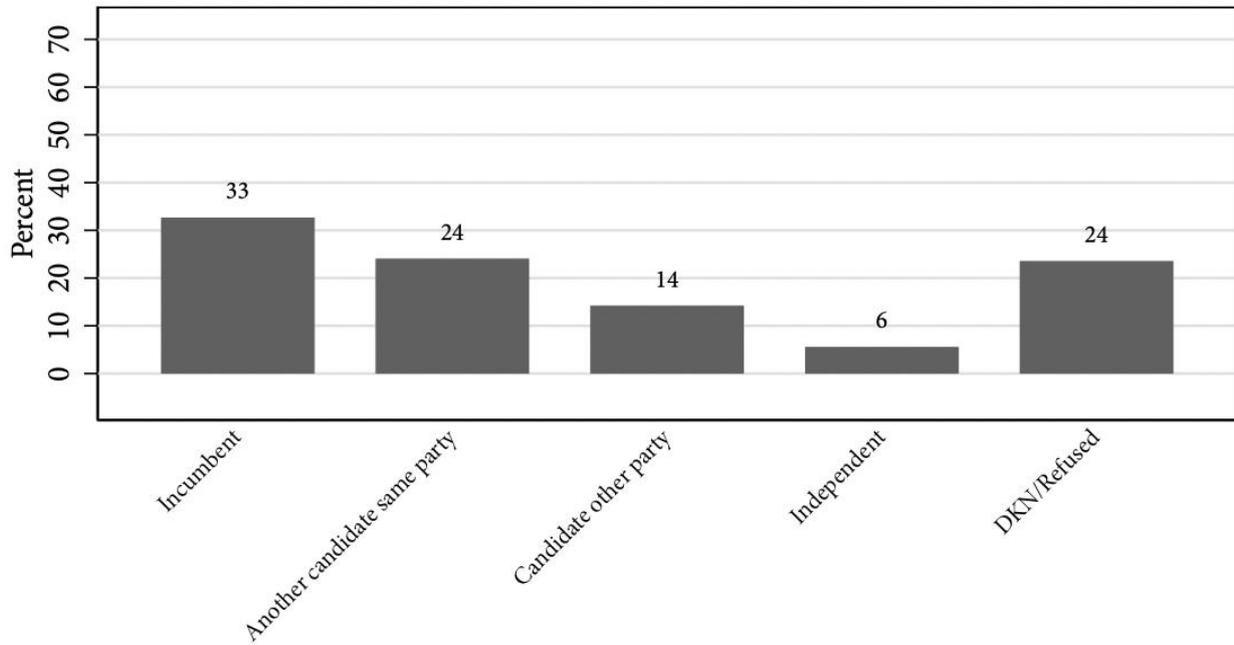
Figure 10: Voting intention in the parliamentary election

Note Figure 10: Only a third of voters (33%) would vote for the incumbent MP, but almost a quarter of the voters (24%) plan to vote for the party of the current incumbent, which suggests that primaries will be hotly contested.
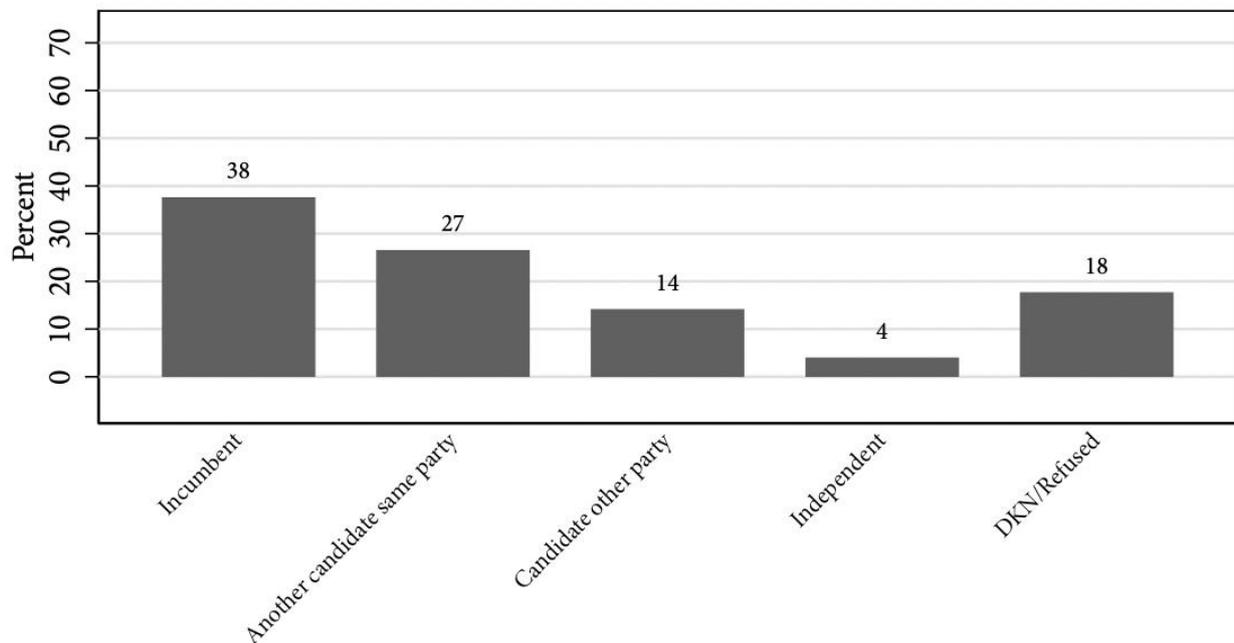

Figure 11: Voting intention in the parliamentary election (only registered and likely voters)

Note Figure 11: The share of voters planning to vote for the incumbent increases slightly when only likely voters (those registered and likely to vote) are analysed.
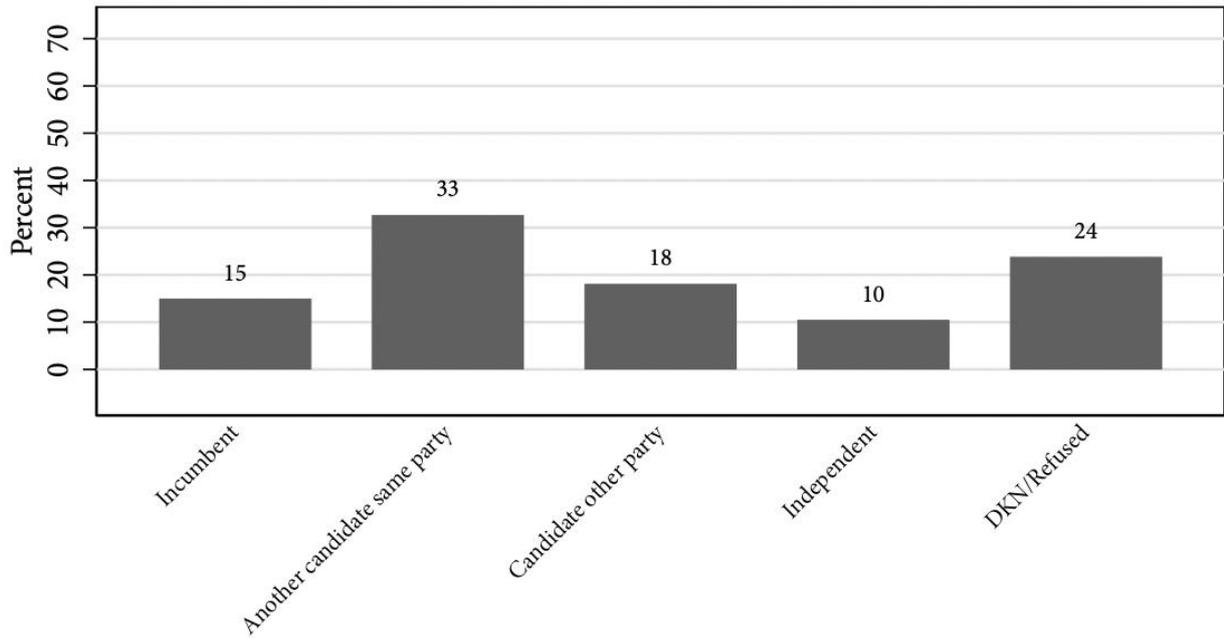
Figure 12: Voting intention in the local election

Note Figure 12: Support for local councillors is even lower than support for MPs. Only 15% say they would vote for the incumbent councillor, but 33% say they would vote for someone from the incumbent's party.
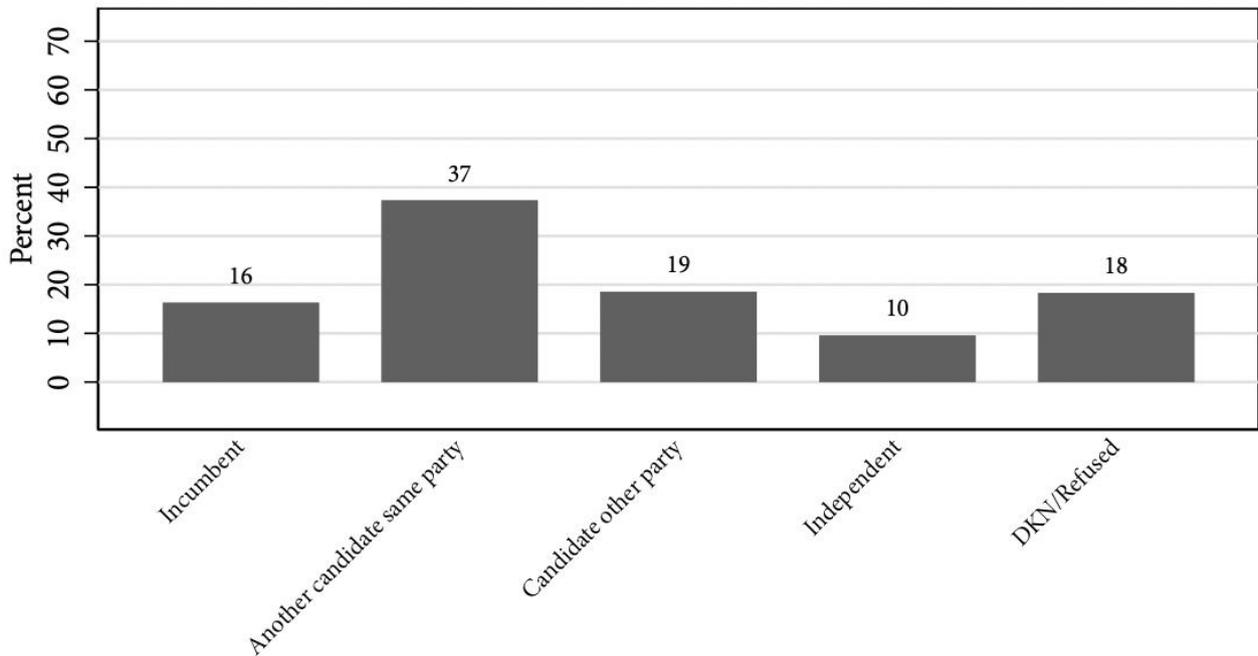

Figure 13: Voting intention in the local election (only registered and likely voters)

Note Figure 13: There are no major changes when only likely voters are analysed.

Performance evaluation

In our survey, we elicited respondents' evaluation of the current economy and government performance. We also asked about the popularity of some major government policy initiatives. Some of our key insights are:

- The Zambian population is split on whether the economy is improving or not. While 38% of the weighted sample believe that the economy has improved in the last 12 months, 41% state that it has worsened. Just 20% believe it has stayed the same. Economic evaluation varies significantly depending on poverty levels and partisanship. Poorer Zambians evaluate the state of the economy as worse than wealthier Zambians, and opposition supporters are more worried about the state of the economy than UPND supporters.
- The UPND government receives positive evaluations (of very well or well) on several important policy areas, including education (90%), addressing caderism (88%), strengthening democracy (78%), managing the drought (73%), food security (71%), mining (70%), health (67%), jobs (67%), and handling corruption (67%).
- Opinion is split on the economy, as 52% believe that the government has performed well or very well and 48% believe the government has performed poorly or very poorly. The same is true for infrastructure, as 54% believe the government has performed very well or well, and 46% believe the government has performed poorly or very poorly.
- Respondents are unsatisfied with government performance on electricity, where only 27% believe the government has performed well, and the cost of living, where approval is only 44%.
- Many government initiatives are popular among voters: 92% approve of the free education program, 80% are happy with the implementation of cash transfers, 77% approve of the use of constituency development funds (CDF), and 74% approve of the cash for work program.
- Presidential approval rates are high. In our weighted sample, 79% strongly approve or approve of the president.
- Approval rates are lower for other elected officials, with approval rates being particularly low for incumbent MPs and councillors.
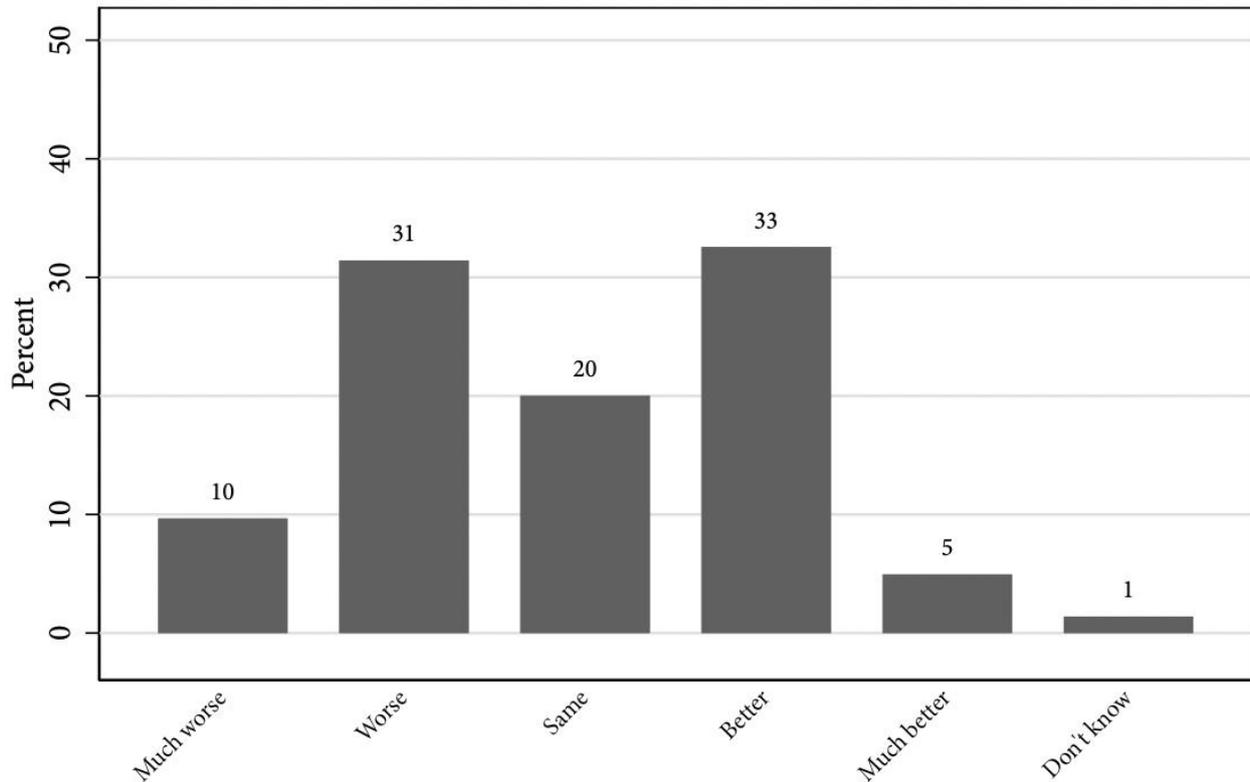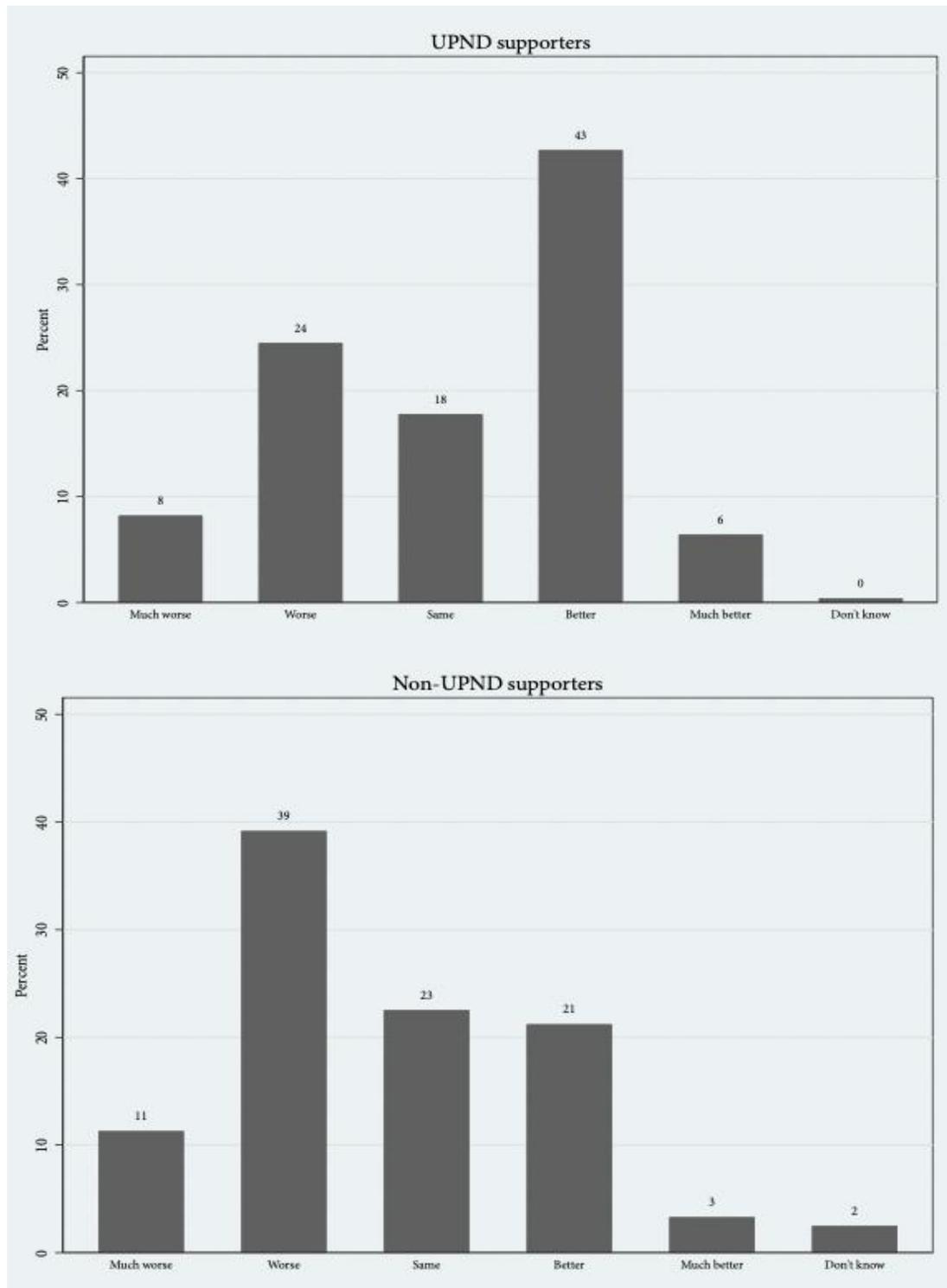
Figure 14: Compared to 12 months ago, how would you evaluate the country's economic conditions?

Note on Fig 14: The electorate splits almost evenly: 41% say the economy worsened, 38% say it improved, and 21% are neutral or non-responsive. This near-tie means that there is genuine disagreement, and there is not a population consensus that economic conditions are becoming bad or good. The balanced split creates an opportunity for either narrative to gain traction, depending on how the story is framed.
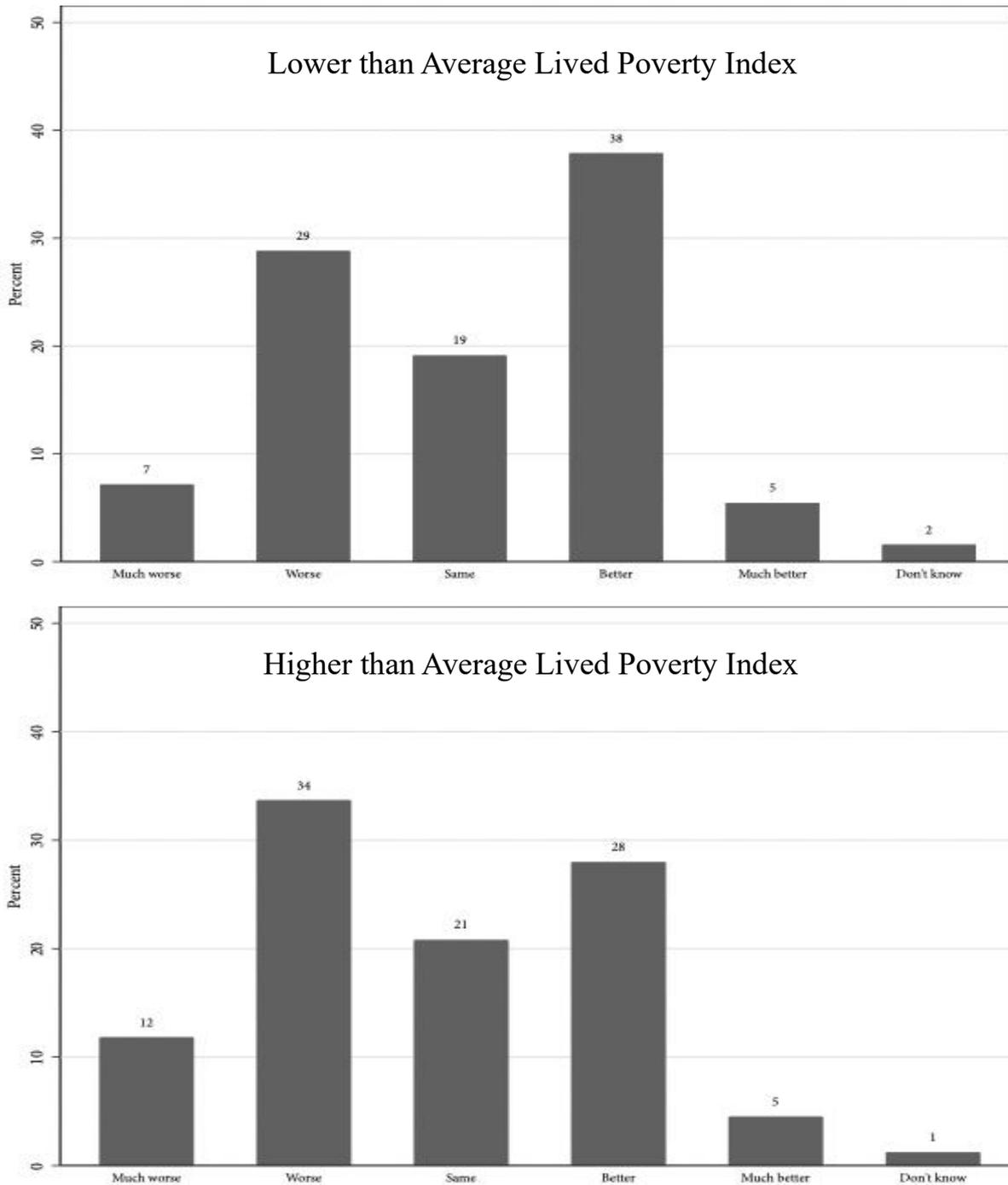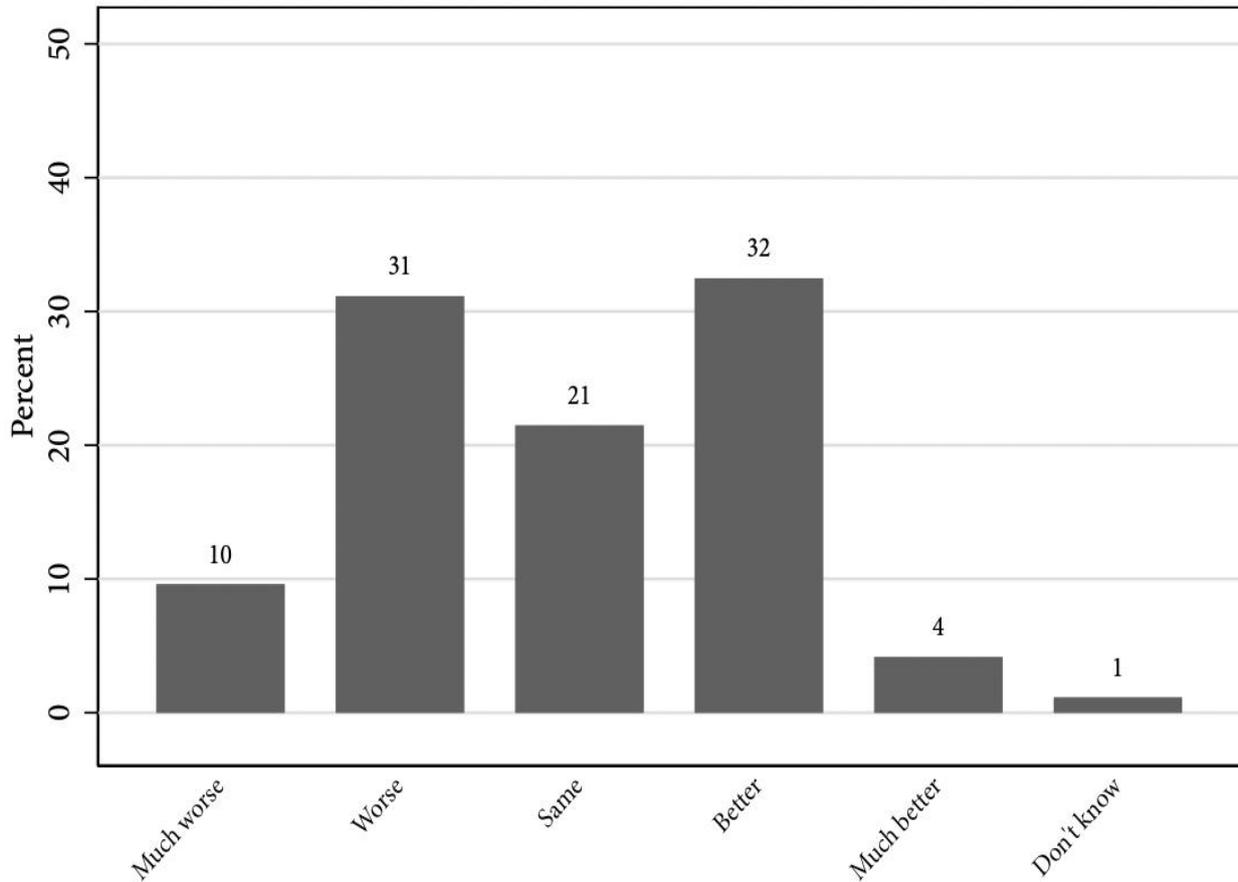
Figure 15: Compared to 12 months ago, how would you evaluate the country's economic conditions? (across the levels of the Lived Poverty Index)

Note: The Lived Poverty Index (LPI) ranges from 5 (lowest poverty) to 25 (highest poverty) and measures respondents' reported access to food, clean water, medicines, cooking fuel, and cash income. The average sample LPI is 8.65 (see Mattes, 2008). The poverty gradient reveals why the overall 41%–38% split (Figure 14) leans negative; the poorest segment's pessimism outweighs wealthier people's relative optimism.

Figure 16: Compared to 12 months ago, how would you evaluate the country's economic conditions? (across partisanship)

Note on Fig 16: Party support creates the largest perception gap in the survey: UPND supporters perceive substantial economic improvement, while non-UPND supporters perceive substantial economic decline. Political affiliation acts as a powerful filter for how people interpret economic reality. This partisan split is larger than the overall 41%–38% split (Figure 14), showing that party loyalty matters more than shared facts, in shaping economic views.
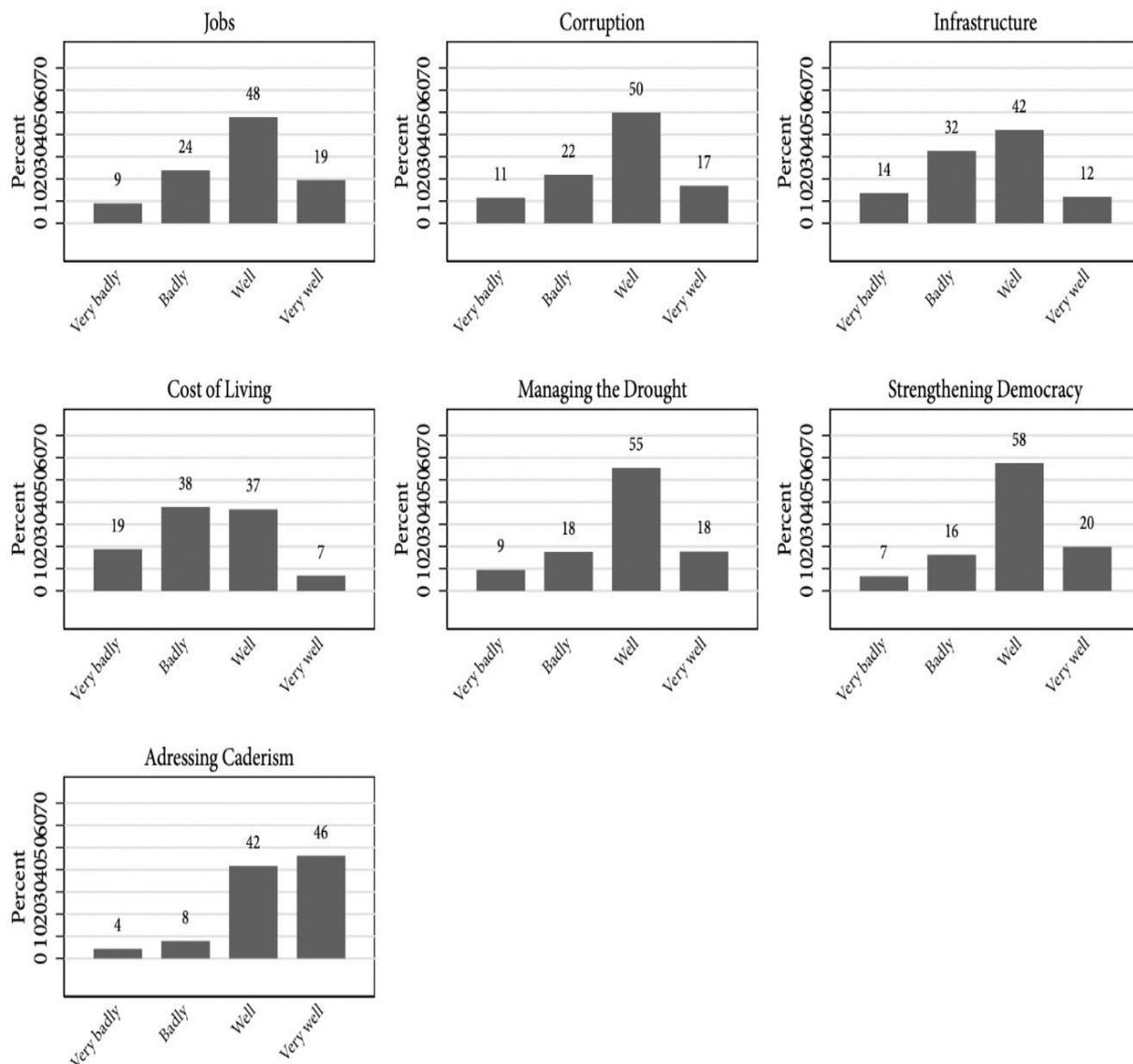
Figure 17: Compared to 12 months ago, how would you evaluate your own economic conditions?

Note Fig 17: Personal financial assessments are nearly identical to views on national economic conditions (41% worse, 36% better, 22% neutral and don't know), showing that people's personal struggles align with their view of the country's economy. This tight alignment means economic pessimism reflects real personal hardship and validates that Figure 14's national outlook is grounded in people's actual lived experience.
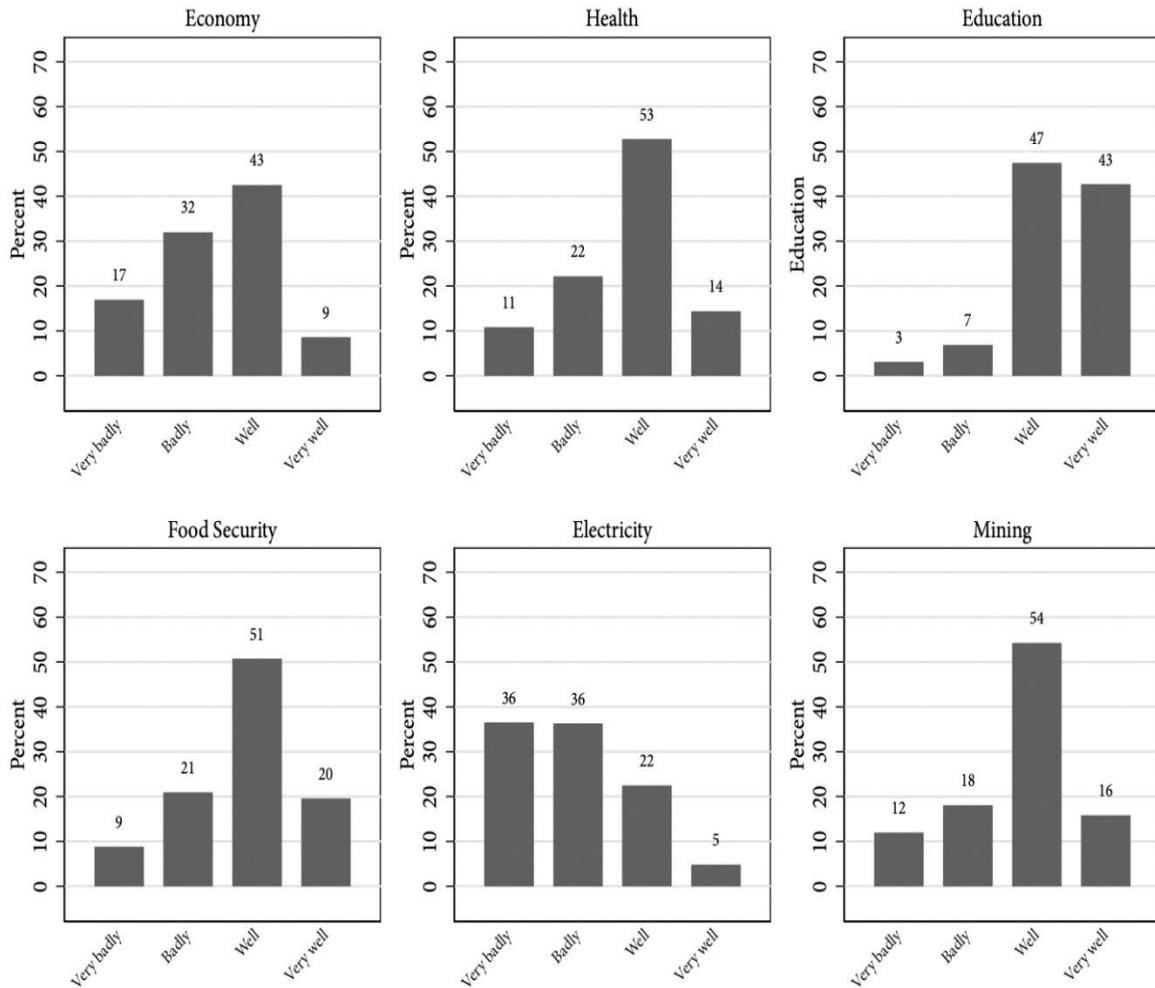
Figure 18: How do you think the government has performed in the following areas? (area 1–6)?

Note Fig 18: Government ratings vary significantly across six policy areas; some receive higher performance rankings (Education, Health, Food Security, and Mining), others receive lower performance rankings (Electricity, and Economy), with no single area earning near-universal approval or rejection. This differentiation means some government policies have stronger public support and alignment than others have.

Jobs
Very badly 9, Badly 24, Well 48, Very well 19

Corruption
Very badly 11, Badly 22, Well 50, Very well 17

Infrastructure
Very badly 14, Badly 32, Well 42, Very well 12

Cost of Living
Very badly 19, Badly 38, Well 37, Very well 7

Managing the Drought
Very badly 9, Badly 18, Well 55, Very well 18

Strengthening Democracy
Very badly 7, Badly 16, Well 58, Very well 20

Adressing Caderism
Very badly 4, Badly 8, Well 42, Very well 46

Figure 19: How do you think the government has performed in the following areas? (area 7–13)

Note on Fig 19: The same mixed pattern appears across seven additional policy areas. The government is seen as performing better in some of these policy areas (addressing cadrerism, anti-corruption, strengthening democracy, job creation, and managing drought) than others (cost of living and infrastructure). The approval rates are varied with no dominant consensus, which shows that the split ratings in Figure 18 are consistent, and are not one-off results. Across the full 13 policy areas reported in Figures 18 and 19, the rating of government performance is genuinely uneven. This suggests that economic pessimism (Figure 14) stems from real service gaps in some government areas instead of from blanket criticism of the government.
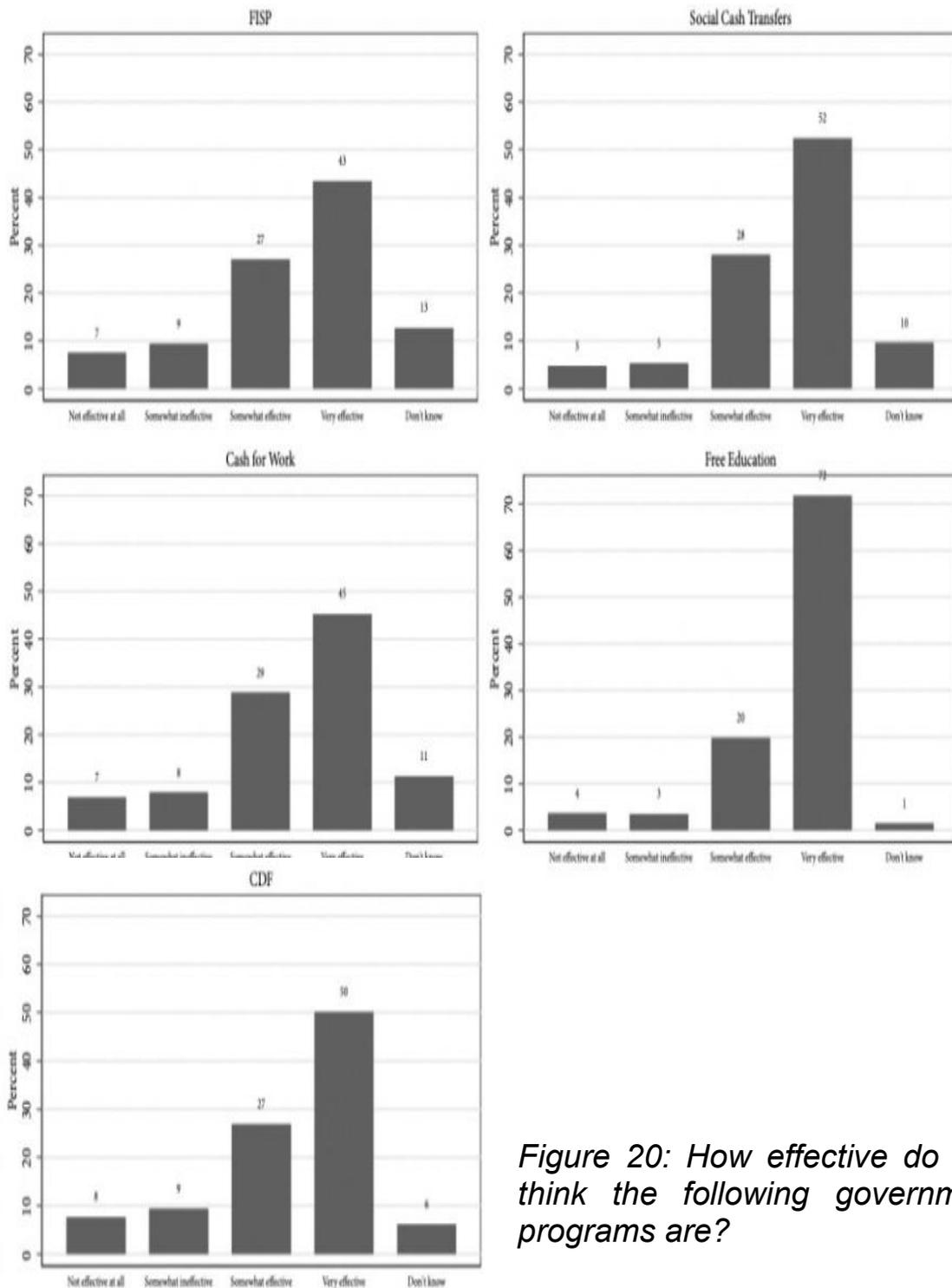
Figure 20: How effective do you think the following government programs are?

Note on Fig 20: Program effectiveness ratings show clear variation between different initiatives, which indicates that voters can distinguish between programs regarding what the programs aim to do and whether they actually deliver results. Some government programs are viewed as working very well (Free Education, Social Cash Transfers, Cash for Work, and CDF), while others are not working too well (FISP). This pattern aligns with the sectoral performance gaps in Figures 18 and 19, thereby showing that the quality of implementation varies across government initiatives.
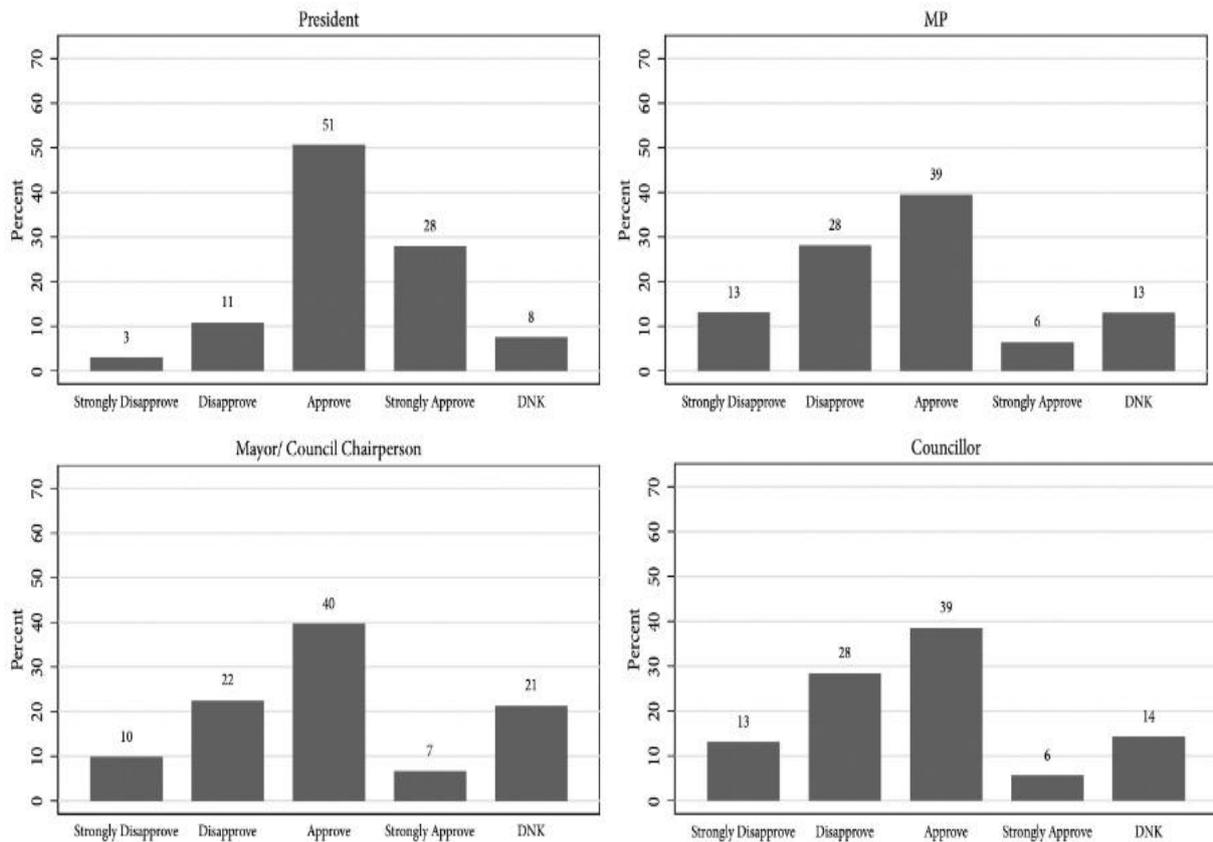
Figure 21: How much do you approve or disapprove of the performance of the following elected officials?

Note on Fig 21: Approval clearly drops from President (high) to Members of Parliament, Mayor/Council Chairperson and local Councillors (lower). Presidential approval remains strong enough to protect the ruling party, but the sharp drop in approval of local leaders signals major electoral vulnerability at sub-national levels.

Institutional trust

The ZERN survey asked a battery of questions about voters' trust in central political institutions. Our main findings are:

- Zambians generally have low trust in media, especially social media. Low trust in media is concerning and is likely to enhance political polarisation in the election and spur conspiracy theories.
- Zambians generally have high trust in the institutions organising and monitoring the election, including the ECZ and the constitutional court. However, significant partisan gaps are a cause for concern.
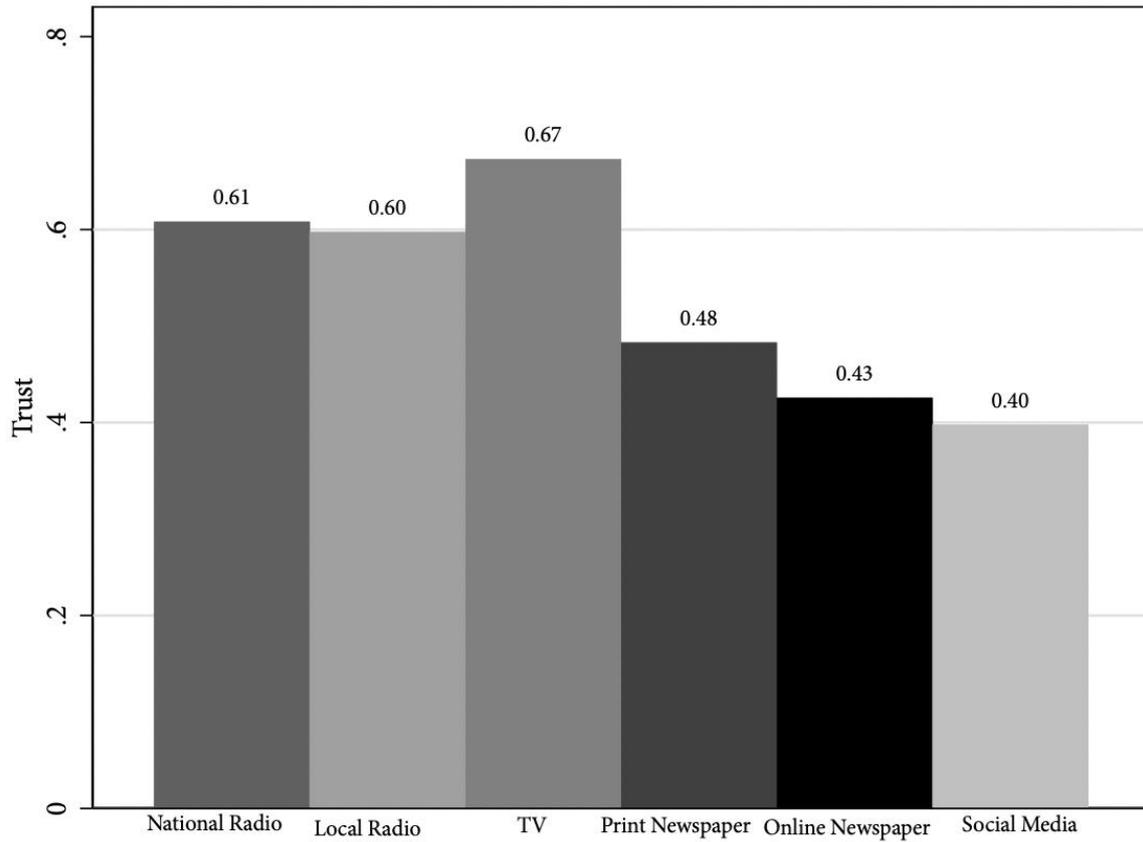
Figure 22: The share of trust in various sources of media

Note Figure 22: Trust is the highest in TV and radio (national and local), but low in papers (print and online) and social media. While social media is the least trusted, it is still the most important medium for political information (see Figure 3).
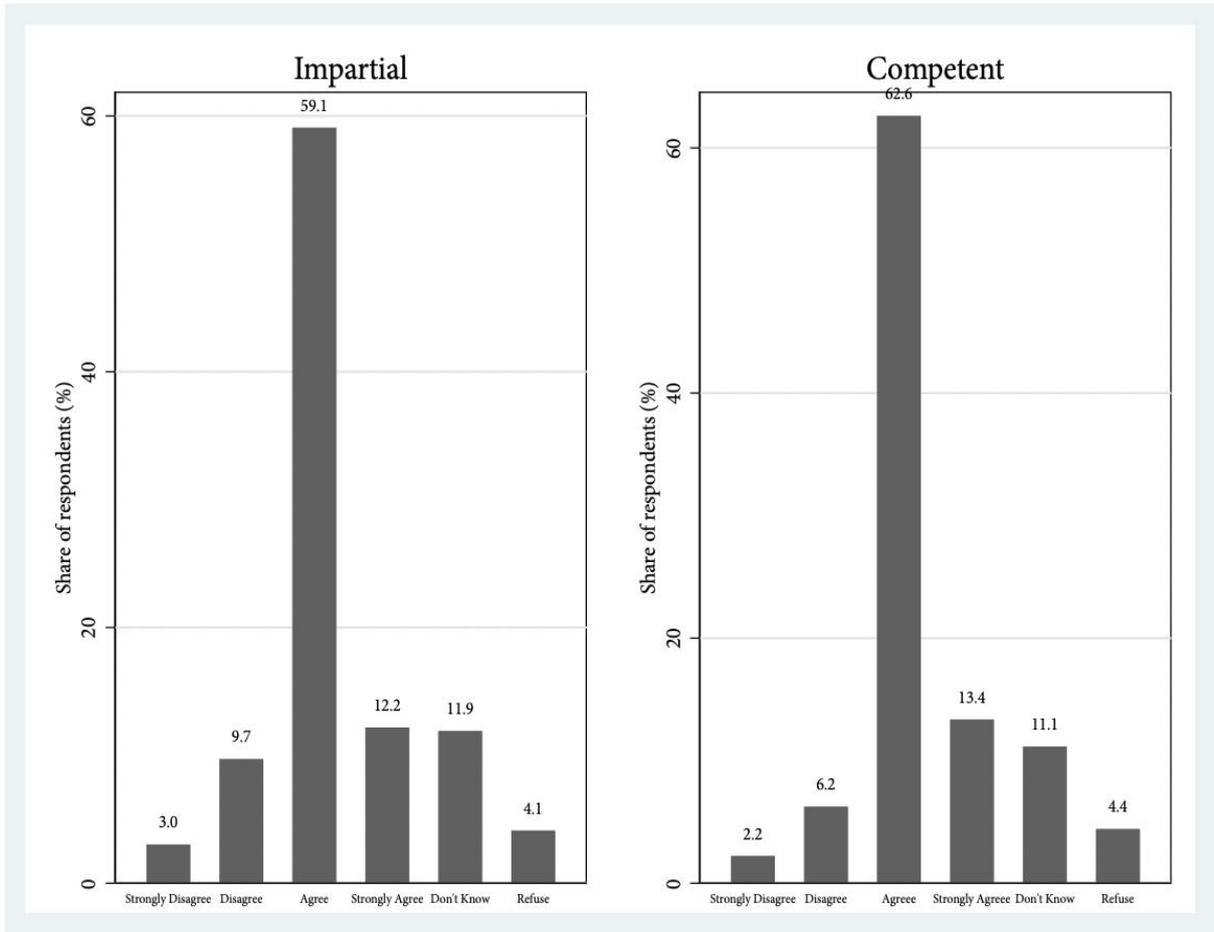
Figure 23: Do you think the Electoral Commission of Zambia is impartial and competent in their handling of the 2026 election?

Note Figure 23: Zambians believe the Electoral Commission of Zambia is both impartial and competent.
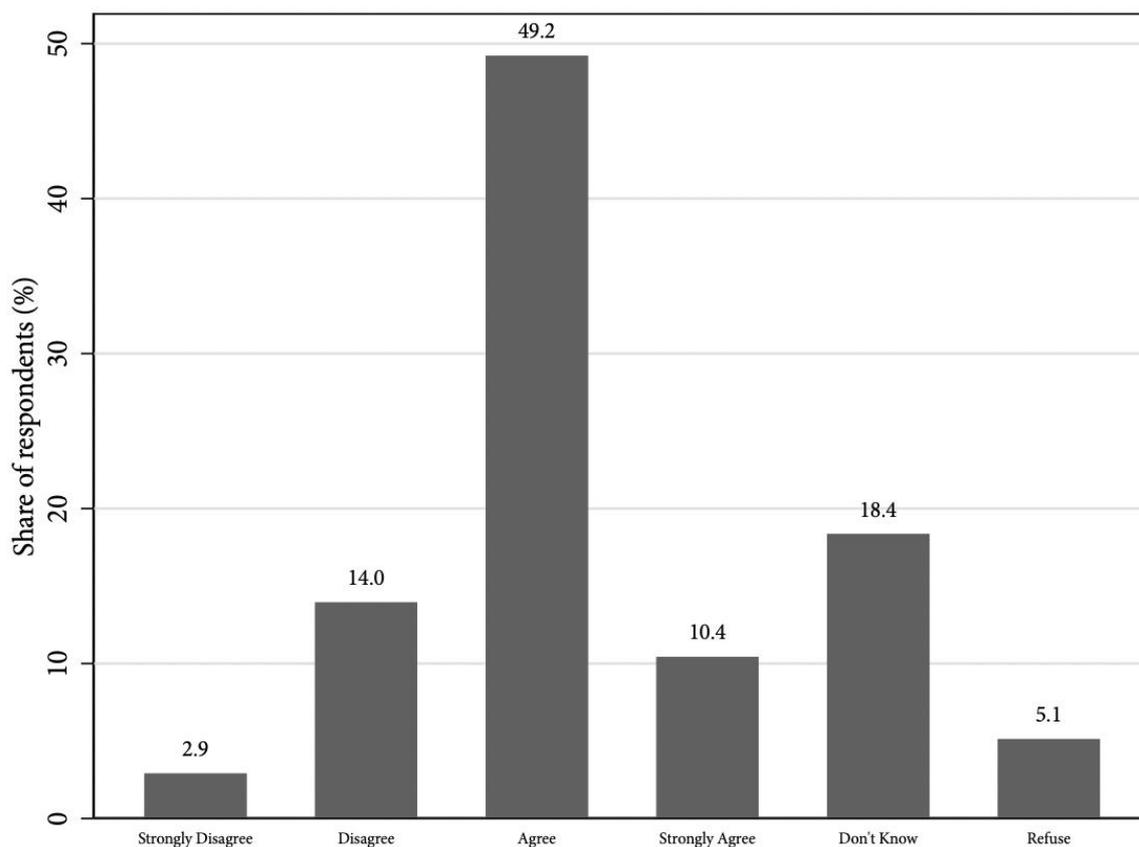
Figure 24: Do you think the Constitutional Court determines presidential petitions impartially?

Note Figure 24: Zambians have confidence in the constitutional court's ability to settle electoral disputes.

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The Institute for Democracy, Citizenship and Public Policy in Africa

The Institute was established in 2017 to conduct empirical research into the factors that strengthen and sustain democracy across Africa. Our team of researchers – including post-doctoral research fellows and PhD students – approach the study of democracy from four broad directions:

Public opinion and voting behaviour: How do citizens view democracy and political institutions in their countries? How do they assess the performance of government and opposition? To what extent and how do they hold governments to account through elections or other mechanisms? We work closely with the **Afrobarometer** surveys of public attitudes towards democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across most of Africa.

Political parties and elected representatives: How do political parties organize, mobilise, conduct election campaigns and govern? How are candidates for election selected? To what extent and how do parties and individual Members of Parliament represent citizens? We host the **Political Parties in Africa** project.

Regional and international factors: How do regional and international organisations affect the conduct of elections, the operation of political institutions, the maintenance of order and the making of public policy?

The consequences for public policy: What determines or informs public policy-making and implementation? To what extent do public policies reflect the will of the citizenry? Our primary focus is on social protection or welfare policy. We also study development and labour market policies.

We address these questions through data collection (including both quantitative and qualitative data, through large-scale surveys, interviews and, where appropriate, archival research) by both teams of researchers and individual researchers. We hold regular seminars (or webinars) and workshops. We collaborate with researchers elsewhere in Africa and further afield.