

# Enhancing Democratic Integrity in Botswana: Citizen Perceptions on Electoral Transparency, Universal Suffrage, and Oversight in the Electoral Processes

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## Abstract

This paper investigates public perceptions of electoral integrity in Botswana, by focusing on three key aspects of the democratic process: transparency in vote counting at polling stations, the enfranchisement of prisoners, and the oversight role of political party agents in voter registration. Drawing on survey data and qualitative evidence analysis, the study assesses citizen attitudes towards these proposed reforms, and the implications of such reforms for enhancing transparency, inclusivity, and accountability within Botswana's electoral framework. Findings indicate overwhelming support for conducting vote counting at polling stations to strengthen transparency and public confidence in election outcomes. Conversely, opinions on prisoner voting rights are polarised, with greater support observed in rural areas where voting is viewed as integral to rehabilitation and democratic inclusion. The participation of political party agents in voter registration received moderate endorsement, tempered by concerns about potential partisanship, particularly among urban respondents. The study concludes that advancing democratic integrity in Botswana requires reinforcing transparency mechanisms, promoting civic education, and fostering inclusive dialogue on electoral reform. The findings contribute to broader debates on democratic consolidation and electoral governance in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** electoral integrity, democratic governance, transparency, prisoner voting rights, political party agents, universal suffrage

## Introduction

Botswana is renowned for its democratic stability, with its electoral process being a cornerstone of its political system. The country follows a multiparty system where general elections are held every five years to elect members to the National Assembly and local councils. The president is

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elected through an indirect method by the members of the National Assembly. The Botswana Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is the primary body responsible for overseeing the electoral process, ensuring compliance with the country's electoral laws, and maintaining voter rolls. Citizens participate through a universal suffrage system, where every citizen who attains the age of 18 years has the right to vote in terms of section 67 of the constitution (Parkin 2022).

Botswana at Independence in 1966 adopted the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system or winner-takes-all electoral system. The system is based on direct election of members representing constituencies or wards. There has, however, been fluctuations in voter turnout over the years, from 69 per cent in 1965, to 55 per cent in 2014 and 49 per cent in the 2019 general election (IEC 2019). Electoral integrity is essential in maintaining the legitimacy of the democratic system, and ensuring that all eligible citizens have a fair opportunity to express their political preferences (Maphunye 2021a).

This paper analyses survey results regarding three key aspects of the electoral process: the procedures for election counting at polling stations, the proposal for granting voting rights to prisoners, and the role of political party agents in monitoring voter registration. The paper assesses public perceptions and concerns related to these areas and examines their implications for the integrity and fairness of elections in Botswana. By evaluating the effectiveness of current practices and considering proposed reforms, this paper provides insights into how electoral processes can be improved to enhance transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. Through this analysis, the paper contributes to ongoing discussions about electoral reforms and the potential for increasing public trust in the electoral system.

## **Background**

### *Importance of Election Integrity*

Election integrity refers to the extent to which elections are conducted freely, fairly, transparently, and in a manner that accurately reflects the will of the voters. In essence, election integrity entails some key elements such as impartial election administration, equal access for candidates and voters, secrecy of the ballot, transparent vote counting, and effective safeguards against fraud or manipulation. According to Norris (2014a), election integrity ensures that the electoral outcomes are credible and legitimate.

Election integrity is the bedrock of democratic governance, and ensures that election outcomes accurately reflect the will of the people. In

the absence of electoral integrity, elections lose their legitimacy, and the government fails to represent the true preferences of its citizens. Transparent processes allow for the validation of electoral results, thereby preventing claims of fraud or manipulation from eroding public trust in the democratic system. Trust in the electoral system strengthens social cohesion and contributes to the stability of political institutions, which allow for a well-functioning democracy. This is particularly critical in nations with emerging or fragile democratic frameworks (Norris 2014c).

In many countries, including Botswana, election integrity plays a significant role in fostering political stability. When citizens perceive the electoral process as transparent and fair, they are more likely to participate actively in and engage with the political system. High voter turnout is an indication that citizens trust the integrity of the process, which in turn strengthens the democratic fabric of the nation (Elklit and Reynolds 2002). Political stability is further enhanced when opposition parties have confidence that elections are conducted without bias or unfair advantage, as this enhances acceptance of election outcomes and sustains democratic competition (Elklit and Reynolds 2002).

Without the guarantee of electoral integrity, electoral fraud and manipulation can undermine democratic institutions. Political players may resort to unethical tactics such as vote rigging, gerrymandering, or bribery, which distort the results and weaken public confidence. Such practices damage the legitimacy of the electoral system and lead to a loss of trust in the democratic process (Long 2023). Lack of faith can lead to political unrest, protests, and even the collapse of democratic institutions, as the public may feel that their votes no longer matter. Upholding integrity prevents such scenarios from occurring, thus ensuring that elections are fair and the results are universally accepted.

Transparency is crucial in the electoral process as it provides citizens and political actors with the assurance that elections are being conducted in an open and fair manner. Transparent processes allow for public scrutiny, thereby ensuring that all parties, from political candidates to civil society organisations, can monitor the process effectively. Moreover, transparency discourages illegal practices and gives the public a clear view of how electoral decisions are made (Androniceanu 2021). As a result, a transparent electoral process fosters confidence in the system, reduces the potential for disputes, and strengthens the legitimacy of the electoral results.

Electoral integrity also ensures the free and equal participation of all eligible citizens in the democratic process. Universal suffrage provides every citizen with the right to vote, regardless of their background, status, or affiliations. This equality in voting is fundamental to a representative

democracy, where every vote carries equal weight. When election integrity is preserved, marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities or economically disadvantaged populations, are assured that their voices will not be drowned out by systemic biases or discriminatory practices (Partheymüller *et al.* 2022). Ensuring that all voices are heard contributes to a more inclusive society, where policies reflect the needs and desires of a broader range of citizens.

The quality of governance is deeply tied to the integrity of the electoral process. Elected officials are more likely to be responsive and accountable to the electorate if they know that their legitimacy depends on the fairness of the electoral process. When citizens perceive that elections are conducted without bias, they are more likely to trust elected officials and believe that they are working in the best interest of the public (Barkow 2019). This trust encourages citizen engagement in policy discussions and strengthens the democratic framework, as citizens feel that their input directly influences the direction of government actions. Transparent elections, therefore, create a more accountable government.

Election integrity prevents the rise of authoritarian regimes that are prone to manipulating electoral processes to retain power. In countries where elections are marred by corruption or fraud, leaders may remain in power despite a lack of popular support, which erodes the democratic foundation of the country. Electoral integrity serves as a safeguard against such practices, by providing a check on governmental power. By ensuring that elections are free, fair, and transparent, the public is empowered to remove leaders who fail to fulfil their duties, thereby strengthening democratic accountability (Peter 2024). This is particularly significant in emerging democracies, where the temptation for political elites to consolidate power is high.

Election integrity is vital for international legitimacy and recognition. Countries with high standards of electoral integrity, such as Canada, New Zealand, Norway, and Germany, are widely regarded as credible and trustworthy in the international arena due to their transparent electoral processes, independent electoral management bodies, and respect for the rule of law. International organizations, including the United Nations and the African Union, emphasise the importance of free and fair elections in upholding democratic governance. When a country conducts transparent elections, it is more likely to attract foreign investment, diplomatic support, and international cooperation (Barkow 2019). Conversely, when elections are tainted by fraud or manipulation, a country may face sanctions or lose credibility on the global stage, which harms the country's reputation and economic stability.

### **Selected Literature Review**

The following section examines key procedural and institutional elements of the electoral process by discussing the counting of votes at polling stations, the legal and democratic debates surrounding prisoner voting rights, and the oversight role played by political party agents in safeguarding electoral integrity.

#### *Electoral Counting at Polling Stations*

Electoral counting at polling stations is a foundational element for ensuring the integrity and transparency of an election. The process of counting ballots must be conducted in a manner that guarantees that the election results reflect the true will of the people. A transparent counting process helps in preventing electoral fraud and builds public trust in the democratic system (Elklit and Reynolds 2005). Transparency can be ensured through clear and efficient protocols, active public engagement, and independent oversight. These mechanisms assure voters that their votes are counted fairly and that any discrepancies are promptly addressed.

The accuracy of electoral counting is also linked to the availability of trained personnel who understand the legal and procedural aspects of the process. Studies indicate that election officials must be adequately trained in handling ballots and conducting the count in compliance with legal standards (Amao 2022). When officials are well trained, the chances of errors and inconsistencies during the counting process are reduced. This professional handling of ballots further strengthens the integrity of the process and ensures that election results are not skewed by human error or oversight (Norris 2014d; James *et al.* 2019).

Independent observers play a crucial role in overseeing the counting process at polling stations. These observers ensure that the counting is done according to the established rules and procedures. Their presence acts as a safeguard against potential manipulation or bias in the counting process (Hyde 2011). Independent election observers, both domestic and international, provide an extra layer of scrutiny, increasing the credibility of the election results. Their reports, which are often published post-election, act as a public record, enhance transparency, and ensure that irregularities are brought to light.

In addition to independent observers, technological tools can be used to improve the transparency of the electoral counting process. Research has demonstrated that the use of digital platforms for real-time updates, such as electronic counting systems, can expedite the process and provide immediate transparency (Elklit and Reynolds 2005). These digital tools allow for the rapid aggregation and dissemination of results, which

reduces the time between the closure of polling stations and the announcement of official results. Such systems, when well-integrated and secure, can significantly reduce the opportunities for fraud or for manipulation, during the counting process.

The implementation of best practices for electoral counting is vital for minimising errors during vote tabulation. For example, a study by Hyde (2011) highlights the importance of ensuring that counting is done in a controlled, secure environment where access is restricted to authorised personnel only. Furthermore, the use of transparent and verifiable methods, such as counting by public witnesses, can help to prevent anyone from tampering with the results. This reduces the chances of electoral malpractice and increases confidence in the system, as voters can be certain that their votes are counted correctly.

The timely announcement of results is another critical aspect of ensuring the transparency of the electoral counting process. Research has shown that delays in result announcements can lead to confusion, speculation, and even unrest among the electorate (Hyde 2011). To mitigate these concerns, election authorities must prioritise efficiency while ensuring that the counting process is accurate and thorough. Delays are often seen as an opportunity for manipulation, which is why it is essential to have mechanisms in place to ensure swift and transparent communication of results to the public.

The role of political party agents at polling stations enhances the integrity of the counting process. These agents are present to observe the counting procedure and ensure that all rules are followed. Their involvement acts as an additional layer of oversight, which contributes to the transparency of the electoral process (Passanti and Pommerolle 2022). Political party agents can challenge any discrepancies they observe, and ensure that all actions during the counting process are fully documented and scrutinised. This independent oversight helps to ensure that no irregularities or manipulative practices are overlooked.

Public access to counting results can further strengthen the credibility of the elections. Research suggests that, when counting is conducted openly and in the presence of the public, it reduces the likelihood of manipulation (Bello *et al.* 2023). Polling stations that allow citizens or their representatives to observe the counting process are less likely to experience issues with transparency. Public involvement not only fosters trust but also acts as a form of accountability, thereby ensuring that election results are consistent with the intentions of the electorate. This public accessibility is crucial for maintaining the legitimacy of the electoral process and reinforcing democratic principles.

### *Prisoner Voting Rights*

Prisoner voting rights remain a contentious issue worldwide, with divergent policies reflecting contrasting views on democracy, rehabilitation, and punishment. South Africa offers a progressive model in this regard, where the Constitutional Court ruled in *Minister of Home Affairs v NICRO* (2004) that denying prisoners the right to vote was unconstitutional. This decision emphasised that the right to vote is a fundamental democratic principle that cannot be arbitrarily revoked. The ruling acknowledged the importance of fostering democratic inclusion and protecting the rights of marginalised groups, even those who have committed crimes (Hyde 2011).

Kenya has taken a more nuanced approach by allowing some categories of prisoners to vote following a High Court decision in 2010. While prisoners are permitted to participate in referendums, they are excluded from general elections. In *Priscilla Nyokabi Kanyua v Attorney General & Another* (2010), the court held that the constitution did not disqualify inmates from voting in the constitutional referendum, as Section 43's disqualifications applied only to National Assembly and presidential elections and not to referenda. Comparative scholarship suggests that this form of partial inclusion reflects an evolving judicial recognition of prisoners' political rights, even as broader enfranchisement remains contested (Abebe 2013). However, broader enfranchisement of prisoners remains an unresolved issue, with ongoing debates about its implications for democratic integrity.

Botswana, by contrast, maintains a policy of prisoner disenfranchisement. In the case of *Thomas Sibanda v the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Independent Electoral Commission* (2009) before the high court of Botswana, a prisoner who was serving a ten-year sentence for robbery and burglary claimed that he was denied the opportunity to register to vote in the general election. The prisoner sought judgement on whether the provision of the Electoral Act that excluded prisoners who were serving sentences longer than six months was violating the provisions of the constitution. The court, however, upheld the ban on the basis that the Act under section 6 clearly states that people in lawful custody on the date of elections are disqualified from voting (*Sunday Standard*, 2009). Since this decision, there has been no reported constitutional litigation successfully challenging prisoner disenfranchisement in Botswana, despite growing international and regional discourse advocating for the democratic inclusion of incarcerated persons.

In Ghana, prisoners remain disenfranchised, which reflects the belief that individuals who violate societal norms should forfeit their

voting rights. However, the exclusion of prisoners from the democratic process has come under increasing scrutiny. Activists argue that denying prisoners the right to vote contradicts Ghana's commitment to human rights and democratic principles. According to Rahman (2023), Ghana's continued disenfranchisement of prisoners raises concerns about the broader implications for democracy and the reintegration of offenders into society after completing their sentences.

The exclusion of prisoners from voting has been justified in some contexts on the basis that it serves as a deterrent and reinforces societal norms. Barkow (2019) argues that disenfranchisement is often framed as part of the punitive measures imposed on offenders, and reflects a belief that those who violate the law should be excluded from participating in the democratic process. However, critics argue that this approach undermines the rehabilitative goals of the criminal justice system and perpetuates cycles of social exclusion.

Advocates for prisoner voting rights emphasise the potential for democratic inclusion to serve as a form of rehabilitation. Beckett (2018) highlights that allowing prisoners to vote fosters a sense of civic responsibility and connection to society, which can facilitate reintegration and reduce recidivism. By maintaining ties to the democratic process, incarcerated individuals are more likely to view themselves as active participants in society, thereby contributing to their eventual rehabilitation.

International legal frameworks support the recognition of prisoner voting rights as a fundamental aspect of democratic participation. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights affirms that all individuals, regardless of their status, have the right to participate in public affairs. Temperman (2019) emphasises that denying prisoners the right to vote contradicts international human rights standards and perpetuates social inequalities. This perspective underscores the need for states to align their electoral laws with global commitments to democratic inclusion.

The impact of prisoner voting rights on electoral outcomes remains a topic of debate. Simon (2021) suggests that allowing prisoners to vote may have implications for electoral results, particularly in regions where incarcerated populations are significant. Critics such as Clegg (2001) and Ashworth (2005) argue that prisoner suffrage could undermine the civic responsibility associated with democratic participation and may encourage electoral incentives that prioritise inmates' interests, particularly in closely contested constituencies. However, empirical evidence on this issue remains inconclusive, highlighting the need for further research.

Botswana's approach to prisoner voting rights reflects broader trends in Africa, where disenfranchisement is often justified as a means of maintaining law and order. Parkin (2022) argues that dominant-party

systems in Botswana and other African nations use disenfranchisement to consolidate political control and minimise dissent. This perspective highlights the complex interplay between electoral policies, political stability, and democratic governance in emerging democracies.

South Africa's inclusion of prisoner voting rights demonstrates a commitment to democratic principles and the protection of human rights. Maphunye (2021b) notes that South Africa's democratic trajectory has been characterised by efforts to promote inclusivity and ensure that marginalised groups are not excluded from the political process. This approach reflects an understanding that democratic participation is essential for fostering social cohesion and preventing political disenfranchisement.

In Zambia, discussions about prisoner voting rights have gained traction in recent years. Hern (2020) explores the evolving discourse on electoral reform in Zambia and highlights the growing recognition of the need to include marginalised populations in the democratic process. Although Zambia continues to disenfranchise prisoners, this conversation around electoral inclusion reflects the broader trends in expanding democratic participation in the region. For example, in Kenya, although the 2010 constitution guarantees universal suffrage, practical barriers continue to limit prisoners' participation in elections Kenya law (2013). Moreover, in Malawi, although electoral reforms have acknowledged the importance of inclusive participation, prisoners are yet to enjoy this right (*Centre for Human Rights Education, Advice and Assistance* 2025).

The role of technology in promoting electoral transparency and integrity has also influenced discussions about prisoner voting rights. Passanti and Pommerolle (2022) examine the impact of technology on the 2017 Kenyan presidential election and emphasise the potential for technological advancements to enhance electoral inclusivity. The use of technology in voter registration and vote counting can mitigate concerns about fraud and ensure that all eligible voters, including prisoners, are included in the democratic process.

Technological advancements can play a transformative role in facilitating prisoner voting and ensuring electoral integrity. Bello and Chukwudi (2023) argue that the integration of digital platforms in electoral processes can enhance transparency and accountability, reducing the risk of fraud and manipulation. The use of biometric verification and secure voting systems can mitigate concerns about the potential impact of prisoner voting on electoral outcomes.

In Nigeria, the debate over prisoner voting rights intersects with broader concerns about electoral integrity and governance. Peter (2024) highlights the challenges of ensuring credible elections in Nigeria, where

issues of electoral fraud and manipulation are prevalent. Granting prisoners the right to vote could contribute to strengthening electoral integrity by promoting greater accountability and transparency in the electoral process.

Public perceptions of prisoners' voting rights play a significant role in shaping policy decisions. International research shows that debates about prisoner suffrage are deeply influenced by broader concerns about civic norms, public morality, and electoral legitimacy. For example, Penal Reform International's briefing (2016) *The Right of Prisoners to Vote: A Global Overview* documents how, in many jurisdictions, restrictions on prisoner voting are justified through normative arguments about political responsibility and social order; these arguments reflect underlying public attitudes that shape legislative and policy choices about enfranchisement. These dynamics underscore the need for public education and awareness campaigns to foster a more nuanced understanding of the implications of prisoner voting rights and the principles of democratic inclusion.

The ethical dimensions of prisoner disenfranchisement are deeply rooted in questions of justice and equality. Amao (2022) argues that denying prisoners the right to vote perpetuates systemic inequalities and undermines the principles of democracy. This perspective calls for a reassessment of electoral policies to ensure that they align with the values of inclusivity and fairness.

Botswana's policy of disenfranchising prisoners has been criticised for its failure to align with international democratic norms. Elklit and Reynolds (2002) highlight the challenges facing electoral democracy in Africa and emphasise the importance of adopting policies that promote inclusivity and accountability. As more countries move towards granting voting rights to prisoners, Botswana's continued exclusionary policies raise questions about its commitment to democratic principles.

In developing democracies, the discourse on prisoner voting rights is often framed within the context of broader electoral reforms. Long (2023) suggests that expanding voting rights to prisoners can contribute to strengthening democratic governance and promoting social stability. By fostering a sense of civic responsibility among incarcerated populations, electoral inclusion can enhance trust in democratic institutions and reduce political disenfranchisement.

Prisoner voting rights are also viewed as a critical component of criminal justice reform. Uggen *et al.* (2004) and Behan (2014) emphasise that inclusive electoral policies can contribute to breaking the cycle of marginalisation and to promoting the reintegration of offenders into society. By granting prisoners the right to vote, states can signal their commitment to fostering rehabilitation and preventing recidivism.

The future of prisoner voting rights will probably be shaped by ongoing debates about democracy, justice, and human rights. Manza and Uggen (2006) explore the historical context of disenfranchisement in the USA and highlight the potential for reform in light of evolving democratic norms. As countries around the world continue to grapple with the issue, the discourse on prisoner voting rights will remain an important aspect of the broader conversation on democratic inclusion and social justice.

### *Role of Political Party Agents*

Political party agents play a pivotal role in safeguarding the electoral process by ensuring transparency, accountability, and fairness. Their presence at polling stations acts as a deterrent against potential electoral malpractices such as vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter intimidation. Party agents monitor the voting process, oversee vote counting, and ensure that results are accurately reported. According to Daniel and Southall (2019) the vigilance of party agents enhances the credibility of elections by minimising opportunities for fraud and manipulation. Their ability to challenge irregularities and report discrepancies strengthens the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes.

In Botswana, for instance, the group *Madibelathopho* (translated as ‘protectors of the vote’) aimed to enhance the integrity of the voter registration process by insisting on being present to document the registration details. However, their efforts were met with resistance from the IEC, which denied them access, thereby raising concerns about the transparency of the registration process.

In Zambia, political party agents play an essential role in the electoral system, where they are stationed at polling centres to ensure adherence to the prescribed procedures during elections. A study by Hern (2020) indicates how party agents in Zambia have been instrumental in exposing electoral irregularities, including cases of multiple voting and attempts to alter results at the constituency level. The presence of party agents has significantly contributed to reducing the incidence of voter fraud and to fostering public trust in the electoral process. During Zambia’s 2021 general election, party agents were particularly vigilant in verifying voter identities and observing the transmission of results, which helped to maintain the integrity of the electoral outcome.

Similarly, in Kenya, political party agents play a crucial role in monitoring the elections, particularly during the tallying and transmission of results. According to Kirwa (2018), party agents ensured that electoral processes complied with legal standards during the 2017 general election in Kenya. Despite challenges such as restricted access to certain stages of

the counting process, the presence of party agents led to the timely identification and reporting of irregularities. Their efforts contributed to the Supreme Court's decision to annul the presidential election due to inconsistencies in the transmission of results. This highlights how vigilant party agents can help to uphold electoral justice and protect democratic principles.

In Ghana, party agents, also known as polling station agents, play a significant role in fostering electoral integrity. Rahman (2023) notes that the presence of party agents during the 2020 general election in Ghana helped to reduce disputes and conflicts by ensuring that the vote-counting process was conducted transparently. Political parties deploy agents at various polling stations to observe the conduct of election officials, confirm that ballots are properly counted, and record the results. The meticulous documentation by these agents serves as an additional safeguard, enabling political parties to contest discrepancies through established legal frameworks if necessary.

Nigeria also provides a noteworthy example where political party agents have contributed to strengthening electoral processes. During the 2019 general election, party agents played a key role in preventing electoral fraud and ensuring the smooth running of the polls. The Independent National Electoral Commission (2020) observed that party agents were instrumental in observing the accreditation of voters, verifying the accuracy of voter lists, and ensuring that the collation and announcement of results were conducted without manipulation. Despite occasional incidents of violence and allegations of vote-buying, the presence of party agents was critical in mitigating potential irregularities and reinforcing public confidence in the electoral system.

The role of political party agents is not limited to the voting and counting processes. They also actively participate in monitoring the voter registration process to ensure that all eligible voters are registered while preventing the inclusion of ineligible individuals. As Norris (2017) points out, party agents act as watchdogs, particularly in countries where voter registration is prone to manipulation. Their involvement ensures that voter rolls are accurate and that no one is unfairly disenfranchised. This vigilance, combined with legal frameworks that empower party agents to challenge irregularities, ensures that elections are free, fair, and credible across many African democracies.

In view of the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that political party agents –whether appointed directly by political parties or nominated on behalf of individual candidates – play a multifaceted and indispensable role in safeguarding the democratic process across the entire electoral cycle. Their participation during voter registration, polling day

voting, and the counting of ballots enhances transparency, deters electoral malpractices, and provides an institutionalised mechanism through which political actors can observe and verify compliance with electoral procedures. This continuous presence contributes significantly to strengthening public confidence in the integrity of electoral outcomes. Comparative experiences from Botswana, Zambia, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria illustrate this role in different institutional forms. While the electoral legal frameworks of Zambia, Kenya, Ghana, and Nigeria explicitly provide for political party or polling agents at registration centres, polling stations, and counting venues, Botswana's electoral system recognises polling agents appointed by individual candidates who perform substantively equivalent oversight and verification functions during voter registration, voting, and ballot counting processes. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that agent-based monitoring – whether formally party-based or candidate-based – remains a critical component of electoral integrity and the accurate reflection of the will of the electorate.

## **Methodology**

### *Afrobarometer Surveys*

This paper utilises survey data from the Botswana Afrobarometer Round 10 surveys conducted from 6 to 19 July 2024. Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Ten survey rounds in 42 countries have been completed since 1999. Afrobarometer's national partners conduct face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice.

### *Sample Universe*

The sample universe for Botswana Afrobarometer surveys includes all Batswana of voting age. This implies that the survey excludes anyone who is not a citizen and anyone who has not attained this age on the day of the survey. Also excluded are areas determined to be either inaccessible or not relevant to the study, such as those experiencing natural disasters, as well as national parks and game reserves. As a matter of practice, the methodology excluded people living in institutionalised settings, such as students in dormitories, persons in prisons, police or military barracks, hospitals or nursing homes, or quarantined areas.

### *Sampling Design*

The Afrobarometer team in Botswana, led by Star Awards, interviewed a nationally representative, random, clustered, stratified probability sample of 1,200 adult Batswana. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of about 3 percentage points at a 95 per cent confidence level. Previous surveys in Botswana were conducted in 1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2017, 2019, and 2022.

The sample is designed as a representative cross-section of all citizens of voting age. The goal is to give every adult citizen an equal and known chance of selection for an interview. This ensures that the survey results provide an unbiased estimate of the views of the national voting-age population. Afrobarometer strives to reach this objective by strictly applying random selection methods at every stage of sampling, and by applying sampling with probability proportionate to population size.

### *Statistical Analysis*

The SPSS statistical software was used to analyse the survey data using simple frequencies, and cross tabulations by demographic groups. In addition, an index on lived poverty was used to disaggregate the questions of interest that talk to electoral transparency, universal suffrage, and oversight in the electoral processes. Participants responded to the following statements:

1. In order to improve transparency, the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations;
2. The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections;
3. Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters.

The Lived Poverty Index was constructed as an average index of 5 poverty items, covered by the question,

Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat?  
Enough clean water for home use?  
Medicines or medical treatment?  
Enough fuel to cook your food?  
A cash income?

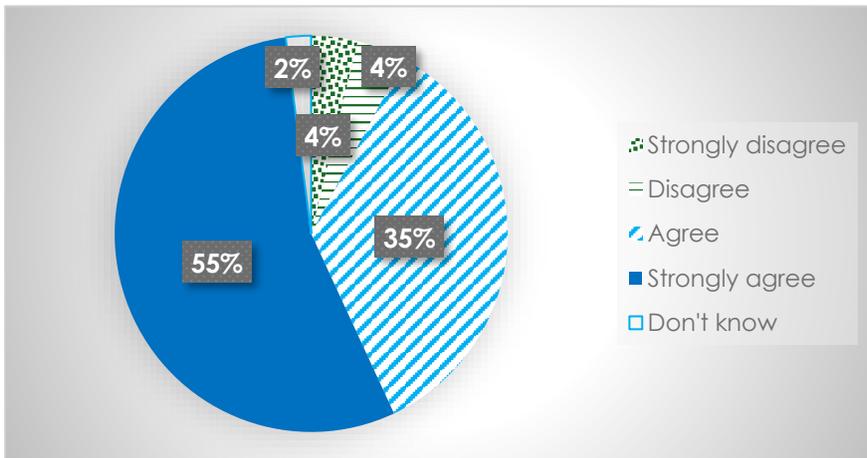
These were coded as: Never = 0; Just once or twice = 1; Several times = 2; Many times = 3; Always = 4, and Don't know = 9.

## Results

This section presents the data analysis of survey results regarding three key aspects of the electoral process in Botswana: the transparency of vote counting at polling stations, the issue of prisoner voting rights, and the role of political party agents in observing voter registration. The responses were categorised by urban, rural, and semi-urban settings, as well as gender, to provide a comprehensive overview of public opinions on these electoral reforms.

### *Transparency in Counting of Votes*

The first question asked respondents whether they disagree or agree that ‘in order to improve transparency, the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations’. Figure 1 shows that an overwhelming majority (90%) ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations.

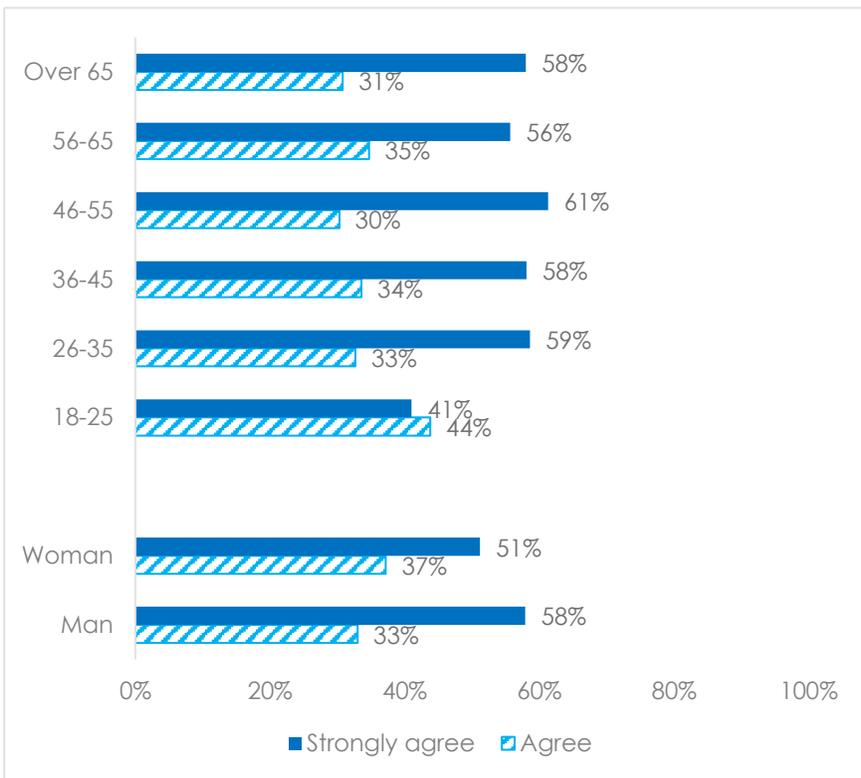


**Figure 1: Counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations | Botswana | 2024**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? In order to improve transparency, the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations.

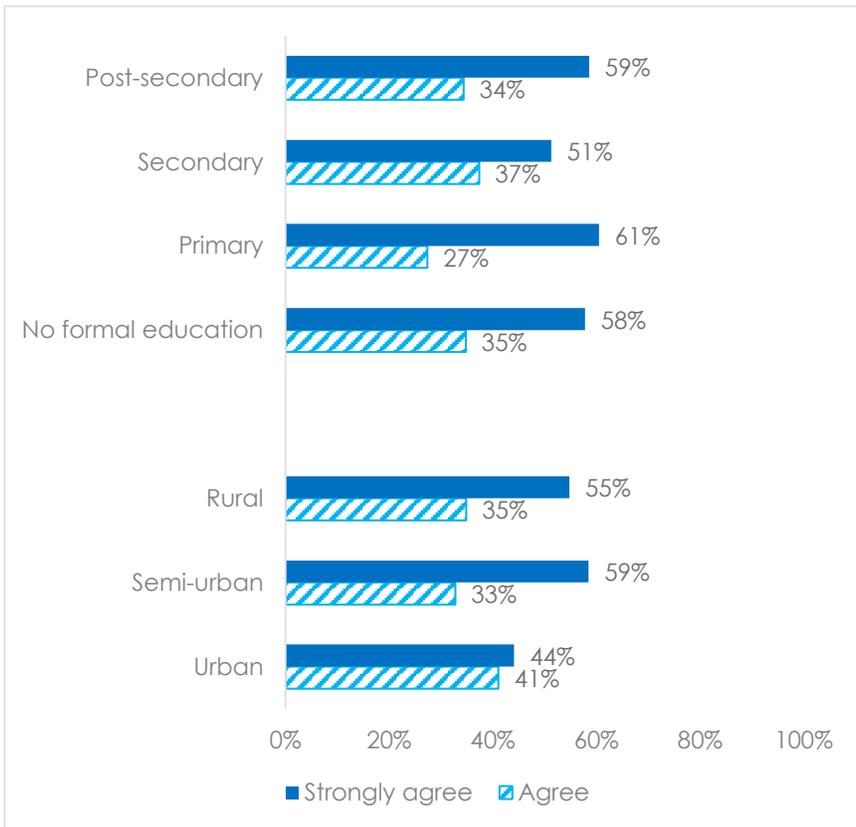
The group of respondents who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with this statement was disaggregated by age group and sex, and education and location, respectively, in Figures 2 and 3. Disaggregation of the study variable gives insight into the relationship between the study variable and demographic variables. The figures show that slightly more men than

women strongly agree with the proposition. By age and education, there are slight variations with no discernible pattern. For the youngest voters (18–25 years old), more agree than strongly agree that the counting of votes should be done at the polling stations. More of the older voters significantly strongly agree than agree with the proposition. More voters in the semi-urban and rural areas than urbanites strongly agree with the proposition.



**Figure 2: Counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations | by age group and sex | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? In order to improve transparency, the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations.

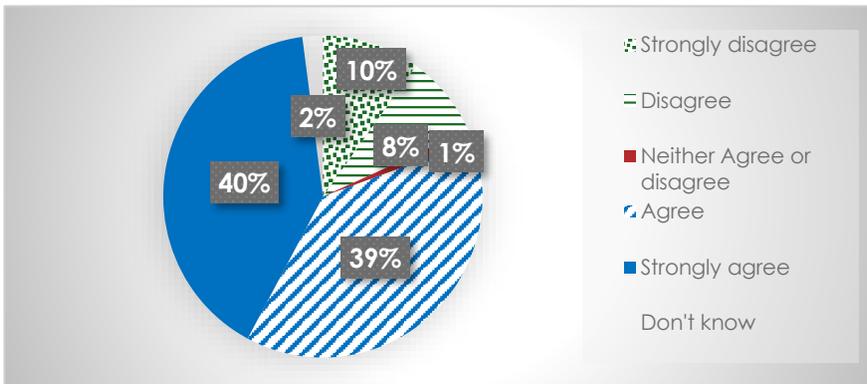


**Figure 3: Counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations | by location and education attainment | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? In order to improve transparency, the counting of votes during elections should be done at the polling stations.

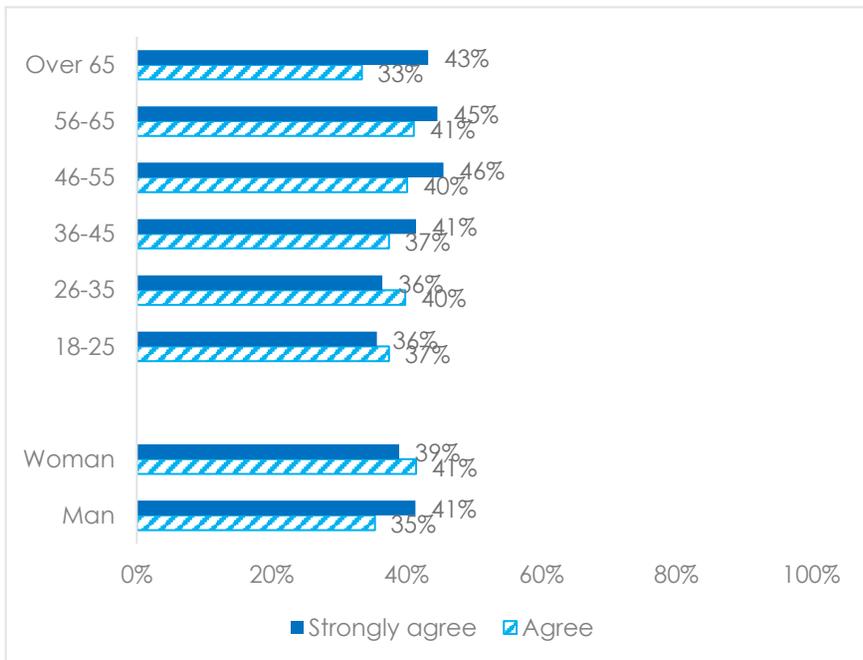
### *Allowing Prisoners to Vote*

The second question probed respondents' views on granting prisoners the right to vote in elections. The results indicate strong support for this, although close to one-fifth of the respondents do not support the proposition. Figure 4 shows that an overwhelming majority (79%) 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that prisoners should be allowed to vote.



**Figure 4: The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections | Botswana | 2024**

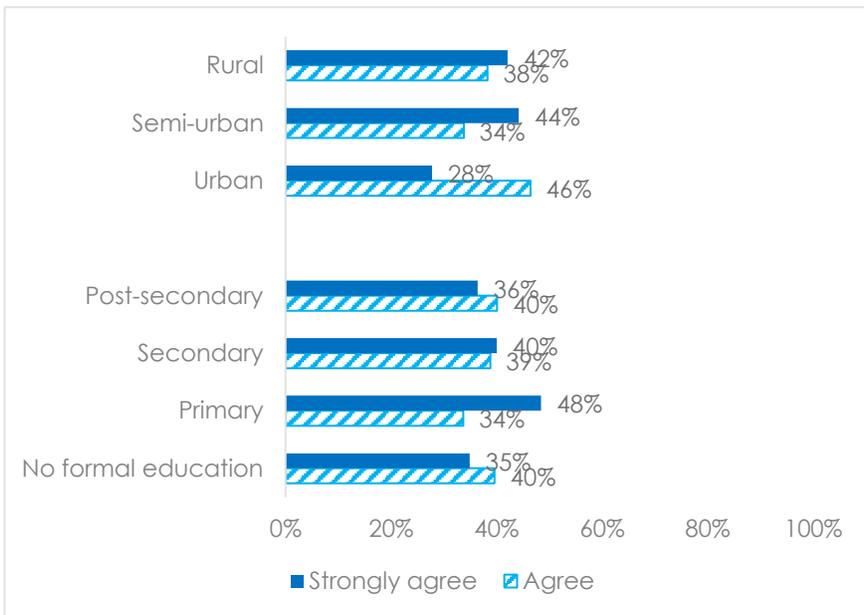
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections.



**Figure 5: The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections | by age group and sex | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections.

The proportion of respondents who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with this statement was disaggregated by age group and sex, and education and location, respectively, in Figures 5 and 6. The figures show that slightly more men than women strongly agree with the proposition. Overall, more women than men strongly agree or agree (80% v 76%). The results also show that more of the older voters than the younger voters strongly agree that prisoners should be allowed to vote. More voters with a primary level of education than voters with other levels of education strongly agree with the proposition. More semi-urban and rural dwellers than urbanites strongly agree with the proposition.

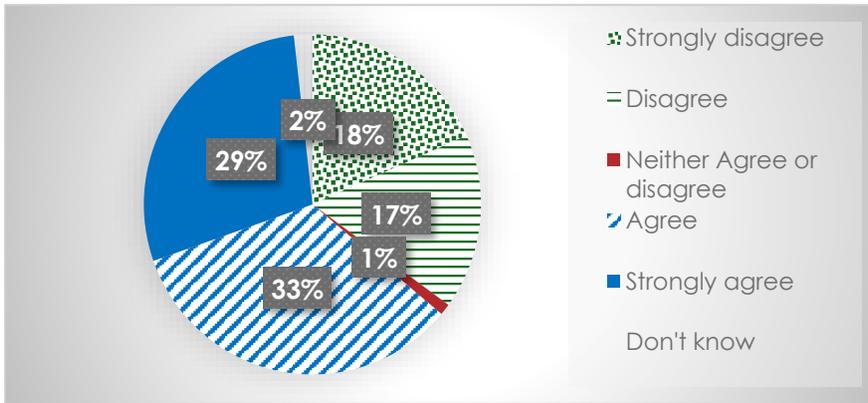


**Figure 6: The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections | by location and education attainment | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? The law should be changed to allow prisoners to vote in elections.

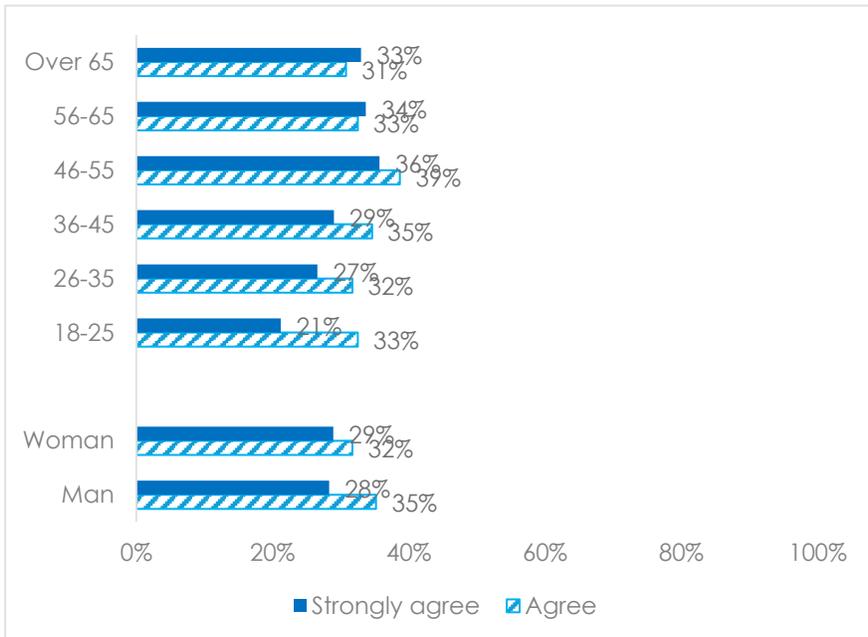
### *Allowing Party Agents to Observe Voter Registration*

The third question explored the role of political party agents in observing voter registration. The results in Figure 7 suggest mixed opinions. A general favourability is shown towards the idea of political party agents being allowed to observe the registration of voters, with a majority of respondents agreeing (33%) or strongly agreeing (29%).



**Figure 7: Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters | Botswana | 2024**

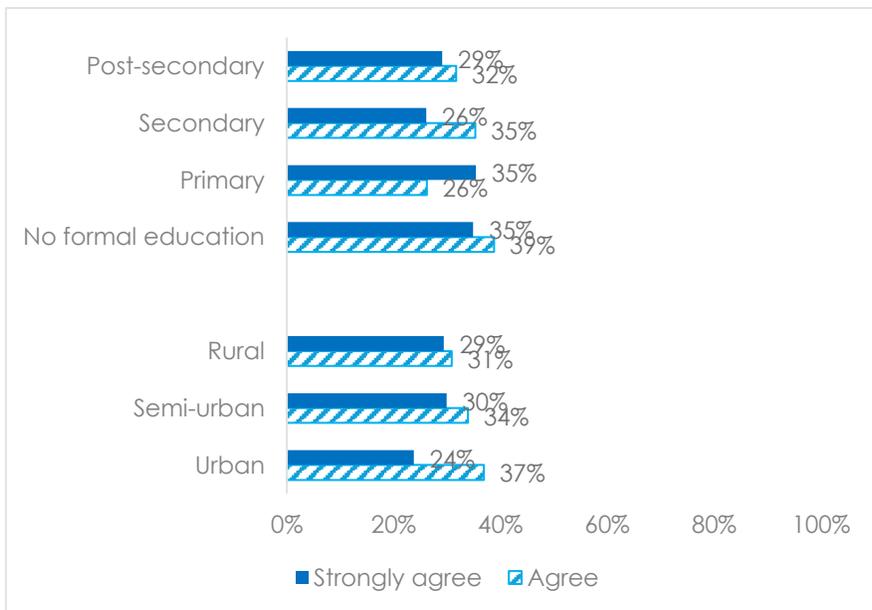
**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters.



**Figure 8: Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters | by age group and sex | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who 'agree' or 'strongly agree'**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters.

In Figures 8 and 9 the proportion of respondents who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with this statement is disaggregated by age groups and sex, and education and location, respectively. The figures show that slightly more men than women agree with the proposition. The results also show that more of the older voters than the younger voters strongly agree that political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters. By education, more voters with no formal or primary education than voters with formal education agree and strongly agree with the proposition. More urbanites than semi-urban and rural dwellers agree and strongly agree with the proposition.



**Figure 9: Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters | by location and education attainment | Botswana | 2024 | per cent who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’**

**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me whether you disagree or agree, or have you not heard enough to say? Political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters.

A statistical model is a process to fit a model that describes the relationship between a response variable and one or more predictor variables. There are many different models that one can fit, including simple linear regression, multiple linear regression, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and binary logistic regression. The study variables were transformed into a dichotomous variable, hence the fitting of a logistic regression model.

### *Binomial Logistic Regression Model*

The binomial logistic regression is a special case of a generalised linear model, if one wants to model the probabilities of a response variable as a function of some explanatory variables. The Wald chi-square test is a statistical test used to assess the significance of individual variables (coefficients) in a statistical model, particularly in logistic regression. It tests the null hypothesis that a particular coefficient equals zero, meaning the variable does not affect the outcome. A large Wald chi-square value ( $\chi^2$ ) with a small p-value indicates that the variable is statistically significant.

The coefficients represent the impact of each predictor on the log odds of the binary outcome. The odds ratios,  $\text{Exp}(B)$ , indicate the change in the odds for a unit change in the predictor. An odds ratio greater than one suggests an increase in the odds of the event occurring, while an odds ratio less than one implies a decrease. The Wald statistic helps assess the significance of each predictor variable. P-values test the null hypothesis that the corresponding coefficient is equal to zero. A low p-value suggests that the predictors are significantly related to the dependent variable.

A binary logistic regression analysis was carried out to investigate the effects of location (urban, semi-urban, rural), education (no formal education, primary, secondary, post-secondary), age (18–25, 26–35, 36–45, 46–55, 56–65, over 65), and sex of respondent (male, female) on the likelihood of a respondent saying they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that counting of votes should be done at polling stations. The results are shown in Table 1.

The model is not statistically significant, ( $\chi^2(11) = 16.584, p = 0.121$ ), explaining between 1.4 per cent (Cox–Snell R-square) and 3.3 per cent (Nagelkerke R-square) of the variance in the response in the counting of votes done at polling stations, and correctly classifying 92.1 per cent of the cases. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(8) = 13.053, p = 0.110$ ).

In the model, the urban primary sampling unit (PSU) is highly significant ( $B = -0.730$ , Wald = 6.882, p-value = 0.009,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.482$ ), indicating that urbanites are less likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to the counting of votes at polling stations than semi-urban voters are. Also in the models, voters with a secondary ( $B = -0.904$ , Wald = 4.072, p-value = 0.044,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.405$ ) or post-secondary ( $B = -0.680$ , Wald = 4.237, p-value = 0.040,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 0.507$ ) school level of education are less likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to the counting of votes at polling stations.

**Table 1: Model 1 – Logistic model of counting votes at the polling station**

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Semi-urban location			8.068	2	0.018	
Urban location	-0.730	0.278	6.882	1	0.009	0.482
Rural location	0.034	0.267	0.017	1	0.897	1.035
No formal education			6.382	3	0.094	
Primary education	-0.065	0.693	0.009	1	0.925	0.937
Secondary education	-0.904	0.448	4.072	1	0.044	0.405
Post-secondary education	-0.680	0.330	4.237	1	0.040	0.507
over 65 years old			2.574	5	0.765	
18–25 years old	0.001	0.458	0.000	1	0.998	1.001
26–35 years old	0.300	0.470	0.410	1	0.522	1.351
36–45 years old	0.196	0.471	0.172	1	0.678	1.216
46–55 years old	0.406	0.465	0.760	1	0.383	1.500
56–65 years old	0.524	0.509	1.059	1	0.303	1.688
Man	0.195	0.220	0.781	1	0.377	1.215
Constant	2.864	0.518	30.549	1	0.000	17.523

A binary logistic regression analysis was carried out to investigate the effects of the same independent variables (location, education, age, and sex of respondent) on the likelihood of a respondent saying they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that prisoners be allowed to cast votes. The results are shown in Table 2.

The model is statistically significant, ( $\chi^2(11) = 27.933, p = 0.003$ ), explaining between 2.4 per cent (Cox–Snell R-square) and 3.9 per cent (Nagelkerke R-square) of the variance in the response of allowing prisoners to cast a vote, and correctly classifying 81.2 per cent of the cases. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(8) = 9.725, p = 0.285$ ).

In the model, urban PSU is highly significant ( $B = -0.358$ ,  $Wald = 3.031$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.082$ ,  $Exp(B) = 0.699$ ), indicating that urbanites are less likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to the counting of votes at polling stations than semi-urban voters, as are rural people ( $B = -0.304$ ,  $Wald =$

2.869, p-value = 0.090, Exp(B) = 0.738. Also in the models, elderly voters (56–65 years; B = 0.616, Wald = 2.796, p-value = 0.095, Exp(B) = 1.851) are 1.851 times more likely than pensioners to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that prisoners be allowed to cast a vote. Men on the other hand, are less likely than women (B = -0.348, Wald = 5.066, p-value = 0.024, Exp(B) = 0.706) to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that prisoners be allowed to cast a vote.

**Table 2: Model 2 – Logistic model of allowing prisoners to cast a vote**

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Semi-urban location			4.445	2	0.108	
Urban location	-0.358	0.205	3.031	1	0.082	0.699
Rural location	-0.304	0.180	2.869	1	0.090	0.738
No formal Education			2.253	3	0.522	
Primary Education	-0.186	0.393	0.224	1	0.636	0.830
Secondary Education	0.111	0.298	0.140	1	0.709	1.118
Post-Secondary Education	0.228	0.198	1.331	1	0.249	1.256
over 65 years old			12.785	5	0.025	
18–25 years old	-0.344	0.332	1.071	1	0.301	0.709
26–35 years old	-0.130	0.330	0.156	1	0.693	0.878
36–45 years old	-0.083	0.339	0.060	1	0.806	0.920
46–55 years old	0.474	0.350	1.835	1	0.176	1.607
56–65 years old	0.616	0.368	2.796	1	0.095	1.851
Man	-0.348	0.155	5.066	1	0.024	0.706
Constant	1.708	0.346	24.310	1	0.000	5.518

A binary logistic regression analysis was carried out to investigate the effects of these independent variables (location, education, age and sex) on the likelihood of a respondent saying they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that political party agents should be allowed to observe the registration of voters. The results are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Model 3 – Logistic model of allowing political party agents to observe voter registration**

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Semi-urban location			2.009	2	0.366	
Urban location	-0.015	0.173	0.007	1	0.932	0.985
Rural location	-0.200	0.145	1.905	1	0.168	0.819
No formal education			6.107	3	0.107	
Primary education	0.679	0.353	3.708	1	0.054	1.972
Secondary education	-0.113	0.237	0.226	1	0.635	0.893
Post-secondary education	0.090	0.164	0.302	1	0.582	1.095
over 65 years old			22.195	5	0.000	
18–25 years old	-0.473	0.273	2.996	1	0.083	0.623
26–35 years old	-0.279	0.271	1.059	1	0.303	0.757
36–45 years old	-0.031	0.278	0.013	1	0.911	0.969
46–55 years old	0.536	0.281	3.636	1	0.057	1.709
56–65 years old	0.060	0.282	0.045	1	0.831	1.062
Man	0.082	0.125	0.432	1	0.511	1.086
Constant	0.632	0.284	4.932	1	0.026	1.881

The model is statistically significant, ( $\chi^2(11) = 33.920, p = 0.000$ ), explaining between 2.9 per cent (Cox–Snell R-square) and 3.9 per cent (Nagelkerke R-square) of the variance in the response to allowing political party agents to observe voter registration, and correctly classifying 63.4 per cent of the cases. The Hosmer and Lemeshow test suggested a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2(8) = 14.729, p = 0.065$ ).

In the model, primary education is significant ( $B = 0.679, Wald = 3.708, p\text{-value} = 0.054, Exp(B) = 1.972$ ), indicating that voters with primary education are more likely to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ to the proposition that political party agents be allowed to observe voter registration than voters with post-secondary education. Also in the model, young voters aged 18–25 years ( $B = -0.473, Wald = 2.996, p\text{-value} = 0.083, Exp(B) = 0.623$ ) are less likely than pensioners to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that party agents should observe voter registration. The middle-aged

(46–55 years) on the other hand, are more likely than pensioners ( $B = 0.536$ ,  $Wald = 3.636$ ,  $p\text{-value} = 0.057$ ,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.709$ ) to ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that party agents should observe voter registration.

## Discussion

### *Overview of the Key Findings*

The aim of this paper was to explore public perceptions of three key aspects of Botswana’s electoral process: the transparency of vote counting at polling stations, the proposal for allowing prisoners to vote, and the role of political party agents in observing voter registration. The findings from the survey reveal varying levels of support for each of these reforms, with significant demographic differences based on location and gender. These findings are consistent with broader debates on electoral integrity, inclusion, and democratic legitimacy in emerging democracies (Norris 2014d; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, International IDEA, 2019).

### *Vote Counting Transparency at Polling Stations*

An overwhelming majority of respondents (90%) support the idea that vote counting should take place at polling stations to enhance transparency. This finding aligns with the work of Norris (2014b), who argues that transparent electoral procedures are fundamental to electoral integrity and public trust. Transparent vote counting reduces opportunities for manipulation and enhances citizens’ confidence in election outcomes, particularly in newer or consolidating democracies.

Similarly, International IDEA (2019) emphasises that counting ballots at polling stations, in the presence of party agents and observers, is a global best practice that strengthens accountability and reduces post-election disputes. Comparative studies of African elections show that delays or opaque aggregation processes often fuel both suspicions of fraud and electoral violence (Cheeseman and Klaas 2018).

Almost six-in-ten (59%) of semi-urban dwellers expressed strong support followed by rural respondents who expressed stronger support (55% strongly agree) than their urban counterparts (44% strongly agree), a trend that may reflect the differences in trust towards local electoral processes in less urbanised areas. This is supported by the Commonwealth Expert Team (2025), which recommended that ballots be counted at polling stations to enhance public confidence and reduce suspicions of manipulation. *The Botswana Gazette* (2024a) reported that the swift

release of results by Botswana Television within 24 hours of counting was praised by observers and reinforced the public's desire for transparent and timely vote tabulation (as cited in the Commonwealth Expert Team findings).

In Botswana, the low percentage of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed (8%) suggests a broad consensus on the importance of transparency in vote counting. This broad support is in line with global trends, where public faith in electoral processes is linked to transparency and accountability (Norris 2014c). Additionally, the rural-urban divide (rural v semi-urban and urban) suggests that there were differences in how populations perceived the benefits of transparent local processes, perhaps due to the perception that elections in urban areas are more prone to manipulation due to higher political competition (Elklit and Reynolds 2005).

Fewer of the youngest voters (21%) strongly agree that political party agents should observe voter registration compared with older voters. This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that younger voters are often less familiar with the role of party agents in electoral administration and may view party involvement in registration processes with scepticism, as younger voters associate the role of party agents with partisan interference instead of accountability (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). In terms of education, voters with no formal or only primary education show stronger support (35%) for party-agent observation than those with secondary or post-secondary education. This may reflect a greater reliance on visible, actor-based oversight mechanisms among less formally educated voters, which is a finding consistent with studies highlighting how perceptions of electoral credibility vary across social groups (Elklit and Reynolds 2005).

### *Prisoner Voting Rights*

Public opinion on allowing prisoners to vote is more divided. While 79 per cent of respondents support prisoner voting rights, with semi-urban areas showing stronger support (44%), there is significant resistance, particularly in urban areas (13% strongly disagree). This division reflects long-standing international debates on the relationship between punishment, citizenship, and democratic inclusion.

Comparative scholarship strongly challenges blanket prisoner disenfranchisement. Ewald (2002) and Uggen and Manza (2002) argue that denying prisoners the vote undermines democratic principles by excluding citizens from political participation without clear rehabilitative or deterrent

benefits. These scholars emphasise that voting can serve as a mechanism for civic responsibility and reintegration.

Conversely, critics argue that imprisonment justifiably entails temporary suspension of certain civic rights. This position is reflected in retributive theories of punishment, which frame disenfranchisement as part of societal condemnation of serious crime (Manfredi 2004).

In Botswana, although the Electoral Act allows prisoners serving fewer than six months to vote, the IEC has not upheld this right, and has cited logistical constraints as the cause of this omission (Pheage 2017). Civil society organisations such as the Botswana Institute of Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Offenders (BIRRO) have criticised this inaction, and argued that the IEC should lead efforts to register eligible prisoners. The Southern Africa Litigation Centre has emphasised that the treatment of prisoners reflects a country's democratic maturity, and noted that practical barriers often prevent prisoners from exercising their rights.

The slightly higher level of support in rural areas could reflect a more inclusive view of democracy, where rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners are prioritised. This aligns with arguments in the literature that suggest that prisoners should retain their right to vote as part of a broader rehabilitative process that reinforces their civic connection to society. For instance, Easton *et al.* (2012) argue that enfranchising prisoners acknowledges their continued status as citizens, can foster civic responsibility, and helps integrate them into the political community even during incarceration. Conversely, the resistance, particularly among men (12%) compared to women (8%), highlights concerns about the integrity of the electoral process, as voters might worry that prisoners could vote in ways that disproportionately influence policies that affect their conditions.

A notable legal case in Botswana involved a prisoner, Thomas Sibanda, who sued the government for denying him the right to vote; Sibanda argued that the Electoral Act violated constitutional protections (*Sunday Standard* 2009). This case underscores the ongoing debate and suggests that public opinion may be shaped by perceptions of fairness, legality, and the role of punishment in civic exclusion.

Fewer younger voters aged 18–25 (36%) strongly agree that prisoners should be allowed to vote compared with older cohorts, where support rises to between 41 per cent and 45 per cent. This pattern aligns with research showing that younger citizens in many African democracies tend to hold more punitive views on crime and punishment, while older voters often emphasise rehabilitation and social reintegration (Roberts and Hough 2011). In terms of education, voters with primary-level education exhibit stronger support (48%) for prisoner enfranchisement than those with higher levels of education, which is a finding consistent with studies

suggesting that attitudes towards prisoner voting are shaped less by formal education than by normative views of citizenship, inclusion, and justice (Uggen *et al.* 2004; International IDEA 2019).

### *Political Party Agents in Voter Registration*

Support for allowing political party agents to observe voter registration was moderate, with 62 per cent of respondents agreeing that it would enhance transparency. There is roughly equally strong support between men and women, with significantly higher support among the elderly respondents compared to the young respondents. There is also stronger support among those with no formal education and urbanites. Catt *et al.* (2014) note that party agents play a critical role in safeguarding electoral integrity by deterring malpractice and enhancing mutual trust among political competitors.

Support for the proposition is stronger (29% + 33% = 62% strongly agree or agree) than opposition to it. However, the opposition to this idea (18% + 17% = 35% strongly disagree or disagree) underscores concerns about the potential for partisan manipulation and bias. These concerns are reflected in the work of Passanti and Pommerolle (2022), who caution against the risks of political party agents introducing bias into the process, especially in competitive urban environments. In 2023, the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC) took the IEC to court to demand the right for its agents to monitor the voter registration process, thus highlighting concerns about transparency and potential exclusion (Mpuang 2023).

The greater support in rural and semi-urban areas (29% and 30% strongly agree) suggests that voters in these areas might view political party agents as an essential safeguard, whereas urban voters (24% strongly agree) may be more sceptical about the potential for political interference. *The Botswana Gazette* (2024b) also reported that voters were reluctant to register without knowing their candidates, prompting the IEC to urge political parties to engage more actively with constituents. These findings highlight the delicate balance that must be struck between increasing transparency and preventing partisanship from undermining the electoral process (Bello and Chukwudi 2023). The Commonwealth Expert Team (2025) further recommended inclusive post-election dialogue and greater civil society involvement to rebuild trust in electoral institutions.

Fewer of the youngest voters (21%) strongly agree that political party agents should observe voter registration compared with older voters. This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that younger voters are often less familiar with the role of party agents in electoral administration

and may view party involvement in registration processes with scepticism, associating it with partisan interference rather than accountability (Bratton and Van de Walle 1997). In terms of education, voters with no formal or only primary education show stronger support (35%) for party-agent observation than those with secondary or post-secondary education. This may reflect a greater reliance on visible, actor-based oversight mechanisms among less formally educated voters, a finding consistent with studies highlighting how perceptions of electoral credibility vary across social groups (Elklit and Reynolds 2005).

### *Gender and Geographic Variations in Responses*

The findings of this study reveal notable gender and geographic differences in respondents' views on electoral reforms. Quantitative data showed that women were more likely to support reforms such as prisoner voting rights (80% agree or strongly agree) compared to men (76%). This gender divide aligns with broader global patterns, where men often exhibit greater scepticism towards reforms perceived as extending rights to marginalised groups.

Qualitative insights support this trend. A gender-based violence activist, Wiseman Gorewang, who works closely with prison inmates, publicly advocated for prisoner voting rights, and emphasised that many prisoners would vote responsibly if given the chance. His advocacy reflects a growing civil society push for inclusive democratic practices, which is often supported by women and gender rights organisations.

Additionally, the *Gender Audit of the 2024 Botswana Elections* revealed that women's political participation remains low, with only 8.7 per cent representation in Parliament, despite efforts to promote inclusivity. This underrepresentation may influence women's stronger support for reforms that broaden democratic access.

The gendered nature of political attitudes in Botswana is also shaped by historical and legal contexts. For instance, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, systemic barriers persist. The *Abolition of Marital Power Act* and other reforms have improved women's rights, but gaps remain in areas such as employment and political representation. These disparities may contribute to women's more empathetic stance towards extending voting rights to prisoners, viewing it as part of a broader struggle for inclusion.

Geographically, rural respondents showed stronger support for electoral reforms, particularly around transparency and prisoner voting rights. This may reflect differing perceptions of governance and democratic participation. Rural communities often experience limited

access to political power and may view reforms as a means to enhance their voice in national affairs.

Supporting this, Afrobarometer Round 7 survey data indicate that a significant proportion of Botswana expressed trust in electoral institutions and supported electoral reforms, including public funding for political parties and measures to enhance transparency in the electoral process (Afrobarometer 2017). These findings suggest a generally positive public orientation towards institutional reform and democratic accountability. Furthermore, the Zimbabwe Election Support Network and Electoral Support Network of Southern Africa (ZESN–ESN–SA) Election Observation Mission to Botswana’s 2024 general election reported that voters across urban, peri-urban, and rural areas participated peacefully in the electoral process; the mission viewed elections as an important mechanism for political participation and democratic governance (ZESN–ESN–SA 2024).

However, urban respondents, with greater access to diverse media and political discourse, tended to be more critical of reforms. This scepticism may stem from concerns about security, fairness, and the politicisation of electoral processes. For example, urban-based civil society groups protested the 2024 Constitutional Amendment Bill, by citing a lack of transparency and potential Executive overreach. These protests led to the Bill’s withdrawal, which demonstrates urban citizens’ active role in shaping democratic reforms.

The 2024 elections saw the UDC win a majority of seats with only a plurality of votes, which prompted calls for proportional representation from urban-based analysts and media outlets. Civil society voices have also weighed in. Mothei Sejakgomo, Chairman of BIRRO, stated: ‘If countries like South Africa are doing it, why can’t we? The IEC has an obligation to facilitate registration of voters in prison’ (*The Botswana Gazette* 2019).

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined public perceptions of electoral integrity in Botswana by focusing on transparency in vote counting, prisoner voting rights, and the role of political party agents in voter registration. Drawing on Afrobarometer Round 10 data, the findings reveal strong public support for reforms that enhance visible transparency, alongside more ambivalent attitudes towards reforms that challenge established norms of punishment and partisan oversight.

An overwhelming majority of respondents support the counting of votes at polling stations, which underscores the centrality of procedural transparency to public confidence in electoral outcomes. This consensus,

which cuts across most demographic groups, suggests that locally verifiable counting mechanisms remain a critical foundation of electoral legitimacy in Botswana. By contrast, opinions on prisoner enfranchisement are more divided. Although a clear majority are in support of allowing prisoners to vote, resistance persists, particularly among urban respondents, which reflects enduring tensions between punitive conceptions of citizenship and inclusive democratic norms. Support for allowing political party agents to observe voter registration is similarly mixed, which indicates the existence of public recognition of the value of oversight alongside concerns about partisan interference.

Overall, the findings suggest that, while Botswana broadly endorses reforms aimed at strengthening electoral transparency, more contested reforms require careful public engagement and institutional design. For policymakers, these results highlight the importance of sequencing reforms, strengthening civic education, and clarifying oversight mechanisms to maintain trust in electoral institutions. More broadly, the paper contributes to debates on democratic consolidation in Africa by demonstrating how citizen perceptions shape the legitimacy and feasibility of electoral reform in dominant-party systems such as Botswana.

### **Recommendations**

Given the findings of this study, it is essential for policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations in Botswana to engage in further dialogue regarding these electoral reforms. Specifically, there is a need to:

1. **Increase Public Awareness:** Efforts should be made to raise public awareness on the importance of electoral transparency and the potential benefits of reforms such as prisoner voting rights and political party agents' oversight of voter registration. This can be achieved through educational campaigns, public discussions, and outreach programmes to ensure citizens are well-informed about these reforms.
2. **Address Urban-Rural Divides:** Policymakers should focus on bridging the gap between rural and semi-urban, and urban perceptions of electoral reforms. Tailored approaches that consider regional concerns and priorities will be necessary to foster broader consensus across the country.
3. **Promote Inclusivity:** Efforts should be made to explore how electoral processes can be made more inclusive, particularly regarding marginalised groups, such as prisoners. This includes

ensuring that reforms are not only implemented but are also seen as fair and beneficial to all citizens, regardless of their background.

4. **Engage Stakeholders:** It is crucial for the Independent Electoral Commission and political parties to engage in discussions with various stakeholders, including civil society groups, the general public, and international organisations, to assess the feasibility and impact of these proposed reforms.

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