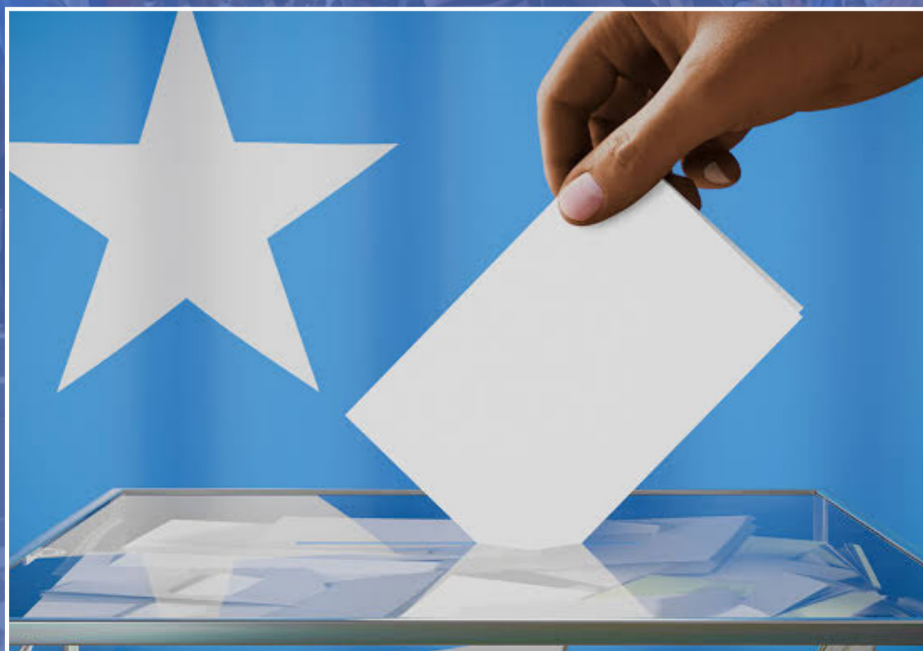


Navigating Political Transition: Citizens' Views on Elections, Legitimacy, and Governance in Somalia

Somali Public Agenda (SPA) & Somali Dialogue Platform (SDP)

July 2026



Navigating Political Transition: Citizens' Views on Elections, Legitimacy, and Governance in Somalia

Somali Public Agenda (SPA) & Somali Dialogue Platform (SDP)

July 2026



Somali Public Agenda
Mogadishu Somalia
Tel: +252(0)85 8358
Email: info@somalipublicagenda.org
Website: <https://www.somalipublicagenda.org>



Somali Dialogue Platform
Nairobi/Mogadishu
Website: <https://riftvalley.net/>

© Somali Public Agenda & Somali Dialogue Platform 2026

Somali Public Agenda is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent public policy and administration research and action organization based in Mogadishu. It aims to advance understanding and improvement of public policy and services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis, dialogue, policy and service design, and training.

Somali Dialogue Platform (*Wadahadalada Somaaliyeed*) is a programme, implemented by the Rift Valley Institute, that works to facilitate agreement amongst Somalis on contentious political issues.



With the exception of any third-party images and photos, the electronic version of this publication is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share Alike 3.0 (CC BY-NC-SA 3.0) licence. You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the publication as well as to remix and adapt it, provided it is only for non-commercial purposes, that you appropriately attribute the publication, and that you distribute it under an identical licence. For more information visit the Creative Commons website: <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>>.

Somali Public Agenda

Mogadishu

Somalia

Tel: +252(0)85 8358

Email: info@somalipublicagenda.org

Website: <<https://www.somalipublicagenda.org>>

Design and layout: Asal Creative Design

Table of Contents

Table of Figures	iv
Table of Tables	iv
Acronyms	iv
Executive Summary	1
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Methodology and Sample	5
3.0 Findings	10
3.1 Perceptions of the Political Environment	10
3.2 Democratic Principles	11
Peace and Stability	14
Freedom of Information	15
Relationship Between Democratic Preferences and the Constitutional Debate	17
3.3 Trusted Actors and Institutions	19
Mediation and Political Dialogue	20
Election Management and Oversight	21
3.4 Dialogue Priorities	23
4.0 Conclusion	24
5.0 Recommendations and Policy Considerations	25
6.0 Annex: Sample Demographics	27

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Sample Frame Distribution, Kismayo	5
Figure 2: Achieved Sample Demographics	6
Figure 3: Political Profile, Political Engagement Levels	8
Figure 4: Political Profiles, Perceptions of Political Environment	10
Figure 5: Predictors of Prioritizing Peace and Stability	14
Figure 6: Predictors of Prioritizing Free Press	16
Figure 7: Democratic Principles, Transparency vs Stability	16
Figure 8: View of Government Mandate and Priorities	18
Figure 9: Confidence in Mediators, by District and Actor	20
Figure 10: High Confidence in Election Management, by Government Actor	21
Figure 11: Election Actor Impact on Election Confidence	22
Figure 12: Topics Prioritized for Government Communication	23

Table of Tables

Table 1: Democratic Principles - Summary of Trade-off Selections	13
Table 2: Achieved sample demographics	27

Acronyms

CATI	Computer Assisted Telephone Interview
FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
FMS	Federal Member State
OPOV	One Person, One Vote
SPA	Somali Public Agenda

Executive Summary

Somalia's constitutional and electoral transition is unfolding amid significant political uncertainty. Public debate remains largely elite-driven, with limited systematic evidence on how citizens understand democratic principles, electoral legitimacy, political mediation, and government accountability. This study addresses that gap through a May-June 2026 public opinion poll conducted across Mogadishu and five Federal Member State capitals, reaching 928 respondents. The analysis examines which democratic principles citizens prioritize, which actors they trust to mediate political disputes, which institutions they trust to manage or oversee elections, and which issues they want political leaders to communicate about more openly.

The findings show that citizens express strong support for democratic reform in principle, but their preferences become more complex when democratic goals are weighed against peace, stability, term limits, press freedom, and public participation. Nearly nine in ten respondents say it is important that Somalia's leadership be elected through one-person-one-vote elections. However, when asked to choose between competing priorities, many place substantial weight on peace and stability. Women are especially likely to prioritize stability, while respondents who believe the presidential term has already ended, and those who are more politically engaged, are more willing to prioritize competing democratic objectives.

Views on the presidential mandate are among the strongest predictors of democratic preferences. A majority of respondents believe the presidential term has ended. These respondents are more likely to prioritize term limits, timely political transition, and press freedom. Those who believe the mandate continues are more likely to prioritize political stability and government authority. This suggests that democratic principles are interpreted through the lens of the current constitutional dispute, rather than in isolation.

The study also identifies a tension in public attitudes toward transparency and accountability. Respondents strongly value transparent government communication. However, support for press freedom is more limited, particularly when framed as potentially conflicting with peace, stability, or the dignity of political leaders. Many citizens appear to value transparency as an outcome, without necessarily viewing an independent and critical press as the primary mechanism for achieving it.

Preferences for mediators are relatively consistent across locations, suggesting broad national perceptions of potential actors rather than purely local political dynamics. In relation to election management, confidence in the Federal Government compared with state or regional authorities varies substantially by location. In some locations, respondents express higher or similar confidence in the FGS to manage fair elections, while in others confidence is stronger in local authorities. This suggests that trust in election management is not simply federal or local, but is shaped by local political context and perceptions of institutional credibility. At the same time, support from trusted third parties, particularly Somali civil society organizations, is widely seen as increasing confidence in electoral legitimacy.

Finally, citizens identify security and counterterrorism operations as the issue on which political leaders should communicate more openly, well ahead of elections and public finance. This reinforces a central theme of the research report: expectations of democracy, accountability, and political reform are closely tied to concerns about security, stability, and effective governance. Electoral and constitutional dialogue will therefore be more persuasive when it connects democratic reform to citizens' everyday concerns, including security, inclusion, legitimacy, and trust in public institutions.

1.0 Introduction

Somalia is currently undergoing a period of significant political uncertainty and contestation surrounding the country's constitutional and electoral trajectory. Disputes regarding constitutional amendments, electoral sequencing, the transition timeline, and the respective roles of federal and state-level institutions have contributed to increasing political tensions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Federal Member States (FMS), and opposition actors. At the same time, discussions surrounding the feasibility and legitimacy of different electoral models – including one-person-one-vote elections, indirect electoral arrangements, and potential transitional mechanisms – have become increasingly central to national political debate.

Despite the significance of these debates, much of the current political discourse remains highly elite-driven, with relatively limited systematic evidence on citizens' perspectives regarding electoral processes, political legitimacy, institutional trust, and political priorities. Existing discussions around electoral reform and political transition are often shaped by negotiations among political leaders and institutions, while citizens' preferences, concerns, and perceptions remain comparatively underrepresented in public debate and policy discussions. This gap is particularly important in the current context, where questions of legitimacy, political consensus, inclusion, and public trust are likely to shape both the feasibility and public acceptance of future political arrangements.

This Somali Public Agenda (SPA) public opinion poll seeks to address this gap by generating empirically grounded evidence on citizens' perspectives regarding Somalia's political transition and electoral processes. Through a representative survey conducted across Mogadishu and the capitals of the Federal Member States, this research report presents the key findings from the Election Polling and provides systematic insight into citizens' priorities, concerns, and preferences at a critical political juncture.

The overall objective of the election poll is to inject empirically grounded citizens' perspectives into national election debates, promote evidence-based decision-making, and contribute to more inclusive and legitimate electoral processes in Somalia.

This research report is intended not only to document polled citizens' views on elections for public discussion, but also as a starting point for broader citizen-centered engagement on electoral processes and political transition in Somalia. In particular, the paper identifies key areas where inclusive dialogue may be necessary to strengthen political legitimacy, public trust, and consensus-building around future electoral arrangements.

This research report addresses four core research questions:

1. **Democratic Principles:** What democratic principles and political priorities do citizens place the greatest importance on during periods of political transition and public debate?

2. **Trusted Actors and Institutions for Mediation:** Which actors and institutions do citizens trust to mediate political disputes and facilitate political dialogue?
3. **Trusted Actors and Institutions for Managing Political Processes:** Which actors and institutions do citizens trust to manage or oversee legitimate electoral and political processes?
4. **Dialogue Priorities:** Which political, governance, and public policy issues do citizens most want political leaders to address more openly and transparently?

Collectively, these research questions are intended to generate insight not only into citizens' preferences regarding electoral arrangements, but also into broader questions of political legitimacy, institutional trust, accountability, and public expectations during a period of heightened political uncertainty.

2.0 Methodology and Sample

Data Collection

The findings presented in this research report are based on a quantitative public opinion survey implemented using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). The survey was conducted across six urban locations representing the Federal Government and Federal Member States: Mogadishu (Banadir), Garowe (Puntland), Kismayo (Jubaland), Baidoa (Southwest State), Dhusamareb (Galmudug), and Jowhar (Hirshabelle) between May 30 and June 15 2026.

Respondents were recruited through a two-stage sampling approach. Initial household recruitment employed random walk procedures to establish a sampling frame of eligible respondents. In each district, we first identified a secure area for fieldwork. Within this area, we selected random starting points across multiple neighborhoods, and enumerators then used a random household walk procedure from each starting point to recruit eligible households. This helped distribute recruitment across the selected location and reduce the risk that the sample would be concentrated in a single neighborhood or household cluster. These respondents were subsequently interviewed by telephone using CATI. Within households, we designed respondent selection procedures to reduce common sources of sampling bias related to gender, age, and mobile phone ownership, supporting a broadly representative sample within each study location. Figure 1 shows the sample frame in Kismayo as an example, illustrating how recruitment points were distributed across neighborhoods based on random starting point selection



Figure 1: Sample Frame Distribution, Kismayo

Sample

The target sample size was 810 respondents, with approximately 135 respondents surveyed per location. This sample size was intended to provide sufficiently robust descriptive analysis both across the overall sample and across broad geographic groupings. We achieved a slightly larger sample of 928 respondents, reaching between 136 – 181 community members in each district.

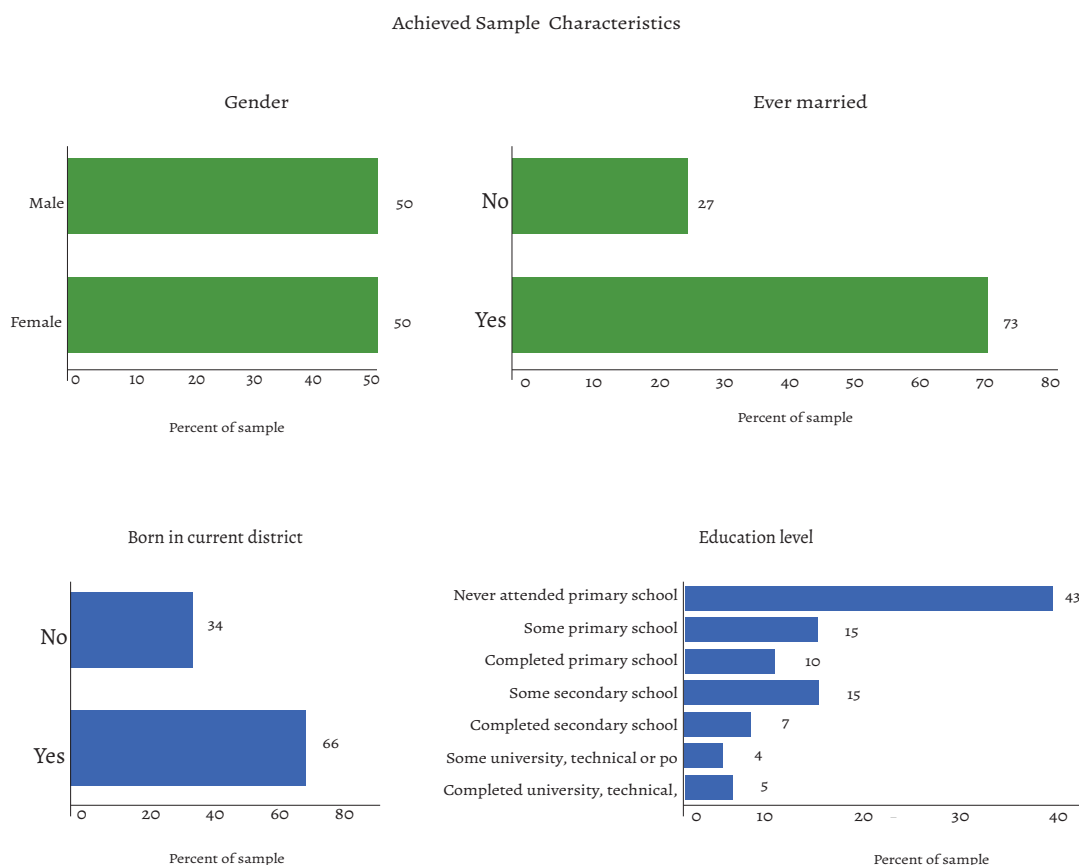


Figure 2: Achieved Sample Demographics

The sample is evenly distributed across male and female respondents. The majority of respondents were born in their current district of residence, though approximately one third (34%) were born elsewhere and moved to their current district. Less than one third (27%) of respondents are single and never married. Most (59%) are currently married, with the remainder divorced (10%) or widowed (3%). Across the full sample, 42% of respondents have never attended any formal education, including primary school – though this varies considerably across districts.

Analysis

Analysis was conducted in two stages. First, we used descriptive statistics to summarize the distribution of responses for all survey questions, including frequencies, percentages, and graphical summaries.

Second, we used bivariate regression analyses to examine associations between respondents' demographic characteristics, political attitudes, and democratic priorities. The analytical approach was selected according to the measurement level of each outcome variable. We analysed binary outcome variables using logistic regression, while ordinal outcome variables were analysed using ordered logistic regression. Continuous predictors (e.g., age and household income) were modelled directly within these regression frameworks, while categorical predictors were included using indicator variables. Selected analyses also employed ordinary least squares regression to examine relationships involving continuous indices constructed from multiple survey items.

Unless otherwise stated, statistical significance is assessed at the 5 percent level ($p < 0.05$). Throughout the research report, references to differences or variation between demographic, geographic, political, or other subgroups refer to statistically significant differences. Where differences are not statistically significant, this is explicitly noted. Unless otherwise stated, responses coded as "Don't know" or "Refused" were treated as missing data and excluded from analyses involving the relevant variables. As a result, sample sizes vary slightly across analyses depending on the number of valid responses available for each question

Political Profiles

Across each research question, we are interested in understanding subgroup trends across various dimensions. We use two categories to characterize subgroups. The first relates to demographics and social position; variables of interest include location/geography, gender, age, education level, income, marital status, and district origination. The second is referred to as a 'political profile' and considers an individual's political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors generally. Examining these subgroup patterns helps identify where support for current political processes may be stronger or weaker, where important social or political cleavages may exist, and whether the views and priorities of specific groups, including women, young people, or economically marginalized respondents, are being reflected in ongoing political debates.

Throughout this research report, we examine how citizens' democratic priorities vary not only across demographic groups, but also according to their broader political profile. While demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and education explain some variation in political attitudes, respondents' political knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of the current political environment prove to be equally – and in many cases more – important predictors of democratic preferences.

Political engagement is defined using several self-reported awareness and activity measures:

- **General Awareness:** Compared to others in your community, how would you describe your level of awareness of the politics of Somalia?
- **Political Discussion:** Over the past 30 days how frequently did you discuss political issues of Somalia with your friends, family, or other people you know? Political

issues include the elections, but also anything related to the government and its performance.

The results for the full sample are shown in Figure 3. Overall, a minority of respondents report high awareness and/or frequent discussion of Somali politics. The two self-reported measures of political engagement – political awareness and frequency of political discussion – are moderately correlated,⁽¹⁾ suggesting that respondents reporting greater political awareness also tend to discuss politics more frequently.

The reported frequency of engagement in political discussions shows a stark bifurcation in the population, with nearly half of the sample (47%) reporting to never engage in discussions and another half (49%) doing so on at least a weekly basis.

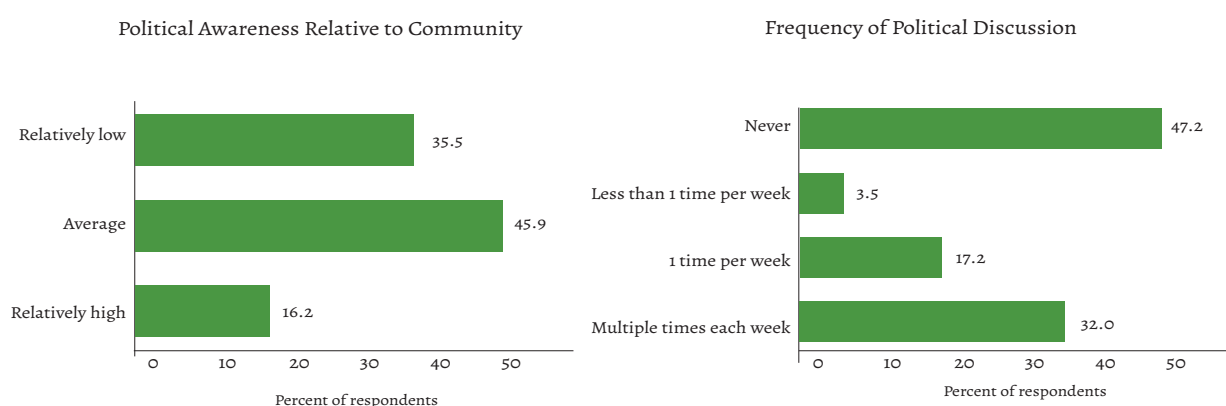


Figure 3: Political Profile, Political Engagement Levels

Notably, women and individuals with no formal education consistently report lower levels of political engagement across both measures.⁽²⁾ At the same time, as income increases, reported frequency of political discussions with peers increases.

While a substantial minority of respondents report actively following and discussing politics, many others engage only rarely or not at all. The observed differences by gender, education, and income indicate that engagement is shaped not only by individual interest, but also by broader social and economic factors. These patterns provide important context for interpreting the analyses that follow, as subsequent sections demonstrate that levels of political engagement are associated with how citizens navigate key democratic trade-offs and evaluate political institutions.

1 (Spearman's $\rho = 0.33$)

2 Both gender and education are independently associated with political engagement. Women report lower levels of political engagement than men, even after accounting for educational attainment, while respondents with formal education report higher levels of political engagement regardless of gender. The only exception to this is with regards to participation in local elections – once we control for gender, education is no longer statistically significant.

Limitations

Representativeness: While the survey is intended to generate representative public opinion data within the selected urban centers, findings should not be interpreted as nationally representative of all populations in Somalia, particularly rural populations and communities outside the selected locations.

Response bias: As with any telephone survey, participation depends on respondents answering their phone and agreeing to be interviewed, introducing the potential for non-response bias. Several measures were taken to minimize this risk. Unanswered numbers were called back up to four times across different days of the week and at different times of day. Enumerators also arranged call-backs with respondents who were temporarily unavailable to reduce bias toward individuals who were at home or unoccupied during standard working hours. The resulting sample achieved coverage across most demographic characteristics. Nevertheless, some bias may remain if individuals who choose to participate in a political opinion survey differ systematically from those who decline.

Social desirability: Survey questions concerning democracy, governance, and political participation may be susceptible to social desirability bias, with respondents potentially favoring answers perceived to be more socially or politically acceptable. To mitigate this risk, many of the key attitudinal questions were designed as forced-choice trade-offs between two broadly legitimate alternatives rather than between a clearly desirable and undesirable option. This approach encourages respondents to reveal underlying preferences rather than selecting what they perceive to be the “correct” response.

Interpretation of political trade-offs: Several survey questions ask respondents to choose between competing priorities such as political stability, timely democratic transition, citizen participation, or alternative models of political representation. While these are presented analytically as distinct dimensions, respondents may not perceive them as independent concepts. For example, preferences regarding the timing of elections, electoral models, or systems of political representation are likely intertwined with perceptions of security and stability. As a result, responses should be interpreted as reflecting respondents' overall assessment of complex political trade-offs rather than isolated preferences on a single issue.

Baidoa language considerations: To minimize interviewer effects, sampled respondents were randomly assigned to enumerators across call sheets rather than allocating individual enumerators to specific locations or respondent groups. An exception was necessary in Baidoa, where interviews were conducted in Af-Maay and therefore assigned only to the three enumerators proficient in the language. While respondent allocation within Baidoa remained random among these enumerators, this represents a minor departure from the survey's standard enumerator assignment procedures

3.0 Findings

Findings are presented around the stated research questions: (1) Democratic Principles, or how Somali citizens prioritize competing political and democratic principles, (2) Trusted Actors and Institutions, asking which actors and institutions they trust to mediate political disputes and oversee electoral processes, and (3) Dialogue Priorities, identifying which governance issues they most want political leaders to address more openly and transparently. For each research question, results are analyzed by demographic group and political profile.

3.1 Perceptions of the Political Environment

The survey is implemented in a context of heightened political tension. We expect that individuals' views towards political disputes and the potential for escalation will be relevant to priorities and weighing of democratic principles. We ask two questions related to the current political environment:

- **Presidential mandate:** As far as you know, when does the FGS presidential term end? (The term has ended / The term ends next year).
- **Concern about political violence:** In your opinion, how concerned are you over the possibility of political violence related to current events?

These measures capture not only respondents' perceptions of the current political situation but also, potentially, broader political alignments. Throughout the remainder of the research report, they emerge as some of the strongest predictors of democratic priorities.

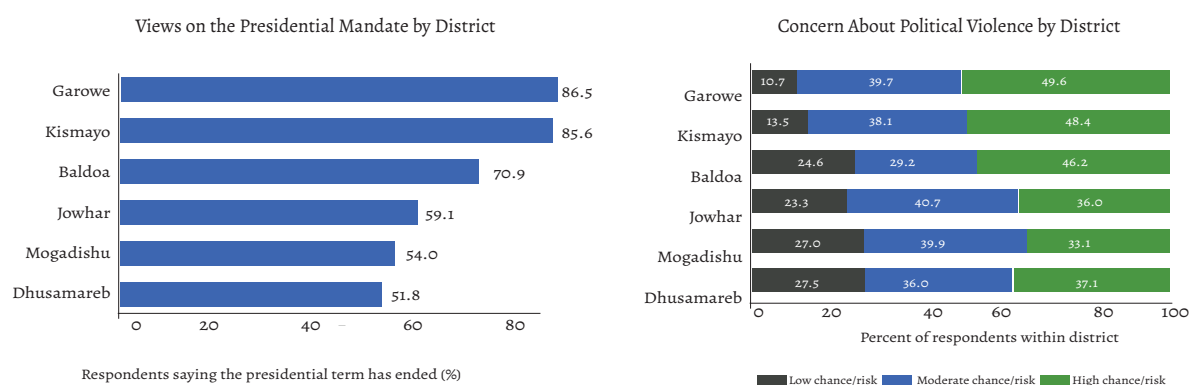


Figure 4: Political Profiles, Perceptions of Political Environment

Across the full sample, the majority of respondents (59%) say that the presidential term has ended.⁽³⁾ However, this varies by district and is influenced by strong sentiments in Garowe

3 However, not all of the remaining sample stated that the term ends next year. Across the full sample, 11% said I don't know. This is a high share in some districts: around 20% in Baidoa and 15% in Kismayo. This uncertainty itself is informative, reflecting the complexity and contested nature of the current political debate.

and Kismayo. In other districts, there is less certainty, with fewer than half of respondents in Mogadishu and Dhusamareb reporting as such. The distinction in Garowe and Kismayo is unsurprising, given Puntland and Jubaland leadership's opposition to the FGS. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note the extent to which elite political narratives appear to be mirrored in public opinion. The lack of consensus in other districts is also notable, indicating that disagreement around the issue trickles down to the community level.

Perceptions around the presidential mandate are closely associated with levels of concern about political violence. Respondents who say that the presidential term has ended are substantially more likely to report higher risks of political violence than those who believe the term ends next year. The direction of this relationship, however, is not clear. It may be that respondents who believe the current constitutional dispute is more acute consequently perceive a greater risk of violence. Equally, those who view the presidential term as having expired may regard confrontation as a more likely, or even more acceptable, outcome of the current political impasse. Alternatively, both attitudes may simply reflect broader political alignments rather than a direct causal relationship. The findings therefore suggest that views on the presidential mandate and expectations of political violence are closely linked, while the nature of that relationship remains uncertain.

By contrast, political engagement is only weakly associated with views on the presidential mandate. In other words, the extent to which a respondent agrees that the FGS mandate has ended is not driven by how closely that respondent follows politics.

Citizens also differ fundamentally in how they interpret the current political environment, or, in other words, whether they believe the current mandate has ended and whether they are concerned about political violence. These perceptions emerge throughout the remainder of the paper as some of the strongest predictors of democratic priorities.

3.2 Democratic Principles

Our first research question asks: what democratic principles and political priorities do citizens place the greatest importance on during periods of political transition and public debate? When democratic principles are discussed in the abstract, support appears broad and relatively uncontroversial. In this survey, almost nine in ten respondents (88%) say it is either very important or somewhat important that Somalia's next President be elected through OPOV elections.

However, periods of political transition frequently require difficult trade-offs between competing objectives. Citizens may value peaceful political transitions, constitutional processes, broad participation, press freedom, government transparency, and merit-based leadership simultaneously, yet these priorities may come into tension in practice.

These trade-offs are particularly relevant in Somalia, where debates around one-person, one-vote elections and the current constitutional and political transition are not only institutional or procedural questions. They also carry real implications for stability, inclusion,

and public trust. In some contexts, electoral processes and political disputes have already contributed to tensions or violence, making questions of sequencing, participation, security, and legitimacy highly salient for citizens. As a result, the trade-offs examined in this section should not be understood as purely hypothetical. Rather, they reflect real choices and risks that Somali citizens may associate with ongoing political processes.

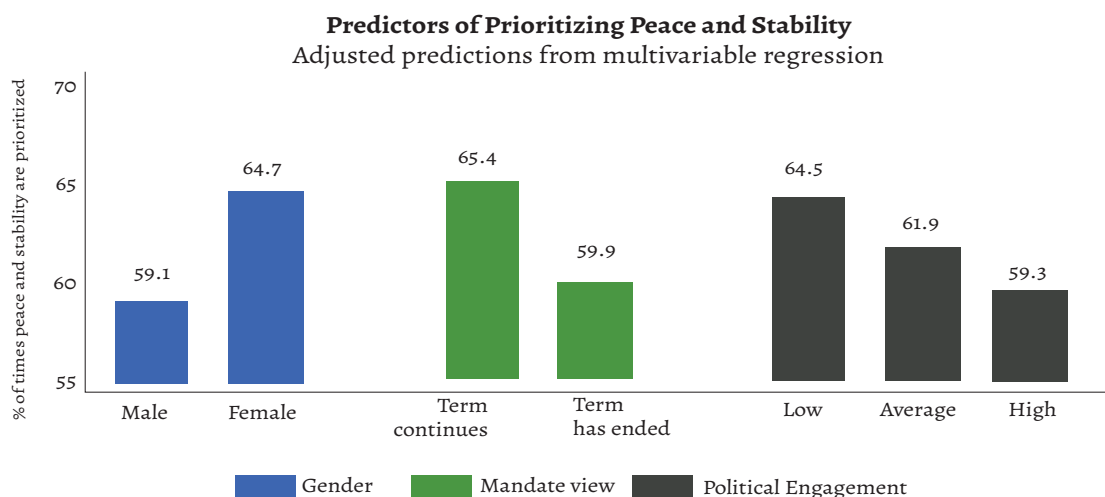
This section examines how respondents navigate these competing priorities and whether democratic preferences vary across demographic groups and political profiles. To examine these trade-offs, respondents were presented with a series of forced-choice questions requiring them to select between two competing positive outcomes or two competing negative outcomes. The scenarios span a range of democratic principles, including electoral systems and public participation, term limits, eligibility to run for office, and the role of the press and media. A summary of these trade-offs is presented in Table 1, ordered from least to highest degree of divisiveness amongst the sample.

Table 1: Democratic Principles - Summary of Trade-off Selections

1. Which is more important?	Citizens can elect the best person for the job, regardless of clan	All major clans are represented equally in government leadership
	92%	8%
2. In the case of the upcoming presidential transition, what do you think is more important?	Ensuring peace and stability in Somalia	Increasing the participation of citizens in the process
	82%	18%
3. Sometimes there are disputes between government leaders and the media, because leaders feel the media is being unfair or inciting tensions. In your opinion, which is more important?	Maintaining peace and stability, even if it means restricting press freedom	Maintaining freedom of the press, even if it causes tensions
	73%	28%
4. In the case of the next presidential transition, which do you think is more important?	Hold OPOV elections, but delay the elections to allow for preparations to be made	Uphold term limits, but hold the elections without using OPOV
	65%	35%
5. Which is more important?	Government decisions and election processes are communicated openly and transparently to the public	Preserve political stability, even if some negotiations and decisions happen privately
	62%	38%
6. Sometimes government leaders criticize or restrict the press because they feel journalists are being unfair or are insulting them. In your opinion, which is more important?	Maintaining the dignity of government leaders, even if it means restricting press freedom	Maintaining freedom of the press, even if it offends government leaders
	56%	44%
7. Which is more important?	Elections and political transitions remain peaceful and secure	Political transition moves forward on time without term extensions
	52%	48%

Peace and Stability

Across the democratic trade-offs examined in this section, peace, security, and political stability emerge as recurring considerations. Four of the democratic trade-offs presented respondents with a choice between peace, security, or political stability and an alternative democratic objective.⁽⁴⁾ To summarize responses across these scenarios, we calculate the proportion of occasions on which each respondent selected the peace, security, or stability option. Across the full sample, respondents prioritize stability in 63% of these trade-offs.



Bars show adjusted predictions holding other model variables at their means. Political engagement shown at -1, 0, and +1 SD.

Figure 5: Predictors of Prioritizing Peace and Stability

Figure 5 shows which types of respondents are more likely to prioritize peace, security, and stability when asked to choose between competing political goals. The results account for the other characteristics shown in the figure, so each finding reflects the relationship between that specific characteristic and respondents' preferences. Three characteristics stand out:

Women are consistently more likely than men to prioritize peace and stability across the four scenarios, regardless of their level of political engagement or their views on the presidential mandate.

By contrast, respondents who believe that the presidential term has already ended are significantly less likely to prioritize stability, regardless of their gender or level of political engagement, instead placing relatively greater emphasis on competing objectives. This should not necessarily be interpreted as stronger support for the current electoral process or for democratic reforms in general. Rather, it may suggest that respondents who view the mandate as expired are less willing to accept stability as the overriding priority if they believe the current political arrangement lacks legitimacy.

Higher levels of political engagement are also associated with a lower propensity to prioritize peace and stability, even after accounting for differences in gender and views on the

⁴ See questions numbered 2, 3, 5, and 7 in Table 1.

presidential mandate, suggesting that more politically engaged respondents are somewhat more willing to accept trade-offs in pursuit of other democratic principles.

Freedom of Information

Government accountability to citizens is commonly understood to rely on a range of institutions and mechanisms, among which a free and independent press is often considered one of the most important. In Somalia, however, journalists have faced intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrest, and legal restrictions from state authorities, making press freedom an important and contested dimension of democratic governance. Respondents were asked to consider two scenarios in which freedom of the press is weighed against competing objectives.

In both scenarios, a minority of respondents prioritize press freedom over competing objectives. The preference for restricting the press is particularly strong when freedom of the press is presented in tension with peace and stability, with nearly three quarters of respondents favoring stability. When the trade-off is instead framed as press freedom versus the dignity of government leaders, opinions are more evenly divided, although a majority still favor protecting government leaders from offensive or insulting media coverage. This finding is notable because protecting public officials from criticism is generally viewed as inconsistent with a core democratic function of the media. In democratic systems, a free press is expected to scrutinize political leaders, including through reporting and commentary that may be critical, uncomfortable, or perceived as offensive. The willingness of a majority of respondents to prioritize the dignity of government leaders over press freedom therefore suggests comparatively limited public support for one of the principal institutional checks on executive power.

To examine which respondents consistently prioritize freedom of the press across the two scenarios, we calculate the proportion of press freedom trade-offs in which each respondent selected the press freedom option. Figure 6 presents a multivariable regression examining which respondent characteristics are independently associated with this measure.

Even after accounting for respondents' political engagement and views on the presidential mandate, women remain significantly less likely than men to prioritize press freedom. Respondents with formal education are, by contrast, significantly more likely to prioritize press freedom, while those who believe the presidential term has ended are also more likely to favor protecting the press. Political engagement itself is positively associated with prioritizing press freedom, although this relationship is comparatively modest.

Navigating Political Transition:

Citizens' Views on Elections, Legitimacy, and Governance in Somalia

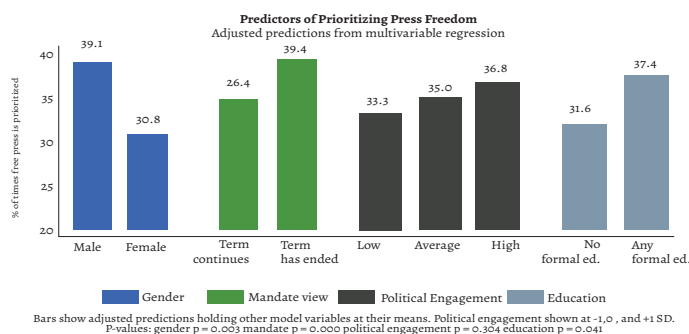


Figure 6: Predictors of Prioritizing Free Press

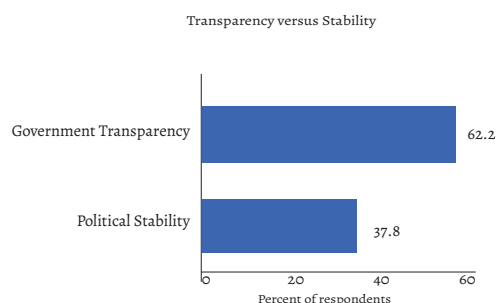


Figure 7: Democratic Principles, Transparency vs Stability

While respondents are generally willing to subordinate press freedom to competing objectives, nearly two thirds (62%) prioritize transparent communication by government over preserving political stability. At face value, these findings appear contradictory: respondents strongly value transparency while simultaneously placing relatively lower priority on one of the principal mechanisms through which government accountability is typically exercised.

One possible explanation is that respondents distinguish between government transparency and media freedom. This distinction is particularly relevant in Somalia, where public information is often transmitted through multiple channels, including government communication, clan structures, religious leaders, and informal social networks, rather than through formal news media alone. Rather than viewing the press as the primary mechanism for accountability, respondents may place greater responsibility on government institutions themselves to communicate openly with citizens. Further research would help to better understand how citizens expect government transparency to be achieved in practice.

Taken together, the findings reveal a potential tension in public attitudes towards democratic governance. Respondents express strong support for government communicating openly with citizens, yet many are also willing to restrict press freedom when it conflicts with other objectives, including protecting the dignity of political leaders. In other words, respondents appear to value transparency as an outcome without necessarily viewing an independent and critical press as the mechanism through which that outcome is achieved. Whether this reflects limited trust in the media, expectations that government should communicate directly with citizens, or broader features of Somalia's information environment remains an important question for future research.

Relationship Between Democratic Preferences and the Constitutional Debate

Some consistent trends emerge: women are less likely to prioritize democratic options than men.⁵ One possible interpretation is that women may have lower confidence that a new electoral system would meaningfully increase their political influence or participation, at least in the short term. While one-person, one-vote elections may broaden formal participation, political parties and voter mobilization are still likely to be shaped heavily by clan structures. This could shift the balance of power between clans without necessarily addressing the gendered barriers that limit women's ability to influence clan decision-making, secure party support, or hold elected office. In this sense, women may not view democratic reforms as automatically translating into greater representation or voice. As a result, some women may place greater weight on immediate concerns such as stability, social cohesion, or protection from political conflict than on democratic procedures whose benefits for women's representation remain uncertain.

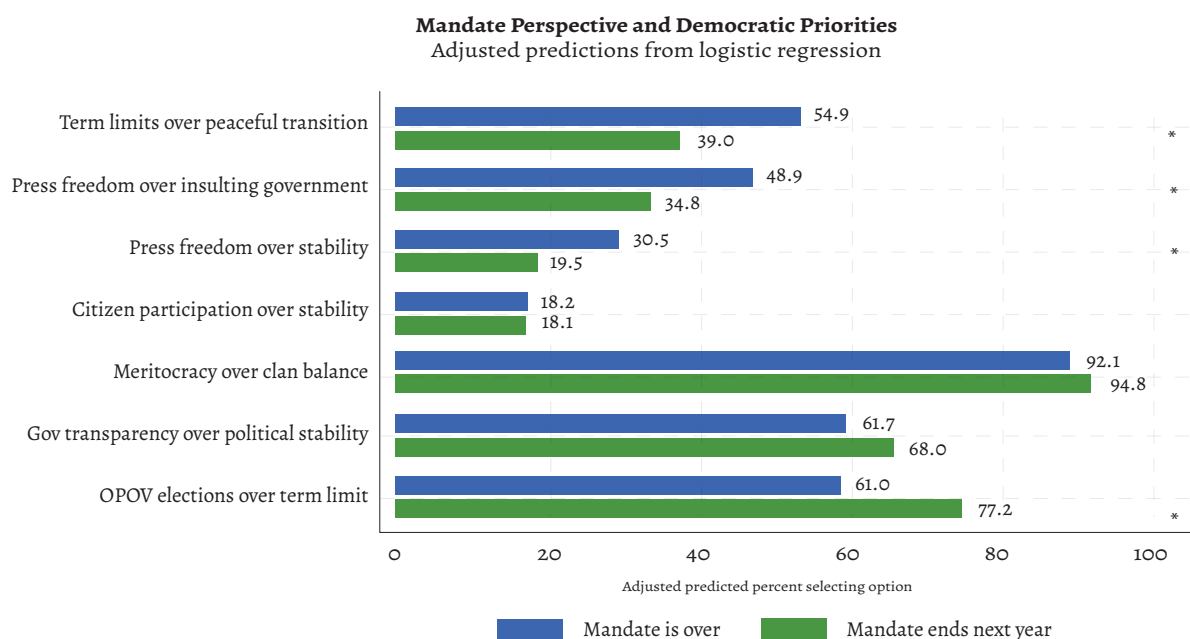
However, other demographic characteristics explain relatively little variation in democratic priorities. Age, education, income, marital status, and district of origin do not have statistically significant associations with how respondents navigate most democratic trade-offs.

Political profiles have some predictive power: more politically engaged individuals are more likely to forgo peace and security for democratic progress. However, the strongest and most consistent predictor is respondents' interpretation of the current constitutional dispute. Views regarding whether the Federal Government's presidential mandate has expired extend beyond a question of constitutional interpretation. Throughout the current political crisis, disagreement over the presidential mandate has become one of the central points of contestation between the Federal Government and opposition leaders. Consequently, responses to this question likely capture broader political alignments and the narratives respondents find most credible, rather than factual knowledge alone.

Throughout the preceding analyses, respondents' views regarding the current presidential mandate repeatedly emerge as one of the strongest predictors of democratic preferences. This raises an important question: are all democratic principles equally associated with the current constitutional dispute, or are some issues more politically contested than others?

Figure 7 shows how views on the presidential mandate are linked to respondents' choices across different democratic trade-offs. The bars show the estimated share of respondents in each group who selected each option, after taking gender and political engagement into account. Blue bars show respondents who believe the presidential mandate is already over, while orange bars show those who believe it continues until next year. Asterisks mark cases where the difference between the two groups is large enough to be considered statistically meaningful.

5 Many of the trade-off questions present democratic outcomes in tension with peace and/or stability. However, the gender difference should not be interpreted only as women placing greater emphasis on peace and stability. Women are also significantly less likely than men to prioritize press freedom when it is framed against protecting politicians from insult, suggesting that the pattern extends beyond security-related trade-offs.



* Difference between mandate groups significant at $p < 0.05$. Predictions hold gender and political engagement at their means.

Figure 8: View of Government Mandate and Priorities

Several clear patterns emerge. First, views on the presidential mandate are most strongly associated with trade-offs that relate directly to the current constitutional and political dispute. Respondents who believe the presidential mandate has already expired are more likely to prioritize term limits over a peaceful transition, and more likely to prioritize press freedom over both government dignity and political stability. By contrast, respondents who believe the mandate continues until next year are more likely to prioritize proceeding with OPOV elections over concerns related to term limits. These differences are statistically significant.

Second, not all democratic principles appear equally politicized. Attitudes towards term limits, political transition, and press freedom – issues that sit at the center of the current constitutional dispute – vary substantially according to respondents' interpretation of the presidential mandate. By contrast, views regarding merit-based political leadership and government transparency are remarkably consistent regardless of respondents' political alignment. Nearly all respondents favor selecting the best-qualified leaders irrespective of clan, and support for transparent government communication varies little between groups.

This distinction is important. It suggests that citizens differentiate between broad democratic values and democratic questions that have become directly implicated in the current political crisis. Principles such as meritocracy and transparency appear to command broad consensus across political divides. In contrast, preferences regarding term limits, the pace of political transition, and restrictions on the press appear to be interpreted through the lens of contemporary political competition.

These findings closely mirror observations from previous public opinion research conducted during Puntland's 2023-24 electoral crisis.⁽⁶⁾ That study found widespread support for One Person, One Vote elections in principle, but substantially more divided opinions once respondents considered the practical trade-offs associated with the ongoing political dispute. Likewise, party affiliation proved to be a much stronger predictor of democratic preferences than demographic characteristics. Together, the two studies suggest that democratic principles in Somalia are often viewed through the context of immediate political events rather than in isolation.

These patterns may also reflect the extent to which public attitudes are shaped by elite political narratives. In Somalia's current transition, support for OPOV elections is not only an institutional preference; it has also become a politically contested position associated with competing claims over authority, legitimacy, and control of the reform process. As a result, citizens may interpret OPOV and related democratic principles through the positions advanced by the political actors they trust or identify with, rather than as abstract commitments to a particular democratic model. This does not mean that public support for elections is necessarily insincere, but it suggests that support is often politicized and contingent on how elections are framed within the immediate political environment.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that democratic preferences in Somalia are neither fixed nor purely ideological. Citizens consistently express strong support for democratic governance in principle. However, how those principles are prioritized may depend heavily on how respondents interpret the current political environment and the narratives advanced by political actors. Democratic preferences are therefore shaped not only by competing institutional models, but also by competing political narratives surrounding the ongoing constitutional transition.

3.3 Trusted Actors and Institutions

This section examines the actors and institutions that Somali citizens trust to support political dialogue and electoral processes. During periods of political transition, trust in those responsible for facilitating negotiations, mediating disputes, and overseeing political processes can be as important as the institutional arrangements themselves. Even well-designed political processes may struggle to gain legitimacy if citizens lack confidence in the actors responsible for implementing or overseeing them.

The analysis considers two related dimensions of institutional trust. First, we examine preferences for international actors that could facilitate political dialogue between the Federal Government and opposition parties. Second, we explore which domestic and international actors citizens trust to manage or oversee legitimate electoral and political processes. Across both questions, we assess not only overall levels of trust, but also how preferences vary across demographic groups, political profiles, and attitudes towards democratic principles.

6 Sababi Institute, "Public Support for OPOV Elections in the Wake of Puntland's 2023-2024 Electoral Crisis," Sababi Institute, accessed 22 June 2026. See: <https://sababi.org/public-support-for-opov-elections-in-the-wake-of-puntlands-2023-2024-electoral-crisis/>

Mediation and Political Dialogue

The second research question examines which actors Somali citizens trust to facilitate political dialogue and mediate disputes between political actors. Mediation has played a recurring role in Somali politics, with both regional organizations and international partners frequently supporting negotiations during periods of political disagreement. Understanding which actors enjoy public confidence may therefore help identify mediation arrangements that are more likely to command legitimacy among citizens.

Respondents were presented with the following scenario:

Currently there are political disagreements between the Justice and Solidarity Party, which is President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's political party, and opposition parties. Sometimes when leaders in government are in disagreement, a third party will help mediate discussions. Of the following, who do you think would be the best choice to mediate political dialogue between the Justice and Solidarity Party and opposition parties?

To reduce respondent burden while still allowing comparison across a larger set of actors, each respondent was randomly presented with two of the following five potential mediators: African Union, United Kingdom, Turkey, United States, United Nations. Respondents were then asked how confident they were that their selected mediator would be able to successfully facilitate a peaceful political settlement. Confidence is generally high across all proposed mediators. For every actor, a majority of respondents report high confidence. Differences between mediators are modest relative to differences across respondent groups and districts.

Confidence in mediation varies significantly across districts and is also associated with respondent characteristics. Older respondents and married respondents express greater confidence in their selected mediator, while respondents with formal education tend to be somewhat more skeptical. There is also evidence that respondents expressing greater confidence in local government are more optimistic about mediation efforts generally. Taken together, these findings suggest that confidence in mediation reflects broader optimism regarding political institutions and the prospects for resolving political disputes, rather than confidence in any particular international actor alone.

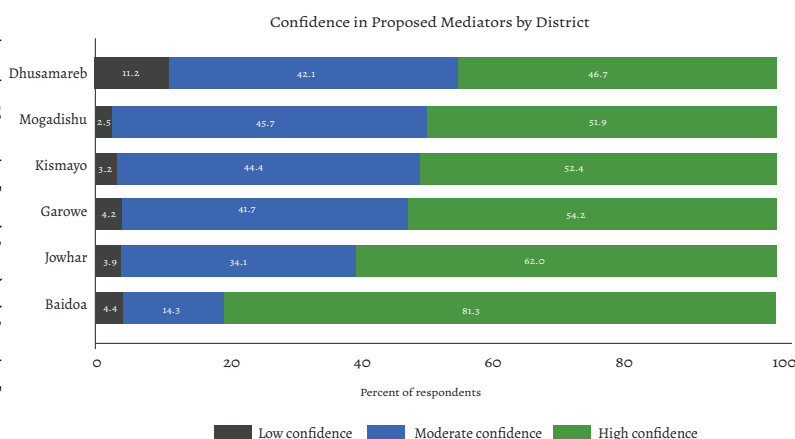


Figure 9: Confidence in Mediators, by District and Actor

Election Management and Oversight

Confidence in election management is central to the legitimacy of electoral processes. Beyond whom should oversee elections, public acceptance of election results depends on whether citizens believe the responsible institutions can administer elections fairly and impartially. This section examines confidence in different domestic actors to manage elections and whether the involvement of international or domestic partners influences confidence in the electoral process. Respondents were presented with the following scenario:

Currently, there is disagreement about who should manage elections for future presidents of the Federal Government and for Federal Member States. How confident are you that [election actor] would run a fair election process?

In each location, approximately half of respondents were asked about their confidence in the FGS as the election actor. The other half were asked about their state (or region, in Banadir).

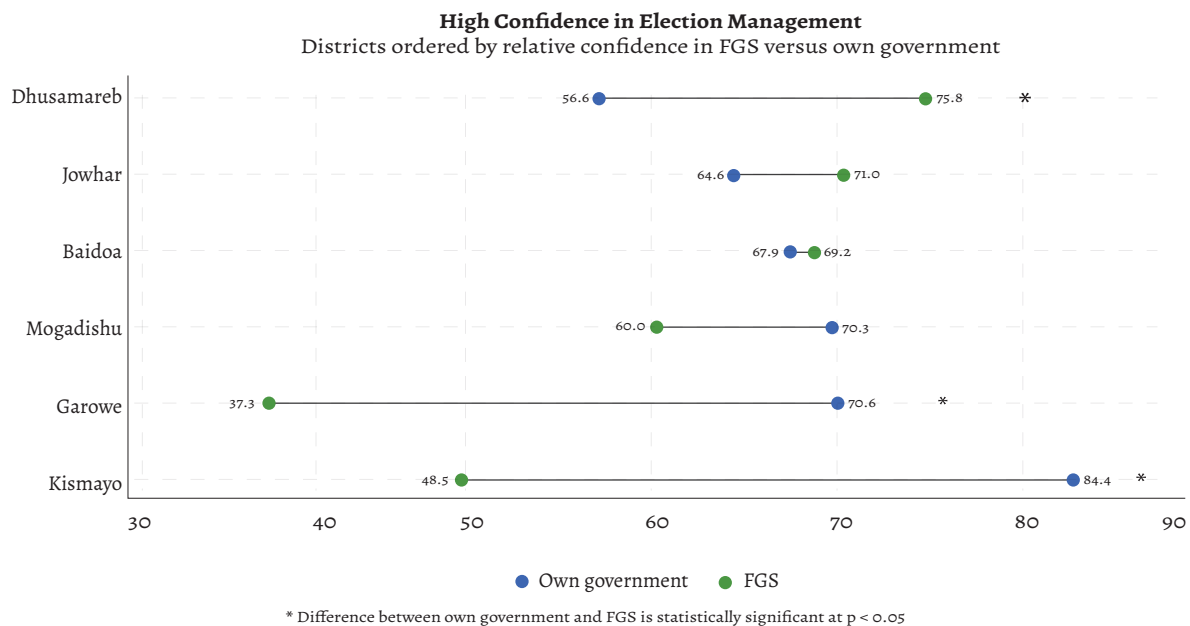


Figure 10: High Confidence in Election Management, by Government Actor

Figure 10 shows the share of respondents who report high confidence in different actors to manage a fair election process. The results show substantial variation across locations. In Dhusamareb, respondents express significantly higher confidence in the FGS than in their own government. In Kismayo and Garowe, the reverse pattern is observed: respondents are significantly more likely to express high confidence in their own government than in the FGS. In Jowhar, Baidoa, and Mogadishu, differences between the two actors are not statistically significant. Overall, the findings suggest that confidence in election management is highly location-specific rather than reflecting a uniform preference for either federal or local authorities.

Respondents were also asked about whose support in the election process may add confidence in their legitimacy. Participants were posed with the following: “If [actor] was supporting the process, would your confidence increase, decrease, or stay the same?” Each respondent was randomly allocated one actor from a list of five:

- African Union
- United Nations
- Intergovernmental Authority on Development
- Turkey
- Somali civil society

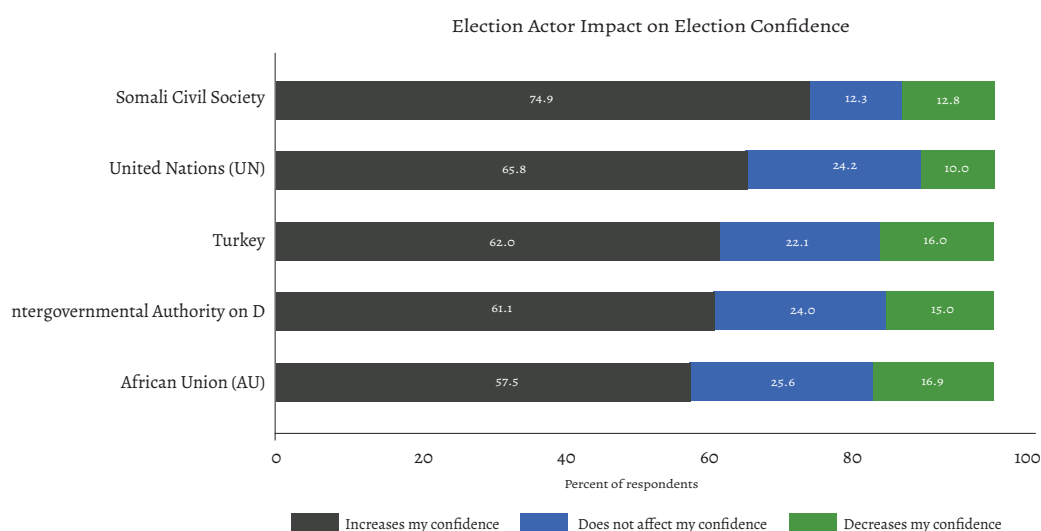


Figure 11: Election Actor Impact on Election Confidence

Across all five actors, a majority report that involvement of the actor would increase their confidence in the legitimacy of election processes, while relatively few believe it would reduce confidence. The strongest support is for Somali civil society organizations, with more than two thirds (68.4%) stating that their involvement would increase confidence. This exceeds support for all international actors, including the United Nations (62.8%), Türkiye (56.1%), IGAD (55.4%), and the African Union (54.4%). These findings suggest that respondents place considerable value on external support and/or oversight, but that legitimacy derives not only from international involvement. Trusted domestic institutions, particularly Somali civil society organizations, appear to play an equally, if not more, important role in strengthening confidence in electoral processes.

These findings suggest that confidence in election management depends not only on who administers elections but also on who is perceived to oversee and validate the process.

While respondents express greater confidence in state-level institutions than in the Federal Government, the involvement of trusted third parties – particularly Somali civil society organizations – has the potential to substantially strengthen confidence in electoral legitimacy.

3.4 Dialogue Priorities

Respondents were asked which issue they believe political leaders should communicate about more openly and transparently, choosing between elections and political processes, security and counterterrorism operations, and public spending and budgeting. Across the full sample, nearly two thirds of respondents (65.5%) identify security and counterterrorism operations as the highest communication priority. Security is the dominant choice in every district, ranging from 61.6% of respondents in Jowhar to 79.4% in Dhusamareb.

Elections and political processes are a distant second, selected by 18.9% of respondents, followed by public spending and budgeting (10.6%). Despite some modest geographic variation, there are no meaningful differences across demographic groups or political profiles. The consistency of these findings suggests broad agreement regarding the areas where citizens most expect greater government transparency.

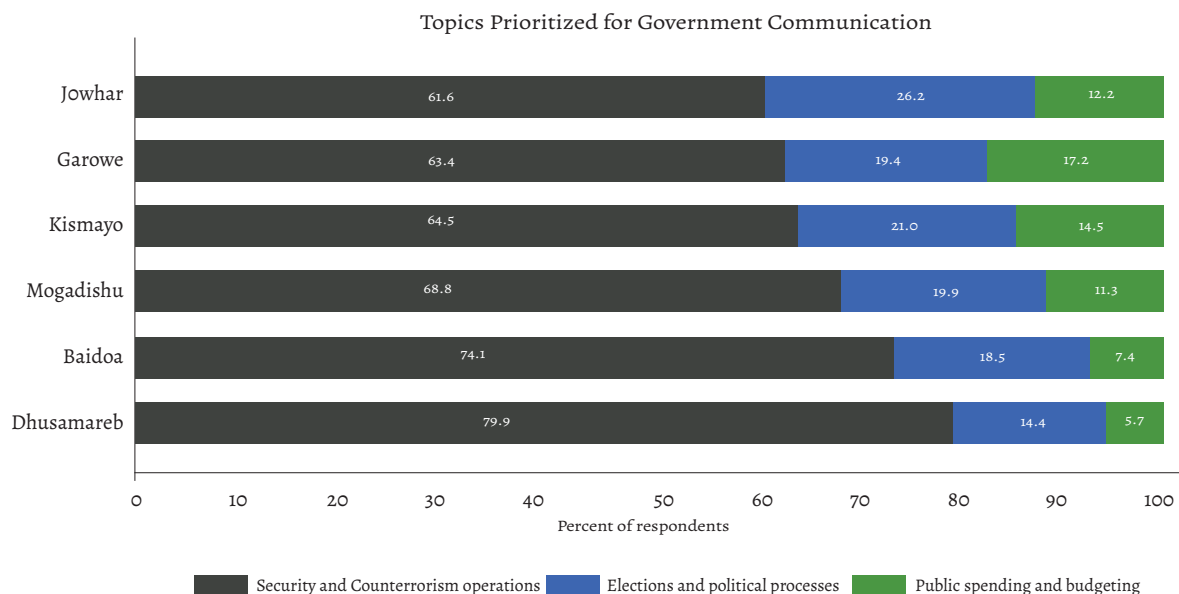


Figure 12: Topics Prioritized for Government Communication

These findings reinforce a recurring theme throughout the paper. While respondents consistently express support for transparent government, they place greatest priority on transparency in relation to security and counterterrorism operations rather than elections or public finance. Together with the earlier findings that respondents frequently prioritize peace and stability over competing democratic objectives, this suggests that citizens' expectations of government communication are closely aligned with their broader emphasis on security as the foundation for effective governance.

4.0 Conclusion

This study shows that Somali citizens broadly support democratic reform, but interpret democratic principles through the immediate realities of political uncertainty, constitutional contestation, and security concerns. Support for one-person-one-vote elections, transparency, and accountable governance is strong in principle, yet citizens often prioritize peace, stability, and trusted oversight when these objectives appear to be in tension with direct elections. These trade-offs are not abstract in the Somali context: elections, constitutional disputes, and other political processes can carry real risks of instability or violence, making questions of sequencing, legitimacy, and security highly salient for citizens. Views on the presidential mandate emerge as a particularly important dividing line, shaping attitudes toward term limits, press freedom, and political transition. At the same time, the findings point to areas of broad consensus: citizens want more transparent communication from government, particularly on security and counterterrorism, and they place value on credible third-party involvement, especially Somali civil society, in strengthening confidence in electoral processes. Overall, the findings suggest that electoral and constitutional dialogue in Somalia will be most effective when it moves beyond abstract reform commitments and directly addresses citizens' concerns about legitimacy, security, inclusion, and trust in public institutions.

5.0 Recommendations and Policy Considerations

- 1. Strengthen confidence in constitutional processes as a foundation for democratic reform:** Citizens' views on democratic reforms are closely tied to how they interpret the current constitutional transition. This suggests that perceptions of government legitimacy influence not only attitudes towards the transition itself but also support for a broader range of democratic reforms. OPOV elections may strengthen government legitimacy by more directly linking government selection to constituent preferences, but elections alone are unlikely to resolve legitimacy concerns if the surrounding constitutional process is viewed as contested or exclusionary. Confidence-building measures could therefore include clearer public communication on the constitutional timeline, transparent explanation of electoral sequencing, credible mechanisms for resolving disputes, and inclusive dialogue involving federal, state, opposition, civil society, and community stakeholders. Where legitimacy is widely questioned, reforms risk being interpreted through a political rather than policy lens.
- 2. Design civic engagement initiatives that connect democratic reform to peace, security, and everyday wellbeing:** Women consistently place greater emphasis on peace and stability than on competing democratic objectives. This does not necessarily imply lower support for democracy, but it suggests that democratic participation may be viewed through a different set of priorities and risks. Further research should explore whether these differences reflect greater exposure to insecurity, lower confidence that democratic processes will be inclusive or effective, or different expectations regarding the practical benefits of political participation. Civic engagement initiatives may need to explicitly demonstrate how democratic reforms contribute to security, representation, and everyday wellbeing.
- 3. Ground strategic communications in current political concerns, not only abstract democratic principles:** The findings suggest that democratic principles are interpreted through the lens of contemporary political events. Communications that focus solely on abstract democratic concepts may therefore have limited resonance where citizens primarily understand reforms through current political disputes. Dialogue and public communication should connect democratic principles to concrete governance challenges and everyday experiences, while building a shared vocabulary around constitutional processes, accountability, and democratic institutions.
- 4. Use areas of broad consensus as entry points for civic dialogue and reform messaging:** The findings suggest that some democratic principles are more politically contested than others. Issues such as term limits, press freedom, and the timing of political transition are closely tied to the current constitutional dispute and may be interpreted through partisan or elite political narratives. By contrast, principles such as merit-based leadership, government transparency, and accountable public communication appear to command

broader support across mandate-view groups. Donors, civil society organizations, and civic education actors can use areas of wider agreement - including transparency, meritocracy, accountability, and public communication - as entry points for dialogue before moving into more divisive questions around electoral sequencing, constitutional change, and political transition.

5. Clarify how citizens expect accountability and transparency to function in practice:

The apparent disconnect between strong support for government transparency and comparatively weak support for press freedom raises important questions about how citizens expect accountability to function in practice. Future research should explore whether this reflects limited trust in the media, expectations that government should communicate directly with citizens, reliance on alternative information channels such as clan and religious leaders, or broader characteristics of Somalia's information environment. Understanding how citizens believe governments should be held accountable is likely to be as important as understanding whether they value accountability itself.

6. Build election-management arrangements that combine federal authority with locally trusted institutions:

Confidence in election management varies substantially by location and by actor. This suggests that electoral legitimacy cannot be built through a single national institution alone. While greater involvement of state bodies in current electoral processes may be politically difficult, future electoral planning should consider how Federal Member State institutions, regional authorities, and other locally trusted bodies can be more effectively engaged in coordination, communication, observation, and dispute-resolution roles. At the same time, the findings show that Somali civil society organizations are especially important for public confidence. Donors and implementing partners should therefore prioritize support to credible Somali civil society actors as conveners, public information channels, observers, and accountability actors, rather than relying only on international oversight to strengthen electoral legitimacy.

6.0 Annex: Sample Demographics

Table 2: Achieved sample demographics

District	Dhusamareb	Kismayo	Garowe	Mogadishu	Jowhar	Baidoa	Total
n	181	139	136	155	179	138	928

Gender

Male	49.2%	47.5%	45.6%	49.7%	58.7%	44.9%	49.7%
Female	50.8%	52.5%	54.4%	50.3%	41.3%	55.1%	50.3%

Education Level

Never attended primary school	30.9%	43.9%	27.9%	38.1%	46.4%	66.7%	41.9%
Some primary school	13.8%	20.1%	12.5%	14.8%	16.2%	10.9%	14.8%
Completed primary school	11.0%	10.8%	9.6%	11.0%	5.0%	12.3%	9.8%
Some secondary school	24.3%	8.6%	16.2%	18.7%	14.0%	3.6%	14.8%
Completed secondary school	4.4%	8.6%	11.0%	7.7%	7.3%	5.1%	7.2%
Some university, technical or post-secondary education	6.1%	3.6%	6.6%	3.2%	4.5%	0.7%	4.2%
Completed university, technical, or post-secondary education	8.3%	0.7%	11.8%	4.5%	3.9%	0.0%	5.0%

Age

Mean	30.3	32.1	31.6	30.3	30.8	35.7	31.6
Mean (Women)	31.8	30.4	31.1	28.9	29.9	33.4	30.9
Mean (Men)	28.8	34.0	32.1	31.6	31.3	38.4	32.3
Max	77	70	75	77	78	72	78
Min	18	18	18	18	18	18	18

Monthly Income

District	Dhusamareb	Kismayo	Garowe	Mogadishu	Jowhar	Baidoa	Total
Mean	\$ 108.46	\$ 99.88	\$ 148.65	\$ 111.30	\$ 65.85	\$ 59.00	\$ 91.35
Max	\$ 1,000.0	\$ 700.0	\$ 800.00	\$ 900.0	\$ 800.0	\$ 620.00	\$ 1,000.0
Min	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00	\$ 0.00

Marital Status

District	Dhusamareb	Kismayo	Garowe	Mogadishu	Jowhar	Baidoa	Total
Single	37.0%	18.0%	36.0%	40.0%	24.0%	4.3%	27.2%
Married	47.0%	66.9%	44.1%	46.5%	66.5%	87.0%	59.2%
Divorced	12.7%	12.9%	14.7%	9.7%	6.7%	5.8%	10.3%
Widow/Widower	3.3%	2.2%	5.1%	3.9%	2.8%	2.9%	3.3%

Born in District of Residence

All	72.4%	56.8%	43.4%	53.5%	88.3%	74.6%	66.1%
Women	79.3%	60.3%	44.6%	52.6%	81.1%	80.3%	66.8%
Men	65.2%	53.0%	41.9%	54.5%	93.3%	67.7%	65.3%

Better Governance for Brighter Somalia



Somali Public Agenda (SPA) is a non-profit public policy and administration think-and-action tank based in Mogadishu, with the mission to advance responsive, evidence-based, and inclusive governance and public services in Somalia through research and analysis (through SPA Research), dialogue (through SPA Dialogue & SPA Podcasts), co-design of evidence-based policies and services (through SPA Policy Lab), and capacity development (through SPA Learning Lab).

SPA has established a unique reputation as a credible, neutral, and influential think-and-action tank across Somalia; has networks spanning the political landscape, including government institutions, opposition actors, and civic stakeholders; and has a strong track record of influencing policy at the highest level, as evidenced by our Success Stories and Testimonials pages on our website.

Our team is regularly called upon to provide analysis and commentary in the media, as well as to Somali government officials and the international community.

🌐 www.somalipublicagenda.org

✉ info@somalipublicagenda.org

☎ Tel: +252(0)85 8358

📍 Mogadishu - Somalia

📧 [f](#) [X](#) [@](#) [in](#) [@somalipubagenda](#)