

Money and Elections in the Maldives

Perceptions and Reality



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Republic of Maldives
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Money and Elections in the Maldives – Perceptions and Reality

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Executive Summary


The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), in close cooperation with national experts from Commerce, Development and Environment (CDE) Consulting, conducted a nation-wide survey to measure the prevalence of vote buying in the Maldives during the March 2014 parliamentary elections. This is the first systematic study of its kind conducted in the Maldives and it provides statistical data on the prevalence and the nature of vote buying, as well as attitudes and opinions on wider campaign funding issues and elections as a whole.

Several key conclusions can be drawn based on the survey results:

- 1) **Vote buying is a serious problem in the Maldives, and if not addressed it threatens to undermine the democratic process in the country.** Though vote buying is a common problem in some parts of the world, the proportions that it has assumed in the Maldives are alarming.
 - More than one in three Maldivians (37 percent) have either been offered money or gifts for their votes personally, or have personally witnessed either a family member or someone else being offered money or gifts.
 - Eighty two percent of those who reported experiencing vote buying said they were offered cash, with the majority (53 percent) being offered between MVR 4,000 (USD 262) and MVR 20,000 (USD 1,309)
 - The survey also finds that ballot marking was the most common technique used to ensure that those offered money or gifts cast their ballot for the candidate or the party who offered them money or gifts.

- 2) **Despite the prevalence of vote buying, the majority of the Maldivian voters have not lost faith in the electoral process and believe that their vote counts.** Vote buying should be addressed before cynicism and apathy take root.
 - Eight out of 10 Maldivians have positive views of elections and believe that voting gives them influence over decision-making in the country, regardless of their interest in politics
 - Nearly half (49 percent) of all Maldivians are very or somewhat interested in matters of politics and government. Interest in politics is significantly higher among men than women (59 percent versus 38 percent).
 - Young people age 18-24 are less interested in politics than any other age group (36 percent are interested in politics compared to 44-58 percent among other age groups).

- 3) **Maldivians have a negative perception of how political parties and candidates spend campaign funds. In addition, they lack access to information on how the political parties and candidates obtain and spend their funding, and do not believe that the information available is accurate.** Perceptions can be changed by improving transparency through better implementation of existing rules, introduction of new legislation, and voter education by combined efforts of government, civil society, media and political parties.
- Most people believe that campaign funds are spent on illegal or unscrupulous activities. Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of Maldivians believe that political parties and candidates spend most of their campaign funds on vote buying and on gifts for voters.
 - A significant proportion (39 percent) of Maldivians said that they “don’t know” the key sources of election campaign funding for political parties and candidates.
 - Four out of five people reported that they have never seen or heard about reports on campaign spending in the Maldives. Even in the case of those very interested in politics, 81 percent said that they have not seen or heard about reports on campaign spending.
 - More than 70 percent of Maldivians said that they believe candidates are not honest in reporting campaign spending.
- 4) **There is nearly unanimous support for campaign finance reform, specifically to combat vote buying.** Maldivian lawmakers clearly have public support to engage in measures to combat vote buying and introduce preventive measures before the next electoral cycle.
- Almost 90 percent of Maldivians said that vote buying should remain illegal.
 - More than 70 percent believe that there should be a limit on political contributions by any one person.
 - Close to three-quarters of Maldivians said that they would like to see campaign spending limits for political parties and candidates.
- 5) Although a majority of Maldivians have expressed satisfaction with specific aspects of the electoral process, **electoral fraud is an area of concern among a significant percentage of the population.**
- More than a third (36 percent) believes that fraud was committed during the March 2014 parliamentary elections. The more educated a respondent is, the more likely he/she is to believe that electoral fraud took place. This underscores the need for better education of voters about the electoral process and electoral fraud.
 - On the other hand, Maldivians have a very positive opinion of election officials, including polling station officials and the Elections Commission. Eighty one percent of the population was satisfied with their experiences at the polling station, and 73 percent said that the Elections Commission performed well in conducting elections.

- 
- 6) **Amongst those who did not cast their ballot in March 2014, re-registration and other logistical issues such as transportation, were cited as some of the main reasons for not voting.** Although turnout has been traditionally high in the Maldives¹, this finding clearly shows that certain structural issues present obstacles for Maldivian voters. These issues, particularly the requirement for re-registration ahead of each election, could be addressed through legislative reform.

¹Turnout for the most recent parliamentary elections was nearly 78% and it exceeded 80% for recent presidential elections.

1. Introduction

Vote buying has been recognized as one of the most pressing problems in Maldivian elections by domestic and international observers and stakeholders. Both European Union² and Commonwealth³ observation reports on the 2014 parliamentary election stated that allegations of wide-spread vote buying, excessive campaign expenditures and abuse of state resources undermined the core principles of democratic elections. Similarly, in a survey conducted by Transparency Maldives prior to the 2013 presidential election, 15 percent of the interlocutors reported that money or other incentives were offered in exchange for their vote.⁴

Although allegations of vote buying are rampant, one major challenge in addressing it is the lack of quantitative data and research. In order to fill this gap, IFES conducted a survey to gather data from Maldivian voters about vote buying, campaign finance and other election-related issues. The data was collected in June 2014 and pertains only to the conduct of parliamentary elections held in March 2014 (please see methodology section below for details).

IFES has extensive experience in conducting research on electoral issues around the world. To date, IFES has implemented opinion research on electoral issues in more than 40 countries. IFES designs its research to be responsive to the need for data on pressing electoral issues, and ensures that its research design and approach is sensitive to the country context. IFES works with local partners to provide reliable data on electoral issues, which is then utilized by a large range of electoral stakeholders. This survey is a continuation of these efforts and provides nationally representative data that can be utilized by electoral stakeholders to strengthen elections and democratic process.

The survey report is divided into three sections. Section one presents opinions of Maldivians on the election processes as a whole. Section two is focused specifically on issues related to campaign finance. Section three presents detailed information and evidence on vote buying practices in the Maldives during the 2014 parliamentary election.

2. Methodology

In the course of the survey, a total of 1,063 interviews were conducted with citizens of the Maldives ages 18 and above. The sample was designed to be nationally representative, with interviews conducted in all administrative regions. The number of interviews per region was proportional to each region's share of the population. Within each atoll, islands were selected using random sampling methodology.

Interviews were carried out confidentially and face-to-face in the homes of respondents. The data presented in this survey has been weighted to ensure that it is representative of the population of the Maldives by region, gender and age. A survey of this size has a +/- 3 percent margin of error.

The fieldwork and data processing for the survey was undertaken by CDE Consulting, a public opinion research organization based in Male', Maldives. All interviews were conducted in Dhivehi language between June 1 and 28, 2014 by interviewers specially trained on the IFES survey. Survey data was then compiled and analyzed by IFES experts.

3. Opinions on Elections and Election Process

Despite the prevalence of vote buying, most Maldivian voters trust the electoral process and believe that their vote counts. This means that the level of cynicism and apathy that may follow in the wake of wide spread vote buying has not yet taken root in the Maldives.

Most Maldivians have a positive view of elections and are satisfied with the overall conduct of the parliamentary elections, as well as specific aspects of the electoral process. A majority of Maldivians also express satisfaction with the work of the Elections Commission and polling station staff during elections.

Challenges with voter registration and identification and other logistical issues such as transportation, were cited as the main reasons preventing some respondents from casting their ballots in March 2014. These structural issues can be addressed by legislative reform. In addition, there is concern about electoral fraud among a significant percentage of the population, particularly in Male', the far South, and Southern Atolls.⁵

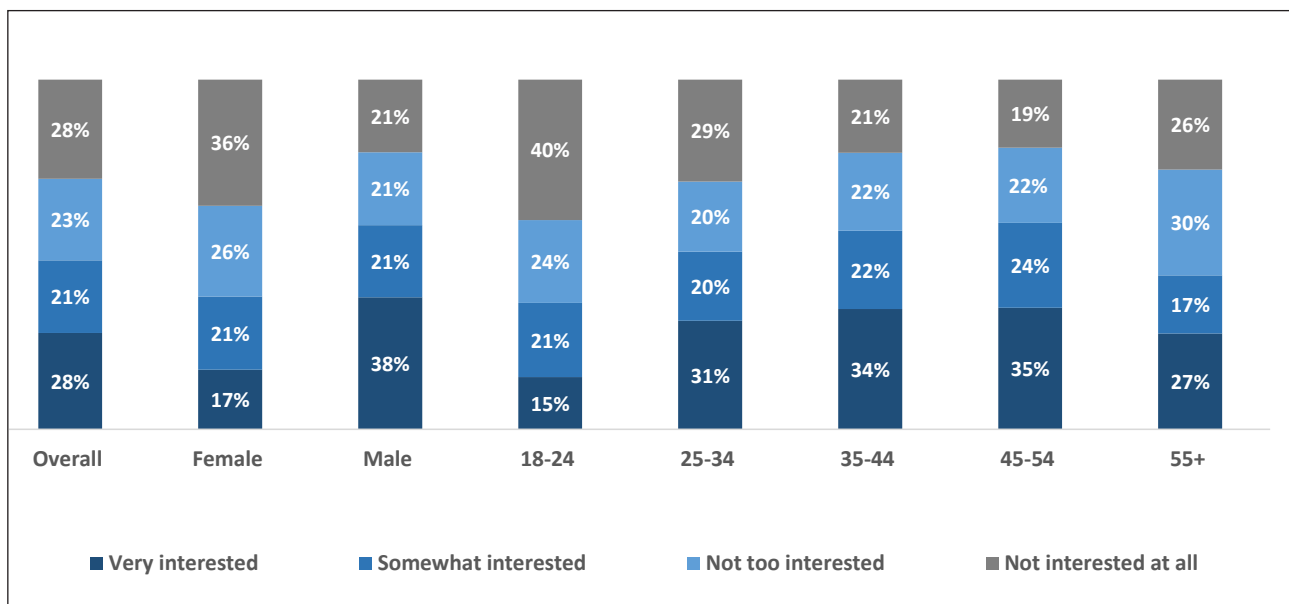
⁵For the purpose of this survey, the following six geographical distributions were used;

- 1) The far North Atolls: Haa Alif, Haa Dhaalu, Shaviyani
- 2) Northern Atolls: Noonu, Raa, Baa, Lhaviyani
- 3) Central Atolls: Kaafu, Alif Alif, Alif Dhaalu, Vaavu
- 4) Southern Atolls: Meemu, Faafu, Dhaalu, Thaa, Laamu
- 5) The far South Atolls: Gaafu Alif, Gaafu Dhaalu, Gnavyani, Seenu Atoll
- 6) Male'.

3.1 Opinions on Elections and Election Process

- The survey finds that **nearly half (49 percent)** of all Maldivians are **very or somewhat interested in matters of politics and government**, while **slight more than half are “not too interested” (23 percent) or “not interested at all” (28 percent)** (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Interest in Matters of Government and Politics

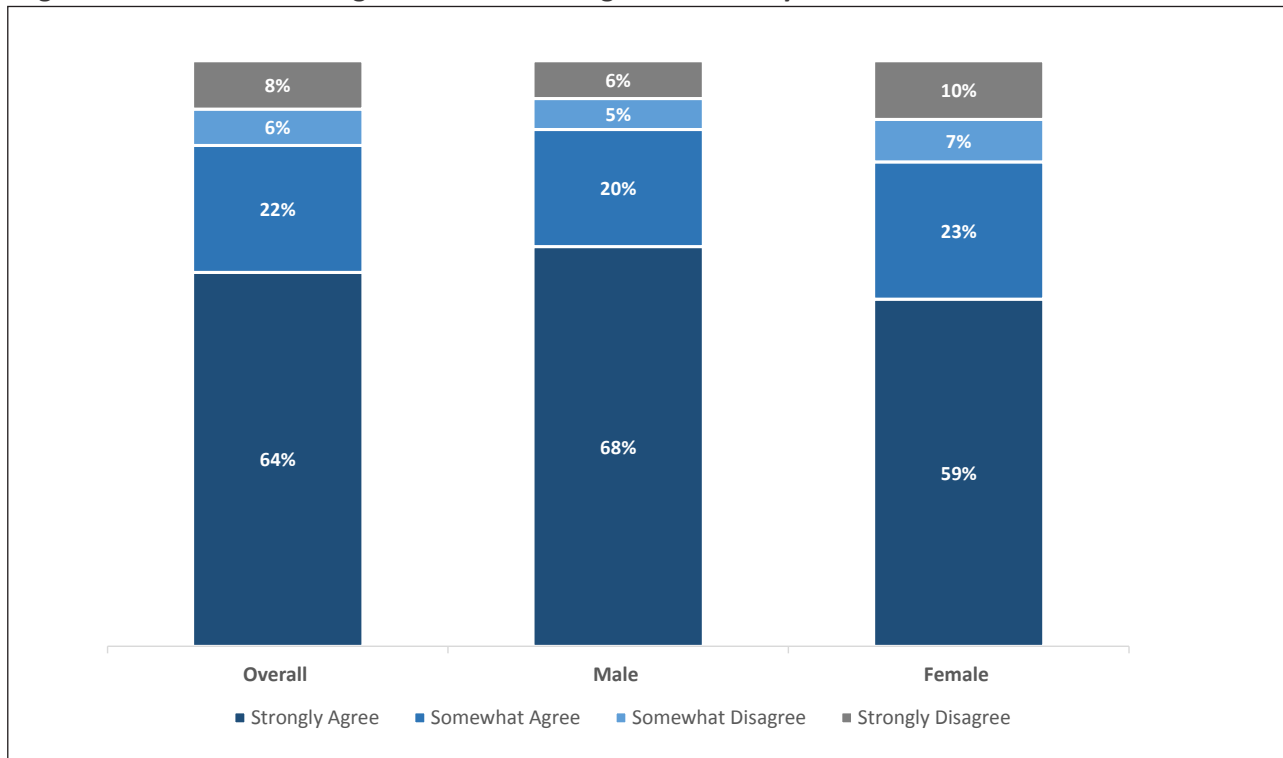


“How interested are you in matters of politics and government ?”

- Interest in politics is significantly higher among men than women (59 percent versus 38 percent). Interest in politics is also higher among 35-44 year olds (56 percent) and 45 to 54 year olds (59 percent), compared to younger voters (18-24 year olds, 36 percent).

- Despite the fact that only about half of Maldivians express at least some interest in politics, **most Maldivians have a positive view of elections and believe that voting gives them influence over decision-making in the country** (Figure 2).

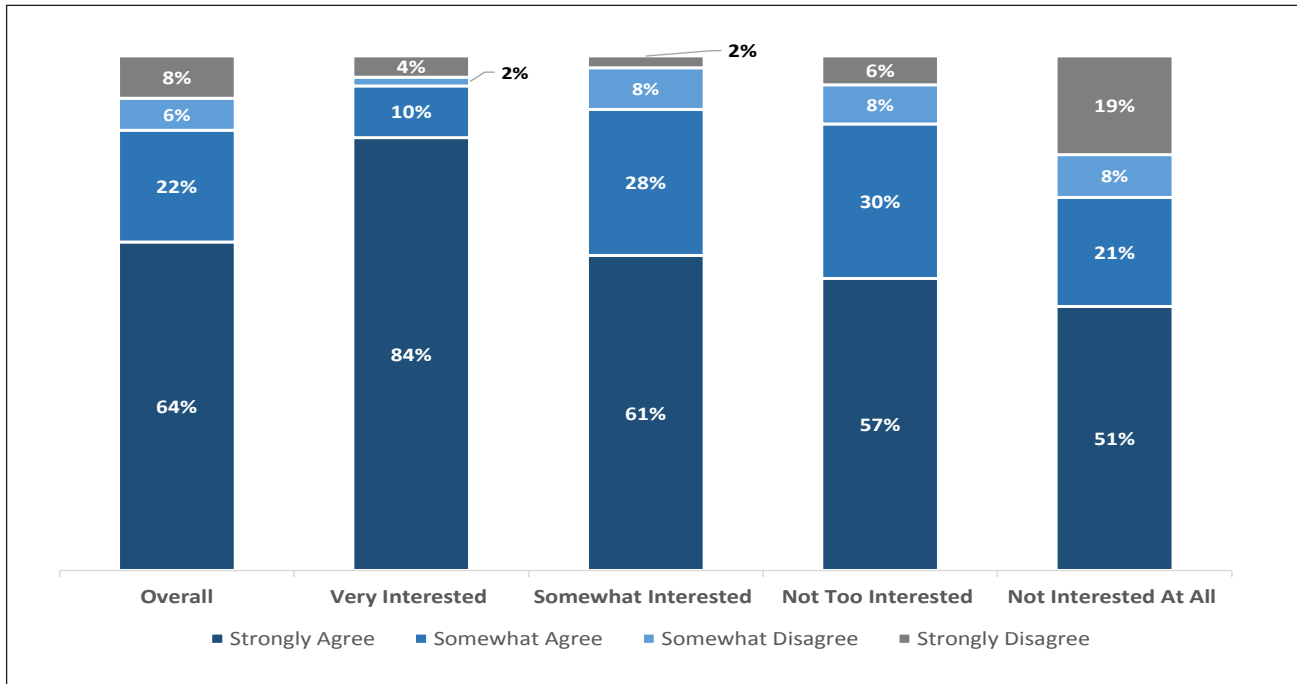
Figure 2 - Influence of Voting on Decision-Making in the Country



Do you agree that "voting gives people like me a chance to influence decision-making in the Maldives?"

- **More than 8 in 10 people strongly or somewhat agree that voting gives them a chance to influence decision-making in the Maldives.** Respondents agree with this statement whether or not they are interested in politics (Figure 3). There is little difference between men or women, with 88 percent of men and 82 percent of women agreeing with that statement.

Figure 3 - Influence of Voting on Decision-Making in the Maldives, by Interest in Politics



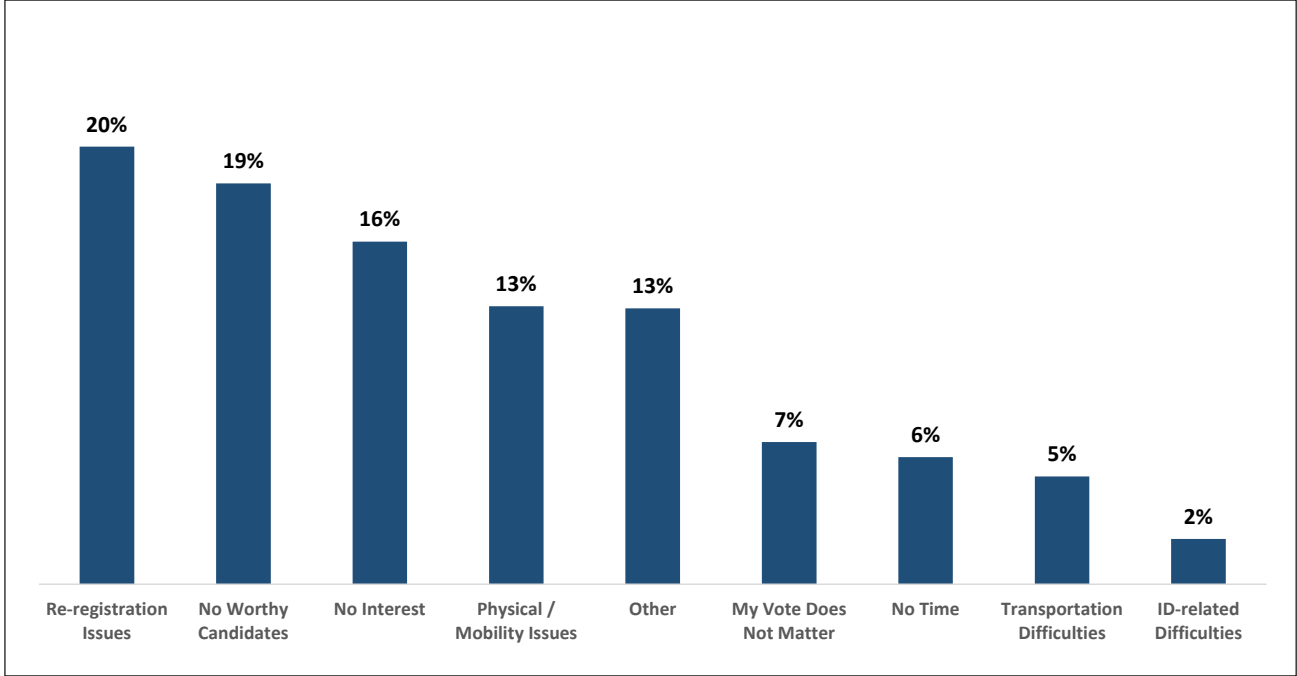
Agree or disagree: 'Voting gives people like me a chance to influence decision-making in the Maldives.'

3.2 Participation in 2014 Parliamentary Elections

- Among voters who report not voting in the last parliamentary elections, the reasons for not voting fall roughly into two general categories: logistical difficulties or political pessimism and indifference (Figure4).

Over 40 percent of those who did not vote did not do so because of logistical difficulties, and may have done so if there were mechanisms in place to ensure broader participation. Twenty-two percent of non-voters had re-registration and ID-related difficulties and 18 percent had mobility and transportation issues. Nineteen percent of non-voters did not vote because they found no candidate worthy of their vote. Further, 16 percent reported no interest and 7 percent reported that they do not believe that their vote matters.

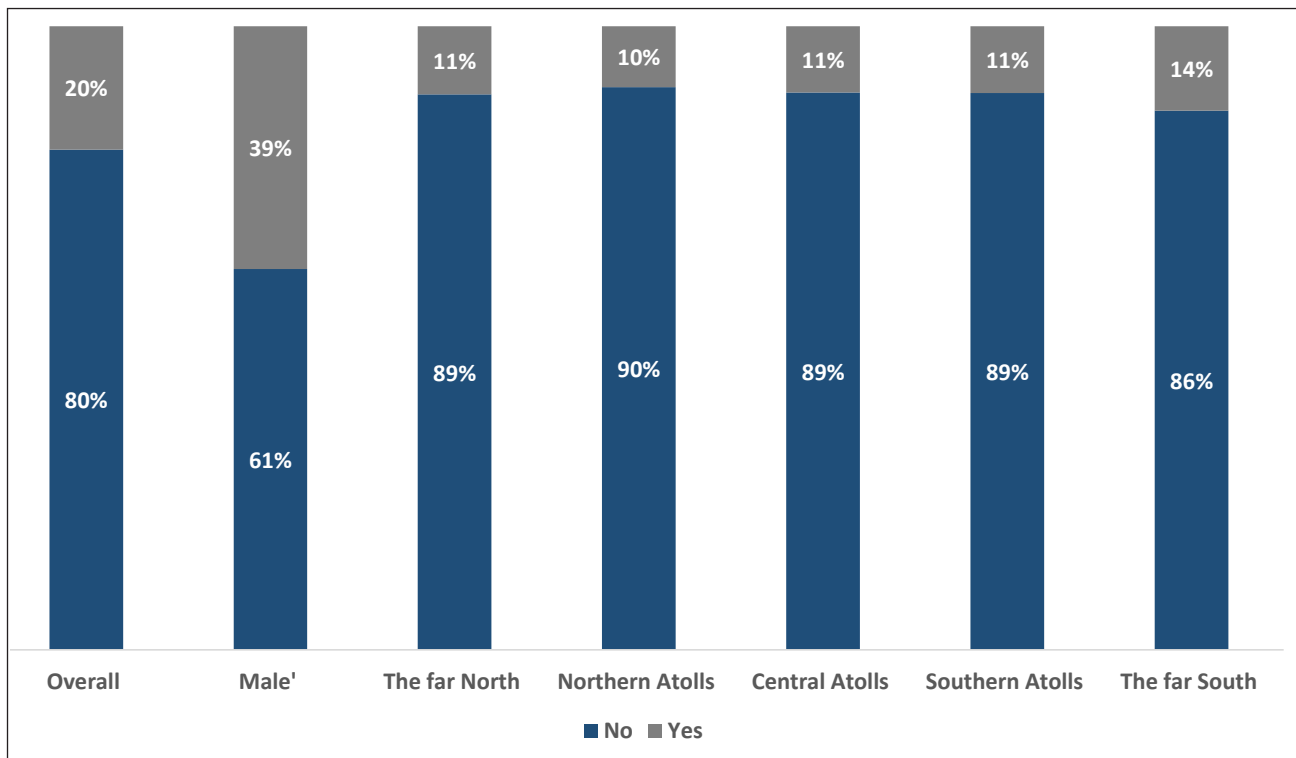
Figure 4 - Reasons for Not Voting in 2014 Parliamentary Elections



- Among those who reported voting in the parliamentary elections, nearly 20 percent said they were required to re-register to vote in the elections. Re-registration was reported by a significantly higher percentage of voters in Malé (39 percent) (Figure 5).

That means that nearly 4 out of 10 voters in Malé' have to manually re-register before each election. This presents a burden for a large number of voters, as well as Elections Commission during a very busy period.

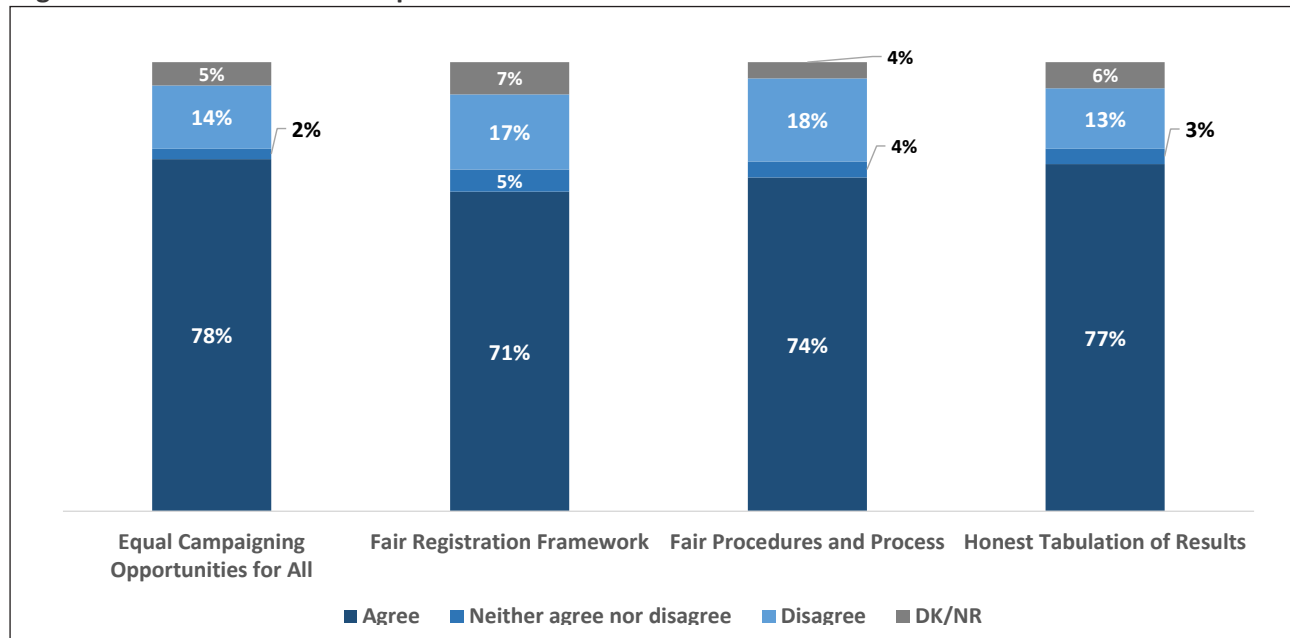
Figure 5 - Percent of Voters Requiring Re-Registration



3.3 Trust in the Electoral Process

- More than 7 in 10 voters agree that there are fair procedures in place for elections in their constituency, that the tabulation of ballots is honest and that candidates have equal campaigning opportunities (Figure 6).

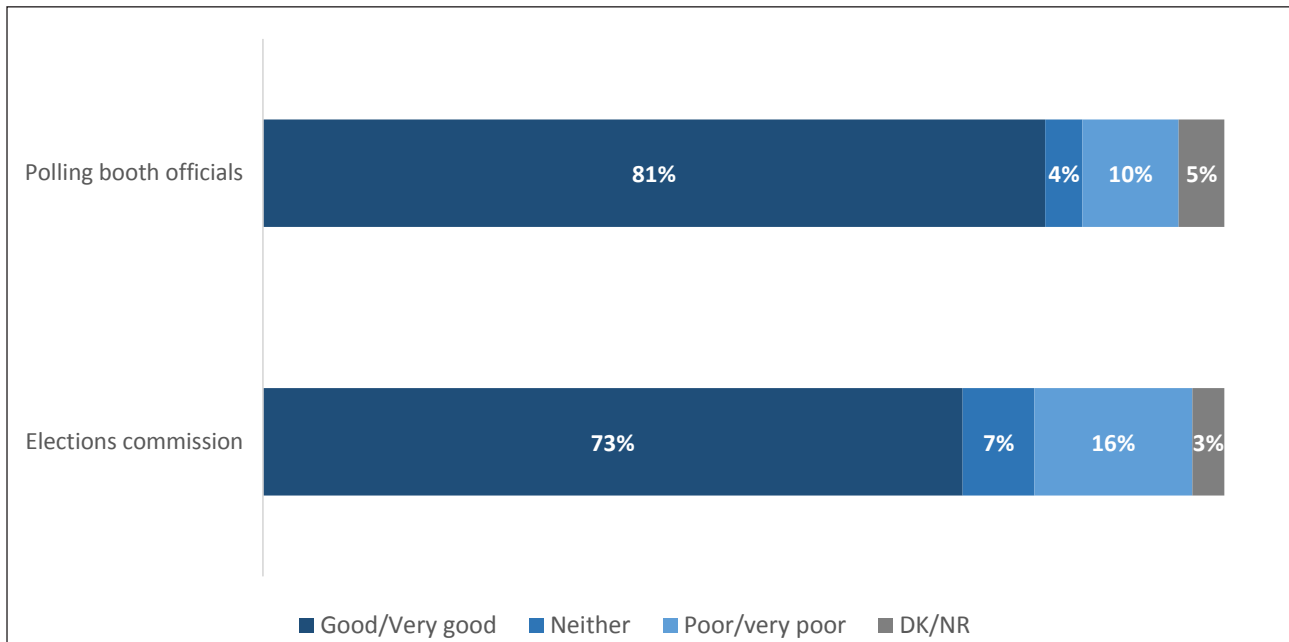
Figure 6 - Views on Different Aspects of the Electoral Process



Do you agree or disagree that the parliamentary election in your constituency had:

- Maldivians also have positive views of polling station officials and the Elections Commission.** In total, 81 percent of voters were satisfied with their experiences at polling stations, and 73 percent agreed that the Elections Commission performed good or very good (Figure 7). These levels of satisfaction extended across all major sub-groups in the population.

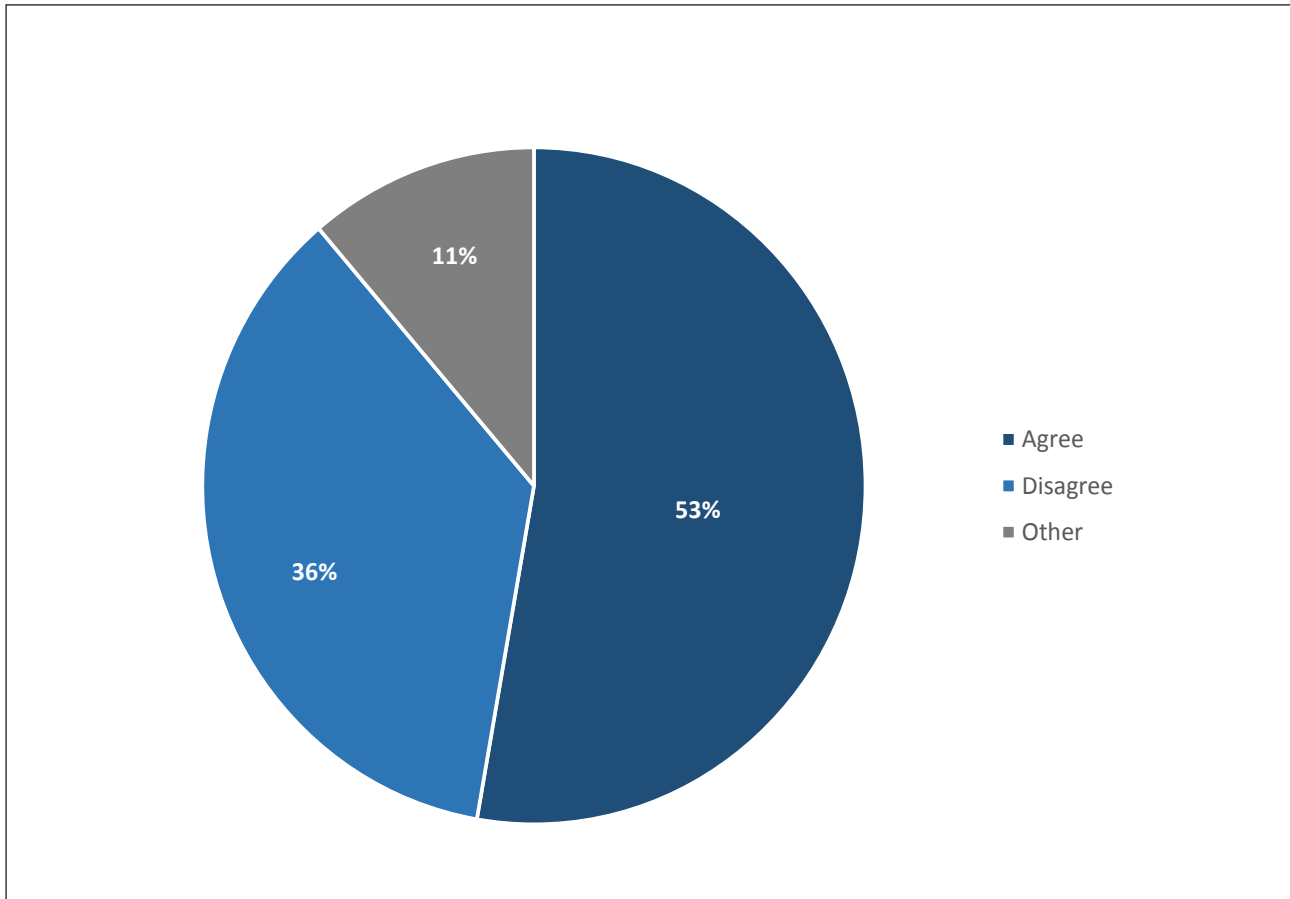
Figure 7 - Views on the Conduct of Polling Station Officials and the Elections Commission



How would you rate the performance of the above with regard to the last parliamentary election?

- Despite the generally positive evaluations of many aspects of the election process and of election officials, many Maldivians are concerned about fraud in the election process. While a slight majority (53 percent) agree that the election was free from fraud, a significant percentage (36 percent) disagree with this statement (Figure 8).

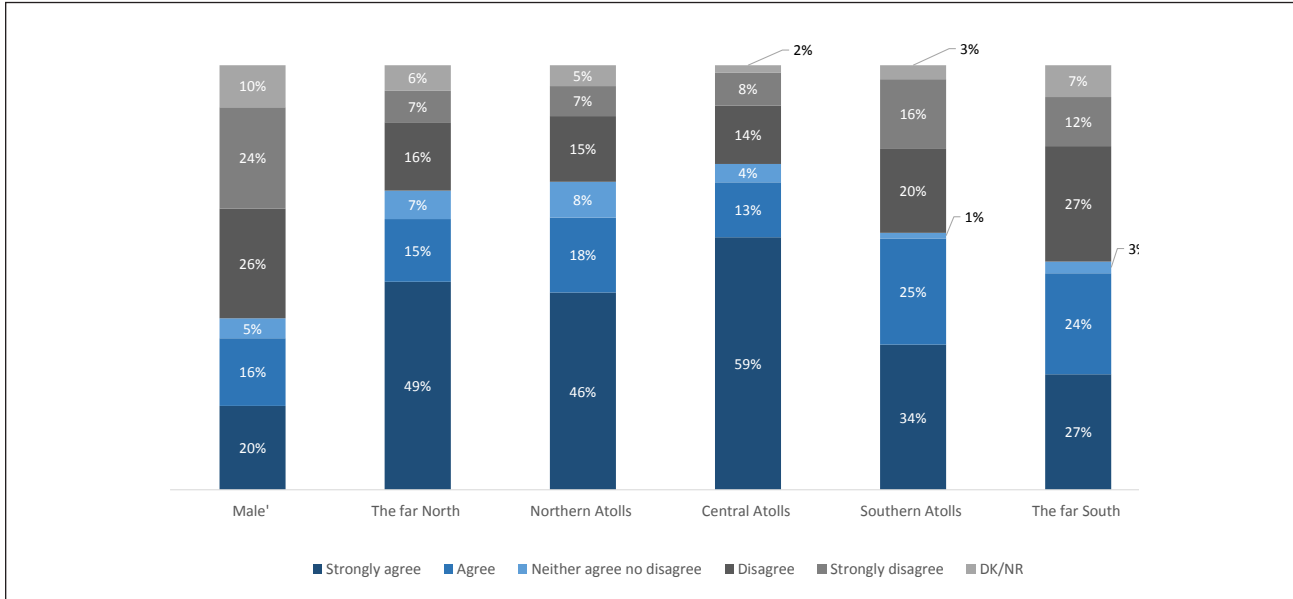
Figure 8: Perception of Fraud in the Elections



Do you agree or disagree that the parliamentary election in your constituency was free of fraud?

- Regionally, a far higher percentage of respondents in Malé (50 percent), disagree that the elections were free of fraud. Similarly, 36 percent of respondents from Southern atolls and 39 percent of respondents from the far South disagree that the elections were free from fraud.

Figure 9 - Perceptions of Fraud in Elections, by Region

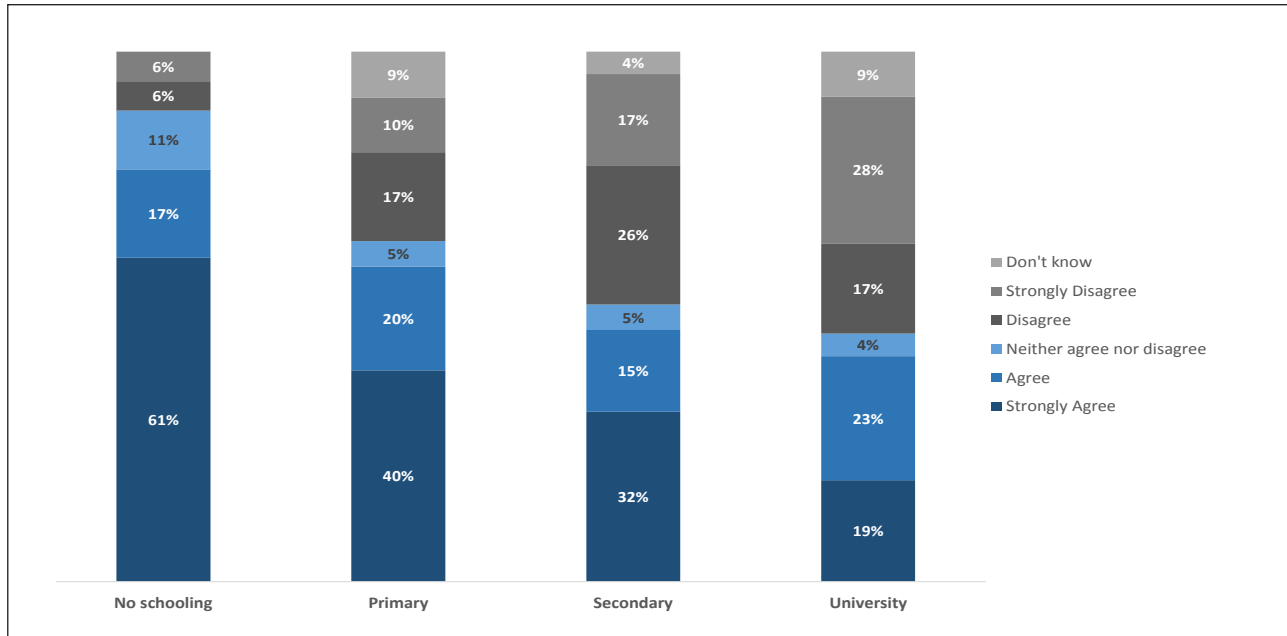


“Do you agree or disagree that the parliamentary election in your constituency was free of fraud?”

- **When broken down by education, it is evident that the more educated a respondent is, the more likely he/she is to disagree that the election was free of fraud** (Figure 10). People with secondary or university education may be more educated about the electoral process, and thus more aware of fraudulent activity. This underscores the need for better education of voters about the electoral process and electoral fraud.

It is important to note that among respondents who disagree that the election was free from fraud, a majority (64 percent) have positive opinion of the Elections Commission, indicating that Maldivians do not necessarily consider the Elections Commission as contributing to fraud.

Figure 10 - Perceptions of Electoral Fraud, by Education Levels



Do you agree or disagree that the parliamentary election in your constituency was free of fraud?

4. Opinions on Campaign Finance Issues

According to the survey results, there is nearly unanimous support for campaign finance reform and specifically for combating vote buying. The Maldivian lawmakers have clear public support to introduce preventive measures to combat vote buying ahead of the next elections.

Maldivian voters have significant concerns about the use of money in election campaigns and would like to see stronger regulation and controls adopted. The majority support stronger limits on how much money is contributed and spent during campaigns, and they would like to see measures which level the playing field for electoral contestants. The majority would also like to see financial disclosure from donors and the amount they contribute to campaigns. Most Maldivians believe that campaigns use more funds for illegal or unethical activities than for legitimate campaign activities, and that candidates are not honest in disclosing campaign spending.

It should be noted that there are some regulations already in place in the Maldives that address spending limits and use of government resources. However, due to a lack of information and the degree to which political parties and candidates adhere to these regulations, the public displays a high degree of distrust on these issues. Greater transparency and stronger regulations may be two steps that contribute to reducing this distrust over the long term.

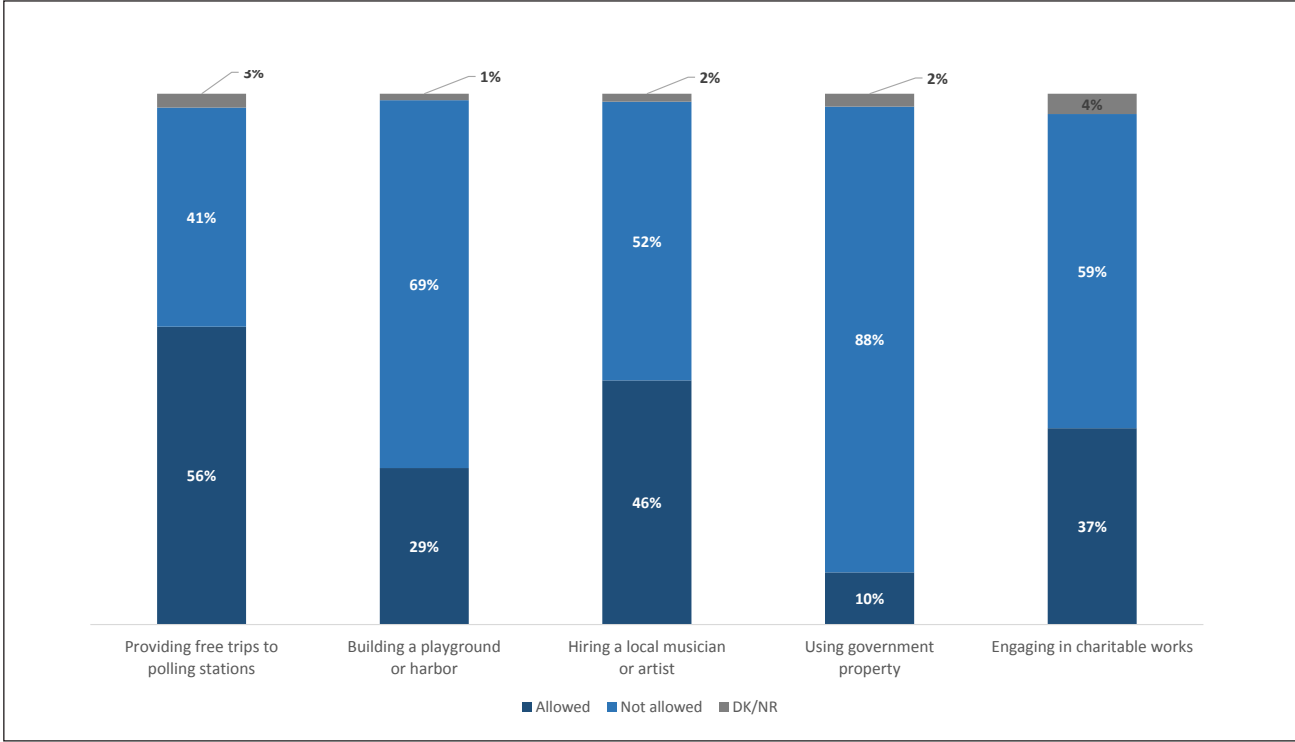
4.1 Use of Campaign Funds/Activities

- The majority of voters find many activities that political parties and candidate typically undertake during elections as inappropriate, regardless of whether if they are illegal or not (Figure 11).

A clear majority, nearly 90 percent, do not believe that government property, including vehicles and boats, should be allowed for campaign or political purposes. A significant majority of Maldivians believe that both charitable activities (59 percent) and community development activities, such as building a playground or a harbor (69 percent), should not be allowed during election campaigns, recognizing that these activities can be utilized by campaigns to generate support. A slight majority (52 percent) also do not think it is appropriate for local musicians or entertainment to be hired during campaigns while 46 percent think this is appropriate.

However, a slight majority (56 percent) think it is appropriate for campaigns to provide transportation to polling stations for voters while 41 percent disagree. It is interesting that Maldivians do not approve of many other methods of potentially influencing voters, but they approve of candidates providing transportation to voters. This may be due to the difficulties and the high cost of local transportation, and may also reflect an entrenched practice. There is no significant regional variation on this question.

Figure 11 - Perceptions on Legitimacy of Typical Campaign Activities

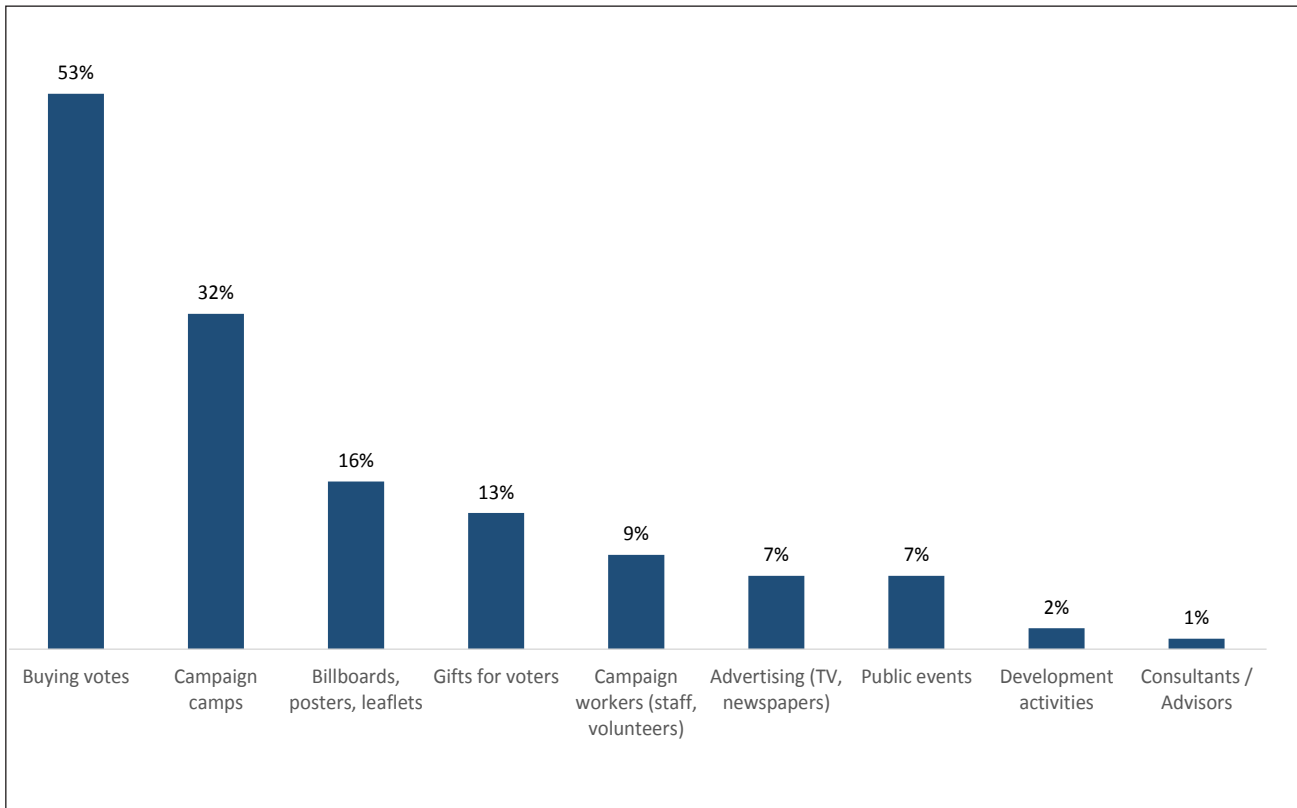


Please tell me what you think should be allowed or not allowed in election campaigns:

- The survey also finds that Maldivians generally do not have positive opinions about the way in which political parties and candidates spent campaign funds during the last parliamentary elections (Figure 12).

When asked for their opinion on the way candidates and political parties spent most of their funding during the last parliamentary elections, a majority believes that it was for illegal/unscrupulous activities. **Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of Maldivians believe that political parties and candidates spent most of their campaign funds on vote buying and on gifts for voters during the last parliamentary elections.** A slight majority (53 percent) believe that political parties and candidates spent most of their money on direct vote buying and 13 percent say that political parties and candidates spent funds on buying gifts for voters.

Figure 12 - Perception on Campaign Spending by Political Parties and Candidates



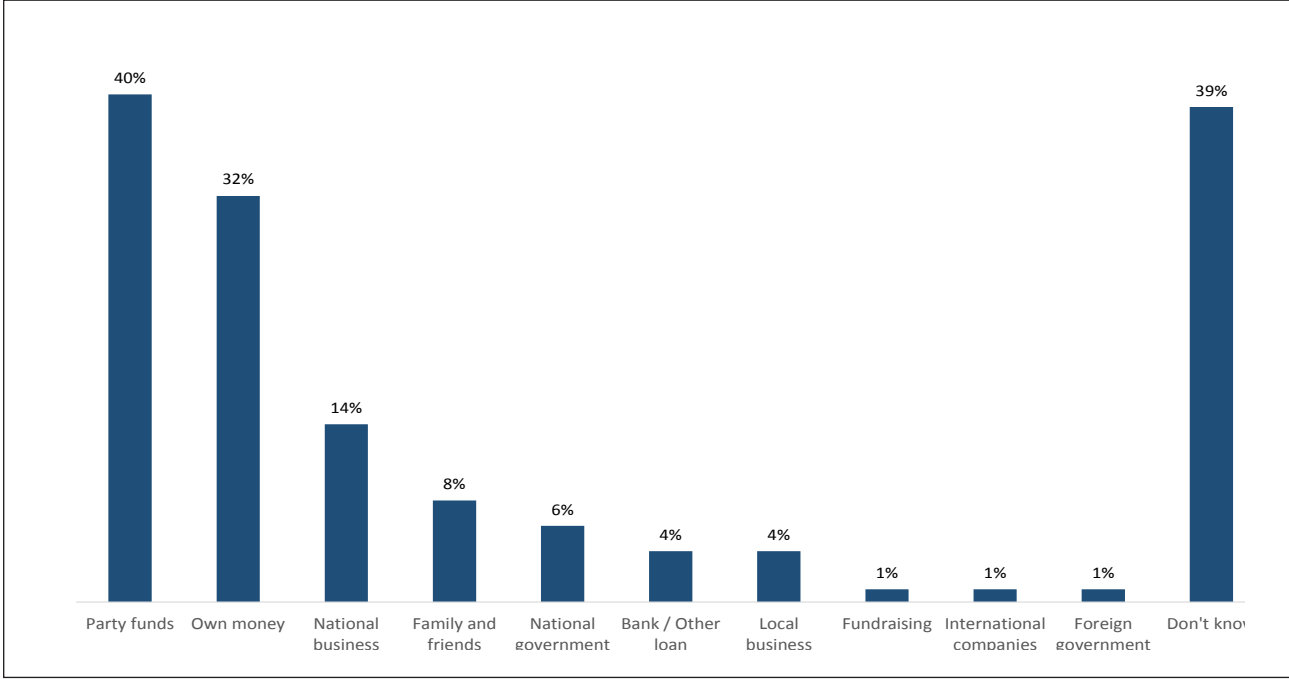
In general, what kind of activities and initiatives did candidates and parties spend most of their money during the last parliamentary electoral campaigns in the Maldives?

4.2 Funding for Campaigns and Views on Reporting of Campaign Expenditures

- When asked for the key sources of funding for political parties and candidates, most Maldivians believe that political parties and candidates receive election campaign funding from either party funds (40 percent) or that candidates are self-funded (32 percent). National businesses are the third-highest perceived source of funding, with 14 percent of voters mentioning this source of funding (Figure 13).

But perhaps more significant is that nearly 4 in 10 Maldivians said that they do not know the source of funding, suggesting a significant lack of information on how parties and candidates fund their campaigns.

Figure 13 - Perception about the Key Sources of Election Campaign Funding

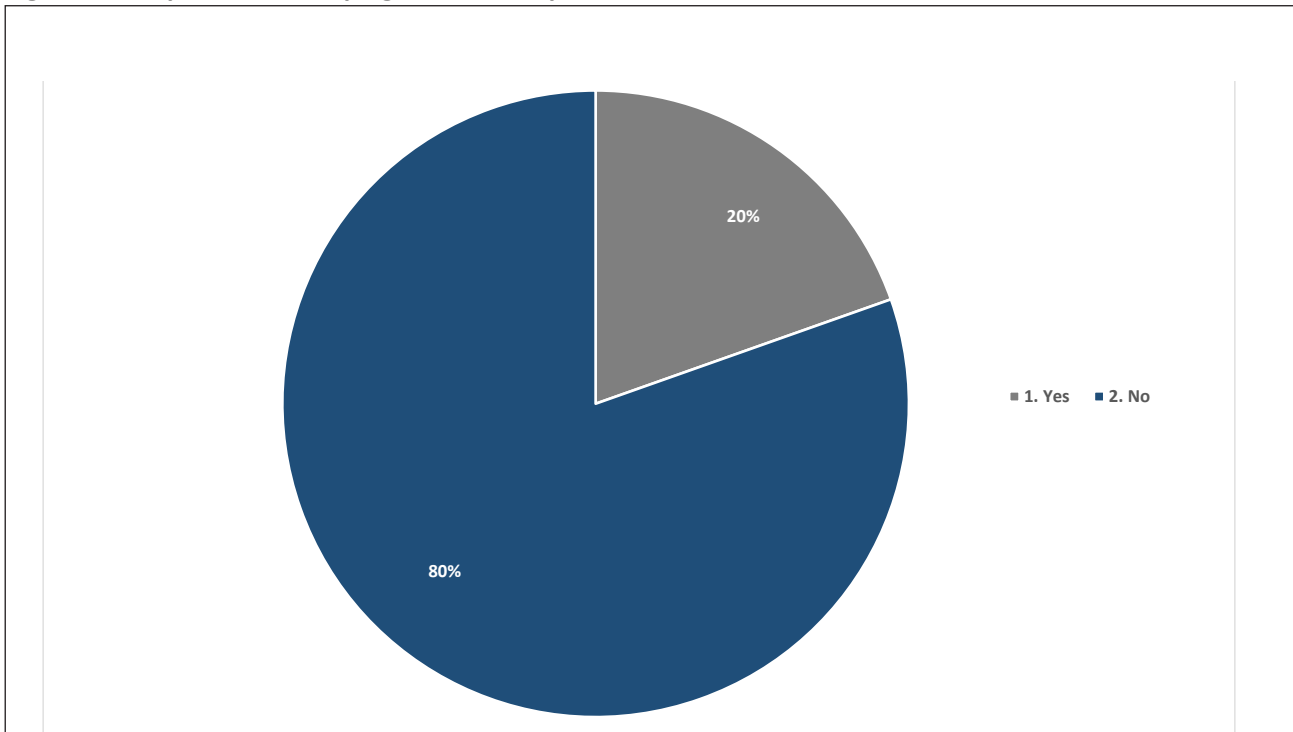


What do you think are the key sources of election campaign funding for parties/candidates in your constituency?

- While Maldivians have strong views on the use of campaign funding, the survey finds that very few actually have been exposed to any reports on campaign spending (Figure 14).

Four out of five respondents report hearing nothing about how political parties and candidates spent their money on political campaigns. Even in the case of those very interested in politics, 81 percent say that they have not seen or heard reports on campaign spending.

Figure 14 - Exposure to Campaign Finance Reports

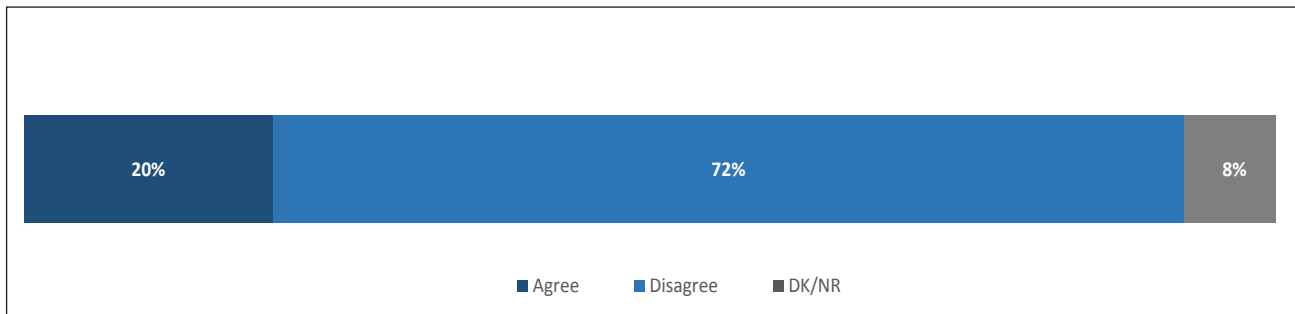


Have you ever seen or heard about reports on money spent on political campaigns in Maldives?

- The lack of exposure to campaign finance reports may also impact how much Maldivians trust candidates in terms of honestly reporting their campaign spending. **When asked whether candidates are honest in reporting their campaign spending, 72 percent of voters disagree with this statement** (Figure 15).

This lack of trust can at least partially be addressed through greater financial transparency by the candidates and political parties, as well as improved civic education and voter awareness.

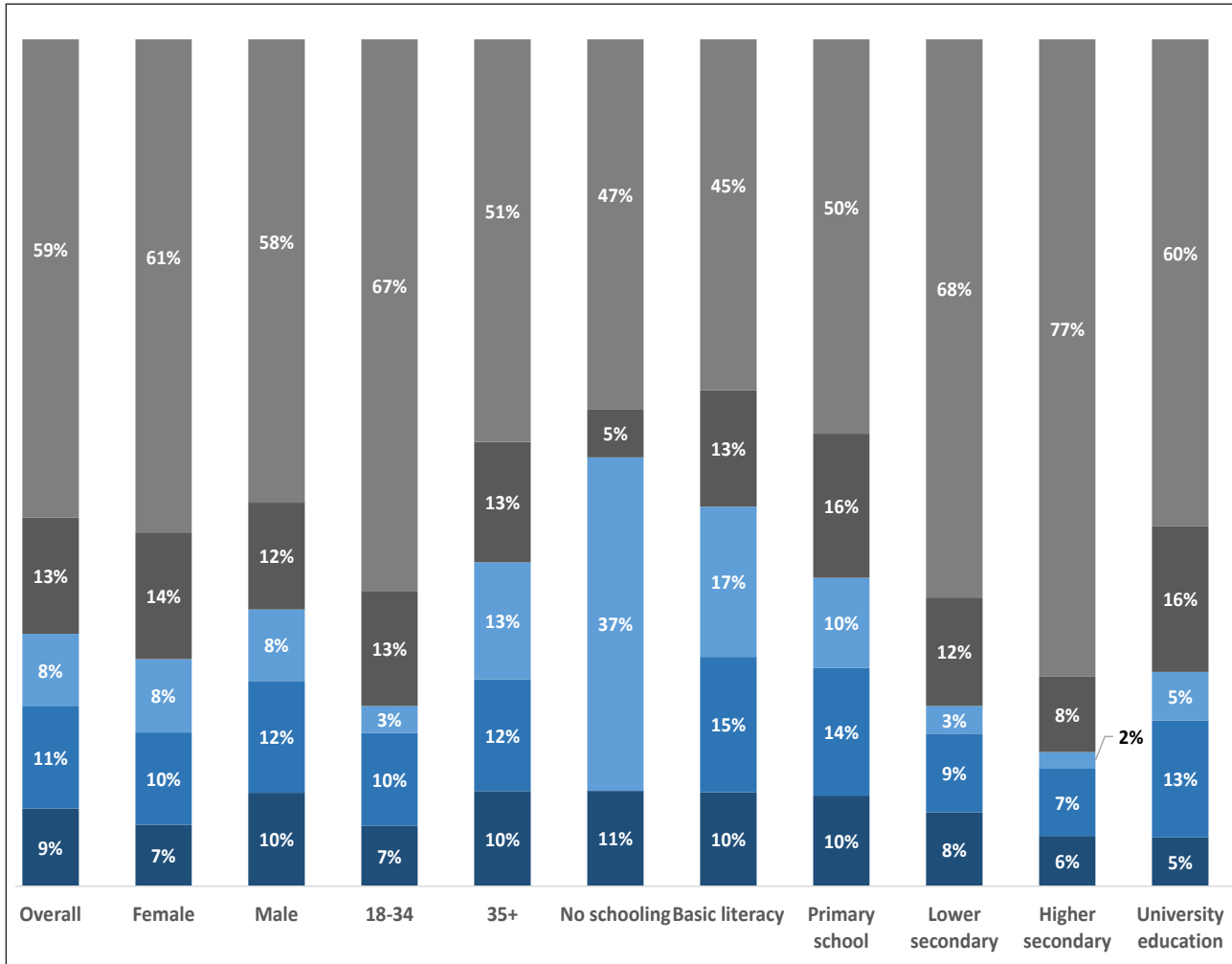
Figure 15 - Views on Candidate Honesty in Campaign Finance Reporting



Candidates are honest in reporting their spending during campaigns?

- While the majority of Maldivians in all age groups believe that candidates are dishonest in reporting campaign spending, this opinion is more prevalent among younger Maldivians (18-34yrs: 80 percent; 35+yrs: 64 percent), women (75 percent) and those who are better educated (higher secondary: 85 percent, university education: 76 percent, primary school: 66 percent).

Figure 16 - Views on Candidate Honesty in Campaign Finance Reporting, by Gender and Education



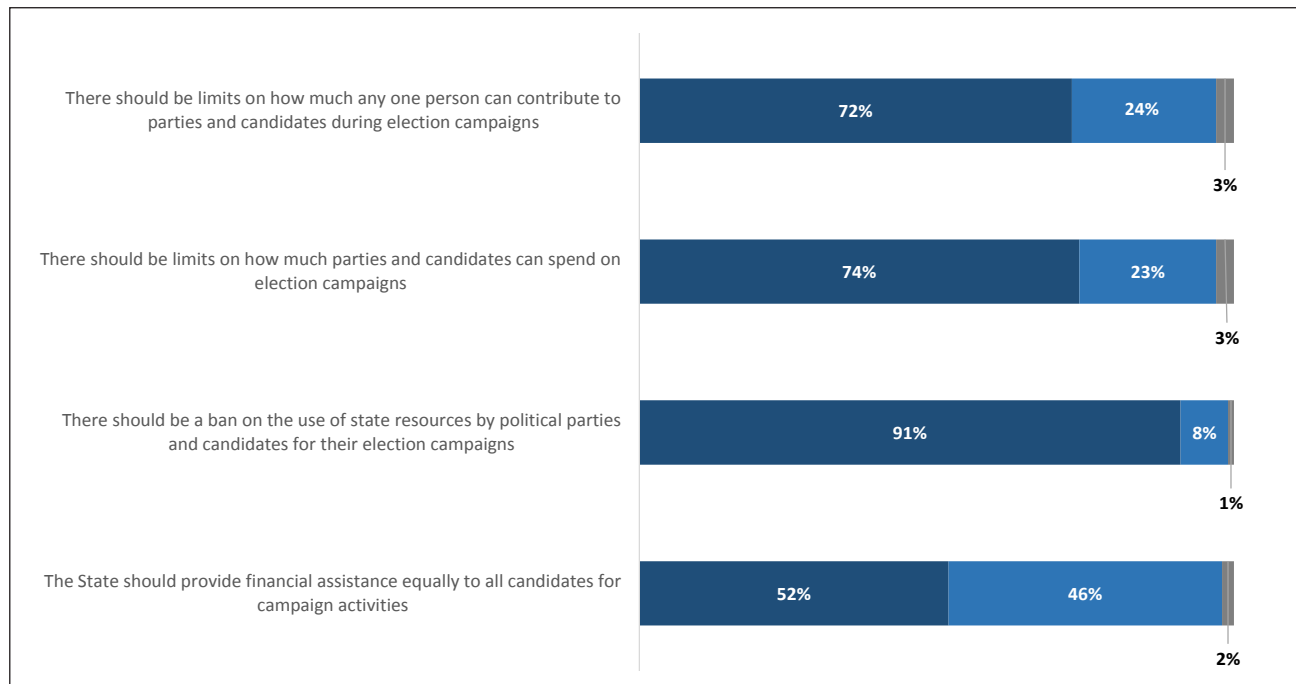
Agree or disagree: "Candidates are honest in reporting their spending during campaigns".

4.3 Views on Campaign Finance Issues

- The vast majority of voters are supportive of limitations on campaign finance in the Maldives** (Figure 17). Close to three-quarters of Maldivians support a limit on political contributions by any one person as well as limits on campaign spending by political parties and candidates. More than 9 in 10 Maldivians agree with a ban on the use of state resources for election campaigns, which reflect responses to an earlier question on the use of government property during campaigns (see Figure 9).

Voters are nearly evenly split when asked if the state should provide financial assistance to all candidates, with 52 percent in favor and 46 percent opposed.

Figure 17 - Views on Specific Campaign Finance Issues

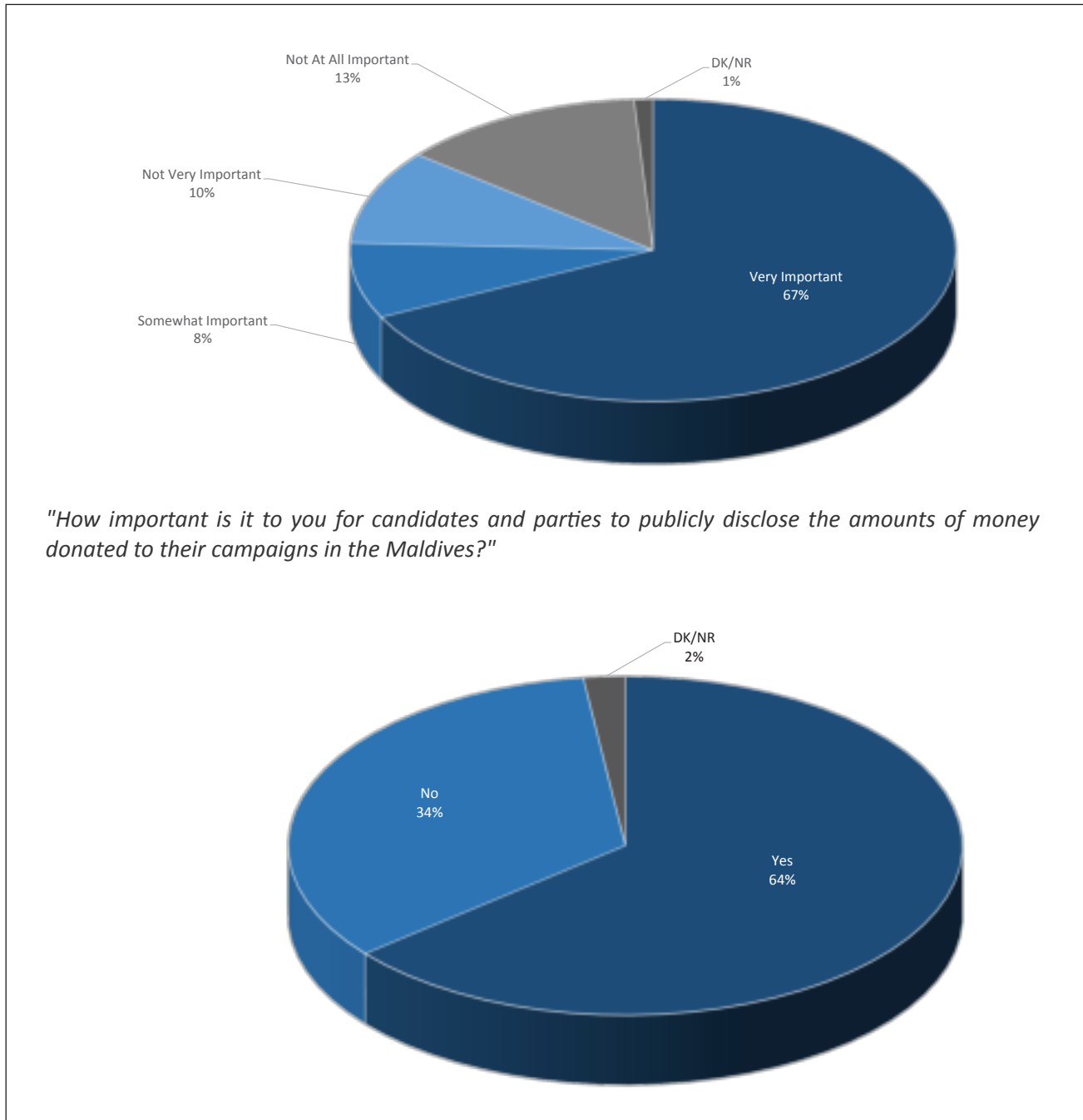


Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the above statements?

- Maldivians are strongly supportive of public disclosure of campaign contributions. **Overall, 67 percent think it is very important and a further 8 percent think it is somewhat important for political parties and candidates to publicly disclose the amount of money donated to their campaigns.** In addition, 64 percent believe that candidates and political parties should disclose the identity of their campaign donors.

This data indicates that there is significant support for greater transparency of campaign finance through a more robust implementation of existing regulations, as well as introduction of new measures.

Figure 18 - Views on Campaign Finance Disclosure



5. Vote Buying

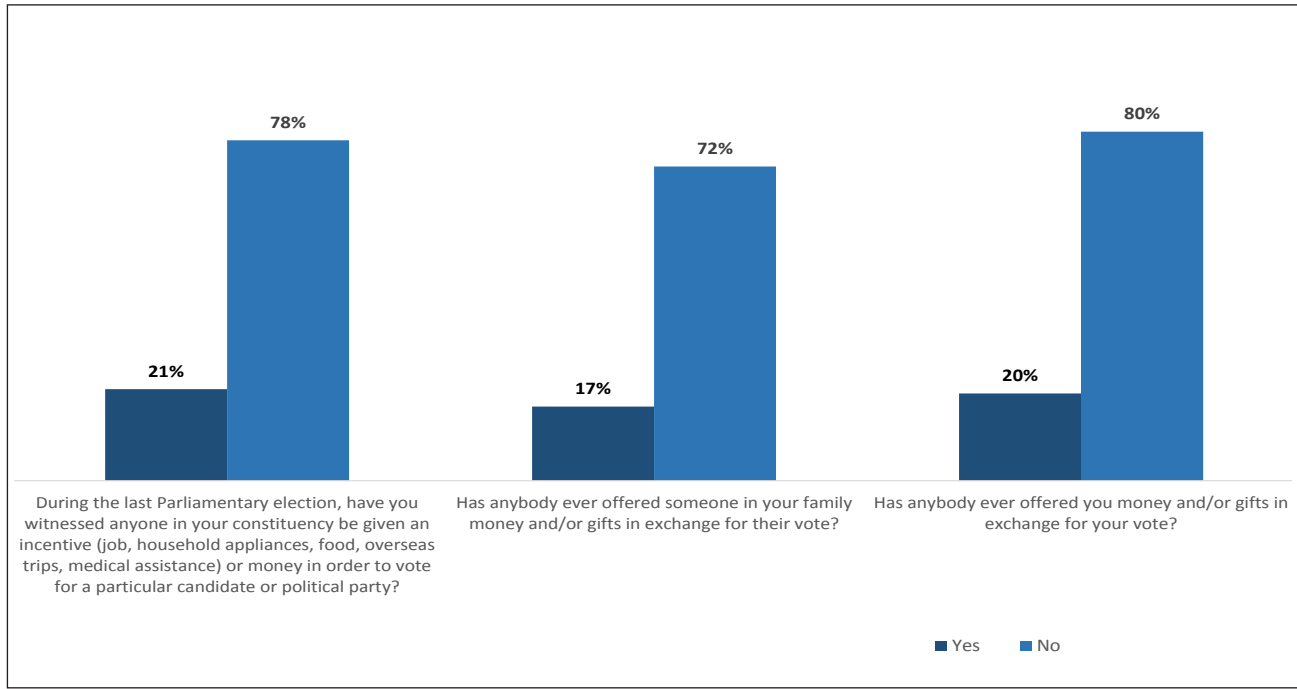
Survey results confirm that vote buying is a serious problem in the Maldives and if not addressed it threatens to undermine the democratic process in the country. Though vote buying is a common problem in some parts of the world, the proportions that it has assumed in the Maldives are alarming. More than a third of Maldivians report that they have direct experience with vote buying or specific observation and knowledge of others who have been offered money or gifts for their votes. At the same time, the vast majority of Maldivians understand that vote buying should be illegal, and would support actions to combat it.

NOTE: For the purpose of the survey, the participants were asked only if they personally have been offered money or gifts or if they have actually witnessed money or gifts being offered. Hearsay, second-hand accounts and unverifiable instances are therefore not counted for the purpose of this survey. It also must be noted that respondents to opinion surveys are generally reluctant to report activities which may seem to be illegal or unethical.

Therefore, the reported percentage of vote buying in this survey is a conservative estimate and is likely to be somewhat higher than reported.

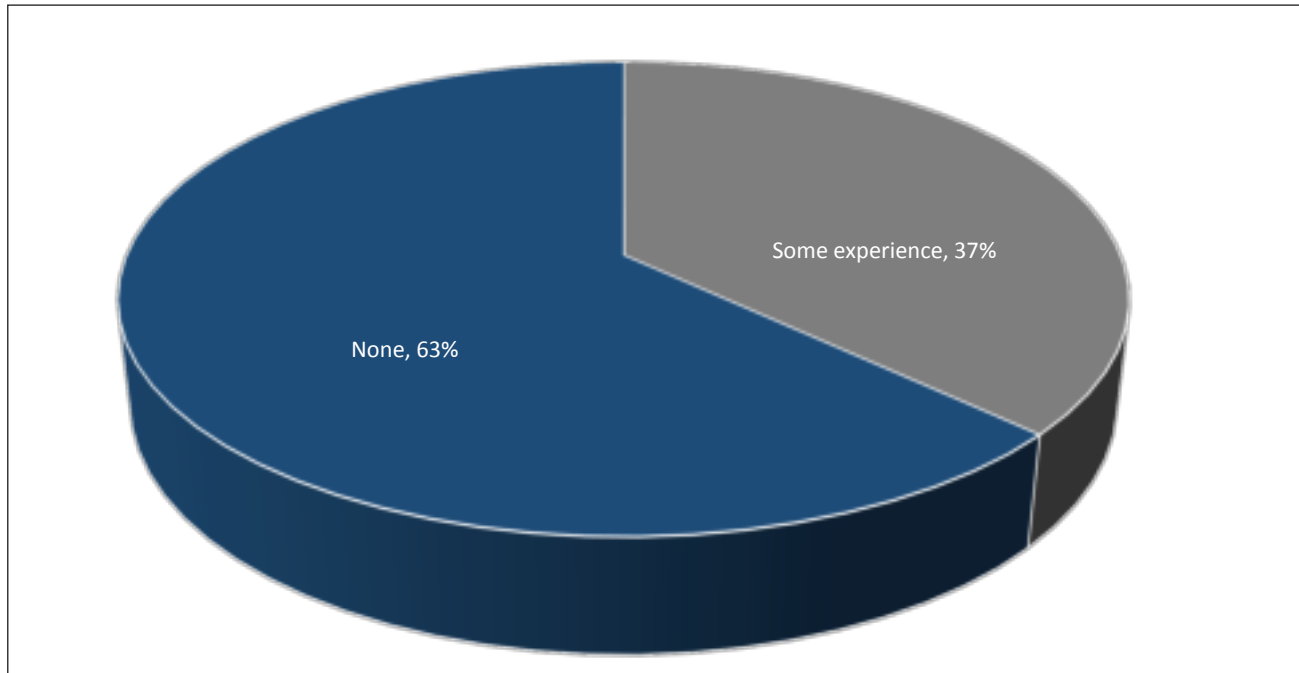
- The survey demonstrates that a significant percentage of Maldivians have either been offered money or gifts for their vote or have personally witnessed cases where others have been offered money or gifts. **Twenty percent of the voters in the Maldives have been offered money or gifts for their vote, 21 percent have witnessed others being offered the same and 17 percent report that someone in their family has been offered money or gifts for their vote** (Figure 19).

Figure 19 - Experience with Vote Buying



- Combining the responses to all three of the questions presented in Figure 15, the survey finds that **37 percent of Maldivians have either been offered money or gifts for their votes personally, or have personally witnessed either a family member or someone else who has been offered money or gifts** (Figure 20).

Figure 20: Three Different Scenarios of Vote Buying Experiences

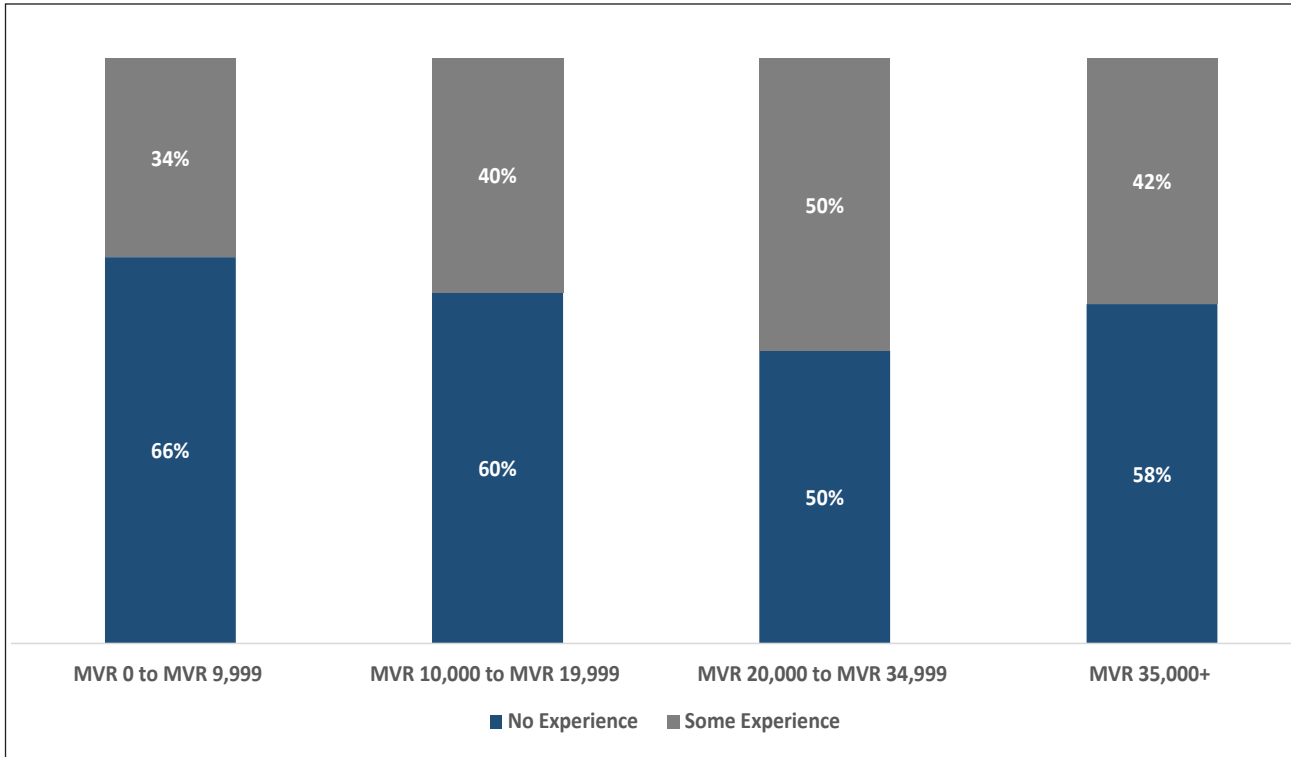


The three different scenarios within the 37 percent of vote buying experienced by Maldivians:

- 1) Respondent witnessed someone being offered money for their vote*
- 2) Respondent offered money for their vote*
- 3) Respondent's relatives offered money for their vote*

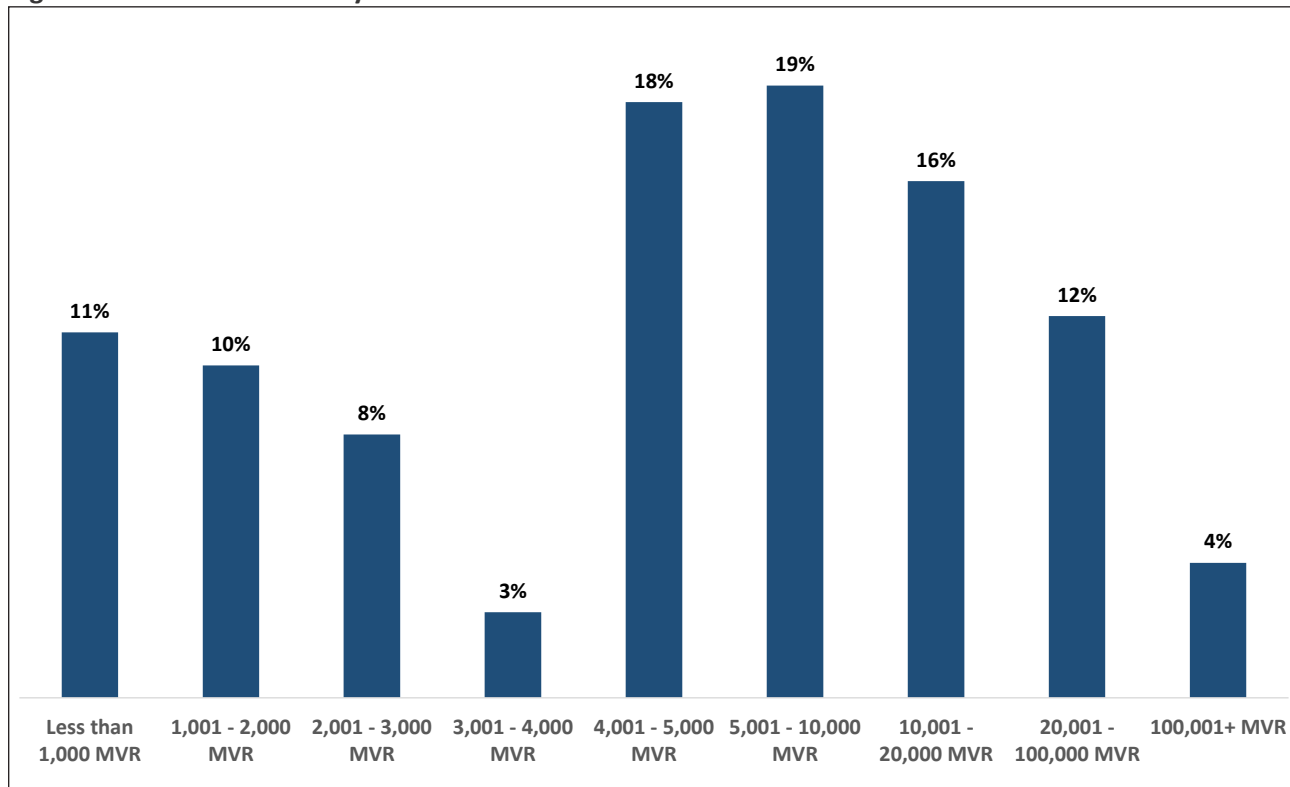
- Income does not seem to be a factor in experiences with vote buying. Despite the general perception that those with lower income may be more exposed to vote buying, the survey shows that there is no notable difference in vote buying with respect to income-level of the voter. If anything, those at lower income levels are somewhat less likely to experience vote-buying.

Figure 21 - Experience with Vote-Buying, by Income Level



- Eighty two percent of Maldivians who report being offered something in exchange for their vote say they were offered cash as opposed to a gift or service. **The majority of the voters (53 percent) report being offered between MVR 4,000 (USD 262) and MVR 20,000 (USD 1,309) for their vote** (Figure 22). Similar amounts are reported by those who say that they know of relatives who were offered money for their votes.

Figure 22 - Amount of Money Offered for the Vote

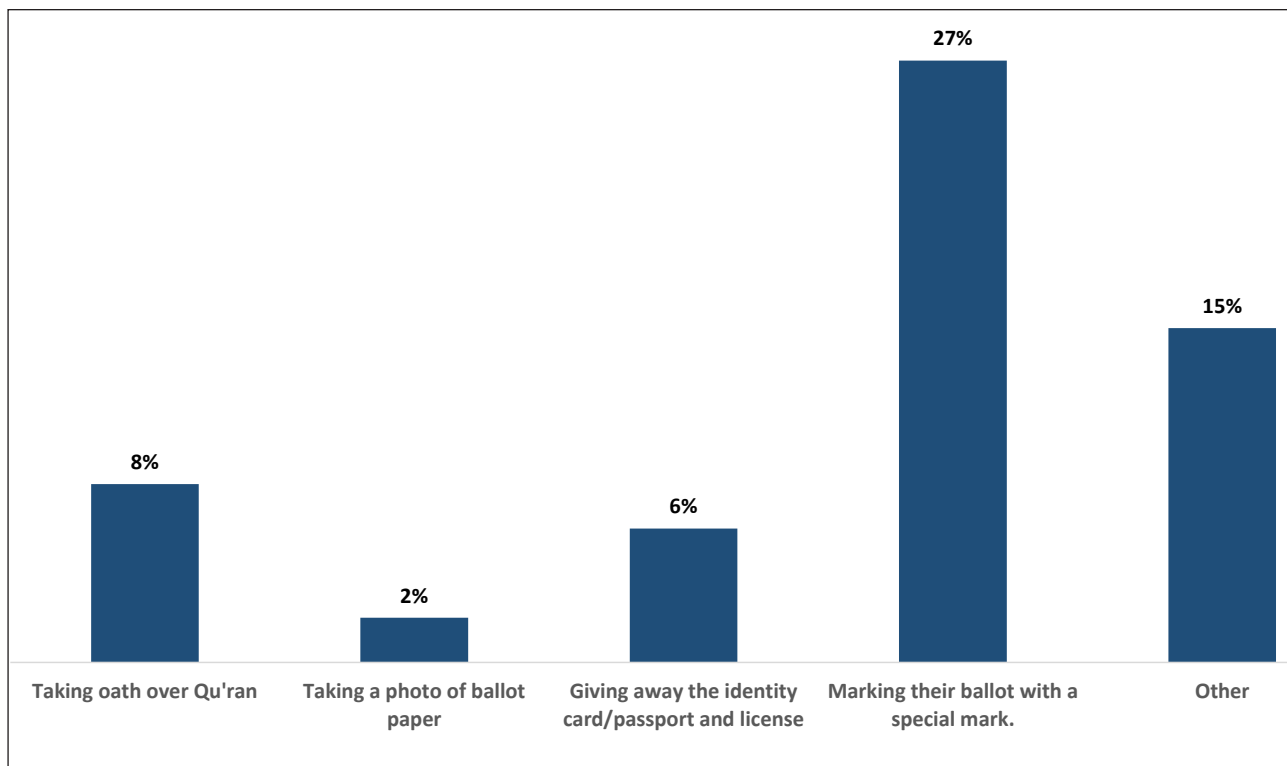


“How much were you offered in exchange for your vote?”

- When those who reported being offered money or gifts were asked how the candidate ensured that they would vote for the candidate, a variety of methods were mentioned (Figure 23). **Putting a special mark on the ballot is clearly the most used method, with 27 percent of voters stating they were asked to do so.**

Further 8 percent were asked to swear an oath on the Qur’an, 6 percent were asked to turn over their identity papers and 15 percent mentioned other means. Fourteen percent say nothing was asked of them and 27 percent did not give a response.

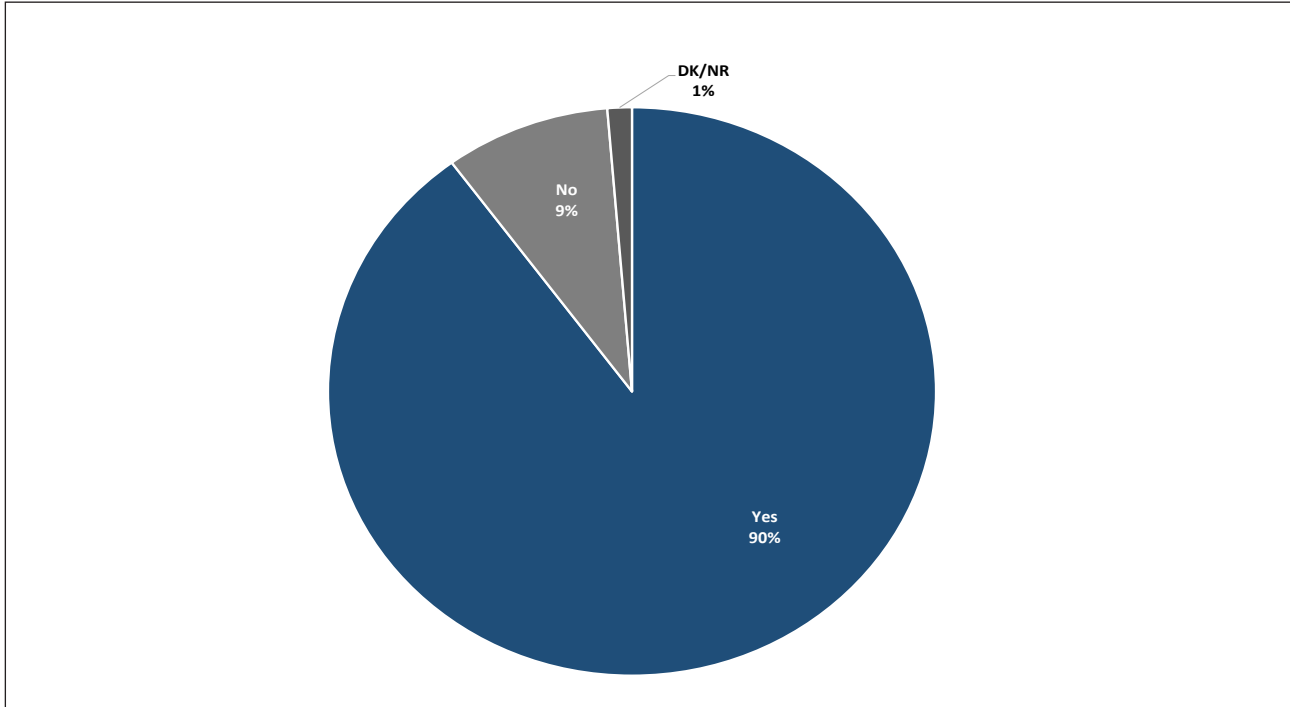
Figure 23 - Different Methods Candidates Used to Ensure People Who Received Money or Gifts Voted for Them



“How did candidates ensure that the people who receive money or gifts voted for the candidate who offered the money or gifts?”

- Finally, when asked whether offering money or gifts for votes should be illegal in the Maldives, 90 percent of voters said yes (Figure 24).

Figure 24 - Views on Legality of Vote Buying



"Do you think giving money or gifts to voters in exchange for their votes should be illegal in the Maldives?"





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