

ELECTIONS AND CIVIC SPACE IN SOUTH SUDAN: FINDINGS FROM THE 2024 PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF PEACE SURVEY

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Summary

- This report summarizes findings from an opinion poll on perceptions of peace in South Sudan that Detcro, PeaceRep, and FES's Raising Civil Voices project conducted between March and June 2024. The poll collected the views of **4,769 people** in **15 locations** across all ten states and one administrative area.
- The data shows a mixed picture regarding civic and political space. **44%** of respondents said they feel 'unsafe' or 'very unsafe' speaking publicly about politically sensitive issues, and this rose to an astonishing **68%** of respondents in IDP settlements. More than half of respondents thought that electoral fraud was likely in elections. However, respondents expressed generally positive views about the ability for parties to campaign freely and the ability of the NEC to organize credible elections.
- As in previous polls, the 2024 opinion poll suggests a strong appetite for elections to be held on time, despite the concerns about whether the environment is conducive for elections. **71%** of respondents think that South Sudan is ready for elections and **70%** of respondents say elections should happen in December 2024 as envisaged in the roadmap agreement. However, respondents in IDP camps are more than three times as likely to say that South Sudan is not ready for elections and more than twice as likely to support a delay than other respondents in urban and rural areas.
- When asked whether elections for president, governors, national MPs and state MPs should happen at the same time or be sequenced relative to one another, **60%** of respondents said they should happen at the same time and just **38%** said they should be sequenced. The findings are consistent with the overall optimism about South Sudan's capacity to conduct elections.
- The polling data suggests that South Sudanese do not just want to vote as soon as possible, but that they also think that elections can correct some of the most pressing problems in the country. Overall, a majority of respondents think that South Sudan will become less corrupt (**74%**), have improved service delivery (**78%**), and gain international respect (**80%**) after elections have been conducted.
- Respondent views on the most important issue shaping their choice of candidate emphasize security (**44%**). Among respondents in IDP camps, the proportion of respondents prioritizing security rises to an astonishing **78%**.
- Most respondents think that Western partners should lead in election observation, with the United States being the most popular, followed by the United Kingdom, European Union, and multilateral organizations, such as IGAD, the UN and the AU. These perceptions place high expectations on South Sudan's peace partners, especially the Troika and the European Union, who have thus far shown a certain scepticism towards elections, given the difficult political, economic and security context.
- Even though civil society did not feature prominently in the list of actors that respondents thought should lead in election observation, when asked directly what role they think civil society should play, most respondents said, 'observing and monitoring'. Respondents were rather sceptical of the idea of civil society activists running as political candidates. This suggests a desire to separate the spaces of civil society and politics.
- The desire to see elections held on time is juxtaposed with considerable fear of election-related violence. **57%** of respondents assess the risk of violence as 'very high' or 'somehow high', including nearly all respondents in Bor South, and almost half of respondents (**47%**) think that violence is likely to increase during elections. Respondents were split in their predictions that elections would cause a return to full-scale civil war: **38%** of respondents thought a return to civil war was unlikely, while another **38%** thought a return was likely.
- As in previous polls, the SPLM (IG) and SPLM-IO emerged as the most popular political formations. **52%** of respondents say that the SPLM (IG) has the best vision for the country and **21%** say the SPLM-IO has the best vision for the country. SPLM (IG) shows dominance in Yirol West, Rumbek Centre, Renk, Pibor, Gogrial West and Bor South, while the SPLM-IO dominates in Rubkona and in IDP settlements, where **60%** of respondents said they have the best vision for the country. Interestingly, more than half of respondents think that the SPLM (IG) and SPLM-IO should agree to form a single party before elections, suggesting a certain appetite for a continued sharing of power between the two groups.
- While South Sudanese want to see credible and fair elections held as soon as possible, this appears unlikely in accordance with the existing timeline. A more pragmatic approach would be to hold elections at a politically opportune and technically feasible point in the future. A major question for policymakers is how the public would relate to an extension and what are the implications for their confidence in the transitional process. In considering the options, policymakers should be guided by public opinion to guarantee that the electoral process is at least 'good enough' to provide for a credible and widely accepted outcome.
- If a delay occurs, one step policymakers can take to build trust amongst voters is to implement tangible election education and preparation activities on the ground. Even if people cannot vote in December 2024, they may be reassured by a visible election preparation presence in their villages and neighborhoods.

Introduction

As of June 2024, the future of the transitional process in South Sudan remains uncertain. According to the National Elections Amendment Act (2023), the National Elections Commission (NEC) must announce the date of elections six months in advance, so if elections were to be held in December 2024, the NEC would need to announce it this month, June 2024. That announcement has not taken place, and the parties to the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU) remain divided on the topic. The UN has made clear that in its view the parties have not achieved the “critical mass” of progress that is required to hold “free, fair and peaceful elections,” citing 10 preconditions involving technical, political, security and legislative reforms that have not yet been addressed by the parties.

Meaningful dialogue and communication among the parties to the peace agreement has been limited. The parties have announced their intention to engage in inter-party dialogue to determine the way forward, but little tangible progress has been made and political leaders have taken divergent public stances on key issues. More recently, in May 2024, a parallel political process was initiated in Kenya to revisit aspects of the peace agreement, and many people speculate that it may provide space for the parties to negotiate another extension of the transitional period.

This report presents opinion polling data on elections and civic space to inform ongoing discussions about the fate of the transitional process in South Sudan. Among the issues it covers are people’s perceived safety when speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues, the timing and sequencing of elections, what people expect elections to deliver, the perceived risk of electoral violence, and respondent political preferences. The report draws on recent opinion polling data collected by Detcro, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and the Raising Civil Voices program by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), funded by the European Union.

Between March and June 2024, Detcro and PeaceRep collected the views of 4,769 people in 15 locations across all ten states and one administrative area, encompassing urban, rural and IDP camp environments. Respondents were asked about their daily experiences of safety based on indicators of everyday peace developed through qualitative research during the project’s inception phase, along with questions about their perception of the peace process, national elections, civic and political space, and climate security, among other topics. This is the fifth opinion poll that Detcro and PeaceRep have conducted since 2021. To date, the research has gathered the views of a total of 18,039 South Sudanese.

The poll collected the views of 4,769 people in 15 locations across all ten states and one administrative area.



1 A convenience sample of 15 counties was selected to represent the principal regions and conflict theatres in South Sudan. The research team used an approximately self-weighting stratified random sampling approach to select households, and then individuals within households. This method centred on a randomization strategy implemented using ArcGIS and the GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01.01 dataset. For each workday, enumerators began at randomly drawn map coordinates and followed a random walk guided by smartphone apps. Enumerators recorded responses using KoboToolbox smartphone software. See Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University and Novel-T. 2021, GRID3 South Sudan Settlement Extents, Version 01, Geo-Referenced Infrastructure and Demographic Data for Development (GRID3), available at: <https://doi.org/10.7916/d8-khpa-pq09>.

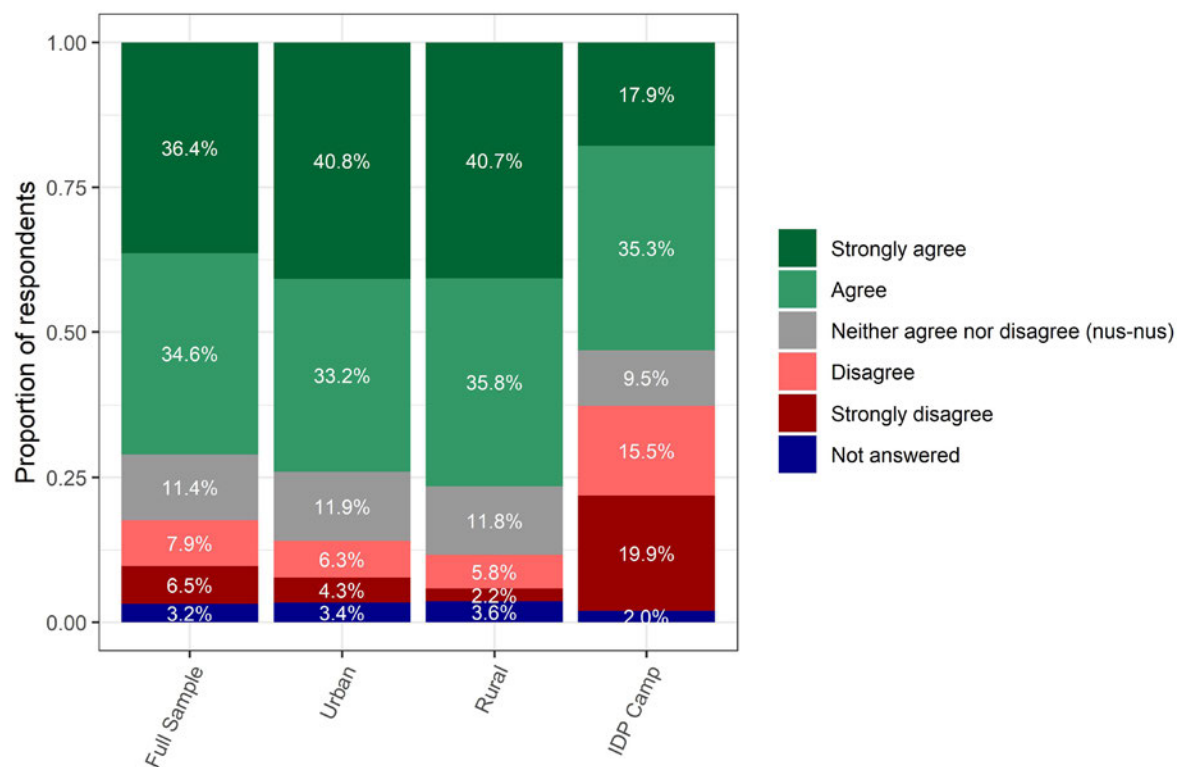
Civic Space and a Conducive Environment for Elections

The first question regularly raised about general elections in South Sudan is if the political and security environment is conducive to hold such elections in a credible way. In a letter to the President of the UN Security Council dated 8 April 2024, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres raised numerous concerns and urged the parties to “commit to take urgent steps to achieve a critical mass of implementation necessary for a peaceful conduct of free, fair and credible elections.”² Various other entities, as well as opposition parties and movements have also voiced concerns, especially regarding their ability to campaign and

raise political issues without interference from government and security forces.

In this context, the 2024 Peace Perception Survey asked respondents for their views on whether civic and political space is sufficient to provide for credible electoral campaigns and elections. The responses show a mixed picture. For example, 44% of respondents said they feel ‘unsafe’ or ‘very unsafe’ speaking publicly about politically sensitive issues, and this rose to an astonishing 68% of respondents in IDP settlements (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: At present, how safe do you feel speaking publicly on politically sensitive issues? x Environment



2 https://documents.un.org/symbol-explorer?i=S%2F2024%2F297_1713206376804&s=S%2F2024%2F297

However, respondents expressed more positive views (64%) about the ability for parties to campaign freely (see Figure 2). People who express a preference for the SPLM-IO are twice as likely (29%) to say political parties are not able to campaign freely as those who prefer the SPLM (IG) (15%), but even among SPLM-IO supporters, more than half (58%)

think that parties are able to campaign freely (see Figure 3). Respondents are also positive about the ability of the NEC to organize credible elections (see Figure 4). These latter results suggest considerably more optimism than reflected in most official statements.

Figure 2: Agree/Disagree: ‘All political parties are able to campaign freely in South Sudan.’ x Location

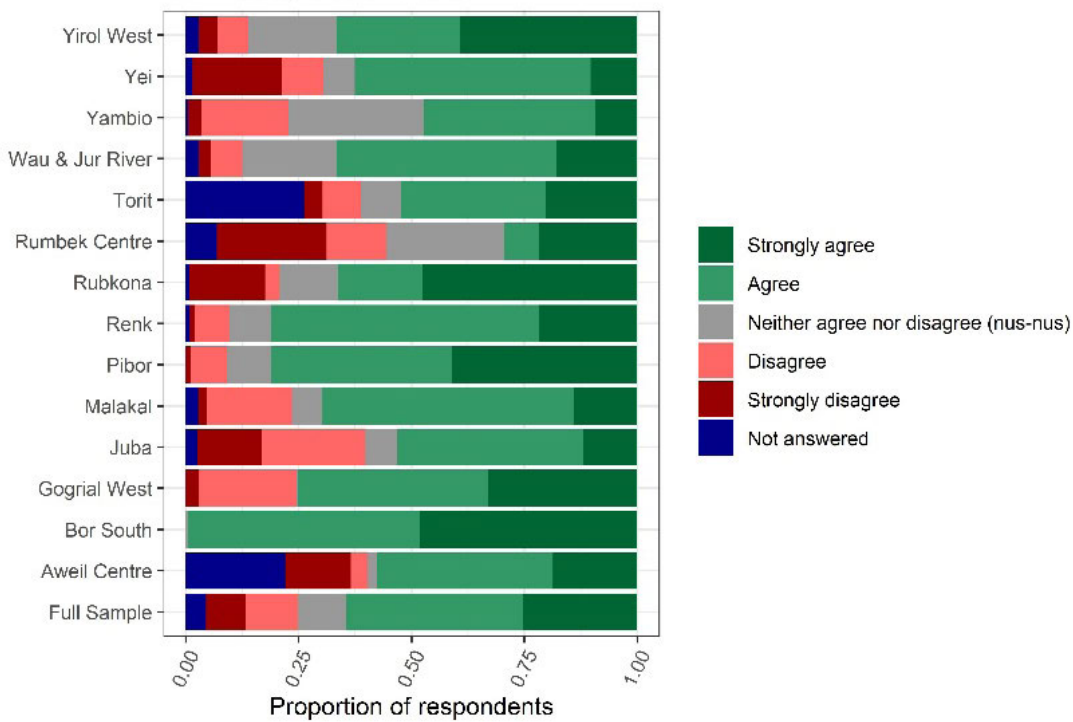


Figure 3: Agree/Disagree: ‘All political parties are able to campaign freely in South Sudan.’ x Political Preference

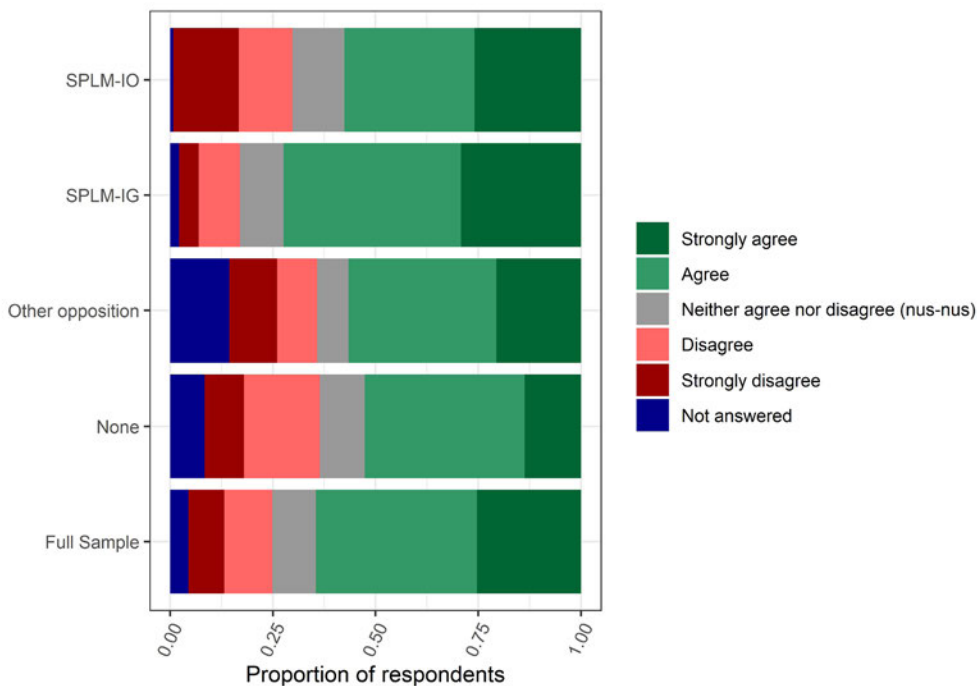
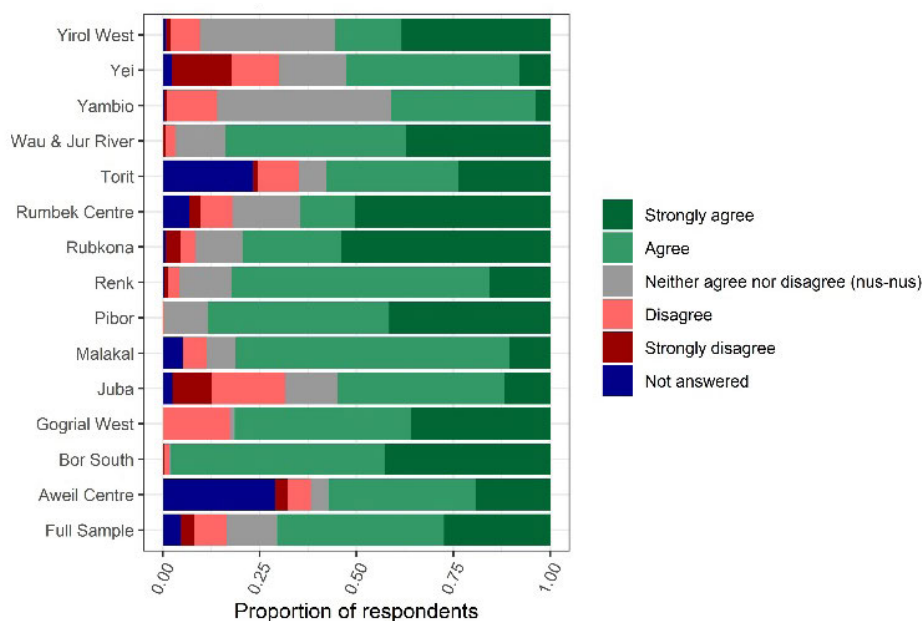


Figure 4: Agree/Disagree: 'The National Elections Commission can organize credible elections.' x Location

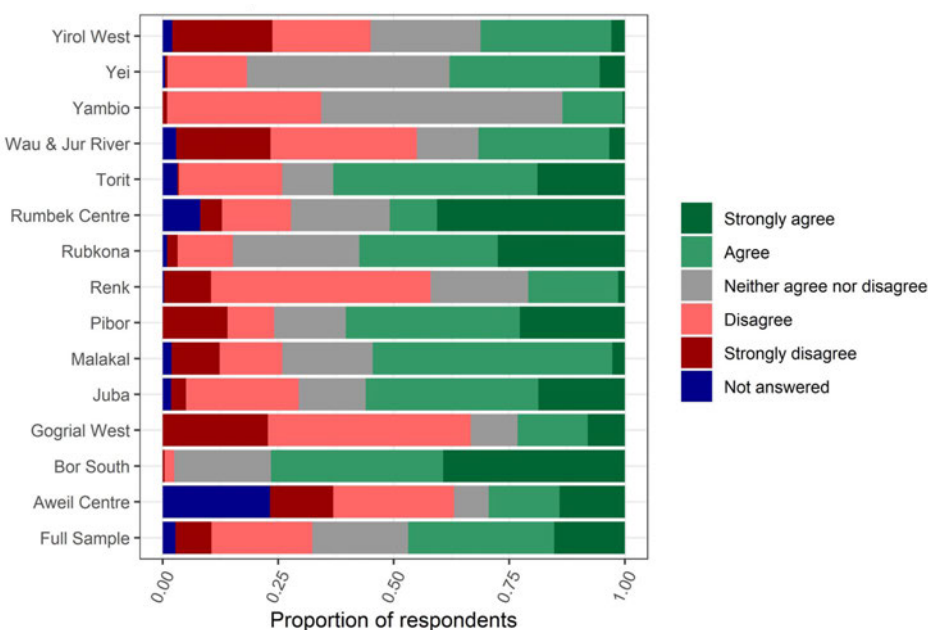


People's confidence in the NEC reveals a degree of trust in the institutional framework, despite limitations related to late appointments, a lack of finances, and considerable logistical challenges. Unexpectedly, there is considerable confidence in Bor and Pibor, areas that have experienced a large amount of local armed conflict and are politically contested. At the same time, the comparably high scepticism in Rumbek Centre towards the ability of parties to campaign freely (see Figure 2) suggests that the zero tolerance approach of the current State Governor, which has succeeded in restoring a degree of order and physical

security to Lakes State, has done so at the expense of civic and political space.

The confidence in the NEC is juxtaposed against considerable fear of electoral fraud. almost half of respondents thought that fraud was likely and just 26% thought it was unlikely (see Figure 5). Policymakers could mitigate the risk that electoral fraud compromises the credibility of the process by placing emphasis on election observation, safeguarding the electoral process, and on political communication to prevent fraudulent behaviour.

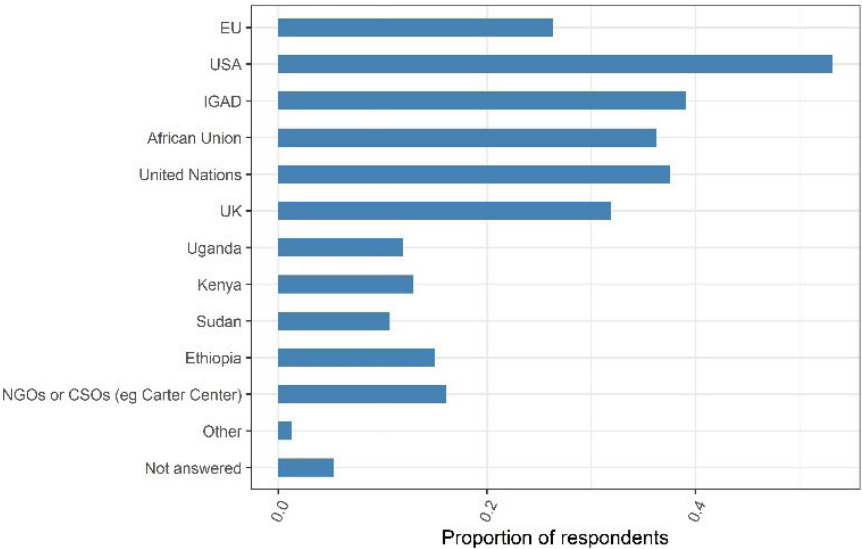
Figure 4: Agree/Disagree: 'The National Elections Commission can organize credible elections.' x Location



When asked who should lead in election observation, respondents predominantly point to Western partners, with the United States being the most popular, followed by the United Kingdom, European Union, and multilateral organizations, such as IGAD, the UN and the AU. Neighboring states feature far less prominently as do civil society organizations (see Figure 6). These high levels of trust in Western partners appear in other parts of the survey. For example, when respondents were asked what country could serve as a model for South Sudan, the United States was also the most common answer, followed by the European Union and the United Kingdom.

These perceptions place high expectations on South Sudan’s peace partners, especially the Troika and the European Union, who have thus far shown a certain scepticism towards elections, given the difficult political, economic, and security context. For this and other reasons, it is critical that the Western stakeholders present a clear position on elections that goes beyond raising concerns and calling upon the government to do more to create a conducive environment for elections. While these are fair points, international partners should not shy away from taking a clear stance on whether they support the electoral exercise or not.

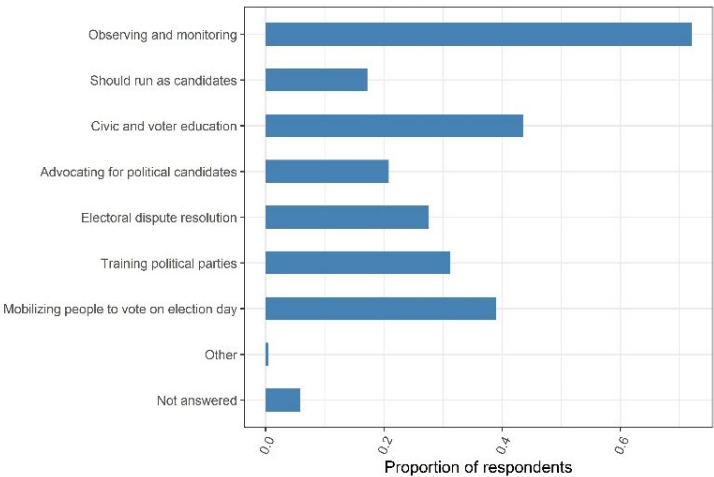
Figure 6: Which of the following organizations should lead in observing the South Sudan elections in December 2024?



Even though civil society did not feature prominently in the list of actors that respondents thought should lead in election observation, when asked directly what role they think civil society should play, most respondents said, ‘observing and monitoring’ (see Figure 7). Voter education and voter mobilization are seen as other areas in which

they could contribute. Conversely, respondents were rather sceptical of the idea of civil society activists running as political candidates. This suggests a desire to separate the spaces of civil society and politics, even though these roles traditionally overlap in the South Sudanese context and elsewhere.

Figure 7: What should be the role of civil society in the electoral process?



Timing of Elections

As in previous polls, the 2024 opinion poll suggests a strong appetite for elections to be held on time, despite the concerns cited above about whether the environment is conducive for elections. 71% of respondents think that South Sudan is ready for elections and 70% of respondents say elections should happen in December 2024 as envisaged in the roadmap agreement (see Figures 8 and 9). This has been a consistent finding across successive opinion polls.

However, the support for holding elections on time is not uniform across the sample. Respondents in IDP camps are more than three times as likely to say that South Sudan is not ready for elections and more than twice as likely to support a delay than other respondents in urban and rural areas (see Figure 8 and Figure 9). These findings also mirror party preferences, with respondents who support the ruling SPLM (IG) less likely to think elections should be delayed (12%) than those who support the SPLM-IO (31%) or those who do not express support for any political party (29%) (see Figure 10).

Figure 8: Agree/Disagree: ‘South Sudan is ready for elections.’ x Environment

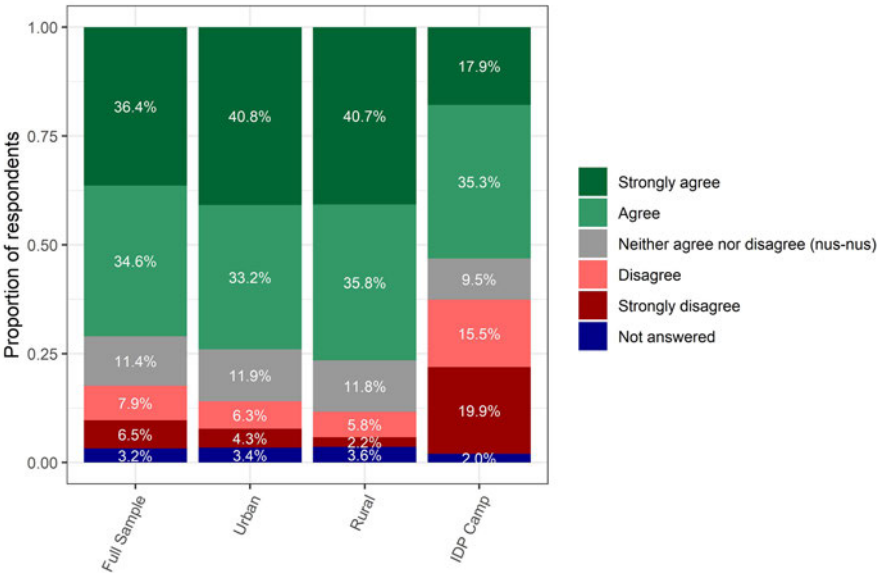


Figure 9: When should elections happen? x Party Preference

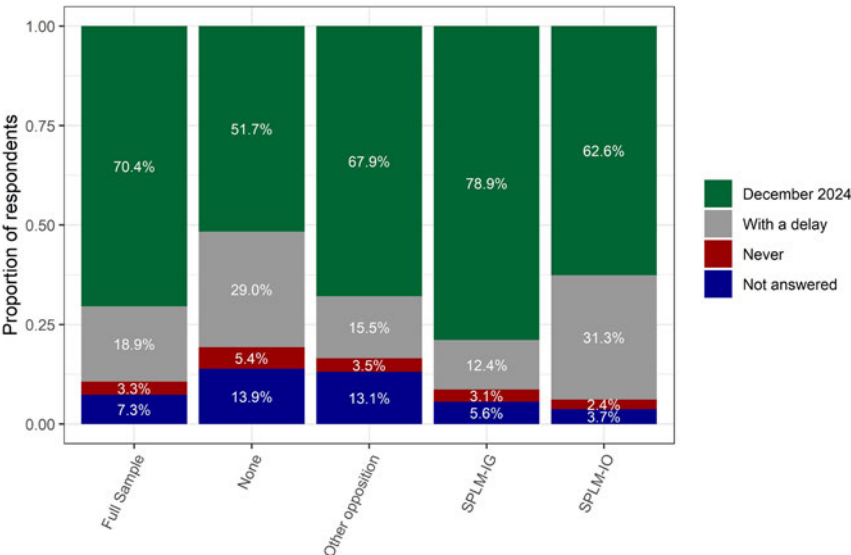
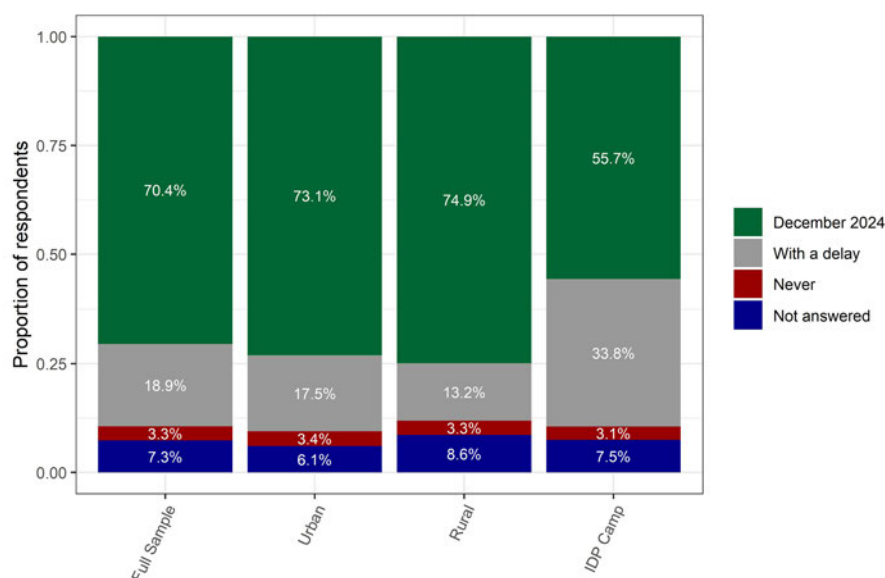


Figure 10: When should elections happen? x Environment



Sequencing of Elections

The possible sequencing of elections presents a critical policy choice to the Government of South Sudan. An analysis by a trilateral mechanism with representation from the UN, AU and IGAD determined that the current electoral system, comprised of simultaneous elections using a first past the post system for presidential and governor elections and a mixed system of both first past the post and proportional representation for national and state legislative assemblies will require each voter to complete 12 different ballots.³ This would be an exceedingly complex and expensive process in a country with one of the highest illiteracy rates in the world.⁴

The possible sequencing of elections remains a live topic in South Sudan. In March 2024, the SPLM (IG) publicly proposed a sequencing of elections with executive elections to be held as planned in December 2024 and parliamentary elections to follow one year later.⁵ Meanwhile, the SPLM-IO maintains the position that the entire electoral process

should be postponed to allow more time for the parties to implement outstanding tasks in the peace agreement. The parties have announced their intention to engage in inter-party dialogue to determine a way forward, but as of this writing there is no consensus on the sequencing or timing of elections.

Polling data suggests that South Sudanese favour simultaneous elections at the national and state levels. When asked whether elections for president, governors, national MPs and state MPs should happen at the same time or be sequenced relative to one another, 60% of respondents said they should happen at the same time and just 38% said they should be sequenced.⁶ It should be noted that the data was being collected as this national debate was unfolding and many people may not be entirely familiar with the trade-offs of the various approaches. Nonetheless, the findings are consistent with the overall optimism about South Sudan's capacity to conduct elections.

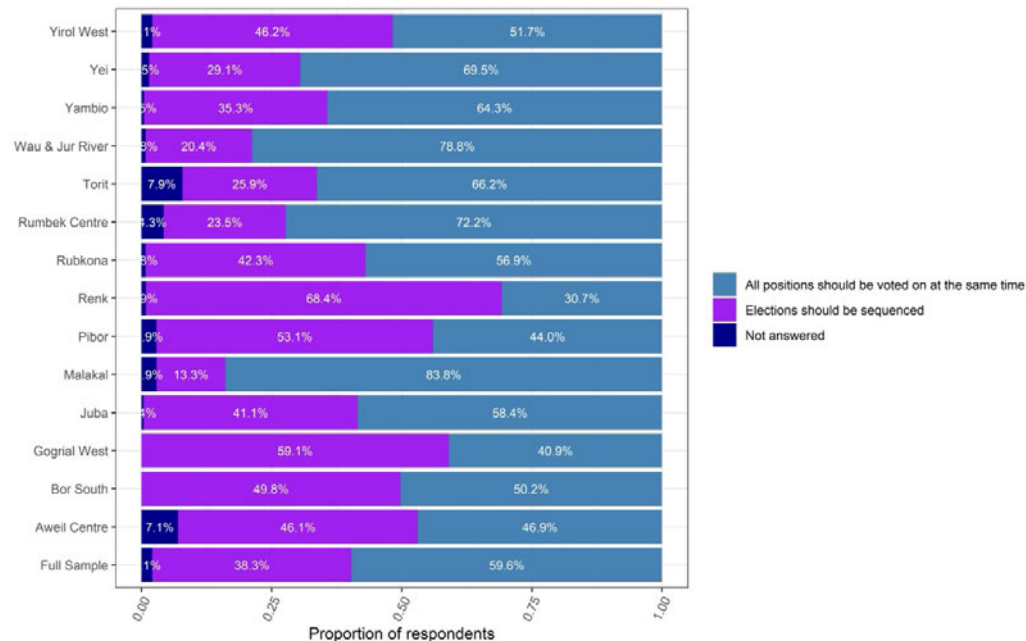
3 Joint Task Force (JTF), *Immediate Priority Decisions for Electoral Process* (27 Jul. 2023) (draft document) (on file with authors).

4 The April 2024 letter from the UN Secretary-General to the Security Council noted: "The parties are yet to determine the type and number of elections to be conducted before the end of the transitional period. Holding multiple elections at the national, state and local levels (ten in the case of South Sudan) on the same day would be challenging. In order to allow for planning, budgeting and staffing, it is vital and urgent that a decision be made on how many elections will be held at the same time." Letter from UN Secretary-General to President of the UN Security Council, U.N. Doc. S/2024/297 (8 Apr. 2024) (on file with authors). The Secretary-General's letter advised that the UN remain focused on creating an enabling environment for credible and safe elections and forgo direct assistance to the elections themselves at this point.

5 Office of the Secretary General, SPLM National Secretariat, *The SPLM position towards the National Elections as provided for in the Roadmap* (20 Mar. 2024), available at <https://dr.211check.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/SPLM-Position-on-South-Sudan-December-2024-Elections-1.pdf>.

6 After asking the question, enumerators explained to respondents that 'different elections' means that you would vote for the president, governors, national MPs, state MPs, and local government at different times.

Figure 11: Should different elections happen at different times and be sequenced, or should all elections happen at the same time? x Location



Expectations of Elections

The polling data suggests that South Sudanese do not just want to vote as soon as possible, but that they also think that elections can correct some of the most pressing problems in the country. Overall, a clear majority think

that South Sudan will become less corrupt (74%), have improved service delivery (78%), and gain international respect (80%) after elections have been conducted (see [Figures 12, 13 and 14](#)).

Figure 12: Likely/Unlikely: 'After elections, there will be less corruption in South Sudan.' x Location

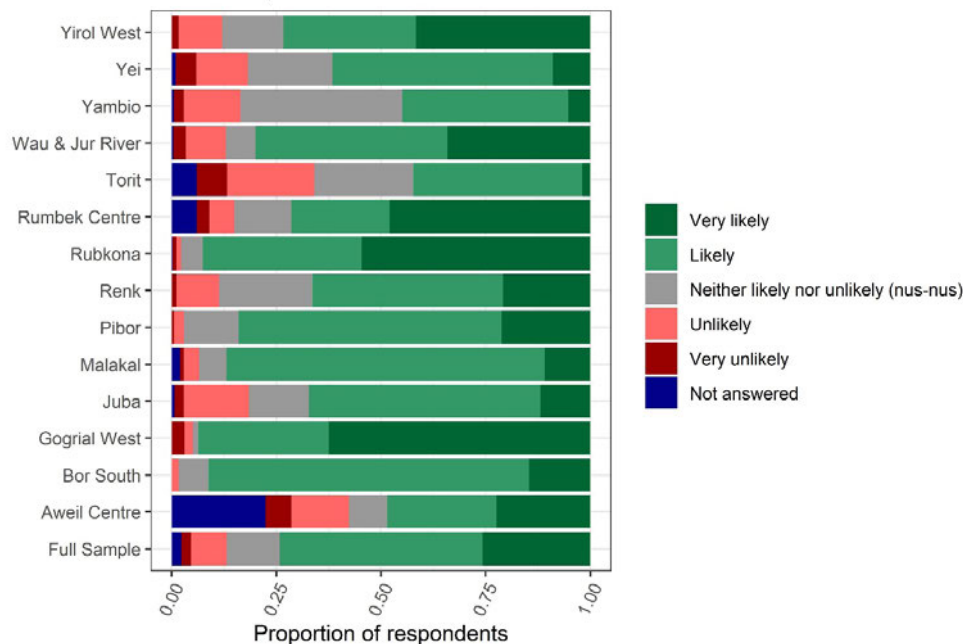


Figure 13: Agree/Disagree: 'After elections, there will be improved services in South Sudan.' x Location

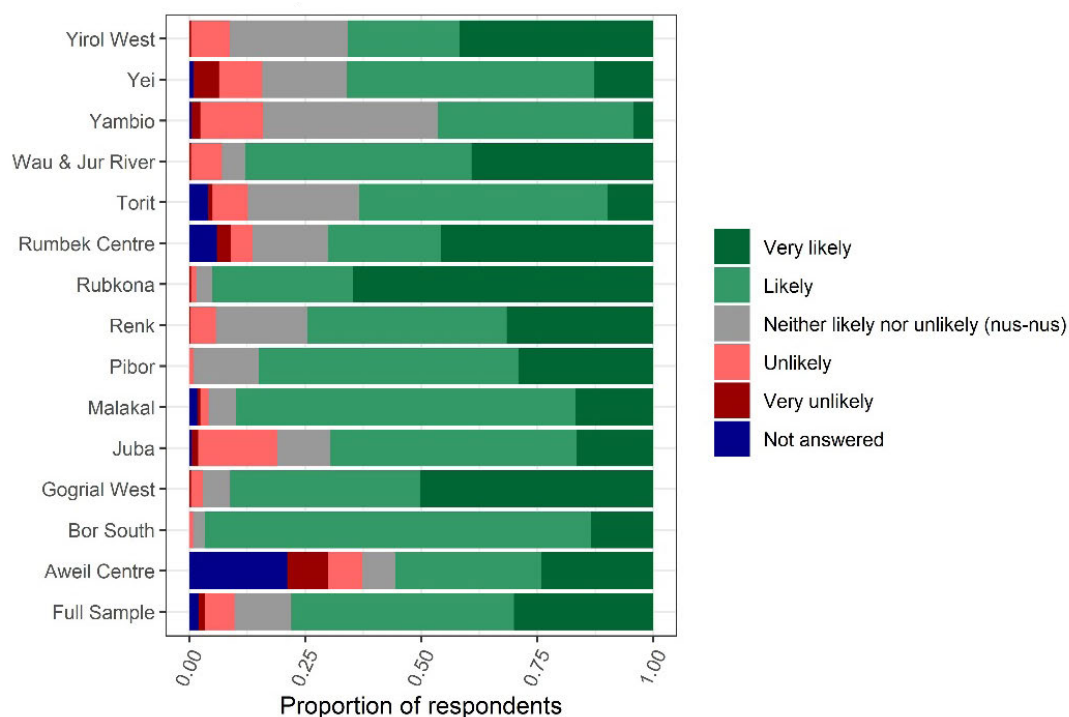
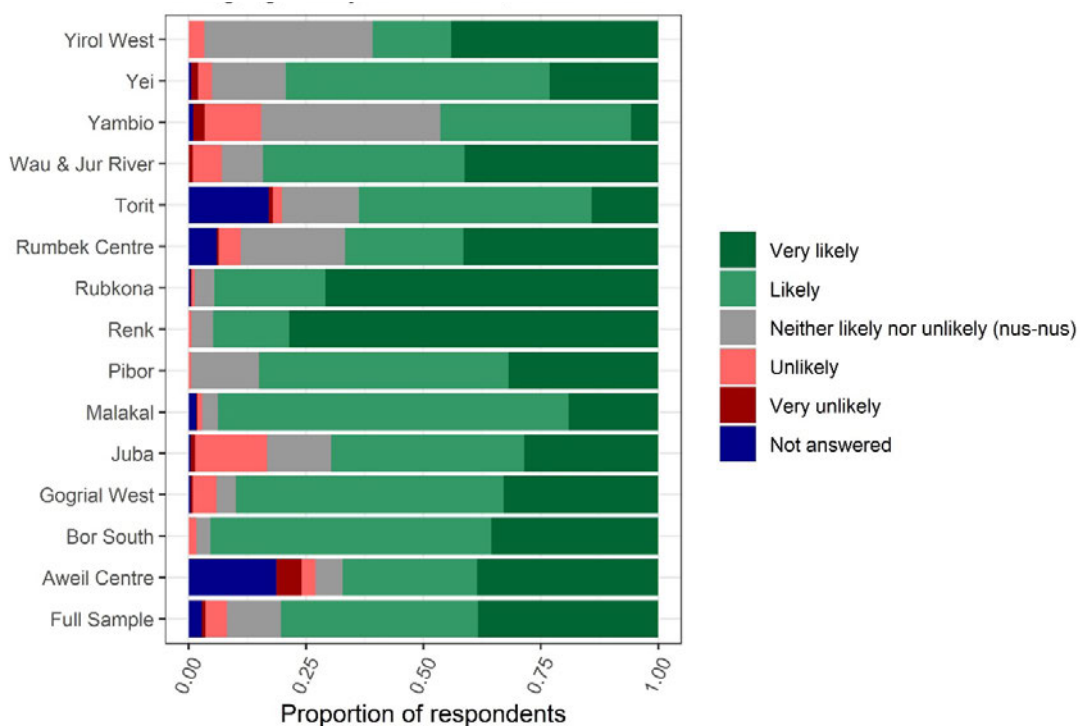


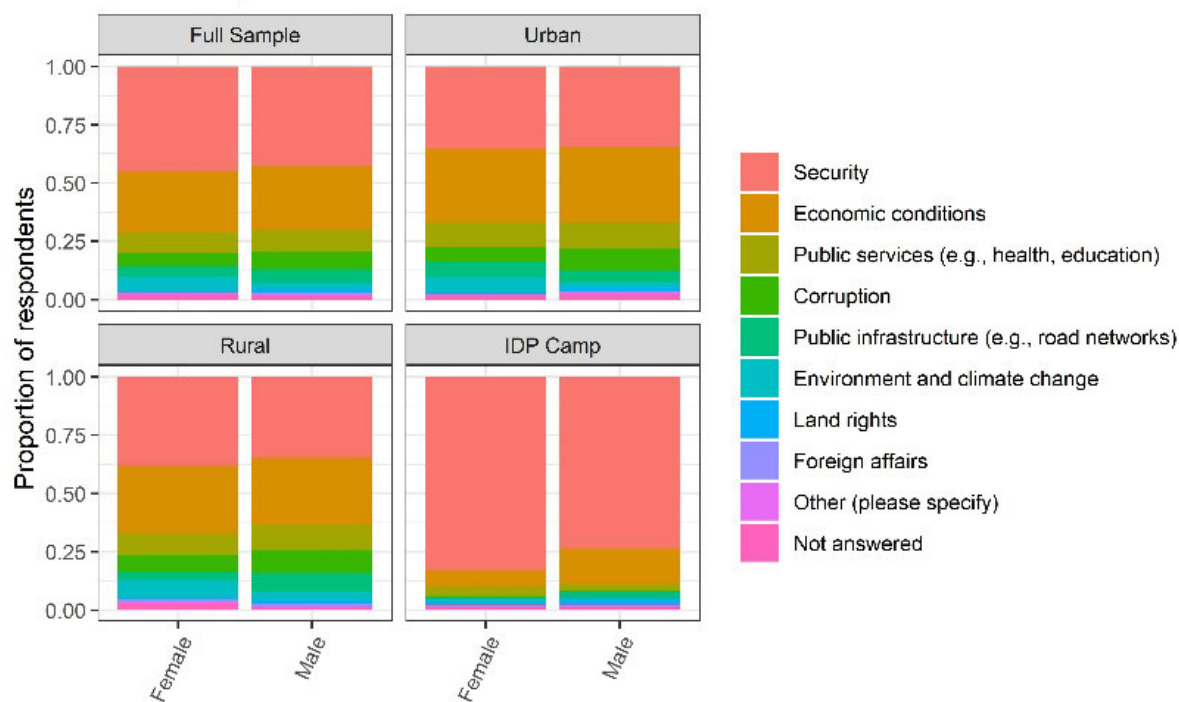
Figure 14: Agree/Disagree: 'The completion of elections will improve South Sudan's image globally.' x Location



Respondent views on the most important issue shaping their choice of candidate emphasize security (44%). Among respondents in IDP camps, the proportion of respondents prioritizing security rises to an astonishing 78%, highlighting the major security challenges that IDPs

face in IDP settlements, particularly since all but one of the protection of civilian (POC) sites have transitioned from UN to government control, as well as the pervasive insecurity in rural areas that prevent most IDPs from returning to their homes.

Figure 15: Which of the following issues is the most important factor affecting your choice of candidate to vote for in the elections? x Environment



Risk of Electoral Violence

As in past opinion polls, respondents express considerable fear of election-related violence. Fifty-seven % of respondents assess the risk of violence as 'very high' or 'somehow high', including nearly all respondents in Bor South (see Figure 16), and nearly half (47%) agree that violence is likely to increase during elections (see Figure 17). Perhaps most surprisingly, an equal number of

respondents (38%) think that it is likely that elections will cause a return to full-scale civil war as those who think that a return to war is unlikely (see Figure 18). Among the more surprising findings of the opinion poll is that people are still largely unequivocal that elections should happen on time despite these very serious concerns about the implications for conflict dynamics in South Sudan.

Figure 16: How would you assess the risk of violence in relation to elections? x Location

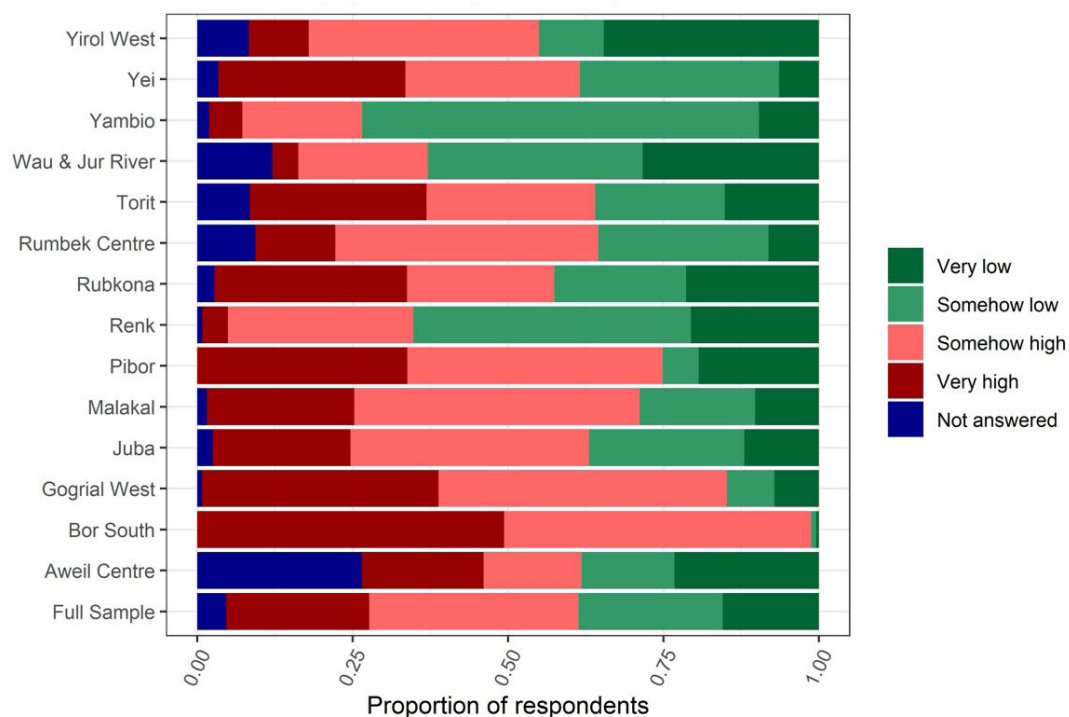


Figure 17: Agree/Disagree: 'There is likely to be an increase in violence during elections.' x Location

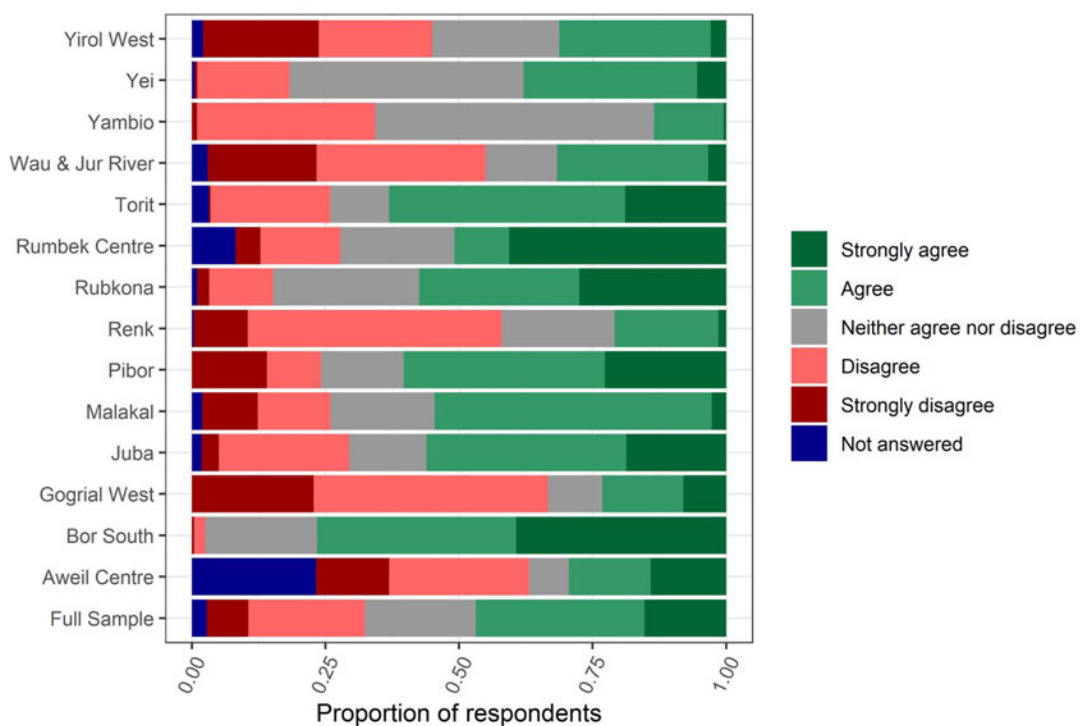
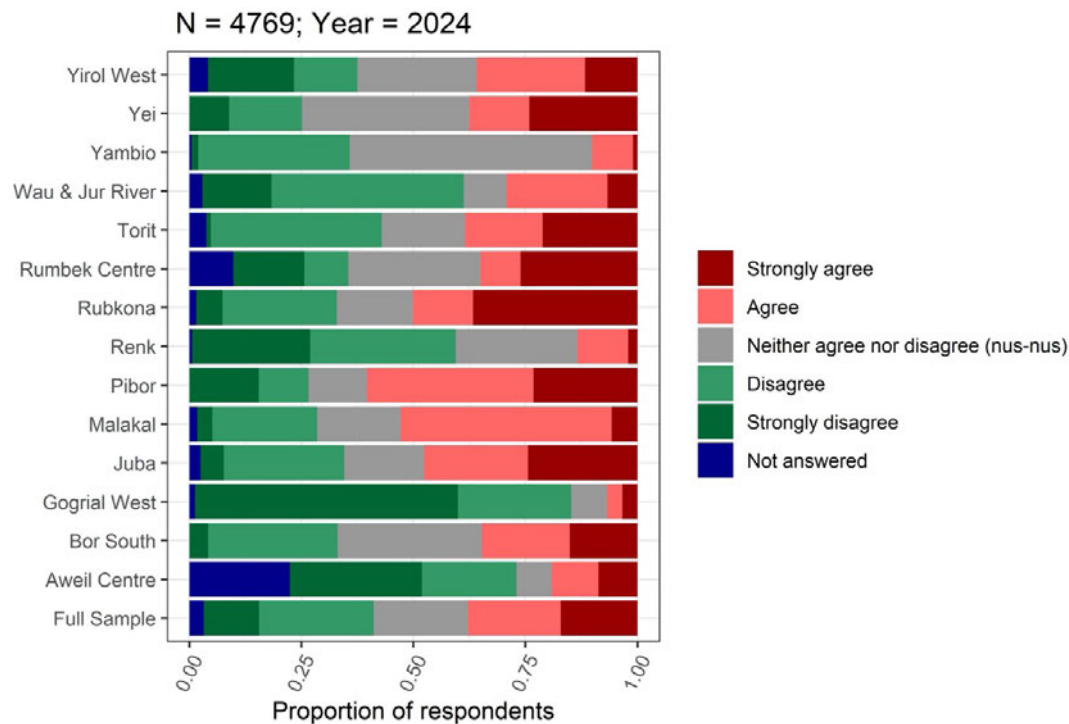


Figure 18: Agree/Disagree: ‘If elections are held as planned in Dec. 2024, it is likely to cause a return to full-scale civil war in South Sudan.’ x Location



Party Preferences

Respondent preferences for political parties have also remained remarkably consistent across waves of data collection. In the 2024 data, support for both the SPLM (IG) and SPLM-IO has increased slightly over the figures for 2023, with 52% of respondents saying that the SPLM (IG) has the best vision for the country (up from 45% in 2023) and 21% saying the SPLM-IO has the best vision for the country (up from 17% in 2023) (see Figure 19). The results continue to vary sharply at the subnational level, with

the SPLM (IG) showing dominance in Yirol West, Rumbek Centre, Renk, Pibor, Gogrial West and Bor South, while the SPLM-IO dominates in Rubkona and in IDP settlements, where 60% of respondents think they have the best vision for the country (see Figure 20). Interestingly, more than half of respondents think that the SPLM (IG) and SPLM-IO should agree to form a single party before elections, suggesting a certain appetite for a continued sharing of power between these two dominant political formations.

Figure 19: Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan? x Location

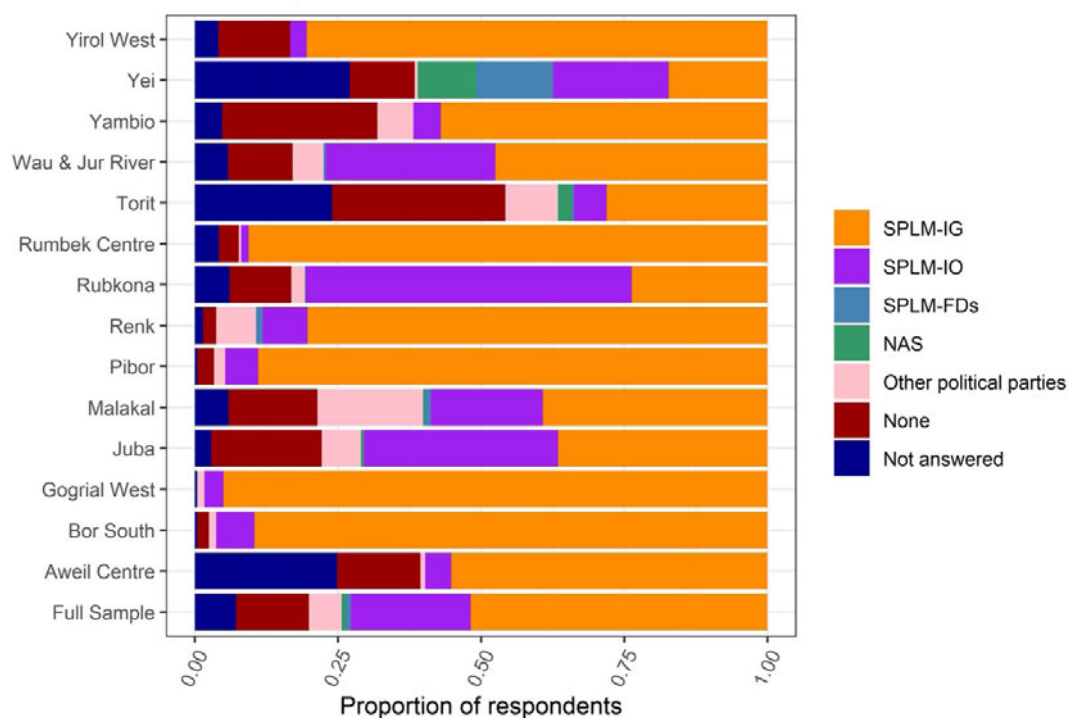


Figure 20: Which political party do you think has the best vision for South Sudan? x Environment

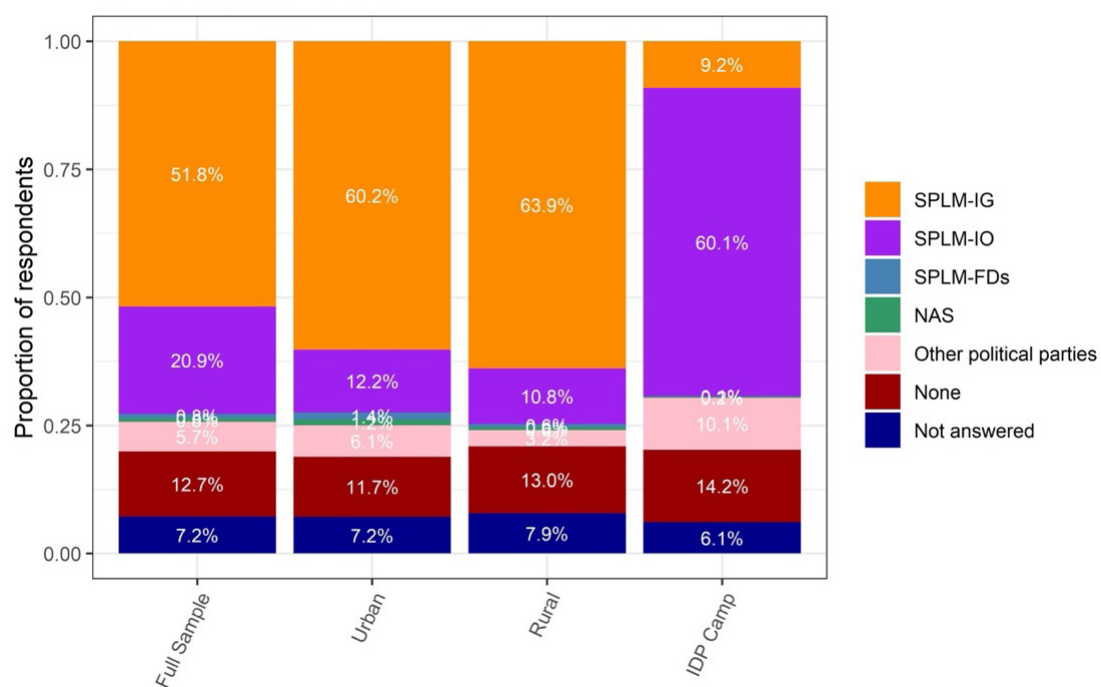
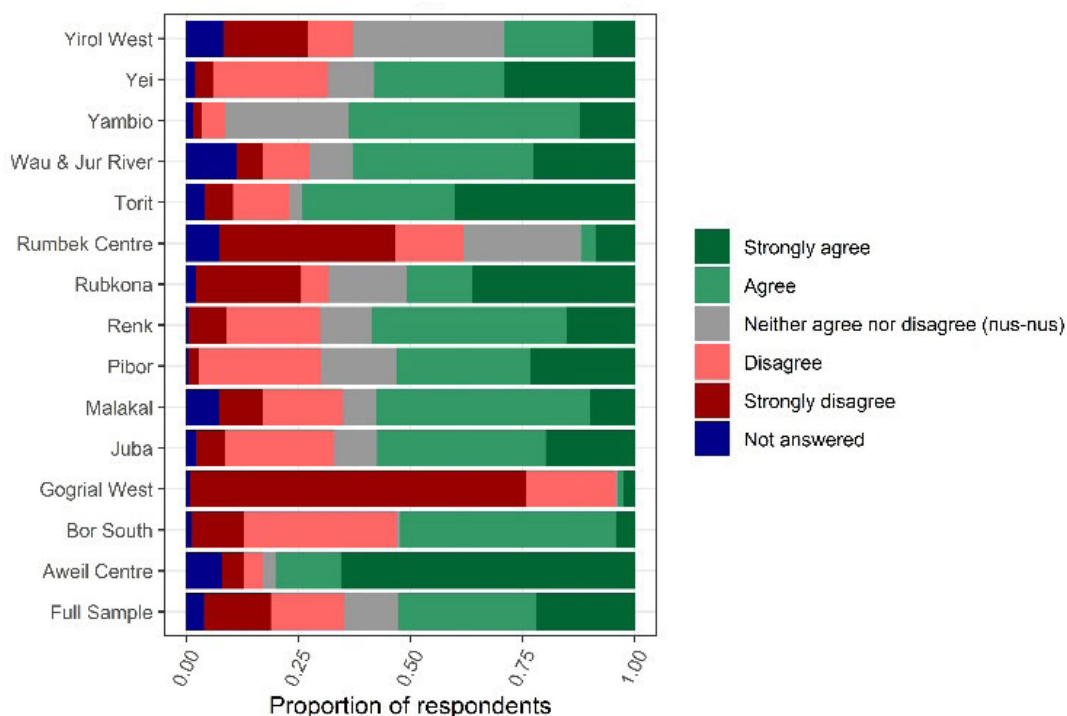


Figure 21: Agree/Disagree: “The SPLM and SPLM-IO should agree to become one party before elections happen.” x Location



Concluding Remarks

The opinion poll shows a clear juxtaposition between people’s willingness to vote and their fears about the impact that elections will have on conflict dynamics in South Sudan. South Sudanese want to see credible and fair elections held as soon as possible, but this is a lofty demand that does not seem to be feasible by December 2024. A more pragmatic approach would be to hold elections at a politically opportune and technically feasible point in the future. A major question for policymakers is how the public would relate to an extension and what are the implications for their confidence in the transitional process. In considering the options, policymakers should be guided by public opinion to guarantee that the electoral process is at least ‘good enough’ to provide for a credible and widely accepted outcome. If a delay occurs, one step policymakers can take to build trust amongst voters is to implement tangible election education and preparation activities on the ground. Even if people cannot vote in December 2024, they may be reassured by a visible election preparation presence in their villages and neighborhoods. These activities can also help the NEC negotiate access and iron-out logistical

problems of transferring materials to polling locations in advance of a vote.

Positive views on the NEC indicate a general trust in electoral institutions and a willingness to engage in the electoral process. However, there is still significant scepticism, especially regarding people’s ability to speak publicly on politically sensitive issues and the prospect of electoral fraud. This underscores the importance of safeguarding procedures and more sustained political communication and public outreach. Expectations of electoral violence are also high. Given past experiences, this is concerning, as South Sudanese tend to be good judges of security risks. This data should be taken as a significant indicator of potential hotspots for violence before, during, and after elections.

The political landscape in South Sudan is diverse and from a democratic perspective, relatively mature, with a number of outspoken opposition voices. The SPLM (IG), as a liberation organization, does not have overwhelming

numbers, reflecting ethnopolitical divisions and distrust stemming from successive civil wars. The diversity of the political landscape could work to the advantage of the electoral process. If South Sudan could organize a process that meets minimum standards of credibility, all major political actors would likely gain something from elections, avoiding a 'winner takes all' scenario that would marginalize opposition groups and their constituencies.

While some policymakers favour a sequencing of elections in the interest of feasibility and expedience, it should be noted that the separate conduct of executive and legislative elections also carries risks. The transitional legislature would remain in place, maintaining the opposition's strong political position in the legislative branch, but the opposition's victories in the executive branch would likely be limited to a handful of state governor and county-level races. If the opposition were to be completely marginalized politically,

it would reduce their incentive to engage in nonviolent political competition and political violence might become a more attractive option. To mitigate these risks, policymakers should ensure that any decision on the potential sequencing of the electoral process, whether for logistical or procedural reasons, be preceded by careful political dialogue.

Elections in South Sudan present both opportunities and challenges. The willingness of South Sudanese citizens to participate in the electoral process, despite their fears, underscores a profound desire for democratic governance and political stability. Ensuring that elections are perceived as credible and fair, even if imperfect, is paramount to fostering trust in the electoral system and preventing potential conflicts. Strengthening electoral institutions, enhancing transparency, and promoting inclusive political dialogue are an important means of mitigating the risks of election-related violence.

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