

# Mass Attitudes toward ‘One Person, One Vote’ in the Wake of Puntland’s 2024 Electoral Crisis

## Key Takeaways

---

- Despite tensions that prevented completion in all districts, Puntland citizens are broadly satisfied with the local government elections held in May 2023.
- A large majority of citizens favor One Person, One Vote (OPOV) elections, though this sentiment is not universal, even in the abstract.
- When paired with realistic tradeoffs – a term extension, increased tensions, or conflict – support for OPOV elections drops considerably.
- Elite commentary during much of the crisis indicated widespread preference for timely, non-OPOV elections, but public opinion was far more divided, suggesting the need for a greater focus on mass, rather than elite, opinion.
- Far-from-universal support for OPOV elections highlights the need to understand citizen preferences regarding democracy, election models, and inclusive governance in greater detail.

## Introduction

---

Puntland concluded its most recent leadership transition in early January, 2024, after several months of uncertainty about how and when elections would be held. On January 1, 66 parliamentarians were announced, having been selected using the indirect method employed in previous cycles. On January 8, these Members of Parliament re-elected the incumbent, President Said Abdullahi Deni, who won 45 out of 66 votes in the third round. The process, completed on January 8, met the constitutionally mandated limit on President Deni’s first term of 5 years, and no term extension was necessary.

The *procedure* the election would follow was uncertain until very near the end. The period before and after Puntland’s local government elections on May 25, 2023, was marked by controversies and disputes over a range of issues, including constitutional amendments proposed by President Deni and the Puntland Parliament, the parliament’s expansion of the number of recognized political parties from three to eight, and appointments to the Puntland Electoral Commission. This was coupled with violent Election Day attempts to prevent the election from going forward, standoffs with opposition militia in Garowe that resulted in the delay – and eventual cancellation – of local elections in three districts of Nugaal, and clashes that resulted in the deaths of 30 people. Delays in completing the local government elections and failed implementation in Garowe, Dangorayo, and Godob Jiraan shortened the timeframe available for OPOV parliamentary and presidential elections, which needed to be held before January 8, 2024.

As January approached, disputes over the election began to intensify. By October, there had already been a range of constitutional debates and tensions over appointments to the Puntland Electoral Commission (PEC). In October, tensions intensified with debate over the electoral model to be followed. Opposition leaders proposed an indirect, clan-based model to ensure elections could occur on time, while President Deni’s argument for OPOV elections – and a delay until February – was seen as a method to extend his term much longer, as holding direct elections on such a short timeframe would be difficult or impossible. In mid-



November, members of the opposition published an election timeline that maintained the January 8 date in line with the constitution; later, President Deni mobilized state troops in Bosasso and Garowe and denied a permit for opposition groups to hold a rally in Garowe. On December 6, President Deni reversed his position and acquiesced to an indirect, clan-based election model. The crisis did not fully abate, however, as this was followed by surprise parliamentary term extensions self-granted by MPs (which would allow them to select the next President, as opposed to the incoming MPs) and a Constitutional Court decision nullifying the extension. These crises focused on the model took place alongside other issues, such as the participation of elders from SSC-Khatumo and the representation of Dhulbahante areas in Puntland's parliament.

## Objectives

---

The May 25 local government elections, while flawed in some ways, were widely seen as an important and positive step forward in the realization of democratization in Puntland. In light of events since then, it is reasonable to wonder whether Puntland's democratization is stalled or if the failure to hold OPOV elections represents backsliding away from direct, democratic elections. Critical – and under-examined in the Puntland context – is the extent of popular support for OPOV elections.

Similarly, throughout public and private discussions of the way forward in this election cycle, expert commentators, analysts, and citizens alike have had to grapple with the tangible tradeoffs between OPOV elections, on one hand, and enforcing other tenets of good governance – e.g., abiding by time-limited terms and respecting freedom of assembly – on the other. Missing from these debates is empirical evidence on the opinions of Puntland's citizens and their views of these tradeoffs. Rigorous evidence of this kind is important for predicting the likely trajectory of Puntland's democratization, insofar as citizen preferences impact this trajectory; it is also essential for understanding the depth of democratic principles held by citizens and how they view tradeoffs between beneficial but mutually exclusive 'goods' – tradeoffs that are unavoidable in any polity.

In this brief, we report the results of a survey conducted jointly by the Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), the Sababi Institute, and Somali Public Agenda (SPA) during December and early January. The goal of the study was to understand citizen preferences regarding OPOV elections in Puntland. Specifically, we address two questions:

1. Which model – OPOV versus indirect, clan-based selection – did Puntland's citizens actually prefer, in the context of the January elections?
2. How strong are citizen preferences for OPOV elections (and other democratic norms), when balanced against competing demands?

Evidence on these questions can be useful for understanding Puntland's political landscape. And, given Puntland's position at the vanguard of democratization in Somalia, it may inform our understanding of public opinion and democratic principles in other Federal Member States, as they move toward their first OPOV elections.

## Methodology

---

Between December 7 and January 3, we conducted 684 phone-based interviews with respondents in locations across the Bari, Mudug, and Nugaal regions of Puntland. Respondents were selected via a multi-stage, stratified sample design, with clustering. Three major urban areas – Bosasso, North Galkayo, and Garowe – were selected for inclusion; within urban areas, randomly selected starting points and a random walk procedure ensured equal probability of selection for respondents in each neighborhood. Smaller towns and villages (a total of 17, across the three regions) were selected randomly with probability proportionate



to their populations. Within each village, we used randomized starting points and a random walk method for selecting households; all adults within a household were eligible for inclusion, using random selection.

Respondents were recruited in the weeks leading up to the survey, while interviews were conducted by phone. Recruitment included 2,351 households and 3,477 potential respondents; over-recruitment was intentional, to account for non-response. Response rates were somewhat lower than in previous studies conducted in Somalia, owing to the topic of the survey and the need to complete fieldwork quickly.<sup>1</sup> Women made up 59.8% of recruited respondents and 57.6% of the final sample – in line with our past experience, female respondents tend to have greater availability, resulting in overrepresentation and non-response bias.<sup>2</sup>

The average cluster size in the final sample is 6.6 respondents. This implies a margin of error ranging from 4.5 to 5.5% when using plausible intra-cluster correlation ( $\rho$ ). All analysis employs clustered standard errors, to account for clustering in the sample. Additional technical details regarding the sample design and analysis are available in [an online appendix](#).

## Sample Characteristics

The sample of 684 respondents is fairly heavily concentrated in the three major urban areas and, to a degree, in the Bari region. Table 1 provides the geographic distribution of the sample; while Bari makes up 44.3% of the overall sample, Bari also has a much larger population than the other two regions.<sup>3</sup> The “rural” share of the sample is 35.8%, though it is important to note that this includes respondents in small- and medium-sized towns, such as Kalabayr and Bacadweyn, as well as very small villages, with as few as 30 households. Again, this distribution broadly aligns with the heavily and increasingly urbanized/settled population of Puntland.<sup>4</sup>

*Table 1: Geographic distribution of respondents*

Region	Major Urban Area	Smaller Towns and Villages	Total
Bari	51.5%	31.4%	44.3%
Mudug	17.8%	38.8%	25.3%
Nugaal	30.8%	29.8%	30.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%

The sample is also quite young, with approximately half of respondents under the age of 30. Figure 1, below, reports the age composition of the sample. The mean age is just 32.3 years. Again, this reflects a general trend in Somalia, which – leaving aside children and adolescents – generally has a very large population of adults aged 18-35.

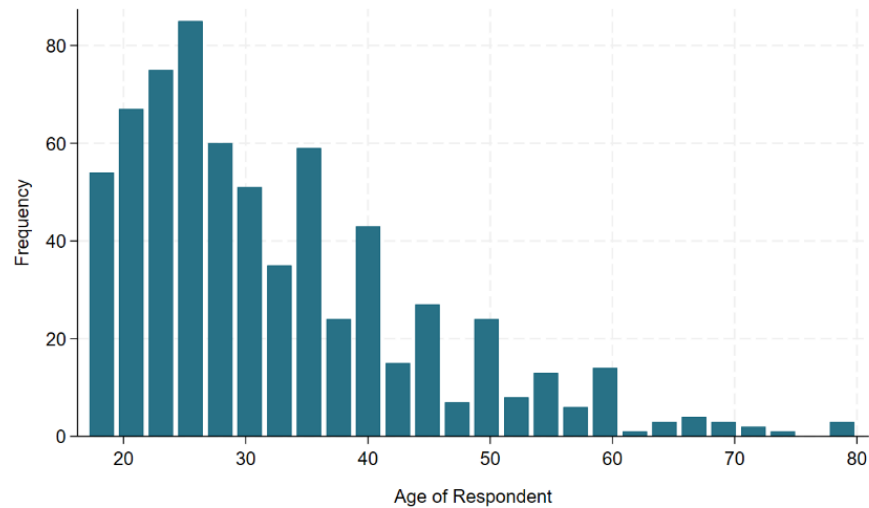
<sup>1</sup> Response rates tend to be higher in longer data collection exercises because it allows the team to make additional call attempts to each respondent.

<sup>2</sup> We do not formally correct for non-response. We test the robustness of our findings to post-stratification that corrects for overrepresentation of women (weighting the sample to recover a 50-50 gender distribution) but do not employ model-based corrections.

<sup>3</sup> Note, however, that we did not intentionally select the sample to reflect underlying region-level populations, nor did we allocate interviews across towns/cities with this intention.

<sup>4</sup> For population figures related to region, urbanicity, and age, see the Population Estimation Survey of Somalia from 2014.

Figure 1: Age distribution of respondents



Beyond age, Table 2 below reports the composition of the sample in terms of other demographic and political characteristics. Respondents who self-report as an IDP make up 32.9% of the sample – much higher than estimates from the 2014 Population Estimate Survey of Somalia, but in line with an increasing number of IDPs over time and the concentration of IDPs in major urban areas. The median respondent in our sample completed primary school but did not continue into secondary school. Around one-third of respondents (33.2%) of respondents completed secondary school, and around one-third of those (12.9% of the overall sample) went on to complete university or some other form of post-secondary education.

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristic	Share of Sample
<b>Demographics</b>	
Female	57.6%
Youth (under 30)	49.9%
IDP	32.9%
<b>Highest Education Completed</b>	
No formal schooling	29.7%
Some primary school	13.6%
Completed primary school	22.4%
Completed secondary school	20.3%
Completed university or other post-secondary	12.9%
Other	1.2%
<b>Party Affiliation (Support in May 25 Local Elections)</b>	
Kaah	49.4%
Mideeye	23.5%
Sincad	6.1%
Mustaqbal	3.1%
Ifiye	2.1%
Other	2.3%
Refused	13.5%
<b>Frequency of Political Discussion</b>	
Multiple times per week	48.1%

1 time per week	14.5%
Less than 1 time per week	6.7%
Never	29.0%
Don't know/Refused	1.8%

Just under half of respondents report that they are Kaah supporters.<sup>5</sup> Kaah supporters make up a larger share of the sample in Mudug than in other regions – 68.2% in Mudug, compared to 43.2% and 42.8% in Bari and Nugaal, respectively. This should not be taken as an extremely reliable indicator of the geographic distribution of Kaah support, however. The first reason is that a significant number of respondents refused to respond to this question, especially those who did not vote in the May 25 elections.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Mudug sample is heavily rural and almost certainly underrepresents voters in Galkayo relative to their share of Mudug’s population. It is worth noting, though, that Mudug was also a stronghold of Kaah support in the May 25 local government elections, so this may reflect broadly valid patterns of regional support for the President’s party. Finally, respondents are more politically engaged than we expected, though most seem to exist at one of the two extremes – either engaging in political discussion and debate very frequently (multiple times per week) or not at all.

## Limitations

Although the survey was designed with rigor in mind, a few important limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results.

### Geographic Coverage

The survey does not cover all of Puntland, primarily due to timeline and cost constraints. The disputed areas of Sool and Sanaag were excluded entirely. Within Bari, Mudug, and Nugaal, the main population center that was not included was Qardho. Other population centers in the eastern, coastal regions, were also not included (e.g., Eyl and Bandarbeyla). Rural areas were not uniformly included, though the sample has more widespread rural representation than the vast majority of surveys of its size, capturing data from 17 distinct smaller towns or villages.<sup>7</sup>

### Achieved Sample and Representativeness

Two issues result in a sample that we cannot claim to be truly representative, in the formal statistical sense.<sup>8</sup> First, while villages in the rural stratum were selected with PPS sampling and would be representative under particular assumptions regarding response rates, the urban stratum was not. Surveys in the urban stratum cannot be re-weighted to be representative of the underlying populations of their respective neighborhoods, because the true populations of those neighborhoods are unknown. Second, while the sample was selected using randomization at each stage, differential response rates produce a sample that has unequal sample sizes across villages and neighborhoods. Again, while it is possible to re-weight observations in the rural

<sup>5</sup> More precisely, they indicated that Kaah “has the best vision or plan for Puntland today,” from a list of all parties that competed in the local government elections.

<sup>6</sup> Although the question was about general support for a party and their vision for Puntland, as opposed to support in the May 25 elections, many respondents appear to have interpreted the question to ask the party they supported in the local government polls.

<sup>7</sup> Note that, in some cases, we are able to perform sensitivity analysis to determine whether inclusion of particular areas, such as Qardho, would be sufficient to meaningfully alter our results. In some cases, the much greater population of included areas relative to excluded areas means a more inclusive sample could not arithmetically reverse our results. However, this is only true of some of our aggregate-level findings, and does not apply to subgroup analysis conducted via regression, for instance.

<sup>8</sup> By representative, we mean a sample in which every person in the population has an equal probability of selection into the sample (or an unequal, but known, probability of selection which can be adjusted using survey weights to generate equal probabilities).

stratum, this is not possible for urban respondents. Therefore, readers should be cautious when extrapolating findings beyond the sample itself.

## Retrospective: Local Government Elections

---

We start by reflecting on public opinion surrounding the May 25 local government elections (LGE), which concluded the first OPOV elections held in Puntland since 1969. We expect the experiences of the LGE – a momentous event that was widely discussed across Somalia – to shape citizens' views of OPOV elections and democratic governance more generally. Thus, understanding how these elections are perceived in hindsight, especially given they were not without hiccups, is a useful starting point for understanding Puntland public opinion.

According to the Puntland Electoral Commission, 67.5% of registered voters turned out to vote.<sup>9</sup> As is the case in many contexts, self-reported turnout was higher in our survey than the official tally: excluding voters and registrants in the Nugaal districts where elections were not held, 69.5% of our respondents report voting in the May 25 elections. Between the two population centers where much of our sample is concentrated, turnout rates were significantly higher in the greater Galkayo area (including Bursaalax and Xarfo) than in Bosasso, by 7.9 percentage points. Turnout rates were also significantly higher (9.0 points) in rural areas, holding all else equal. Beyond these geographic patterns, the strongest predictor of voter turnout are measures of political engagement: for instance, 74.9% of respondents who discuss politics with family or friends at least once per week voted on May 25, compared to 59.9% of respondents who discuss politics less frequently or not at all.

We also assessed perceptions of the government's implementation of the May 25 elections. The elections required financial resources, political capital, and technical effort; at the same time, they were not completed in several districts, excluded Sool, and were repeatedly delayed – a contributing factor to the Parliamentary and Presidential electoral crisis at the end of 2023. It is unclear, then, whether the elections would contribute to a deepening of pro-democracy sentiment.

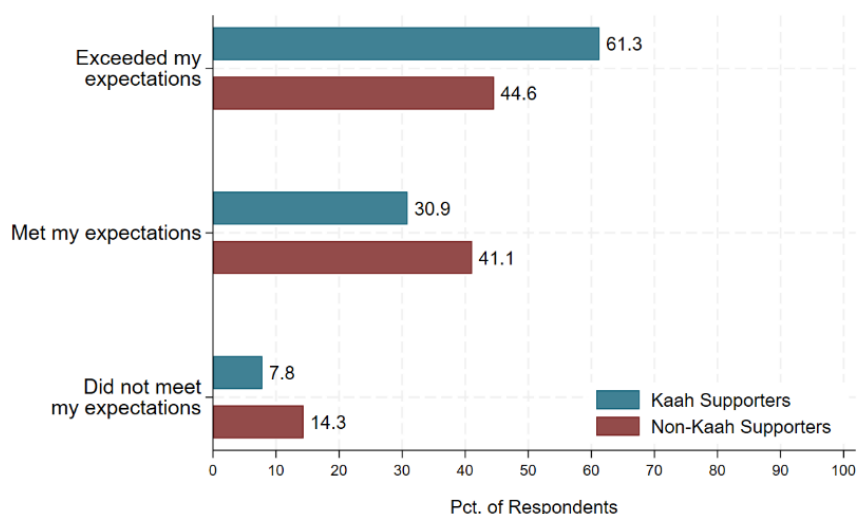
In fact, the vast majority of voters felt the government met or exceeded their expectations in delivering the May 25 polls. Overall, 84.8% of respondents felt this way, with a very slim majority (50.7%) stating that the government exceeded their prior expectations for implementation. Unsurprisingly, residents of Garowe – where elections were cancelled – had the least positive views, but 81.2% still felt their expectations had been met or exceeded. The politically engaged – those who self-reported having average or greater political knowledge, and those reporting more frequent political discussions – tended to be less satisfied with the elections.

While even among opposition supporters a majority were satisfied with the May 25 electoral process, supporters of President Deni's Kaah party were the most enthusiastic. In what will become a theme of this brief, party affiliation appears to color perceptions of the elections, proposed electoral models, and other outcomes – as it does in many democratic contexts. Figure 2 compares perceptions of the May 25 elections among Kaah supporters and all other respondents, illustrating the greater enthusiasm among the former group.

---

<sup>9</sup> This figure excludes the three districts in which early elections were held in 2021 and the districts (Garowe, Godob Jiraan, and Dangorayo) where polls were cancelled due to tensions over the elections.

Figure 2: Government's performance in delivering the May 25 local government elections



## Support for OPOV Elections, In Principle

Although previous studies conducted in Puntland and other Federal Member States have documented support for democratization among citizens, these studies rely on qualitative interviews and small sample sizes.<sup>10</sup> To shed light on support for democratization, in the form of OPOV elections, we asked respondents to rate the importance of holding OPOV elections during the 2029 cycle. This question was intended to capture preferences for OPOV *in the abstract*, i.e. in the absence of other considerations, as the elections are sufficiently far in the future that party preferences for or against OPOV and security concerns should not affect respondent views as much.

In light of past research and the seemingly strong pro-democracy norms among citizens in Somalia, we expected widespread support for holding OPOV elections in 2029. On one hand, this was generally true: 79.4% of respondents feel it is very important for Puntland's president to be elected via OPOV in 2029; just 6.4% feel it is "not at all important." Respondents feel similarly about the 2029 parliamentary elections, with 75.9% stating they felt election of MPs via a OPOV process was very important.

On the other hand, these results suggest that support is not without exception. In both cases, between 10 and 13% of those surveyed believe a OPOV process in 2029 is "somewhat important." Tepid support, when OPOV elections are presented without explicit tradeoffs, such as costs, increased intergroup tensions, or political instability, suggests that *some* citizens are open to non-OPOV models, and may be even more open to this option when faced with the occasional negative byproducts of OPOV elections.

## Making Tradeoffs in the Context of OPOV Elections

The current election cycle presented Puntland's leaders and citizens alike with exactly the kinds of tradeoffs that may reduce support for OPOV elections *in practice*. At the broadest level, shifting from a clan-based selection model to OPOV elections always threatens to cause conflict, simply because it will (almost

<sup>10</sup> An exception is the report June 2021 report by PDRC in the run-up to the early "trial" local government elections in Puntland, which surveyed 2,548 respondents. This survey focused on implementation and the outcome of the elections – e.g., barriers to timely implementation, methods for broadening representation, and so forth – rather than on attitudes toward democracy. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first publicly available survey of Puntland voters' preferences regarding election models and OPOV elections.

certainly) produce shifts in the distribution of political power/representation.<sup>11</sup> More specific to the recent election cycle was the tradeoff between holding OPOV elections and enforcing the constitutionally mandated term length of five years. As noted above, in October 2023, President Deni advocated for holding OPOV elections, while members of the opposition interpreted this as a ploy to extend his term, under the (very likely correct) assumption that it would not be possible to hold OPOV elections in the available time, between October 2023 and either January or February 2024).<sup>12</sup>

These issues place the OPOV model in competition with other positive outcomes – peace and stability, and upholding term lengths, respectively. We hypothesized that support for OPOV elections would be lower in this cycle, due to these tradeoffs and the very prominent public and political debate around them. Further, we expected that framing the issue explicitly around such tradeoffs (e.g., holding OPOV elections but increasing the risk of instability or conflict) would produce more nuanced, and less overwhelmingly positive, views of OPOV elections.

First, we took advantage of President Deni's acquiescence, on December 6, to an indirect model, using this to analyze support for OPOV elections in this round specifically. We asked respondents whether they approved of the decision, which represented a decision *not* to use OPOV in this round. In contrast to the very strong support for OPOV elections in the context of 2029, our data shows that a majority of voters took the move away from OPOV in stride. Overall, 55.0% of respondents approved of the decision, which brought elite consensus to the election debate but meant OPOV elections were off the table. Indeed, 44.4% of respondents in our sample felt it was very important to hold OPOV elections in 2029 but simultaneously approved of the decision against using OPOV elections for the 2024 cycle.

Second, we presented respondents questions that made explicit the tradeoffs that might apply to OPOV elections, and asked them which was more important in the context of the current (now ended) transition cycle:

- Increasing the participation of citizens in the process
- Ensuring peace and stability in Puntland

When forced to select between two outcomes, each of which is desirable and has strong public support, respondents emphatically favored the latter. Maintaining peace and stability is viewed as sacrosanct, with 84.4% of respondents indicating they would prefer use of election models with less citizen participation than risk conflict. We interpret this majority as citizens stating a preference for stability-maintaining non-OPOV selection models over OPOV, if conflict is a possible consequence of OPOV elections.<sup>13</sup>

By comparison, voters were more willing to accept a term extension in exchange for OPOV elections, when asked to choose between these two outcomes:

- Hold OPOV elections, but delay the elections to allow for preparations to be made

---

<sup>11</sup> Carefully negotiated power-sharing agreements constitute the current political settlement in Puntland, every other FMS, and even in district councils outside Puntland, where councils have not yet been elected by direct elections. Moving from a guaranteed distribution of seats or offices to one based on a popular vote risks conflict for the same reasons any shift in the method for selecting leaders risks conflict – because individuals and groups who lose power have incentives to upend the process through violence.

<sup>12</sup> The mandated end of President Deni's term was in January 2024; however, a one-month delay to February 2024 was often indicated in early discussions, to provide a small amount of additional preparation time.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that respondents may have interpreted the tradeoff as being between more inclusive elections (i.e. OPOV) and conflict, whereas we intended for them to consider the tradeoff between more inclusive elections (OPOV) and an *increased risk of conflict*. Note also that our framing presumes that more inclusive OPOV elections increase the risk of conflict. While we feel there is some evidence for this claim, at least in the case of inaugural elections, respondents need not agree with that claim to engage with the question on its own terms, as we set the two outcomes in direct opposition to one another.



- Uphold term limits, but hold the elections without using OPOV

A slim majority (55.1%) of respondents chose a delayed election (an implicit term extension for the incumbent) if it meant the election would be held using the OPOV model.

Table 3, below, summarizes these disparate results. Considering the results in total, it is clear that support for the OPOV model is only robust in the abstract, in a context without tradeoffs. And, as tradeoffs become more significant (e.g., peace in comparison to a term extension), support for OPOV elections drops further.

*Table 3: Support for OPOV Elections Across Multiple Questions*

Context	Tradeoff of OPOV	Support for OPOV	Specific Statement of Support
2029	None specified	79.4%	"OPOV very important"
2024	None specified	25.9%	"Disapprove of decision not to use OPOV"
2024	Term extension	55.1%	"Hold OPOV elections but delay the elections to allow for preparations to be made"
2024	Peace/Stability	14.6%	"Increasing the participation of citizens in the process" over "Ensuring peace and stability in Puntland"

An open question is why support for OPOV in the current cycle is so much lower than for the 2029 cycle (25.9% versus 79.4%), even when no explicit tradeoffs were highlighted. One reason is that respondents are almost certainly considering the tradeoffs of OPOV in the current cycle internally, without prompting by enumerators. The electoral dispute had been ongoing for at least two months prior to our survey and was headline news in December 2023, when the survey was conducted – therefore, most respondents would be well-aware of the tradeoffs implicit in the question. Another possibility is that respondents wanted to support the newly-formed consensus against the OPOV model – and in favor of timely elections – that emerged on December 6; supporting the indirect model and accepting that the OPOV model would not be used could be seen as a vote in favor of consensus, stability, and forward progress, even if it required use of an electoral model they did not necessarily support.

Also interesting is the divergence between elite and mass opinion regarding the relative importance of OPOV elections versus a timely process. Commentary during the crisis emphasized a consensus among many elites, especially those in the opposition, of a preference for a timely process, with suggestions that this reflected broader public sentiment. However, this is not the case, as shown above in Table 3. The divergence between elite and mass opinion is not limited to any particular place: even in Nugaal, where there appeared to be a particularly strong elite consensus against OPOV elections, 49.5% of respondents stated a preference for OPOV elections. While this is somewhat less support for OPOV than in Bari or Mudug, it highlights the frequency and size of divergence between elite opinion – or, at minimum, publicly-stated elite opinion – and preferences of the broader public.

## Who Supports OPOV Elections?

Variable support for OPOV elections across different contexts – e.g., different circumstances and different sets of tradeoffs – is not entirely surprising. However, if OPOV elections are to take root and be maintained in Puntland over the long term, it is important to understand who supports them and what drives that support. We shed light on this question by analyzing the characteristics of pro-OPOV respondents, to

determine whether support is stronger among younger respondents, more educated respondents, and so forth.<sup>14</sup>

We start by considering support for OPOV elections in general, when respondents were asked whether holding OPOV elections in 2029, was important.<sup>15</sup> Here two clear patterns emerge: respondents who are more politically engaged and respondents who are more educated are, holding all else equal, more supportive of OPOV elections in 2029. For the selection of Puntland's president in 2029, respondents who completed secondary school at 8.5 points more likely to believe the use of an OPOV model is very important than those who did not complete secondary school. Independent of that effect, respondents who self-report frequent (more than once per week) political discussions are 8.2 points more likely to support OPOV. These trends are very similar when we substitute parliamentary for presidential elections.

Worryingly, the youngest respondents in the sample tend to be the least supportive of OPOV elections. The strongest supporters are those between the ages of 30 and 45. Among this group, 85.2% support OPOV for 2029's presidential transitions, compared to 76.7% among those under the age of 25. The gap between age groups is somewhat smaller when we focus on parliamentary elections, but remains significant.

Also notable is the fact that party affiliation does not predict support for or opposition to OPOV elections in 2029. This is important because one concern about the recent debate is that it would re-cast preferences for democracy in partisan terms, likely contributing to an erosion of support.

While support for OPOV elections in 2029 are not affected in this way, views of the 2024 contest very clearly are driven in part by partisanship. To see this, we opt to focus on those who supported the use of OPOV, despite the resulting term extension that would have been necessary, in the context of the current cycle. The reason is that this question had the most straightforward framing of tradeoffs of all those we employed *and* the tradeoffs were both realistic and balanced.<sup>16</sup> In this case, Kaah supporters were much more likely to support OPOV elections. After accounting for education, age, district of residence, and a number of other factors, 63.5% of Kaah supporters preferred holding OPOV elections, compared to 49.4% of non-Kaah supporters.<sup>17</sup>

The correlation between partisan affiliation and preferences regarding how the 2024 electoral dispute should be determined are not surprising, as the debate was explicitly between President Deni and members of opposition parties. It is also encouraging that partisan affiliation *does not* predict support for OPOV in other contexts (e.g., in 2029) – which suggests that support for OPOV is not itself partisan, but that the 2024 dispute was emphatically so. The concern is that, if support for OPOV elections is consistently framed as a partisan issue – or an issue where viewpoints are correlated with other politically relevant social cleavages, such as clan identity – citizens will begin to interpret public debates through the lens of these identities, undermining principled support for democratic norms.

---

<sup>14</sup> These relationships are the subject of a deep literature in political science, with particularly extensive literature analyzing whether education is a driver of pro-democracy attitudes and other “democracy-reinforcing” outcomes, such as civic participation.

<sup>15</sup> We classify respondents as supporting OPOV elections if they said they were “very important” in 2029; respondents who refused to answer or said OPOV elections were “somewhat important” or “not at all important” were classified as not supporting OPOV.

<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the tradeoff between OPOV elections and peace/stability was slightly both open, slightly, to interpretation (as noted above) and represents a particularly extreme tradeoff that few respondents were willing to make.

<sup>17</sup> To be clear, this outcome is not unique to the Puntland electorate. Citizens often interpret information through the lens of their ethnic, partisan, or other social identities and engage in ‘motivated reasoning’ that results in very different interpretations of the same events or policy outcomes.

## Discussion

---

The analysis in this brief suggest the need for a more inclusive definition of “public opinion” in Somalia and a more inclusive discussion of governance models going forward. Regarding public opinion, our analysis highlighted several instances in which public opinion was notably divided. However, this was not reflected in discourse around Puntland’s electoral dispute; indeed, a common shortcoming of political analysis in Somalia is reliance on elite opinion as a barometer for mass opinion and the related notion that members of a particular clan, faction, or region hold uniform opinions. For instance, while many believed there was unity behind the opposition’s demands for timely, non-OPOV elections, approximately half of respondents who self-identified as supporters of Mideeye, Sincad, or Mustaqbal, preferred to hold OPOV elections, even if this resulted in a term extension for President Deni. In general, commentary on Somali politics is analysis-rich and data-poor. The result is widespread neglect – and even misunderstanding – of public opinion.

A more inclusive discussion of governance models in Somalia – at the district, state, and federal level – is also needed. Public support for an OPOV model is not universal and is not without nuance and reservations. These reservations are not hypothetical: when citizens say that they value stability and peace over inclusive elections, we should take notice. Instability and conflict are common, and if OPOV elections are seen to be contributing to those outcomes, public support for democratization is likely to wither. This is even more essential in the other Federal Member States that are moving toward OPOV elections, but which lack the longstanding social and political cohesion found in Puntland.

Somalis – and the international community – have been deeply engaged in developing new models of governance – such as power-sharing arrangements at the district level – that have made possible the formation of district and state governments. These institutional innovations were generally viewed as temporary solutions. However, given the turmoil that comes with nearly any institutional change (and especially one which explicitly reallocates power), it is important to consider whether there is sufficient mass support for more inclusive models, in light of the potential tradeoffs.

Our purpose is certainly not to argue against inclusive governance or OPOV elections. Rather, we believe additional research is needed on this topic, to understand preferences regarding different models and the depth of democratic attitudes. In addition, research can help guide efforts to build up democratic norms and aspects of civil participation that are needed to underpin democracy in the long-term.

