Cost of Politics

The cost of politics in Liberia

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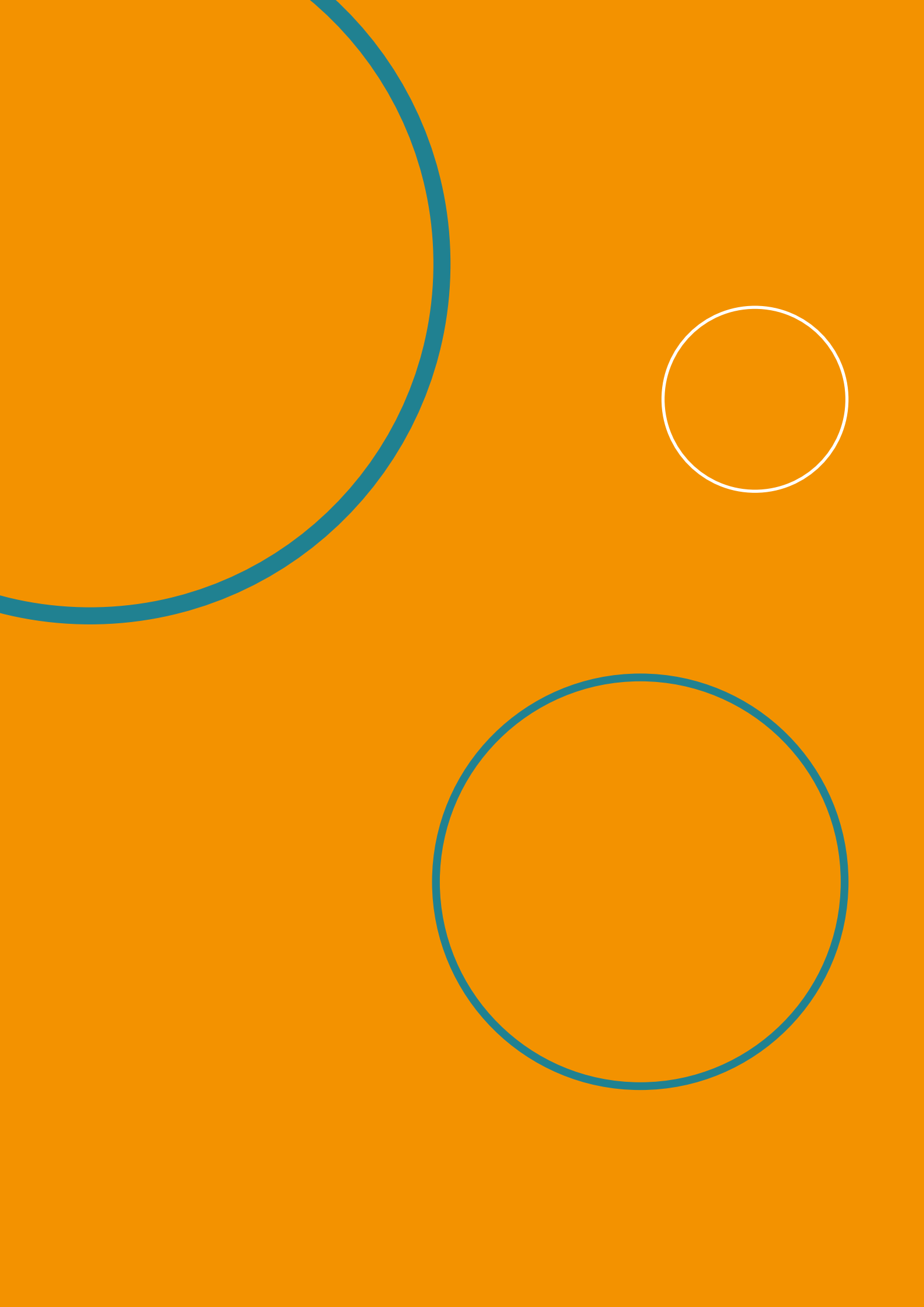
May 2024

WFD
WYDE Civic Engagement
DUCOR INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL & ECONOMIC RESEARCH
Funded by the European Union

This study is supported by a European Union-funded project called WYDE Civic Engagement, led by EPD, European Partnership for Democracy. The WYDE Civic Engagement project is a component of the Women and Youth in Democracy Initiative (WYDE) by the European Commission. The project seeks to enhance the involvement of youth in democratic processes at national, regional, and global levels.

Table of contents



Introduction

Liberia has held four peaceful and successful multi-party elections since the return to constitutional democracy in 2005. Those polls have facilitated seamless transitions and have been judged to be largely free and credible, despite numerous institutional and financial challenges. But while the constitutional and statutory laws on elections are progressive, the rules of the game in practice are skewed in favor of political elites and relatively wealthier individuals, mostly men, who dominate the political space. As a result, electoral politics, rather than being a competition between parties and individuals over policy ideas and records of competence for votes, is largely contested among politically connected elites and the wealthier citizens. This has happened at the same time as Liberia has seen a growth in political parties – from 21 in 2005 to 46 in 2023[1], the rise of independent candidacy, an increased level of political consciousness and a relatively expanded civic space.

This cost of politics study[2] seeks to understand the growing dominance of money in Liberian politics, and how it relates to, and interacts with, other factors such as ethnicity, identity and gender to shape electoral outcomes with a specific focus on the House of Representative elections held concurrently with the presidential vote in 2023. In doing so it breaks new ground and advances understanding about the multiplicity of nuanced factors that may be undermining competitive electoral politics in Liberia and aims to provide reflections on the implications this can have for democratic development and recommendations for how it can be more effectively addressed.

Methodology

The aim of this study is to understand the cost of participating as a candidate in a legislative election in Liberia, using evidence from 2023 House of Representatives elections, and to draw some initial conclusions about how those experiences differ based on gender. To gather the necessary data, the research team deployed a qualitative case study approach drawing on three sources of data: desk review of relevant literature and reports, key informant interviews (KII), and focus group discussions (FGD). These three approaches were concomitantly deployed throughout the research and facilitated the triangulation of collected data.

The desk-based review of relevant laws and literature on contemporary electoral politics in Liberia helped in identifying concepts to explore, and lacuna in the literature that the research may seek to fill. The KIIs and FGDs constituted the main sources of primary data from which the key findings of this study are derived. A semi-structured guide was developed with questions about the candidate's campaign, resources spent, factors that made them win the election, challenges encountered during the election, support received from political parties and supporters, and expected or experienced in-office costs.

The initial plan was to conduct 15 KIIs with candidates who won the election (eight male, seven female). More than 15 sitting members of the House of Representatives from various political parties, including independents, were approached and several follow-up visits made, but the researchers were only able to secure eight interviews through this approach (seven male, one female). In addition to these, the team interviewed four unsuccessful candidates, balanced by gender, who contested but lost legislative elections to capture their perspective. Interviews were also held with two prominent civil society figures and one senior legislative staff member, to probe further

on issues of campaign finance, candidate nomination processes and the implications of the cost of politics on Liberian democracy.

These interviews were supplemented by four FGDs. Two with candidates who contested but lost the election —one with female-only candidates, the other with male candidates only. These two FGDs delved into the nuances of the cost of politics and explored factors such as the role of ethnicity, amounts spent during an election period and factors that contributed to their electoral defeat. They were also asked to reflect on the implications of the cost of entering politics on democratic development and to propose recommendations for reform, as were the participants of two further FGDs with civil society groups working on issues related to governance. In total the views of 51 experts, 43% of whom were female, were sought: 35 candidates from the 2023 legislative elections[3], 15 civil society actors who worked as election observers, and one senior legislative staff.

Table 1: Breakdown of research participants

Activity	Participant Category	Number of Participants
Focus Group Discussion I	Female candidates who lost	11
Focus Group Discussion II	Civil society actors	6 (F=3; M=3)
Focus Group Discussion III	Civil society actors	7 (F=5; M=2)
Focus Group Discussion IV	Male candidates who lost	12
Key Informant Interviews I	Elected members of the House of Representatives	8 (F=1; M=7)
Key Informant Interview II	Civil society actors	2 (F=0; M=2)
Key Informant Interviews III	Candidates who lost	4 (F=2; M=2)
Key Informant Interview IV	Legislative Staff	1 (F=0; M=1)
Total Research Participants		51 (F=22; M=29)

F=female; M=male.

Historical context

Liberia has a long history of electoral politics, which dates back to the country's founding in 1847 when popular elections were first held to elect a new president and a referendum to adopt the country's first constitution[4] With no history of European colonialism, Liberia's democracy had an impressive start with competitive multiparty politics, although confined to the settler communities that occupied the coastal areas. Although a handful of parties dominated the politics at certain periods, the rules of the game provided for competitive multipartyism to elect members of the legislature and the executive branch of the government. But following the 1955 election, the True Whig Party (TWP) – which had been a constant presence in the first century of Liberian elections - eliminated all effective opposition to its rule and made the country a de facto one-party state, thereby derailing the development of competitive multiparty politics in Liberia.

During the era of one-party rule, all electoral contests, including presidential elections, were essentially among TWP members. That was challenged in 1979 when Amos Sawyer, an independent candidate with no affiliation to the TWP, registered to contest the Monrovia mayoral election and demanded an open and level playing field. Sawyer further pushed for the removal of the property ownership requirement for voters, a legal requirement that alienated most Liberians from participating at the time. The government's response to this demand was to cancel the election, buying time to review the changes proposed. But less than a year following the cancellation of the mayoral election, the military overthrew the TWP government in a coup, abolished the constitution and suspended all political activities.

After five years of military rule, the junta 'transformed' into a civilian administration after the military head of state and his party were declared the winners of a controversial election in 1985. Though this was Liberia's first multiparty election in 30 years, the junta leader essentially decided who was fit to challenge him when he banned other potential contenders from participating. And like the TWP, their electoral strategy was deployed along with violence and intimidation. It would be another twelve years until the next election as Liberia's intransigent political crises saw the country descend into a fourteen-year civil war which began in December 1989.

After the Abuja Peace Agreement, the elections were held in 1997 under extra-constitutional arrangements meant to return the country to civilian rule[5] as well as establish conditions for peacebuilding and statebuilding. Thirteen political parties contested, but parties affiliated with warring factions dominated the electoral campaign and limited the space for engagement and competitive campaigning in areas they controlled. The National Patriotic party (NPP) backed by the largest warring faction[6], National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and its candidate Charles G. Taylor won that election with over 70% of the vote, thereby winning the presidency and the majority of seats in the legislature under the system of proportional representation adopted for the vote.

The 1985 and 1997 elections took place during political and violent conflict. During both, the levers of power and violence were controlled by armed actors who made it nearly impossible for other non-armed actors representing organised political parties and interest groups to freely canvass for votes and campaign across the country. This followed a tradition set by the TWP after 1955 when elections were organised largely to create a façade of democratic legitimacy, rather than as part of a broader process of democratic governance incorporating tenets of liberal democracy such a freedom of speech, association, and open, participatory, and competitive democracy.

The recognition of democratic votes as the path to popular legitimacy was a path to which Liberia returned following the cessation of conflict in 2003. With the support of United Nations (UN) peacekeepers and other international bodies such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Liberia organised its first postwar democratic elections in 2005, which resulted in the election of Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first female elected president. Presidential elections have since been held in 2011, 2017 and 2023[7], with two successful turnovers in which opposition figures have won elections against incumbents - one of the benchmarks used by scholars as a measurement of democratic consolidation - having taken place in 2017 and 2023.

This postwar era can rightly be described as the third phase of democratisation in Liberia. Though it has promoted and expanded the space for multi-partyism, it is also characterised by a culture of 'post-party politics,' a phrase that describes the apparent "lack of serious consideration for political parties in twenty-first century electioneering: from the perspective of voters and politicians".[8] Indeed, the failure of Liberia's big parties over the years to win majorities in the legislature, the high turnover of elected legislators, and the increasing number of independents in the legislature are all indicative of a diminishing role and influence of political parties in elections in Liberia. Recent legislative elections have furthered the argument that parties are not as important as the candidates running on them. Even the few urban constituencies that were once considered 'safe seats,' having been won by the same party for three consecutive election cycles, such as Districts 5, 7, and 8 in Montserrado County, voted for candidates from different parties in 2023. Factors such as a candidate's identity, their connection with constituents, and money seem to be influencing voting decisions above all else.

The decline in relevance of political parties in elections has correspondingly reduced their influence in legislative politics. Under Liberia's system of republican, presidential democracy the legislature is the first branch of government in the system of checks and balances. Its key functions are representing electoral constituencies, making laws (including appropriating budgets), and ensuring oversight. The latter function involves holding the other two branches accountable; however, this has been challenged by executive dominance and a lack of party-driven policy debates. The influence of the executive over the legislature has become more pronounced with many independent legislators and opposition legislators who think siding with the ruling party is a way of securing a better political future. The limited control or influence of parties over legislators means opportunities for taking collective policy actions on policies and legislative issues are largely absent. According to one respondent, "parties contribute little or nothing to the campaigns of their candidates, and therefore cannot dictate policy positions to them when they are elected"[9].

Cost of politics: phases and drivers

The cost of running a campaign in a legislative election in Liberia appears to have steadily increased over the last six legislative election cycles since the return to civilian rule in 2005. Although the formal registration cost charged by the National Electoral Commission (NEC) has remained the same for the last two decades[10], aspirants need significant sums to get nominated by political parties, to campaign for election whether as a party candidate or as an independent and to convince voters between elections that they are deserving of their vote. Whilst these costs vary depending on the constituency – whether in rural or urban area - and based on the aspirant's gender, there is widespread agreement that significant financial backing is required to participate because "politics in Liberia has been monetised".[11]

On average, our research participants who won elections – nine participants, excluding one outlier who spent US$2 million on his 2023 election bid - spent US$243,125 to do so. This average figure is below the weakly enforced campaign finance threshold of US$400,000 (or its Liberian Dollars equivalent) provided in the Elections Law of 2014, although three of the nine respondents detailed expenditure figures more than the threshold. On the other hand, male research participants who lost - eight candidates from a range of districts - estimated that they spent on average US$118,000.[12] Amounts spent by unsuccessful female candidates were also significantly lower than the average spent for successful male candidates at US$20,571.[13] Figures that suggest that not only is money an important factor in elections, but one that disadvantages women who find it hard to raise the funds required to spend across the three main phases identified in this research.

The community entry phase

The first phase of the election campaign cycle, which also links closely with the last for those who hold positions of incumbency, in which aspirants are expected to invest is the community entry phase. During this phase, a candidate must introduce themselves to members of the community to popularise their name and to demonstrate they have the necessary resources to lead. Our interviews suggest that voters also consider identity as a factor that links them more to a particular candidate, and that this can be as influential, or more, than the financial resources spent by the candidate. This dynamic is particularly salient in more rural constituencies, and a few urban areas such as Districts 2, 3, 14 and 16 all in Montserrado County, where there is a large population of a single ethnic group. Given the saliency of ethnicity, most politicians in rural areas make their entry through tribal and clan leaders who usually introduce them to the local constituencies and are viewed as crucial powerbrokers. However, there is a cost attached to getting the support of these actors. "You need to invest in their private needs as well as the public interest,"[14] one respondent stressed.

The idea that leaders must be people who can take care of the lives of their subject has roots in local traditions. Indeed, in many traditional societies, the rulers or chiefs are usually from relatively wealthy and noble families. This belief extends to the practice of modern politics, particularly in rural areas, with citizens expecting leaders to come from a wealthy or well-known family for the people to trust them with leadership positions. In the words of one freshman legislator who won in a rural constituency "our people say you cannot take a hungry dog to go hunting. It will eat the meat before coming back to you." To demonstrate that you are not a 'hungry dog,' a candidate must demonstrate wealth by splurging money.

Many do this by undertaking charitable initiatives, by building community infrastructure, paying tuition fees for community youths, engaging with community elders to obtain their endorsement, and by offering direct personal support to community members. This community entry phase usually begins two to three years before the election. This process can be especially expensive for those who have no prior record of civic initiative in the community, "but those who have long been involved with the community and relate well to the people do not have to spend much, because they are already popular due to their previous activities"[15] explained one respondent.

They do this because the primary question candidates confront when they interact with voters is 'what have you done for us before?' Therefore, to prepare for this question and consequently boost their chances of winning, aspiring candidates usually establish various 'humanitarian' or 'charitable' schemes many years to the election — in the constituency they intend to contest for a legislative seat — through which they deliver basic community services such as boreholes, community halls, and the rehabilitation of roads and bridges. As a result of this expectation from the people, candidates pay more attention to delivering services than crafting sound manifestoes and campaign messages.

High incidence of poverty among the electorate is a key contributor to the cost of electoral politics. "The people ask you for nearly everything" one elected female representative noted.[16] The most common request candidates and elected officials receive are request for money to pay school fees, funeral expenses to bury deceased relatives, hospital bills, request to recommend for jobs, request to sponsor weddings, and request to purchase clothes and feeding for newborn babies. To take care of education, nearly all candidates and elected legislators establish what they call 'scholarship' schemes at various high schools and universities through which they finance the education of young people in their constituencies, mostly their supporters. The beneficiaries of these 'scholarship' schemes are expected to campaign and vote for the aspirant in return. District residents who request jobs are usually referred to government agencies in both the central and local government as well as private companies in their constituencies, particularly by incumbents. While for aspiring politicians who belong to ruling parties, they use the opportunities to deploy their loyalists to local government positions so that they remain in the constituency to support the campaign.

The nomination phase

The second phase surrounds outlays made to secure a party nomination. "This involves a lot of money to bribe party leaders to favour you and to buy delegates to vote for you,"[17] according to a candidate who lost in a big party primary[18] – in 2023 this refers to the Unity Party (UP), Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC), and the Collaborating Political Parties (CPP) - and later got nominated by a smaller party.[19] These smaller parties serve as alternative vehicles for individuals who lose out in main party primaries and have little time to put together the nomination package required of independent candidates yet are determined to contest.

Under the law, a candidate nominated by a political party carries far less financial burden and faces less structural barriers during the candidate nomination and registration than a candidate who chooses to contest as an "independent" — defined in the Constitution as "a person seeking electoral post or office with or without his own organisation, acting independently of a political party."[20] Running as a party candidate gives one the advantages of utilising the party's established organisational structure, symbol and legal requirements while an independent candidate has to meet onerous registration requirements, pay high registration and processing fees, and provide a

Independent vs party candidate: Summary of registration/nomination requirement

- Have a bank balance of at least US$10,000 (or LRD equivalent) / Party candidates do not need individual bank balances once the party has a ban balance.
- Pay a candidate registration fee of US$500 in NEC's Bank Account / Party candidates pay the same.
- Pay a US$500 processing fee to the NEC in cash / Party candidates pay the same.
- Have an office in the Electoral District / The party must have an office in the district.
- Submit a petition signed by 300 registered voters of the electoral district endorsing your candidacy (publish petition in at least two newspapers showing voters' name, voter ID number, telephone number, and photograph. Such publication in a daily newspaper cost between US$750 and US$1,000) / Party candidates do not have to do this since the party is registered.
- Develop own symbol for ballot / Party candidates run on the party's symbol.
- Have an insurance bond of US$100,000 / Party candidates do not have to this once the party has an insurance bond.

financial statement with a huge bank balance (see the box below). One female candidate who lost as an independent candidate in Montserrado County noted how burdensome it was that she is reconsidering her options for the next election: "I went through a lot. So, in 2029 if I don't get a party nomination, I won't run. Besides the high cost of nomination, you must fend everything for yourself."[21]

Despite these barriers, 18 of the 73 members of the House of Representatives won as independents in 2023. However, many of these aspirants were former members of political parties who either lost out or chose not to participate in primaries rather than previously politically unaffiliated individuals, who saw the best route to electoral success as going alone, and not on the ticket of a smaller party. This was a route taken by several aspirants interviewed, who explained that they ran on smaller party tickets after losing their party primaries or after being denied participation. Obtaining the nomination of a smaller party is generally less expensive since one does not have to participate in a primary. The main outlay is on the nomination fee which can cost US$1,000-3,000 depending on the record of the smaller party, but even this is negotiable as one female candidate explained.

"We went looking for parties and most parties charged high fees. Some asked for over US$1,000. But we bargained the price and told them the NEC candidate nomination fee was also ahead of us. A day to the deadline we settled on US$300 dollars and that was how we got on their nomination."[22]

But during the 2023 election, most aspirants sought the tickets of the three main parties hoping to tap into their local support bases to boost their own campaigns. But it cost a lot to participate in the primaries, and in most cases "only those favored by the party leadership were approved".[23] In the UP, aspiring candidates were charged US$750 as registration fee to participate in the primary, while CDC aspirants were

charged US$500. But candidates from all big parties agreed that to win the primary "you have so many other expenses and so many things to do which we can't talk about here".[24] In some cases, big parties actively recruited candidates whom they thought had greater chances of winning. This boosted the candidates' campaign on the one hand and helped the party in the local area on the other hand. In these very few cases where both the party and the candidate leverage each other's advantage, the candidate spent little or nothing to gain the nomination.

Whilst party primaries are a critical part of the nomination process, another factor that increases the cost of participation is the NEC candidate nomination and registration exercise which research participants described as 'expensive' and 'time consuming' given that it is highly centralised. While most agreed that the candidate registration fee at NEC is relatively affordable, the costs of traveling from rural areas to Monrovia to register as a candidate with the NEC is not. For women candidates, who have additional family care responsibilities, it cost even more to leave their families to travel to the capital to navigate the bureaucracies to obtain a tax clearance certificate, secure a party nomination form, in the case of a party candidate, and filing their nomination papers with the NEC, that can take a week or two to complete.

The campaign phase

While the preceding phases can be expensive, a candidate must save a lot of money for this last phase to remain relevant up to the day of election and even during it. During the campaign period— usually two months for official campaigning — a candidate must ensure they reach out to communities in their district and organise rallies at which money and other materials must be donated to people in attendance. Individuals that secure the ticket for bigger parties have an advantage during the campaign in that they are likely to benefit from the popularity of the parties among the voters, as well as likely to have a cadre of young activists from these parties on their campaign, be endorsed by leaders of these parties and appear on the same campaign fliers and billboards together. These endorsements undoubtedly boost the campaigns and help present them as viable contenders. In constituencies where these big parties have consistently won legislative elections – such as Lofa and Gbarpolu for UP and Montserrado and Grand Gedeh for CDC, candidates' chances are higher — though not completely guaranteed — as result of their affiliation. But this idea of 'safe seats' is in decline: voters seem to now consider a candidate's personality and contributions to their community far more than the party which fields them. For instance, while the CDC previously won the last three legislative elections in Montserrado Electoral Districts Number 5, 7 and 8, they lost all these seats in 2023.

For candidates in more rural districts, where road conditions are deplorable, campaigning requires much more resources and logistical preparations, time, and labour, particularly in reaching some remote areas. For those with limited financial resources, they are geographically limited and tend to focus on the areas where they are most likely to win votes. At this point, campaign activities, and therefore expenditure, are largely dedicated to producing campaign materials, paying and feeding campaign

workers, mobilising and paying poll watchers for election day, and "so many things that we can't talk about [illegal payments or bribes]."[25] Incumbents with resources and candidates nominated by bigger parties seem to have some advantage during this phase as they benefit from available resources, experience, and existing local structures. Some candidates received support from their parties in the form of donated materials and logistical contributions, but the majority of resources spent were raised by the candidates themselves through personal savings and contributions from friends and families.

"Voter trucking," a practice whereby aspirants take eligible voters from one community to have them registered for election in another electoral district the aspirant intends to contest in return for money, continues to be a widespread practice despite the fact it is prohibited under the Elections Law which describes it as an election "malfeasance" that constitutes an attempt to influence the results of an election.[26] The practice is largely transactional, and the fees charged by the "imported voters" usually ranged from US$10-20 per vote. Additional costs involved in trucking voters include transportation fare and paying for accommodation and feeding both during voter registration and voting periods. One respondent indicated that he spent US$12,500 to transport 200 eligible voters from Monrovia to Sinoe County - 350 kilometers from Monrovia - and an additional US$2,500 to feed them while they were in Sinoe during the voter registration period.[27]

Nearly all respondents admitted to trucking voters, with one suggesting that "you can't depend on the residents of your district to win, you have to import people."[28] Others sought to clarify that they "only trucked friends, family members and voters who are originally from the local areas but now live in urban communities to pursue job and business opportunities."[29]

Post-election expenditure

The expenditure demands do not stop at the ballot box, they continue after the elections for both incumbents and those unsuccessful candidates who retain ambitions of holding elective office. Those who do not win and intend to contest again must double up their community contributions, which arise on an ad-hoc basis, to be considered serious contenders during the next election. Whilst those who win are expected to take care of major projects in their districts as well as the personal requests made by members of the constituency. Many Liberians expect their lawmakers to deliver social development far more than they expect it of their local government administration. This is especially the case in more rural areas where the absence of effective local government machinery to deliver these services sees residents increasingly look up to the central government. Thus, "the failure of the national government to deliver basic services to the people" according to one legislator, who constructed eleven handpumps and two community town halls when in office, "puts legislative candidates and legislators in a difficult position because they are seen as part of the government and therefore must deliver these services."[30] Another elected lawmaker put it more bluntly, "our people do not elect us to make laws, they elect us to deliver services."[31] The elected representatives are therefore held to account more for service delivery than their actual roles as legislators, as one active member explained. "Each time I go to my district no one asks me what you have done in the legislature. All they ask is what did you bring for us, or they present new demands."[32]

Table 2: Incumbent return rates 2011-2023

Election Year	Total Number of Seats	Number of Incumbents Contesting	Percentage (%) Returned	Percentage (%) Not Returned
House of Representatives				
2011	73	62	27.4	72.5
2017	73	65	47.6	52.3
2023	73	65	40.0	60.0
Senate				
2011	15	14	14.3	85.7
2014	15	12	16.6	83.4
2020	15	14	21.4	78.5
2023	15	13	30.7	69.3

These demands and expectations place additional financial burdens and expectations on the elected official throughout the duration of their term. To respond to these more effectively, according to a former representative who lost his reelection bid in the 2023 election, "you have to spend at least US$5,000 a month on your constituents when you win"[33] equivalent to 57% of the monthly gross salary of a member of the House of Representatives. With a monthly gross basic salary of US$8,810 and monthly gasoline coupon allowance of US$2,225, a member of the House of Representative is expected to receive a total of US$794,520 as total salary and benefits during their six-year term. Each member is also entitled to 17 staff members posted in their office (such as chief of staff, political officer, resources officer, security and several assistants), in the constituency office (coordinator, clerk, secretary), and at their homes (yard boy, cook, security) — all paid by the government. But the chances of re-election are not high. The average return rate of incumbents in the last three elections for the 73-seat House of Representatives - 2011, 2017, and 2023 - was just 38%.

Those who strive to satisfy their constituents just to get re-elected "have to engage with so many things, including corrupt deals to earn extra money"[34] argued one respondent. An active member of the House of Representatives confirmed that "you cannot take care of your family and your constituents with your salary alone" noting that "you have to engage in business and take advantage of other benefits that come every now and then." Citizen requests towards political aspirants are also driven by the fact that the people have little faith in politics, government, and the politicians. Lack of development in the local areas, and the abject poverty conditions among the ordinary citizens[36] — which contrast sharply with the relatively affluent life of politicians — have fostered a belief that that ordinary citizens have been neglected by politicians who use their vote as a gateway to acquire personal wealth. According to one key informant "the cost of politics has increased over time because those elected tend not to abide by the social contract. We see elected officials living fabulously; so, the electorate now say if they must elect you, you must pay. So, it is now a politics of the highest bidder."[37]

The costs facing women

Recent election cycles have seen a rise in women political participation at all levels — from holding senior positions in party structures to contesting for elected offices. The number of women who registered to vote during the 2023 elections was slightly higher than the number of men who did so.[38] Despite these developments, women have attained little success in electoral politics, particularly in winning legislative seats, over the last two decades; this is despite the fact that the country has twice elected a woman as president and another as vice president.[39] In the 2005 election — which Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf won as President — 107 women contested for legislative seats (House and Senate), but only 13 won seats. Despite efforts by women organisations and their supporters to increase women representation in elected and appointed positions, the share of women in the legislature has been on the decline since 2005 (see Figure 1). Just 10.7% of seats in Liberia's 103-seat two legislative houses are currently occupied by women, a figure far below the continental average of 24%.[40]

Women candidates interviewed for this study listed three crucial factors that undermined their chances of winning in their electoral districts. The first is the lack of sufficient resources to campaign. Inadequate socio-economic opportunities for women in Liberia affect their progress in other fields of life such as politics. As the cost of participating in political processes increases, most women are faced with making a choice between investing in their families or politics,[41] with the few who seek political office often 'outbid' by relatively wealthier male candidates.[42] Women candidates interviewed suggested that their electoral chances could have been improved had they had sufficient financial resources to campaign. One argued that "the only thing that stopped me from winning is money, that is why in 2029 if I don't have up to US$50,000 to campaign, I will not contest."[43] Based on estimates provided by our research participants, women candidates spent far less than their male counterparts as seen in the table below of male and female candidates who lost legislative elections in 2023.

Figure 1: Percentage of legislature seats held by women (2006-2024)

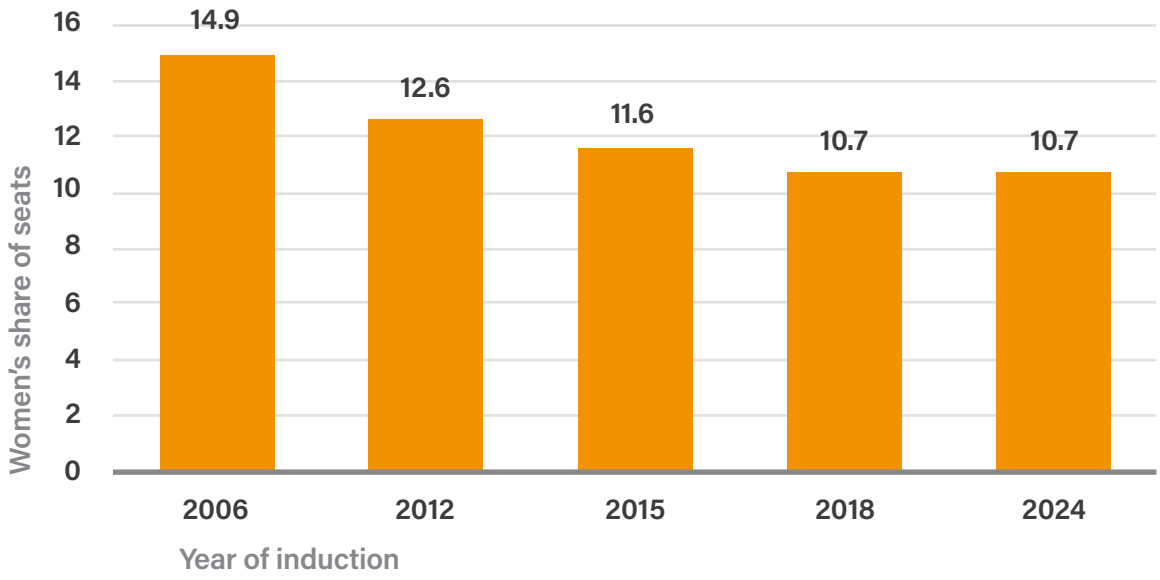


Table 3: Campaign expenses by gender (unsuccessful candidates)

	County	Amount Spent (US$)
Female Candidates		
Candidate 1	Montserrado	30,000
Candidate 2	Montserrado	25,000
Candidate 3	Montserrado	33,000
Candidate 4	Montserrado	8,000
Candidate 5	Montserrado	20,000
Candidate 6	Montserrado	16,000
Candidate 7	Montserrado	12,000
Male Candidates		
Candidate 1	Montserrado	250,000
Candidate 2	Montserrado	9,000
Candidate 3	Montserrado	200,000
Candidate 4	Montserrado	100,000
Candidate 5	Montserrado	40,000
Candidate 6	Montserrado	18,000
Candidate 7	Montserrado	150,000
Candidate 8	Margibi	178,000

But money is not the only cost women must face. There are other important factors that give people access to, and keep them in, power in Liberia, all of which tend to favour men over women when it comes to making leadership decision. In most parts of the country, particularly rural areas, women are largely not considered for leadership positions because of the preponderance of cultural and traditional norms. As a result, their right to contest for electoral offices while accepted by the state on the one hand, is entirely dismissed by some local communities on the other hand.[44]

Another factor concerns sexual threats and harassments women face in politics. Our research participants indicated that they experienced various forms of sexual violence, threats and harassments during their electoral campaigns. These come from party colleagues, members of the constituencies as well as their political opponents. One female candidate lamented that "in the party if you don't have money as a female and you don't have an affair with the male leaders, they treat you like an orphan."[45] Another female candidate reported that she quit the contest in 2023 because "I did not have enough money and my party chair insisted that I sleep with him before getting the party's nomination.

All these issues traumatised me so I had to quit the race [election] entirely."[46] This may be a non-financial cost of seeking to enter politics, but it is one that is not shared by male counterparts, in fact it is the complete opposite.

As one female aspirant noted, "male candidates engage in multiple sexual relationships with women in the constituency as a campaign strategy, but women candidates cannot do that, and society accepts males for doing that."[47] Indeed, during the FGD with male candidates who lost, this last suggestion was confirmed when a male candidate said:

"In rural politics you must have many wives to be considered a serious leader. You just have to visit a village and engage one of their daughters and the entire village will vote for you. All the people want is to be assured that you are somewhat connected to them. So, if you engage several women from bigger families, you are likely to have huge support."[48]

The low representation of women in Liberia's legislature cannot therefore be seen as arising out of lack of interest among women. Rather it is due to several barriers, all of which were neatly summarised by one female candidate:

"Running as a woman in Liberia is very difficult. You face insults; the party doesn't give you full support. They rather attempt to exploit you. Parties just add women candidates to meet quota requirements. When the party finally selects you, you have the society to face next. They ask you if you have a husband, if you have a house, and if you have money to give to them. All of these factors work against us in politics."[49]

Sources of funding

Raising funds to campaign in a context with little or no support from political parties and constituents is difficult. Though friends and families do make contributions to campaigns, the bulk of the campaign resources come from the candidate's personal savings generated from salaries and business ventures. Some candidates indicated that in 2023 they had to borrow money or sell properties and other personal belongings to raise additional money for their campaign. The aspirant who spent up to US$2 million to win a legislative seat suggested that the highest amount he raised from friends and families was just US$2,500, with the bulk of funding coming from his personal income.[50]

Under Liberian laws, candidates are prohibited from receiving campaign funding from foreigners, labour and trade unions and corporate entities.[51] Yet there were suggestions that some legislative candidates, mainly incumbents, received financial support from companies, including multinational companies, working in their constituencies during the 2023 election.[52] In return, these candidates are expected to support legislation or other business interest of these companies should they succeed in getting elected.

For candidates who do not receive the support of their families, mostly women, the sources of money for campaign becomes even more limited. One female aspirant who quit the election suggested that:

"I had to leave the election because my husband and my family did not agree to support me. We have a school and church together. I could not take money from the account without his approval, and he was determined that I did not contest. So, I withdrew from the entire process."[53]

Many aspirants withdrew from competing in the 2023 election due to not having sufficient money to campaign, or even to register as a candidate. This is not surprising in a country where the average yearly salary is US$4,537.[54]

Beyond money: ethnicity and identity

Beyond money, ethnic identity is a key factor that can enhance a candidate's chances of winning, or at least assure them of votes in certain areas. Most of Liberia's electoral districts are ethnically heterogenous. Even the few that appear to be homogenous have sub-tribal and clan differences that serve as fissures of social division within the community. These divisions are usually exploited during elections, particularly when candidates believe that they come from a populous clan or identity group. Indeed, voting patterns in some areas suggests that clans or tribes have stood by their own during very contentious legislative elections; and in most cases, the level of support one receives from the tribe or clan became the deciding factor when exploited effectively. According to one legislative candidate,

"Identity is important in rural areas. The people want to know how you are connected to them before they may consider you. If you are from a particular clan, that clan will support you. If your grandfather was good to the people in the village, they will support you; if he was bad, you can't get their support."[55]

One elected representative suggested that while he and his main contender went neck-to-neck in the urban areas of their district, the deciding votes came from their respective clans: "I won over 60% of the votes in my clan while my opponent won the majority in his wife's clan. But my clan has more population, so he was defeated."[56]

Closely related to ethnicity and clan, are the various socio-cultural and spiritual traditional societies which wield strong influence on politics in rural areas. Like the Masonic Society, which played a key role in the distribution of power in settler society and the TWP, local traditional societies are crucial institutions that decide on clan and tribal leadership matters. "To win in the rural area, you need to be traditional" explained on elected representative, "you need the endorsement of the traditional society, or else you will be vulnerable. You see me, I am very traditional. But we can't discuss the traditional society here; but when I am among my people, I act like them."[57]

These societies are mostly male dominated. Though there are women-led societies, the male dominated ones have the responsibilities of making decisions on leadership and governance matters. This barrier to entry is perhaps why the proportion of seats held by women in the legislature continues to be low. As indicated by one elected representative:

"the women who go and contest in the rural areas are Monrovia-based women who have western education but do not know the traditions of their own areas. The real traditional women in the rural areas hardly contest because they know their role in the society, and the few who attempt, usually do not even have money to campaign."[58]

Due to the saliency of ethnicity and traditional societies in elections in the rural areas, some clans have adopted a practice of mediating between aspiring candidates to ensure the clan is represented in each election by a single individual with the hope of mobilising the majority of the clan's vote behind that candidate. This practice has been driven by the behaviour of incumbents who are perceived to pay more attention to developing their own clans and villages than other areas in the constituency

they represent when in office. As a result, each clan believes if "their own" is elected they stand to receive more development programmes and political recognition. These informal intra-tribal or clan primaries attempt to produce a consensus candidate from among the major families, even if they come from different political parties. Several individuals spoken to for this study indicated that they were requested to attend multiple meetings held by clan and tribal leaders in a bid to select a single candidate. But these efforts are not always successful. One candidate who lost in Lofa County suggested that he lost mainly because his clan fielded too many candidates after the pre-election mediation efforts failed:

I came second in the election. I would have won if my own brothers from our area had not stood against me. The elders advised them to stand down because I was the most popular candidate. The lady [incumbent] who won got the majority in her area. When they counted the vote in my own area, our vote was divided.[59]

This tribal or clan voting pattern, and the emerging role of clans in nominating candidates suggest the dwindling role of parties among rural voters, and further highlight how politicians themselves rely more on tribal and clan solidarity as a mobilising factor, than the parties they belong to and the manifesto they proclaim. This reality has been reflected in recent national level selections for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. During the last few elections, presidential candidates have strategically selected running mates with the hopes of eliciting more votes on the basis of tribal and regional solidarity. For instance, presidential candidates from the big parties usually scramble over selecting running mates from the northcentral counties of Lofa, Nimba, and Bong with the expectation that the running mates can help mobilise their kinsfolk. This consideration, as observed during the 2023 elections was the primary factor, and trumped all other considerations such as integrity, competency, experience and partisan consideration.

Implications for democracy

Although Liberia has seen improvements in democratic development in the last two decades, evidenced by the holding of routine elections in line with the constitution, and the rise of a vibrant civil society that has promoted mass participation in political processes, challenges such as the high cost of politics and weak institutional mechanisms to enforce electoral laws (for instance on campaign financing and voter trucking) persist. The rising cost of politics has limited the extent to which many, especially women, can aspire for political offices. From the outlay required to get known, obtain a party's nomination to challenges of canvassing and campaigning for votes, politics as currently practiced in Liberia, marginalises women, young people, and the poor, leaving governance and leadership to a club of relatively wealthy, largely-male, well-connected individuals.

One consequence of this is that it encourages corruption and diminishes the value of accountability between elected politicians and the voters. Those who win by buying votes, or trucking voters, do not feel accountable to their constituents. In fact, most incumbents are only held to account when they fail to deliver community projects or take care of constituents' personal demands not for failing to undertake their oversight and representation functions effectively or for their voting decisions in the legislature. As a result, incumbents tend to pay more attention to generating more money, "sometimes through extreme means" as suggested by one key informant, to take care of the monetary needs to remain politically relevant. These extreme means may include soliciting bribes from the executive to support legislation from the latter, extortion and soliciting bribes from companies seeking to amend

laws that favour them in particular sectors, and influence peddling in return for money.

A 2016 Global Witness report accused several Liberian officials of deliberately amending procurement laws to favour a company with mining interests;[60] and in 2023 the US Government sanctioned several officials, including the President pro-tempore of the Senate, "for their involvement in significant corruption by abusing their public positions through soliciting, accepting, and offering bribes to manipulate legislative processes and public funding, including legislative reporting and mining sector activity."[61] The involvement of Liberian legislators in multiple business dealings in violation of conflict-of-interest provisions laid out in the Code of Conduct Act is another associated concern. Companies owned by lawmakers are reportedly favored by the government and multinational companies for contracts in construction and logistics.[62]

Another consequence of the high cost of politics, and identity considerations, is the extent to which they diminish competence, integrity, experience, and track record as salient criteria for voting a candidate. Our research participants suggested that their experience and track record, and educational qualifications are rarely considered or discussed during campaign and canvassing events. Rather most of the questions they receive during the campaign surround 'what have you done for us before?' and 'what do you have in this area?' or 'which clan or tribe do you belong to?', in addition to the many personal requests for handouts. The predominance of money and identity in electoral politics leaves little space for debates about manifestoes and policy in legislative elections in Liberia. Politicians pay more attention to raising money for campaigning and devising strategies to play the ethnic card than packaging a more credible manifesto on their legislative agenda. The most common campaign messages focus mainly on promises to build community projects and provide financial aid for students. By doing this, the politicians present themselves as the ultimate provider, thereby diminishing the role of institutions and the government in accountable service delivery.

Outlook

The future of competitive electoral democracy in Liberia will depend on the extent to which individuals are allowed to freely and fairly participate in electoral and policy processes. A level-playing field ensures that candidates and voters have equitable chances of participating in political processes. This study has gathered incontrovertible evidence that suggest competitive, free and fair electoral politics is being undermined by a high cost of participation driven by low level of civic awareness among voters, the tendency of politicians to bribe voters, an inadequate legal framework, and, where they exist, ineffective enforcement of the law. To address some of these issues, the following recommendations are proposed:

Civic and voter education:

Civil society and the NEC must be encouraged to step up efforts at civic education particularly on the functions of elected officials. Taking a longer-term view, mass civic education, awareness and consciousness can result from mandatory civic teaching - which incorporate concepts of democracy, citizenship rights and responsibilities - in primary and secondary schools to build generational understanding as to the roles and functions of legislators.

Legal reform and enforcement:

Reforming the electoral laws to address present realities and challenges of campaigning may assist in curtailing profligate spending during elections and make democracy more competitive. To start with the NEC and other relevant authorities such as the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission and Ministry of Justice, must ensure candidates who violate campaign financing laws during electoral periods are held to account. The most urgent

legal reform needed is a law against vote-buying and strengthening mechanisms for its enforcement against voter-trucking which has become commonplace in Liberia.

Enact gender quota legislation:

The high cost of participating in electoral politics have crowded out women. A gender quota that mandates political parties lists of candidates to be adequately representatives of both genders, or one that establishes special legislative seats for women, can increase women representation and voice in politics. Liberia has long been on this road since the first post-war election in 2005 when political parties and NEC signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding that required political parties to ensure at least 30% of their list of candidates be women candidates. This was never met. Efforts by women groups to achieve a gender quota legislation through legal reforms have been unsuccessful, and the last effort failed in 2022 when the President vetoed new amendments to the electoral law that included gender quota provisions due to disagreement with other provisions of the amendment bill. In May 2023 NEC and the political parties signed another MOU where the parties committed to increasing women participation, including ensuring a 30% gender quota on their list of candidates. But they failed to deliver on this commitment. Just 15.5% of a total of 1,025 candidates that participated in the 2023 elections were female. Given this context more robust efforts to push for legislation or internal party commitments to ensure adequate gender representation in internal party processes, which can increase female representation in the legislature are needed.

Credible and transparent primaries:

Political parties must establish transparent and credible processes for selecting candidates that make it possible for all candidates to have fair and equal chances regardless of their socio-economic status. The NEC, as the regulator, must also support parties in establishing clear frameworks for competitive internal democracy.

Decentralisation of NEC:

The cost of traveling to Monrovia to register as a candidate adds a significant additional burden on candidates from rural areas, particularly women. The NEC should decentralise its nomination process and other crucial election management activities to magistrate offices in the counties to reduce the cost on politicians in the rural areas.

Streamline the requirements for independent candidates:

Given the high cost of participating in party politics, the legislature must reform the requirements for registering as an independent candidate. Lowering the insurance bond, minimum bank balance threshold and candidate registration fee can help remove financial barriers to political participation.

Endnotes

1 In 2005 there were 22 presidential candidates with 21 from political parties and one independent. In 2023 there were 20 presidential candidates with 19 from political parties and one independent. The rest of the parties only fielded legislative candidates.

2 In accordance with Westminster Foundation for Democracy's "cost of politics approach", a whole of politics approach was deployed to both desk-based and interview research to understand the costs from the moment an individual decides to enter parliamentary politics to the end of their term holding office, where they are successfully elected.

3 Some of the candidates have experience of participating in previous elections such as the 2017 legislative elections and the 2020 special senatorial elections.

4 Note that these elections were only held in Americo-Liberian settlements under the control of what was then Liberia. These settlements were mainly in present day Montserrado, Sinoe and Grand Bassa counties. The indigenous communities were not part of this process.

5 Before this time governments were established under power-sharing arrangements. Though headed by civilians, warring faction leaders largely pulled the strings.

6 Charles Taylor and his National Patriotic Front of Liberia rebels controlled about 80% of the country's territories at the time of the 1997 elections.

7 Legislative elections were also held in 2014 and 2020 in which incumbent candidates lost.

8 Pailey, R, N & Harris, D. 2020. "We don't know who be who: postparty politics, forum shopping and Liberia's 2017 elections". Democratization. 27 (5). pp.758-776.

9 Interview with a Representative from Nimba. Monrovia. 7 February 2024.

10 US$500 for the House of Representatives and US$750 for the Senate.

11 Interview with a Representative of Montserrado County. Monrovia. 2 February 2024.

12 This average is based on estimates provided by nine candidates who lost legislative elections during the 2023 elections.

13 Only one successful female representative was interviewed. She claimed to have spent US$75,000 to win her seat, the lowest of all the successful candidates.

14 Interview with a Representative from Bong County. Monrovia. 2 February 2024.

15 Interview with a Representative from Sinoe County. Monrovia. 1 February 2024.

16 Interview with a Representative from Margibi County. Monrovia. 15 February 2024.

17 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

18 Those that hold the most seats in the House of Representatives and which had nationwide presidential campaigns.

19 Many smaller parties do not organise primaries since their membership base is small and it is rare that they have more than one person competing for a single district.

20 Constitution of Liberia (1986), Article 78.

21 Interview with an unsuccessful female candidate from Montserrado County. Monrovia. 1 March 2024.

22 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

23 FGD with unsuccessful male candidates. Monrovia. 15 February 2024.

24 Interview with a Representative from Sinoe County. Monrovia. 1 February 2024.

25 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024

26 Chapter 10 of The New Elections Law (as Amended December 15, 2014)

27 Interview with a Representative from Sinoe County. Monrovia. 1 February 2024.

28 Interview with a Representative from Montserrado County. Monrovia. 2 February 2024.

29 Interview with a Representative from Nimba County. Monrovia. 7 February 2024.

30 Interview with a Representative from Maryland County. Monrovia. 26 February 2024.

31 Interview with a Representative from Nimba County. Monrovia. 7 February 2024.

32 Interview with a Representative from Bong County. Monrovia. 2 February 2024.

33 Interview with a previous Representative that lost election. Monrovia. 15 February 2024.

34 Interview with a civil society actor. Monrovia. 31 January 2024.

35 Interview with a Representative from Bong County. Monrovia.

36 The World Bank estimates that about 60% of Liberians live below the national poverty line. See World Bank. 2023. Liberia Poverty Assessment: Towards a more inclusive Liberia.

37 Interview with a civil society actor. Monrovia. 31 January 2024.

38 According to the NEC 50.1% of registered voters were female in 2023.

39 Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of the Unity Party was twice elected as president in 2005 and 2011; while Jewel Howard Taylor of the National Patriotic Party, and vice president candidate of Coalition for Democratic Change, was elected in 2017.

40 Bebbington, K. 2024. Women's participation in 2024's electoral politics in Africa. Conflict & Resilience Monitor. ACCORD. Available at: https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/womens-participation-in-2024s-electoral-politics-in-africa/

41 Interview with civil society actor. Monrovia. 31 January 2024.

42 FGD with civil society representatives. 25 January 2024.

43 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

44 FGD with civil society representatives. Monrovia. 25 January 2024.

45 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

46 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024

47 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024

48 FGD with unsuccessful male candidates. Monrovia. 15 February 2024.

49 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

50 Interview with a Representative from Nimba County. Monrovia. 7 February 2024.

51 Constitution of Liberia. Article 82.

52 FGD with civil society representatives. Monrovia. 25 January 2024.

53 FGD with unsuccessful women candidates. Monrovia. 24 January 2024.

54 Average salary in Liberia for 2024. Available at: https://worldsalaries.com/average-salary-in-liberia/.

55 FGD with unsuccessful male candidates. 15 February 2024.

56 Interview with a Representative from Maryland County. Monrovia. 26 February 2024.

57 Interview with a Representative from Nimba County. Monrovia. 7 February 2024.

58 Interview with a Representative from Bong County. Monrovia. 2 February 2024.

59 Interview with an unsuccessful male candidate from Lofa County. Monrovia. 1 March 2024.

60 Global Witness. 2016. "Sable Mining: bribes and questionable payments in Liberia". Available at: https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/corruption-and-money-laundering/anonymous-company-owners/sable-mining-bribes-and-questionable-payments-liberia/

61 See, U.S. Embassy in Liberia. 2023. 'U.S. Department of State Designates Three Liberian Officials for Their Involvement in Significant Corruption.' 12 December. Available at: https://lr.usembassy.gov/u-s-department-of-state-designates-three-liberian-officials-for-their-involvement-in-significant-corruption/

62 Carter, B J. 2023. Liberia: Sen. Dillon Accuses Some Colleagues of Conflict of Interest. Daily Observer Newspaper. 7 July. Available at: https://www.liberianobserver.com/liberia-sen-dillion-accuses-some-colleagues-conflict-interest

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