VERY

POOR

Key findings from the qualitative
and quantitative research

> *Our basic existential needs are at stake, so we can't think about anything else. If a person has a normal life and income, maybe he would be an active citizen. If a person doesn't have that, then his only focus would be how to survive.*
> *Female, 42, Kumanovo*

Very Poor – Definition and Size

The very poor people is a group of people deprived of the basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter and education.[20] Institutions in North Macedonia only measure the relative poverty among the population.[21]

However, the most recent data on absolute poverty by the World Bank suggests that an estimated 4.4% in the country (around 92,100 persons) lived on 1.9 USD (46 MKD) per day in 2017, while in 2019 the State Statistical Office has calculated the at-risk-of-poverty rate in North Macedonia at 21.6%, affecting 448,100 persons.[22]

For the purpose of this research, the definition of persons in deep poverty was operationalized to encompass recipients of social welfare with a monthly household income of up to 8,000 MKD or 266 MKD per day.
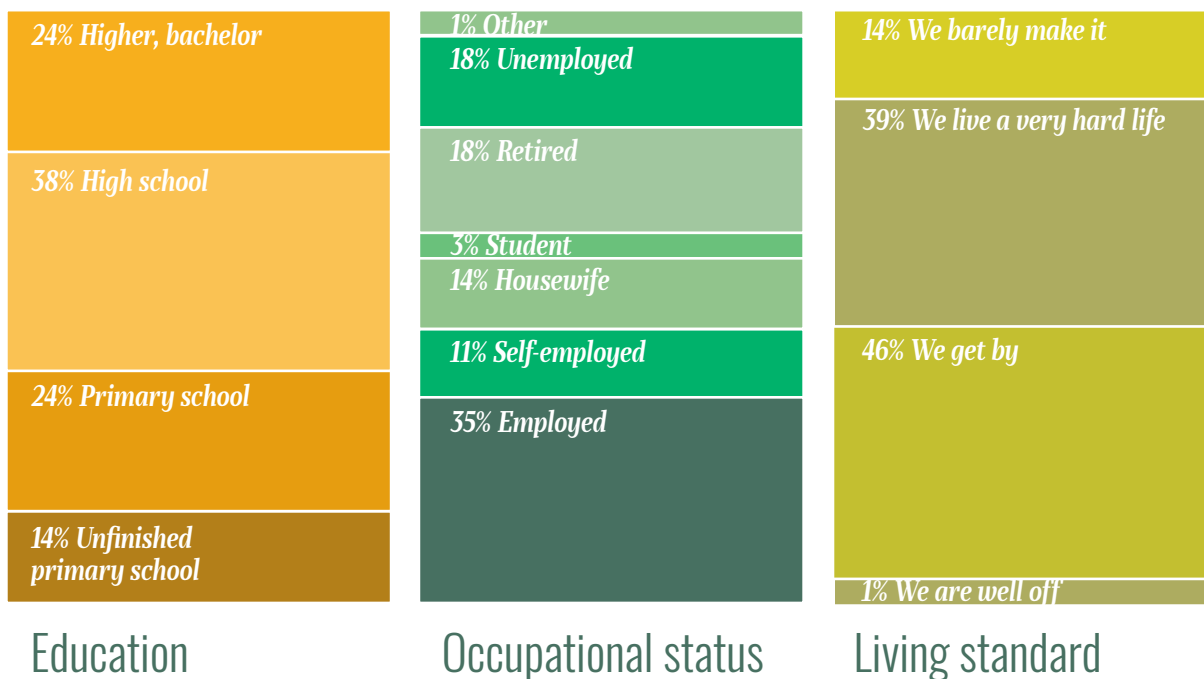
Demographic Profile

A total of 128 very poor people took part in the quantitative face-to-face survey, complemented with four in-depth interviews. This method was selected to address the lack of respondents' access to online and technical resources for the implementation of a focus group in the midst of the COVID-19 restrictions.

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20 https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-summit-for-social-development-1995/wssd-1995-agreements/pawssd-chapter-2.html

21 Absolute poverty refers to a set standard which is consistent over time and between countries. Relative poverty, in contrast, views poverty as socially defined and dependent on social context, based on "economic distance", a level of income usually set at 60% of the median household income

22 State Statistical Office, "Laeken poverty indicators in 2019", (SSO: Skopje, 2020), available at: https://www.stat.gov.mk/pdf/2020/4.1.20.113_mk.pdf, accessed on June 14, 2021

24% Higher, bachelor	1% Other	14% We barely make it
	18% Unemployed	
38% High school	18% Retired	39% We live a very hard life
	3% Student	
	14% Housewife	
24% Primary school	11% Self-employed	46% We get by
	35% Employed	
14% Unfinished primary school		
		1% We are well off
Education	**Occupational status**	**Living standard**

TOPICS OF INTEREST

Interest in the socio-political developments in the country

How interested are you in the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?

13% Very   **32%** Somewhat   **34%** Not much   **22%** Not at all

> Compared to the general population, very poor people tend to be less interested in socio-political developments in the country and in the world. Similarly to other marginalized and vulnerable demographic groups, this is likely due to the fact that the very poor are mostly concerned to "make-ends-meet" and survive the day.

This research shows that some 45% of the survey respondents are "very" or "somewhat interested" in socio-political issues, while 56% are "not at all" or "not very" interested.

Fifty-four per cent (54%) of the respondents sometimes or often discuss these issues with other people, while 46% rarely or never do.
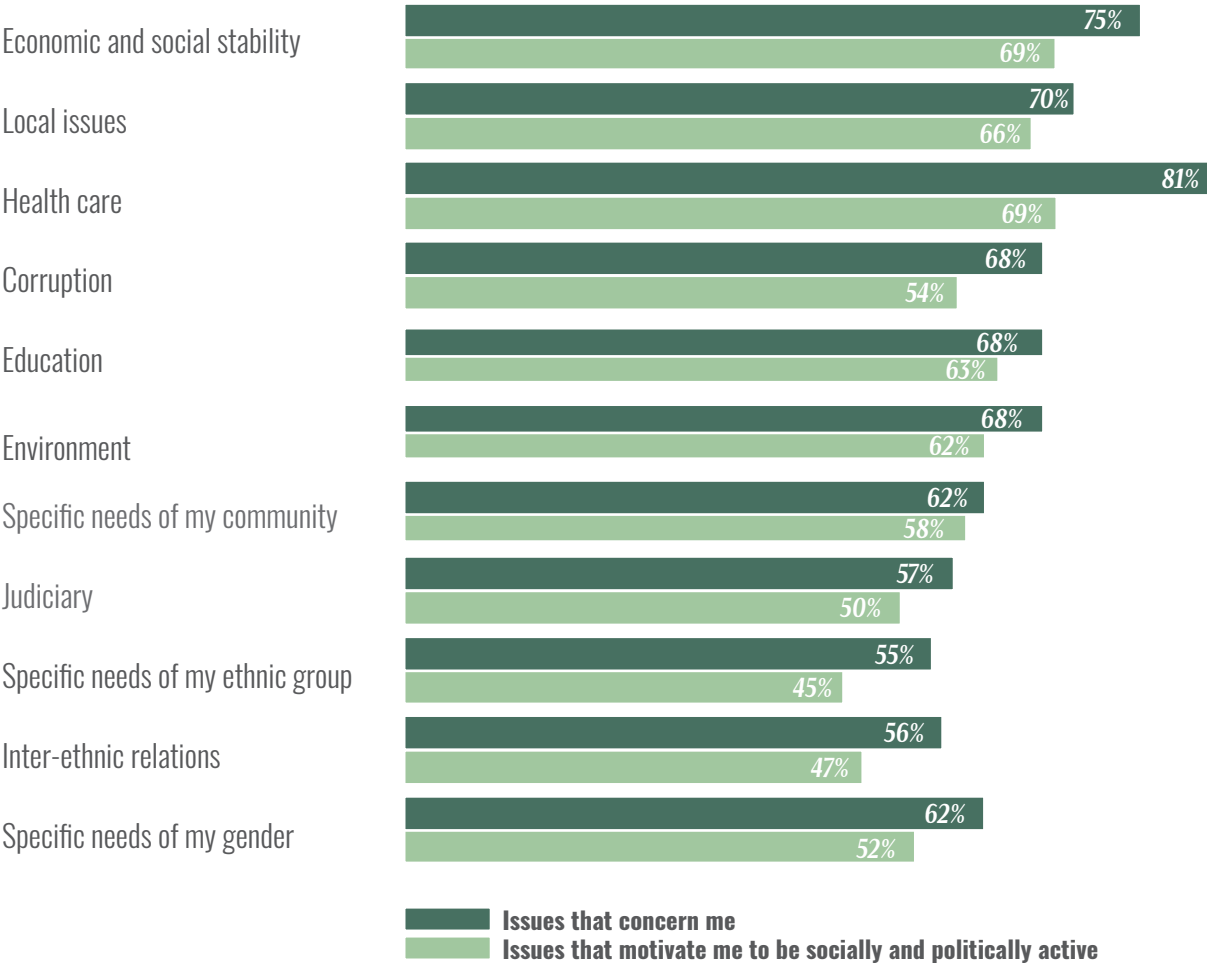
Given the extremely difficult financial situation of this demographic group, their primary concern is how to survive the day.

Similarly to other demographic groups, according to the focus group participants, the COVID-19 crisis, the economic situation in the country and employment rank the highest among the socio-political issues of relevance to the quality of life.

Disappointment in the political parties (mostly due to failure to keep promises), manipulations and pressures make this group less interested in national political issues.

Concerns

How much would you say the following information/issues/topics concern you?
How much would you say the following issues/topics
motivate you to be socially and politically active?

Issue	Concern me	Motivate me
Economic and social stability	75%	69%
Local issues	70%	66%
Health care	81%	69%
Corruption	68%	54%
Education	68%	63%
Environment	68%	62%
Specific needs of my community	62%	58%
Judiciary	57%	50%
Specific needs of my ethnic group	55%	45%
Inter-ethnic relations	56%	47%
Specific needs of my gender	62%	52%

■ Issues that concern me
■ Issues that motivate me to be socially and politically active

Health care (indicated by 81%), economic and social stability (indicated by 75%), and local issues (indicated by 70%) are the three most important issues for this group of respondents.

The above issues, primarily at local level, are the key motivators for them to be more socially and politically active.

Poor people are mostly interested in tangible and specific issues that could improve their lives and those of family members and issues they can relate to. They are less interested in abstract and political issues, which is confirmed by a low interest in socio-political developments.

This group is the least concerned about the specific needs of their ethnic group, education, interethnic relations and the judiciary.

INFORMATION SOURCES

Television is the predominant source of information for the very poor people, as indicated by 69% of the survey participants (20% more compared to the general population). Fifteen per cent (15%) of this group are informed about the socio-political developments mostly via social networks, while 4% obtain information through friends and family and 3% via web portals.

Television is the predominant source of information for the very poor people, as indicated by 69% of the survey participants (20% more compared to the general population).

TV 69%

Of note is that this demographic group uses social networks less often compared to the general population (27%) as well as web portals (10%), likely due to limited technical resources.

Similarly to the general population and the other demographic groups, very poor people believe the media is biased and have low trust in the media.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

More than three-quarters of the respondents have never been involved in any event, activity, or process that could impact the community or the place they live, nor do they want to become more civically engaged.

Have you been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected change in the community or the place where you live?

22%
77%
1%

Are you interested in a more active civic involvement?

21%
75%
4%

0%   100%

Yes   No   Do not know / Refuses to answer

Sixty-two per cent (62%) of the survey participants do not believe in making a positive change either by individual or NGO engagement, while 25% lack interest in civic engagement, which explains the low motivation for civic participation.

Due to the their difficult socio-economic situation, they do not contemplate civic activism and are primarily focused on survival.

> " *Our basic existential needs are at stake, so we can't think about anything else. If a person has a normal life and income, maybe he would be an active citizen. If a person doesn't have that, then his only focus would be how to survive.* "
> *Female, 42, Kumanovo*

The factors that contribute to minimal civic involvement and low levels of civic participation can be summarized as follows:

- Focus on survival - the energy is directed towards finding a solution to the basic existential problems.
- Lost trust in the system and institutions.
- Citizens feel helpless and powerless.
- Fear and pressure from the governing political parties.
- Lack of freedom of speech.

Factors that promote involvement

The prospects for personal or family benefits are the key motivators for most survey participants to become more involved in activities that could effectuate change in the community, as noted by 18% of the respondents. Other important motivating factors are related to their representation (17%) and the responsiveness of the institutions (16%).

Seven out of ten respondents (69%) do not believe they can make an impact as a citizen (17% more compared to the general population), whereas more than one fifth (21%) believe that they could make a meaningful impact in the municipality, but not in other public institutions.

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

To the question whether they would be willing to participate in civic activities, 47% of the respondents indicated they would respond to a questionnaire, 47% would meet colleagues/friends to discuss a personal or a family issue and 32% would prefer reading a brochure or a leaflet. More notable are the percentages of the actions they would avoid. Namely, 86% would not like to participate in an online meeting, 81% would not attend a political party meeting and 81% would not attend a public debate.

In which of the civic activities are you willing to participate?

47%
Respond a
questionnaire

32%
Read a brochure
or a leaflet

47%
Meet colleagues,
friends to discuss

ELECTION PROCESS

Very poor people associate elections with phrases such as: "forgery", "framed", "frustrating", "partially democratic", "the local sheriffs of the ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian political parties put pressure, manipulate and bribe the citizens to win votes".

Do you think that every vote is important and can affect the election results?	**72%** Yes	**20%** No	**1%** Refuses to answer	**7%** Does not know

Similarly to the general population, almost three-quarters of the survey participants think that every vote is important and can affect election results, while 20% do not believe that every vote counts.

Around half of the respondents (51%) indicate that only voting is not sufficient to engage citizens to change or influence policies, one third think voting is sufficient, while 11% claim ignorant on the issue.

Motivation to vote

How regularly do you vote?

| 75% regularly or often	16% sometimes	6% usually not	2% never

The research shows that similarly to the general population, very poor people are regular voters.
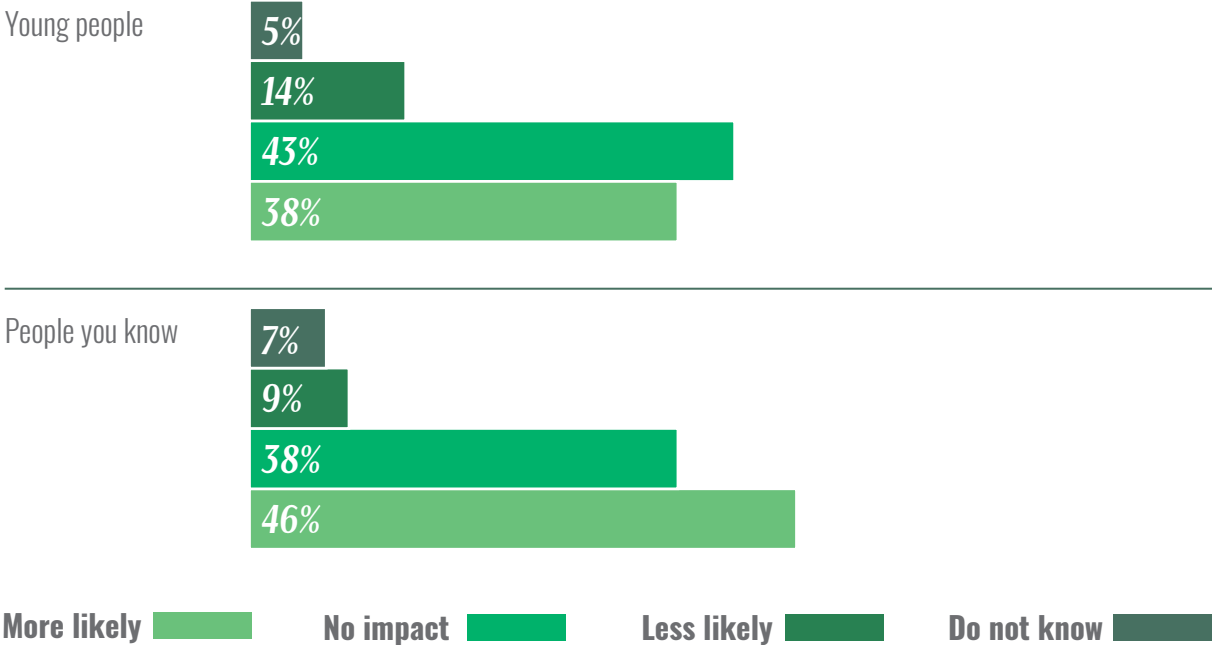
In addition, 34% state they vote for the same party, while 48% vote for different political parties. This indicates that their support for a political party may change if other political opportunities arise.

Factors that influence their decision to vote

Similarly to the general population, the top three factors that influence the decision to vote are: perception that voting is a civic right and duty (47%), better prospects for the future (34%) and fear that someone would misuse their vote (27%).

47% Civic right and duty

34% Better future

27% Fear that someone will steal their vote
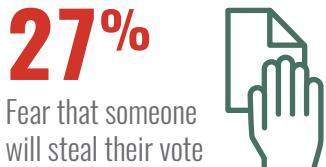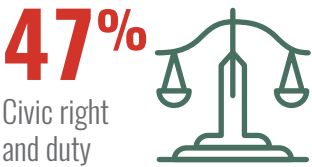
If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?

Young people
- 5%
- 14%
- 43%
- 38%

People you know
- 7%
- 9%
- 38%
- 46%

More likely   **No impact**   **Less likely**   **Do not know**

Similarly to the general population, more than half of the respondents (56%) indicate that their decision to vote is the same or most often the same as that of their families, while 38% state that their decision differs from their families.
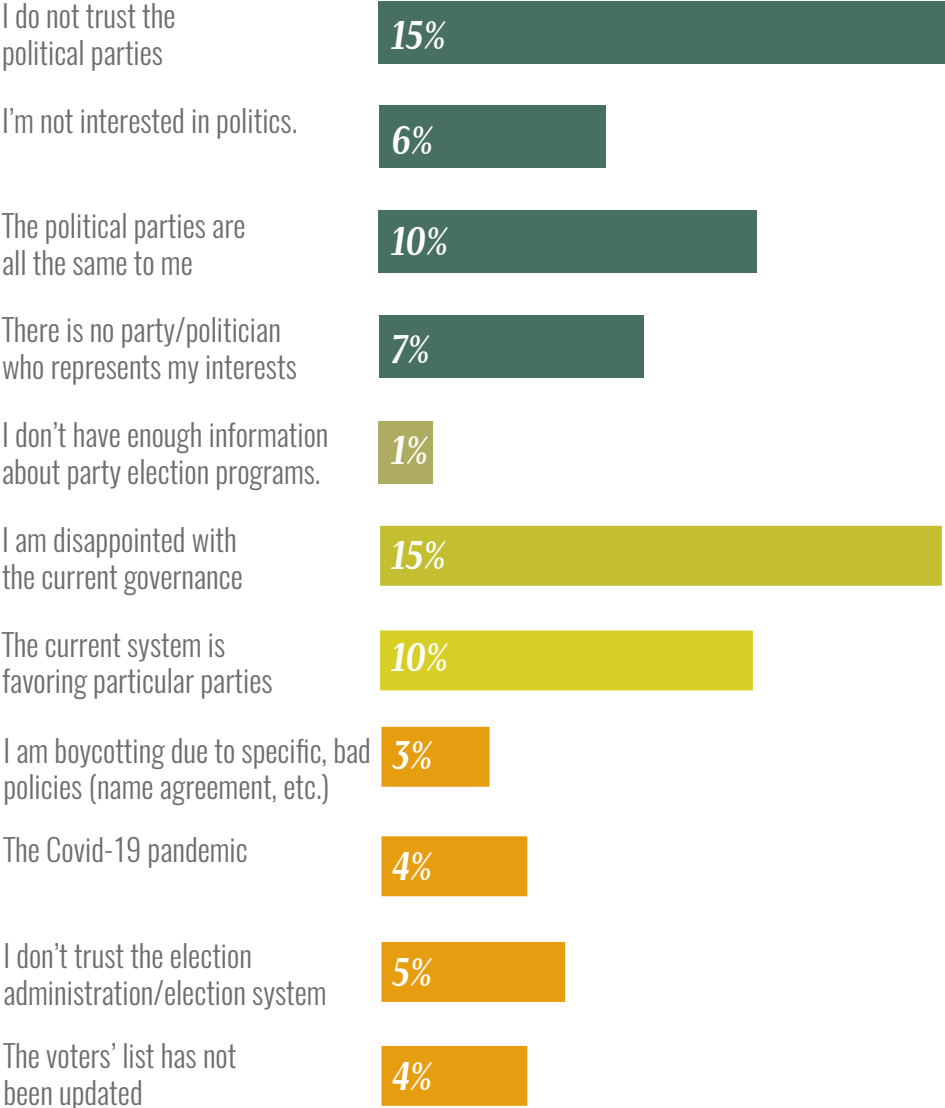
Six out of ten respondents' decision to vote is not influenced by their friends.
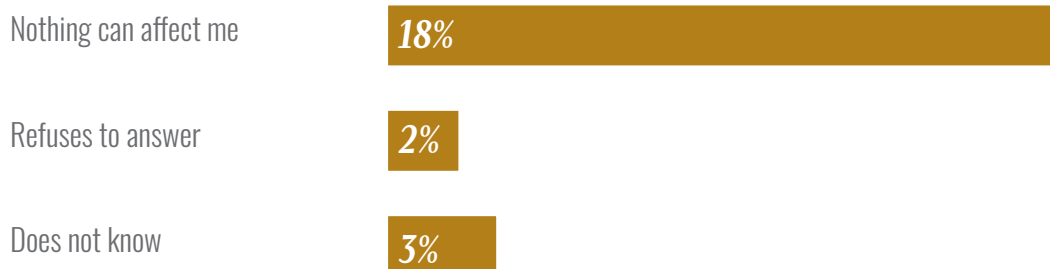
Very poor people would like to see more familiar people as candidates on the party lists for elections or as elected officials (e.g. in municipal councils).

Demotivation to vote

Dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and the political parties demotivates people from remote communities to go out and vote.

What can influence your decision not to vote?

I do not trust the political parties	15%
I'm not interested in politics.	6%
The political parties are all the same to me	10%
There is no party/politician who represents my interests	7%
I don't have enough information about party election programs.	1%
I am disappointed with the current governance	15%
The current system is favoring particular parties	10%
I am boycotting due to specific, bad policies (name agreement, etc.)	3%
The Covid-19 pandemic	4%
I don't trust the election administration/election system	5%
The voters' list has not been updated	4%

Nothing can affect me	**18%**
Refuses to answer	**2%**
Does not know	**3%**

This group believes that citizens are manipulated by the political parties and do not believe in positive changes and in the legitimacy of the election results; however, they are against boycotting elections.

> *More damage is done by not voting compared to the benefits of sending a message of dissatisfaction to the political parties with boycotting.*
> *Male, 62, Skopje*

Furthermore, they believe that abstention from voting benefits the incumbent government and helps them win votes.

COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

The predominant sources of election information are TV (68%), social media (7%), web portals (8%), friends and family members (7%).

Of note is that this demographic group more often gets informed about elections via TV (68%) compared to the general population (52%) and uses social media twice less often (7%).

Newscasts (66%) and TV debates (17%) are the most useful ways of sourcing election information for the survey participants.

With regards to the type of communication with candidates in the election period, this group prefers personal communication i.e. door-to-door or in-person communication in smaller groups (small neighborhood gatherings) and sourcing information via traditional media.

Concerning communication with candidates or representatives from political parties in the period between elections, in addition to personal communication and communication in smaller groups, very poor people prefer to be continually informed about previous political achievements and results of the candidates.

The respondents claim they are interested in election political party programs to find out whether parties' promises are tangible and feasible.

The general impression of this profile group is that the political parties are not interested in addressing the needs of the very poor citizens.

68%
TV

7%
Social Media

8%
Web portals

7%
Close people
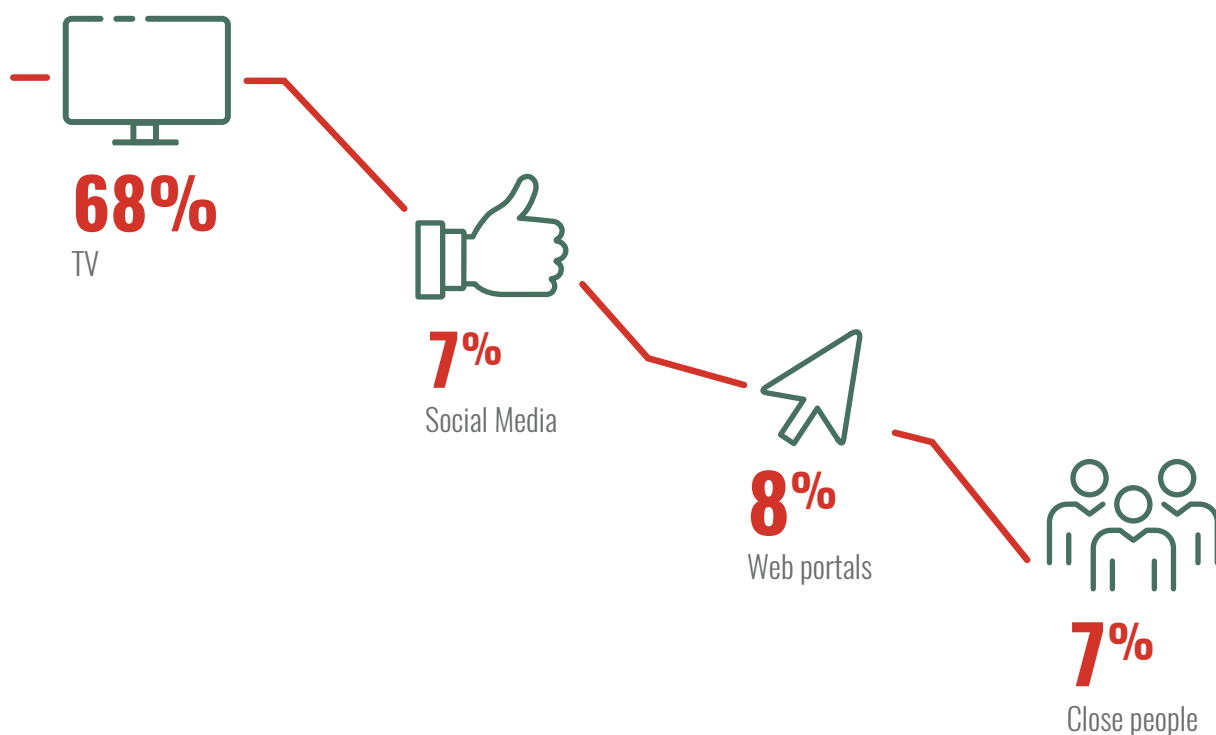
These citizens are especially sensitive to party - political manipulation and promises with regard to employment in the public sector.

> *The very poor citizens are not mentioned anywhere.*
> *Single-parent families are not mentioned*
> *either. This is absolute discrimination.*
> *Female, 42, Kumanovo*

> *It is utopia to believe that any party has*
> *a strategy to help the people.*
> *Male, 45, Tetovo*

The expectations of this demographic group from the political parties are to:

- Reduce unemployment and open new jobs.
- Help single parents and parents of children with disabilities.
- Increase social aid.
- Stop citizen manipulation to win votes.
- Stop dividing the citizens based on their party affiliation.

BARRIERS

Poverty is the strongest barrier for socio-political participation. However, it is necessary to further identify the barriers that inhibit poor people's activation, such as their perceptions, experience or attitudes.

They demonstrate a low level of interest in socio-economic developments in the country and a lower motivation to participate in civic and political activities. The barriers leading to this situation can be described as follows:

- **Previous negative experiences** with political parties, candidates (manipulation, marginalization, lies, unfulfilled promises).
- **Focus on existential concerns and survival** - time and energy are spent on addressing basic existential problems.
- **Disbelief** in the interest of the public institutions to improve their quality of life.
- **Scepticism** of their power to influence.
- **Fear of pressure and consequences** - they believe that their survival and access to income, services or benefits depend on the relations with officials, and if challenged, they could lose what they already have.
- **Lack of skills & knowledge** how and where to participate.
- **Lack of knowledge about forms and means of engagement and participation** in socio-political life, especially knowledge about civic rights and how to protect and exercise the civic rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue and expand on civic education efforts

To empower and increase the importance of civic and political participation, education and information are critical.

- Educate them about the protection of civic and political rights.
- Educate them how to exercise their civic and political rights.
- Educate them about relevant institutional pathways to express their interests, concerns and problems.
- Focus on the benefits of civic engagement, forms and channels for participation, a better understanding of the individual voter's rights and election-day activities.
- Employ non-conventional approaches due the limited time and resources such as direct meetings, visual presentation of printed materials, neighborhood campaigns, education in the social institutions, community leader's partnerships to reach communities and individuals with poor literacy.

Increase the belief in their power to make an impact in the community or society

- Create opportunities for meaningful involvement of the very poor people in local activities or projects on improving segments of their life (converting a local facility into a childcare centre or hygiene facility, small home improvement projects).

- Promote positive examples that prove that activism matters and has the power to influence and influence the society.

- Consider different formats such as small community projects facilitated by political parties or other organization, testimonials, third-party stories.

Improve the negative perception of being underrepresented and invisible

- Demonstrate empathy and understanding of the challenges they are facing.

- Include and keep poverty-related issues and proposals in the public agenda of relevant political representatives.

- Follow up and periodically check on the issues this community is facing in the period between elections.

- Encourage politicians and activists who are part of the major political parties to advocate for the low-income community's needs.

- Use a variety of tools such as regular meetings in the community, collaboration with social services to understand and work on designing a solution for problems, public advocacy of the poverty-related issues, etc.

Promote tailored communication for different low-income groups

The very poor group is highly heterogeneous. It includes:

- Single parents.
- Family with children with disabilities.
- Older people without pensions.
- Larger families with a single income source.
- Families without residential documents, etc.

They all have specific needs and concerns. Tailor the communication to be relevant to their needs.

Create alliances:

With the non-government organizations for improved civic and voter education, in cooperation with the authorities or independently.

Since civic organizations are increasingly involved in providing social services, they inherit both the responsibility and power to act as representatives and advocates for the communities they serve. They can play a key role to:

- Inform and educate about civic and political rights.
- Improve representation of very poor persons in NGOs and other entities that advocate for these communities.
- Facilitate responsiveness of the system: Act as a connection point between this group and the system and support them in protecting their rights and interests.
- Strengthen the capacities, position and networking of NGOs providing social services and help support them to increase their credibility and power to influence.

With the media (focus on traditional)

- Promote narratives focused on positive and successful examples of activism of underprivileged communities.
- Educate them about the ways they can exercise their civic and political rights.
- Promote topics related to issues and concerns of these underprivileged groups.
- Educate and inform them about the importance of voting, mechanisms to protect and exercise voting rights.

Choose relevant communication channels and apply both traditional and non-conventional approaches

Use TV to reach the very poor communities due to limited access to advanced technology

- Use formats that contextualize the information.
- Consider other formats in addition to newscasts e.g., debates, editorials, short stories and testimonials or concerns.
- In addition to political shows, consider using morning programs, lifestyle and specialized shows (e.g on health).
- Whenever possible, present information in an illustrative manner, especially concerning the voting process, voting rights, reporting election irregularities.
- Organize direct meetings or other community events.
- Use formats for direct interaction such as small gatherings, informal meetings in the neighborhood to build trust and increase their positive self-perception.
- Propose community projects or activities with the potential of gathering people or specific community groups.

Pilot non-traditional channels

- Consider effective outreach methods to disseminate information, e.g. in buses, at bus stations, local stores, open markets, barber stores, food packages, bags, etc.
- Use social centres and other institutions of interest for training on civic and political rights and as participation channels.