



**SUPPORT TO
ELECTORAL REFORMS**

ПОДДРШКА НА ИЗБОРНИ РЕФОРМИ
MBËSHËTETJE E REFORMAVE ZGJEDHORE

Demographic Effects on Civic Engagement and Voter Education in North Macedonia



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This report is part of the “Support to Electoral Reforms” project of the Swiss Embassy/Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), implemented by IFES and NYCM. The views, opinions and the content expressed do not necessarily reflect the ones of the donor, the project or the implementers.

Introduction

The report on Demographic Effects on Civic Engagement and Voter Education is a result of a comprehensive evidence-based research that provides unique respondent data and insights about priorities, confinements, and responsiveness to motivational stimuli for 13 demographic profiles of voters.

The report includes a wide spectrum of recommendations for each of the analysed demographic profiles with regards to modalities of civic education, raising awareness on the importance of the election process, choice of media, tools and channels for communication and types of messages.

Stakeholders that deal with civic and voter education may use the findings and recommendations of the Report which are aimed to help enhance the effectiveness and efficacy of voter and civic education campaigns as well as to provide alternative modalities for increased voter engagement.

The report is a joint effort of the TIM Institute¹ and the Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities², part of the Project “Support to Electoral Reforms in North Macedonia” of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and its partner, the National Youth Council of Macedonia (NYCM).

The Project’s overall objective is to support democratic and credible election processes that facilitate political participation and social integration by enabling voters to freely select their representatives and hold them accountable.

The project activities have been channelled to support the overall objective through the achievement of three outcomes:

Outcome 1: Strengthened institutions conduct fair and efficient election processes.

Outcome 2: Internally democratized political parties present citizen-oriented policies and election programs.

Outcome 3: Empowered citizens hold political parties and elected officials accountable.

Beneficiaries of the Project are election management bodies at all levels, government agencies such as Ministry of Information, Society and Administration, Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, State Statistical Office, Ombudsperson Institution, State Audit Office, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice; political parties, non-government organizations, voters and citizens in general.

¹ <http://www.timinstitut.mk>

² <http://www.isshs.edu.mk/>

OVERVIEW

The quantitative face-to-face survey was conducted on a nationally representative sample of 1209 respondents (aged 18 years and above), with an estimated margin of error of +2.81 percentage points at 95% level of confidence. The margin of error is larger among subgroups of respondents.

Methodology

The extensive demographic research entailed a combination of quantitative computer-assisted face-to-face survey and qualitative research, carried out from 30 July to 31 August 2020.

The sample was designed to reflect the demographic characteristics of the country, with representative distribution within demographic groups and regions (according to the latest census and estimations by the State Statistical Office)³. It was distributed proportionally among permanent residents of households in urban and rural areas of the eight statistical regions in North Macedonia. Interviewees included members of the Macedonian, Albanian, Roma, Turkish and other ethnic communities.

To ensure further comprehensiveness and quality of the research, 9 targeted booster interviews were conducted with citizens from the following nine groups:

- ♦ Rural women
- ♦ First time voters (18-20)
- ♦ Rural youth
- ♦ Very poor
- ♦ Chronically unemployed
- ♦ Persons with disabilities
- ♦ Remote communities
- ♦ Roma
- ♦ Other ethnic communities (Turks, Serbs, Vlachs, Bosniaks, etc.)

For each of the nine target groups, 32 respondents from eight statistical regions in the country were included in the survey as a booster.

As such, the total number of respondents who participated in the quantitative face-to-face survey for both samples is 1,497 citizens.

³ https://www.stat.gov.mk/Default_en.aspx

In addition, a qualitative research included 12 focus groups and 4 in-depth interviews with the following demographic groups:

- ♦ Urban population
- ♦ Rural population
- ♦ Women
- ♦ Women from rural areas
- ♦ Youth general
- ♦ Youth from rural areas
- ♦ First time voters
- ♦ Persons with disabilities
- ♦ Persons from remote communities
- ♦ Roma people
- ♦ Other ethnic communities
- ♦ The very poor
- ♦ Chronically unemployed

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, focus groups were organized online via the Zoom platform.

In-depth interviews were conducted only with the group of very poor persons. This method was selected to address the lack of respondents' access to online and technical resources required for the participation in the online focus group.

Research data were collected by the TIM Institute⁴.

The findings for each target group are structured under the following sections⁵:

- ♦ **Topics of interest**
- ♦ **Information sources**
- ♦ **Civic participation**
- ♦ **Election process**
- ♦ **Communication with candidates and parties**
- ♦ **Barriers**
- ♦ **Recommendations**

This report presents only the findings for the variables that have statistical significance and those that appear noteworthy for the readers.

⁴ TIM Institute is a member of ESOMAR, a membership organization representing the interests of data, research and insights professionals at an international level. As a member of ESOMAR, every employee of TIM Institute must work according to the ESOMAR code of conduct and comply with the European Union General Data Protection Regulation. Every employee goes through systematic education on ethics and aspects related to data collection, management and protection.

⁵ The research findings provide opinions and thematic information which vary over time. The sample surveys may be subject to multiple sources of error and unforeseen factors, including sampling, coverage, and measurement errors. Due to the rounding of numbers, the sum of the percentages may not always be 100.

TOPICS OF INTEREST

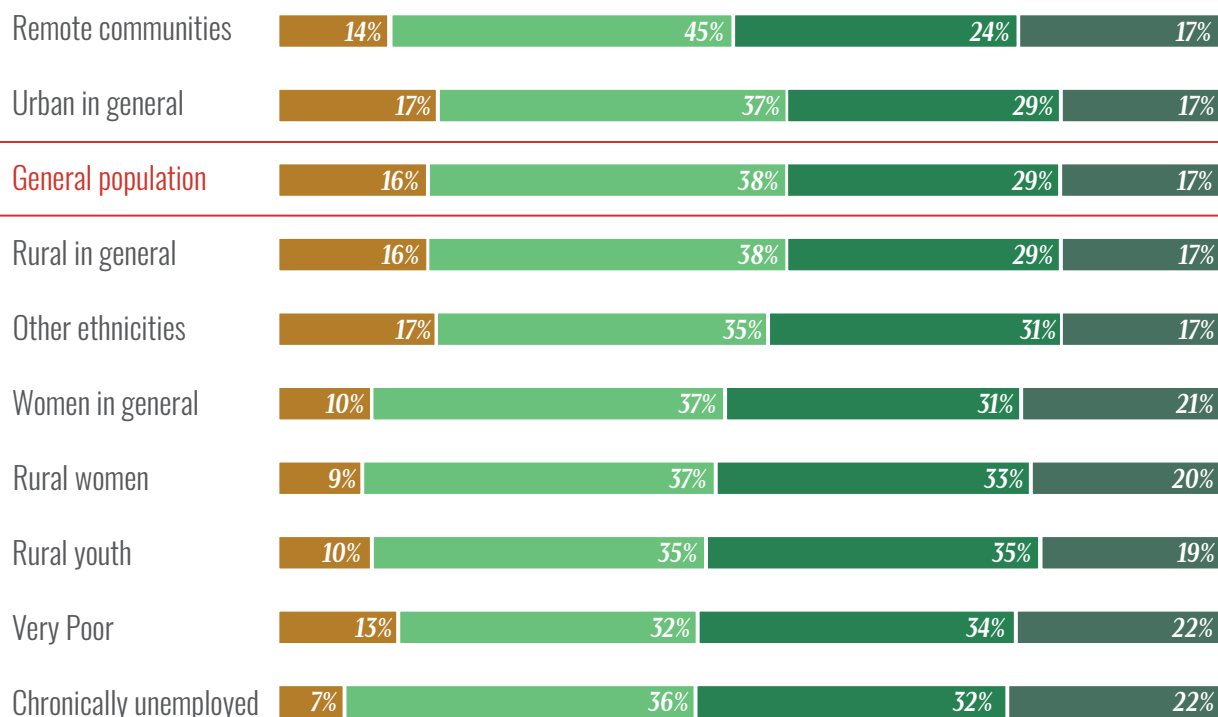
Interest in socio-political developments in the country

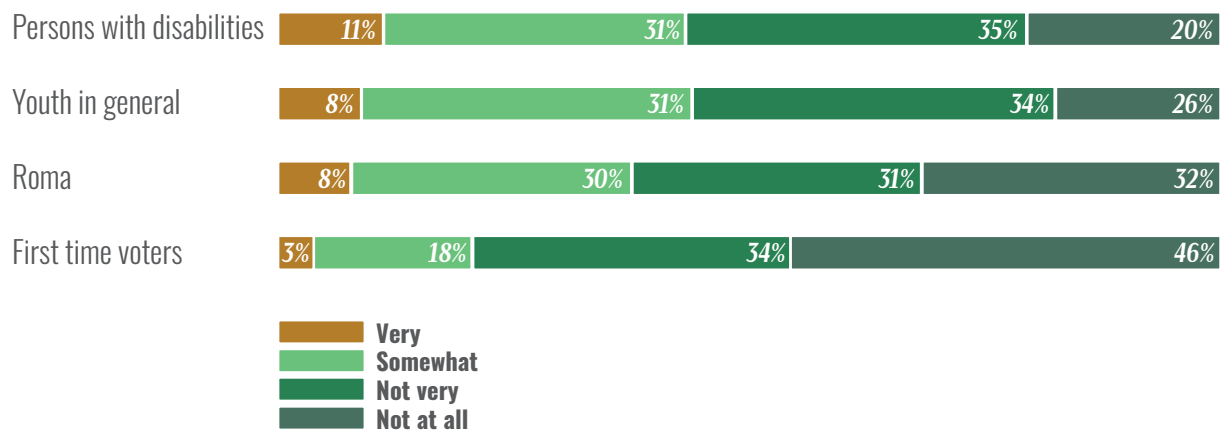
Slightly over half of the general population (54%) are “very” or “somewhat interested” in the current socio-political developments in the country and the world, while almost half of the citizens (46%) are “not at all” or “not very interested”.

In the general population group, the interest in the socio-political developments is more pronounced among:

- ♦ Men
- ♦ Ethnic Macedonians
- ♦ Elderly
- ♦ Citizens with higher education
- ♦ Retirees or public sector employees

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





Compared to the general population, people living in urban areas and those in remote communities tend to be more interested in the socio-political developments in the country and in the world.

Roma and first time voters appear to be the least interested in socio-political developments.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the formation of the new Government rank the highest among the socio-political issues of interest among all demographic groups, which were affected by the developments during the conduct of the survey.

However, there are specifics with regards to the interest in current issues across different demographic groups, mostly related to issues that affect their lives and immediate surroundings.

Youth are mostly interested in education during the pandemic, sports events, entertainment and local cultural events, as well as projects of youth organizations and student exchange programs.

Women share similar concerns with youth about the COVID-19 impact on education processes, kindergartens, unemployment, and youth problems.

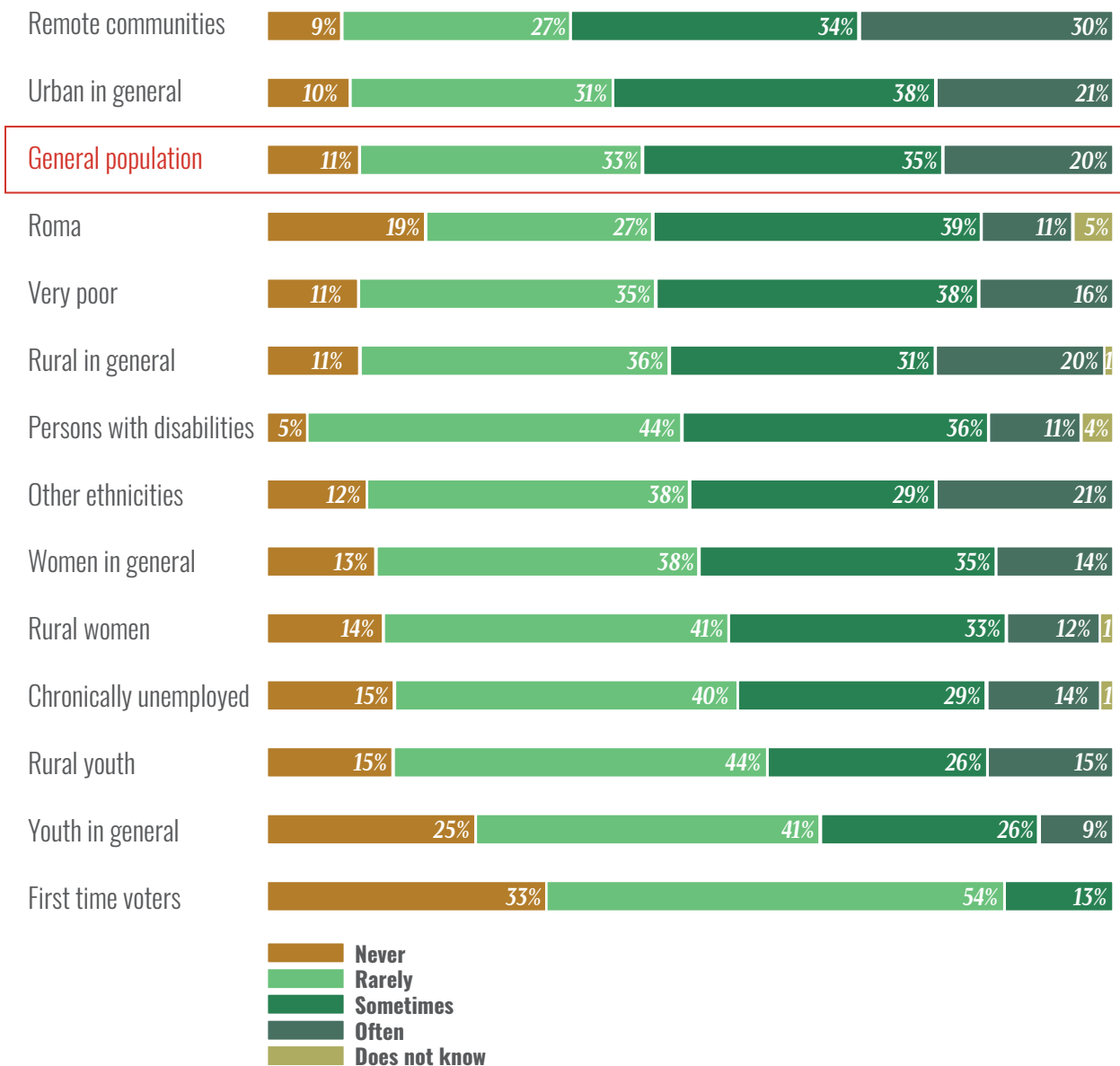
People living in rural settlements and in remote communities are struggling with access to services such as: health care, clean water, electricity, sewerage system, roads, while people in urban settlements are concerned about air pollution in the cities, urbanisation and urban mafia (improper and illegal urban planning and construction work, mostly related to corruption in the local government).

Roma's issues of concern are related to informal Roma settlements, construction of illegal buildings, lack of personal documentation, infrastructure, water supply and sewerage, social and health care.

Persons with disabilities are often faced with isolation in the community where they live. In addition to the unfavourable socio-economic relations of persons with disabilities, there is a need for social protection in all spheres of social life: health care, education, employment and other activities.

Similarly to other marginalized and vulnerable demographic groups, chronically unemployed and very poor people are mostly concerned to “make-ends-meet” due to poor socio-economic conditions. They report being less interested in the socio-political developments as their primary interest is how to survive the day.

How often do you discuss the current political developments in the country?



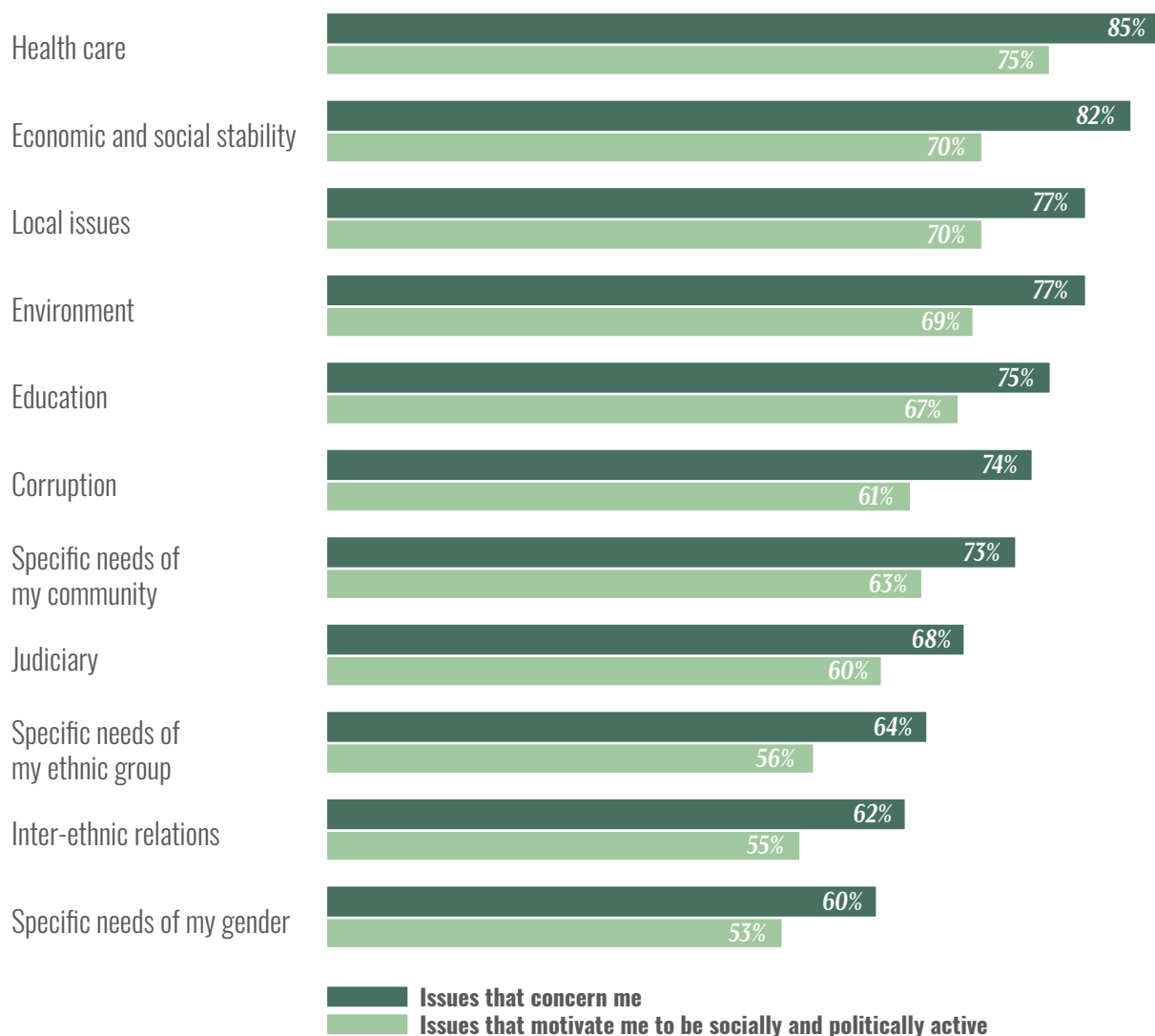
More than half (55%) of the general population sometimes or often discuss the current socio-political developments in the country, while 44% rarely or never do.

Most willing to discuss these issues are people living in remote communities and the urban population, which also show the greatest interest in socio-political developments, whereas the least willing are all youth groups, especially first time voters.

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?



Health care (85%) and economic and social stability (82%) are the most important issues that concern the general population living in the country. These issues are considered the key motivators for their social and political activation.

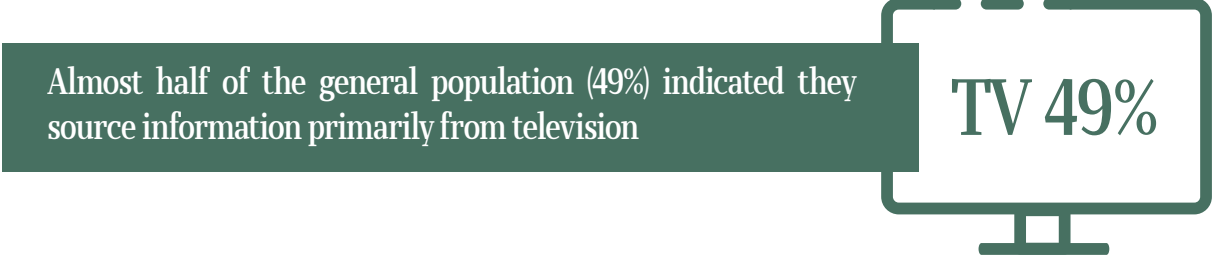
Concerns about these issues are more noticeable among men, older respondents, those with higher education, retirees or employees in the public sector.

All demographic groups are interested in tangible and relatable issues that could improve the quality of their lives. They are less interested in abstract and political issues and care more about health care, economic and social stability, local issues, environment and education. Specific needs related to their gender, their ethnic group and the inter-ethnic relations are of low interest.

Fifty-nine per cent (59%) of women find the specific needs of their gender very or somewhat important, compared to 61% of men. These data indicate that gender issues are of moderate interest for women respondents.

INFORMATION SOURCES

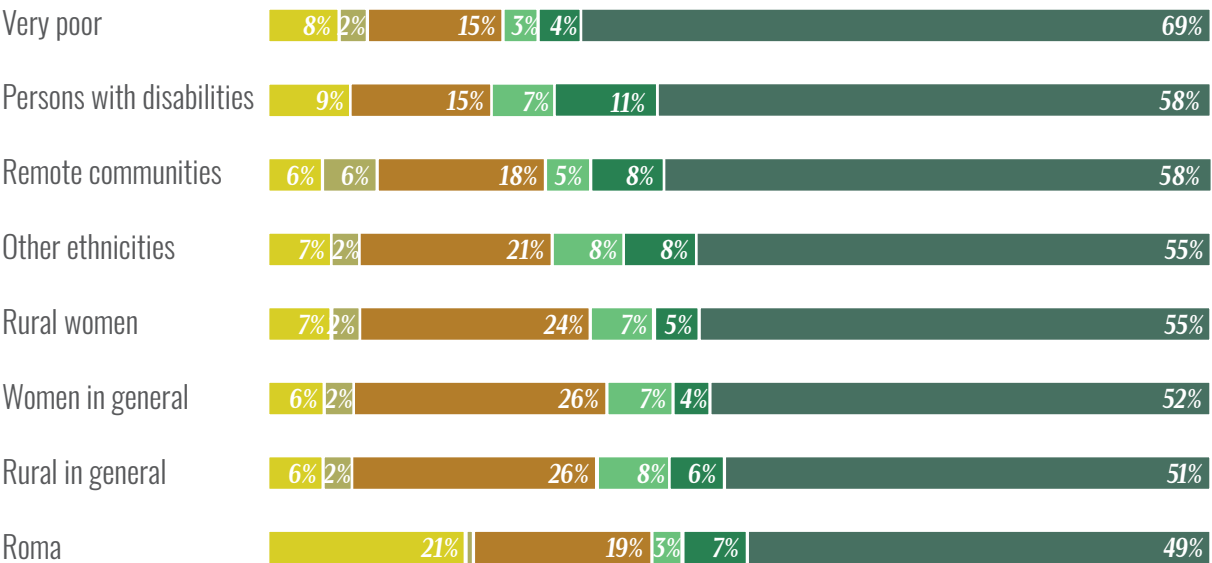
Almost half of the general population (49%) indicated they source information primarily from television and 27% learn about current socio-political developments via social networks. One out of ten citizens tends to get informed via web portals, 5% through their family and friends, while 7% do not seek out information.

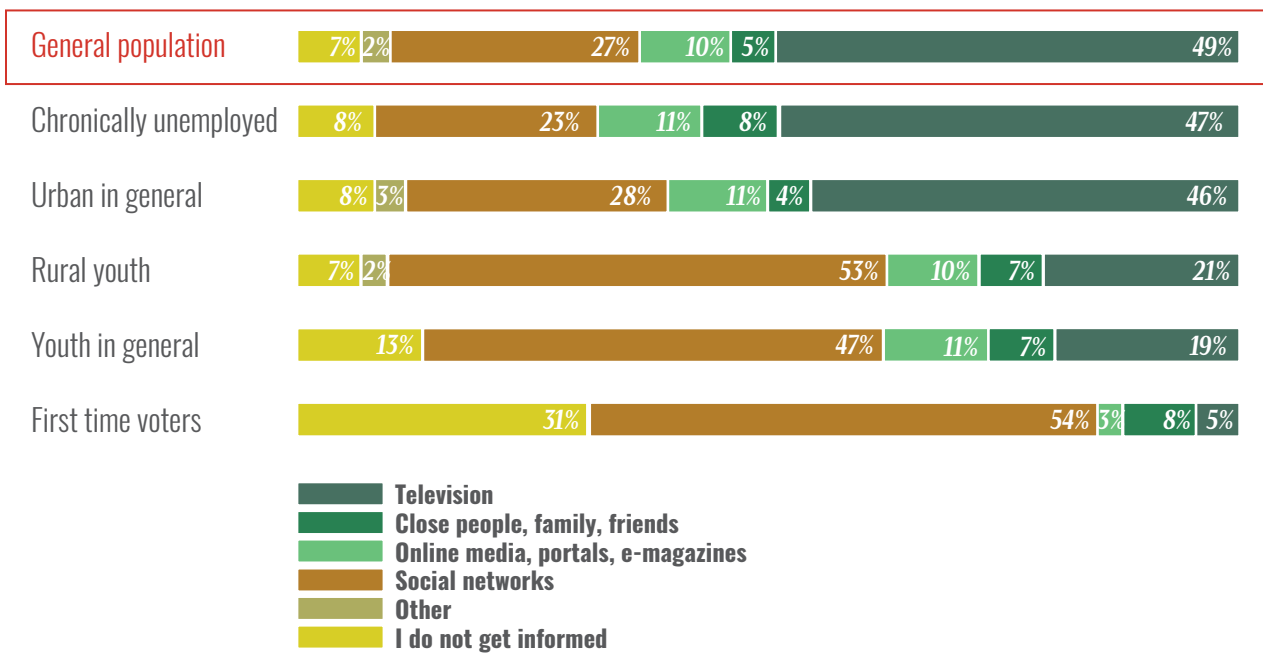


Socio-demographic analysis shows that television is the most commonly used source of information by older respondents, aged 65+ (87%), and least used by the younger respondents, aged up to 24 (20%). Those with lower education tend to get informed via television more (70%) than those with higher education (33%). Retired citizens (83%) and housewives (63%) tend to use TV as a main source of information the most.

Social media is more frequently used by younger respondents, aged up to 24 (52%), students (40%) and those with higher education (35%).

What sources do you most commonly use to get informed about the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world?





As far as demographic groups are concerned, the group of very poor, persons with disabilities, women and people living in remote communities and rural areas (except rural youth) tend to use television more.

All youth groups, especially first time voters and rural youth, source information largely via the social networks.

As noted before, first time voters (31%) and Roma (21%) tend to be less informed about the current socio-political developments in the country and in the world.

Very low trust in the media is common among all demographic groups. There is a widespread perception of the media as biased and prone to proliferation of fake news.

All groups tend to believe that the partial and biased reporting of the media contributes to deepening the gap among the people and causes additional confusion and concerns.

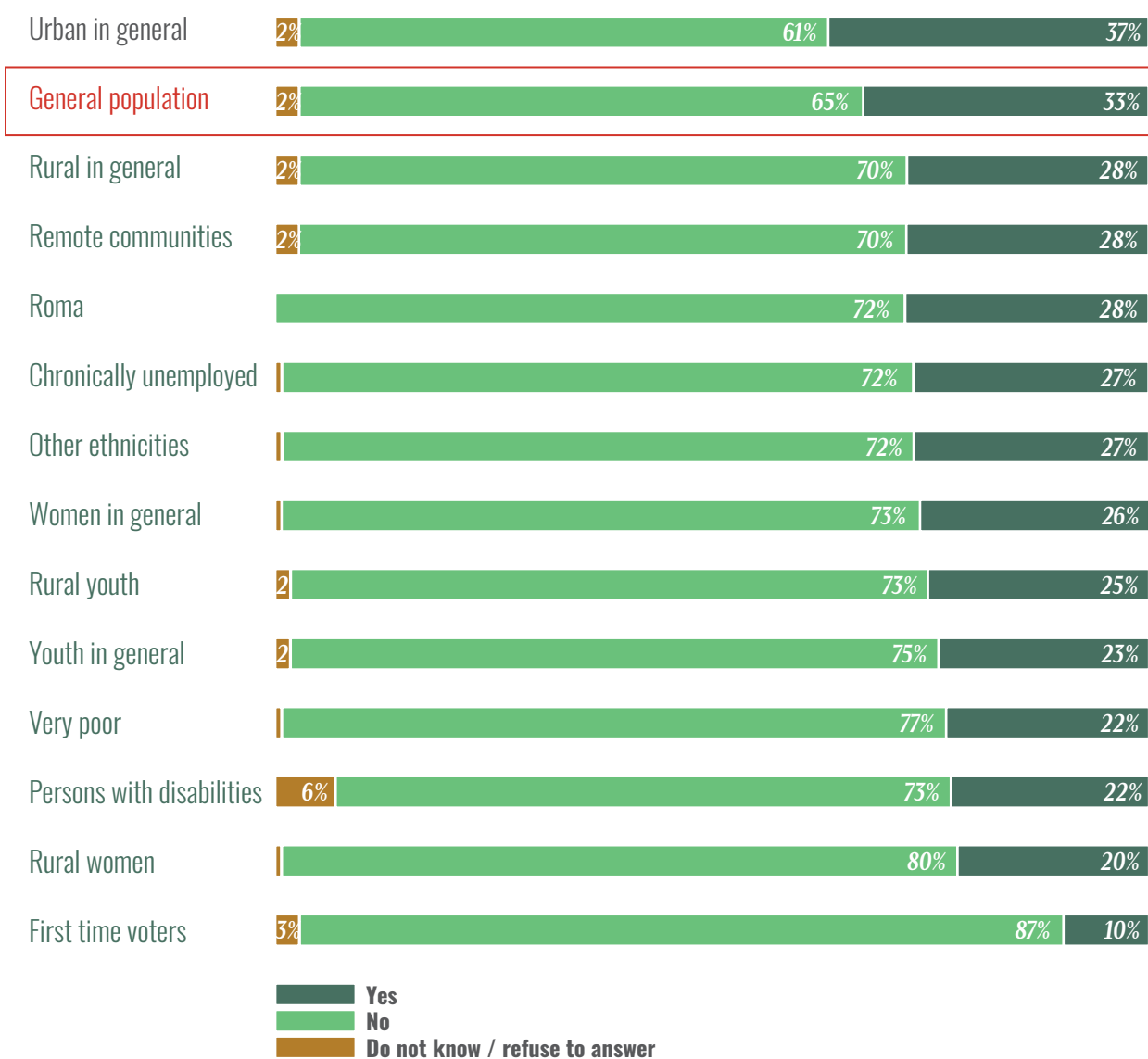
There is a tendency to follow information from several different media in order to compare the presented information and form a personal opinion.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Men tend to be more civically engaged (40%) than women (26%). In addition, respondents with higher education (46%) are significantly more engaged compared to those with secondary (32%) and primary education (17%).

One third of the population has been involved, whereas two thirds have never been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected change in the community or the place where they live.

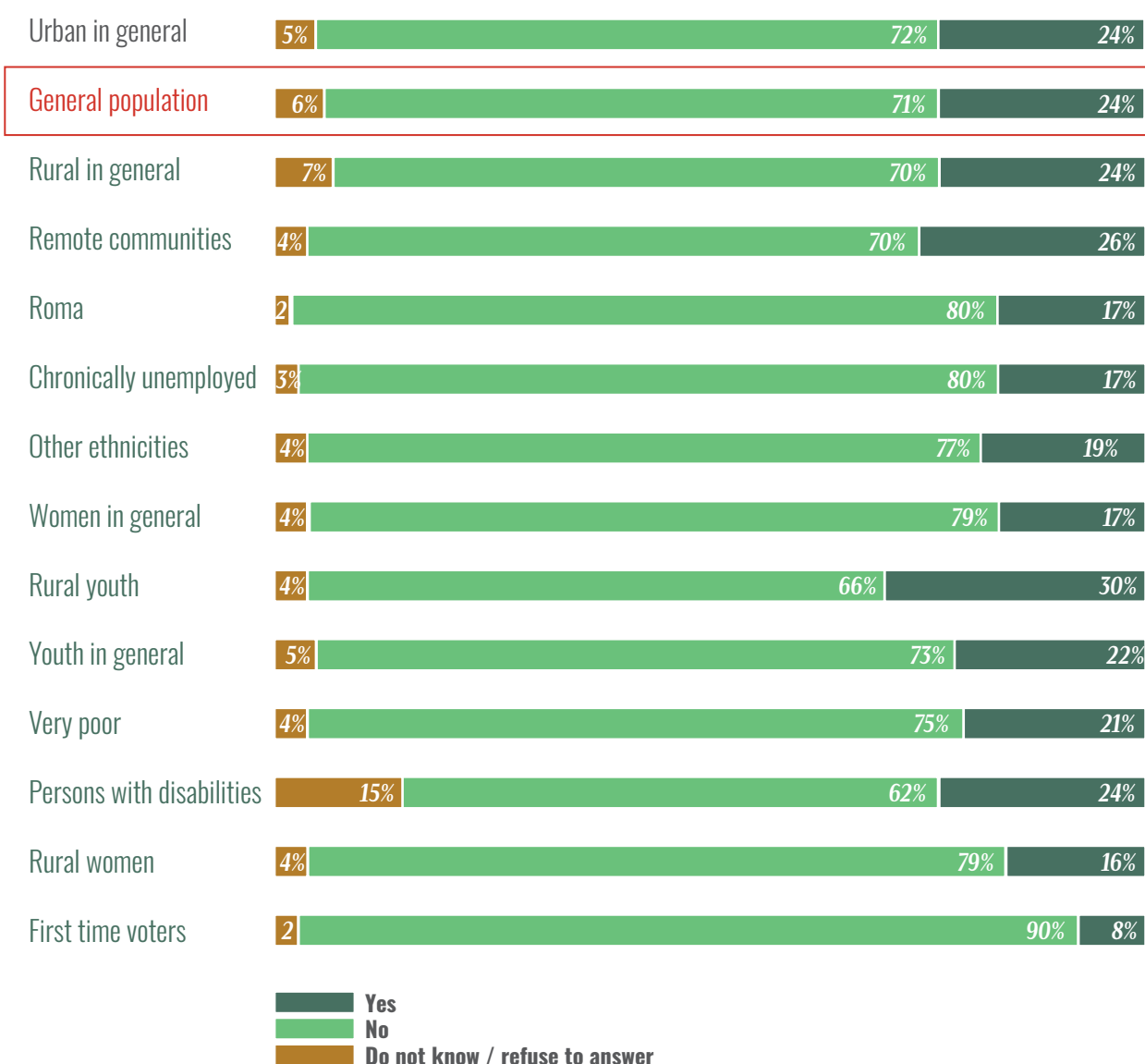
Have you been involved in any event, activity, or process that could have effected any change in the community or the place where you live?



The urban population tends to be the most civically engaged among all demographic groups, likely due to the privileged access to NGOs, availability of participation channels, and higher level of education and social status.

The least engaged are the first time voters, rural women and persons with disabilities.

Are you interested in a more active civic involvement?



Nearly one quarter of the general population (24%) is interested in a more active civic involvement, while 71% do not share this interest.

People living in rural areas (especially rural youth), remote communities and persons with disabilities are the most interested in civic activism. These groups (especially persons with disabilities) have been less involved compared to the general population, likely due to lack of access or opportunities to participate.

The likelihood for recurrent civic engagement is lower compared to the rate of previous engagements, since only 24% of the general population show interest to engage more, compared to 33% who report previous involvement.

The findings show that people with a previous track record of civic activism tend to be disappointed with the results of their actions.

The focus groups provide indications of the reasons for the low civic involvement along with the factors of participation specific to different demographic groups.

The factors common to all demographic groups that contribute to low civic participation can be summarized as follows:

Mindset

- ♦ Indifference and passiveness.
- ♦ Lack of will, perseverance, and proactiveness to resolve problems.
- ♦ Insufficient motivation to persevere in pursuing initiatives.
- ♦ Unwillingness to take up responsibility.

Focus on personal benefits

- ♦ Focus on personal instead of collective interests.
- ♦ Lack of unity and collective action to achieve goals.
- ♦ No solidarity and lack of common goals.

Fear of labeling and retaliation

- ♦ Political parties attribute civic activities to opponent parties and label civic activities as politically motivated.
- ♦ People fear retaliation (fear of losing their employment or having expressed dissatisfaction).

Family, education, and social system

- ♦ Education system that does not stimulate students' civic participation.
- ♦ Family system that fails to nurture proactive children.
- ♦ Social system that does not recognize, stimulate or award youth activity.

Institutions

- ♦ Institutions are perceived as not responsive to citizens' demands.
- ♦ Employees in public institutions lack competence, motivation, and enthusiasm.
- ♦ Networking instead of merit dominates career prospects.
- ♦ Institutions lack transparency, responsiveness, and accountability.

Strong party influence and concentration of power in the political parties

- ♦ Strong political influence in the public institutions and the private sector.
- ♦ Strong division among citizens along political lines.
- ♦ Politically biased non-governmental organizations.

Disappointment and loss of faith

- ♦ There is a widespread perception that civic initiatives are ineffective.
- ♦ People are disappointed and lack trust in the state institutions.
- ♦ Citizens feel helpless and powerless.

Lack of information

- ♦ Lack of information where to report problems.
-

The factors outlined below are specific only to certain demographic groups.

- ♦ The very poor, chronically unemployed and Roma indicate that they are preoccupied with basic survival. Dealing with existential problems on a daily basis is an additional reason why these demographic groups have limited time and resources for civic involvement.
- ♦ In addition to the challenges faced by both genders, women, especially the rural group, have been traditionally expected to provide family-related care, which diminishes their leisure time and opportunities to engage in civic activities. Furthermore, engrained gender prejudices and stereotypes about women in the society (caregivers, irrational, unassertive and not confident) are demotivating factors specific for women.
- ♦ Persons with disabilities face other types of challenges including unresponsive institutions, limited access to public facilities, as well as stereotypes that they avoid work and civic activity. Cumulatively, these factors contribute to the low civic engagement of this group.

Factors that promote involvement

Genuine responsiveness of the system is the key motivator for the general population to become more involved in activities that could influence change in the community, as noted by 28% of the respondents. Other motivating factors concern personal or family benefits (14%), representation of their interests (13%) and transparency and accountability of the institutions (12%). These factors tend to be common across all demographic groups. The key motivating factor for civic involvement is the responsiveness of the system as noted by the youth, rural youth, first time voters, urban population, women, rural women, rural population, chronically unemployed, and other ethnicities.

Community interaction (4%), improving democracy (7%), and societal impact (7%) are the factors that promote civic involvement the least among all demographic groups.

Few groups such as persons with disabilities, very poor, people living in remote communities and Roma, are primarily motivated by obtaining personal or family benefits.

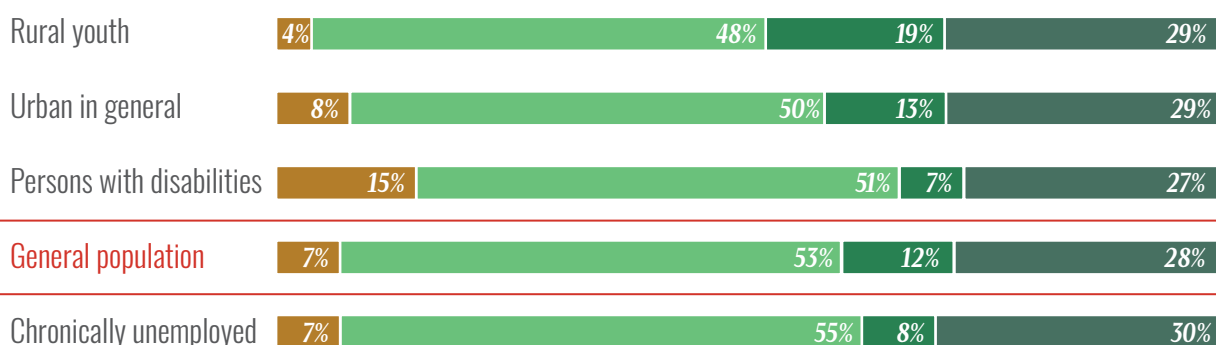
Slightly over half of the general population (53%) do not believe they can make an impact as a citizen, while more than one quarter (28%) consider that they can make a meaningful impact in their municipality.

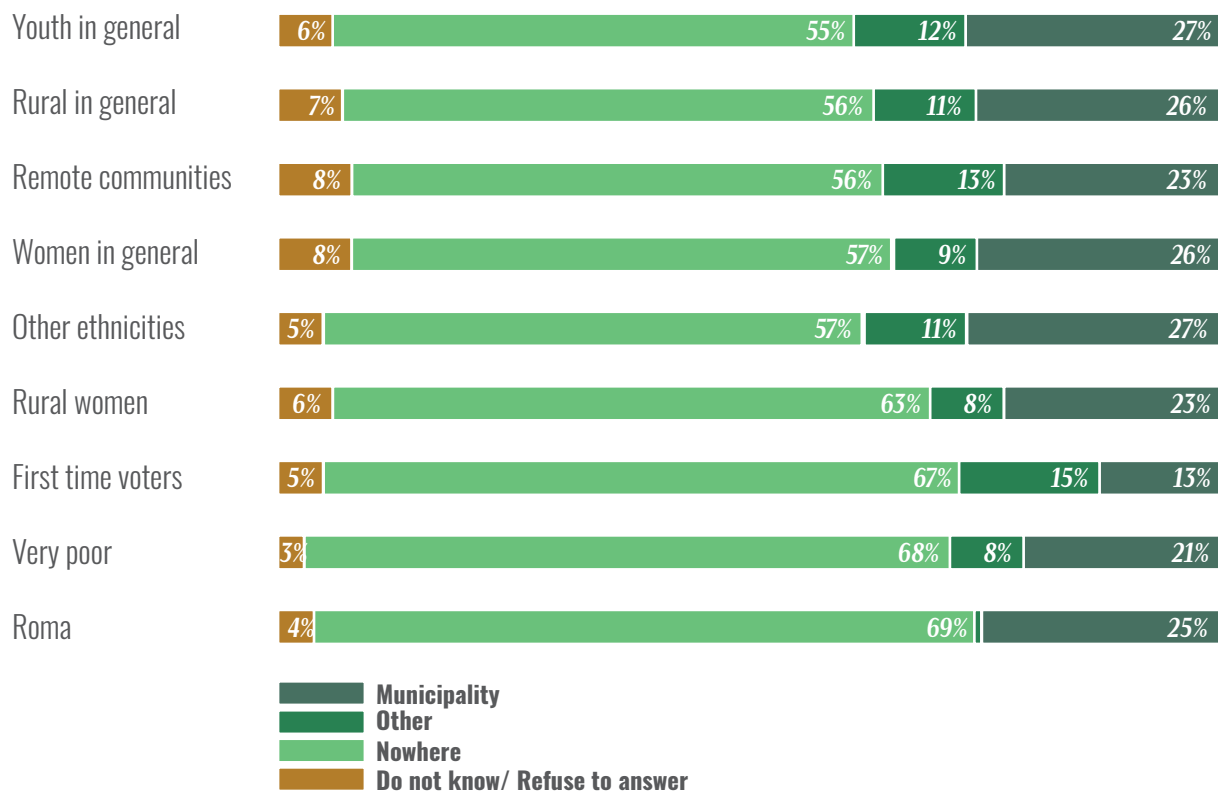
More women (57%) than men (48%) believe they cannot make an impact as a citizen. Respondents from other minorities (Turks, Roma, Serbs, etc.) tend to be more skeptical of their impact as citizens (65%), compared to the ethnic Albanians (55%) and ethnic Macedonians (50%).

In addition, among the general population, disbelief in one's own impact is most noticeable among:

- Younger respondents, aged up to 24 (58%),
- Respondents with primary education (68%),
- Low-income group - up to 12.000 MKD (70%),
- Housewives (83%), farmers (65%) and chronically unemployed (58%).

Where do you think you can have the greatest impact as a citizen?





Comparison between different demographic groups shows that Roma, very poor and first time voters are the most skeptical that they can have a civic impact, followed by rural women and people from other ethnic communities.

Willingness and ability to participate in civic activities

Concerning participation in public life, the general population cited a preference to meeting colleagues/friends to discuss an issue of personal or family concern (46%), whereas a significant percentage prefer responding to a questionnaire (44%) and reading a brochure or a leaflet (44%). A significantly smaller portion of the respondents are willing to participate in public debates (21%), party gatherings (19%) and online meetings (17%).

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

44%

Respond a questionnaire



44%

Read a brochure or a leaflet



46%

Meet colleagues, friends to discuss



In general, women and respondents with lower education report less interest to participate in the activities mentioned above.

Compared to the general population and other demographic groups, youth (11%), rural youth (15%), first time voters (10%), women (12%), rural women (8%) and the unemployed (11%) are less inclined to participate in party gatherings.

The research shows that 58% of the respondents do not believe in making positive change by individual engagement (35%) or by engagement in NGOs, and as members or participants in NGO activities (23%), while 25% lack interest in politics, which explains the low motivation for civic participation.

Women, younger respondents, respondents from other ethnic minorities and those with lower education tend to indicate lack of interest in politics.

ELECTION PROCESS

Widespread negative perception about voting in elections is notable among all demographic groups.

The negative association of elections common for all demographic groups can be summarized as follows:

Empty promises

- ♦ “demagogy”, “fake promises”, “lies”, “good acting”, “asphalting” “salary and pension raise”

Charade

- ♦ “soap opera”, “complete madness” “people and politicians live in parallel universes”

Unnecessary

- ♦ “waste of the state budget”, “too frequent”, “in vain”

Decided by the international factor

- ♦ “prearranged”, “the international factor is the decisive factor for the election outcome”, “does not reflect people’s will”, “decided by the USA”

Bad election campaigns

- ♦ “expensive pre-election campaigns”, “attacks and slander instead of good party programs”

Fear and pressures

- ♦ “strong political pressure”, “fear of job loss”, “political pressure and blackmailing”, “fear among the citizens”

Election irregularities

- ♦ “framed results”, “manipulation”, “forgery“, “corruption” “green market”, “bribing votes”

More of the same

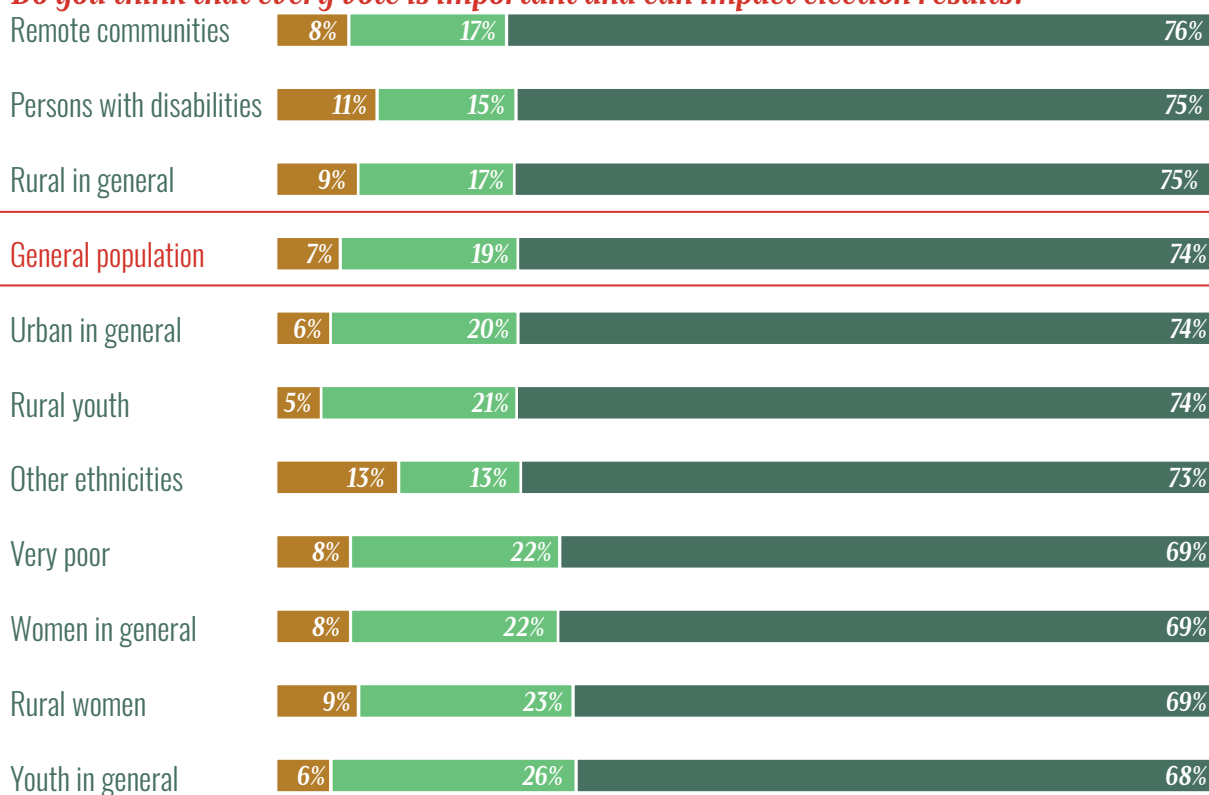
- ♦ “stagnation”, “no changes, the same people”

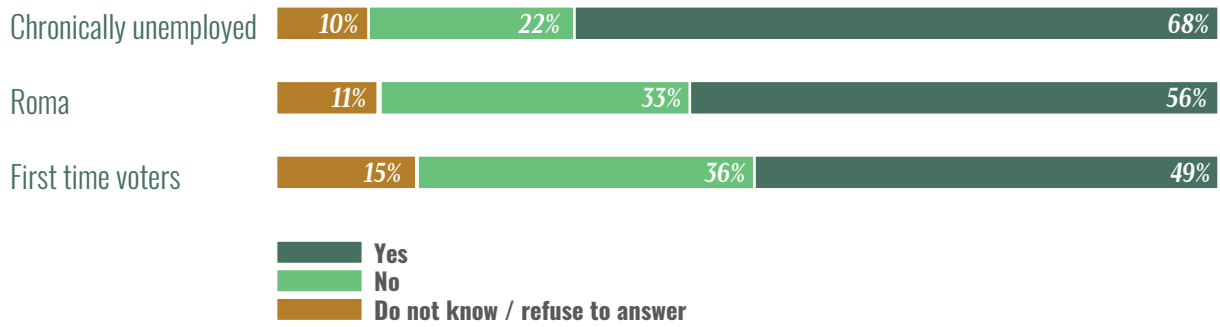
The focus group findings show that a portion of the participants believe that the Election Day proceeds peacefully, with no significant irregularities, compared to the elections in 2000 which were marred by incidents, gun fires, and breaking and filling in ballot boxes. However, they note that pressures, intimidation, political employments, and bribes persist.

Nearly three quarters of the respondents believe every vote is important and can impact election results (74%), while 19% do not believe in the importance of voting.

More women (22%) than men (15%) do not believe in the importance of voting. More sceptical are younger respondents (28%), and least sceptical are older ones (13%). As far as ethnicity is concerned, disbelief in the importance of every vote is most noticeable among ethnic Albanians (26%) compared to other ethnic minorities (20%) and ethnic Macedonians (16%).

Do you think that every vote is important and can impact election results?

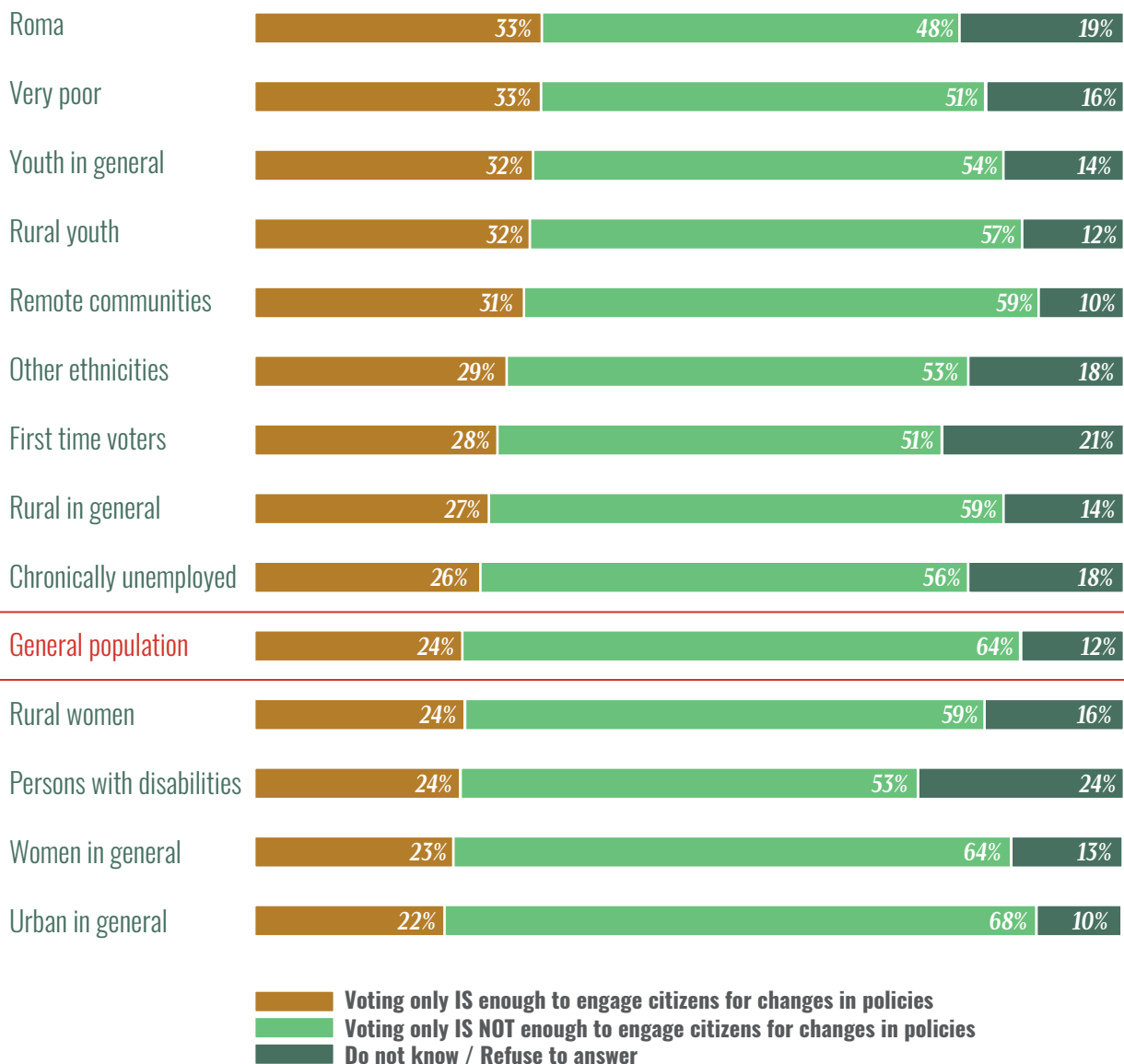




Comparison between different groups shows that first time voters and Roma are the most skeptical about the effects of voting, while people living in remote communities, persons with disabilities, and the rural population are the least.

Almost two thirds of the respondents (64%) believe that voting is not sufficient to bring about policy change, one quarter believe so, while 12% are not aware.

Which of the following statements best reflects your opinion?



Motivation to vote

Fifty-six per cent (56%) of the general population indicate they vote regularly, 20% often, 12% sometimes, 6% usually abstain and 4% regularly abstain from voting.

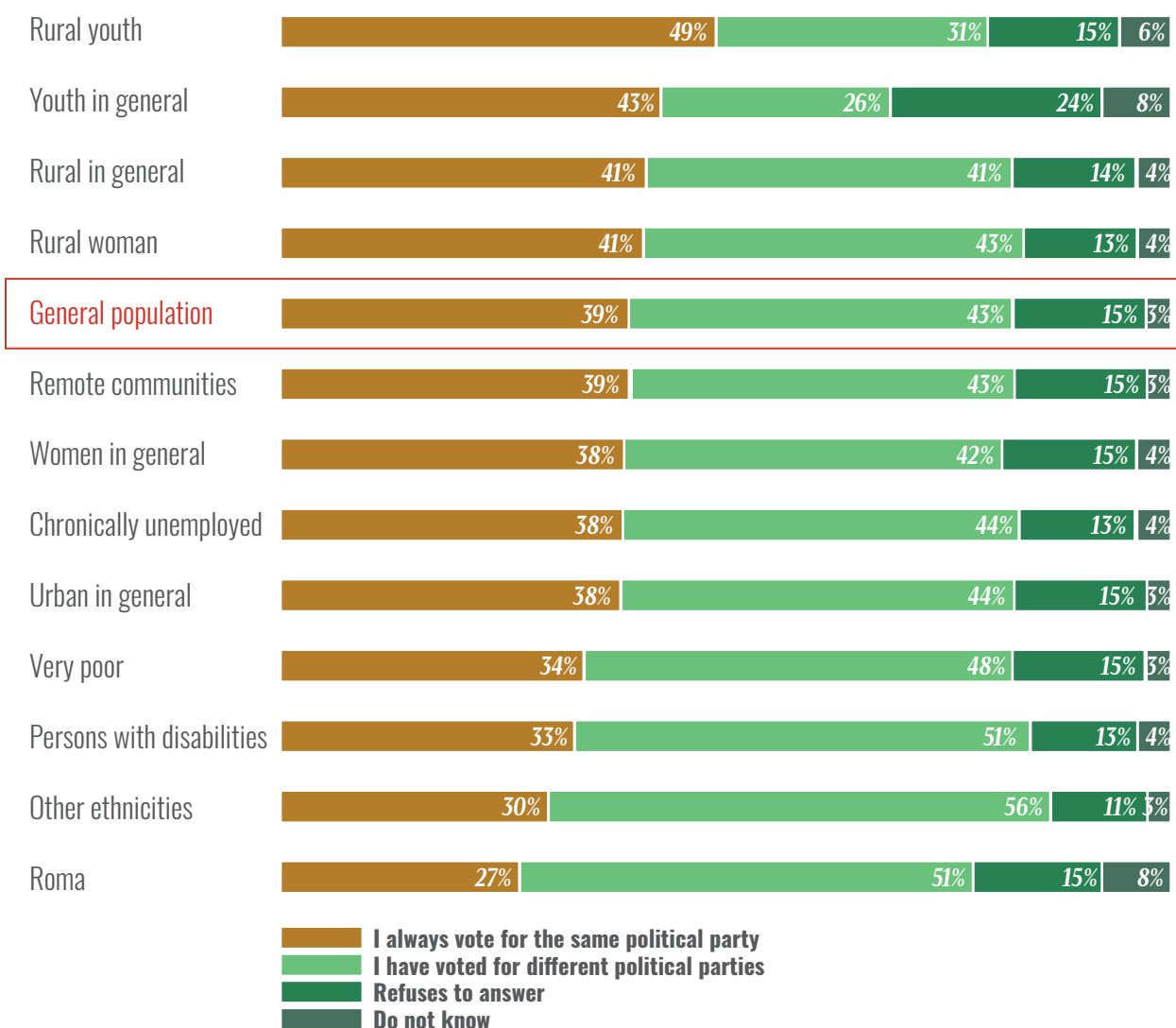
Older citizens (87%), those with higher education (82%), public sector employees (91%), and retired citizens (85%) are the most regular voters during different election cycles.

Compared to the general population, there are more regular voters among people living in remote communities (79%) and other ethnic communities (78%) and less regular voters among persons with disabilities (54%), youth (60%) and Roma (63%). There are more regular voters among ethnic Macedonians (81%) compared to ethnic Albanians (66%)

Forty-three per cent (43%) of the citizens vote for different political parties during different election cycles, whereas 39% regularly vote for the same party.

There are no significant differences with regards to the party loyalty across gender, ethnicity, education and household incomes for the general population.

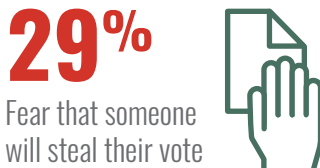
Which of the following best describes you?



Compared to the general population, the rural population is more likely to vote for the same political party, whereas Roma, other ethnic communities and persons with disabilities are most likely to give their vote to different political parties.

Factors that influence the decision to vote

The top three factors that positively influence citizens' turnout are: perception that voting is a civic right and duty (56%), prospects for a better future (42%) and fear that their vote would be misused (29%).

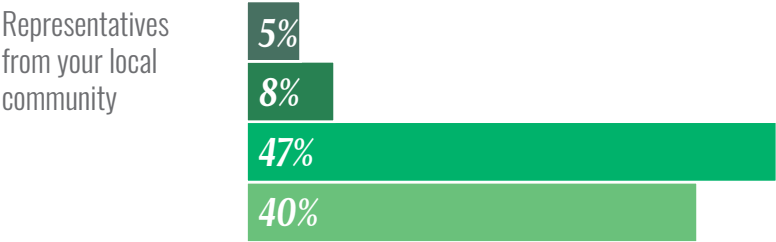
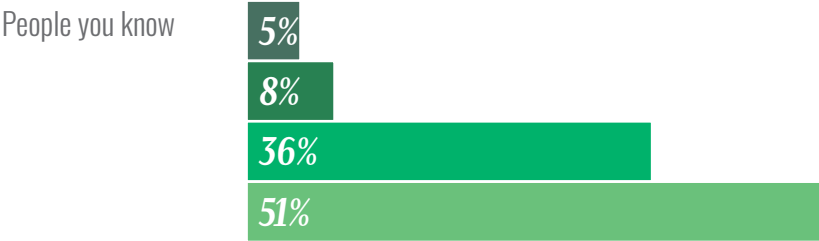


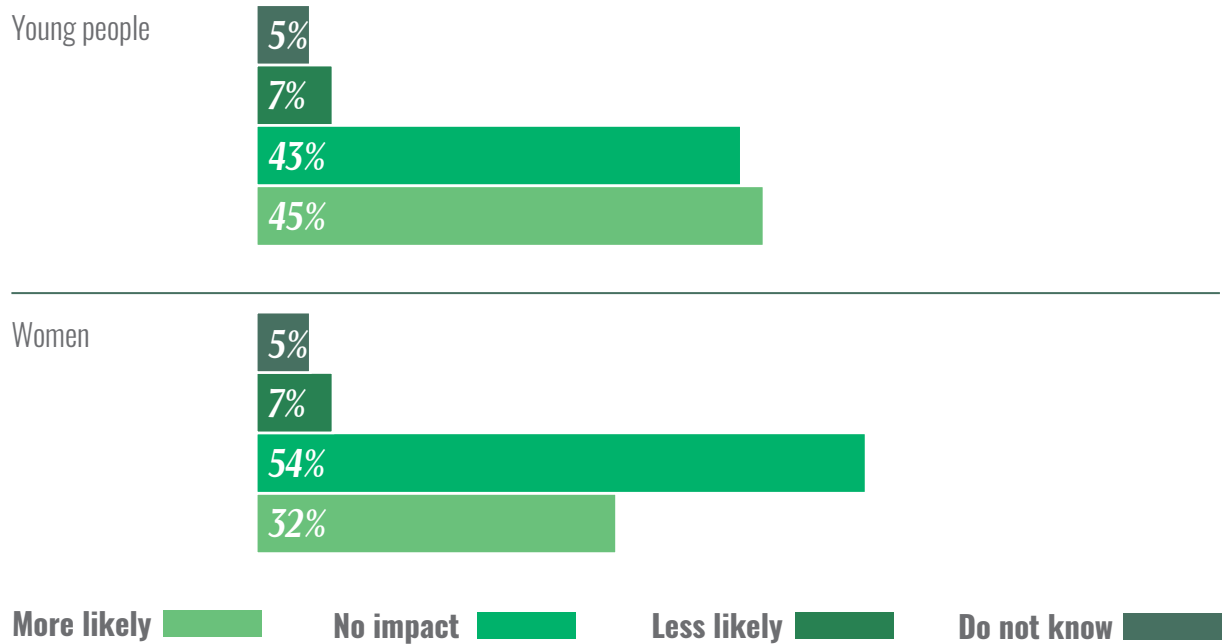
The factors that positively influence citizens' turnout are the same for all demographic groups. Of these, the perception that voting as a civic right and duty tends to be the most important factor for all groups, except for the first time voters who tend to vote to ensure prospects for a better future.

Sixty per cent (60%) of the population indicate that their voting preference is the same or most often the same as that of their families, while 29% state that they vote the same or most often the same as their friends. There is no significant differences across different ethnic groups.

Citizens would like to see more people they know, young people, representatives from their local community and women on the candidate lists. There is no significant differences across different ethnic groups.

If there are representatives of the following groups on the candidate lists, how likely is it that you would vote for that political party?





Women prefer other women on the candidate lists (41%), especially rural women (44%), while youth (51%), women (48%) and Roma (51%) prefer young representatives.

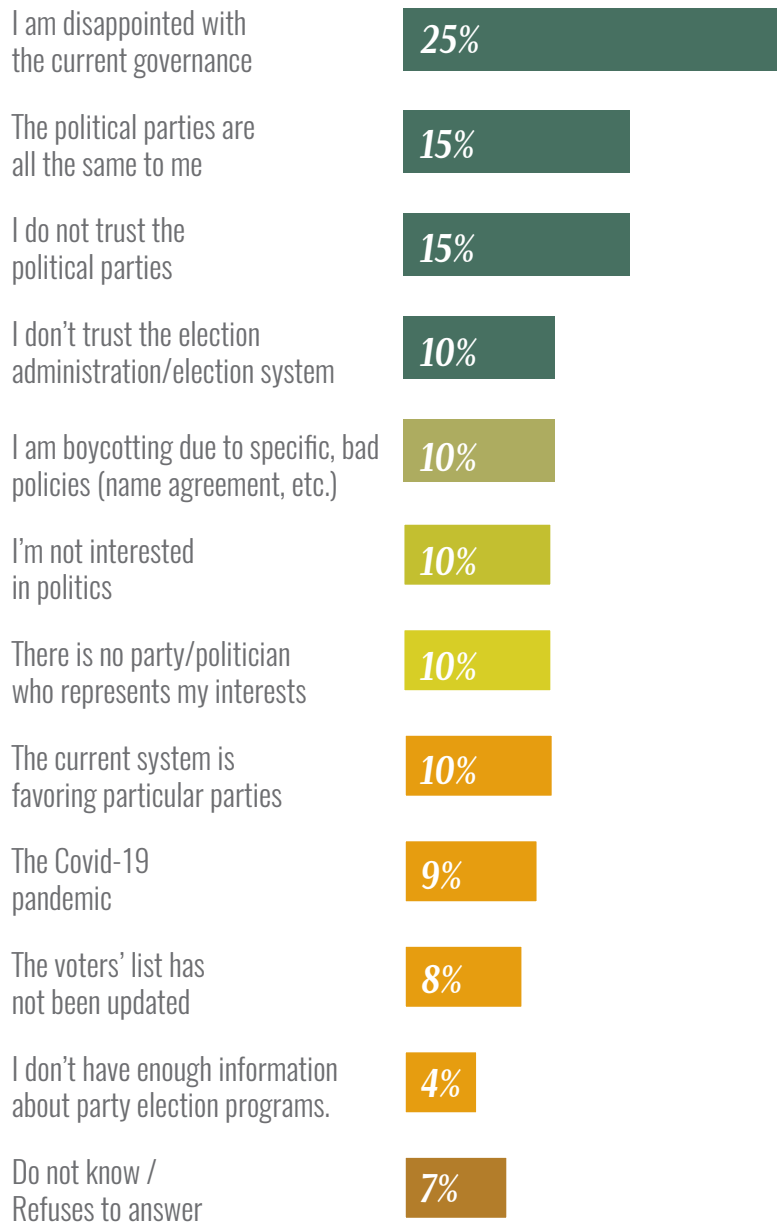
Rural representatives on candidate lists are important for the rural population, but have no impact on other demographic categories.

Roma citizens (59%) are more likely to vote for a political party if the candidate lists include Roma representatives. As far as other demographic groups are concerned, Roma are the least preferable representatives. One quarter of the general population, 28% of the rural population and 31% of the people living in remote communities indicate they are less likely to vote for a political party if Roma representatives are on the candidate lists.

Demotivation to vote

In general, the dissatisfaction with the governance and the political parties demotivates people to go out and vote.

What can influence your decision not to vote?

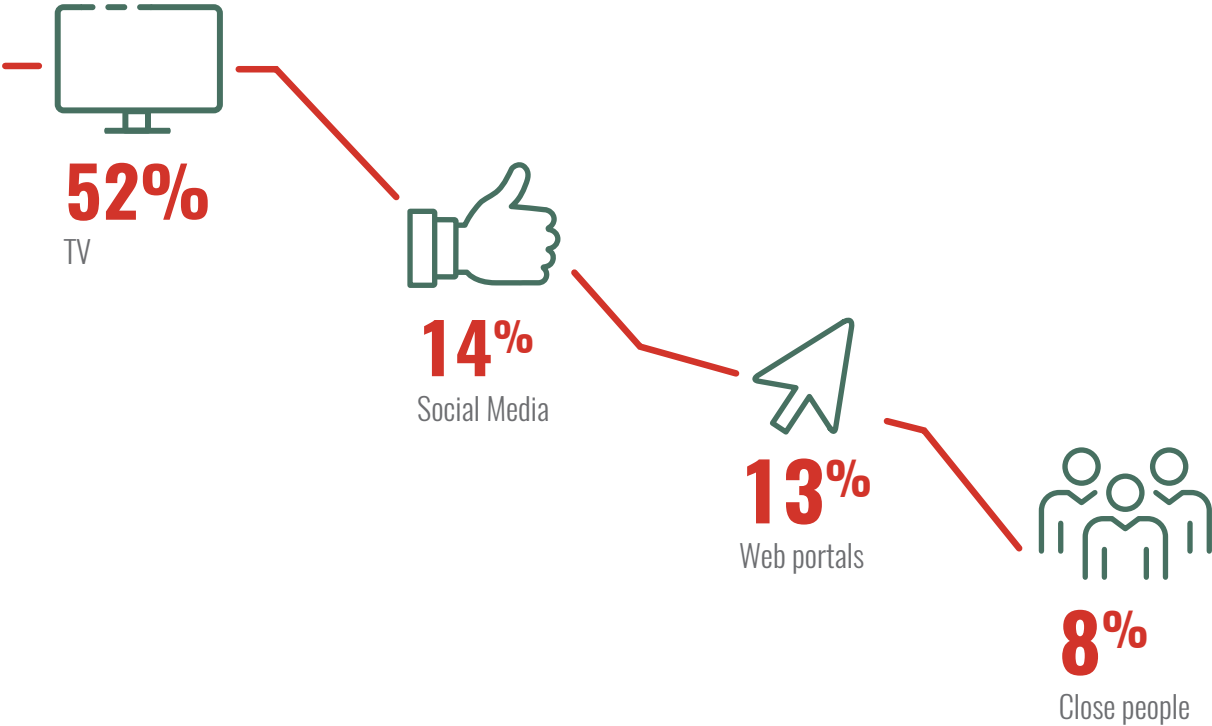


Different demographic groups (urban population, youth, women) indicate that an increasing number of citizens decide not to vote due to dissatisfaction with the political parties in the country. Despite the prevailing opinion that voting is a civic duty, the focus group findings show that many demographic groups (youth, women, people with disabilities) believe that abstention from voting is a legitimate behavior by which to express disappointment and revolt against the political parties that fail to fulfill promises.

Furthermore, all demographic groups believe that the political parties are not interested to be more responsive to the needs of the citizens.

COMMUNICATION WITH CANDIDATES AND PARTIES

TV (52%), social media (14%), web portals (13%), and friends and family members (8%) are the predominant sources of election information.



TV is more frequently used by respondents aged above 65 (84%) compared to respondents aged up to 24 (29%), respondents with primary education (69%) compared to those with higher education (39%), and those with income lower than 12.000 MKD (69%) compared to respondents with income higher than 60.000 MKD (39%).

The predominant sources of election information for different demographic groups are similar to those about socio-political development in the country and in the world.

As noted, the very poor, persons with disabilities, women, other ethnic communities and people living in remote communities and rural areas (except rural youth) use television as a predominant source of election information.

All youth groups, especially first time voters mostly get informed about elections via social networks.

Compared to the general population and other demographic groups, first time voters are least informed about elections, and 21% indicated they do not get informed at all.

Various newscasts (48%) and debates (32%) are the most useful methods of obtaining election information, whereas one in ten (11%) indicate that they do not get informed about elections at all.

Preference for debates is more noticeable among:

- ♦ Men.
- ♦ Ethnic Macedonians.
- ♦ People with higher education.
- ♦ People with higher monthly household income.

Preference for newscasts is more noticeable among persons with disabilities, other ethnic communities, poor and women.

With regards to the type of communication with the candidates before elections, respondents prefer to be informed regularly about the previous achievements and results of the candidates (21%), by the media (18%), via personal communication door-to-door (16%) and in person, but in smaller groups (15%).

The least preferred are the political party programs (5%), rallies (3%), and communication via social media (10%).

The preference for different types of communication with party candidates **before elections** is similar between different demographic groups. However, few specifics should be noted.

The youth is largely reliant on social media as a type of communication, whereas all other groups are less so. Persons with disabilities prefer media, while people living in remote communities, rural women and Roma prefer in-person communication in smaller groups over personal door-to-door communication.

There is a widespread perception among different demographic groups, especially among the rural population and the remote communities, that the parties visit the communities and contact the citizens only in the pre-election period. Respondents believe that party members cater to their own needs more than to those of the citizens, and are solely guided by political marketing and the number of expected votes.

The most preferable types of communication with the candidates in the period between elections are the same: information about previous achievements and results of the candidates (20%), media (18%), personal door-to-door communication (15%) and in person communication. but in smaller groups (16%). Again, rallies, party programs and social media are at the bottom of the list.

Focus groups findings provide an explanation about the respondents' general lack of interest in political party programs. The belief is that the programs are identical with those from previous elections, "about 80% copy-paste", and the parties fail to fulfill the promises. Therefore, the citizens are reluctant to read a lengthy political party program (sometimes over 300 pages).

In addition, there is a perception, especially among the chronically unemployed, that the political parties' programs offer unrealistic solutions to problems. They make generous promises in the pre-election period such as foreign investments, high average salaries, employments. However, once in office, they forget about the people, especially those who are not members of their political party.

The very few respondents who expressed interest in the political parties' programs do so out of curiosity to find out what promises the political parties make, evaluate how tangible and manageable they are, or see if they cater to their needs.

BARRIERS

Representative democracy can only work when citizens are well informed, actively engaged in voting and other civic activity, and equipped with the skills of advocacy, debating, negotiation, and leadership. Yet, the research shows that almost half of the population is not interested in the socio-political developments in the country, with the exception of the elderly ethnic Macedonian men, with previous experience in public services. Increasing the interest and participation of other demographic groups is of paramount importance and it is the subject of analyses and recommendations in other sections of the Report.

The research has identified a set of common barriers for all groups that affect their willingness and ability to be politically and civically active. These, in addition to a range of barriers deriving from the socio-economic status and previous experience, inform their attitudes and behaviour. The barriers specific to each group are the subject of analysis of the group-specific reports.

The research has identified the following barriers to political and civic involvement experienced by all demographic groups:

- ♦ No established culture for civic activism and participation in all demographic groups, especially among rural, vulnerable groups and women.
- ♦ Lack of participation channels.
- ♦ Skepticism about their power to influence politics and policies in the country.

- ♦ Poor responsiveness of the system – lack of interest for citizens’ concerns or capacity to act upon it.
- ♦ Lack of civic and political skills. Even an informed voter needs more tools to become a full participant in civic life. To make communities better, engaged citizens need to learn the skills of communication, networking, as well as running for public office.
- ♦ Fear of pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In response to these identified challenges and barriers, a set of interventions are recommended that may effectively contribute to improving civic and political participation:

Raise awareness about the importance of participation in socio-political life and civic activism among the general population, especially among the youth, women, people with disabilities and the vulnerable groups.

- ♦ Focus on outlining the benefits from civic engagement: talk about tangible benefits that improve life quality.
- ♦ Connect social and political participation to issues that affect the quality of life: health, economic stability, ecology as the most common. When talking to specific demographic groups relate to their specific topics of interest (e.g. youth and education).
- ♦ Promote positive examples of activism. Examples should be demographically diverse (women, youth, other ethnicities, vulnerable groups, etc).
- ♦ Demonstrate the power of the group by initiating civic projects and activities with tangible goals (eco-initiatives, humanitarian activities, social projects).
- ♦ Identify role models and influencers and promote their activities and impact, especially among the younger population and women.
- ♦ Promote NGO activities and visibility.

Promote channels and procedures to encourage participation in the civic life

People tend to lack information about the channels for participation in the socio-political life or they lack opportunities thereof. This is especially the case for the young, inexperienced, and vulnerable groups, such as the very poor or chronically unemployed group.

- ♦ Educate the general population about the ways, formats and institutions where people can actively participate.
- ♦ Reach out to marginalized communities and help them familiarize about participation channels.
- ♦ Create more participation opportunities for the rural population and people with disabilities. While rural youth, people in remote communities and people with disabilities have the highest interest for civic involvement, they lack opportunities to participate or are unaware of the participation channels.

- ♦ Establish alternative channels for participation of rural women tailored to the specific barriers they are facing (lack of time, daily agenda, child care, etc.)
- ♦ Educate the younger population via school/university educational projects for civic and democratic culture.

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

- ♦ Promote positive examples that are recognized and respected by the community. Use examples that prove that activism matters and has the power to correct the society. Consider diversity when choosing examples.
- ♦ Put special focus on promotion of achievements of the unemployed, those with lower education or the very poor community. Skepticism in the power to influence is more pronounced among the vulnerable groups and those with fewer educational or financial resources.
- ♦ Monitor the needs of different groups continuously.
- ♦ Promote smaller community projects and initiatives that tackle various issues of concern, especially those that increase the quality of life.
- ♦ The inexperienced youth groups should be targeted separately and be offered opportunities to participate in relevant projects (education, ecology, human rights, etc).

Improve the negative perception of being under-represented by the elected officials

Despite being a valid barrier for all demographic groups, this is especially emphasized among smaller demographic groups, as well as low-income and low-education groups (very poor, unemployed, Roma).

- ♦ Include and keep issues relevant for these demographic groups in the public agenda of political representatives.
- ♦ Regularly follow up on the communities' concerns in the period between elections.
- ♦ Establish channels for continuous communication with different groups.

Empower by facilitating the development of skills and knowledge for confident civic engagement

Because there is a difference in the level of participation related to education, social status and gender, there is a need to strengthen the capacities of other demographic groups, to increase their confidence and incite participation.

- ♦ Strengthen capacities of low-income and low-education groups, rural communities, Roma etc.
- ♦ Women should be empowered by the development of skills and knowledge to confidently manage their participation without fear of sexist, misogynist abuse and hate speech, intimidation, and violence. Adjust formats to their daily responsibilities and agenda.

Create alliances

With the media (digital and traditional)

- ♦ Contribute to building a culture that encourages civic participation at all levels from different demographic groups. Raise awareness about the benefits of active civic participation.
- ♦ Promote narratives focused on positive civic participation examples, especially those of less active groups (Roma, women, citizens with lower socio-economic status and young).
- ♦ Dedicate more time and space in the programming for covering topics from civic life and activism.
- ♦ Promote channels and ways for civic participation.
- ♦ Promote diversity of candidates (women, youth, rural) during election campaign.
- ♦ Include citizens in debates and talk shows and provide an opportunity to talk about the issues of interest. Debates should be based on the principle of diversity.

With NGOs

- ♦ Promote participation, especially among youngsters, by creating awareness about their role and mission and their potential to impact the quality of life.
- ♦ Create supporting spaces and opportunities for citizens to come together and act on issues they care about. This is especially important for groups that lack confidence and skills to participate as well as for women interested in collaborative participation.
- ♦ Provide guidance and resources that will encourage citizens to confidently participate in civic life.
- ♦ Provide a mechanism that will support dialogue between citizens and the authorities. Advocate for the interests of vulnerable groups that lack the knowledge and skills to initiate dialogue with the authorities.
- ♦ Due to the limited access to NGOs, the rural population, especially the remote communities, would benefit from guidance on establishing participation networks and channels.
- ♦ Promotion of NGOs and their work, especially among groups with lower education and socio-economic status, could help increase their participation.

With influencers/celebrities

Partner with micro-influencers relevant for different demographic groups to promote civic participation.

- ♦ Influencers are regarded as more trustworthy by their followers and therefore better positioned to encourage participation, especially among young people and first-time voters.
- ♦ Influencers also have a great potential to mobilize women for a specific cause and to increase their participation.

- ♦ Influencers should be selected based on their power to influence the community and the degree to which they relate to a specific group.
- ♦ The influencer strategy should ensure diversity of influencers to appeal to various demographic groups.

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

Different media should be used to reach specific demographic groups. Use TV to reach the majority of the population.

TV is especially important to reach the elderly, women, and people on the lower spectrum of income and education.

- ♦ Use formats that give opportunities to contextualize the information and increase its relevance.
- ♦ Use simple language and present the information in an illustrative manner, especially about the voting process, voting rights, reporting election irregularities.
- ♦ Consider other formats in addition to newscasts and debates, editorials, short stories and testimonials that provide perspective into the local concerns and the voting process.
- ♦ Ensure wide outreach by use of translated content or sign language.
- ♦ Use local TV stations to reach the Roma group, rural communities, and other ethnicities.
- ♦ Use a variety of programs (political, entertainment, lifestyle, morning programs, etc.).

Use social media to reach the youth, educated and employed segments of the population

Social media has a great potential to ensure engagement and participation of the youth.

Techniques to consider:

- ♦ Foster two-way communication
- ♦ Promote relevant topics
- ♦ Give space for citizens to be heard
- ♦ Partner with influencers/celebrities
- ♦ Develop candid portrayals of candidates and provide opportunities for the public to interact with them
- ♦ Share your opinion on different issues of interest
- ♦ Inform about the progress of different issues of interest
- ♦ Include a clear call to action

Use other digital media, including web portals and blogs, that have a higher appeal to these segments of the population

Organize direct/face to face meetings or other community events

Building relationships with voters are key to ensuring civic participation. It makes citizens feel appreciated, important and heard.

- ♦ This format is beneficial to ensuring participation of citizens who are reticent and lack the confidence and/or time to participate in the public life (Roma, very poor, unemployed). They tend to participate in the public domain in less formal settings.
- ♦ Due to the busy schedule of rural women and their affinity for direct contacts and meetings, direct and informal meetings can incentivize their participation.
- ♦ The low trust in the media reported by all groups can be countered by organising direct informal meetings and open discussions.
- ♦ These should include coffee gatherings, debates, community projects and other forms of communication.

Pilot other non-traditional channels

- ♦ Consider ways to reach citizens in their daily lives to disseminate information. Choose modalities that fit well with the daily agenda and habits of each group.
- ♦ Consider the use of parks, malls, buses and other facilities to attract the urban population.
- ♦ For the rural, Roma, and vulnerable groups use local stores, open markets, barber shops, food packages, bags, etc.
- ♦ Organize entertaining activities and events to spark interest, especially among the rural population that lacks entertainment.
- ♦ To engage the youth, organize artistic, cultural, or sports activities to strike a balance between education and entertainment.



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