



Sierra Leone's Political Marathon

Volume One: Internal democracy of Political parties - Dec 2025

Following the fallout from Sierra Leone's 2023 election, there is widespread anxiety about the fate of democracy as we prepare for the 2028 election. While much attention is given to the readiness of Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to deliver free, fair, peaceful, and credible elections in 2028, little attention is paid to the preparedness of political parties (Tripartite Committee Report 2024). This imbalance represents a significant oversight in Sierra Leone's ongoing democratic consolidation. Political parties are expected to develop and articulate policy ideas for governing a country. They mobilise the electorate by communicating with citizens and managing supporters' expectations. Thus, the quality of the institutionalisation of political party competition invariably portends the quality of a country's democracy (David Farrell, 2025). Operating in an environment stricken by poverty, primordial orientations, high levels of illiteracy, and decades of political violence, delivering the said expectations has proved to be challenging for political parties in a young democracy like Sierra Leone.

In the run-up to the 2028 elections, IGR is piloting a new series, "Sierra Leone Political Marathon." This quarterly publication investigates pressing issues affecting our democracy, with the aim of raising questions and provoking discussions about how we can improve our democratic culture, hold political institutions accountable, and ensure that the 2028 elections are issue-based and that we, as citizens, can force parties to discuss policies rather than partisanship grounded in ethno-regional ties. In this series of Sierra Leone Political Marathon, we benchmark the preparedness of political parties and their leaders for the 2028 elections. This maiden edition provides a baseline of internal party democracy and responsiveness to emerging opportunities for growth. It focuses on two key objectives: a) to understand the level of inclusivity of party members in decision-making and flagbearer candidate selection; and b) to provide leaders in the SLPP and APC with voters' feedback on the potential flagbearer aspirants and the types of leadership and policy priorities party members want to see on the campaign platform. These are all important, given that parties that are internally participatory, inclusive, and strategically adaptive are better positioned to respond to changing political contexts and the demands of citizens (NDI 2006).

Let us be clear. Both APC and SLPP have internal rules and procedures that determine how candidates are screened and selections made for presidential and parliamentary aspirants. These political parties, therefore, act as useful and necessary gatekeepers, narrowing the list of candidates to a manageable pool and managing internal conflicts. As both parties prepare to nominate party candidates for president and parliament, we explore two questions in this brief to understand voter participation in party primaries: whether decisions on party candidates are centralised (taken by a few people) or participatory. That is, whether ordinary members of the party control the decision-making process for candidate selection. The results will help the two parties deepen internal democratic processes, manage internal conflicts arising from competition, and compete meaningfully in the general election.

I. Methodology

The study employed a nationwide, face-to-face survey methodology conducted between December 9 and 14, 2025, targeting Sierra Leonean adults aged 18 years and above, representing the voting-age population. A total sample of 1,200 respondents was drawn from 150 enumeration areas using probability proportional to population size to ensure national representativeness. The survey results have a margin of error of ± 3 percent at a 95 percent confidence level, adjusted for weighting. Data were collected through in-person interviews in local languages to ensure broad geographic coverage and inclusion of respondents with limited literacy. The research instrument comprised 12 questions, of which two were not reported in this analysis. Both the questionnaire and the findings were subsequently validated through a consultative process involving top executive members of the two political parties.

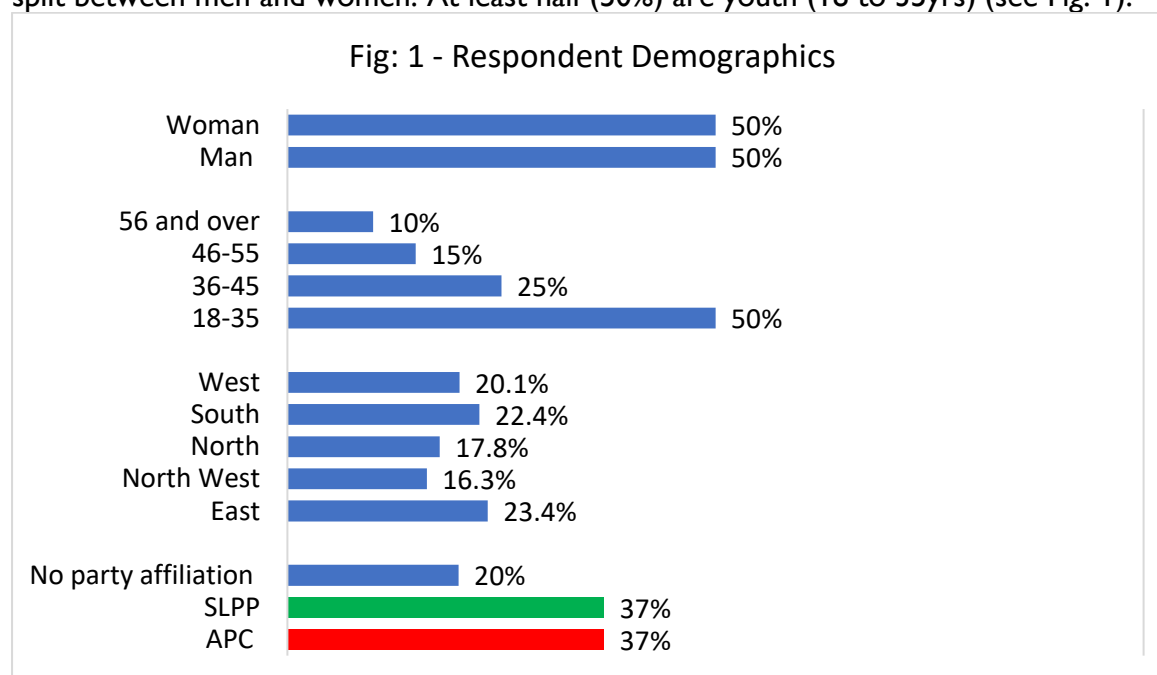
2. Limitations

There are no publicly available databases of registered members of the SLPP or APC that could serve as an appropriate sampling frame for an opinion poll of party membership. In the absence of such databases, the study relied on a randomised sample of the adult population aged 18 years and above. During the validation meeting, the leadership of both parties contended that sampling the general population, rather than a randomised list of party delegates responsible for electing party leaders, limits the survey's ability to predict the outcomes of party primaries and undermines its capacity to capture members' participation in internal decision-making accurately. While this critique appears reasonable, it overlooks the instrumental and sociopolitical meaning of party membership in Sierra Leone, which extends beyond formal possession of a party membership card. In practice, many individuals and communities actively engaged in mobilisation, agitation, demonstrations, and advocacy on behalf of political parties are not formally registered card-carrying members. Moreover, party delegates are ostensibly selected at the community level by party members and are expected to represent the views and preferences of their communities. Consequently, a poll in which 74 percent of respondents self-identify as party members or supporters provides a credible indication of the priorities, perceptions, and concerns of party faithful who, despite their active engagement, have historically been excluded from internal party decision-making processes.

3. Results

3.1. Demographics

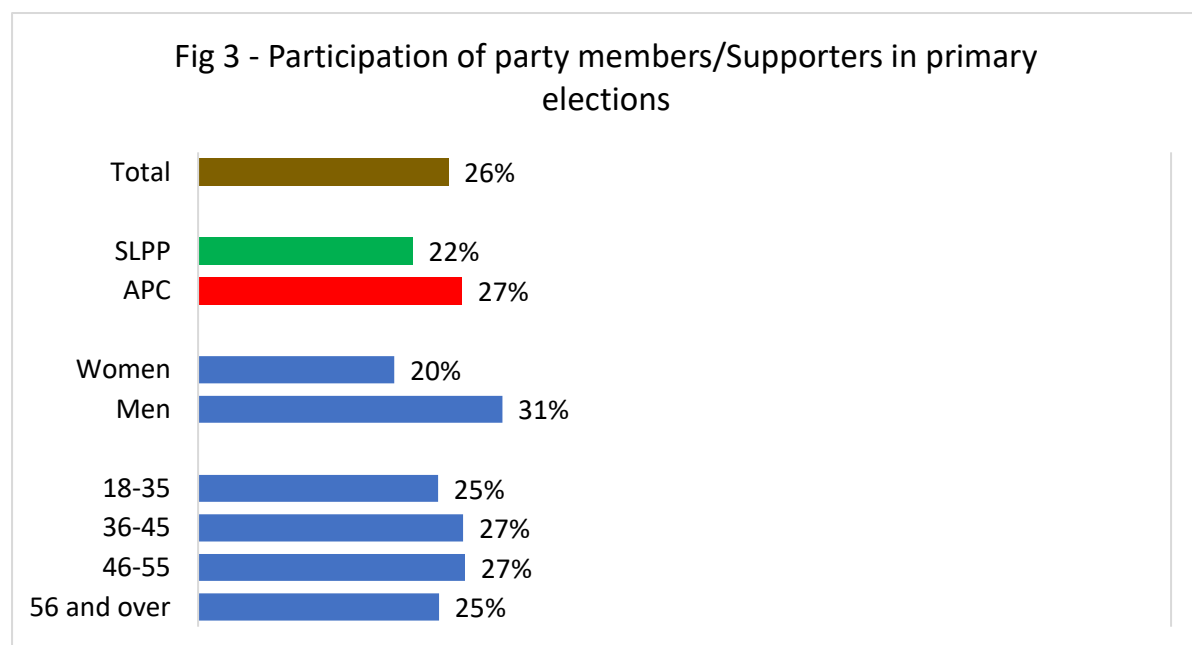
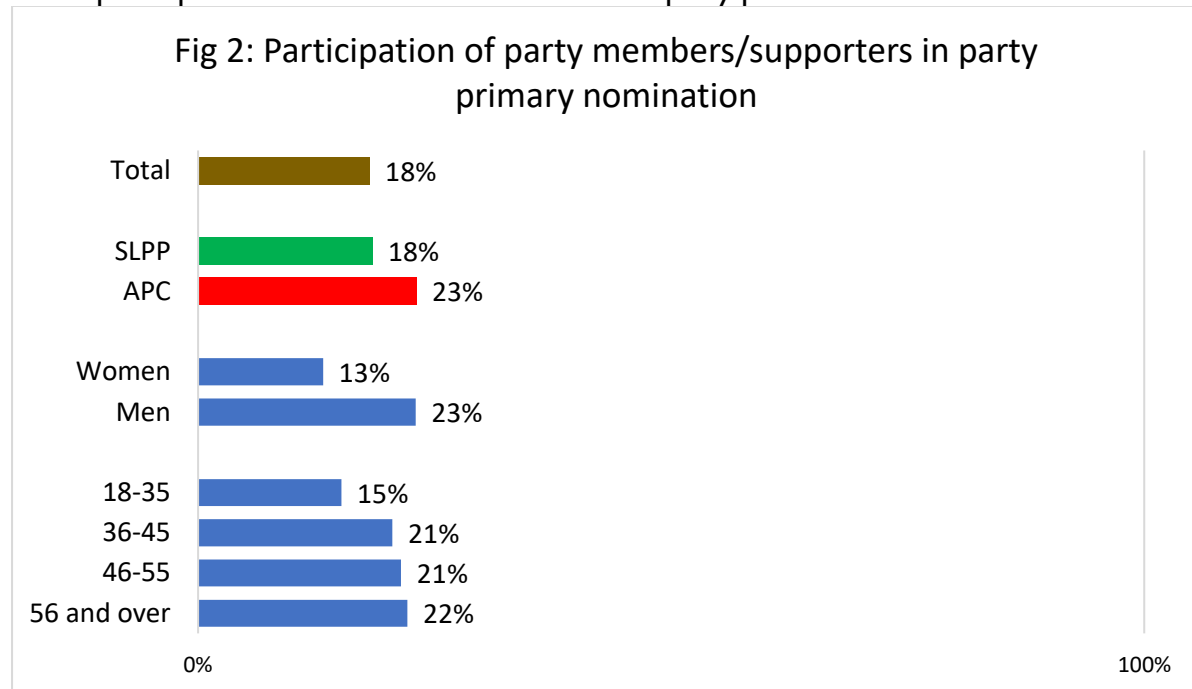
A significant majority (74%) of all respondents identify themselves as supporters or members of the two main political parties. Party membership is split between SLPP and APC, with each receiving 37% of respondents stating they were either APC or SLPP members. It is important to note that the survey did not distinguish between those who claimed they were party supporters versus those who were card carrying members of a party. Respondents are evenly split between men and women. At least half (50%) are youth (18 to 35yrs) (see Fig. 1).



3.2. Voter participation in party primaries.

Overall, member participation in primaries is low. Only 18% of self-identified party members say they take part in nomination in party primaries (Fig. 2), and 26% say they vote in primaries. Men are more likely to participate in nomination and voting processes than women (Fig. 3).

Voter participation in nomination of candidates in party primaries



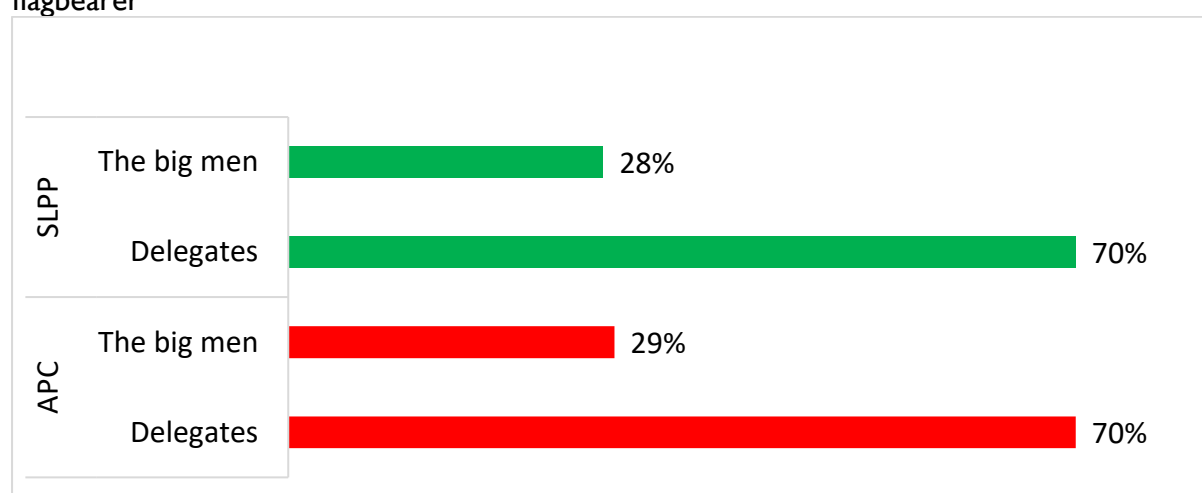
3.3. Who decides who should be the party flagbearer?

In both political parties, delegates are chosen at the ward, constituency, district, regional and national levels, who in turn vote for flagbearer candidates at party conventions. Even though most of these delegates are voted for and seated at the local level, national-level officials

reportedly have varying degrees of influence over their decisions. Some party faithful interviewed for this paper say national officials can sometimes encourage, recommend, or coerce local officials to choose a particular candidate, or, in some cases, use provisions of the party constitution to veto certain candidates. Striking this balance between national-level interest and local support has been difficult. In most cases over the last two decades, it has ended up in conflicts and court cases, leading to the formation of breakaway parties.

When asked who has the power to decide who should be flagbearer, an overwhelming majority (70%) of both parties say they believe it is the delegates who choose (Fig. 4). Less than one-third of party supporters believe that it is party “big” men like former President Koroma or current President, Julius Maada Bio that decide who should be flagbearer.

Fig 4 - Party members/supporters’ perception of who has the power to decide the flagbearer



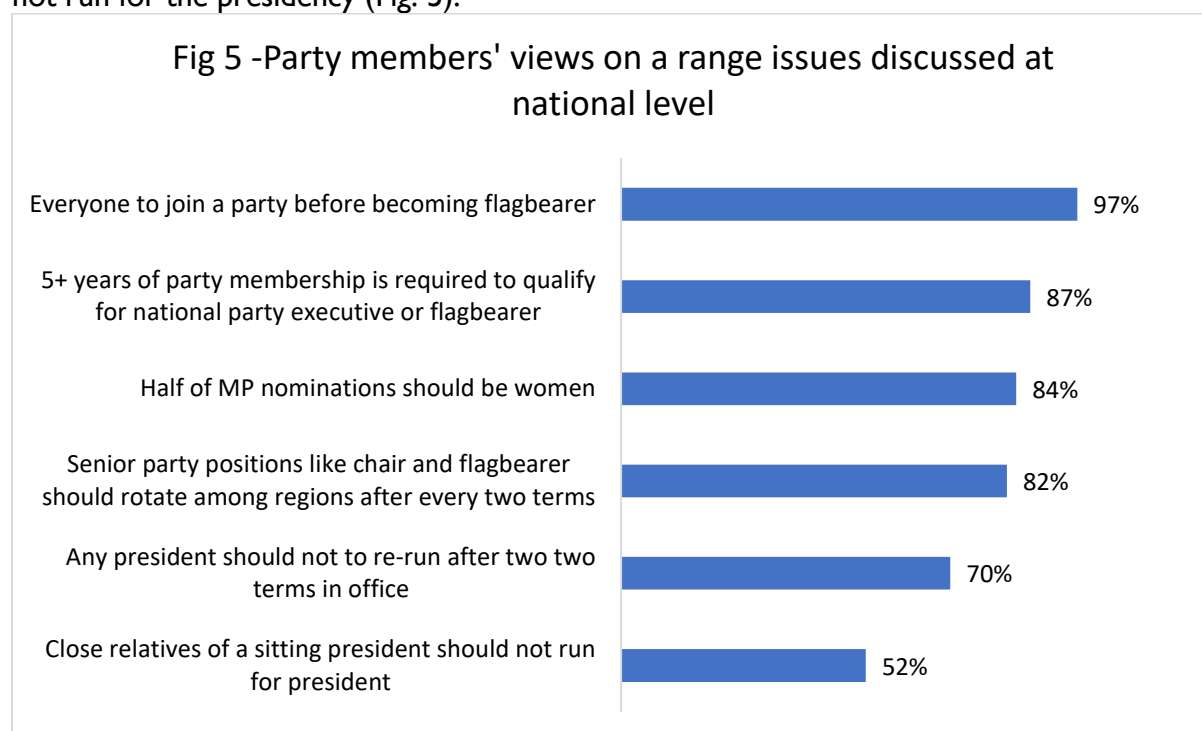
In Table I below, we proposed two options for flagbearer selection. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated a preference for inclusive selection processes: 77% of SLPP supporters and 74% of APC believe that all party cardholders should vote directly in a flagbearer primary, rather than leaving selection in the hands of a few “big men”.

Table I – How to make flagbearer election more inclusive?		
APC	All party card holders to vote in primary	74%
	Let big men decide	26%
SLPP	All party card holders to vote in primary	77%
	Let big men decide	22%

3.4. Party Members’ Views on Crucial National Issues

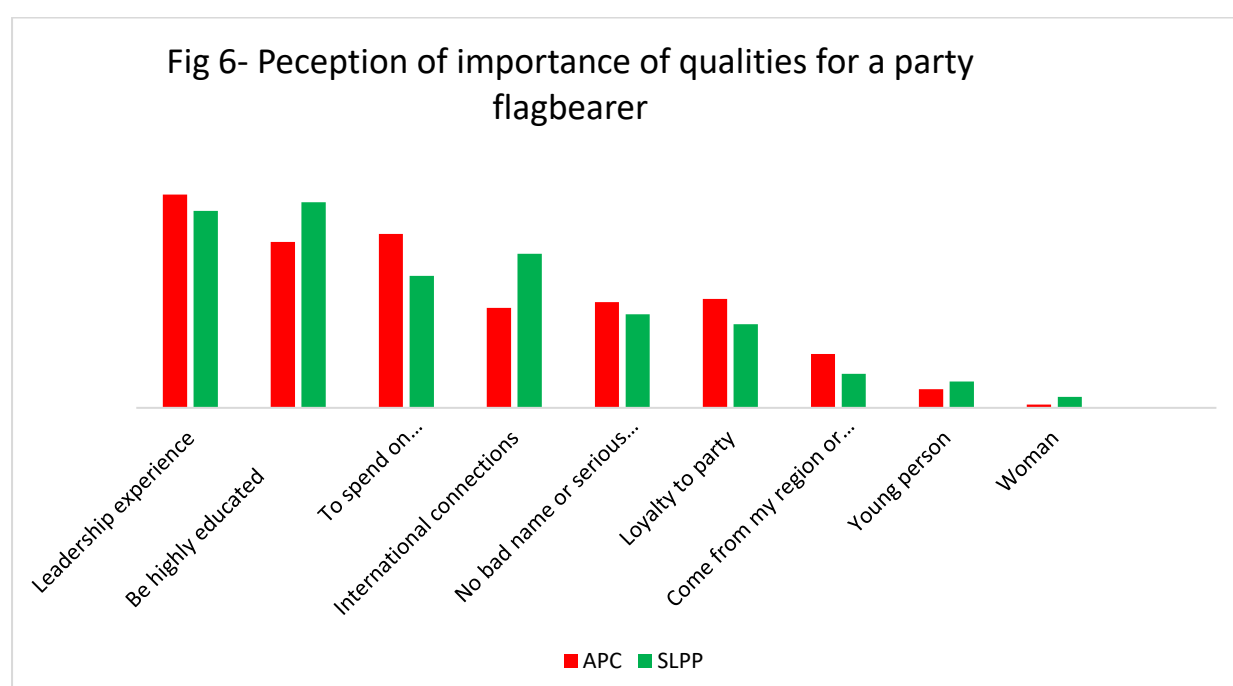
Sierra Leone’s parties are grappling with a range of contentious issues, including qualifications to contest leadership. Some have been referred to the oversight body, the Political Parties Regulation Commission (PPRC), for mediation, while others are being actively discussed in public. Whether it is the candidature of the APC’s former vice president, Samuel Sam Sumana, which was before the PPRC for mediation, or the right of many intending aspirants to contest for the SLPP flagbearer, or the appropriateness of the SLPP’s First Lady, Madam Fatima Bio, to succeed her husband, which has been strongly rumoured, these issues are affecting the solidarity of both parties.

A resounding majority (87%) believe that at least 5 years' membership should be a requirement to qualify for a national party executive position and to be a party's flagbearer. Also, 52% believe that close relatives of a sitting president, such as children or spouses, should not run for the presidency (Fig. 5).



3.5. Desired Qualities of a Flagbearer Candidate

Among the qualities expected of a flagbearer, three stood out for each party. For APC, leadership experience (43%), spending on the party (35%), and being highly educated are the three qualities they found most important. For SLPP, education (42%), experience (40%) and having international connections (31%) stood out. Being a young person or a woman is the least important quality.



3.6. Favourability Rating of key individuals gunning for party flagbearer positions

While neither party has officially declared the campaign for the flagbearer position open yet, a plethora of individuals have been crisscrossing the country campaigning or have been rumoured to be interested. In our consultations on the survey instrument, the leadership of both parties informed us that at the time of this research, they had not officially recognised any individual as an aspirant. However, we assembled 26 names of potential candidates through a review of the media (see list below).

APC

1. Bai Mahmoud Bangura
2. Dr. Ibrahim Bangura
3. Ady Macauley (Esq.)
4. Dr. Richard Conteh
5. Joseph Fitzgerald Kamara
6. Yvonne Aki-Sawyer
7. Chernor Ramadan Bah
8. Sheik Mohamed Kamara (Jagaban)

9. Hon. Osman Timbo
10. Dr. Kelfala Marrah
11. Dr. Samura Kamara
12. Amb. Omrie Golley
13. Dr. Sufian Kalokoh
14. Sorie S Sesay
15. Hassan Gbassay Kanu
16. Samuel Sam Sumana

SLPP


1. Alhaji Musa Tarawally
2. Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh
3. David Moinina Sengh
4. Alie Kabba
5. Kandeh Yumkella
6. Fatima Bio


7. John Oponjo Benjamin
8. Timothy Kabba
9. Sidie Tunis
10. Brima Swarray


The survey utilised two matrices, likability and electability, to get a reliable picture of how self-identified party members/supporters view aspirants. The lists were read out, and respondents were asked to indicate three people from each party that they like (likability) and three people that they are willing to vote for as president (electability). The results below show the favourability rating of these individuals nationally, at the party level, and in the five regions of the country. We present below the results of the top four individuals from both parties who are considered the most likeable and electable.

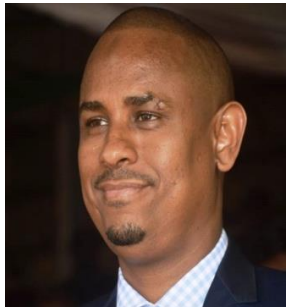
Favourability within APC

Overall, Mr. Sheikh Kamara, aka Jagaban, is perceived as the most likable (63%) and electable (51%). He is the only individual with an electability chance of over 50% for both the APC and the SLPP combined. Dr. Samura Kamara follows behind Jagaban as the next most favourable candidate to self-identified APC members, with 31% of votes, followed by former Vice President Sam Sumana (15%) and Hon Chernor Bah (13%), the former minority leader of parliament and the party's vice-presidential candidate in the 2018 and 2023 elections.

Shiekh Kamara (Jagaban)		Likability	Electability
	National	63%	51%
	APC	70.0%	54.7%
	SLPP	54.0%	46.5%
	Eastern	64.4%	46.3%
	North-western	76.7%	60.7%
	Northern	54.7%	34.9%
	Southern	52.6%	47.0%
	Western	74.1%	73.2%

Samura Kamara		Likability	Electability
	National	43%	31%
	APC	60.0%	48.0%
	SLPP	26.0%	15.8%
	Eastern	41.3%	20.6%
	North-western	62.0%	57.1%
	Northern	61.6%	47.7%
	Southern	18.1%	11.2%
	Western	38.3%	34.4%


Sam Sumana		Likability	Electability
	National	21%	15%
	APC	22.0%	18.5%
	SLPP	21.0%	13.1%
	Eastern	42.3%	31.7%
	North-western	16.0%	11.0%
	Northern	4.7%	3.5%
	Southern	13.0%	7.9%
	Western	17.2%	13.3%


Chernor Bah (Chericoco)		Likability	Electability
	National	21%	13%
	APC	25.0%	14.7%
	SLPP	16.0%	11.6%
	Eastern	10.7%	8.5%
	North-western	30.1%	20.2%
	Northern	25.6%	8.1%
	Southern	10.7%	8.4%
	Western	33.6%	26.6%


Favourability rating within SLPP


Among the governing party's members, no one secured 50% support, leaving the race wide open in the eyes of self-identified party supporters. Hon. Kandeh K Yumkella recorded 48% likeability and 38% electability. Yumkella is closely followed by Chief Minister David Sengeh (27%), First Lady Fatima Bio (26%), and Vice President Juldeh Jalloh (24%).

While the First Lady polls well in her party's stronghold in the Eastern Region, over half of voters (52%) disagree that close family members, such as children and spouses, of a sitting president can run for the presidency in an election immediately following the completion of the tenure of that president. This result mirrors similar sentiment in 2018 when a majority of citizens expressed strong resentment to tenure elongation at the end of the presidency of Ernest Bai Koroma.

Kandeh K Yumkella		Likability	Electability
	National	48%	38%
	APC	48.0%	35.0%
	SLPP	48.0%	42.0%
	Eastern	48.0%	35.0%
	North-western	58.0%	51.0%
	Northern	42.0%	28.0%
	Southern	42.0%	27.0%
	Western	47.0%	39.0%

David M. Sengeh		Likability	Electability
	National	35%	27%
	APC	30.0%	21.0%
	SLPP	38.0%	33.0%
	Eastern	33.0%	25.0%
	North-western	29.0%	21.5%
	Northern	35.0%	25.0%
	Southern	37.0%	31.0%
	Western	41.0%	36.0%

Fatima J. Bio		Likability	Electability
	National	38%	26%
	APC	30.00%	20.3%
	SLPP	47.00%	32.0%
	Eastern	56.0%	44.0%
	North-western	30.0%	21.5%
	Northern	30.0%	17.4%
	Southern	42.0%	34.5%
	Western	17.0%	29.2%

Mohamed Juldeh Jalloh		Likability	Electability
	National	32%	24%
	APC	36.30%	25.4%
	SLPP	28.85%	23.0%
	Eastern	20.2%	14.2%
	North-western	51.3%	40.5%
	Northern	41.5%	21.5%
	Southern	25.0%	21.9%
	Western	28.1%	21.3%

4. Conclusion and recommendations

This report presents a real opportunity for party leaders to integrate the priorities of ordinary party members into the decision-making of political parties. The findings show that although there is widespread belief that party delegates, who should ideally represent ordinary members, make decisions such as electing a flagbearer and other positions, there is a general sense of less inclusivity of the grassroots in decision-making. This has the potential to create a disconnect between the wishes of ordinary people and decisions made by those at the centre of political party affairs.

Three big takeaways from this survey are:

1. Education, experience, ability to spend on the party and international track record are the key attributes voters are looking for in a flagbearer.
2. Sierra Leone voters and party members are against tenure elongation of a president beyond the two-term limit in any shape or form.
3. Mr. Shiekh Kamara, aka Jagaban of the APC, is the only individual with a 50+% endorsement of voters. None of the names in SLPP secured a majority approval. This leaves the ruling party's race wide open.