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# "A Good Product in a Damaged Package": Verification, Institutional Trust and Youth Acceptance of Electoral Technology in Malawi's 2025 General Elections

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## Abstract

Electoral commissions across Africa have adopted biometric and digital systems that promise cleaner elections, yet voters rarely operate the devices themselves. This article asks how such citizens, especially young Malawians aged 18 to 35, judged the Smartmatic-supplied systems that the Malawi Electoral Commission deployed in the general elections of September 2025. The qualitative case study drew on 35 purposively selected participants: Phase 1 comprised interviews with 12 University of Malawi students and three election-monitoring key informants; Phase 2 added four key informant interviews and 16 open-ended online questionnaire responses from experts in law, higher education and civil rights advocacy and members of the public. A framework combining the technology acceptance model, institutional trust theory and electoral integrity shaped the question guide and interpretation; accounts were coded inductively through reflexive thematic analysis. Many participants knew the devices' names but not how they worked, and their judgements turned on whether they could check what the devices produced. Paper records decided the official result, yet participants saw no way to check the link between paper and digital outputs; across that verification gap they judged the system through their trust in the commission: "a good product in a damaged package is also damaged." Some of the most developed doubts came from participants with technical or governance knowledge. We propose perceived ease of verification as the counterpart of ease of use for such voters, and argue that where verification is unavailable, institutional trust filters judgement of the technology.

## FullText

# Trusting a machine you never touch

In September 2025, Malawians voted under a technology that the main opposition parties had asked to have independently audited, and that the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) had refused to open to audit (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2025, p. 14; "MEC rejects opposition's request," 2025). Yet on polling day observers assessed voting as "peaceful, orderly and transparent" and rated the process positively in 99% of the 359 polling stations they visited, although device problems delayed voting in some of them (EU EOM, 2025, pp. 7, 16). The opposition won and all contenders accepted the outcome (EU EOM, 2025, pp. 5, 7), but accepting an outcome is not the same as trusting the technology that produced it. Shortly before polling, the High Court confirmed that only paper documents counted for the official result (EU EOM, 2025, p. 15). In law, the machines did not decide the election, and MEC did not say so clearly. The safeguard that sceptics might have asked for already existed. Whether citizens could see it is the question at the centre of this article.

Biometric registers, electronic voter verification and digital results transmission are now common in sub-Saharan African elections, justified by the claim that machines stop multiple voting and remove human hands from the numbers. The record is more mixed (Debrah et al., 2019), and election technology may be least effective where it is most needed (Cheeseman et al., 2018). Malawi makes the question unusually sharp. In February 2020, the High Court annulled the 2019 presidential election after irregularities, and the Supreme Court of Appeal upheld the ruling later that year (EU EOM, 2025, p. 11; Nkhata et al., 2021). Among the irregularities were edits to results sheets, which later analysis attributes largely to human error, finding no evidence that they were motivated by fraud (Ahlbäck & Jablonski, 2025). In late 2019, only 34% of Malawians said they trusted MEC somewhat or a lot (Chunga, 2020). New technology therefore arrived where many citizens doubted the institution introducing it. Yet in Afrobarometer's 2024 survey 81% of respondents aged 18 to 35 said they would "definitely" vote in 2025 (Chunga & Evance, 2025, p. 15), a measure of stated intention rather than turnout. Young people, defined here as Malawians aged 18 to 35 in line with the Afrobarometer youth category, might be expected to accept technology readily because they grew up with it, but that cannot be assumed for machines that verify their identity and transmit their results.

Existing research stops short of the Malawian situation. Applications of the technology acceptance model (TAM) to electronic voting (Choi & Kim, 2012) and field evidence on voters' experience of it (Alvarez et al., 2013) concern systems that voters use themselves. Work on internet voting treats verifiability as a dimension of transparency, meaning the voter's check that their own ballot was recorded as cast (Agbesi et al., 2024). Studies of Brazil and India show that trust in electronic voting depends on how citizens judge the electoral authority as well as the machine (Avgerou, 2013; Avgerou et al., 2019). In Malawi in 2025, officials operated the devices, the paper ballot remained, and the citizen was what we call a non-operating user: someone

whose vote passes through a system that others run on their behalf. Recent research on Malawi has examined mobile internet and the 2019 election (Yeandle, 2025) and errors in its results sheets (Ahlbäck & Jablonski, 2025), but not how citizens perceived the technologies deployed in 2025.

This article addresses that gap with a qualitative study of 35 participants, centred on 12 University of Malawi students aged 18 to 35 and extended by key informants, experts and members of the public. It asks three research questions (RQs). RQ1: How aware were participants of the electoral technologies used in Malawi in 2025, and how well did they understand them? RQ2: How did they judge the transparency and credibility of those technologies? RQ3: How did participants relate these perceptions to their willingness to vote?

The answers support one argument. For non-operating users, acceptance turned less on whether the technology was easy to use than on whether its outputs were easy to verify. Participants valued the technology when they could watch it work, and distrusted it where it passed out of view, in procurement, the refused audit and what happened to results after they left the polling station. The law had made paper decisive, but participants could see no way to check the link between the paper record and the digital outputs. We call this the verification gap. Across it, participants judged the hidden parts of the system through the trust they already placed, or did not place, in MEC. Institutional trust worked as a filter on what they could not verify, a logic one participant captured in a single sentence: "a good product in a damaged package is also damaged." Two further observations matter. Some of the most developed doubts came from participants whose accounts showed technical or governance knowledge, which sits uneasily with the assumption that resistance to electoral technology simply reflects low digital literacy. And although the outcome favoured acceptance, since one of the opposition parties that had demanded an audit won the presidency, participants' confidence stayed conditional.

The article adds a citizen-level account of the 2025 technology to Malawi research centred on 2019. Building on TAM and on work that treats verifiability as part of transparency, it proposes the construct of perceived ease of verification for non-operating users, together with an account of institutional trust as a filter: the less citizens can check, the more their verdict follows their prior trust in the electoral body. Practically, it points to making the link between paper and digital records visible. These claims are interpretive and describe how 35 purposively selected people reasoned, not how widely their views are held or what caused anyone to vote.

## Paper ballots, digital devices and a refused audit

Malawi held presidential, parliamentary and local government elections on 16 September 2025 (EU EOM, 2025, p. 1). Voting was by paper ballot, counted by hand at each polling station, and technology was added to this paper process at several points. Election management devices were used for biometric voter registration and candidate nomination, and later transmitted consolidated results from constituency and district tally centres. On polling day, biometric voter verification devices (BVVDs) checked voters against the register and transmitted an image of each polling station's results sheet (EU EOM, 2025, p. 14). MEC owned and operated all the technology, with very limited supplier involvement on election day (EU EOM, 2025, p. 14). Press reports identified the supplier as Smartmatic (Mtika, 2025), and participants used "Smartmatic" as a name for the devices themselves.

The technology became contested on three fronts. Little public information was available about procurement, including its terms of reference (EU EOM, 2025, p. 14). In June 2025, five opposition parties, among them the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), asked for an external audit of the election management system. MEC refused, saying that an audit without a legal basis would set a dangerous precedent and threaten the security and integrity of its systems ("MEC rejects opposition's request," 2025), and the High Court later ruled that the decision was MEC's to make (EU EOM, 2025, pp. 14–15). Communication was the third front. MEC described the transmitted image of the results sheet as a "selfie" and said there would be no electronic transmission of results from polling stations, clarifying only a few days before the election that the BVVDs did transmit these images. Its explainers "mostly offered assurances rather than substantive evidence", even political parties remained unsure what the technology did, and observers found little evidence of information security measures or data integrity safeguards (EU EOM, 2025, p. 15). On polling day, 85% of voters were identified using the BVVDs, device problems delayed voting in 11% of

observed polling stations, and the electronic transfer of results from tally centres ran into difficulties (EU EOM, 2025, p. 16). The mission's first priority recommendation called for a legal framework for electronic tools, including oversight and audit (EU EOM, 2025, p. 7).

# Technology, trust and the voter who does not operate the machine

## What electoral technology promises and what it delivers

African evidence on electoral technology offers qualified support for its promise. In Ghana, biometric registration and verification helped detect impersonation and multiple voting and stimulated confidence, while malfunctions and official conduct undercut those gains (Debrah et al., 2019), and success depended on connectivity, staff training and procedures for when equipment failed (Effah & Debrah, 2018). More broadly, the effects of election technology depend on the political context and the independence of the electoral commission, and digital systems can concentrate knowledge in a small technocratic elite (Cheeseman et al., 2018). In Chad, biometric registration was presented as the solution to a political crisis and encouraged a view of democracy as mainly technical (Debos, 2021). In Kenya's annulled 2017 election, the system itself became the focus of distrust: opponents demanded that the commission "open the servers" so that stored results could be checked against the paper tally forms (Omwoha, 2022).

In Brazil, citizens' trust in electronic voting rested on their perceptions of both the technology and the electoral authorities (Avgerou, 2013). In India, trust in electronic voting was produced partly through the way citizens distinguished orderly voting from malpractice elsewhere in the process (Avgerou et al., 2019). A technically sound election can still be seen as illegitimate (Norris, 2014), and studies of public perceptions point to the conduct of the electoral body. In Nigeria, citizens' evaluations of election quality were shaped by the performance of the electoral management body alongside their experience of irregularities and their partisanship (Kerr, 2013). Across 47 elections, citizens expressed more confidence where the electoral management body was autonomous in practice, although autonomy did not necessarily raise trust where media freedom was low (Kerr & Lührmann, 2017). Supporters of winning parties are also consistently more satisfied with the political process than supporters of losing ones (Anderson et al., 2005).

## Young voters and the information around them

In Malawi, young people aged 18 to 35 made up 54% of registered voters in 2019, yet in a 2022 Afrobarometer survey only 60% of them said they had voted in 2020, against 85% of those aged 36 and above (Alfonso & Chunga, 2023). Much of young people's political information now arrives through social media, and comfort with digital devices is not the same as the ability to judge them: digital literacy involves understanding how information is produced and whether it can be trusted (Buckingham, 2015). People also tend to believe that media messages influence others more than themselves, a pattern known as the third-person effect (Davison, 1983). Whether it operates among young Malawians has not been established, and the study treats it as a possibility to examine.

## Conditional acceptance: from awareness to willingness to vote

Three bodies of theory each explain one step in how a citizen moves from hearing about an electoral technology to deciding whether to trust the election and take part in it.

**The technology acceptance model.** TAM holds that people accept a technology when they find it useful and easy to use (Davis, 1989). Choi and Kim (2012) extended it to voters' intention to use electronic voting, and Alvarez et al. (2013) showed that experience of electronic voting shapes perceptions, but both concern systems that voters operate themselves. In Malawi, voters did little more than present themselves for identification. For such voters, we propose that the counterpart of ease of use is perceived ease of verification: how readily ordinary citizens believe they can check, with the means available to them, that what the system records and transmits matches the paper record and the votes cast at their polling station. It differs from

the individual verifiability discussed in research on internet voting, where voters check that their own ballot was recorded as cast (Agbesi et al., 2024). It concerns the tally rather than the single ballot, and it rests on what citizens think they can check, whatever technical guarantees the system offers. From this lens the study takes perceived usefulness and perceived ease of verification.

**Institutional trust theory.** Trust is a judgement about an institution's trustworthiness, formed from experience and from information about its conduct (Levi & Stoker, 2000). We treat it as a filter. Citizens who trust an institution read its ambiguous actions charitably; citizens who distrust it read the same actions as confirmation of their doubts. Norris (2011) adds that critical citizens can support democratic procedures while doubting the institutions that run them. From this lens the study takes the idea of trust as a filter on judgements about technology that cannot be checked directly: the less a citizen can verify, the more the judgement depends on prior trust.

**Electoral integrity.** Perceptions of how elections are run affect legitimacy, confidence and behaviour (Norris, 2014), and citizens who see elections as fair are more likely to say they vote (Birch, 2010). Evidence linking perceptions of electoral technology in particular to participation is thinner, so the framework treats that link as something to examine. From this lens the study takes the outcome side: confidence in the election and willingness to vote.

Together the three lenses describe a sequence that we call conditional acceptance (Fig. 1). Citizens first need to know what a technology is and does. They then judge it by how useful it is and how easily they can verify what it produces. Where they cannot check its workings or outputs, their trust in the institution that runs it filters the judgement, so the same technology may be judged differently by those who trust that institution and those who do not. These judgements shape confidence in the election and, through it, willingness to vote. These are sensitising ideas, not hypotheses for statistical testing. The framework shaped the question guide, whose four core themes follow its components (Appendix A). It was kept out of initial coding, which was built from participants' own words so that the data could reveal what the framework did not anticipate. Once candidate themes had been developed, it was used to interpret and organise them.

## Hearing students, informants and experts in two phases

# A two-phase case study

The study was a qualitative single case study of electoral technology in Malawi's 2025 general elections, with data collected in two sequential phases that addressed the same research questions with the same question guide and were analysed together as one dataset. Phase 1 ran from November 2025 to June 2026 and focused on students aged 18 to 35 at the University of Malawi. Because a sample drawn mainly from one university could not show whether the patterns held among people with other vantage points, Phase 2, conducted in November 2026, extended the sample to people with institutional, professional and civic knowledge of elections and to members of the public. In this purposive logic, what earlier data reveal guides later recruitment (Patton, 2015).

## Who took part and how they were reached

The study involved 35 participants (Table 1), all selected through purposive, non-probability sampling, which seeks information-rich cases: people who can speak in depth to the research questions because of their experience, role or knowledge (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). In Phase 1, the researchers invited students aged 18 to 35 from different academic programmes at the University of Malawi, and 12 were interviewed. Each needed basic exposure to elections or digital technology, checked at the start of each interview through background questions on voter registration and previous voting (Appendix A). Three key informants with direct experience of monitoring elections were also interviewed. The age criterion applied to the student group only; the other groups in both phases were selected for their roles and knowledge.

In Phase 2, four key informants with institutional or academic expertise in election administration were interviewed. Fourteen experts in electoral law, higher education and civil rights advocacy, and two members of the public from outside both the

university and these professions, completed an open-ended online questionnaire, which allowed responses from different parts of Malawi. The questionnaire was circulated through WhatsApp groups in which these professionals regularly interact. Because respondents chose whether to reply, this part of the sample combines purposive targeting with voluntary response. The number of people who saw the link is not known, so no response rate can be given, and the questionnaire accounts are not read as typical of these professions.

Participant characteristics are reported at group level only. Details such as gender, district, programme or exact professional role are not reported, because in the smaller groups they would make participants identifiable. The sample was designed for depth and variation: students provided the core account of how young, digitally connected citizens understood the technology, and the other groups added institutional, technical, governance and lay perspectives.

Table 1

Participants by phase, group and method[a]

| Phase and period | Participant group | Method | n |
|---|---|---|---|
| Phase 1<br>November 2025 to June 2026 | Students aged 18 to 35, University of Malawi | Semi-structured interview | 12 |
| | Key informants with election monitoring experience | Key informant interview | 3 |
| Phase 2<br>November 2026 | Key informants with institutional or academic expertise in election administration | Key informant interview | 4 |
| | Experts in law, higher education and civil rights advocacy | Open-ended online questionnaire | 14 |
| | Members of the public | Open-ended online questionnaire | 2 |
| **Total** | | | **35** |

[a] All participants were selected through purposive sampling; the online questionnaire, circulated through professional WhatsApp groups, combined purposive targeting with voluntary response. Only the student group was restricted to ages 18 to 35. Both phases used the same question guide (Appendix A). In each phase, data collection ended when further accounts added no new codes relevant to the research questions; Phase 2 accounts were compared with codes from both phases (see 'Gathering accounts and deciding when to stop'). Characteristics are reported at group level to protect anonymity.

## Gathering accounts and deciding when to stop

Phase 1 used open-ended, semi-structured interviews built around four core themes: awareness and understanding of electoral technologies; perceptions of transparency and credibility; trust in electoral institutions; and the influence of technology on willingness to vote. A final set of questions covered social media and misinformation (Appendix A). Phase 2 used the same themes and questions in the key informant interviews and the online questionnaire, with background items adapted to each group. Online qualitative questionnaires suit dispersed participants and elicit considered written accounts (Braun et al., 2021).

Data saturation was the rule for ending data collection in each phase, a term that needs care in reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that saturation sits uneasily with reflexive approaches, in which the researcher constructs codes and themes that stay open to revision. We therefore use data saturation in the narrower sense described by Saunders et al. (2018): a practical judgement, made during collection, that further data were adding little that was new to the research questions, not evidence that the meaning in the data had been exhausted. Collection and preliminary coding ran in parallel, with each new account compared against the codes developed so far. In Phase 1, interviewing stopped when further interviews only repeated patterns already identified. In Phase 2, new responses were compared with the Phase 1 codes as well as with earlier

Phase 2 responses, and collection ended when further responses produced no new codes relevant to the research questions, so the Phase 2 decision was made against the combined dataset.

Studies of code saturation report that it is often reached within about 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2006), and usually within 9 to 17 when participants share key characteristics (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Because Braun and Clarke (2021) question such code counts in reflexive analysis, we treat these figures only as a rough benchmark. The stronger justification is information power: the aim was focused and participants were chosen for their direct relevance to it (Malterud et al., 2016). The short written answers, which allowed no dialogue, carry less information power than the interviews, which is one reason Phase 2 widened the sample to new groups instead of adding more students. Theme development continued after collection ended.

# Coding, interpreting and checking the accounts

Transcripts and questionnaire responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Two members of the research team read the material repeatedly and carried out the initial coding; a third reviewed the coding against the full dataset, developed and revised candidate themes and led the interpretation. Differences in reading were discussed and used to sharpen interpretation, not to measure agreement between coders (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The framework was brought in only when themes were being refined and named, and themes that it does not include, such as the third-person pattern reported below, were kept. Table 2 shows how each component of the framework links to the research questions, the question guide and the findings.

Table 2

How the framework was applied in the study[a]

| Framework component (lens) | Research question | Question guide theme | Findings |
|---|---|---|---|
| Awareness and understanding | RQ1: awareness and understanding | Theme 1; social media items | Knowing the name; Filling the gap |
| Perceived usefulness and ease of verification (TAM) | RQ2: transparency and credibility | Theme 2 | "It's in the system"; Seeing it work |
| Institutional trust as a filter (institutional trust theory) | RQ2: transparency and credibility | Theme 3 | "A good product"; "It's in the system" |
| Confidence and willingness to vote (electoral integrity) | RQ3: willingness to vote | Theme 4 | Seeing it work; From perception to willingness to vote |

[a] RQ = research question (see the opening section); TAM = technology acceptance model. The framework informed the question guide and the interpretation of themes, but not initial coding.

Interviews and questionnaire responses were analysed together because both answered the same open-ended questions, but they were not treated as equivalent. Interviews allowed probing and produced longer accounts; questionnaire responses were shorter and could not be followed up. Comparison across phases and modes was therefore thematic: the analysis asked whether a theme appeared across groups and modes and how it was expressed, and a short written answer was not read as the absence of a view. Documentary sources, chiefly the observer mission's final report (EU EOM, 2025), were used to check participants' factual claims. Where an account departed from the documentary record, or could not be checked against it, it is reported as the participant's perception.

Quotations are identified by participant code only, and codes are not linked to roles, because some groups contain only a few people. Counts are given where they help the reader judge how widely a view was held in this sample. Because some topics were raised by probes in the guide, a count shows how many participants discussed a point, not how many would have raised it unprompted. Quotations are reproduced as spoken or written, including grammatical slips; ellipses mark omitted words and square brackets mark editorial insertions.

Generative AI tools assisted with drafting, restructuring, language editing and reference checking of the manuscript, and the authors reviewed, verified and revised all content.

# Position, reflexivity and ethics

Credibility was supported by comparing accounts across groups and phases, checking factual claims against documentary sources and reporting dissenting views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Members of the research team had institutional ties to the participants' university [details withheld for review]. This eased access, but it could also have encouraged socially acceptable answers about MEC and political parties. To reduce the risk, participants were assured of anonymity, no question asked about party preference or vote choice, and criticism of MEC is reported alongside positive accounts of how the election was run. Most questions were worded neutrally, but one Theme 3 question asked directly whether participants would trust the election if the technology worked well but they did not trust MEC (Appendix A), and answers to it are read with this framing in mind.

Responses were anonymised, interview recordings were kept on password-protected phones, questionnaire responses were held in password-protected accounts that only the research team could access, and the questionnaire did not collect names.

# What participants knew, feared and saw

The findings follow the framework's path, from what participants knew and where they learnt it, through their judgements of MEC and their fears, to their experience at the polling station and their willingness to vote.

# Knowing the name, not the system

Participants knew that technology had been used in 2025, but few understood how it worked. A few showed detailed knowledge. P007 named biometric voter registration, electronic voter verification devices, Smartmatic technology and digital transmission of results, and P011 described electoral technologies as means of making election processes traceable, efficient and responsive to the transparency needs of a new generation of voters. Most participants offered only general definitions. P002 described technology used to vote and count votes that "simplifies work", and P005 "new improved methods in voting processes". Such answers give no basis for judging whether a system is credible. Several participants could not identify the technology at all:

"To be honest, I'm not fully familiar with the technological electronic devices that you've mentioned." (P016)

Asked about Smartmatic, P015 replied simply, "I can't remember." P007 explained why familiarity with names did not amount to understanding:

"I don't think they understand. Because knowing these technologies is different from understanding how they work and how they are used. That level of knowledge remains with the ones that administer such technologies." (P007)

Those who administer a system know how it works; those who depend on it often do not. The asymmetry becomes a public problem when purpose and safeguards go unexplained, as participants believed they had. P011 located the problem in timing:

"No, most of the Malawian Youth only know about the electoral technologies after they have been introduced. Very little sensitisation is done to establish the receptivity of the technologies amongst different spectra of Malawian population." (P011)

Participants thought the gap wider beyond the university. P017 pointed to people "living in the rural areas, who may not have access to social media", and P018 noted that "most of the people who vote are people maybe from the villages and all of that, and maybe who are not so literate." The observer record shows that uncertainty reached political parties too (EU EOM, 2025, p. 15). P007 also offered a different view: "the awareness level is enough since there is always someone who guides the whole process." That holds for the act of voting, but leaves open how voters are to judge a system they are guided through but cannot evaluate.

# Filling the gap: social media and the third-person effect

Six participants (P001, P002, P003, P008, P011 and P012) named social media as their main source of information about electoral technology; traditional media and MEC were mentioned less often. Only P007 described a wide range of sources, including television, radio, MEC, university discussions and friends. Participants knew this source was unreliable. P012 noted that negative information and fake news were common on social media, and P001 linked online content to willingness to vote:

"Encountering misleading information yes, and also rumors of elections rigging these have a negative influence for it leads to discourage people." (P001)

Online talk could unsettle even P015, who had a technical background:

"For example, recent elections, We were seeing people online talking about rigging, Sometimes we were losing trust to say, Are these devices reliable? Or maybe they just want to trick us." (P015)

Several participants, however, said that social media affected others more than themselves. P017 put it most plainly:

"As far as I'm concerned, and from my explanation, I would say what I see on the social media does not move me. I don't even get swayed by the social media... But I know, as I was stressing to say, social media has got the power to influence people." (P017)

This resembles the third-person effect. It shows how participants understood the information environment, not that they were misled, and the guide's question on whether misinformation affects how young people view elections itself invites talk about others. Read alongside the observer evidence that MEC's explanations came late (EU EOM, 2025, p. 15), these accounts suggest, as P011 also argued, that thin official explanation left space that social media filled, although the data do not establish that late communication caused particular beliefs.

**"A good product in a damaged package": trust in the institution decides**

The theme that recurred most consistently was that participants judged the technology as a tool used by people whose integrity they questioned. P011 expressed this in the metaphor that gives the article its title:

"No, a good product in a damaged package is also damaged." (P011)

P017 made the same point in technical language:

"Because 'garbage in, garbage out.' What you feed in the system is what comes out... So if the technology functions properly, but it's now the people managing it, I wouldn't have trust in the whole outcome." (P017)

Both statements locate trust in the management, not the device. P001 said, "No, I won't trust results if I don't trust the institution, for institutional trust matters the most." P005 grounded distrust in past experience: "I have no trust in MEC because of the experiences we had in Malawi of leakages." P005 did not say what the "leakages" were, and the term is reported as the participant's perception of past irregularity; if it refers to the 2019 results-sheet edits, later analysis found no evidence of fraudulent motive (Ahlbäck & Jablonski, 2025). P007 was blunter: "MEC is compromised systemically and my trust is low."

For some participants these views predated 2025 and drew on the annulled 2019 election. The guide invited the comparison by asking whether participants would still trust the election if a technology worked well but they did not trust MEC, so the agreement itself partly reflects how the question was put. What the theme adds lies in the reasons participants gave, such as past experience and the handling of the audit.

Definitions of transparency show what participants expected of MEC. P006 defined it as "the ability to provide electoral right information to the general public at the right time and using the right method." P007 went further, treating transparency as shared control:

"Electoral transparency means making sure that the whole electoral process is open, and that all stakeholders can equally control, and influence the management and administration of the electoral process." (P007)

These definitions treat transparency as access and oversight. By that standard, many who addressed the question judged the 2025 deployment as falling short, and the most developed criticism came from participants with detailed knowledge, P007 among them.

**"It's in the system": fears of what cannot be seen**

Distrust of the institution took the form of specific fears. Hacking and manipulation, both listed among the guide's probes, were the concerns mentioned most often, by ten participants (P001, P003, P005, P008, P009, P010, P012, P014, P016 and P018). P016 linked the fear to the country's record, recalling that "We've had issues in Malawi where a lot of systems have been hacked." P018 connected security to national capacity and dependence on a foreign supplier:

"We are not even the ones who made the technology. We actually got it from someone... As a country, we're not even able to maintain it or fix it if it has got any issues... We don't even have experts on how the whole thing works. People can hack it, taking advantage of that." (P018)

P018's concern is about capacity and oversight, not evidence of foreign interference. The observer record indicates that MEC, not the supplier, operated the technology, and that information security measures and data integrity safeguards were not evident to observers (EU EOM, 2025, pp. 14–15). The fear thus responded to a documented gap in public information, although the data do not show that any manipulation occurred. Concerns about system failure had a more direct basis. P001 recalled "system failure as it was the case with the 2025 general elections where we had network issues", which matches observed difficulties in the electronic transfer of results from tally centres (EU EOM, 2025, p. 16). The clearest statement of what participants needed came from P018, who compared technology with paper:

"I feel like paperwork would be much better in a way of producing transparent results, because you are able to go through the paperwork, you are able to see, you are able to report to people. While on technology, it's not known. It's in the system." (P018)

For P018, paper was preferable because it could be inspected, and the digital system suspect because it could not be. The concern echoes the Kenyan demand to "open the servers" (Omwoha, 2022), yet in law paper documents determined the official result, so participants feared a digital system that did not decide the outcome.

# Seeing it work: experience at the polling station

Views on the 2025 devices tended to be more positive than views on electoral technology in general, and some participants attributed this to experience. Several described confidence that grew after the election rather than before it:

"My confidence increased after how elections were conducted for at first we didn't believed in it... but after the manner in which the elections where conducted people started believing." (P001)

P014 similarly said that the technology initially raised concerns but later proved reliable, and P012 valued its capacity to identify duplicate registrations early. P017 linked confidence to the speed of verification and voting: "in terms of speed, it increased my confidence in the system." In these accounts, direct experience of a smooth process did what advance explanation had not.

Even positive views carried conditions. P016 sensed "that maybe Malawi is going somewhere", but believed the technology "should have been tested somewhere else" before national use. For P011, Smartmatic brought no increase in confidence "as the worries of many people regarding the technology were not properly addressed." P007 drew the distinction most sharply:

"the technology might have been okay but how it was handled it brought in suspicions and people thought they had malicious intentions since they didn't want to make it open to preaudit." (P007)

P007 placed the problem in the refusal of an independent audit. Without independent evaluation, good performance on the day reassured some participants but did not settle their doubts about what they could not see.

# From perception to willingness to vote

Participants described three relationships between technology and their willingness to vote. Some said technology encouraged them by reducing the time and effort voting required. P001, P002, P008 and P012 described this, and P017 gave the clearest account of a reluctant voter who ended up voting because the process was quick:

"I was not willing to vote, but I ended up voting... When I went to the polling station, because of the use of technology that it was fast. I did not last five minutes. There was no queue and the whole process, from starting from the reception all the way, it didn't last five minutes. Even the verification process, it didn't last five minutes. And then I would say, it encouraged me to go anyway." (P017)

This is P017's own retrospective explanation of a perceived pathway, not an established effect of speed on behaviour. Others said technology discouraged them by adding new reasons for suspicion. P016 was the most direct:

"For now, they do discourage me because we've just started using these technologies. To employ them at a large scale is what scares me the most... In my own opinion, it discourages me, but I believe that I'm not the only one discouraged by this." (P016)

P018 found Smartmatic efficient yet still feared that "people could manipulate the whole system." A voter could experience a fast process and remain unsure what happened to information after it left the polling station. For a third group, technology was not a deciding factor. P011 explained that technologies "make elections easy to handle" but played no part in the decision to vote, although their introduction with little sensitisation still eroded P011's confidence. P007 saw the technology as beside the point:

"It doesn't in any way because the problem will always be the people who choose the technologies, they always have a good reason to choose a particular technology than the others." (P007)

Participants said technology encouraged them where they experienced it as useful, discouraged them where institutional distrust turned it into another point of possible manipulation, and did not matter where their decisions rested on other grounds, including judgements about the people behind the system. These are accounts of stated willingness and reasons, not measures of behaviour. Because MEC did not release age-disaggregated electoral data (EU EOM, 2025, p. 7), the study cannot show whether technology changed turnout among young voters.

# Verification, trust and the limits of familiarity

The findings follow the framework of conditional acceptance closely. That is partly to be expected, because the question guide followed its components, so the qualifications are the more informative result.

# From ease of use to ease of verification

TAM predicts acceptance from perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989), and in its applications to electronic voting the voter is the user (Choi & Kim, 2012). In Malawi in 2025, beyond presenting themselves for identification, voters did not operate the devices. Usefulness still mattered, since speed was experienced as a benefit, but ease of use in the ordinary sense had little to attach to. What participants asked for was the ability to check, and P018's contrast between paper that "you are able to see" and technology that is "in the system" states the issue clearly.

The clearest evidence lies in what reassured participants. Identification at the polling station, the part they could see, was quick, and several said their confidence rose once they had watched it work. The parts they could not see, including transmission, data security and the procurement and audit decisions behind the system, remained the focus of their fears. Seeing the front of the system work did not show them the rest of it, as P018's mix of praise for efficiency and fear of manipulation shows. Perceived ease of verification names this distinction: what participants wanted to see was the agreement between paper, device and declared result.

The 2025 case shows the verification gap in a specific form. In law, the paper record decided the result, so the safeguard that participants valued in paper existed. What was missing was a way for citizens to see it at work: MEC did not communicate the decisive role of paper clearly, and participants described no practical means of checking the link between paper and digital

outputs. Between a safeguard that existed and one that citizens could see, trust supplied the verdict. The construct also explains why comprehension did not decide confidence. Several participants could not explain how the devices worked, yet their confidence grew when the process visibly ran well, while others with detailed knowledge remained sceptical because they could not see inside the system. In these accounts, comprehension was neither required for confidence nor enough to secure it, and visible checks counted for more.

The extension has limits. It identifies a mechanism in the reasoning of 35 purposively selected participants, not its prevalence among Malawian voters. It is most likely to apply where officials operate the devices, where a paper record runs alongside the digital one and where trust in the electoral body is low. Where voters operate the machines, ease of use regains its ordinary meaning, and where trust is high, citizens may take the link between paper and digital records on trust.

## Institutional trust as a filter

Participants who distrusted MEC said they would not trust the results however well the devices worked, and P007 said the refusal of an independent audit led people to suspect "malicious intentions". This is consistent with accounts of political trust as a judgement of an institution's trustworthiness formed from experience of its conduct (Levi & Stoker, 2000), with survey evidence from Nigeria and from a cross-national study of 47 elections that judgements of election quality follow views of the electoral body's performance and autonomy (Kerr, 2013; Kerr & Lührmann, 2017), and with the Brazilian and Indian evidence on electronic voting (Avgerou, 2013; Avgerou et al., 2019). The data show the distrusting side of the filter more clearly than the charitable side, because few participants expressed high trust in MEC, and part of the agreement was prompted by a direct question.

Some of the most developed criticism came from participants whose accounts showed detailed knowledge of technology or governance. This does not fit the assumption that resistance to electoral technology reflects digital illiteracy. It is closer to Norris's (2011) critical citizens, who support democratic procedures while demanding more of the institutions that run them. Knowledge did not make participants immune to rumour, however: P015, who had a technical background, was unsettled by online talk of rigging. Citizens who can see the governance gaps pose MEC a harder problem than misunderstanding does, and they caution against treating technology as a technical answer to political distrust (Debos, 2021).

## Experience, outcome and the timing of confidence

Confidence was not fixed before the election. For P001 and P014 it grew after the vote, and performance repaired some of the damage done by poor communication, which suggests that public demonstrations and trial use before an election could build confidence earlier. Confidence built on experience may also be fragile, because it depends on the system continuing to perform and on the outcome being accepted.

The 2025 result matters here, because supporters of winning parties tend to be more satisfied with the political process than supporters of losing ones (Anderson et al., 2005). The DPP had joined the demand for an audit ("MEC rejects opposition's request," 2025), and its candidate, Peter Mutharika, won the presidency (Reuters, 2025). This may have eased acceptance among some participants, but the study did not collect party preferences and cannot test it. After power changes hands, the views of winners and losers about political institutions also tend to converge (Moehler & Lindberg, 2009), and 2025 was Malawi's second turnover in succession, after the opposition won the court-ordered fresh election of 2020 (Nkhata et al., 2021). Whether this history narrowed partisan differences in trust in MEC lies beyond these data. Within this partisan context, even under favourable conditions, participants' confidence remained conditional on visible checks and explained decisions. In a closer contest, the same governance gaps could carry greater risk.

## Trust as the hinge between technology and the vote

The three relationships between technology and willingness to vote are consistent with Norris's (2014) argument and Birch's (2010) evidence that perceptions of electoral integrity are associated with political behaviour, while showing that technology did not act uniformly. What distinguished the responses was less the technology than the participant's judgement of the institution using it. Institutional trust thus appears to condition how technology judgements relate to stated willingness to vote, and claims that new technology will raise or lower participation need to specify for whom, and under what conditions of trust.

# Making the paper trail visible

The findings point to five changes. First, independent oversight and audit of electoral technology should be placed on a legal footing, as the observer mission recommended (EU EOM, 2025, p. 7), with findings published in plain language in English and Chichewa. Second, governance information should be published before deployment. In our view, procurement documents, functional requirements, standard operating procedures, audit summaries and polling-station results-sheet images can be made public without compromising security, while configurations, credentials and network details should not be. This goes further than existing guidance, which recommends publishing test results but treats wider disclosure, such as of source code, as a trade-off with security (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.), so documents should pass an independent security review before release. Third, civic education about technology should begin before procurement decisions are final and reach people offline through radio, community meetings and schools, with basic media literacy included. Fourth, MEC should explain clearly, before polling day, that paper records determine the result, and publish polling-station results sheets alongside transmitted images, which would give citizens a practical means of verification. Fifth, staff training and public communication should be treated as one task. In Ghana, the reliability of biometric systems depended on how well officials were trained to handle failures (Effah & Debrah, 2018), and officials who can explain what a device does and what happens when it fails are likely to be the most immediate source of public confidence on polling day.

# What this study can and cannot show

The sample was purposive, and the study does not claim that its participants represent Malawi's electorate. Phase 1 centred on students at one university, and the online questionnaire in Phase 2 may have favoured people with internet access and digital literacy. All accounts were given after the result was known, and Phase 2 took place about 14 months after the election, so accounts may have been shaped by knowledge of the outcome and, especially in Phase 2, by recall. Interviews and written responses differ in depth, one guide question framed the link between technology and trust in MEC directly, and the study did not record party preferences. The research team's institutional ties to the students' university may also have shaped what they were willing to say about MEC and political parties. The study's strength lies in explaining how participants in different roles reasoned, not in measuring how widely their views are held.

Interviews with rural and less connected young people would test whether these mechanisms hold beyond the university and the online sphere. A panel following the same voters across electoral cycles would show whether confidence grows as the technology becomes familiar or erodes if governance gaps remain. Studies pairing citizens' beliefs about security with independent audit evidence would allow perception and performance to be compared, and survey measures of perceived ease of verification would allow the construct to be tested at scale.

# Repairing the package

Malawi's 2025 elections were run with new technology amid public doubt, yet voting was orderly and the result accepted. Many participants knew the names of the devices but few knew how they worked, and their judgements turned less on understanding than on whether they could check what the system produced. Where they could see it work, chiefly in fast identification at the polling station, some reported greater confidence and a few greater willingness to vote. Where they could not, they judged the system through their trust in MEC, which for many was low.

The article proposes perceived ease of verification as the counterpart of ease of use for non-operating users, and finds that institutional trust worked as a filter where verification was unavailable. Some of the most developed doubts came from participants with technical or governance knowledge, which suggests that resistance to electoral technology can reflect informed scrutiny of its governance as much as unfamiliarity with devices. The case is informative because its outcome favoured acceptance, yet confidence remained conditional on visible checks and explained decisions.

The practical lesson follows from the gap itself. The paper safeguard already existed; citizens needed to see it. Publishing polling-station results sheets alongside transmitted images, placing audit on a legal footing and explaining the role of paper before polling day would give non-operating users something they can verify instead of something they must take on trust. A

good product in a damaged package, as one participant put it, is also damaged. Malawi's next elections will show whether MEC repairs the package before a closer contest tests the product.

## Declarations

**Competing interests.**

The authors declare no competing interests.

# Use of generative AI.

Generative AI tools were used to assist with drafting, restructuring, language editing and reference checking. The authors reviewed, verified and revised all content and take full responsibility for the manuscript.

# Author Contribution

Ernest Pondani conceptualised the manuscript, designed the methodology, wrote the original draft and supervised the work. Peter Kumwenda and Courage Daudi collected the data in both phases, curated it and contributed the literature review to the original draft. All three authors took part in the formal analysis, reviewed and edited the manuscript, and read and approved the final version

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Conceptualisation of the manuscript: Ernest Pondani. Methodology: Ernest Pondani. Investigation (data collection in both phases) and data curation: Peter Kumwenda and Courage Daudi. Formal analysis: Peter Kumwenda, Courage Daudi and Ernest Pondani. Writing (original draft): Ernest Pondani, with literature review contributions from Peter Kumwenda and Courage Daudi. Writing (review and editing): all authors. Supervision: Ernest Pondani. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. Many thanks to Associate Professor Boniface Dulani who supervised Courage Daudi’s undergraduate dissertation.

# Data Availability

The data are not publicly available because of the political sensitivity of the topic and the confidentiality promised to participants. De-identified excerpts are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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## Figures

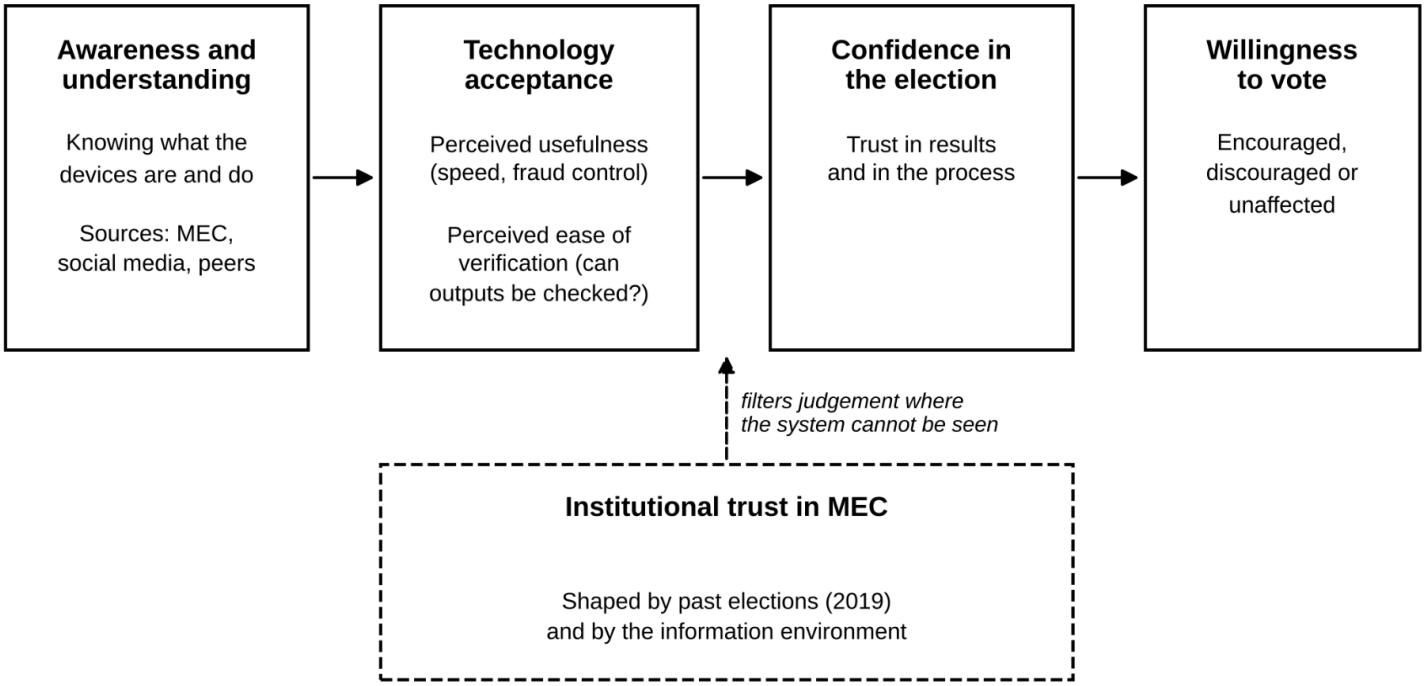


**Figure 1**

Conditional acceptance: an integrated framework combining the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989), institutional trust theory (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Norris, 2011) and electoral integrity (Norris, 2014); solid arrows show the sequence from awareness to willingness to vote, and the dashed box and arrow show institutional trust filtering judgement where the system cannot be checked