

Research Article

A Comparative Assessment of Voting Patterns, Political Trust, and Perceived Political Freedom Among the Mende and the Temne During APC and SLPP Administrations

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Abstract

Ethnicity and regional identity have long been integrated into political strategies employed by elites to mobilize electoral support in Sierra Leone. Although such strategies can facilitate political participation and collective mobilization, they may also deepen ethnic divisions and reinforce political ideologies based on ethnic cleavages. Against this backdrop, this study examined and compared the political behavior and perceptions of political freedom among members of the two major ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, the Mende and Temne, during the presidential administrations of the two dominant political parties, the All People's Congress (APC) and the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP). The study adopted a quantitative research approach using secondary data obtained from Afrobarometer survey rounds 5, 6, 8, and 9. Cross-tabulation analysis was employed to examine patterns of voting behavior, levels of trust in political institutions, and perceptions of political freedom across the two ethnic groups and political administrations. The findings revealed that ethnicity continues to influence citizens' political behavior in Sierra Leone. Evidence of ethnic affiliation was observed in respondents' voting patterns and in their levels of trust in the president and the ruling party under both APC and SLPP administrations. Despite these ethnic tendencies, the majority of respondents believed that citizens were free to join any political organization and vote for candidates of their choice, indicating political freedom within the democratic process. The study concludes that ethno-regional cleavages remain evident in the political behavior of Sierra Leoneans, even in the presence of perceived political freedoms. It recommends that policymakers, political parties, and civil society organizations strengthen civic education and promote issue-based politics to reduce ethnic polarisation and foster national cohesion in Sierra Leone's democratic governance.

Keywords

Political Behavior, Political Identity, Political Freedom, Afrobarometer, Sierra Leoneans

1. Introduction

Entrenched patronage networks in many African states are mostly built on ethnicity and regionalism. According to [1-6], such a political strategy is practised in the Gambia, Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, South Africa, and Zambia,

among others. Political elites in these countries use these networks as a tool to maintain power, command state resources, and co-opt key constituencies [7]. While this strategy pro-

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Received: 1 June 2026; **Accepted:** 13 June 2026; **Published:** 10 August 2026



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motes social movements [8], it has a far-reaching adverse effect on any country. It may sometimes exacerbate ethnic tensions, foster competition among groups [9, 10], and weaken the ability of formal institutions to operate impartially [7]. Consequently, a range of strategies, including accommodating, opposing, and dismissing, have been proposed to respond to ethno-regional politics [11]. However, there are challenges in managing ethnic diversity in Africa [12], especially when political competition is based on ethnicity and region.

Sierra Leone presents a case of ethno-regional politics employed by political elites and citizens alike. On the one hand, party loyalty is driven by ethnicity and region. For instance, in Bo City, [13] found that tribes and regions shape the voting behavior of many respondents [13]. On the other hand, political competition and strategies involve high ethno-regional salience, with political elites mobilizing support via this strategy. Although the country has not reported ethnic conflict in its political system, several studies on the causes of the civil war discussed the role of grievance [14-17]. The grievance stemmed from the marginalization and exclusion of certain groups who lacked access to basic services. Equally, ethno-regional politics can promote marginalization and limit broader participation, potentially leading to political conflict. Hence, [18] pinpointed that ethnic divide, among other factors, could lead to conflict ahead of the 2023 general elections.

Previous studies have examined the effect of ethno-regional politics on various aspects of governance, such as the allocation and accessibility of resources, citizens' perceptions of government performance [19], foreign policy [20], and democratic consolidation [21] and quality [22]. Other studies focus directly on conflict and violence in African states that employ ethno-regional politics [23]. Altogether, these studies demonstrate why political competition should not be based on ethnicity and region, contributing to the individual element of the adverse effect of ethno-regional politics. However, many of these studies focus primarily on political parties and elite behavior rather than on the political behavior of ordinary citizens. Additionally, studies that address this gap have failed to show changes in citizens' political behavior and perceived political freedom across governments, thereby limiting efforts to determine the consequences of ethno-regional politics.

Departing from most existing work on African ethno-regional politics, this paper shifts its analysis from the behavior of political elites to that of ordinary citizens. Specifically, it compares the political behavior and perceptions of political freedom among the two major ethnic groups in Sierra Leone (the Mende and Temne) across different political administrations. Such an analysis is necessary because political behavior and perceptions of freedom are dynamic and may change as governments change. Citizens may respond differently to political transitions depending on whether they perceive the ruling administration as inclusive, representative, and respectful of political rights. Examining these changes provides a deeper understanding of whether ethnic and regional identities continue to shape political choices regardless of the party in

power or whether citizens' attitudes become more issue-based over time.

Furthermore, comparing different administrations makes it possible to identify whether patterns of ethnic voting, support for the ruling party, trust in political institutions, and perceptions of political freedom remain consistent or vary according to the political context. This is particularly important in Sierra Leone, where politics has historically been associated with regional and ethnic alignments. By examining similarities and differences across administrations, the study contributes to understanding whether democratic competition reinforces or weakens ethno-regional divisions and whether citizens perceive similar levels of political freedom under different governments.

Political behavior is assessed through voting patterns and trust in the president and the ruling party. In contrast, perceptions of political freedom are measured through citizens' reported freedom to join political organizations and choose whom to vote for. These indicators are cross-tabulated with ethnicity and region to reveal how political attitudes vary across groups and over time.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, I discuss the theoretical framework; Section 3 briefly summarises the historical trajectory of Sierra Leone's political landscape; and Section 4 presents the emergence of ethno-regional politics in Sierra Leone. Section 5 discusses the analytical method and data sources. Sections 6 present the results and discusses the findings. The conclusions ensue.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This study is based on the argument of social identity theory and social capital theory.

On the one hand, Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, argues that individuals derive part of their identity from membership in social groups. These groups may be based on ethnicity, religion, region, language, or other social characteristics. Individuals tend to favor members of their own group (in-group) while distinguishing themselves from members of other groups (out-groups). When a particular identity becomes salient, individuals are more likely to interpret politics through the lens of the distinction between "us" and "them," to favor co-ethnics or co-partisans, and to align their attitudes and actions with the group they believe represents their collective interests [24, 25]. In the context of Sierra Leone, this theory explains why political competition has long been framed in ethnic and regional terms. While the SLPP is widely perceived as historically linked to the Mende and the South-East, the APC is commonly associated with the Temne and the North. These identity cues can influence not only voting patterns but also political trust and perception of political freedom.

On the other hand, social capital theory explains how repeated interaction, networks, norms, and trust shape coopera-

tion within and across groups. In political settings, where citizens feel connected through dense social ties and shared norms, trust can support broader participation, tolerance, and institutional legitimacy. Within ethnically divided political environments, social capital may develop more strongly within ethnic groups than across groups. This can lead to variations in trust in political leaders and ruling parties, depending on whether members of particular ethnic groups perceive themselves as politically represented. The theory therefore provides a useful lens for understanding differences in trust in the president and the ruling party across APC and SLPP administrations. Social capital theory thus helps interpret the consequences of identity-based politics by linking ethnic and regional political alignment to the formation of trust, the strength of associational life, and the fragmentation of political confidence across social boundaries.

3. Historical Trajectory of Sierra Leone's Political Landscape

Sierra Leone's political landscape has witnessed various upheavals during the pre- and post-independence eras. During these periods, the country transitioned into a republic and a one-party state, experienced a coup d'état, and adopted democratic practices, including multiparty parliamentary and presidential elections.

Pre-Independence Era

Sierra Leone's pre-independence politics were shaped by colonial dualism. The British governed the Crown Colony and the Protectorate through separate political and administrative arrangements, creating unequal participation, status, and access to power. While the Colony offered many positions in the colonial administration to the Krios, the Protectorate relied on indirect rule, which empowered chiefs. This institutional split produced a durable political cleavage between Colony and Protectorate elites and laid the foundations for later contests over who legitimately represented the emerging nation [26].

The approach to independence, therefore, was based on a fragile compromise. The transition did not dismantle inherited hierarchies but transferred them into a new state. As later scholarship has shown, post-independence statebuilding conversations were already marked by unresolved identity questions, regional competition, and elite efforts to use the state for narrow accumulation and domination rather than broad national integration [27]. Independence in 1961 thus marked not the resolution of political rivalry but its transformation into a domestic struggle over the postcolonial state.

Post-Independence Era

The Prime Ministerial Period

The first post-independence phase was formally parliamentary, but politically fragile. Under Sir Milton Margai, Sierra Leone retained a reputation for relative moderation. After Milton Margai died in 1964, Albert Margai's leadership acceler-

ated polarisation. His efforts to restructure power and his flirtation with a one-party model deepened opposition fears that the state was being converted into an instrument of exclusion. The one-party idea was already a major contested project in the mid-1960s, and both Albert Margai and Siaka Stevens treated it instrumentally; they defended it when it seemed likely to secure power and rejected it when excluded from power [28].

The 1967 elections became the decisive rupture. The APC won, but before Siaka Stevens could consolidate power, the army intervened, producing a chain of coups and counter-coups. The military's entry into politics did not emerge in a vacuum. It reflected the erosion of institutional trust, the politicization of the armed forces, and the view among competing factions that power could no longer be safely transferred through normal constitutional means [27, 29]. The prime ministerial era, therefore, ended not through orderly democratic succession but through military disruption, setting the stage for authoritarian reconstruction.

The One-Party State Period

Siaka Stevens' eventual consolidation of power marked the beginning of a long authoritarian phase. Although the APC first came to office through electoral competition, Stevens gradually dismantled meaningful pluralism. His rule was built through patron-client networks, strategic appointments, selective repression, and the hollowing out of formal institutions. Asangna describes this as a politics of decline in which public institutions, including parliament, the civil service, and the military, were subordinated to personal and party control [30].

The formal transition to one-party rule in 1978 entrenched these tendencies. The APC became the sole legal party, and the state itself was absorbed into an informal structure of loyalty and reward.

Under Joseph Momoh, who succeeded Stevens in 1985, the one-party system persisted but with reduced authority and capacity. The regime inherited institutions already hollowed out by corruption and clientelism. State decay, economic decline, and the inability to maintain control over the countryside created the conditions for insurgency to emerge. The transition from one-party rule to open conflict was therefore not abrupt; it was the consequence of cumulative institutional erosion.

The Military Coup and Civil War Period

The outbreak of war in 1991, against the backdrop of state collapse, transformed Sierra Leone's political order. The insurgency of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) drew strength from external support, greed, and grievances stemming from marginalization, among other factors. In 1992, the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) overthrew Momoh. Kande's notion of the militariat argued that junior officers and lower-ranking soldiers seized power not as disciplined institutional guardians but as actors themselves shaped by state decay, frustration, and social collapse [31].

The eventual transition away from military rule was externally and internally forced. Elections in 1996 returned Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and the SLPP to office, though war continued.

The Lomé Peace Agreement of 1999 attempted to end the conflict through power-sharing, amnesty, and incorporation of the RUF into political life. However, it was deeply controversial because it privileged order over justice and gave extensive concessions to violent actors [27]. British military intervention and stronger international peacekeeping after 2000 shifted the balance. By 2002, the war formally ended, opening a new democratic phase.

The Democratic Era and Multi-Party Elections

Postwar Sierra Leone re-entered multi-party politics through elections in 2002, 2007, 2012, 2018 and 2023. Elections became central to state legitimacy and the consolidation of peace, and Sierra Leone was widely presented as a model of post-conflict recovery. However, the literature is clear that elections alone did not transform the deeper political structure. Ofori and Aleyomi argue that while post-conflict elections restored constitutional order and prevented relapse into large-scale war, they did not, by themselves, resolve the structural roots of exclusion, elite dominance, youth marginalization, and regional inequality [32].

The 2002 elections overwhelmingly favored the SLPP, reflecting gratitude for the end of the war and the opposition's weakness. The 2007 elections, however, saw the APC defeat the incumbent SLPP, marking the first peaceful electoral transfer of power in the postwar era. Subsequent elections reinforced both progress and limitations. The 2012 elections consolidated APC dominance under Ernest Bai Koroma, while the 2018 elections brought Julius Maada Bio and the SLPP back to power, with the 2023 elections keeping the SLPP in power.

4. Emergence of Ethno-Regional Politics in Sierra Leone

Political activities at the national level tend to take on an ethnic dimension because of the absence of class distinctions. Sierra Leone has been plagued by ethnic tensions, which extend to the major political parties. By 1961, the power struggle between the SLPP and the APC was already evident. Sierra Leone's most enduring political cleavage revolves around the rivalry between the Mende-dominated south and east and the Temne- and northern-dominated north. This cleavage did not arise naturally from primordial hostility. Ethnic identities in Sierra Leone became politicized through the interaction among state formation, class formation, and competition for access to political office and material resources [33].

During the colonial period, British rule institutionalized the divide between the Colony, centered on Freetown, and the Protectorate, comprising the hinterland. The Krio elite of the Colony enjoyed closer links to colonial administration, better access to education, and limited political representation. The transition to independence briefly united Protectorate elites against the Krio. SLPP, founded in 1951, emerged as the principal vehicle of Protectorate nationalism. At its inception, the

SLPP projected itself as a broad national movement. However, its social base increasingly became associated with Mende-speaking populations of the south and east.

Post-independence politics intensified ethno-regional competition because control of the state determined who benefited from public resources. Kandeh shows that cabinet appointments, bureaucratic recruitment, and the distribution of development opportunities increasingly reflected ethnic considerations [33]. Under the SLPP, Mende representation in the cabinet remained disproportionately strong relative to the Temne. Fridy and M'Cormack-Hale cite cabinet Figures showing that in 1962 and 1964 Mende ministers outnumbered Temne ministers, reinforcing northern perceptions that the SLPP had become the vehicle of southern and Mende dominance [34].

It was in this context that the APC emerged. The APC was formed in 1960 as an opposition party by Siaka Stevens and other dissidents, many of whom had broken from the SLPP. Its formation marked a decisive moment in the consolidation of ethno-regional politics. Although the APC presented itself as a national and populist alternative to the elitism and corruption of the SLPP, it quickly became associated with northern interests, especially the Temne and, later, the Limba.

Rather than transcend ethno-regional politics, the APC in power reproduced them in a different form. After consolidating authority from 1968 onward, Siaka Stevens increasingly used the state to reward northern allies and weaken the opposition. Kandeh demonstrates that under Stevens, Temne and northern representation in the cabinet rose sharply, while Mende presence declined [33]. Under Stevens and, later, Joseph Momoh, a Limba, the state became associated not only with northernization but eventually with Limbization, as key offices were concentrated among northerners, particularly the president's co-ethnics. Thus, the change from SLPP to APC did not end ethnicized patronage. It simply reversed its direction. State institutions, cabinet appointments, and the coercive apparatus all became increasingly infused with ethnoregional calculations.

This pattern had important long-term consequences. First, it deepened the perception that access to state power was necessary for group survival and advancement. Second, it weakened the legitimacy of national institutions, since parties came to be seen less as ideological organizations than as vehicles for communal access to state resources. Third, it embedded voting patterns that would endure across decades. According to [35], Sierra Leone's post-conflict elections in 2002 still reflected these older alignments, even though the election was also shaped by what he calls the "peace vote." Likewise, Fridy and M'Cormack-Hale demonstrate statistically that the 2007 elections reproduced long-standing patterns in which the APC performed strongly in Temne-dominant northern districts, while the SLPP remained strongest in Mende-dominant southern and eastern districts [34]. Their analysis confirms that ethnicity continued to structure partisan preference well into the post-war era.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative comparative research design using secondary data obtained from Afrobarometer survey rounds 5, 6, 8, and 9. The study compares patterns of political behavior across two political administrations in Sierra Leone. Rounds 5 and 6 were conducted during APC-led governments, while Rounds 8 and 9 were conducted during SLPP-led governments. The comparison allows examination of similarities and differences in voting patterns, political trust, and perceptions of political freedom between the two administrations. Hence, gathering data from these four datasets provided a comprehensive analysis of the topic.

The analysis relied primarily on cross-tabulations, with responses disaggregated by region and ethnicity. Particular attention was given to Mende and Temne respondents because these ethnic groups have historically been associated with the two dominant political parties in Sierra Leone. The study does not seek to establish causal relationships but rather to identify

and compare patterns of political behavior across different political administrations.

Since attention was on APC and SLPP, as well as Mende and Temne, the study adopted inclusion criteria. To include a particular response, the study used the “select cases” option in SPSS based on the following conditions.

- The respondent must have reported belonging to the Mende or Temne ethnic group.
- Voted for either APC or SLPP.
- Perceived political freedom to be “Not at all free”, “Not very free”, “Somewhat free” or “Completely free”.
- Expressed “Not at all”, “Just a little”, “Somewhat” or “A lot” trust in the president and the ruling party.

6. Presentation of Results

The results are analyzed, presented in the Tables below, and discussed further.

Table 1. Parties Voted For.

		SLPP	APC
Round 5			
Eastern	Mende	91.9%	8.1%
	Temne	61.5%	38.5%
Southern	Mende	94.3%	5.7%
	Temne	50.0%	50.0%
Northern	Mende	100.0%	0.0%
	Temne	1.9%	98.1%
Western	Mende	84.2%	15.8%
	Temne	11.4%	88.6%
Round 6			
Eastern	Mende	83.8%	16.2%
	Temne	40.0%	60.0%
Southern	Mende	96.3%	3.8%
	Temne	50.0%	50.0%
Northern	Mende	-	-
	Temne	21.9%	78.1%
Western	Mende	78.6%	21.4%
	Temne	47.4%	52.6%
Round 8			
Eastern	Mende	99.2%	0.8%
	Temne	0.0%	100%
Southern	Mende	98.7%	1.3%

		SLPP	APC
Northern	Temne	0.00%	100%
	Mende	-	-
	Temne	7.7%	92.3%
Western	Mende	100.0%	0.0%
	Temne	12.5%	87.5%
Round 9			
Eastern	Mende	95.0%	5.0%
	Temne	33.3%	66.7%
Southern	Mende	94.8%	5.2%
	Temne	54.5%	45.5%
Northern	Mende	100.0%	0.0%
	Temne	12.2%	87.8%
North-West	Mende	100.0%	0.0%
	Temne	12.2%	87.8%
Western	Mende	72.4%	27.6%
	Temne	10.8%	89.2%

Source: Afrobarometer

Note: In the Northern Area, the criteria for selecting a case were not met for the Mende, so the study reported no results for that particular round.

Table 1 shows a pattern of ethno-regional politics in respondents' voting behavior across the four survey rounds. Most Mendes across all the regions agreed that they voted for SLPP. This is especially true for the eastern and southern provinces, which are considered SLPP strongholds. In these regions, 83.3% to 99.2% of Mende respondents voted for SLPP. Similarly, the impact of ethnicity is also observed in APC's strongholds and the Western area, where the majority of the Mendes aligned their votes with the SLPP.

Temne respondents voted for the APC. While those in the northern province and Western area consistently exhibited

strong support for the APC, some variation emerged in the Eastern and Southern regions. In Round 5, most Temne respondents in the Eastern Province voted for the SLPP, although votes shifted to the APC in the subsequent rounds. Similarly, the Southern Province recorded equal numbers of respondents' votes for APC and SLPP in rounds 5 and 6, with SLPP receiving more votes from Temne respondents in round 9. While this shows a shift away from ethnicity, regional impact is observed as these regions are considered SLPP's strongholds.

Table 2. *Freedom to Join Any Political Organization.*

		Not at all free	Not very free	Somewhat free	Completely free
Round 5					
Eastern	Mende	0.8%	4.8%	7.3%	87.1%
	Temne	0.0%	30.8%	7.7%	61.5%
Southern	Mende	2.9%	1.9%	16.2%	79.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	12.5%	87.5%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%

		Not at all free	Not very free	Somewhat free	Completely free
Western	Temne	0.5%	2.4%	27.2%	69.9%
	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	15.0%	85.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Round 6					
Eastern	Mende	2.7%	16.2%	5.4%	75.7%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	1.3%	1.9%	2.5%	94.3%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	85.7%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	2.0%	2.7%	6.7%	88.7%
Western	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	6.7%	93.3%
	Temne	2.6%	0.0%	18.4%	78.9%
Round 8					
Eastern	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	0.0%	4.0%	8.7%	87.2%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	88.9%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	0.8%	1.5%	1.5%	96.2%
Western	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	17.6%	82.4%
	Temne	0.0%	2.1%	31.9%	66.0%
Round 9					
Eastern	Mende	1.7%	0.8%	1.7%	95.8%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	1.3%	0.0%	2.6%	96.1%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	9.1%	90.9%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	4.1%	2.7%	93.2%
North-West	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	1.4%	4.1%	94.6%
Western	Mende	3.4%	13.8%	3.4%	79.3%
	Temne	1.6%	7.8%	10.9%	79.7%

Source: Afrobarometer

Table 2 indicates that respondents across all ethnic groups and survey rounds generally perceived the freedom to join any political organization as “Completely Free”, regardless of their regions. For example, most Mende respondents in the

Northern province and Western area believe that citizens can join any political organization. Similarly, in SLPP’s strongholds, most Temne respondents agreed that freedom to join any political organization is completely free.

Table 3. *Freedom to Choose Who to Vote For.*

		Not at all free	Not very free	Somewhat free	Completely free
Round 5					
Eastern	Mende	0.0%	2.4%	4.8%	92.7%
	Temne	0.0%	8.3%	8.3%	83.3%
Southern	Mende	1.9%	1.9%	19.0%	77.1%
	Temne	0.0%	12.5%	0.0%	87.5%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%	66.7%
	Temne	0.5%	2.9%	21.5%	75.1%
Western	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	5.0%	95.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Round 6					
Eastern	Mende	0.0%	5.3%	18.4%	76.3%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	0.6%	2.5%	1.9%	95.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	85.7%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	2.6%	0.7%	9.3%	87.4%
Western	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Round 8					
Eastern	Mende	0.0%	1.6%	0.8%	97.5%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	0.0%	3.3%	7.3%	89.3%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	88.9%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	0.8%	0.0%	1.6%	97.7%
Western	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	17.6%	82.4%
	Temne	0.0%	2.1%	31.9%	66.0%
Round 9					
Eastern	Mende	1.7%	0.0%	1.7%	96.6%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	1.3%	0.0%	2.6%	96.1%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	9.1%	90.9%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	2.7%	2.7%	94.5%
North-West	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	4.1%	95.9%
	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	96.4%

		Not at all free	Not very free	Somewhat free	Completely free
Western	Temne	0.0%	4.7%	1.6%	93.8%

Source: Afrobarometer

Table 3 demonstrates consistently high levels of perceived electoral freedom among both Mende and Temne respondents throughout the 4 rounds. In most cases, more than three-quarters of respondents reported being completely free to choose

whom to vote for. Among Mende respondents, the percentage selecting “Completely Free” remained particularly high. Similarly, Temne respondents expressed strong perceptions of voting freedom.

Table 4. Trust President.

		Not at all	Just a little	Somewhat	A lot
Round 5					
Eastern	Mende	14.5%	21.8%	41.9%	21.8%
	Temne	16.7%	25.0%	33.3%	25.0%
Southern	Mende	27.6%	44.8%	18.1%	9.5%
	Temne	14.3%	28.6%	0.0%	57.1%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	1.5%	3.4%	8.3%	86.9%
Western	Mende	40.0%	5.0%	45.0%	10.0%
	Temne	11.1%	11.1%	27.8%	50.0%
Round 6					
Eastern	Mende	16.2%	10.8%	29.7%	43.2%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	40.3%	41.5%	11.9%	6.3%
	Temne	0.0%	42.9%	57.1%	0.0%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	11.3%	18.7%	12.0%	58.0%
Western	Mende	28.6%	28.6%	14.3%	28.6%
	Temne	29.7%	8.1%	2.7%	59.5%
Round 8					
Eastern	Mende	8.9%	7.3%	4.9%	78.9%
	Temne	22.2%	22.2%	0.0%	55.6%
Southern	Mende	4.7%	14.1%	8.1%	73.2%
	Temne	55.6%	22.2%	11.1%	11.1%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	39.2%	34.6%	12.3%	13.8%
Western	Mende	11.8%	29.4%	5.9%	52.9%
	Temne	29.8%	40.4%	12.8%	17.0%
Round 9					

		Not at all	Just a little	Somewhat	A lot
Eastern	Mende	1.7%	15.0%	15.0%	68.3%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	2.0%	6.5%	7.2%	84.3%
	Temne	9.1%	45.5%	9.1%	36.4%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%
	Temne	34.2%	28.8%	17.8%	19.2%
North-West	Mende	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Temne	37.8%	29.7%	16.2%	16.2%
Western	Mende	6.9%	34.5%	20.7%	37.9%
	Temne	42.2%	46.9%	3.1%	7.8%

Source: Afrobarometer

Table 4 shows that trust in the president changed from one administration to the next. During the APC administration (Rounds 5 and 6), Temne respondents generally expressed higher levels of trust. In contrast, Mende respondents reported substantially lower levels of trust in the president during this

period. The pattern reversed following the election of the SLPP government. During Rounds 8 and 9, Mende respondents expressed substantially higher levels of trust in the President. Conversely, trust among Temne respondents declined markedly during this period.

Table 5. Trust the Ruling Party.

		Not at all	Just a little	Somewhat	A lot
Round 5					
Eastern	Mende	30.9%	30.9%	23.6%	14.6%
	Temne	0.0%	58.3%	16.7%	25.0%
Southern	Mende	42.9%	31.4%	18.1%	7.6%
	Temne	33.3%	11.1%	22.2%	33.3%
Northern	Mende	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%
	Temne	7.3%	25.7%	21.4%	45.6%
Western	Mende	36.8%	47.4%	10.5%	5.3%
	Temne	20.0%	20.0%	31.4%	28.6%
Round 6					
Eastern	Mende	23.7%	15.8%	23.7%	36.8%
	Temne	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Southern	Mende	44.0%	37.7%	12.6%	5.7%
	Temne	16.7%	0.0%	50.0%	33.3%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	13.3%	20.0%	18.0%	48.7%
Western	Mende	46.7%	6.7%	33.3%	13.3%
	Temne	44.7%	13.2%	5.3%	36.8%

		Not at all	Just a little	Somewhat	A lot
Round 8					
Eastern	Mende	5.7%	9.8%	8.9%	75.6%
	Temne	22.2%	22.2%	0.0%	55.6%
Southern	Mende	4.7%	14.7%	23.3%	57.3%
	Temne	50.0%	37.5%	12.5%	0.0%
Northern	Mende	-	-	-	-
	Temne	47.3%	31.8%	10.1%	10.9%
Western	Mende	11.1%	27.8%	5.6%	55.6%
	Temne	41.7%	37.5%	6.3%	14.6%
Round 9					
Eastern	Mende	8.5%	9.3%	25.4%	56.8%
	Temne	66.7%	0.0%	33.3%	0.0%
Southern	Mende	3.3%	3.9%	16.3%	76.5%
	Temne	30.0%	40.0%	0.0%	30.0%
Northern	Mende	33.3%	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%
	Temne	50.7%	24.7%	13.7%	11.0%
North-West	Mende	0.0%	66.7%	0.0%	33.3%
	Temne	56.8%	13.5%	16.2%	13.5%
Western	Mende	14.3%	28.6%	14.3%	42.9%
	Temne	60.9%	23.4%	7.8%	7.8%

Source: Afrobarometer

Table 5 reveals the strongest evidence of ethno-regional politics in Sierra Leone. Throughout the study period, levels of trust in the ruling party closely mirrored ethnic patterns of party identification. During the APC administration, Temne respondents generally expressed higher levels of trust in the ruling APC. In contrast, trust in the APC among Mende respondents was considerably lower. Following the transition to the SLPP government, trust patterns shifted significantly. Mende respondents expressed much stronger trust in the ruling party. By contrast, trust in the SLPP among Temne respondents remained low.

7. Discussion of Results

The findings reveal a remarkably consistent pattern of ethno-regional political behavior among the Mende and Temne during both APC and SLPP administrations. Voting patterns demonstrate strong ethnic alignment, with Mende respondents overwhelmingly supporting the SLPP and Temne respondents predominantly supporting the APC. These patterns remained largely consistent across survey rounds despite

changes in political leadership. The findings support the argument of Social Identity Theory that individuals often align their political preferences with groups to which they perceive themselves to belong. Additionally, this confirms [13] that tribalism influences electioneering processes. Moreover, [4] reports that the SLPP enjoys overwhelming support among the Mende people, whereas the Temne and Limba mostly support the APC.

The results further indicate that political trust varies considerably across administrations. During the APC administrations represented by Rounds 5 and 6, Temne respondents generally reported higher levels of trust in both the president and the ruling party. Conversely, Mende respondents displayed comparatively lower levels of trust. Following the transition to SLPP administrations in Rounds 8 and 9, the pattern reversed: Mende respondents reported substantially higher levels of trust, while trust among Temne respondents declined. These findings suggest that political trust is closely associated with perceptions of political representation and group inclusion. Similar results were reported by [36, 37]. While [37] reported that the presence of ethnic nepotism worsens the negative effect of ethnicity on interpersonal trust, [36] found lower

trust levels in a country with an ethnic divide.

In contrast, perceptions of political freedom remained consistently high across the two ethnic groups and survey rounds. Most respondents reported that they were completely free to join political organizations and to choose whom to vote for. This pattern suggests that although ethnicity and region remain important factors in voting behavior and political trust, citizens generally perceive the democratic space as open and accessible regardless of which political party is in power. While [10] observes that ethnicity determines political association, perceptions of freedom of association and of whom to vote for suggest how political identity can also be formed and nurtured.

8. Conclusion

This study compared voting patterns, political trust, and political freedom among the Mende and the Temne during APC and SLPP administrations using Afrobarometer survey data. The findings reveal persistent ethno-regional patterns in voting behavior and political trust. Mende respondents consistently demonstrated stronger alignment with the SLPP, while Temne respondents generally exhibited stronger alignment with the APC. Similarly, levels of trust in the president and ruling party tended to be higher among ethnic groups associated with the governing party at a particular period.

However, the comparison also shows that perceptions of political freedom remained consistently high across ethnic groups and administrations. Most respondents believed that citizens were free to join political organizations and free to choose whom to vote for regardless of which political party governed the country. The findings therefore suggest that while ethnicity and region remain important features of political behavior in Sierra Leone, they do not appear to undermine citizens' perceptions of political freedom.

The study reports several limitations. First, the study's analysis might affect the link between ethno-regional politics and citizens' political behavior, as regression, chi-square and other inferential analyses were not performed. However, using several rounds of survey data was useful for identifying patterns and changes in this behavior. Additionally, the relationship between ethnicity and political trust is complex and requires the inclusion of other variables, such as respondents' economic conditions, political polarisation, and demographic profiles, especially educational level. Moreover, due to the inclusion criteria, the study analyzed responses below the actual 1200 obtained by Afrobarometer in the surveys. Finally, the study restricted political freedom to the freedom to join any association and to choose whom to vote for, which are not complete metrics. Further study should address these limitations.

Abbreviations

SLPP Sierra Leone People's Party

APC All People's Congress
RUF Revolutionary United Front
NPRCC National Provisional Ruling Council

Author Contributions

Shekou Ansumana Nuni: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in any form.

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