



Institute for Economic and Social Research



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## **Give Us a Chance! Uncovering Latent Political Participation among Malawians**

Under the auspices of the Afrobarometer<sup>1</sup>, IfESOR conducted a nation-wide survey of political opinions and attitudes in Malawi between 15<sup>th</sup> June and 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2005. A nationally representative sample of 1200 respondents drawn from all the districts in the country was interviewed. In this paper, we use Afrobarometer data to investigate the nature of political participation among Malawians.

Other than voting, the 2005 Malawi Afrobarometer survey finds that Malawians do not participate at high levels in various forms of politics. But the survey results suggest that this is not because they are uninterested, or predisposed against participation. Rather the evidence implies that low levels of participation occur because people do not see opportunities to participate. Moreover, they regard the political system too complicated for ordinary folk to easily understand.

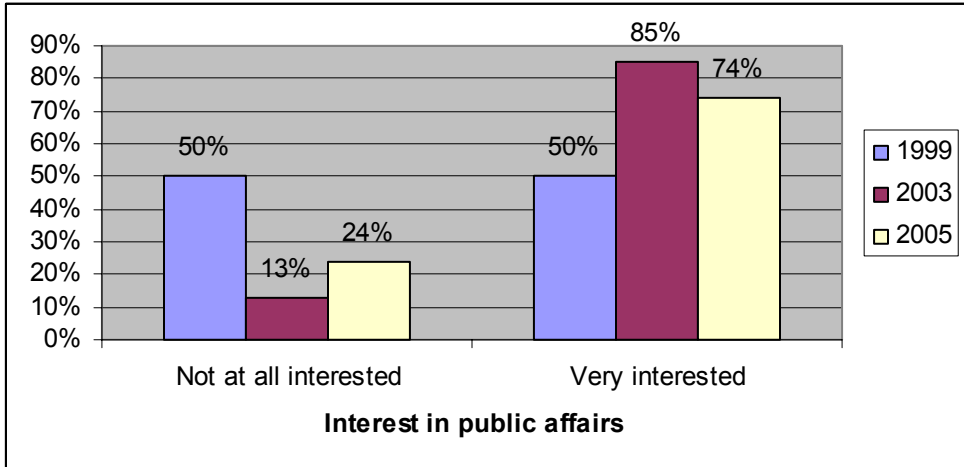
### **The Bases of Political Participation in Malawi**

Jane Mansbridge defines political participation as “the bottom-up practice of deliberative democracy.” It consists of “legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and the actions they take.” The concept encompasses voting in elections, collective action around policy issues, contacting political representatives and outbursts of street protest. One line of argument is that if conventional forms of participation fail to make popular voices heard, citizens in a democracy are within their rights to stage boycotts, strikes and demonstrations. Participation also includes engagement in community affairs and contacting patrons such as traditional leaders, religious figures, or business leaders.

Political participation is a function of many factors. An important starting point is a basic mental engagement with politics (or what political scientists call “cognitive engagement”). Thus, we began by asking people: “How interested would you say you are in public affairs?” As shown in Figure 1, a large majority of Malawians (74 percent) say they are either “very” or “somewhat interested.”

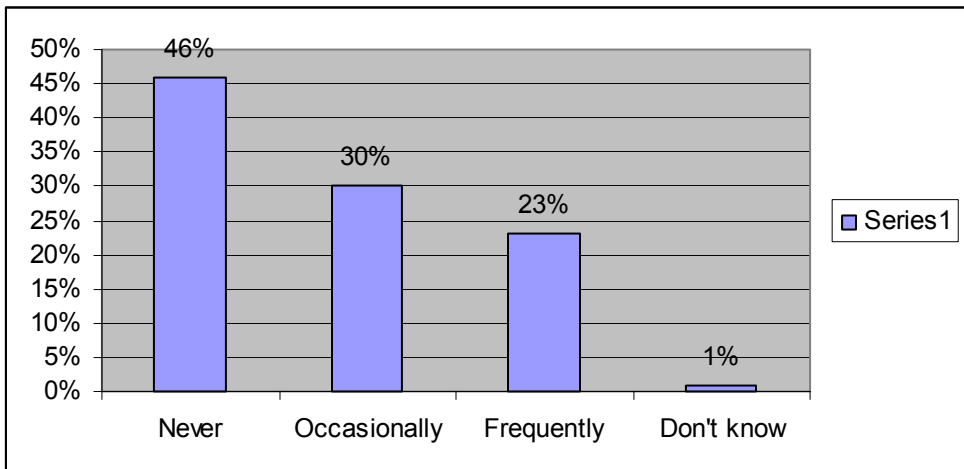
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<sup>1</sup> The Afrobarometer is a comparative series of public attitude surveys. The first round in Malawi was conducted in November-December 1999 and the second round from April-May, 2003. Round 3 of the Afrobarometer (2005-6) covered 18 sub-Saharan African countries (9 in SADC: Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe; 5 in West Africa: Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal; and 4 in East Africa: Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania and Uganda).



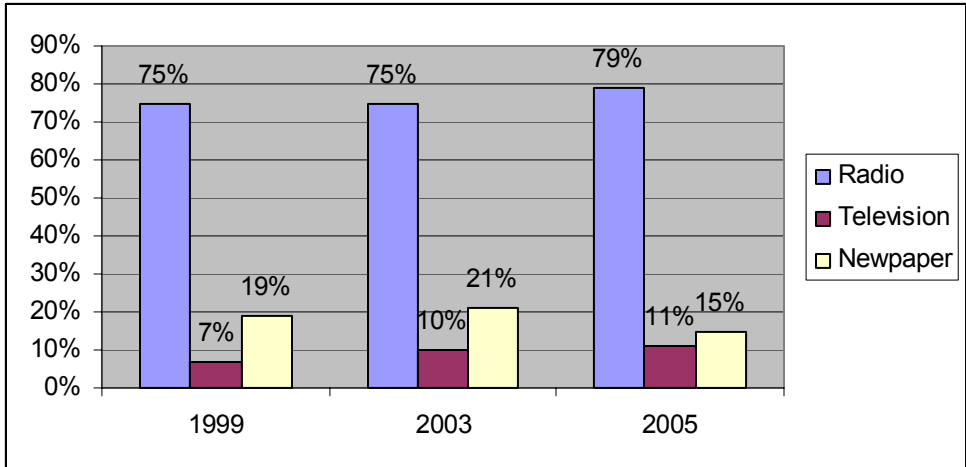
**Figure 1: Interest in public affairs**

We then asked people: “When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters?” Despite the fact that a majority of people are interested in public affairs, 46 percent of them never discuss political matters with friends or family members. But slightly more than half do: 30 percent do it occasionally and 23 percent frequently discuss political matters with friends (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Discussion of politics**

But in order to translate these levels of interest and discussion into political action, citizens need to be exposed to the political system. In Malawi, like in many African countries, exposure may take place informally through the process of interpersonal discussion that we have just mentioned. But exposure can also occur through more formal channels such as the news media. The results indicate that a large majority of Malawians receive news from radio (79 percent). However, far lower proportions obtain news through newspapers (15 percent) and television (11 percent) (Figure 3). Since there are close to ten radio broadcasting networks in the country, the implication is that Malawians get a variety of news content and have choices to make regarding the sources of news. It should also be observed that there is a slight drop in 2005 in the percentage of Malawians who get news from the newspaper. This is most likely due to the price increase of newspapers in recent times.

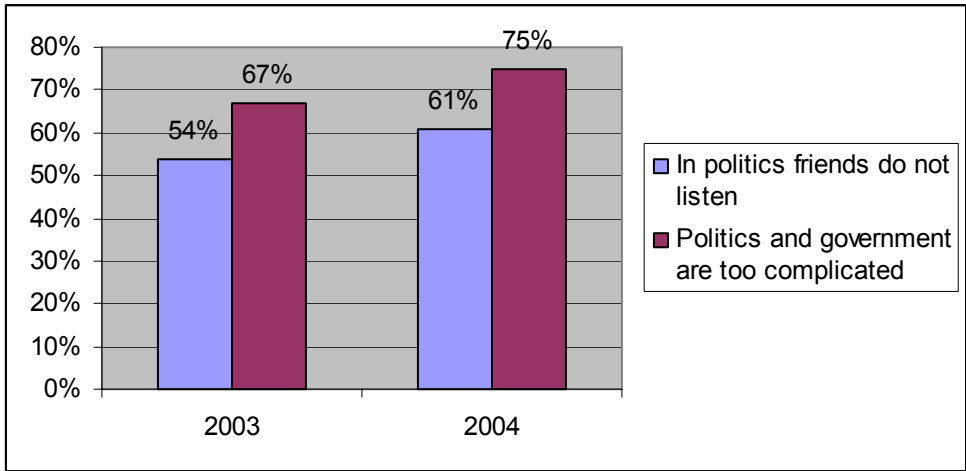


**Figure 3: Sources of News**

But regardless of levels of formal and informal exposure to the political world, do people feel competent to engage in politics? To tap this we asked respondents which of two separate statements they most agreed:

- Politics and government sometimes seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on.
- As far as politics are concerned, friends and neighbors do not listen to you.

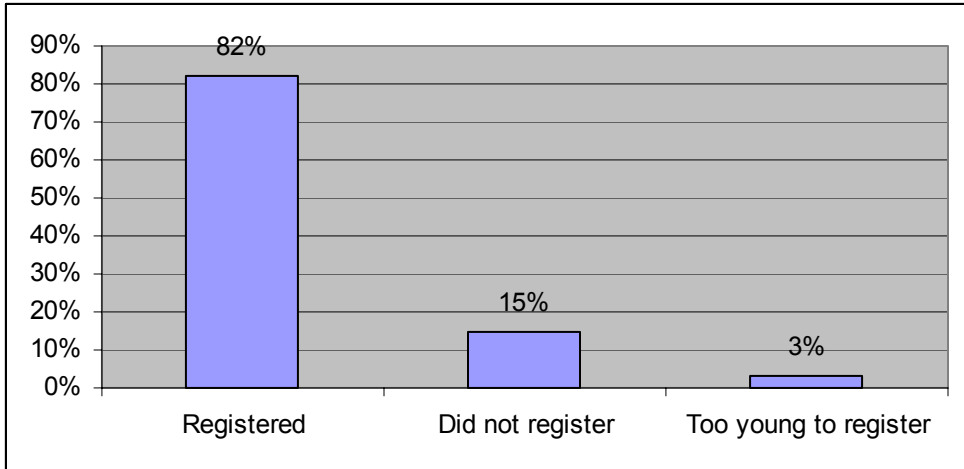
We found that three quarters (75 percent) agreed that politics and government are too complicated; and 60 percent agreed that other people do not listen to their opinions about politics (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Respondents' Views of their Political Competence.**

**Voting Participation**

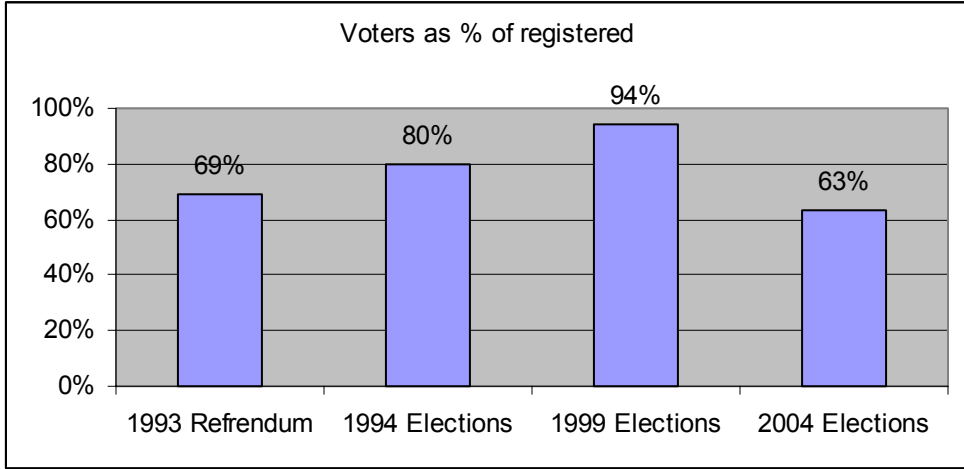
Voting is perhaps the most primary requirement of political participation in a democracy. We began our exploration of this subject by asking people if they had had registered to vote in the last elections of 2004. A large majority (82percent) said they had. Only 15 percent did not register for various reasons and three percent were too young to vote in 2004 (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Voter Registration (2004)**

In terms of voting behaviour, Malawians like to exercise their rights to choose their political leaders and political system. As can be seen in Figure 6, voter turnout (as expressed as a percent of registered voters) increased from 69 percent in the 1993 referendum to 94 percent in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 1999. In the 2004 parliamentary and presidential elections, voter turnout dropped to 63 percent. Registration of voters has also been increasing from 3,775,256 in 1994 to 5,071,822 in 1999 and to 5,184,086 in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, political participation, as defined by registration and voting behaviour, is quite variable in Malawi but occasionally hits high peaks. In our opinion, most Malawians see elections as giving them a chance to express their assessment of the performance of their elected leaders during their term of office.



**Figure 6: Voter Turnout (as percentage of registered voters): 1993 to 2004.**

<sup>2</sup> Source: 1993 figures are from the 2004 Report of the Public Affairs Committee. 1994 to 2004 figures are from the 1994, 1999 and 2004 reports of the Malawi Electoral Commission.

<sup>3</sup> The drop in voter turnout in 2004 has been attributed to several reasons which include confusion brought about by last minute change in polling date, confusion over registration rolls and frustration and disillusionment with unfulfilled promises made at the last election.

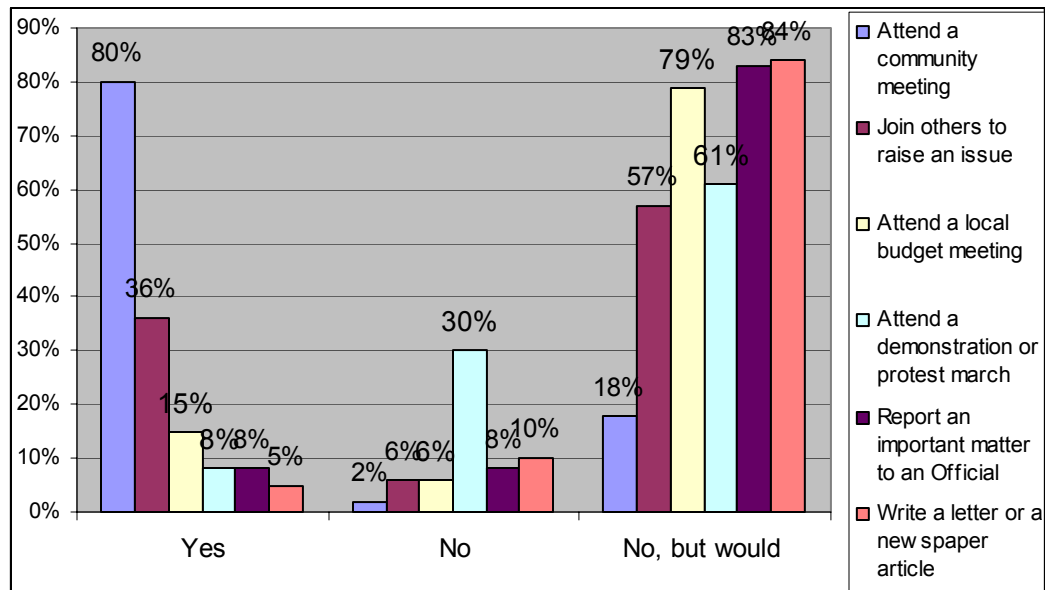
## Participation Between Elections

In order to examine a range of other types of political participation that occur between elections, we asked the respondents the following question:

“Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance:

- attended a community meeting
- got together with others to raise an issue
- attended a demonstration or protest march
- attended a local budget meeting
- contacted an influential person
- wrote a letter or a newspaper article
- reported an important matter to an official (e.g. a crime you witnessed)?”

A relatively large proportion said they had attended a community meeting (80 percent). But only about half as many said that they had joined with others to raise an issue (37 percent). Malawians are even less likely to have done other things, such as attending a local budget meeting (15 percent) or a demonstration or protest march (8 percent). Only 7 percent said they had reported an important matter to an official and 5 percent said they had written a letter to a newspaper (Figure 7).



**Figure 7: Participation Between Elections**

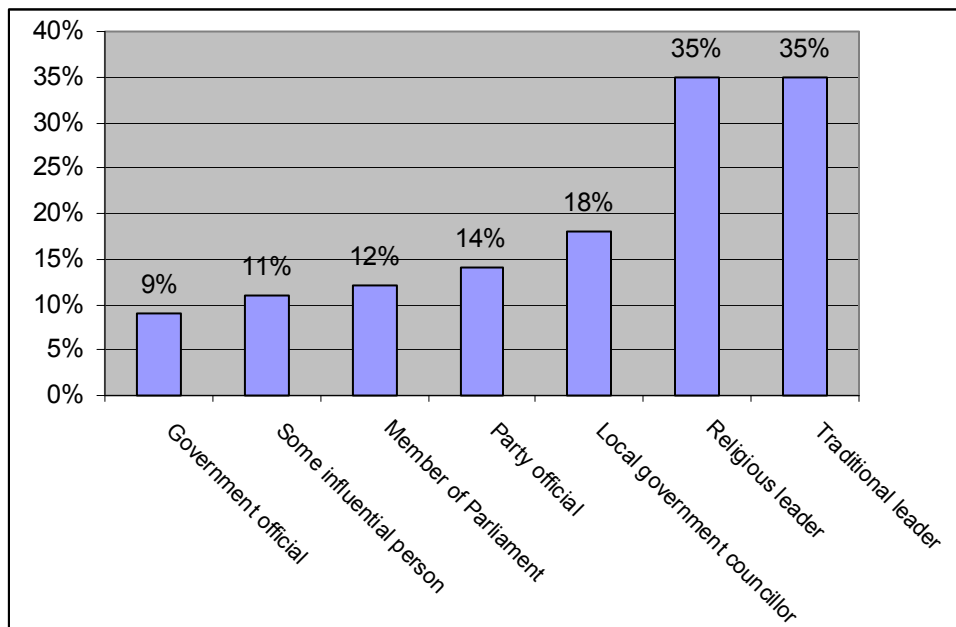
As noted earlier, participation also includes contacting formal officials and local influentials such as a traditional leaders, religious figures, or business leaders. Thus, we asked the respondents the following question:

“During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views:

- a local government councillor
- a member of Parliament
- an official of a government ministry

- a political party official
- a religious leader
- a traditional ruler
- or some other influential person?”

We find that Malawians are most likely to have contacted traditional and religious leaders (35 percent each). Next in line are local government councillors (18 percent), followed by party officials (14 percent), Member of Parliament (11 percent), other influential persons (11 percent) and lastly, government officials (9 percent). Almost one half the sample (47 percent) *made no contact at all* in the past year (Figure 8).



**Figure 8: Contacts with Leaders**

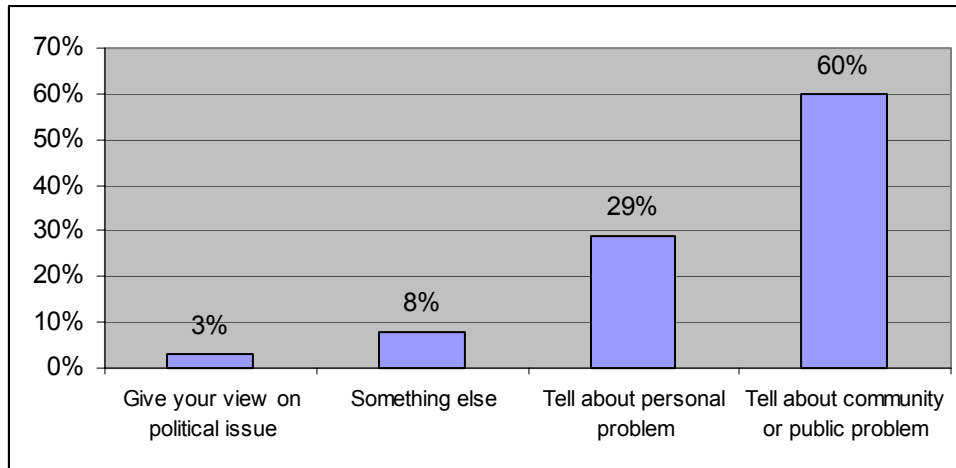
Why do people contact formal and community leaders? We analysed results to the following question:

“Think of the last time you contacted any of the leaders you have mentioned. Was the main reason to:

- Tell them about your own personal problems?
- Tell them about a community or public problem?
- Give them your view on some political issue?
- Or something else?”

The results show that when Malawians contact officials and leaders, the reason is most likely to be to tell them about a community or public problem (60 percent of the those who had made any contact, or 32 percent of all people) or a personal problem (29 percent of all contacting, 15 percent of all citizens). Another three percent contacted an influential person to give their views on a “political issue” (see Figure 9).

Two important lessons come out of this finding. The first is that citizen contact with officials and leaders are mostly public or personal and not to give a political opinion. Secondly, this finding explains why religious and traditional leaders are contacted more often than political leaders.



**Figure 9: Reasons for Contact with Leaders**

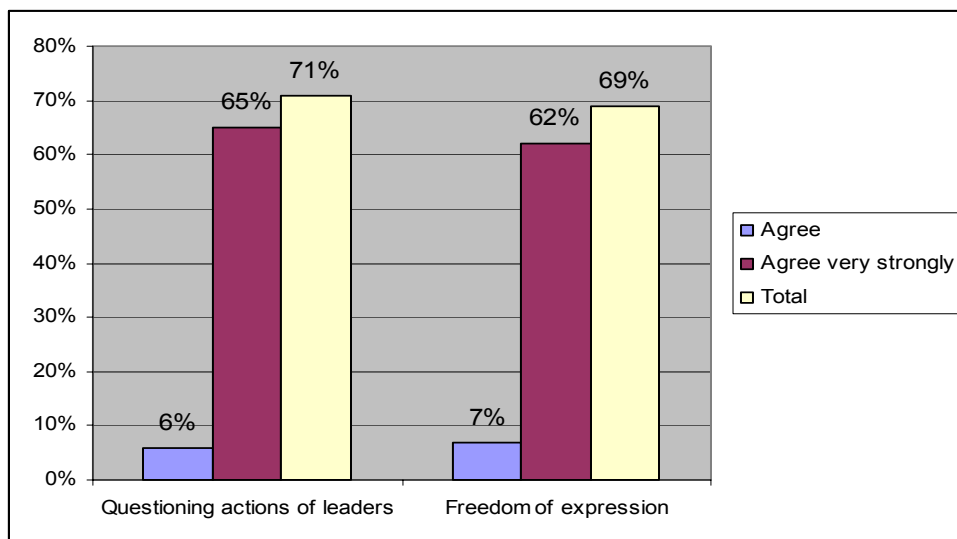
### Latent Political Participation

While political participation (outside of voting and village meetings) appears low and uneven, it is important to note that Figure 7 revealed some important trends. If people told us they had not taken part in some form of action, we asked them whether they would “never do this,” or whether they “would do this if you had the chance?” The results reveal that large majorities answered in the affirmative on all the actions except attending a community meeting (which people already do in high numbers). On average, 7 in 10 Malawians would take these actions given a chance (Figure 7 above). The implication is that there is a latent political emotion that goes unexpressed because people feel they are not given a chance.

A further indicator of latent participation that is not yet openly expressed can be observed in Malawians responses to the following two items in which we asked people to tell us which statement was closest to their own views.

- A. As citizens, we should be more active in questioning the actions of our leaders.
  - B. In our country these days, we should show more respect for authority.
- 
- A. Government should not allow the expression of political views that are fundamentally different from the views of the majority.
  - B. People should be able to speak their minds about politics free of government influence, no matter how unpopular their views may be.

As may be observed from Figure 11, majorities of Malawians believe that they should more actively question the actions of their leaders (71 percent) and that people should be free to speak their minds on politics freely without government influence (69 percent).



**Figure 10: Key Democratic Principles**

Finally, we were interested in finding out whether Malawians would exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities if they saw an elected leader or some other official doing something wrong. Respondents were asked what, if anything, would you do to try and resolve each of the following situations?

- You were waiting for a government permit or license, but kept encountering delays?
- Election officials left your name off the voters roll?
- You suspected a school or clinic official of stealing.
- The police wrongly arrested someone in your family.
- Someone wrongly seized your family’s land.

The results indicate that public protest to complain about official wrong-doing is not a common choice of action for Malawians (Figure 12). On average, less than one percent of the respondents referred to this as an option for each of the situations described above. Most Malawians believe lodging a complaint through proper channels or procedures (on average, 76 percent). Only about one in ten gave more passive responses such as, “don’t worry, things will be resolved given enough time” or say “do nothing, because nothing can be done.” Moreover, only an average of three percent of Malawians are predisposed to “use connections” or “offer a bribe.” The implication is that Malawians are quite willing to work through the proper channels, without resorting either to protest, or bribery and personal connections or to passive apathy.

In conclusion, we have seen that there is latent willingness among Malawians to participate in civic and political activities. However, this potential is not expressed. It may be that people are not aware of their civic responsibilities. In order to tap into this potential there is a need for more civic education on civic responsibilities.

This Briefing Paper was prepared by Stanley Khaila and Catherine Mthinda of IfESOR.

The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 18 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer’s research, capacity building and outreach activities, including the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Swedish