

Popular perceptions of elections, government action, and democracy in Mali

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 219 | Fadimata Haïdara and Thomas Isbell

Summary

Much of the rhetoric ahead of Mali's national elections in July has focused on security and reunification in the face of a continuing armed rebellion in the North (Bekow, 2018). Perhaps less obviously, the stakes are also high when it comes to what Malians demand from their government and their democracy.

Maliens' highest priorities, according to 2017 survey findings, are food security, good governance, access to health services and water, poverty alleviation, and economic growth (Coulibaly, 2018). As of February 2017, citizens gave the government negative grades on most of these issues.

In tandem with declining performance ratings for the government, Malians expressed increasing dissatisfaction with their democracy. Although general support for democracy, elections, and government accountability appeared solid, citizens had considerable reservations about multiparty competition, the electoral commission, their security during election campaigns, and the way their democracy is functioning.

While these do not predict voting priorities and intentions, they do suggest that the upcoming elections could prove pivotal in how Malians view democracy and its benefits to their quality of life.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mali, led by Groupe de Recherche en Economie Appliquée et Théorique (GREAT), interviewed 1,200 adult Malians in February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Reflecting their share of Mali's total population, small sample sizes in the sparsely-populated regions of Kidal, Gao, and Tombouctou produce results with very large margins of error. Particularly in Kidal, results should be considered purely suggestive.

Previous surveys were conducted in Mali in 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012 (did not include the regions of Tombouctou, Gao, and Kidal due to the security situation), 2013, and 2014.

Key findings

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Malians "approve" or "strongly approve" of the president's job performance, though that is down from 71% in 2014. Similar proportions approve of the performance of their National Assembly members (65%) and local government councillors (63%).

- However, large majorities of Malians say the government has performed “fairly badly” or “very badly” on priority issues, including keeping prices stable (79%), narrowing income gaps (78%), improving living standards of the poor (75%), creating jobs (74%), and ensuring that people have enough to eat (66%)
- Most Malians say that elections are the best way to choose leaders (81%) and that past national elections were mostly free and fair (76%). But only half (51%) trust the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission.
- While a majority (58%) of respondents support multiparty competition, about half say that it “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict (51%) and express at least “a little” fear of becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns (48%).
- Overall, two-thirds (67%) of Malians support democracy, but only 37% say they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with the way democracy is working.

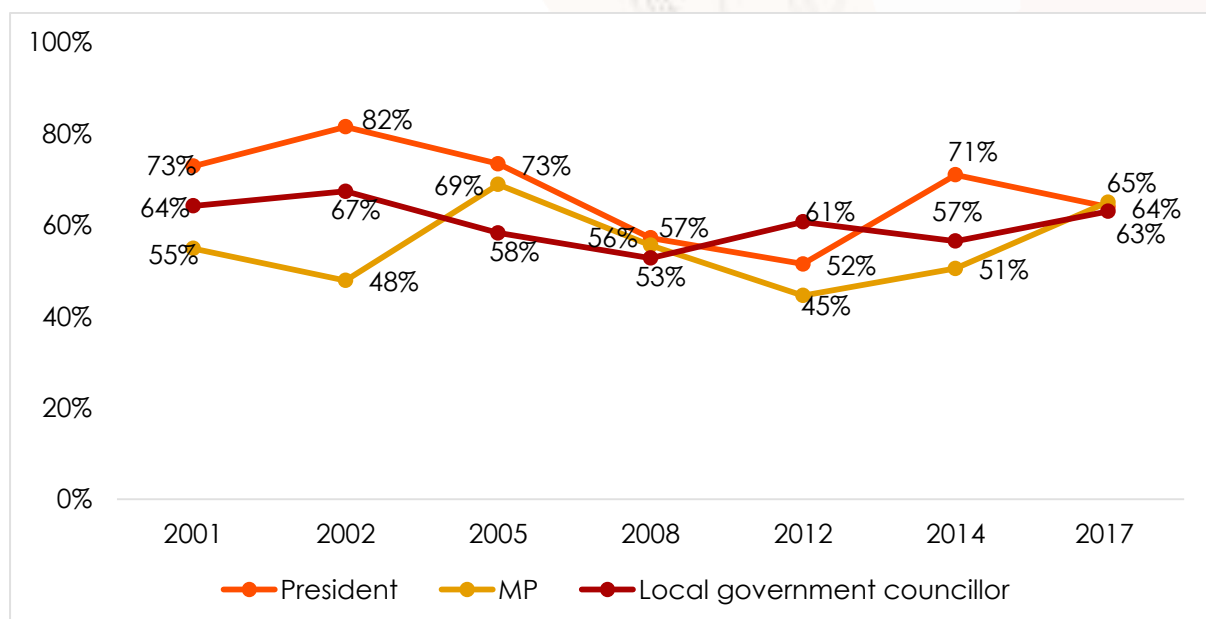
President and government performance down in public approval

Public approval of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's job performance has declined slightly, and a growing number of Malians are dissatisfied with the government on priority issues.

Almost two-thirds of Malians “approve” or “strongly approve” of the performance of the president (64%), their National Assembly representatives (65%), and their local government councillors (63%) (Figure 1). The president's job-performance rating in 2017 declined by 7 percentage points from the 2014 survey, part of a pattern in which the president's performance rating peaks in the first survey after they are elected for the first time (2002 and 2014) and then drops, even after re-election (as in 2008).

Performance evaluations of members of Parliament (MPs) have improved by 20 percentage points over the past five years, while those of local councillors have generally hovered around 60%.

Figure 1: Approval of elected leaders' job performance | Mali | 2001-2017

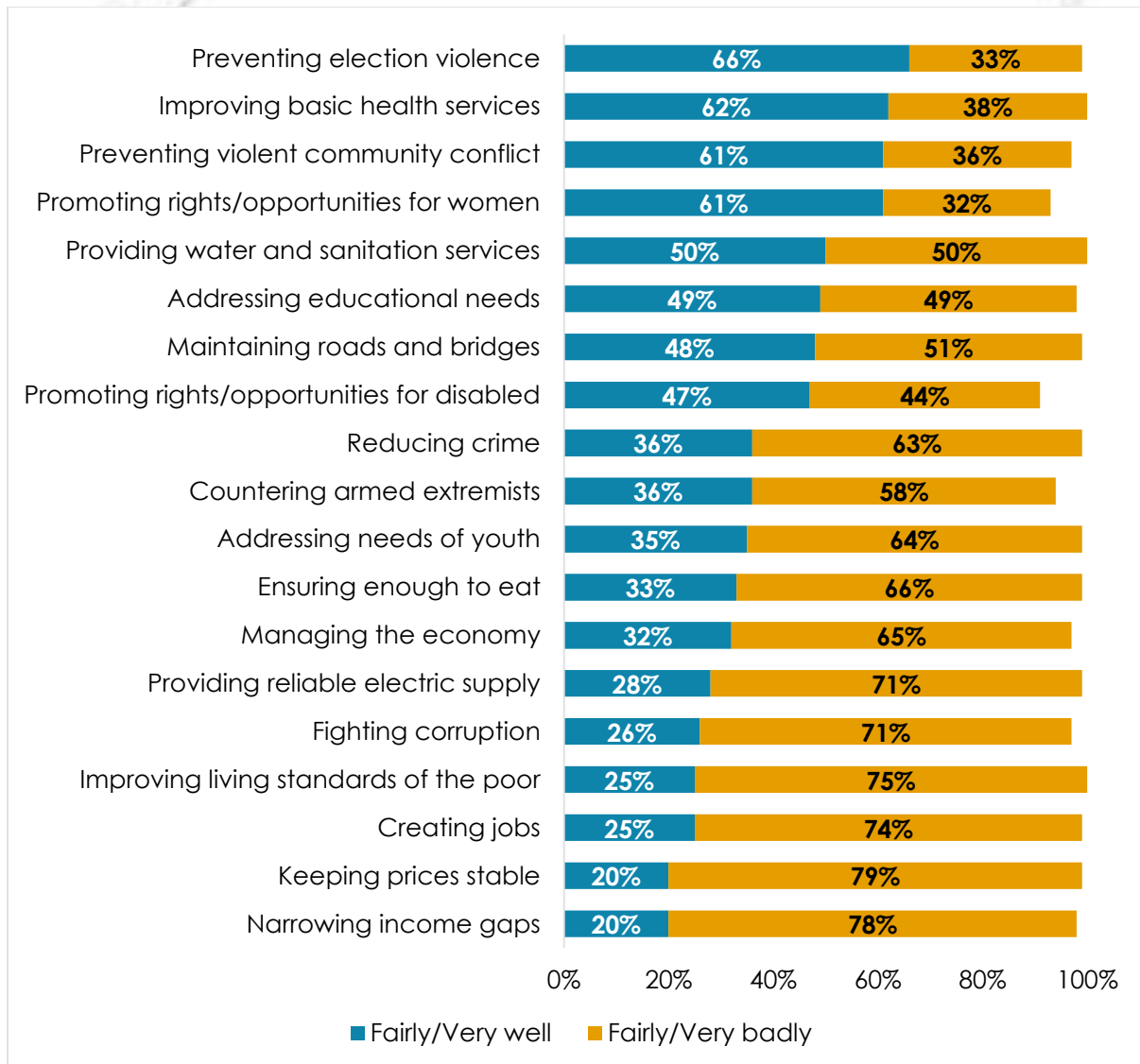


Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? Your member of Parliament? Your elected local government councillor? (% who “approve” or “strongly approve”)

In contrast to majority approval of how their elected officials have done their jobs, Malians overwhelmingly say the government has performed “fairly badly” or “very badly” on priority issues, including efforts to keep prices stable (79%), narrow income gaps (78%), improve living standards of the poor (75%), and create jobs (74%) (Figure 2). Two-thirds disapprove of the government’s performance on food security (66%) and managing the economy (65%).

The government does receive majority positive ratings on preventing election violence (66% “fairly” or “very” well), improving basic health services (62%), preventing or resolving violent community conflict (61%), and promoting equal rights and opportunities for women (61%).

Figure 2: Government performance | Mali | 2017

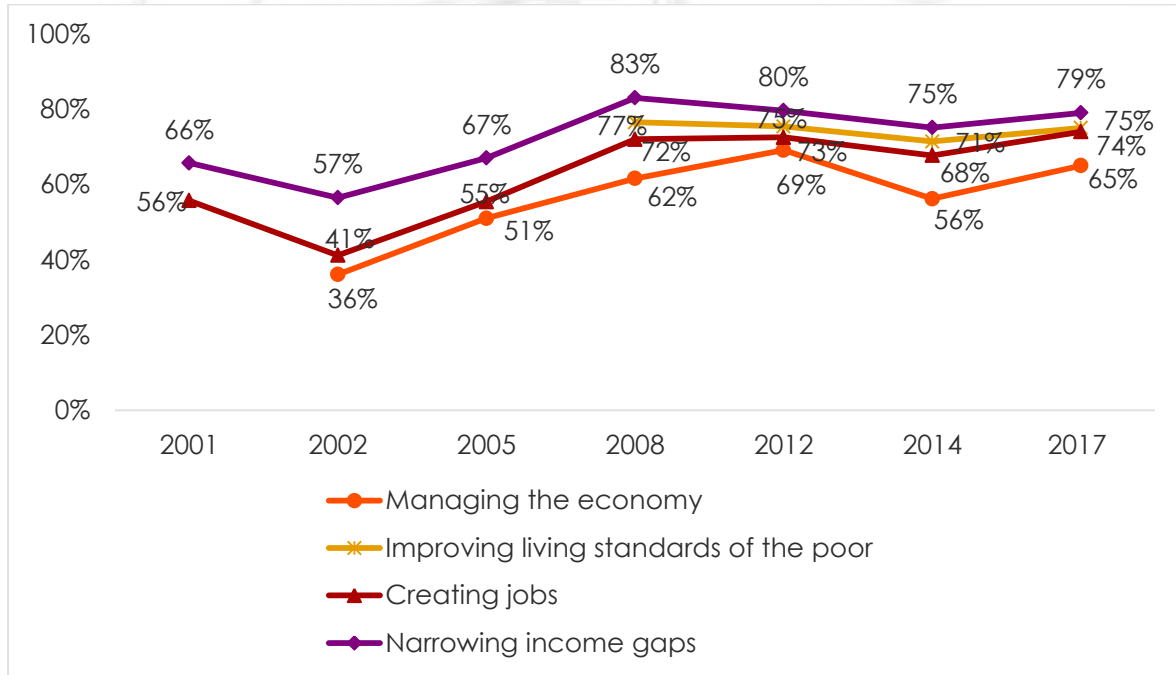


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Citizens' evaluations of how well the government has handled key economic issues – managing the economy, improving living standards of the poor, creating jobs, and narrowing gaps between rich and poor – have generally been growing more negative since 2002 (Figure 3). Between 2002 and 2008, a period corresponding to the first and early second

presidential terms of Amadou Toumani Touré, negative evaluations of government performance on these issues increased steadily. During the 2012-2013 transition leading to Keïta's presidency, evaluations were briefly more positive before heading downhill again.

Figure 3: Poor government performance on key economic issues | Mali | 2001-2017

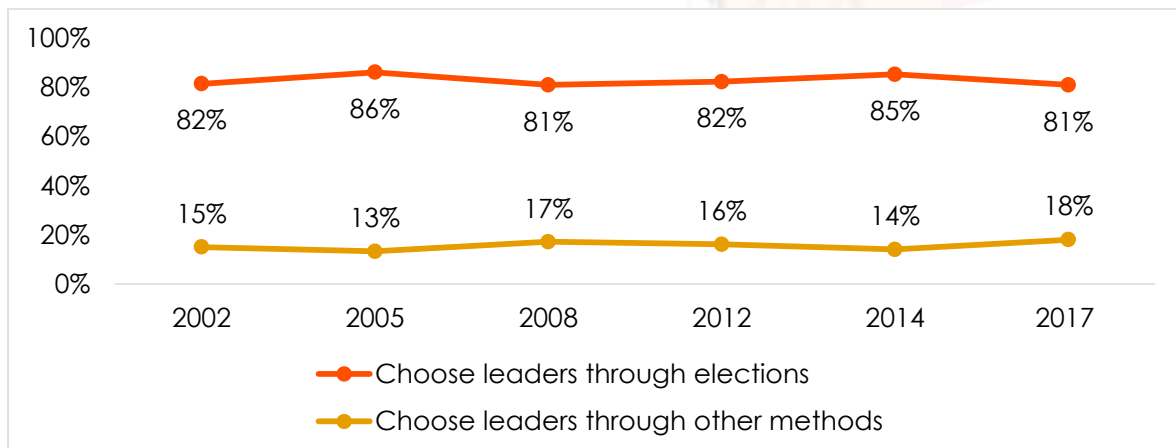


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Elections and multiparty competition

While evaluations of government performance are largely negative, Malians widely support the mode by which their national leaders are chosen. Support for regular, open, and honest elections has been strong and consistent (above 80%) for the past 15 years (Figure 4).

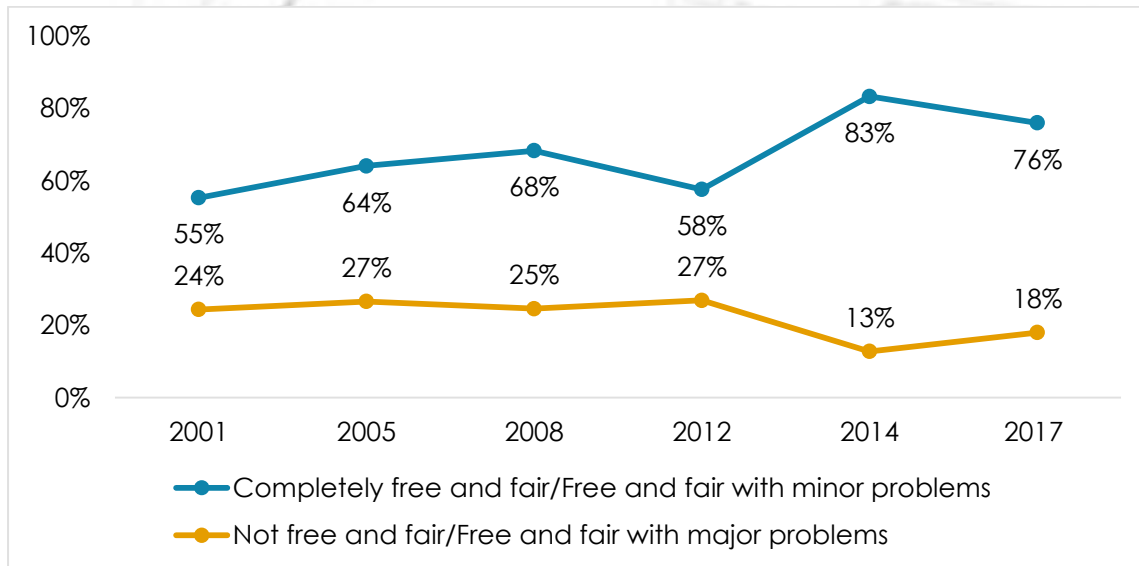
Figure 4: Support for elections | Mali | 2002-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 - We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 - Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Most Malians also view their most recent national elections as free and fair. Three-fourths (76%) say the communal elections in November 2016 were “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems” (Figure 5). While this is a modest decline from 2014 assessments of the most recent previous election (83% free and fair), it remains considerably more positive than views of elections prior to 2012.

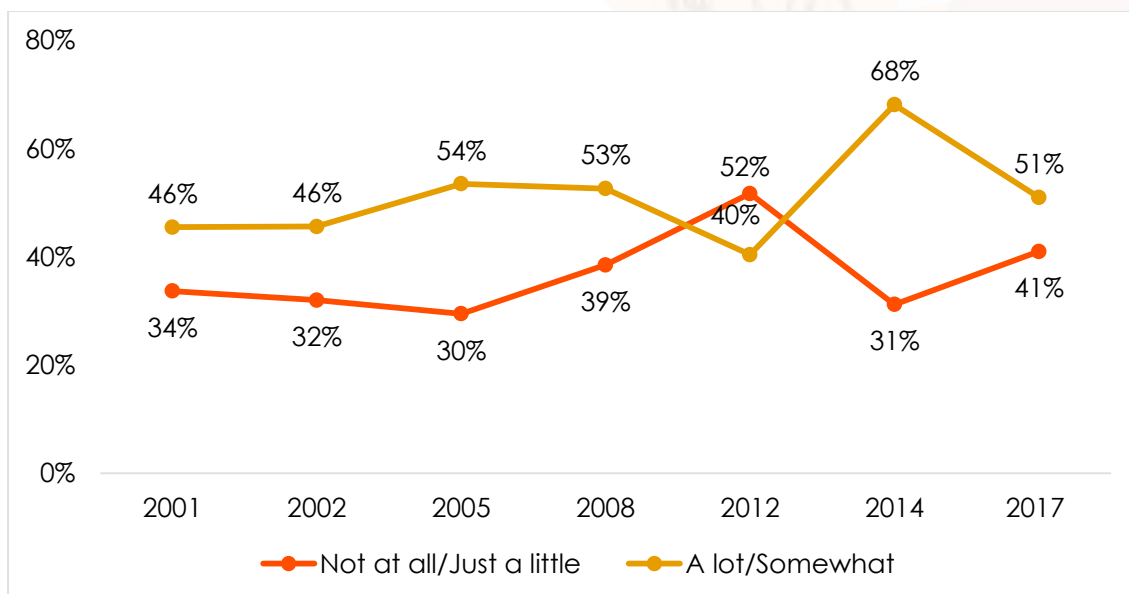
Figure 5: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | Mali | 2001-2017



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20xx]?

Despite favorable perceptions of elections, trust in the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) dropped sharply, returning to pre-2012 levels. Only about half (51%) of Malians say they trust the IEBC “somewhat” or “a lot,” down from 68% in 2014 (Figure 6).

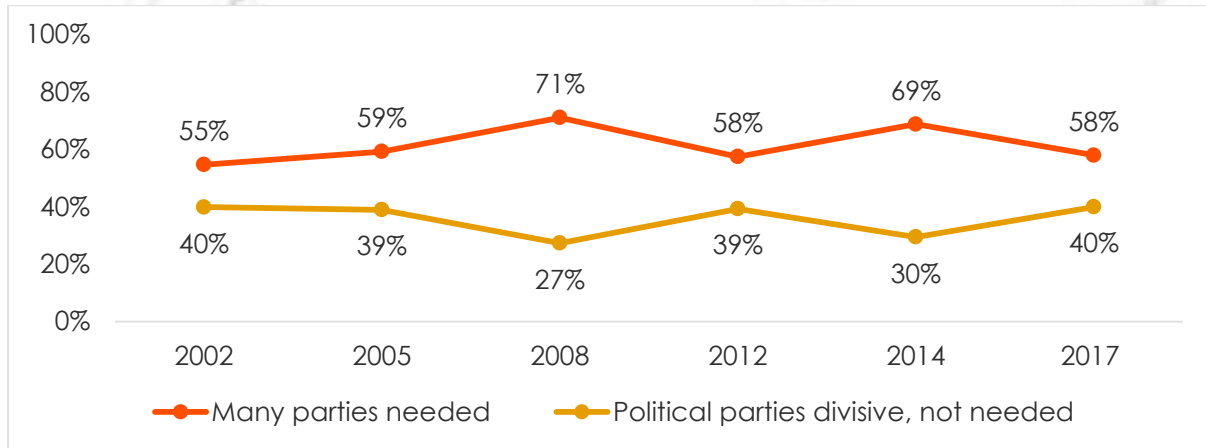
Figure 6: Trust in the electoral commission | Mali | 2001-2017



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC)?

Maliens also express significant reservations about multiparty competition, perhaps reflecting unease about the fact that more than 100 parties are currently sharing the political space in Mali. Although a majority (58%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” that many political parties are needed to ensure that voters have a genuine choice, fully four in 10 respondents (40%) say that political parties are divisive and Mali doesn't need many of them (Figure 7). This negative view of political parties has grown by 10 percentage points since 2014 but is similar to levels recorded in 2002, 2005, and 2012.

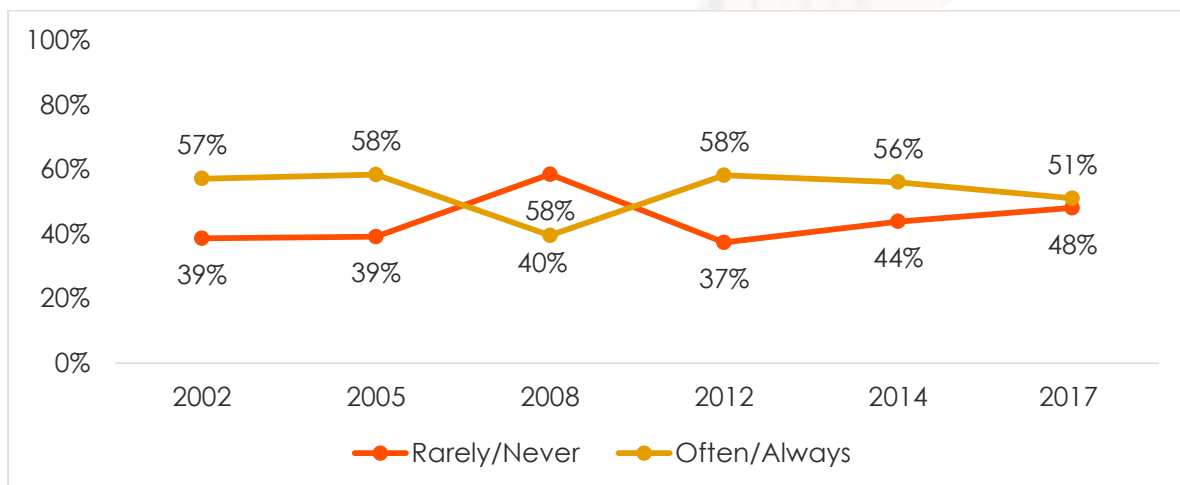
Figure 7: Views on multiparty democracy | Mali | 2002-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Mali.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Malians have real choices in who governs them.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Moreover, fully half (51%) of Malians believe that multiparty competition “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict (Figure 8). This proportion has decreased modestly since 2012 (58%) but still reflects a high level of wariness considering that despite fierce rhetoric Mali has experienced few violent conflicts based on party competition in the past.

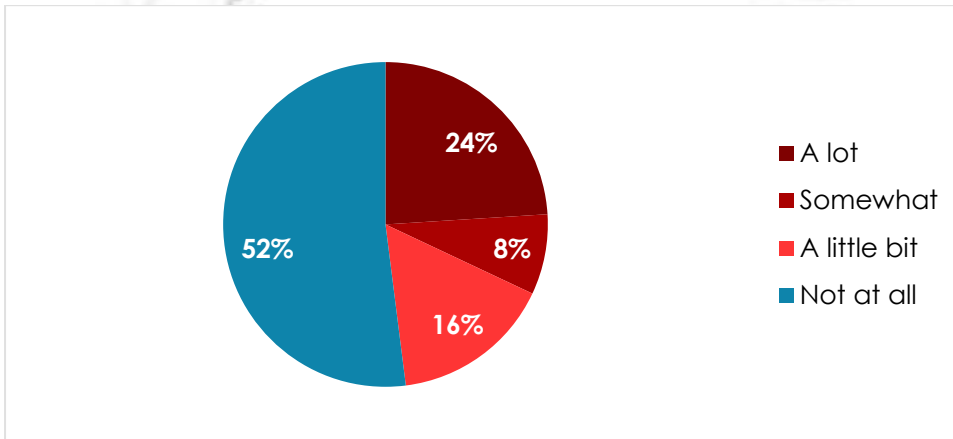
Figure 8: How often party competition leads to conflict | Mali | 2002-2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?

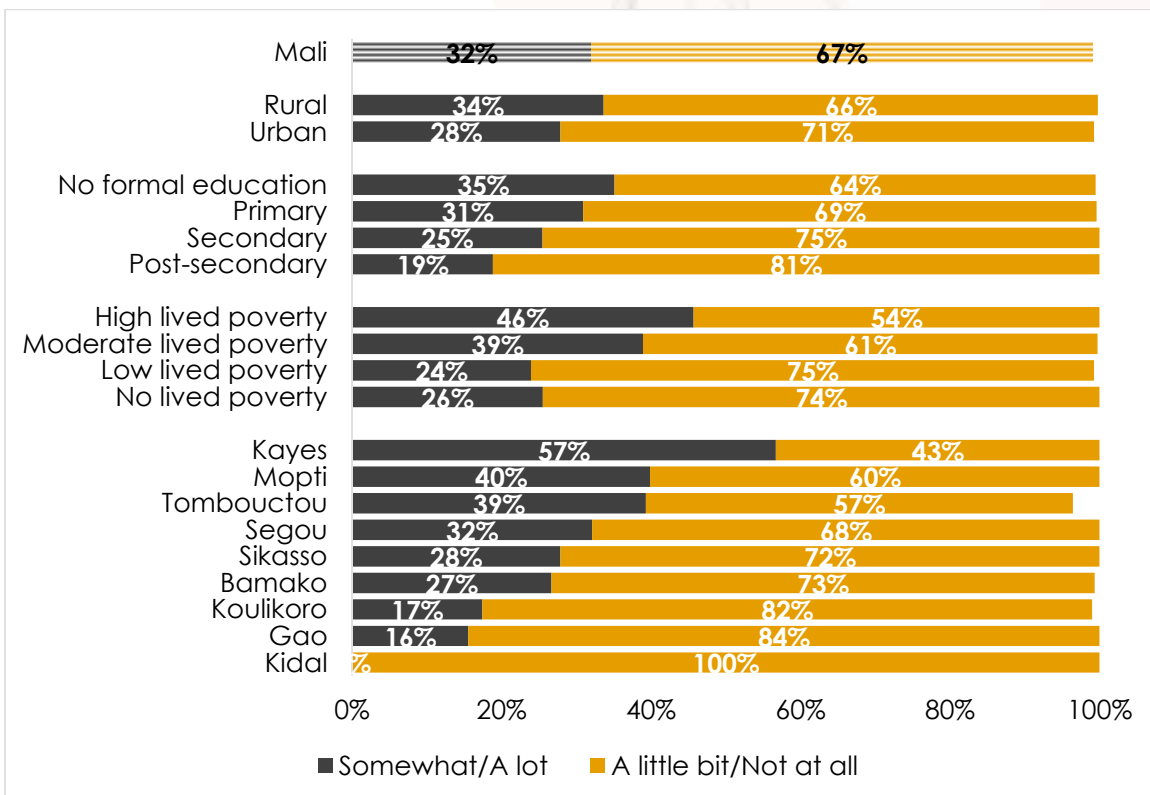
Almost half (48%) of Malians say they fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence during election campaigns, including one in four (24%) who express “a lot” of fear (Figure 9). Fear of election-related intimidation or violence is particularly common among Malians with no formal education (35%) and those who suffer high (46%) or moderate (39%) lived poverty (Figure 10). Fear is most commonly reported in the regions of Kayes (57%), Mopti (40%), and Tombouctou (39%), although small sample sizes in individual regions (and resultant large margins of error) mean that these regional differences must be interpreted with care.

Figure 9: Fear of political violence during elections | Mali | 2017



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

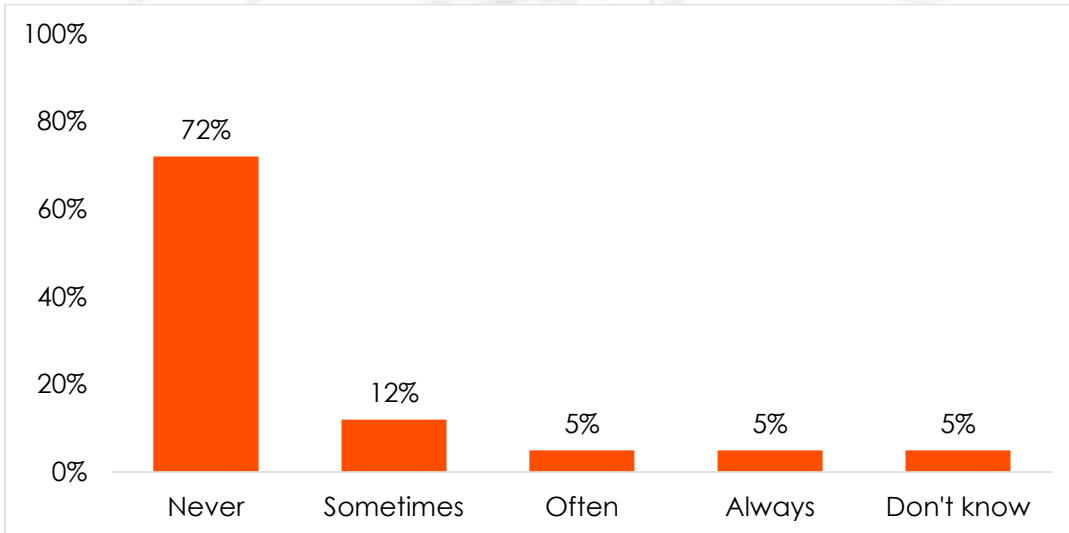
Figure 10: Fear of electoral violence | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Seven in 10 Malians (72%) say that opposition parties are “never” prevented from running in elections, while about two in 10 say they are “sometimes” (12%), “often” (5%), or “always” (5%) prevented from running (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Opposition prevented from running | Mali | 2017

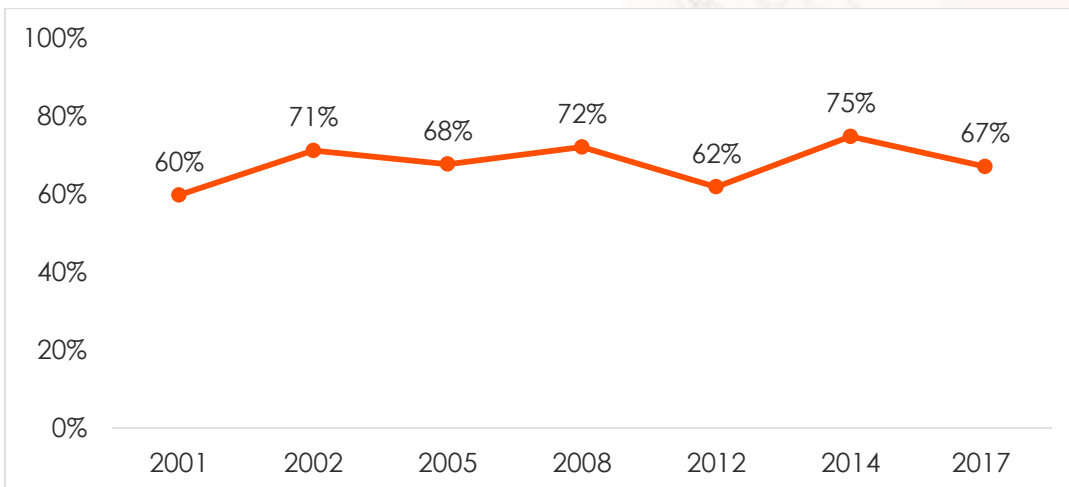


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, during this country's elections how often are opposition candidates prevented from running for office?

Attitudes toward democracy

Despite doubts about the electoral commission and multiparty competition, two-thirds (67%) of Malians support democracy over any other political system. This reflects a decline from 75% in 2014 but is consistent with levels of support for democracy in Mali since 2001 (Figure 12), with modest declines in expressed support after electoral years, when the fictions of electoral campaign give way to the sometimes-disappointed hopes of daily reality.

Figure 12: Support for democracy | Mali | 2001-2017



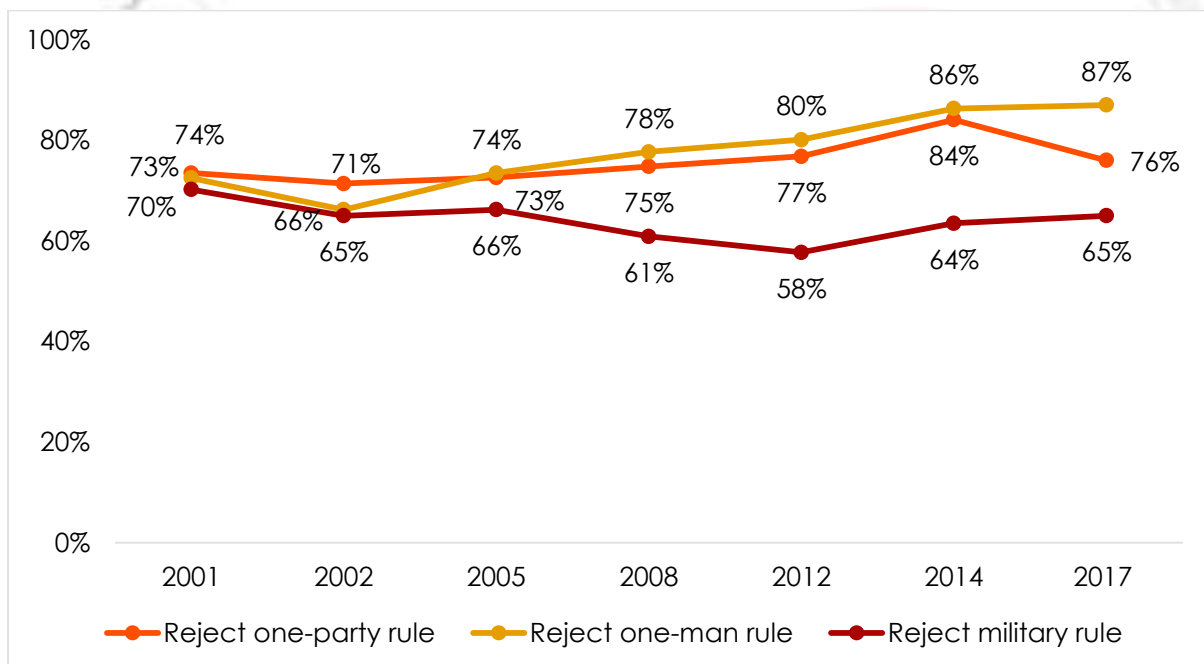
Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.
 (% who agree with Statement 1)

Moreover, large majorities of Malians have consistently rejected non-democratic alternative regime types over the years (Figure 13). Almost nine out of 10 Malians (87%) “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of dictatorship or one-man rule, a 14-point increase from 2001.

Disapproval of one-party rule has generally hovered around three-fourths of the population before peaking at 84% in 2014, the year after the last presidential election, and then dropping back to 76% in 2017.

Slightly fewer Malians reject military rule, ranging from a high of 70% in 2001 to a low of 58% in 2012, at the end of the rule of former army general Touré and the beginning of the crisis in the North and Center of the country. Since then, opposition to military rule has rebounded to about two-thirds (65% in 2017).

Figure 13: Reject non-democratic regime types | Mali | 2001-2017



Respondents were asked: *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?*

- Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office?
- Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything?
- The army comes in to govern the country?

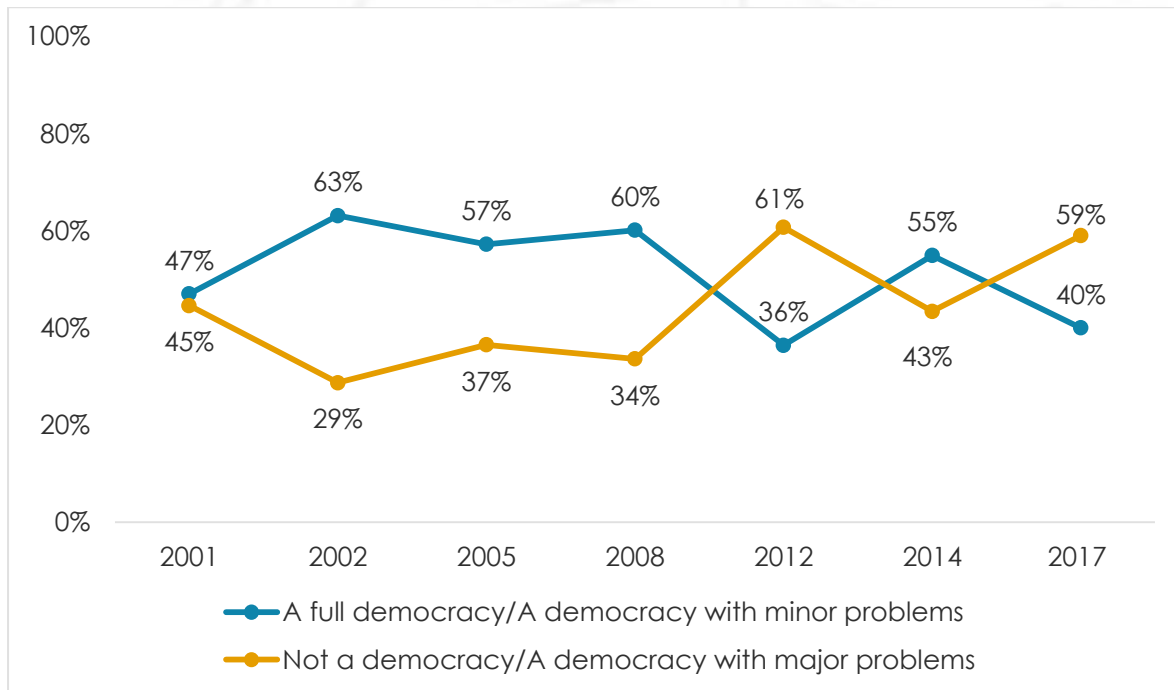
(% who “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove”)

But while most Malians support democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives, only a minority see Mali as a well-functioning democracy. Just 40% of respondents describe Mali as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems,” down from 55% in 2014, and significantly below levels in 2001-2008 (Figure 14). Almost six in 10 (59%) say Mali is “a democracy with major problems” or “not a democracy” at all.

Similarly, only 37% say they are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way democracy is working in Mali, a decrease from 48% in 2014 and well below satisfaction levels before 2012 (Figure 15). The proportion of citizens who say they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied” with their democracy has been steadily increasing over the past 16 years, except for a dip in 2012, and is now at almost double the level it was in 2001 (34%).

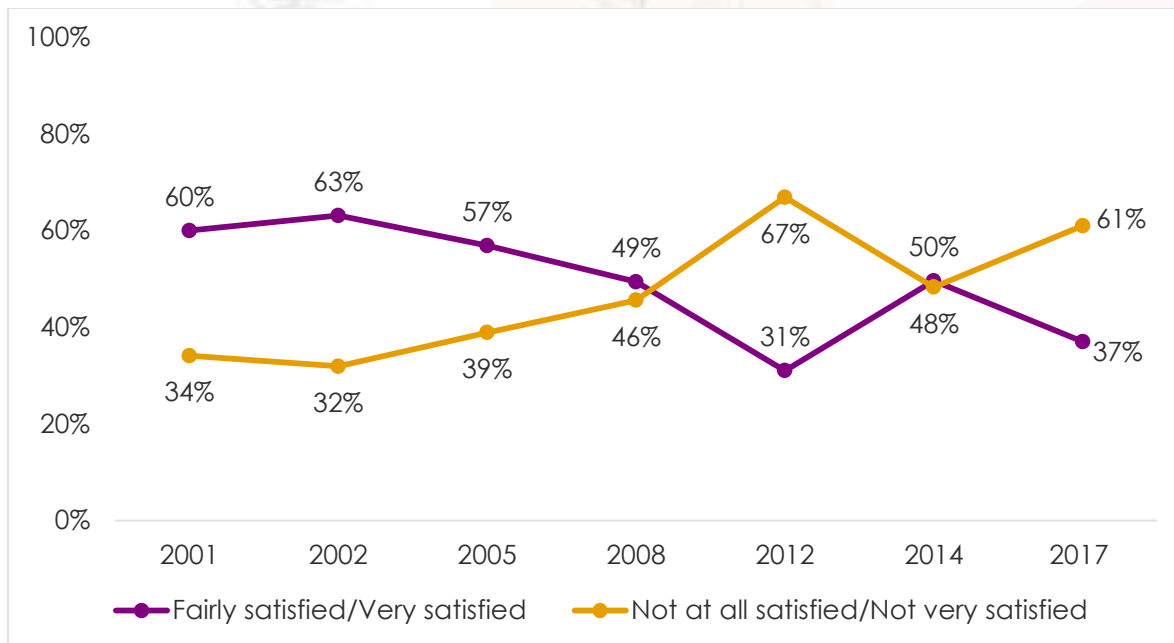
On both questions – extent of democracy and satisfaction with democracy – the 2012 survey, shortly after the outbreak of the 2012 crisis, showed peaks in negative responses.

Figure 14: Extent of democracy | Mali | 2001-2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Mali today?

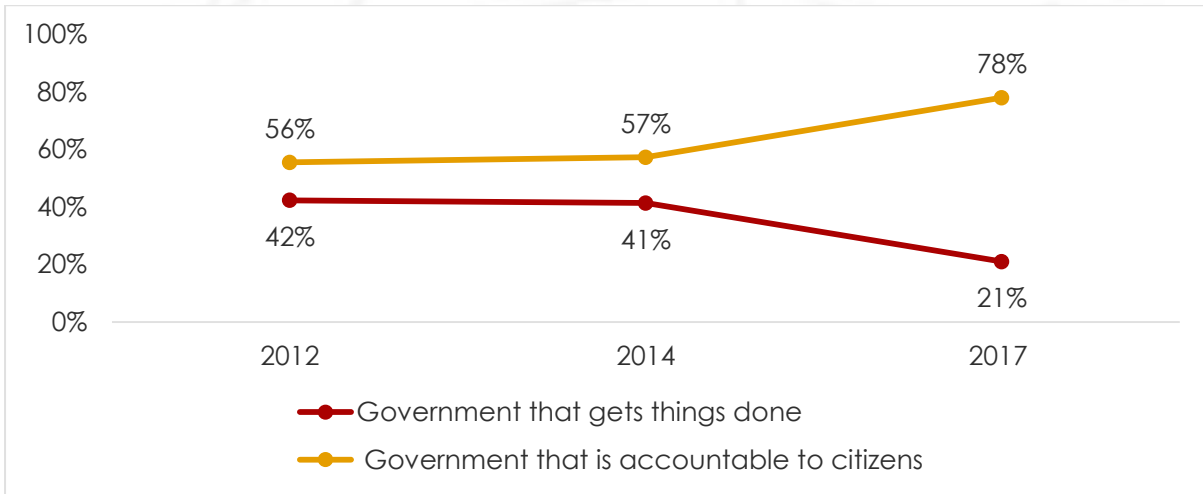
Figure 15: Satisfaction with democracy | Mali | 2001-2017



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Mali?

One increasingly important priority for Malians is government accountability. More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents believe it is more important “for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly” than it is to have a government that “can get things done” (Figure 16). The proportion holding this view increased by 21 percentage points between 2014 and 2017.

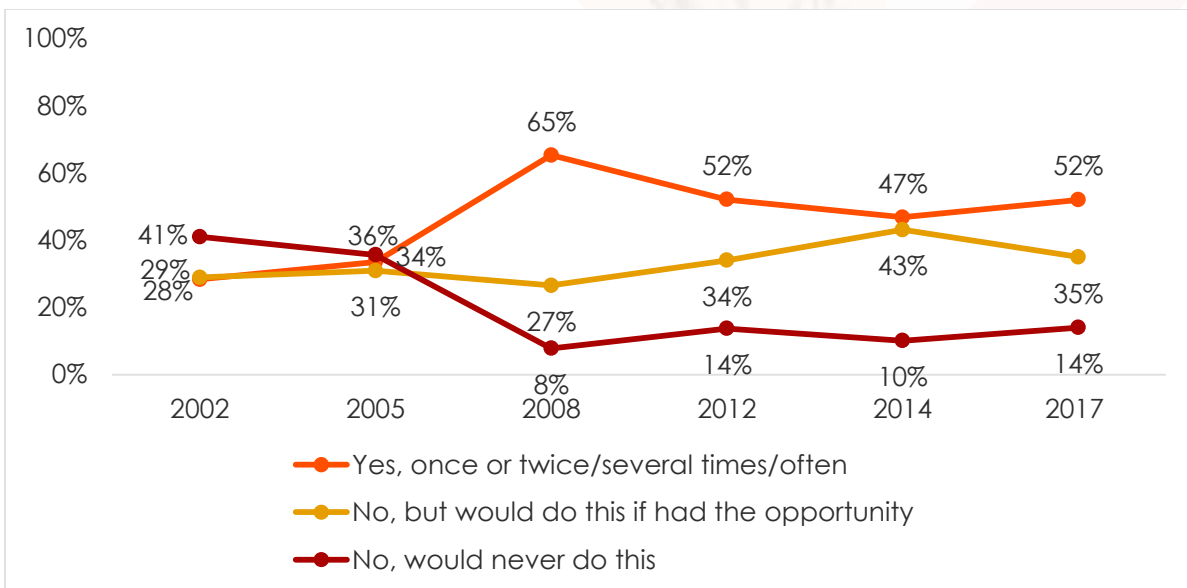
Figure 16: Government accountability vs. efficiency | Mali | 2012-2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.
 Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

In line with wanting accountable government, many Malians are also willing to engage in community action. More than half (52%) say they got together with others to raise an issue at least once during the 12 months preceding the survey, 5 percentage points more than in 2014 and almost twice as many as in 2002 (though fewer than at the peak (65%) in 2008) (Figure 17). The proportion of respondents who say they “would never” get together with others to raise an issue (14%) has hovered around one in 10 over the past decade, far below the 41% who took this attitude in 2002.

Figure 17: Got together with others to raise an issue | Mali | 2002-2017



Respondents were asked: 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: Got together with others to raise an issue?

Conclusion

A majority of Malians support democracy, elections, and government accountability – but also give their democratically elected government failing marks on their highest-priority issues. Moreover, substantial proportions of the population have doubts about multiparty competition, the electoral commission, their security during election campaigns, and the way their democracy is working. As the election campaign officially gets underway, candidates face the democratic challenge of addressing citizens' priorities.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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