

Batswana support democracy, but satisfaction and perceived freedom of speech decline

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 228 | Thomas Isbell and Batlang Seabo

Summary

Botswana has long been considered a leader in democratic practice, ranking among Africa's best performers with regard to good governance, the rule of law, and respect for civil liberties. But in recent years, the same experts who have given the country high marks have also downgraded Botswana's freedom status in response to a series of attacks on media and arrests of journalists (Freedom House, 2016), placed it among high-scoring but "deteriorating" countries in terms of good governance (Mo Ibrahim, 2016), and criticized former President Ian Khama's "reliance on edicts and decision by caprice" (Good, 2009, p. 320).

While scholars credit the country with conducting regular and free elections within a multiparty system, they also note that a single party has dominated electoral competition since independence (Kebonang & Kaboyakgosi, 2017; Taylor, 2003; Good & Taylor, 2007).

Findings from the most recent Afrobarometer survey in Botswana suggest that some citizens, too, are troubled by developments in their democracy over the past decade. While Botswana still strongly endorse democracy and multiparty competition, they are significantly less likely to express satisfaction with the way their democracy is working and feel less free to say what they think.

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 Botswana, led by Star Awards Pty Ltd, interviewed 1,200 adult Batswana in July 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Botswana in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, and 2014.

Key findings

- Most Batswana (78%) see their country as a democracy, but satisfaction with the way their democracy is working has declined by 24 percentage points over the past decade, from 83% in 2008 to 59%.
- Even so, popular support for democracy and rejection of non-democratic alternatives remain high, at eight in 10 (80%) or more.

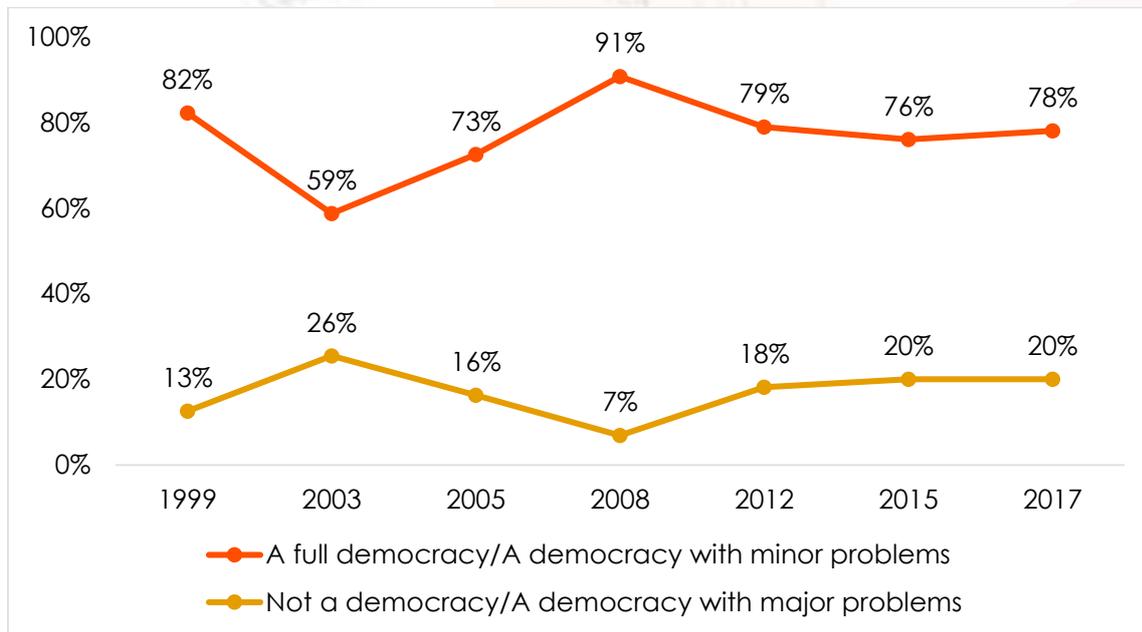
- But perceptions of freedom of speech are declining: Over the past decade, the share of Batswana who feel “somewhat free” or “completely free” to say what they think has dropped by 20 percentage points, to 73%. And the proportion of Batswana who say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics has grown to 49%.
- Still, majorities say that compared to “a few years ago,” Batswana now enjoy more freedom to join political organizations (70%) and to speak out as part of the political opposition (61%).
- Popular support for multiparty competition has increased, from 62% in 2012 to 75%, and more than eight in 10 Batswana (84%) say such competition “rarely” or “never” leads to violent conflict.
- Batswana express strong support (above 70%) for government accountability and the legitimacy of government, the courts, and the police.

Views on democracy

By and large, Batswana see their country as a democracy and support democracy as the best political system but are increasingly dissatisfied with the way their democracy is working.

More than three-fourths (78%) of respondents see their country as “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems.” This proportion has declined from a peak of 91% in 2008 but has been stable since 2012 (Figure 1).

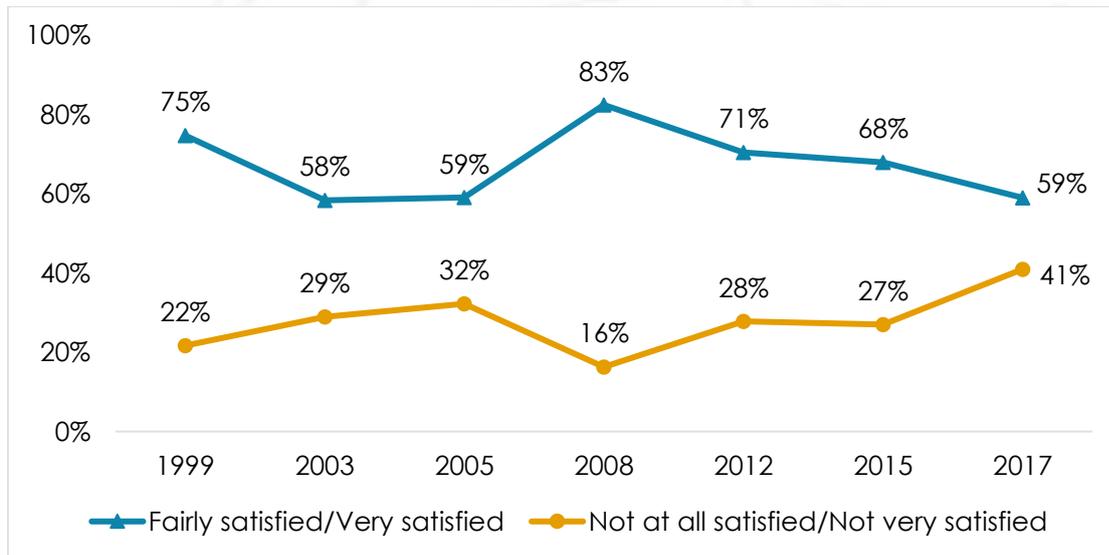
Figure 1: Extent of democracy | Botswana | 2017



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

However, the share of Batswana who are “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with how democracy is working in their country has dropped by 24 percentage points over the past decade, from 83% in 2008 to 59% (Figure 2). The 2017 result is comparable to satisfaction levels recorded in 2003 and 2005 surveys. Dissatisfaction with how democracy is working in Botswana has increased from 16% in 2008 to 41% in 2017.

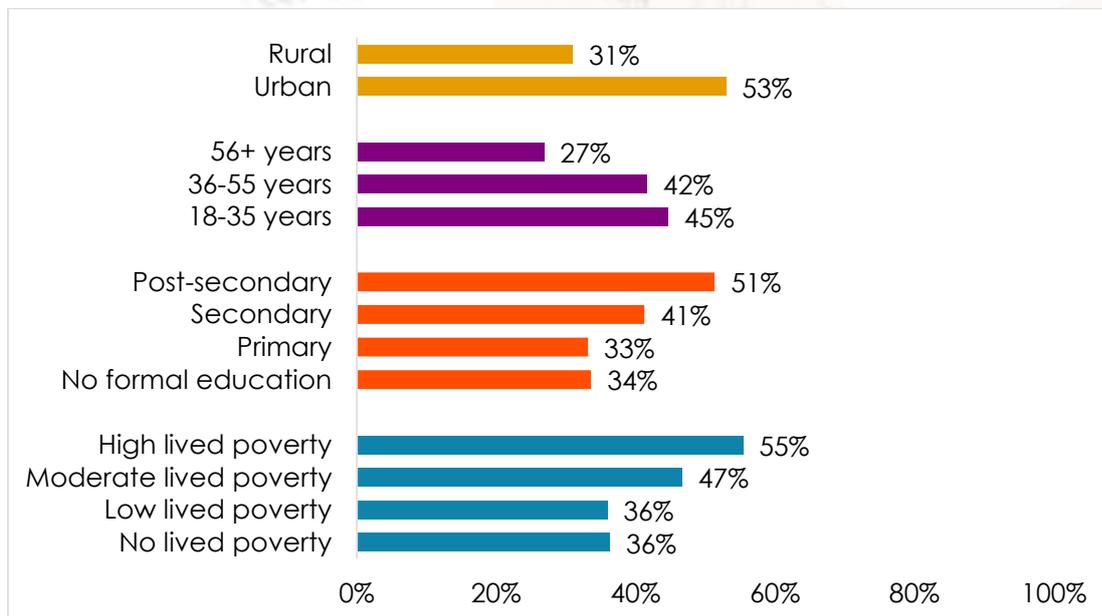
Figure 2: Satisfaction with democracy | Botswana | 2017



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

Dissatisfaction with Botswana's democracy is particularly high in the cities (53% vs. 31% in rural areas) and among younger and highly educated citizens as well as poor respondents¹ (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Dissatisfaction with democracy | Botswana | 2017

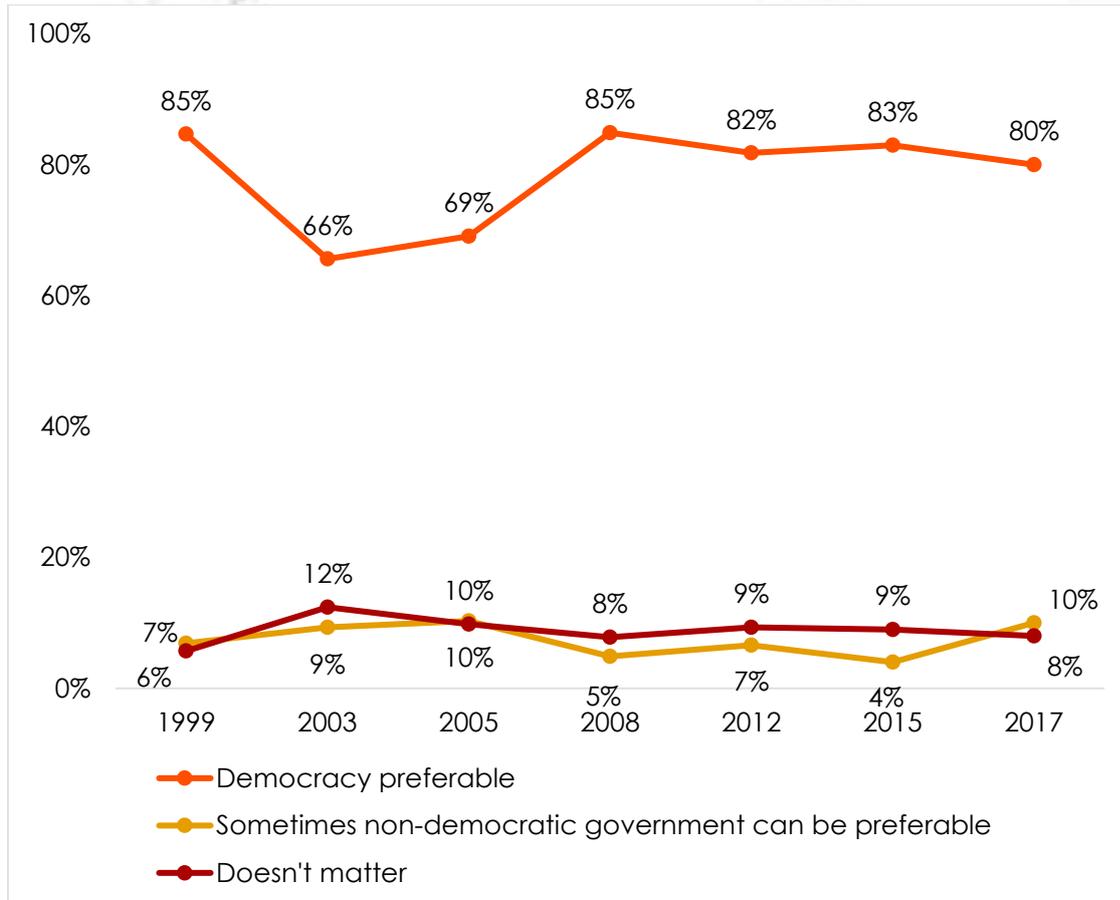


Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Botswana? (% who say "not very satisfied" or "not at all satisfied")

¹ Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?"

Despite increasing dissatisfaction with its functioning, democracy as a regime type continues to enjoy overwhelming popular support in Botswana (Figure 4). Eight out of 10 respondents (80%) prefer democracy to any other political system. While this is a slight decrease since 2008 (85%), it is considerably above the levels of 2003 (66%) and 2005 (69%). The share of Botswana who say that non-democratic alternatives may sometimes be preferable increased from 4% in 2015 to 10% in 2017 but has never exceeded 10% since Afrobarometer surveys began in 1999.

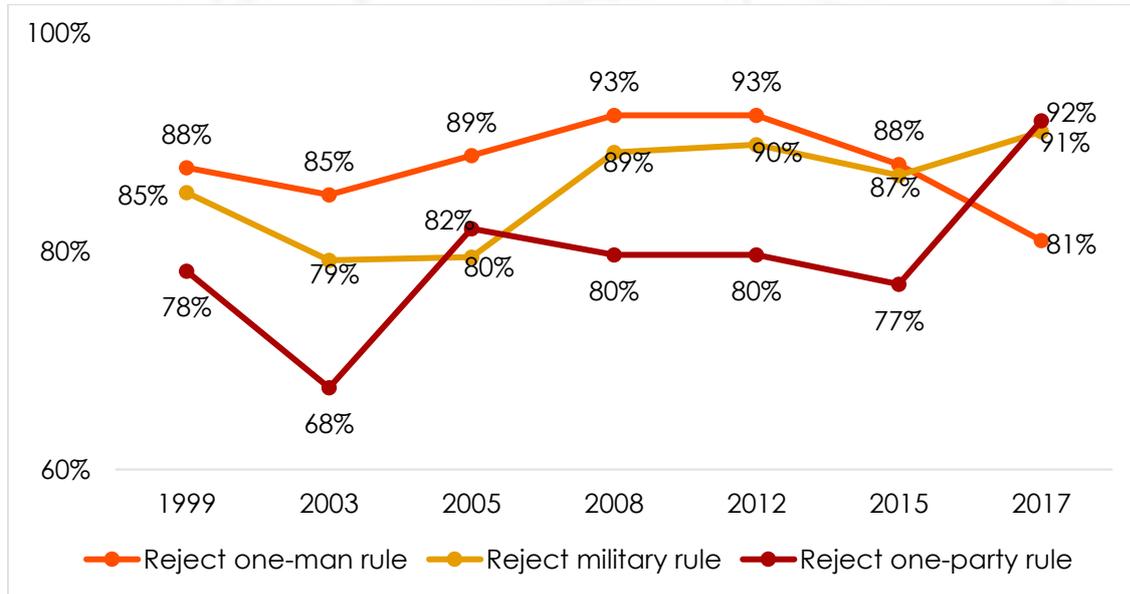
Figure 4: Support for democracy | Botswana | 2017



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.

Botswana also overwhelmingly reject non-democratic alternatives to democracy (Figure 5). Since 1999, more than eight in 10 Botswana have consistently “disapproved” or “strongly disapproved” of strong-man rule, although that share has dropped from 93% in 2008 and 2012 to 81% in 2017. Rejection of military rule, on the other hand, has been growing, from 79% in 2003 to 91% in 2017. Similarly, disapproval of one-party rule has been on the rise, from 68% in 2003 to 92% in 2017, including a 15-percentage-point increase since 2015.

Figure 5: Reject non-democratic regimes | Botswana | 2017



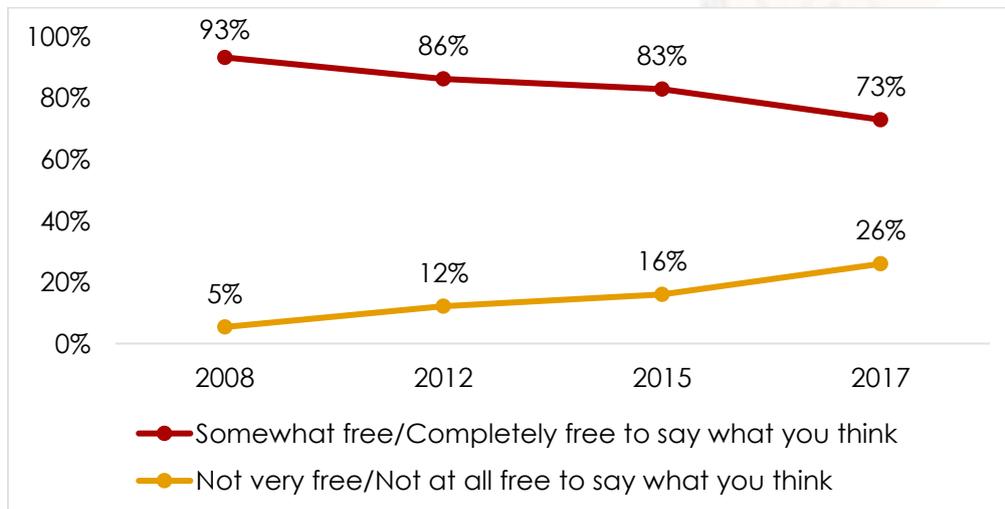
Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives:

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

Civil freedoms and rights

Alongside declining satisfaction with how their democracy is working, fewer Batswana feel free to speak their minds. Over the past decade, the share of respondents who say they feel "somewhat free" or "completely free" to say what they think has dropped by 20 percentage points, from 93% in 2008 to 73%. Over the same period, the proportion of Batswana who say they feel "not very free" or "not at all free" to express their views has increased fivefold, from 5% to 26% (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Freedom of speech | Botswana | 2017

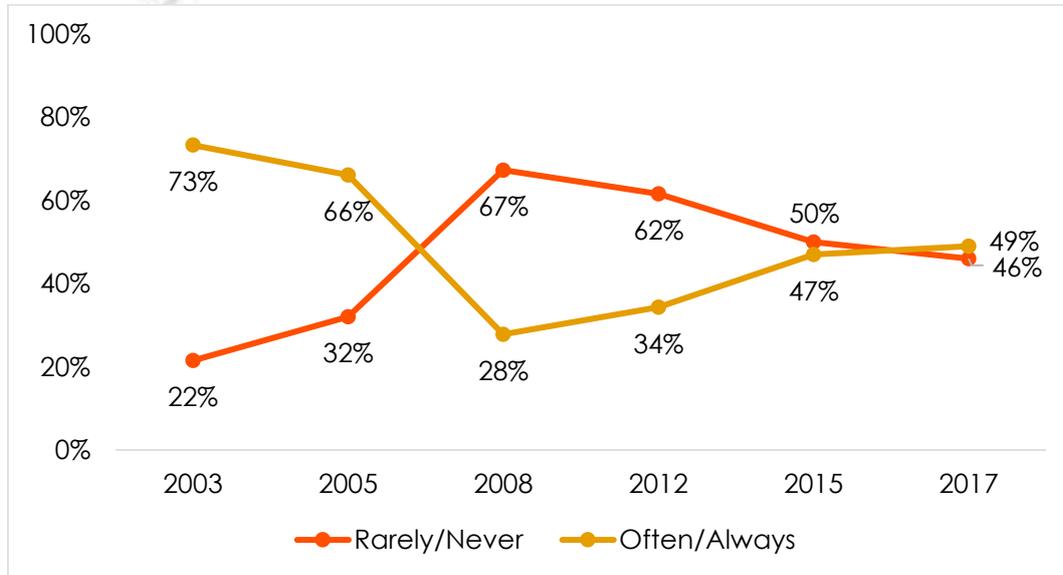


Respondents were asked: In this country, how free are you to say what you think?

Similarly, an increasing number of Batswana say people "often" or "always" have to be careful about what they say about politics. About half (49%) of respondents feel that way in 2017, up from 28% in 2008 (Figure 7). This is the first time since the 2005 survey that Batswana who say you "often" or "always" have to be careful in discussing politics outnumber those who say you "rarely" or "never" have to be careful about political speech.

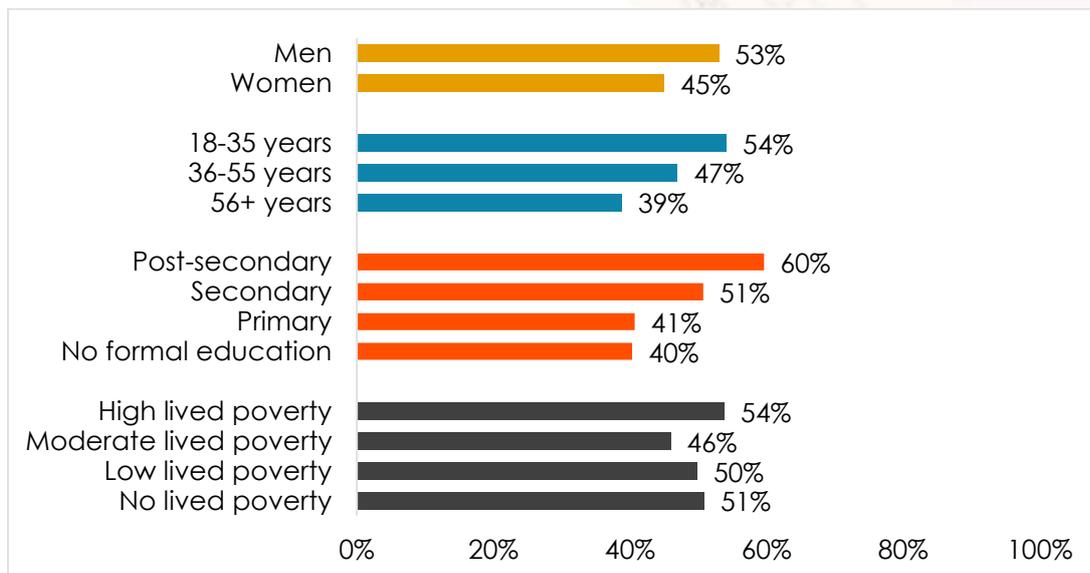
Men are more likely than women to see a need for caution in political speech (53% vs. 45%). So are younger respondents (54% of 18- to 35-year-olds) compared to their elders, as well as those with secondary (51%) or post-secondary education (60%) compared to their less-educated counterparts (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Have to be careful what you say about politics | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics?

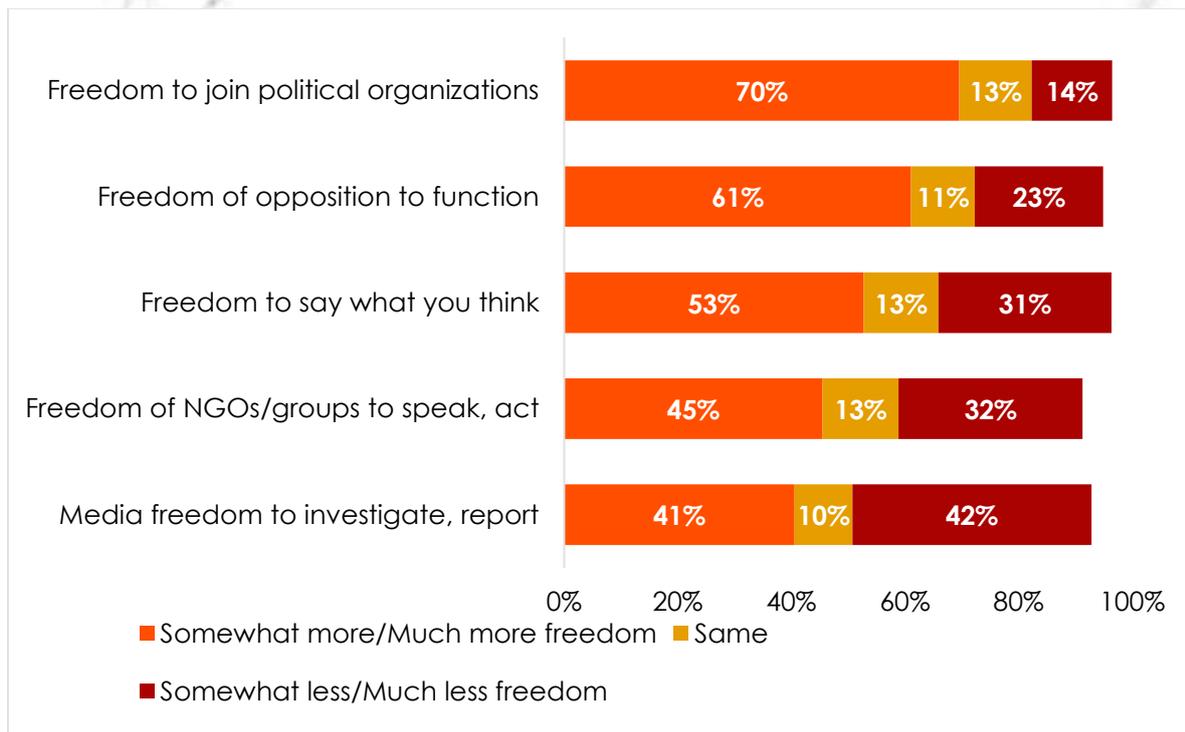
Figure 8: Have to be careful what you say about politics | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? (% who say "often" or "always")

In contrast to these alarming findings on freedom of speech, when respondents are asked to assess their civil liberties compared to “a few years ago,” majorities say Botswana now enjoy “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom to join political organizations (70%), for political opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies (61%), and for people to say what they think about politics (53%) (Figure 9). Respondents are more divided when it comes to the freedom of independent groups to speak and act (45% say there's more freedom vs. 32% less) and the freedom of the media to investigate, report on, and criticize the government (41% more vs. 42% less freedom).

Figure 9: Change in civil freedoms | Botswana | 2017



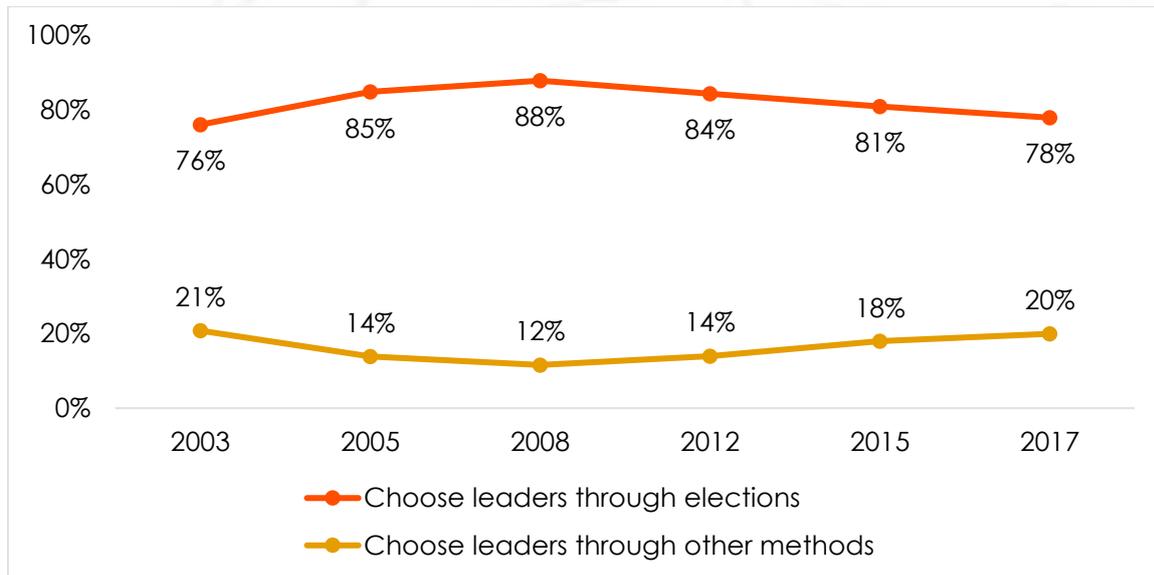
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?
- Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?
- Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?

Attitudes toward elections and multiparty competition

Botswana widely support choosing leaders through elections (78%), although this support has declined by 10 percentage points since 2008 while support for “other methods” of choosing leaders has increased from 12% to 20% (Figure 10).

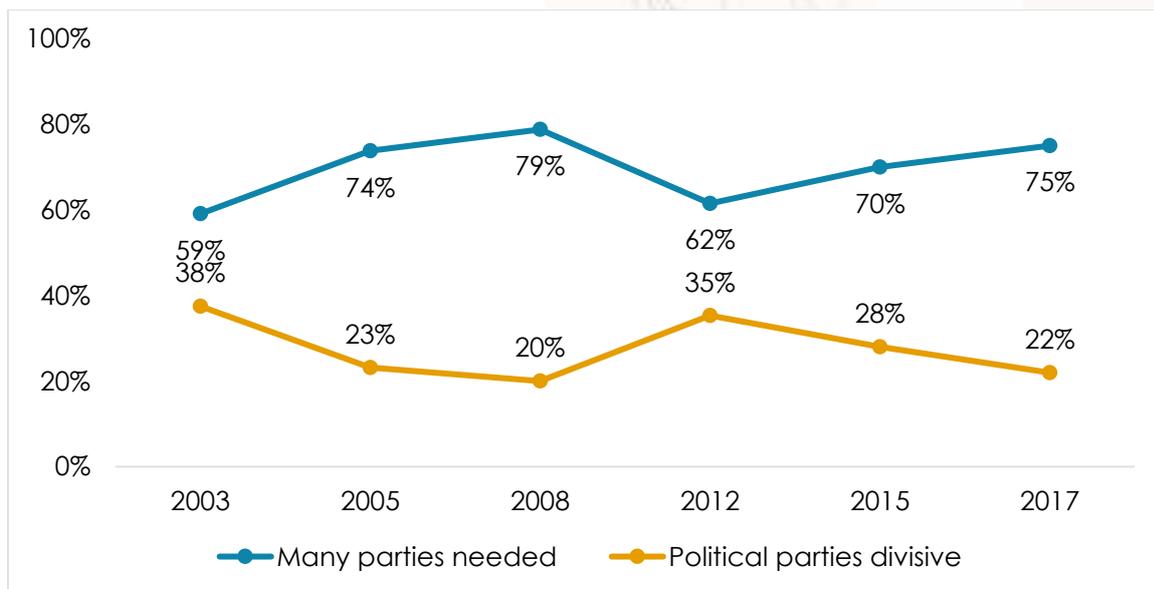
Figure 10: Choose leaders through elections | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
 Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

Three out of four Botswana (75%) affirm that the country needs many political parties in order to give voters real choices, while 22% say instead that political parties create division and confusion and Botswana doesn't need many of them. Support for multiparty competition has grown by 13 percentage points since 2012 (Figure 11).

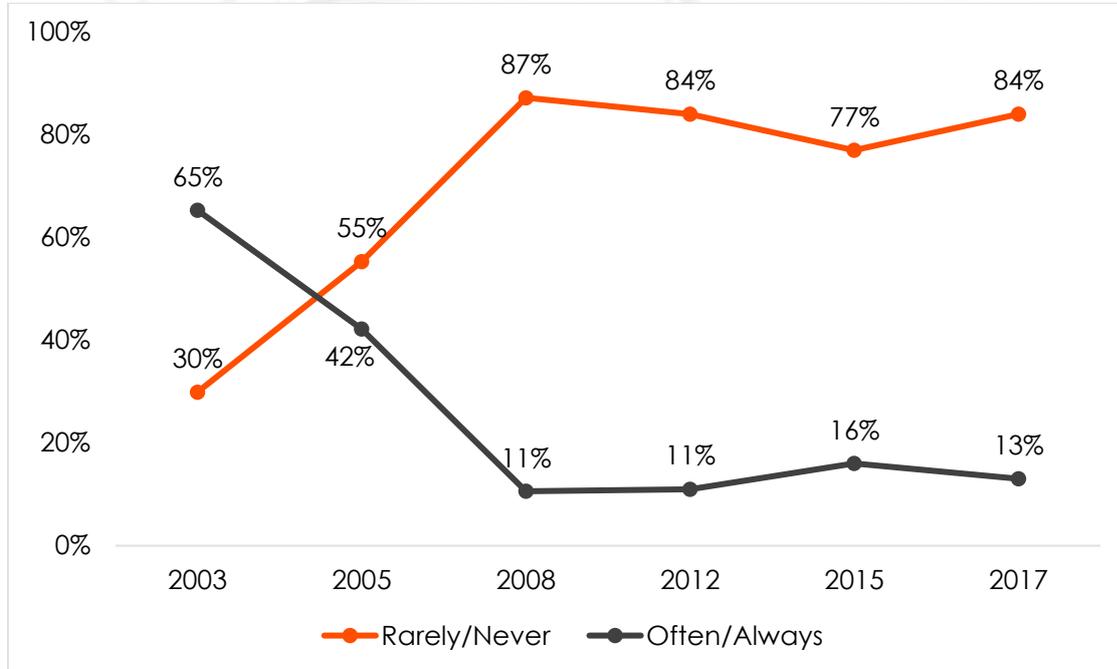
Figure 11: Support for multiparty competition | Botswana | 2017



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 Botswana.
 Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Botswana have real choices in who governs them.

While a majority (65%) of Botswana said in 2003 that party competition “often” or “always” leads to violent conflict, this proportion has dropped to between 11% (2008/2012) and 16% (2015) in survey rounds since then. In the 2017 survey, 13% see party competition as frequently leading to violence, while 84% believe it “rarely” or “never” does so (Figure 12).

Figure 12: How often party competition leads to violent conflict | Botswana | 2017



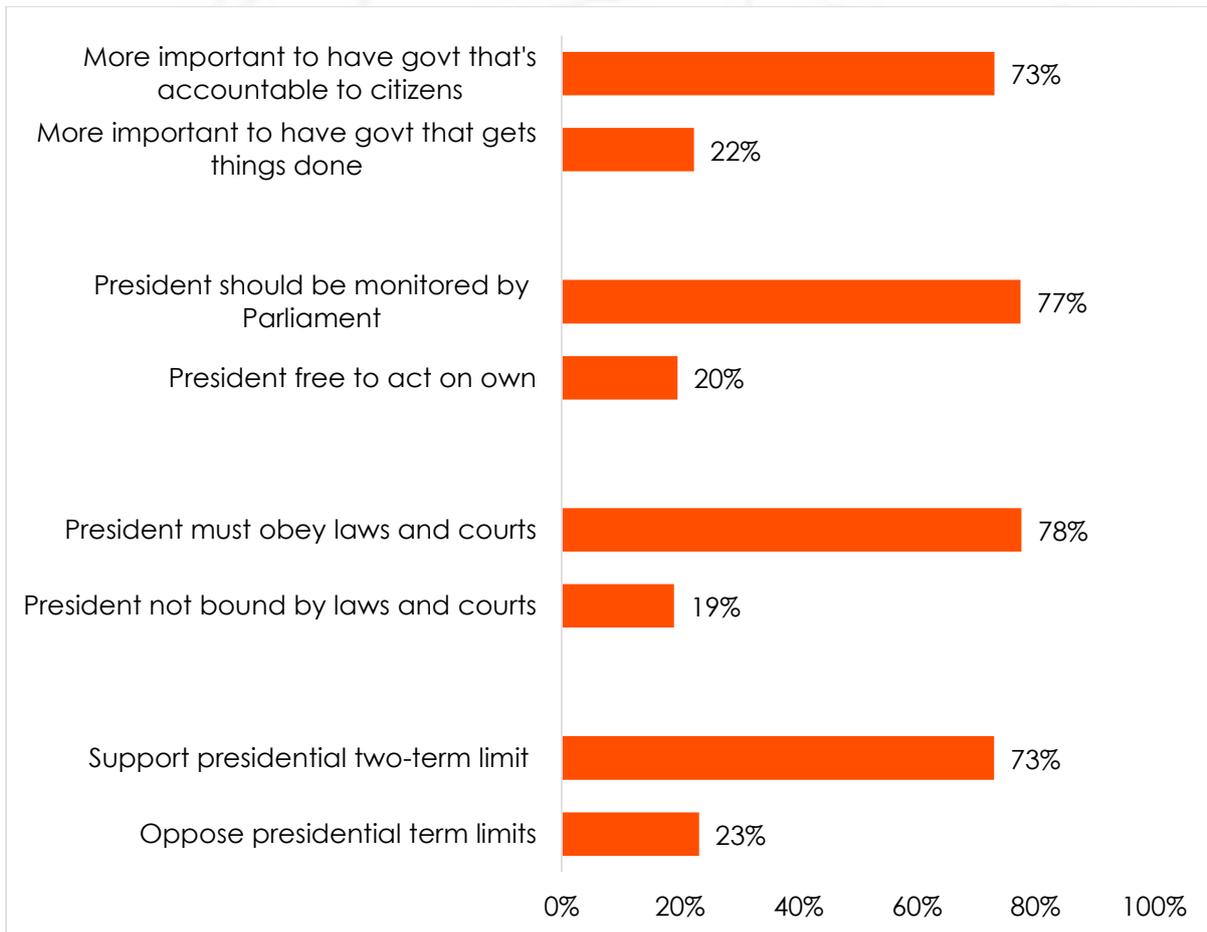
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict?*

Government accountability

Hand in hand with their support for democracy, Botswana strongly favours government accountability (Figure 13). More than seven in 10 (73%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” that it’s more important to have a government that is accountable to its citizens, even if that means that decisions are made more slowly, than it is to have a government that can get things done.

Similarly, more than three-fourths agree that the president should be accountable to Parliament for how the government spends taxpayers’ money (77%) and that the president must always obey laws and court decisions, even he thinks they’re wrong (78%). Almost as many (73%) support a two-term limit on presidents.

Figure 13: Views on government accountability | Botswana | 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.

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

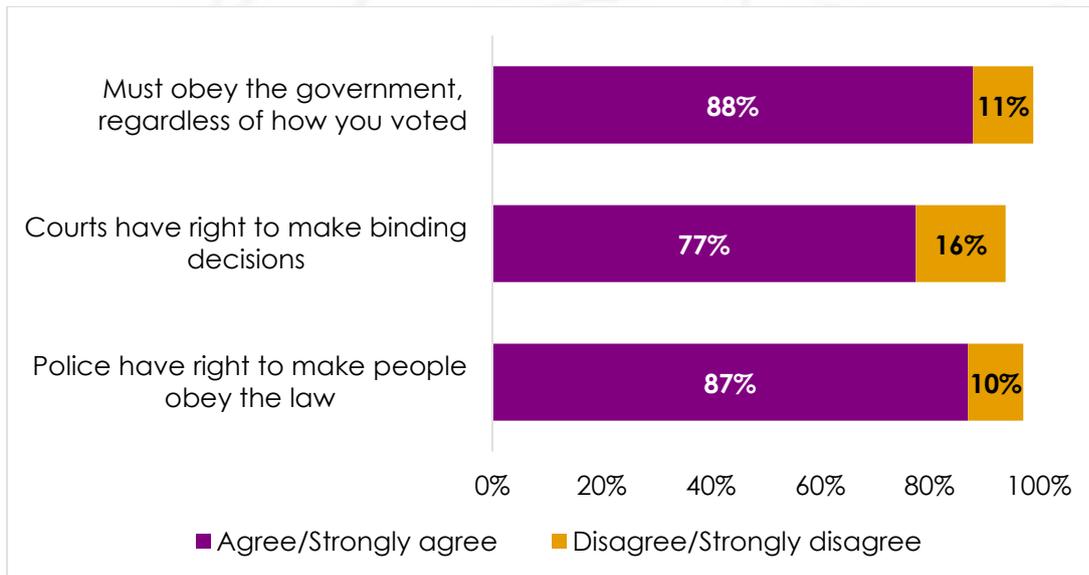
Statement 1: The Constitution should limit the president to serving a maximum of two terms in office.

Statement 2: There should be no constitutional limit on how long the president can serve.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Botswana also strongly affirm citizens' duty to obey the government, regardless of whether they voted for it (88%), as well as the legitimacy of the courts in making decisions that are binding (77%) and the right of the police to make people obey the law (87%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Legitimacy of the government, courts, and police | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked:

- Which of the following statements is closest to your view?
- Statement 1: It is important to obey the government in power, no matter who you voted for.
- Statement 2: It is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that you did not vote for.
- For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree:
- Statement: The courts have the right to make decisions that people always have to abide by.
- Statement: The police always have the right to make people obey the law.

Conclusion

Batswana continue to provide a strong popular base of support for democracy, elections with multiparty competition, the rule of law, and accountable government with term limits for the president. Nevertheless, increasing dissatisfaction with how democracy is working and a growing sense that people have to be careful about expressing their views suggest that the government has work to do to restore public confidence that has weakened over the past decade.

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Thomas Isbell is a PhD student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Email: tisbell@afrobarometer.org.

Batlang Seabo is a senior lecturer in the Department of Political and Administrative Studies at the University of Botswana. Email: batlang.seabo@mopipi.ub.bw.

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