

Citizen engagement in Botswana: Beyond voting, how much interest in participation?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 230 | Batlang Seabo and Thomas Isbell

Summary

While Botswana is widely recognized for its unbroken series of successful elections stretching back to independence in 1966, analysts have long pointed to low levels of political participation and a weak civil society as barriers on its path toward a strong democracy (Democracy Research Project, 2002; Mpabanga, 2000; Holm, Molutsi, & Somolekae, 1996; Mfundisi, 2005).

More recent analysis has shown that while most Botswana see their country as a democracy, satisfaction with the way their democracy is working and perceived freedom of speech have declined steeply over the past decade (Isbell & Seabo, 2018).

If citizen engagement is one of the pillars of a strong democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963; Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2013), findings of the latest Afrobarometer survey are a mixed bag for Botswana's democratic prospects. While most Botswana say they vote in elections and attend community meetings, the proportion of citizens who express interest in public affairs and discuss politics are in decline, and only a minority contact public officials or get together with other citizens to raise an issue.

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 Botswana 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

- Two-thirds (67%) of Botswana say they voted in the most recent national election, 7 percentage points more than in 2014 and 13 points more than in 1999. Four in 10 (40%) say they attended a campaign rally, and 22% say they worked for a candidate or party.
- But citizens' interest in public affairs has been on a decline, dropping from 85% in 2003 to 67% in 2014.

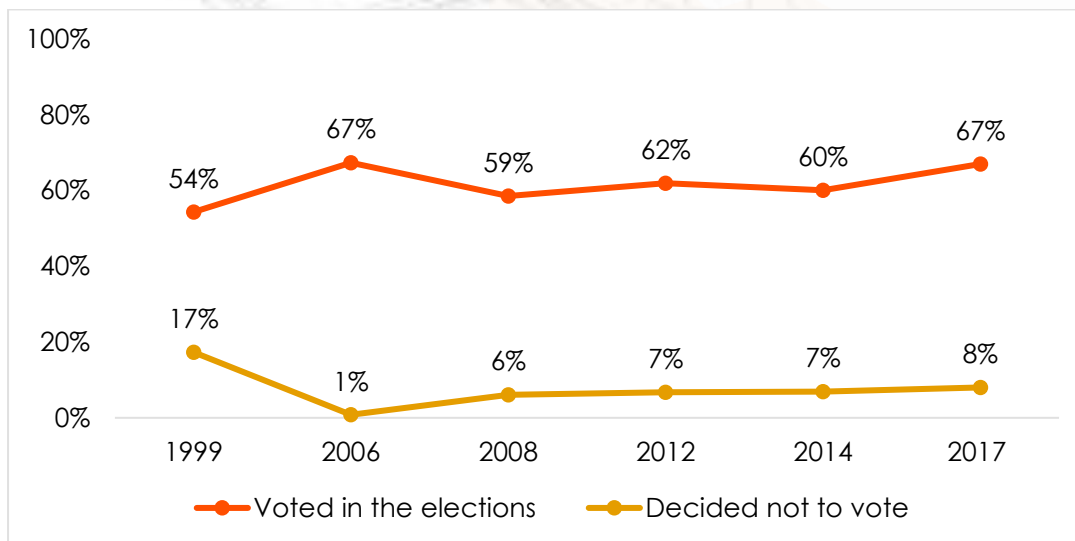
- And fewer Batswana are discussing politics with family and friends. The share who say they do so “occasionally” or “frequently” declined by 9 percentage points between 2014 and 2017, from 69% to 60%.
- Seven in 10 Batswana (71%) say they attended at least one community meeting during the previous year, an increase of 7 percentage points from 2014.
- But only one in three (33%) say they joined others to raise an issue, and even fewer say they contacted public officials or participated in a demonstration.

Participation in electoral politics

Given the central role of elections in democracy, we begin by examining whether Batswana participate in elections, how they see the role of voters, and whether they affiliate with political parties.

If voting in elections is a democratic citizen's basic form of participation, two-thirds (67%) of Batswana say they met this requirement in the most recent national election in 2014. This reflects a modest increase from 60% in 2014 (concerning the election of 2009) and, over the longer term, a 13-percentage-point increase from 54% in 1999 (Figure 1). The proportion of respondents who say they “decided not to vote” (8% in 2017) has been stable over the past decade.

Figure 1: Voted (self-reported) in most recent national election | Botswana
 | 1999-2017



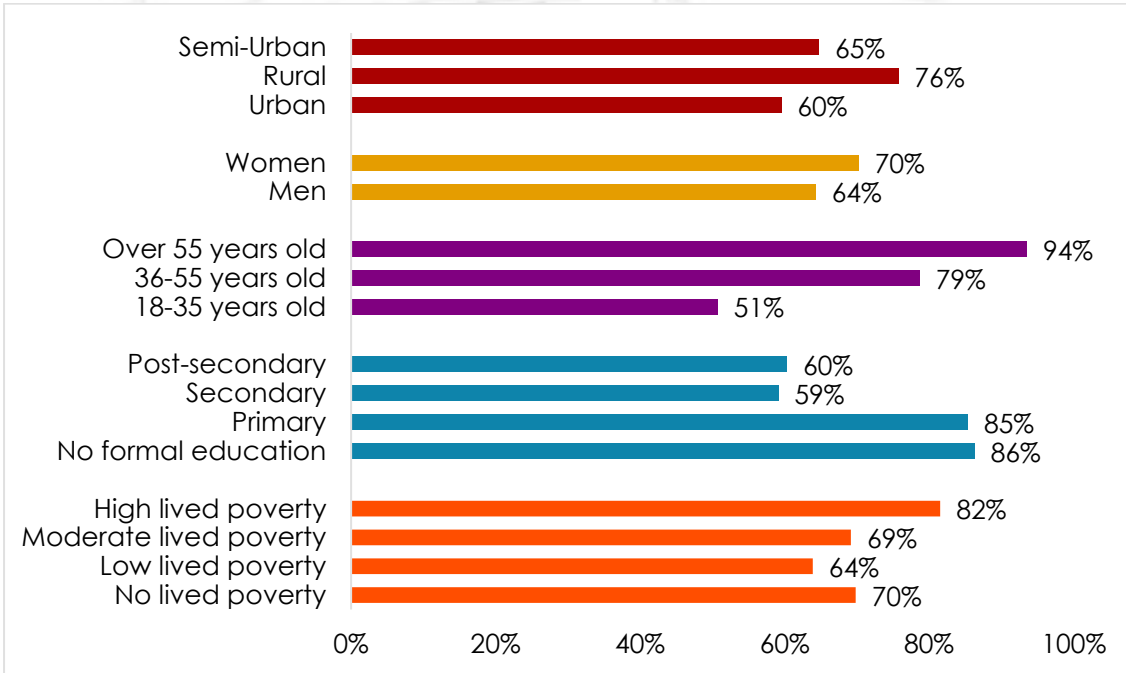
Respondents were asked: Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in [20xx], which of the following statements is true for you?

Self-reported voter turnout is particularly high among rural residents (76%, vs. 60% in urban areas), women (70%, vs. 64% of men), older citizens (94% of those aged over 55), less-educated citizens (85%-86% among those with primary or no formal schooling), and citizens who experience high levels of lived poverty¹ (82%) (Figure 2). One explanation for high self-

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?*

reported voter turnout among these groups may be that, as beneficiaries of government social schemes, many attach instrumental value to voting for the ruling party.

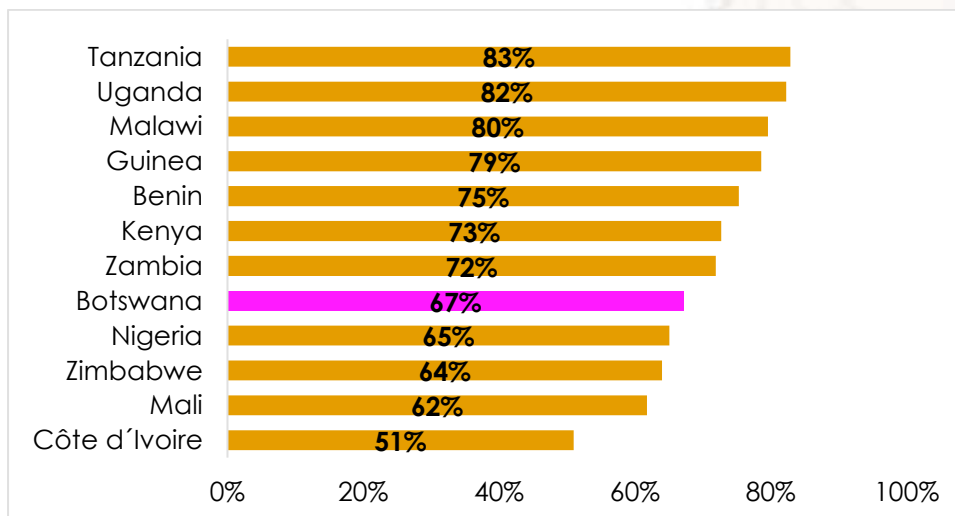
Figure 2: Voted (self-reported) in most recent national election | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in 2014, which of the following statements is true for you? (% who say they voted)

Compared to 11 other African countries surveyed in 2016/2017, self-reported voter turnout in Botswana is in the middle range – higher than in Zimbabwe (64%), Mali (62%), and Cote d'Ivoire (51%) but well below Tanzania (83%), Malawi (80%), and Guinea (79%) (Figure 3).

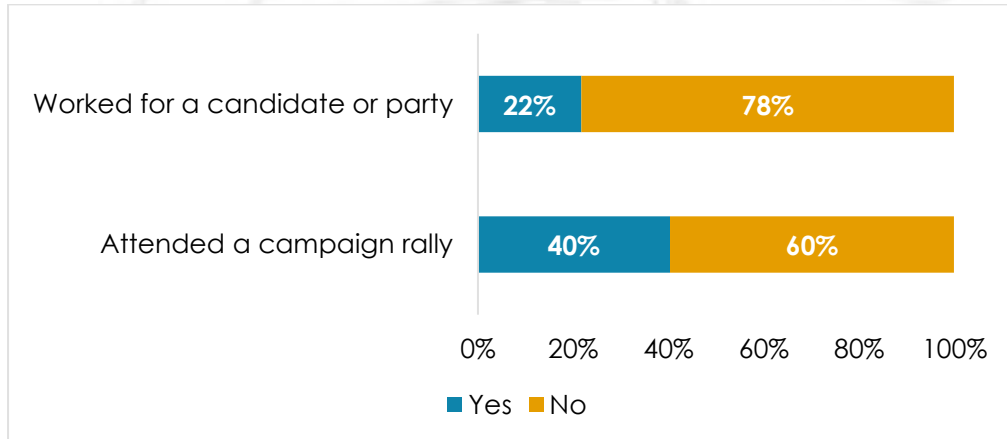
Figure 3: Voted (self-reported) in most recent national election | 12 African countries | 2016/2017



Respondents were asked: Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in [20xx], which of the following statements is true for you? (% who say they voted)

Besides voting, a considerable number of Batswana say they also got involved in the 2014 election in other ways. One in five (22%) say they worked for a candidate or party, and four in 10 (40%) say they attended a campaign rally (Figure 4).

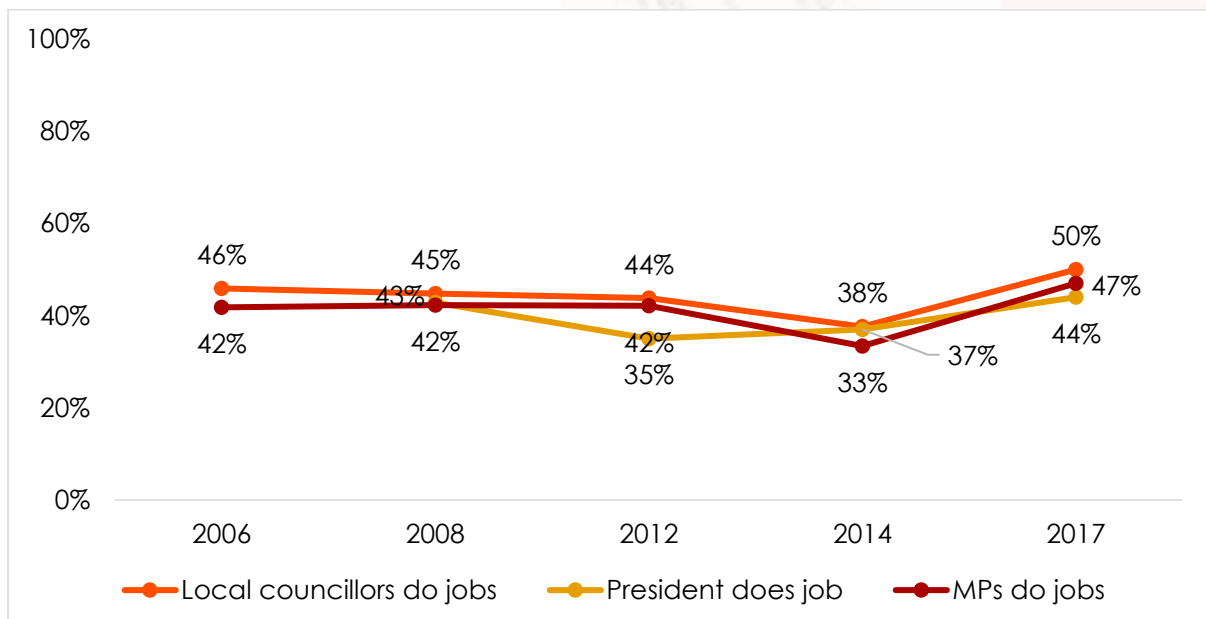
Figure 4: Involvement in most recent national election | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in 2014, did you: Attend a campaign rally? Work for a candidate or party?

A growing number of Batswana see voters as being responsible for holding elected officials accountable (Figure 5). Half (50%) of respondents assign voters the task of making sure that local councillors do their jobs, an increase of 12 percentage points since the 2014 survey. Similarly, 47% say it's the voters' responsibility to make sure that members of Parliament do their jobs, up from 33% in 2014, and 44% say the same with regard to the president (vs. 37% in 2014). All three 2017 proportions are at their highest level since 2006.

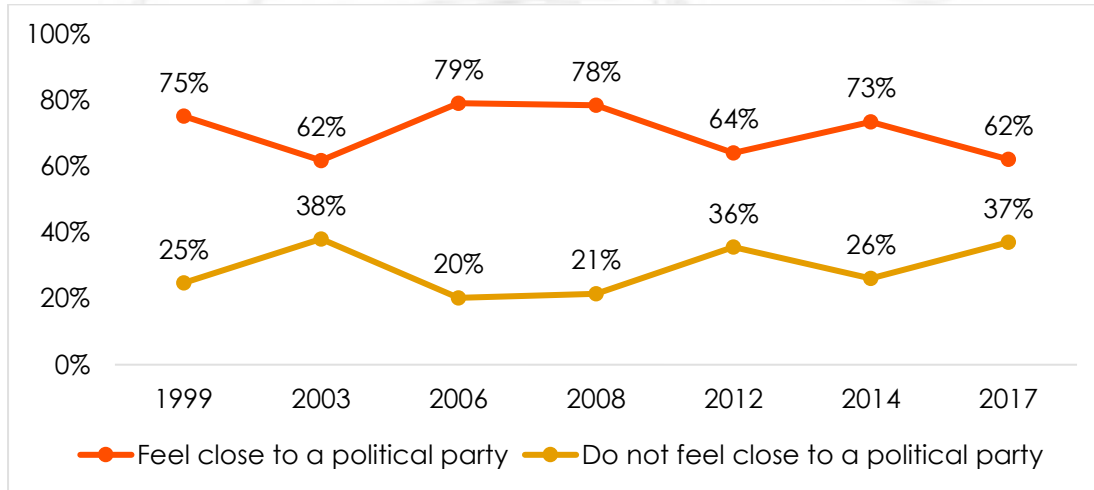
Figure 5: Voters responsible for holding elected officials accountable | Botswana | 2006-2017



Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected: Members of Parliament do their jobs? Members of [the county assembly] do their jobs? The president does his or her job? (% of respondents who say voters should be responsible)

More than six in 10 Batswana (62%) say they “feel close to” a political party, tying with the 2003 survey result for the lowest level of expressed partisanship over the past two decades (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Partisanship | Botswana | 1999-2017

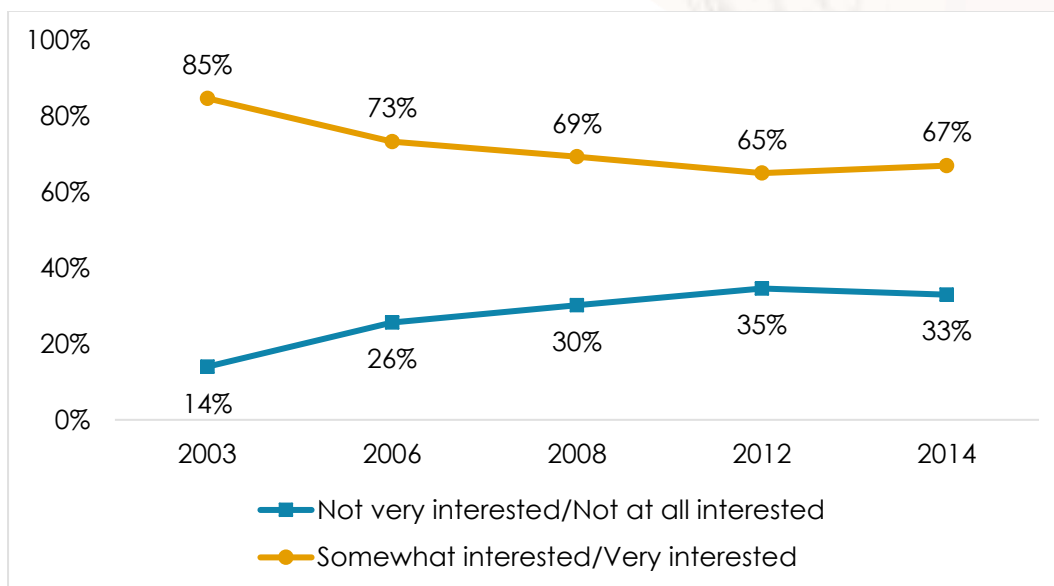


Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Awareness and engagement

While the findings above suggest that many Batswana participate in electoral politics, the proportion of Batswana who express interest in public affairs appears to be decreasing. In surveys from 2003 through 2014 (but not in 2017), Afrobarometer asked Batswana how interested they are in public affairs. Responses over the years suggest broad but declining interest. In 2014, two-thirds (67%) of respondents said they were “somewhat” or “very” interested – about the same proportion as in 2012, but 18 percentage points below the 2003 result (85%) (Figure 7). The share of Batswana reporting little or no interest increased from 14% in 2003 to 33% in 2014.

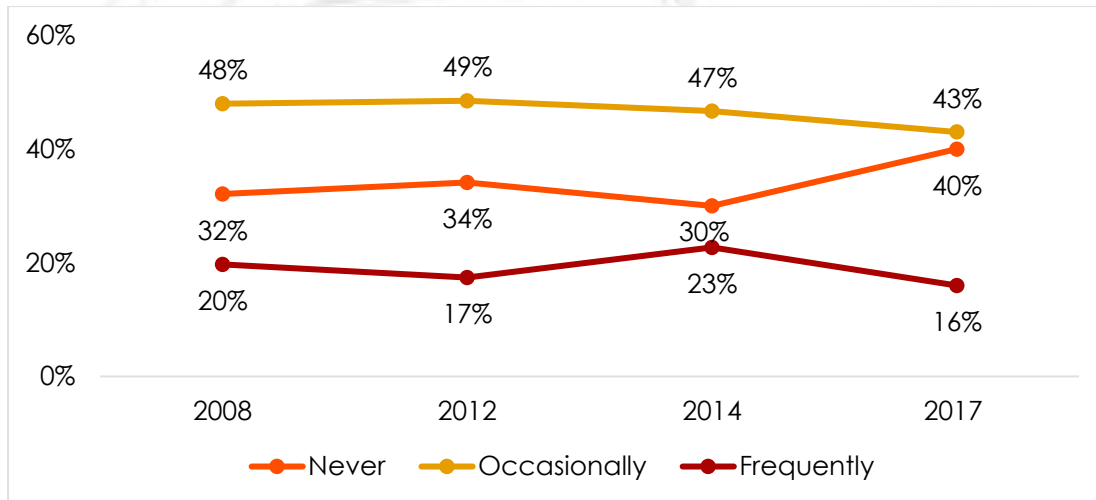
Figure 7: Interest in public affairs | Botswana | 2003-2014



Respondents were asked: How interested would you say you are in public affairs?

A second indicator of popular interest also shows a downward trend: Between 2014 and 2017, the share of Botswana who say they “never” discuss political matters with friends and family increased from 30% to 40%, while the proportion who say they do so “occasionally” or “frequently” declined by 9 percentage points (Figure 8).

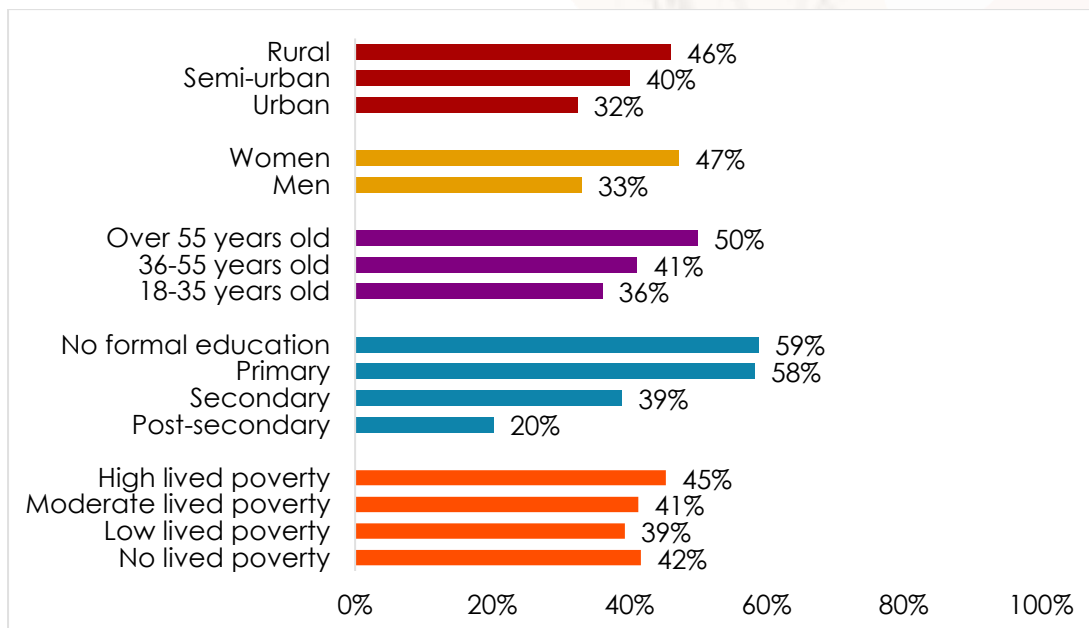
Figure 8: Discuss politics with friends and family | Botswana | 2008-2017



Respondents were asked: When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?

Comparing responses of “never,” it appears that socio-demographic groups that are least likely to discuss politics with friends and family are rural dwellers (46%, vs. 32% of city residents), women (47%, vs. 33% of men), older respondents (50%, vs. 36% of 18- to 35-year-olds), and the least-educated respondents (58%-59% of those with only primary or no formal schooling, vs. 20% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Never discuss politics with friends and family | Botswana | 2017



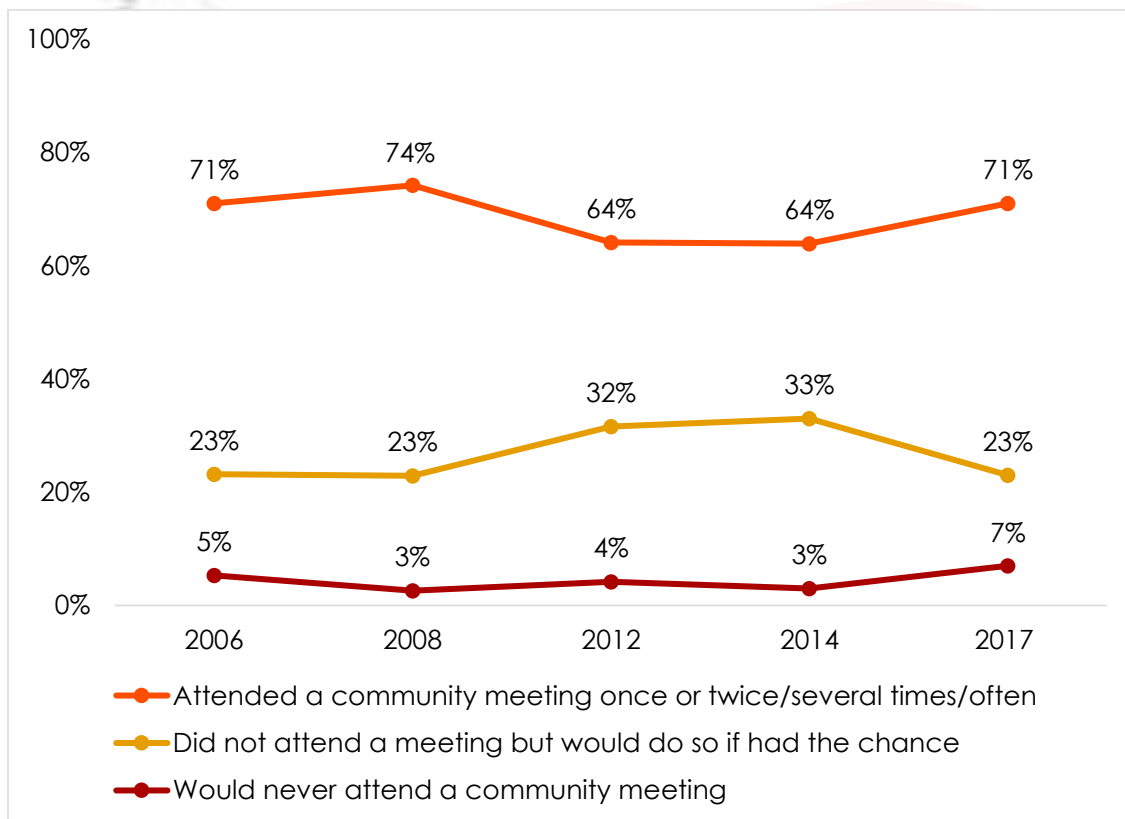
Respondents were asked: When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never? (% who say they “never” discuss politics)

Participation beyond election campaigns

While voting and participating in electoral campaigns may be the most obvious indicators of political participation in a democratic system, what happens between elections is no less important. Attending community meetings, joining other citizens to raise an issue, contacting officials to share one's views, and marching in protest can be important forms of day-to-day participation by an engaged citizenry.

Seven in 10 Batswana (71%) say they attended community meetings at least once or twice during the previous year, a finding that has been fairly consistent (ranging from 64% to 74%) over the past 10 years (Figure 10). Only 7% of Batswana say they would never attend a community meeting.

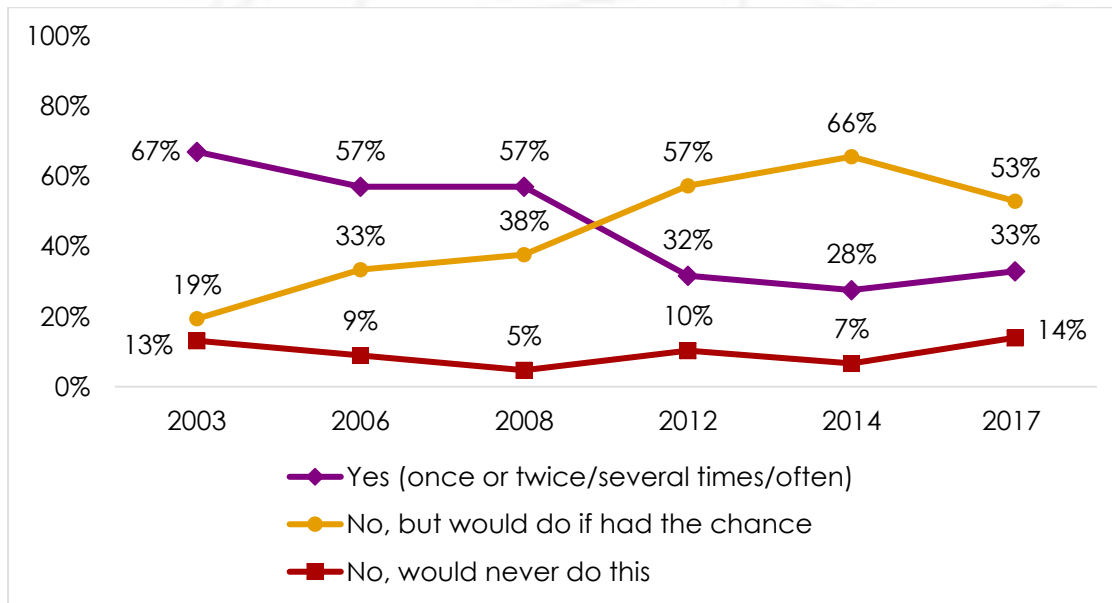
Figure 10: Attended community meetings | Botswana | 2006-2017



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: Attended a community meeting?

While self-reported attendance of community meetings is fairly stable, the proportion of Batswana who say they joined others to raise an issue during the previous year has declined sharply, from 67% in 2003 to 33% in 2017 (Figure 11). Over the same time period, the share of respondents who say they did not join others to raise an issue but would do so if they had the chance increased steadily, from 19% in 2003 to 66% in 2014, before declining by 13 percentage points in 2017. Meanwhile, the proportion who say they “would never” join others to raise an issue has reached an all-time high of 14%, twice as many as in 2014.

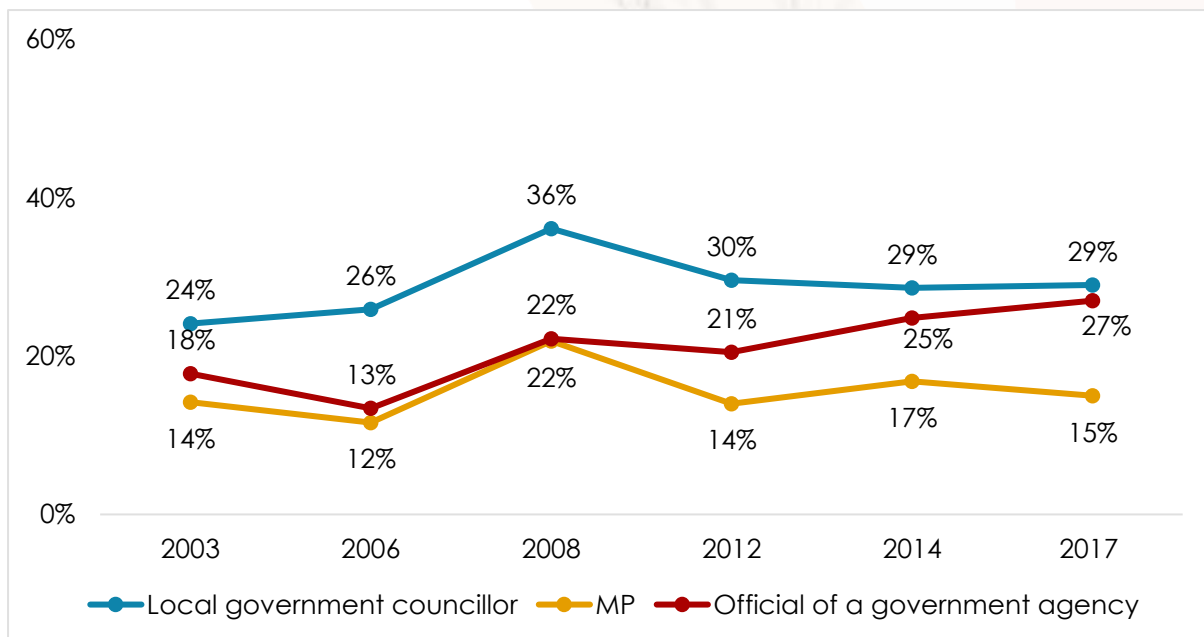
Figure 11: Joined others to raise an issue | Botswana | 2003-2017



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?

As for contacting officials to discuss an important problem or share their views, about one in three Botswana say they contacted local government councillors (29%) or officials from a government agency (27%) “once,” “a few times,” or “often.” About half as many (15%) report contact with their member of Parliament (Figure 12).

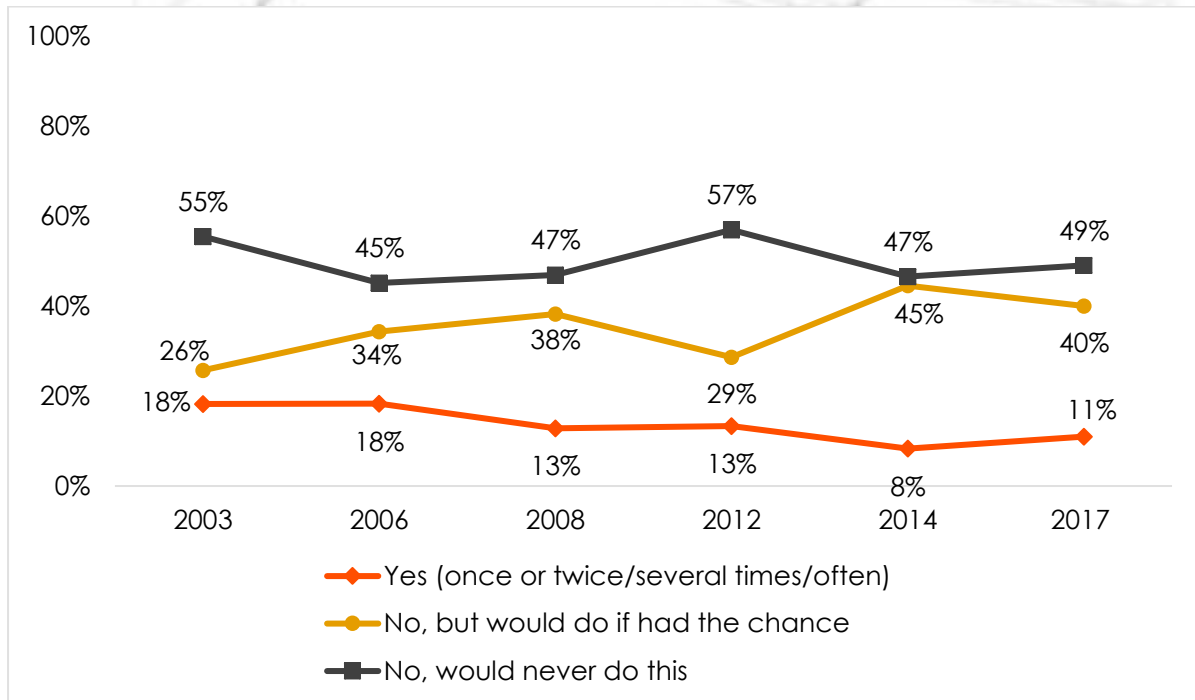
Figure 12: Contacted officials | Botswana | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: 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 agency? (% who said “once,” “a few times,” or “often”)

As might be expected, even fewer Batswana say they participated in a demonstration or protest march during the year preceding the survey: one in nine (11%), down from 18% in 2003 and 2006 (Figure 13). The proportion of respondents who say they “would never” take part in a demonstration has declined slightly over the years, from 55% in 2003 to 49% in 2017, while the share who say they had not joined a demonstration but were open to doing so if given the chance has been on a gradual increase, from 26% in 2003 to 40% in 2017.

Figure 13: Participated in a demonstration | Botswana | 2003-2017



Respondents were asked: Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. 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: Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

Conclusion

Although majorities of Batswana say they turn out to vote in national elections and attend community meetings, their interest in public affairs and political discussion is on the decline, and only minorities are inclined to join others to raise an issue and to contact public officials to share their views. This does not bode well for a strengthening of Botswana's democracy and suggests that more public education may be needed to inculcate a sense of citizens' rights and duties beyond the casting of a vote.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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