

In Gabon, views on elections darken in wake of 2016 contest seen as less than free and fair

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 236 | Thomas Isbell and Sadhika Bhoojedhur

Summary

Elections form a central pillar of democratic rule, yet many elections in Africa have been marred by unfair campaign conditions, rigged votes, or term-limit adjustments to help incumbents retain office (Bratton, 1998; Levitsky & Way, 2002; Lindberg, 2006; Collier & Vicente, 2012).

In Gabon, violence ensued after President Ali Bongo was accused of electoral fraud in his narrow re-election victory in 2016 (Hoijs & Batassi, 2018). Legislative elections were scheduled and repeatedly postponed until the Constitutional Court dissolved Parliament and called for the government to step down in May 2018 (Reuters, 2016; Muisyo, 2017; Agence France-Presse, 2018). While elections have been scheduled for October 2018, constitutional amendments in January 2018 have strengthened the president's powers, and many fear that Bongo's "constitutional power grab" could be setting up a further executive dynasty in Africa (Kiwuwa, 2018).

Given their recent experiences with elections, how do ordinary Gabonese view the electoral process in their country? Based on Afrobarometer survey data from 2017, this dispatch finds that support for choosing leaders through elections has decreased since 2015. An overwhelming majority of Gabonese see their most recent national election as less than free and fair, and many believe that people have to be careful about how they vote. Most say the government is doing a poor job of preventing political violence at election time, and looking ahead, fewer than one in three Gabonese feel that improvements to the electoral process are likely.

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 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Gabon, led by the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche en Géosciences Politiques et Prospective (CERGE), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens in November 2017. A sample of this size produces country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. One previous survey was conducted in Gabon in 2015.

Key findings

- About two-thirds (68%) of Gabonese endorse "regular, open, and honest elections" as the best way to choose leaders, an 8-percentage-point drop from 2015.

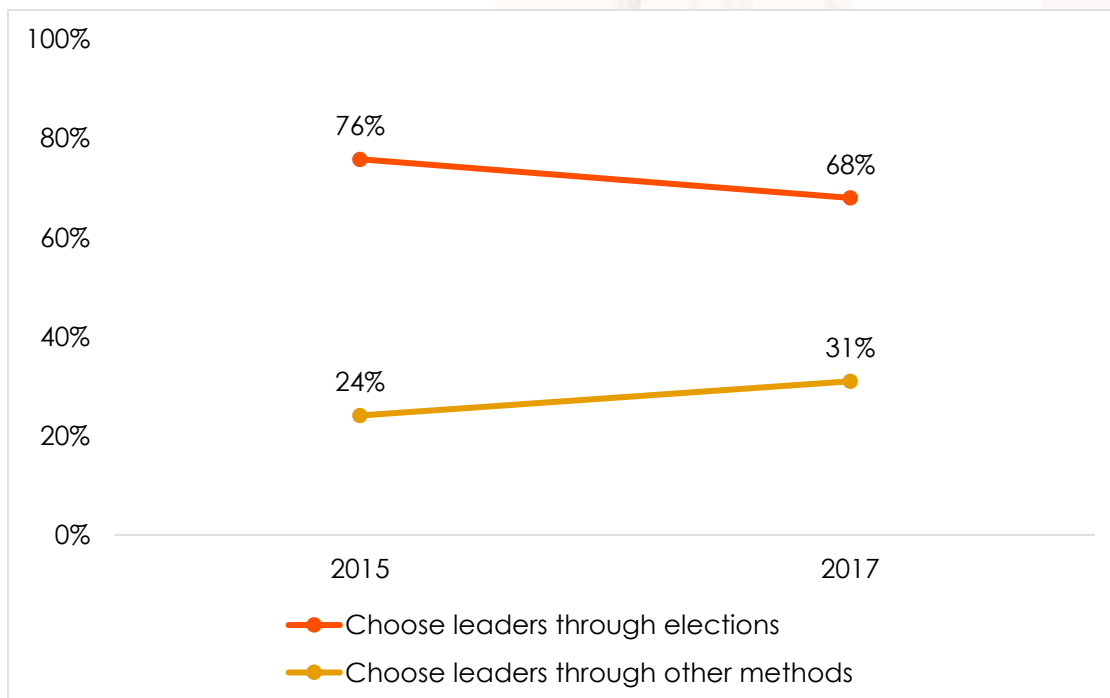
- Fewer than one in five Gabonese (18%) rate the 2016 national election as “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems” – half as many as perceived the 2011 legislative elections as fair.
- Only about one in six Gabonese (16%) say they trust the national electoral commission “somewhat” or “a lot,” a 9-percentage-point decline since 2015.
- Most Gabonese say that people have to be careful about how they vote in elections (85%), what they say about politics (86%), and which political organizations they join (82%).
- Four in 10 Gabonese (42%) say they fear election-related intimidation and violence, and most (85%) say the government is doing a poor job of preventing such violence.
- A majority of Gabonese think that electoral reforms proposed after the 2016 post-election crisis are unlikely to be implemented.

Decreasing support for elections

While more than two-thirds (68%) of Gabonese support choosing their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections, this represents an 8-percentage-point decrease since 2015. Almost one-third (31%) of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that the country should adopt other methods for choosing their leaders (Figure 1).

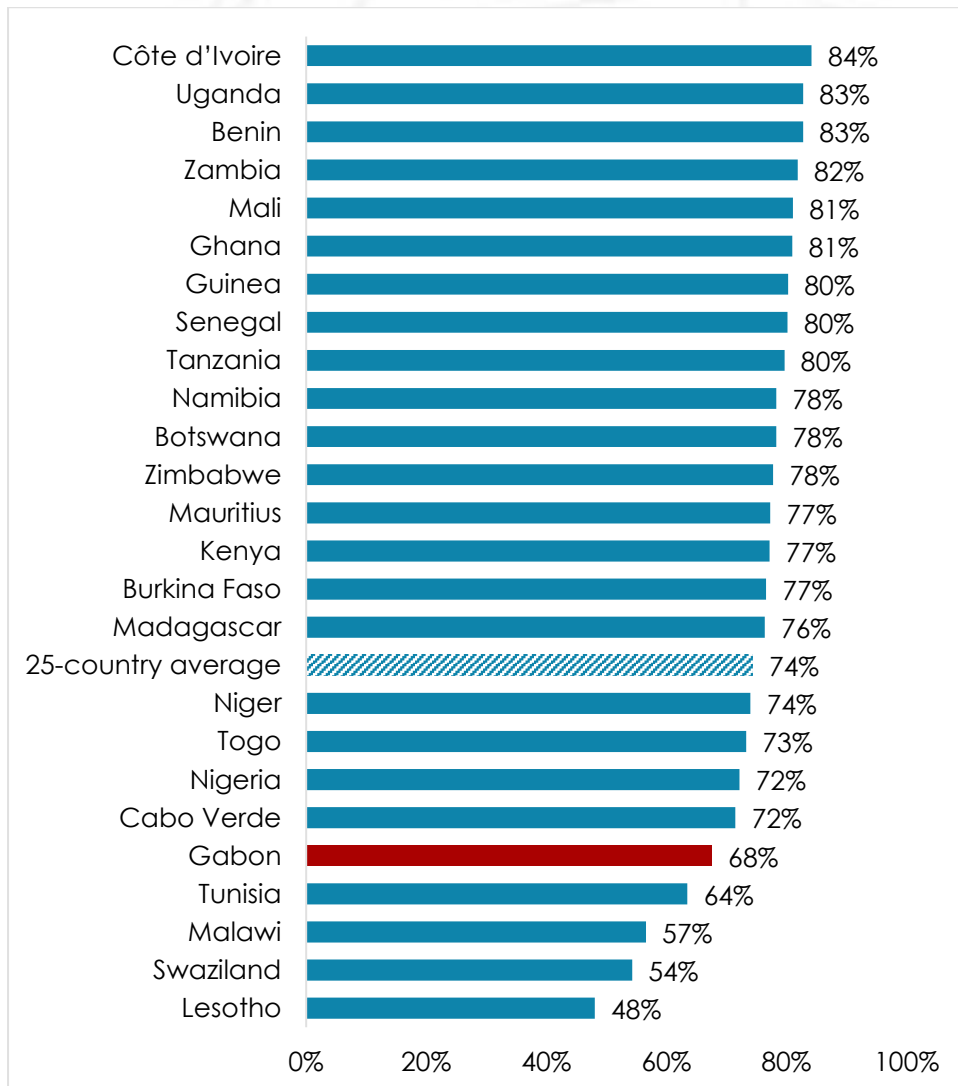
Among 25 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018, Gabon ranks 21st in its support for elections (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Support for elections | Gabon | 2015-2017



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.
 (% who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement)

Figure 2: Support for elections | 25 African countries | 2016/2018

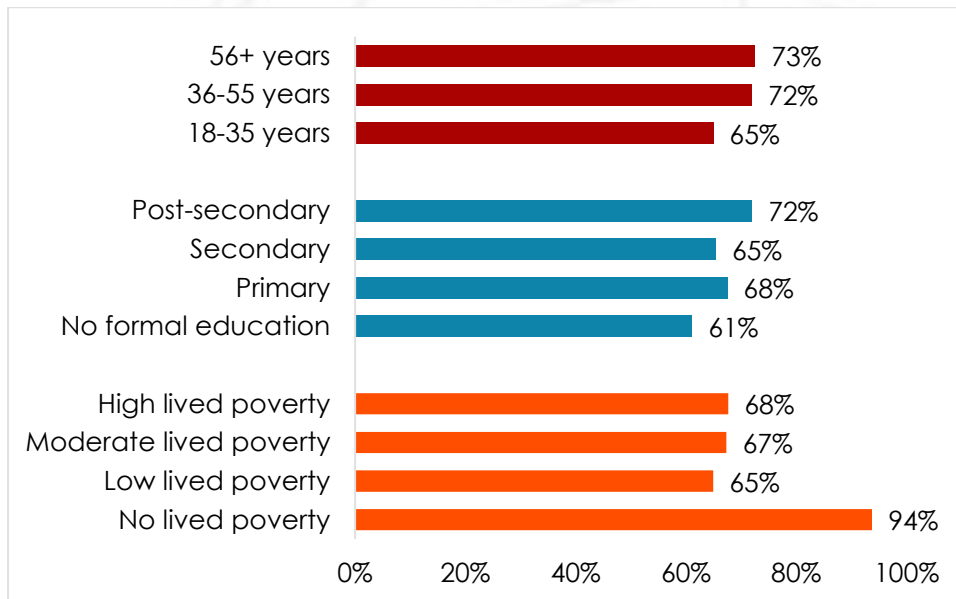


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Support for elections is somewhat weaker among younger Gabonese: Only 65% of 18- to 35-year-olds say that elections are the best way to choose leaders, compared to 72%-73% among their elders. Support for elections increases with education level, from 61% among those with no formal education to 72% among those who have post-secondary qualifications. Poor Gabonese are less supportive of elections than wealthier citizens (68% of respondents with high lived poverty¹ vs. 94% of those with no lived poverty) (Figure 3).

¹ Afrobarometer assesses respondents' "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?*

Figure 3: Support for elections | by socio-demographic group | Gabon | 2017

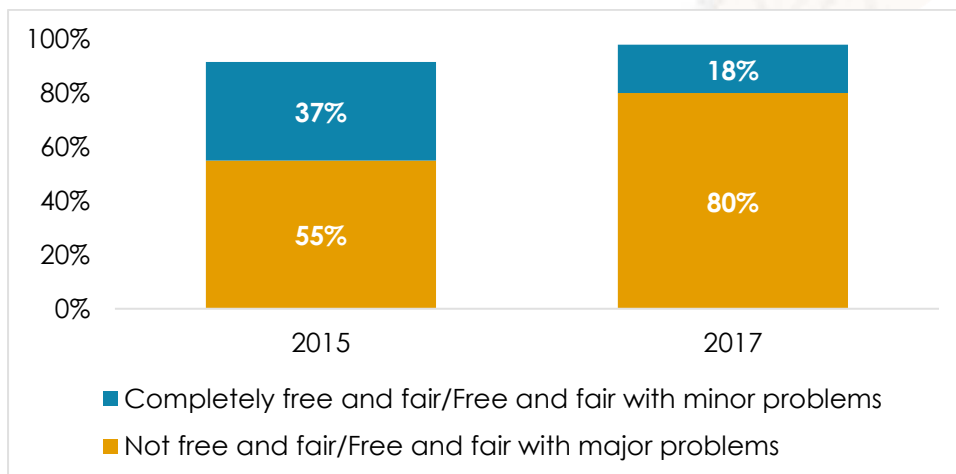


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 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with Statement 1)

Little faith in the quality of elections

Citizens' faith in elections, already weak in 2015, appears to have been further damaged by Gabon's 2016 contest. Fewer than one in five respondents (18%) say the 2016 election was either "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems" – half as many as described the 2011 legislative elections as free and fair in the 2015 survey (37%). Correspondingly, the share of respondents who perceive the 2016 election as having been "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems" increased by 25 percentage points (Figure 4).

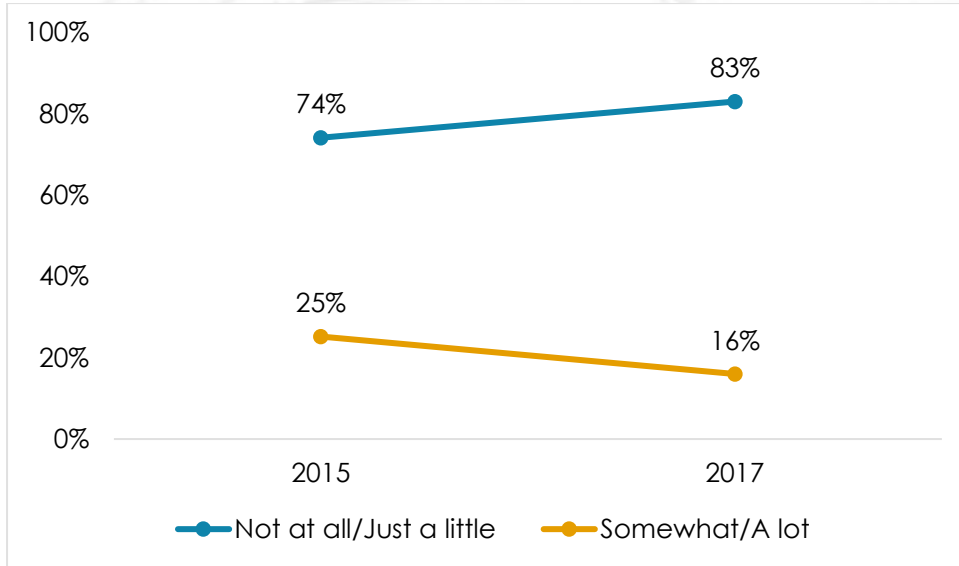
Figure 4: Freeness and fairness of the last national election | Gabon | 2015-2017



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

Similarly, Gabonese express declining trust in the body charged with ensuring the implementation of free and fair elections. Only one in six respondents (16%) say they trust the national electoral commission "somewhat" or "a lot," a 9-percentage-point decline since 2015 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Trust in the electoral commission | Gabon | 2015-2017

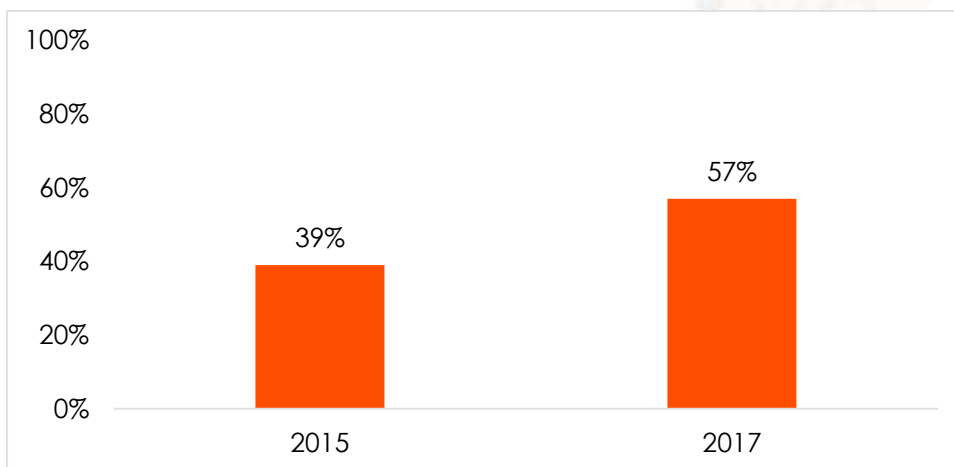


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The National Autonomous and Permanent Electoral Commission?

Participation in the electoral process

Decreasing confidence in the quality of their elections does not appear to have reduced citizens' participation in the electoral process. A majority (57%) of respondents say they voted in the 2016 election, a substantial increase from 39% who said in 2015 that they had voted in the 2011 elections (Figure 6). (It should be noted that the 2011 elections were legislative, rather than presidential, elections.)

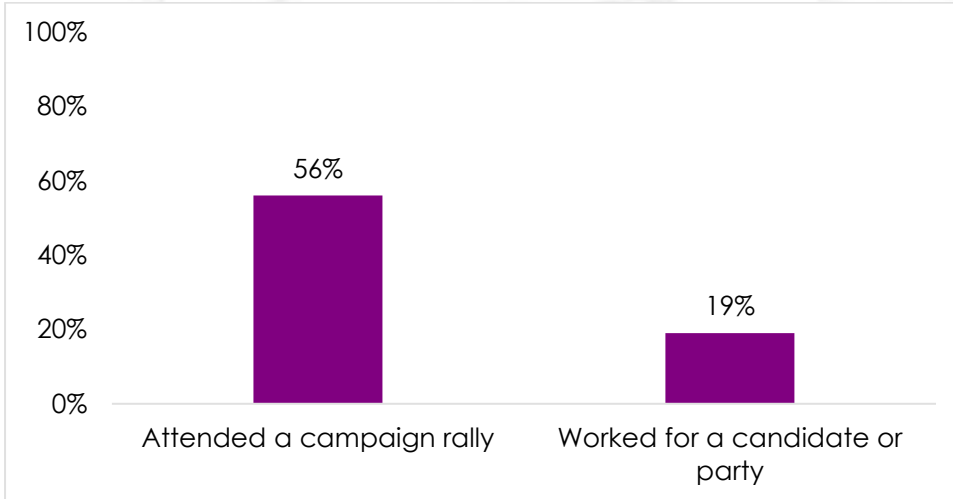
Figure 6: Voting (self-reported) in the most recent national election | Gabon | 2015-2017



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)

Indeed, more than half (56%) of respondents say they attended a campaign rally ahead of the 2016 election, while 19% say they worked for a candidate or party (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Involvement in 2016 election campaign | Gabon | 2017

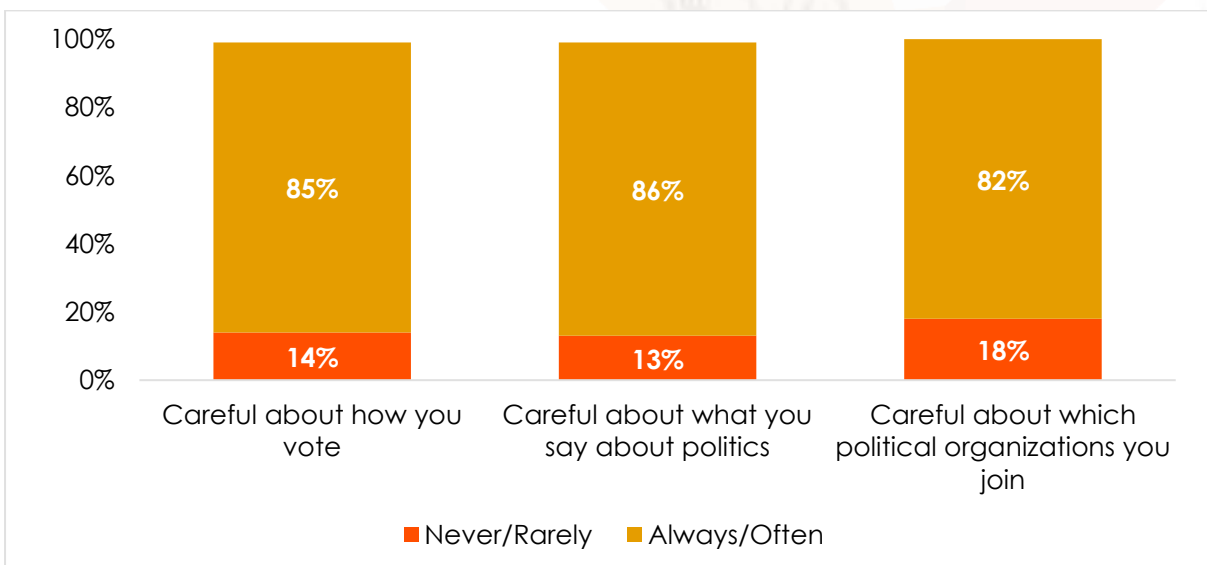


Respondents were asked: Thinking about the last national election in 2016, did you: Attend a campaign rally? Work for a candidate or party? (% who say “yes”)

But an overwhelming majority of Gabonese say that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about how they vote in an election (85%), what they say about politics (86%), and which political organizations they join (82%) (Figure 8).

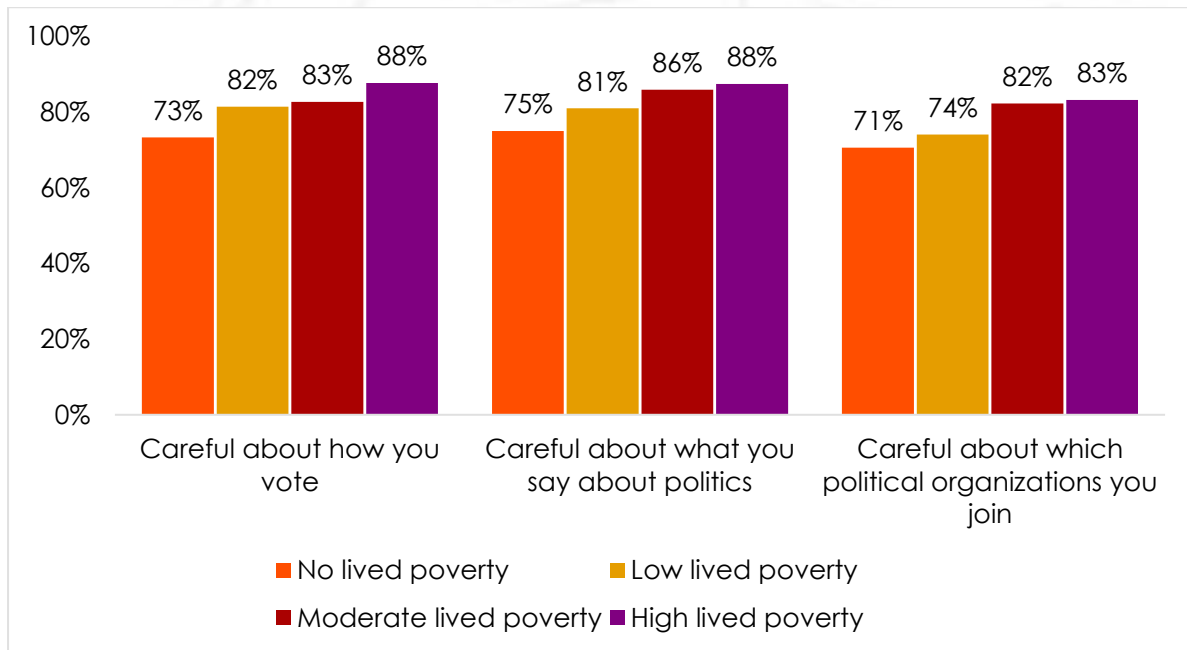
Caution about political activities is particularly common among the poorest respondents (Figure 9). For example, 88% of those who experienced high lived poverty say people often/always have to be careful about how they vote, compared to 73% of the wealthiest respondents.

Figure 8: Caution regarding political activities | Gabon | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election? Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? Do people have to be careful about which political organizations they join?

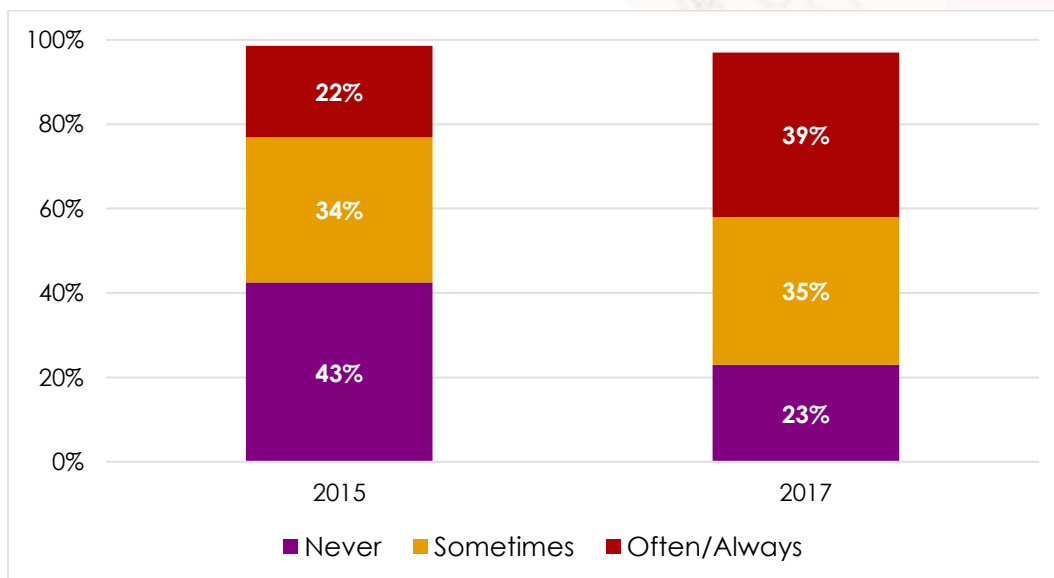
Figure 9: Caution regarding political activities | by lived poverty | Gabon | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country: Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election? Do people have to be careful of what they say about politics? Do people have to be careful about which political organizations they join? (% who say "often" or "always")

In addition to having to be careful about political activities, an increasing proportion of Gabonese say the opposition is prevented from running for office. Four in 10 respondents (39%) say this happens "often" or "always," an increase of 17 percentage points from 2015, and an additional 35% say it occurs "sometimes" (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Opposition prevented from running in national elections | Gabon | 2015-2017

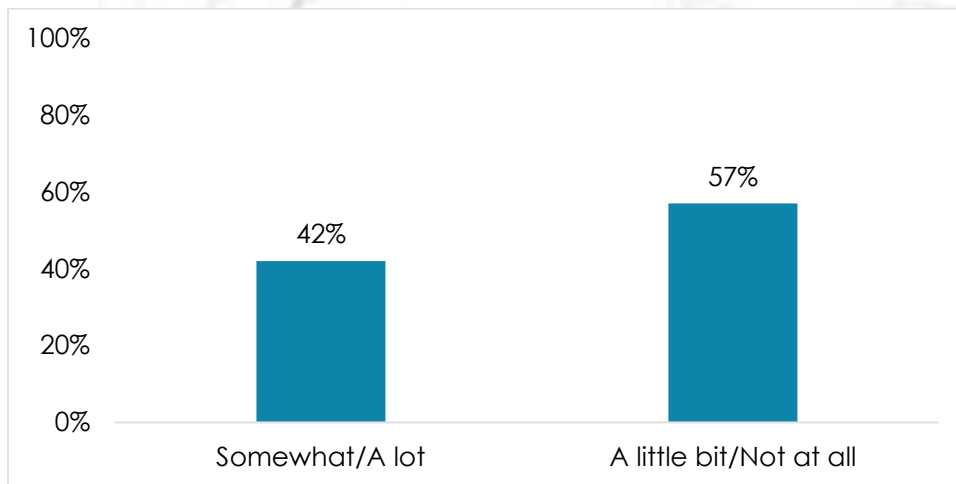


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, during this country's elections, how often are opposition candidates prevented from running for office?

Electoral violence

While electoral rights may be enshrined in law, actual participation may be obstructed if citizens fear for their safety. Four in 10 Gabonese (42%) say they fear (“somewhat” or “a lot”) falling victim to political intimidation or violence during election campaigns (Figure 11).

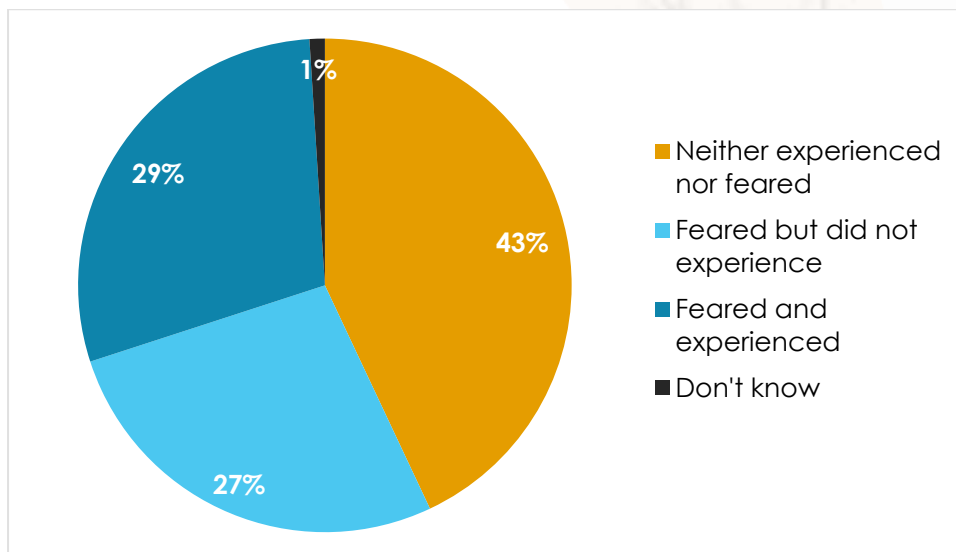
Figure 11: Fear of political intimidation or violence during elections | Gabon | 2017



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

More than half (56%) of Gabonese say they feared violence at a political event during the previous two years, including 29% who say they actually experienced such violence (Figure 12). Only four in 10 (43%) say they neither feared nor experienced violence at political events during the preceding two years.

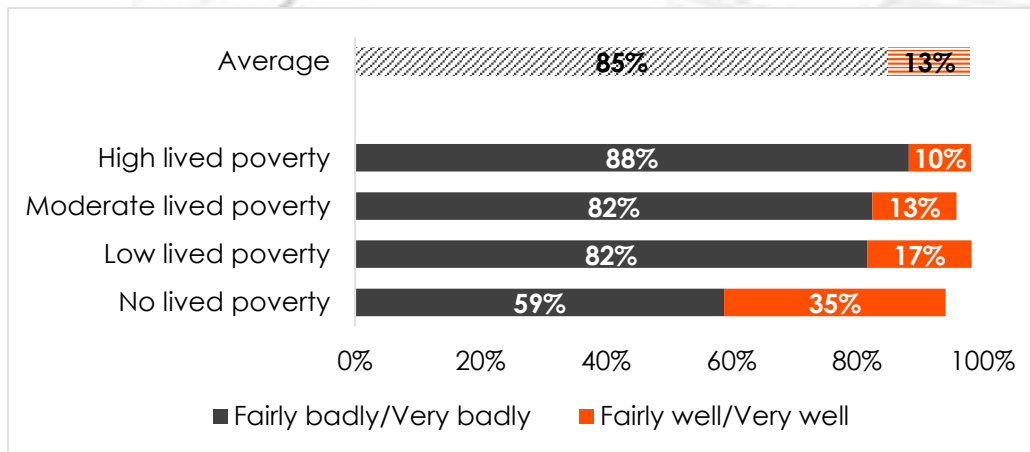
Figure 12: Fear and experience of violence at political event | Gabon | 2017



Respondents were asked: In any society, people will sometimes disagree with one another. These disagreements occasionally escalate into physical violence. Please tell me whether, in the past two years, you have ever personally feared any of the following types of violence: Violence at a political rally or campaign event? [If yes:] Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years?

In line with substantial levels of fear, most Gabonese (85%) say the government is doing “fairly badly” or “very badly” in preventing political violence during election campaigns. This view is particularly common among the poorest respondents (88%, compared to 59% among their wealthy counterparts) (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Government performance in preventing election violence | by level of lived poverty | Gabon | 2017

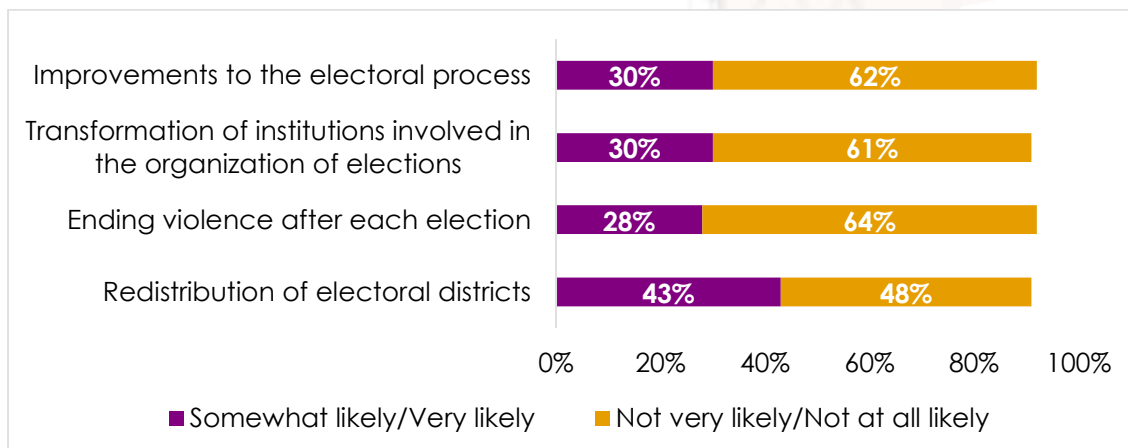


Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Preventing political violence during election campaigns? (% who say “fairly badly” or “very badly”)

Likelihood of improvements in the electoral process

After Ali Bongo’s heavily disputed re-election in 2016, Ali Bongo the incumbent and opposition leader Jean Ping proposed rival “dialogues” to resolve issues surrounding the election (Akwei, 2016; Iob, 2016). While the dispute remains unresolved, a majority of Gabonese are pessimistic about the likelihood of actual improvements. More than six in 10 respondents say they think it is “not very likely” or “not at all likely” that resolutions will be implemented to improve the electoral process (62%), transform institutions involved in the organization of elections (61%), and end violence after elections (64%) (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Likelihood of improvements to the electoral process | Gabon | 2017



Respondents were asked: In April and May 2017, the government organized a political dialogue without taboos after the post-election crisis following the presidential election of 2016. What is the likelihood that each of the following resolutions will be implemented, or haven't you heard enough to say?

Conclusion

After years of delays, Gabon's legislative election is currently scheduled for October 2018. Most Gabonese, however, feel that elections in their country are badly flawed, and popular support for this method of choosing leaders has declined. Most Gabonese say they have to be careful about engaging in political activities, and very few trust the national electoral commission. A substantial proportion of citizens fear election-related violence, and most think the government has done a poor job of ensuring peaceful elections. Given these public perceptions, and pessimism about the likelihood of improvements, it is questionable how freely Gabonese will be able to make their voices heard.

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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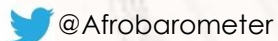
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