

# Despite freedoms seen as growing, Tunisians show limited citizen engagement

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 336 | Thomas Isbell and Mohamed Najib Ben Saad**

## Summary

Tunisia has been a model of successful democratic transition in the Arab world since its revolution in 2011 (Caryl, 2019). While Libya, Yemen, and Syria have descended into civil war, Egypt and Bahrain into repression and authoritarianism, Tunisia is the only Arab Spring country where democracy has survived (Chulov, 2018).

The small North African country has held repeated free and fair elections, including constituent assembly elections in 2011, municipal elections in 2018, and parliamentary and presidential elections twice, in 2014 and 2019. Tunisia ratified the most progressive constitution in the Arab world in 2014, guaranteeing freedoms of expression, of assembly, and of the press; protecting the right to access information; and mandating gender equality with an active commitment by the state to ensuring it (Constitute Project, 2019). While enormous economic problems continue to plague the country, its actions earned it a reclassification by Freedom House (2015) from “not free” to “free.”

One of the main reasons democratization succeeded in Tunisia while failing in other Arab Spring countries is the country’s strong civil society. In 2010, when protests escalated and reached the capital, civil society groups, trade unions, lawyers, journalists, and opposition parties joined the uprising and played a key role in ending 23 years of authoritarian rule (Yerkes & Ben Yahmed, 2018). After the revolution, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet – made up of the Tunisian General Labor Union; the Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts; the Tunisian Human Rights League; and the Tunisian Order of Lawyers – was awarded the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize for successfully negotiating a compromise between secular and Islamist political actors when the democratic transition was close to collapse due to intense political polarization (Nobel Prize, 2015). Politicians agreed to overcome their differences and achieve consensus that gave space to both Islamists and seculars in the new political system (Marks, 2015).

In this dispatch we use Afrobarometer survey data to explore citizen engagement in Tunisia. We find that while a majority of Tunisians say civic and political liberties have expanded in recent years, the proportion of citizens who feel restrained in discussing politics has increased, and fewer are going to the polls on Election Day. Even though a growing number of Tunisians express a willingness to join together to raise an issue or to participate in a protest, in practice only small minorities engage through civil-society organizations or contact with their leaders.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network that provides reliable data on Africans’ experiences and evaluations of quality of life, governance, and democracy. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent’s choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Tunisia, led by One to One for Research and Polling, interviewed 1,200 adult Tunisians in April-May 2018. 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 Tunisia in 2013 and 2015.

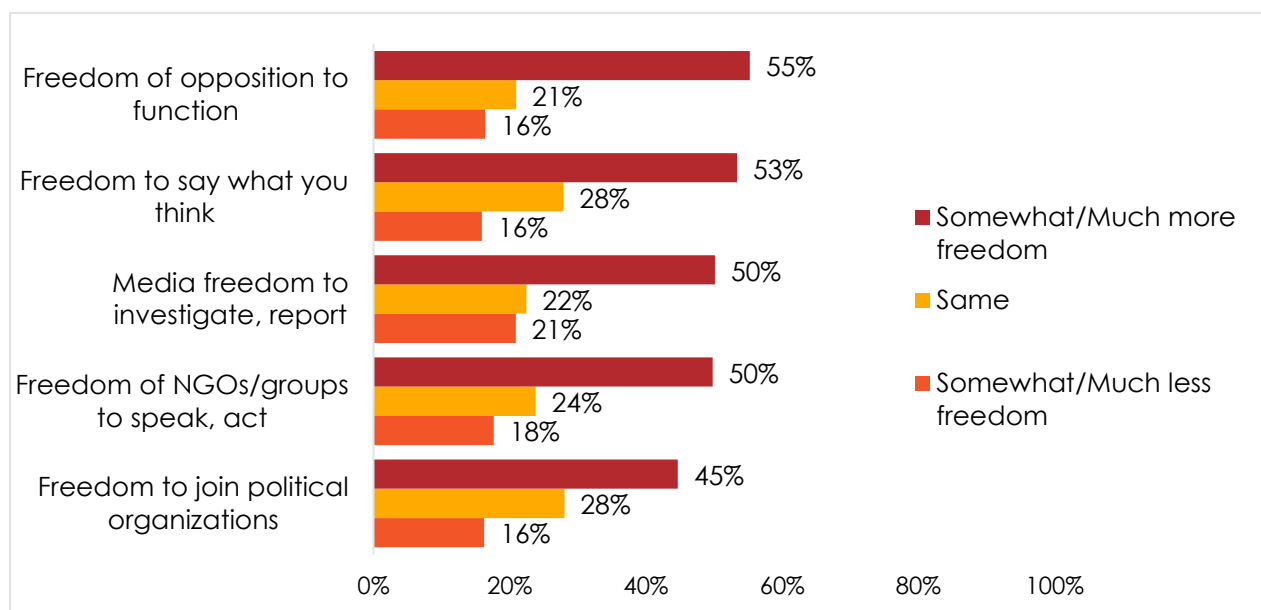
## Key findings

- A majority of Tunisians say they enjoy greater political and civic freedoms than they did “a few years ago.” However, a growing number of citizens believe they have to be cautious when talking about politics.
- More than two-thirds (68%) of Tunisians say they discuss politics at least occasionally, and three-fourths (73%) report watching TV news every day. Among the youngest adults, the Internet and social media are a more common daily news source (77%).
- Electoral participation is in decline. Only 50% of Tunisians say they voted in the most recent national election, and the number who decided not to vote doubled between 2013 and 2018.
- While only small minorities of Tunisians say they joined others to raise an issue or participated in a demonstration during the previous year, a growing share of citizens say they would take such action if they had the chance.
- Civic and political engagement through voluntary associations and contact with leaders is limited to about one in 10 citizens.

## Civic and political freedoms

A majority of Tunisians say civic and political freedoms in the country have improved compared to “a few years ago.” More than half (55%) say the political opposition now has greater freedom to function, while almost as many see greater freedom for citizens to say what they think (53%), for media to investigate and report (50%) and for nongovernmental organizations to speak and act (50%). About one in five respondents or fewer say these freedoms have decreased in recent years (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Perceived change in freedoms | Tunisia | 2018**

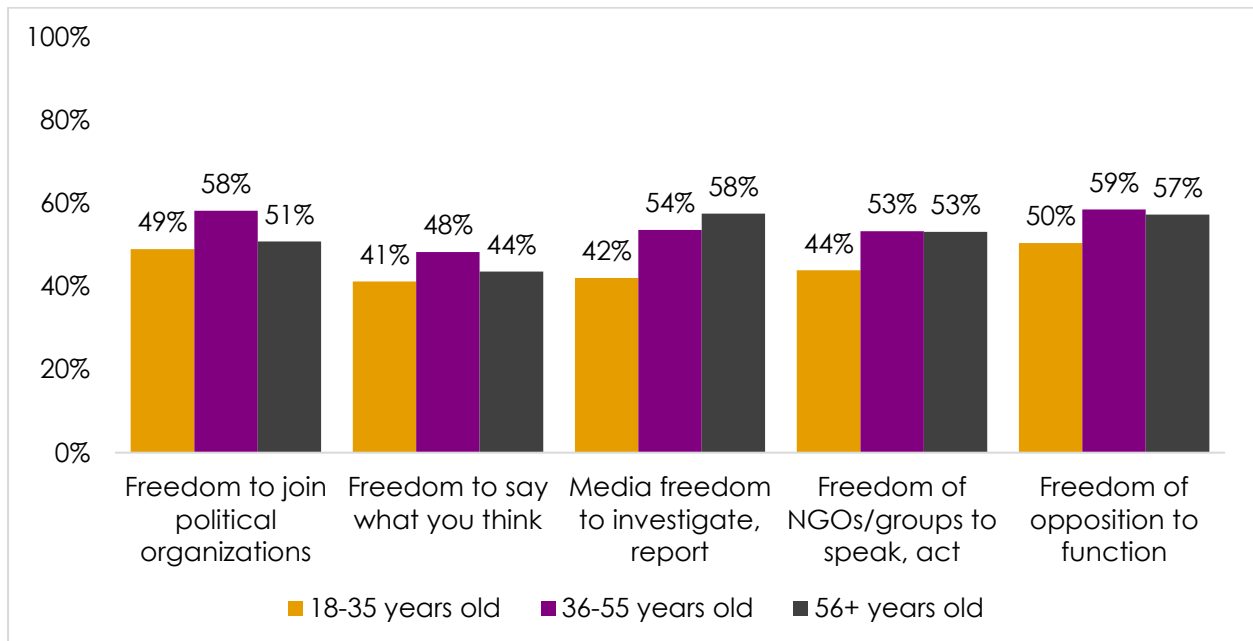


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

Fewer than half (45%) of respondents say they enjoy greater freedom to join political organizations than in the past, although that's still about three times the proportion who say this freedom has decreased.

Young Tunisians are generally less likely than their elders to perceive increased freedoms, perhaps because they interpret "a few years ago" as referring to a more recent past than older respondents. For example, while about six in 10 Tunisians above age 55 say that media freedom has increased (58%), fewer than half (42%) of 18- to 35-year-olds agree (Figure 2).

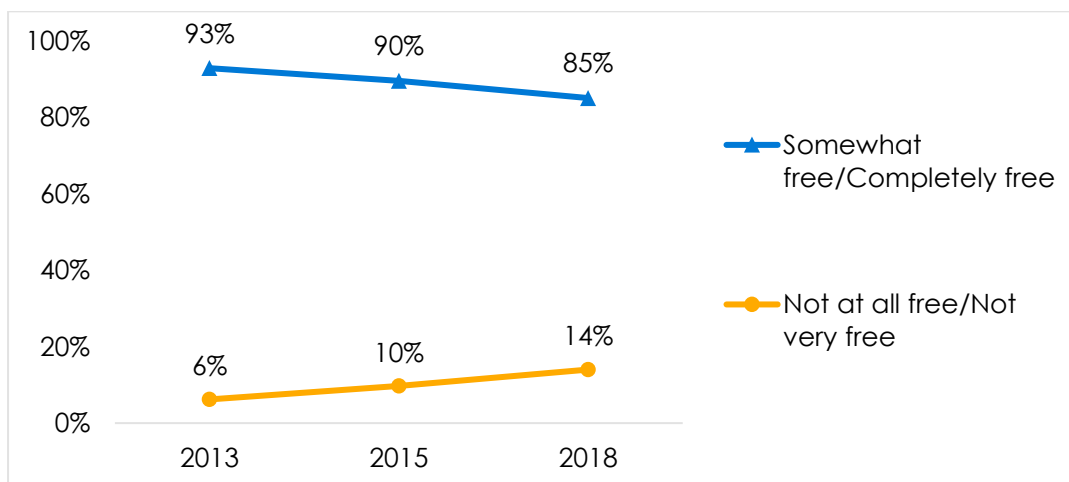
**Figure 2: Greater freedom than a few years ago | by age group | Tunisia | 2018**



**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? (% who say "somewhat more" or "much more")

But contrary to perceptions of increased freedom, the share of Tunisians who say they feel "somewhat free" or "completely free" to speak their minds, though still a large majority, has been decreasing, from 93% in 2013 to 85% in 2018 (Figure 3).

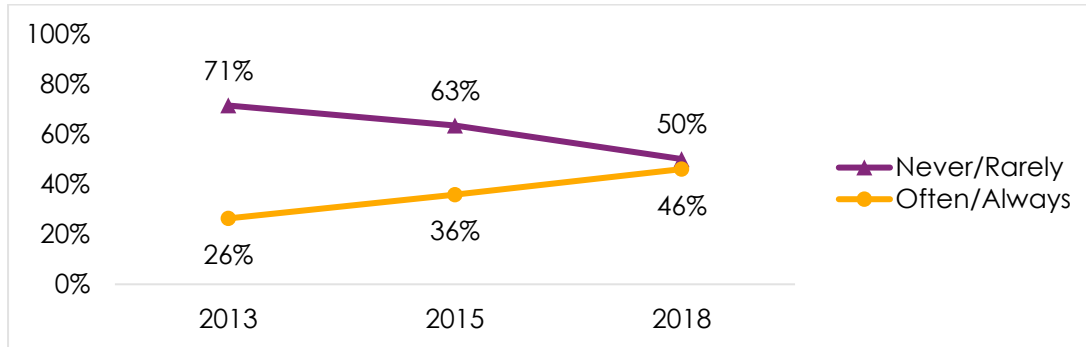
**Figure 3: Freedom to say what you think | Tunisia | 2013-2018**



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

At the same time, growing numbers of citizens feel they have to be cautious in their political speech. While only a quarter (26%) of respondents in 2013 said that people “often” or “always” have to be careful what they say about politics, in the latest survey almost half (46%) of respondents feel that way (Figure 4).

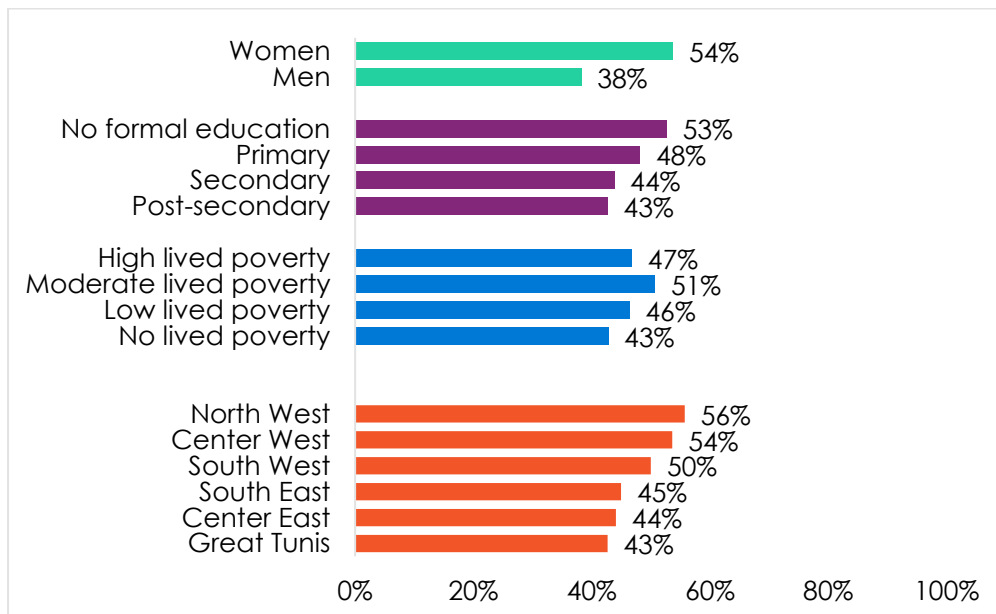
**Figure 4: Caution in political speech | Tunisia | 2013-2018**



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

Women are more likely than men to see caution in political speech as necessary (54% vs. 38%) (Figure 5). More-educated citizens less often see a need to be careful in what they say about politics, ranging from 43% of those with post-secondary qualifications to 53% of those with no formal education. Similarly, the economically best-off respondents<sup>1</sup> are less likely than their poorer counterparts to say people have to be careful in talking about politics.

**Figure 5: Caution in political speech | by socio-demographic group | Tunisia | 2018**



**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”)*

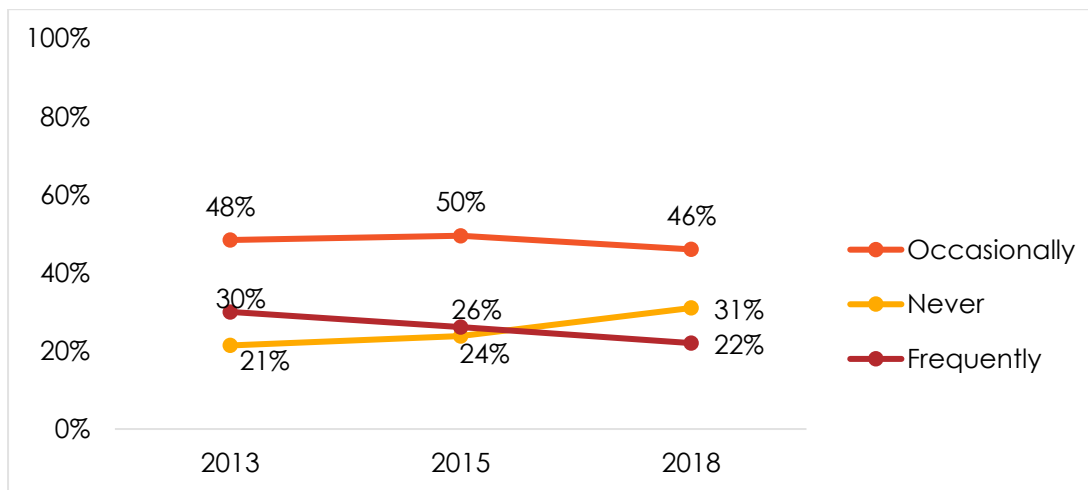
<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer’s Lived Poverty Index (LPI) measures respondents’ levels of material deprivation by asking how often they or their families went without basic necessities (enough food, enough water, medical care, enough cooking fuel, and a cash income) during the preceding year. For more on lived poverty, see Mattes, Dulani, & Gyimah-Boadi (2016).

Differences also emerge across regions in Tunisia. While majorities of respondents in the North West (56%), Center West (54%), and South West (50%) say that people must be careful in what they say about politics, fewer than half of residents in other regions agree.

### Political and civic engagement

More than two-thirds of Tunisians say they occasionally (46%) or “frequently” (22%) discuss politics with friends and family. But the proportion who say they “never” talk about politics has increased from 21% in 2013 to 31% in 2018 (Figure 6).

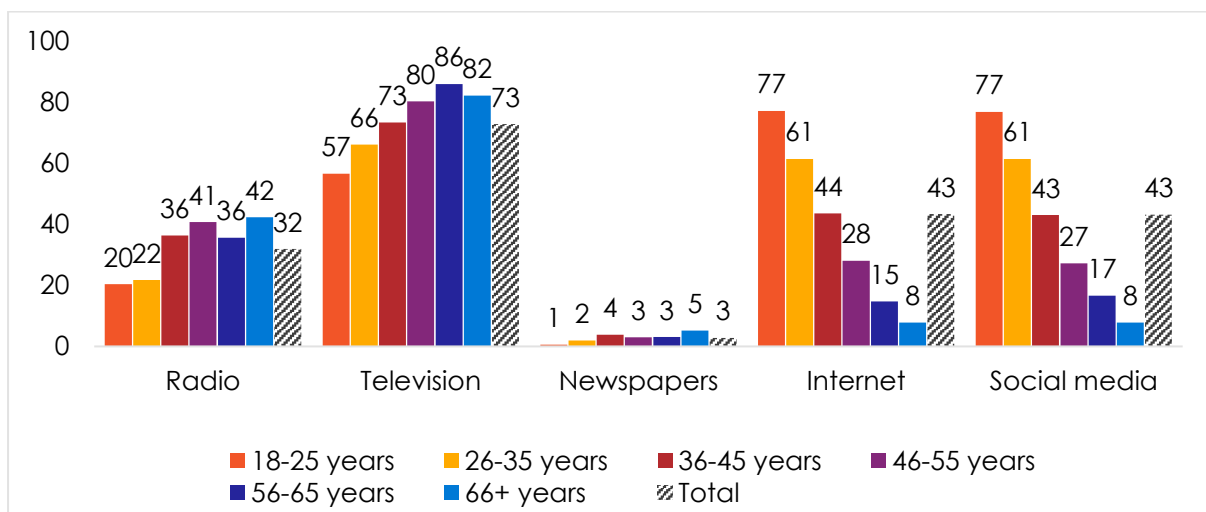
**Figure 6: How often discuss politics | Tunisia | 2013-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters?

Most Tunisians stay on top of the news via television; 73% say they get TV news every day. The Internet (43%) and social media (43%) surpass the radio (32%) and newspapers (3%) as daily news sources among Tunisians. This is especially true among younger Tunisians: More than three-fourths (77%) of 18- to 25-year-olds say they get news from the Internet and social media every day – about three times as many as among the cohort above age 45 (Figure 7).

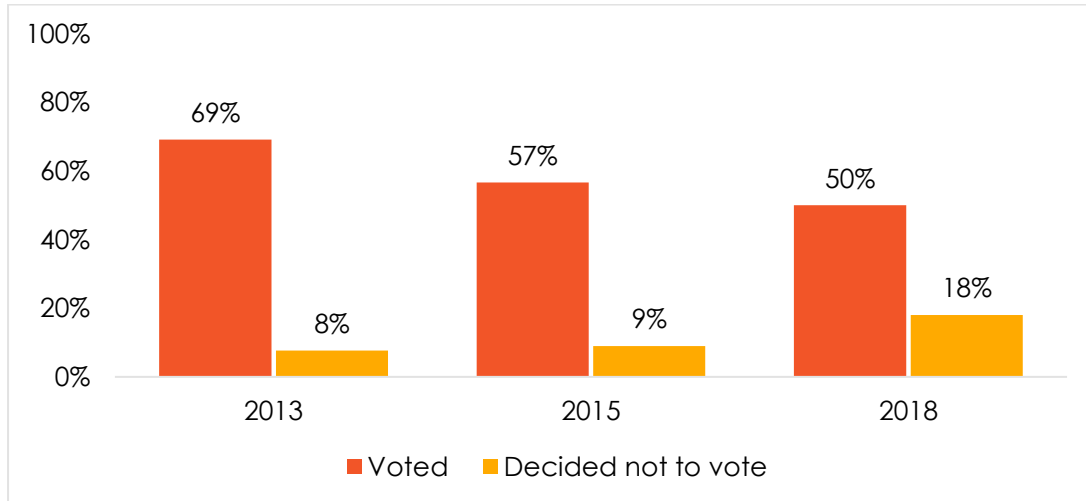
**Figure 7: Daily use of media for news (%) | by age group | Tunisia | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources? (% who say “every day”)

While elections are the most obvious means by which citizens engage in the political process, the proportion of Tunisians who report voting in the most recent national election has been declining, from 69% in the 2013 survey to 50% in 2018. Meanwhile, the share of respondents who say they decided not to vote more than doubled, from 8% to 18% (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Voting in the most recent national election | Tunisia | 2013-2018**

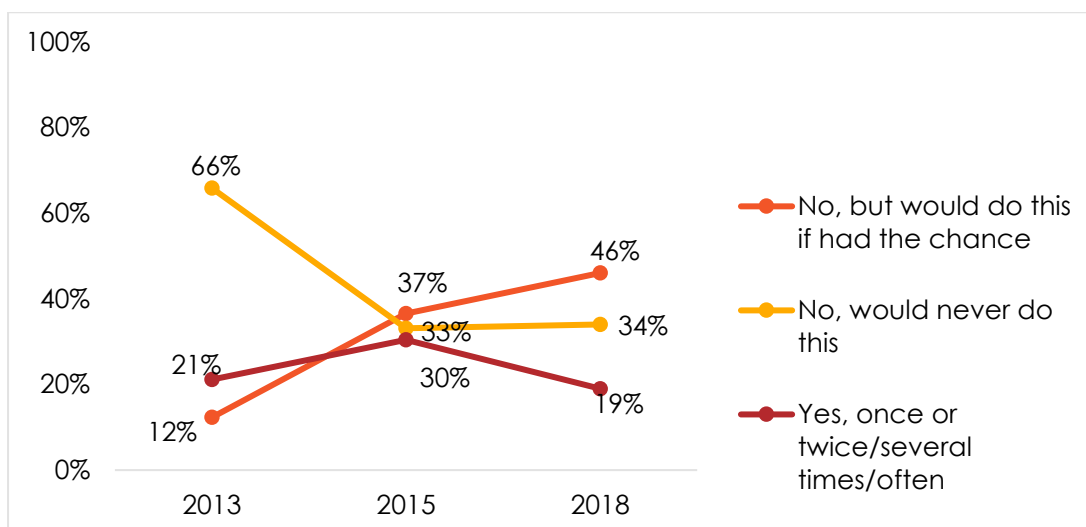


**Respondents were asked:** Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent national election in [20xx], which of the following statements is true for you?

When it comes to other forms of political action, only small minorities of Tunisians say they joined others to raise an issue or participated in a protest during the previous year, but increasing numbers say they would take such action if they had the chance.

One in five respondents (19%) say they got together with others to raise an issue during the preceding 12 months, about the same proportion as in 2013. But the share of respondents who express a willingness to join with others if they “had the chance” almost quadrupled over the same time period, from 12% to 46% (Figure 9).

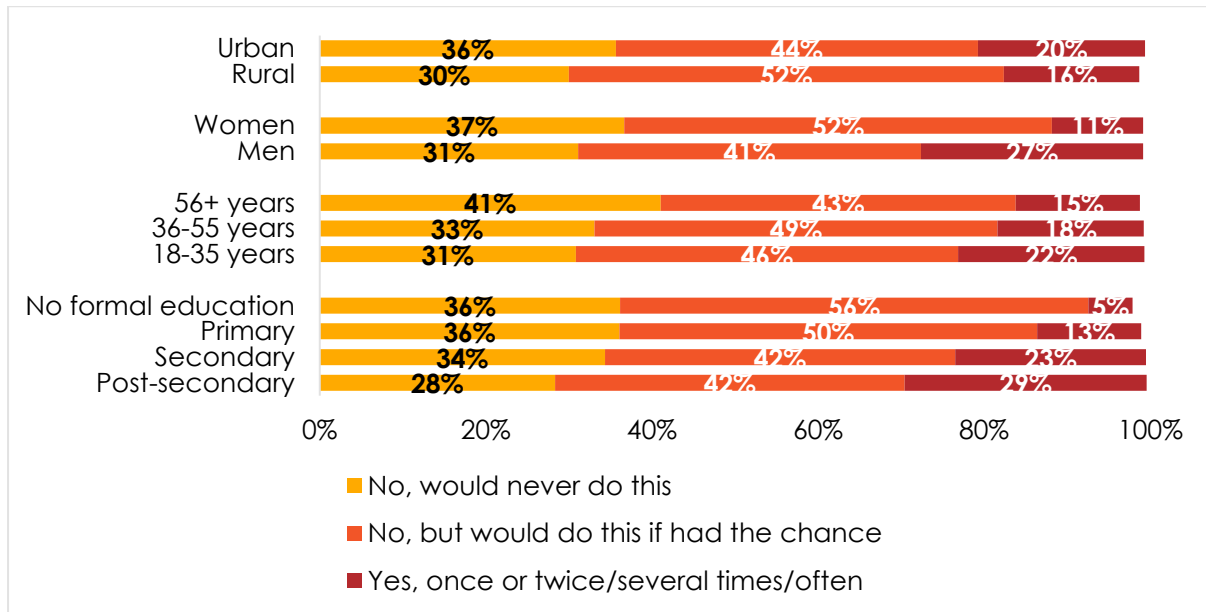
**Figure 9: Joined others to raise an issue | Tunisia | 2013-2018**



**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?

Rural residents, men, younger Tunisians, and those with higher levels of education are more likely to say they joined others to raise an issue or would do so if they had the chance. In terms of action during the previous year, men (27%) and citizens with post-secondary education (29%) are considerably more likely to have gotten together with others to raise an issue than women or less-educated respondents (Figure 10).

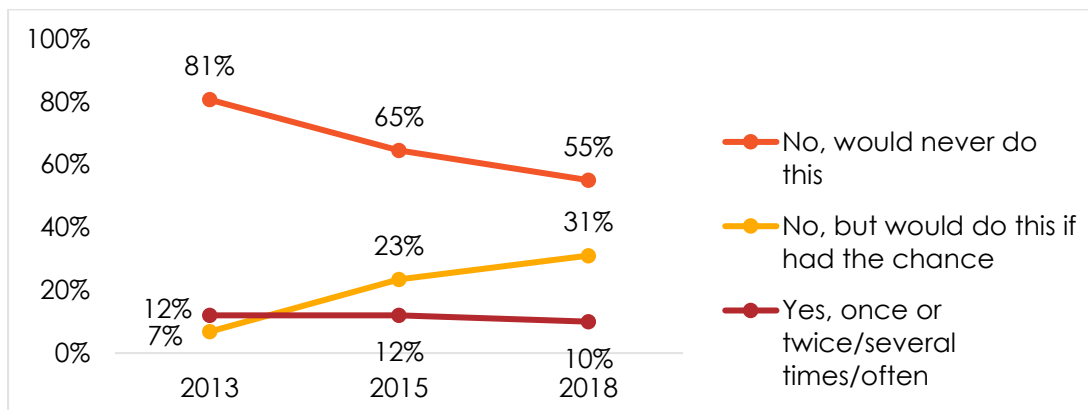
**Figure 10: Joined others to raise an issue** | by socio-demographic group | Tunisia | 2018



**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?

Similarly, while only one in 10 Tunisians (10%) say they participated in a demonstration or protest march during the 12 months preceding the survey, the share who say they would do so if they had the chance grew more than fourfold between 2013 and 2018, from 7% to 31% (Figure 11).

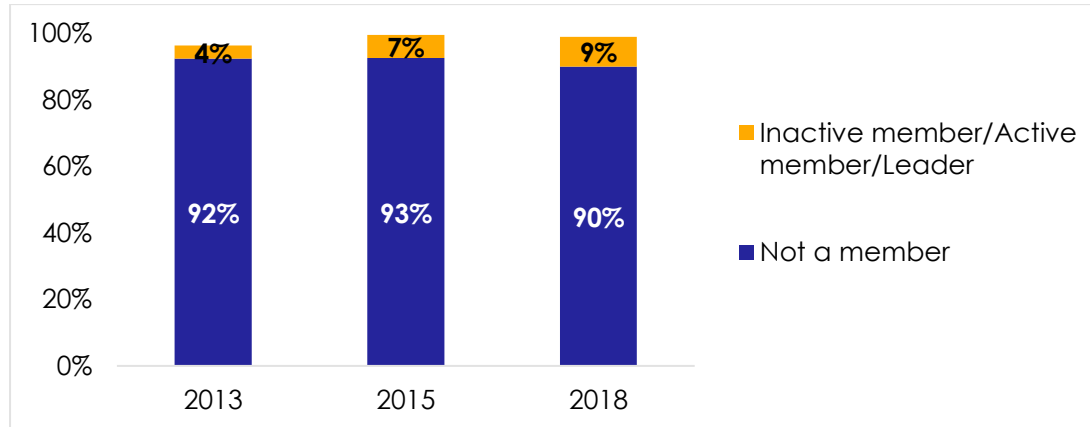
**Figure 11: Attended a demonstration or protest march** | Tunisia | 2013-2018



**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?

Fewer than one in 10 Tunisians (9%) say they are members of a voluntary (other than religious) association or community group, a 5-percentage-point increase from 2013 (Figure 12).

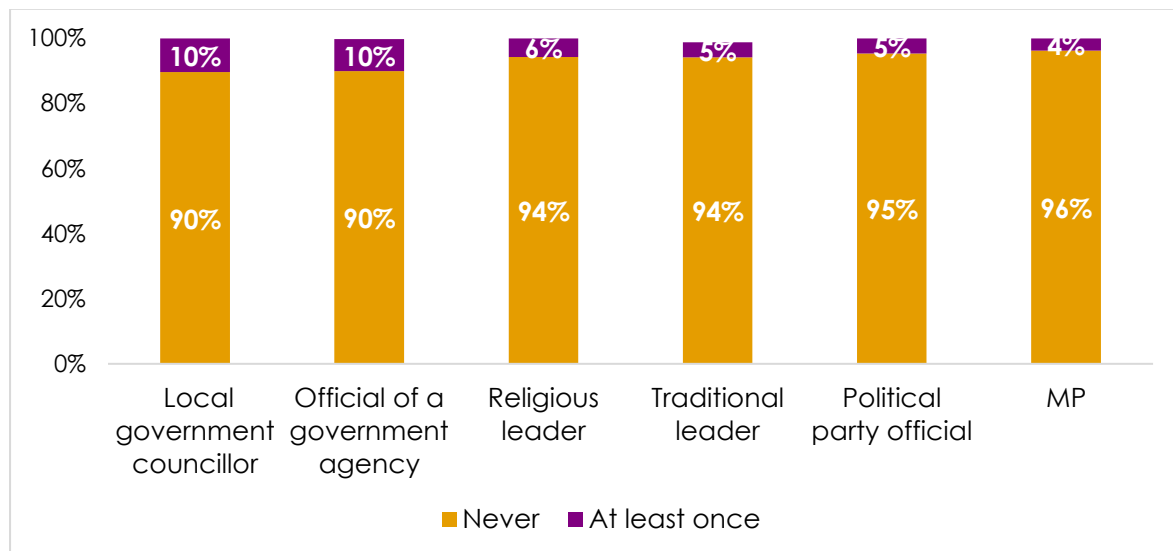
**Figure 12: Membership in voluntary or community group | Tunisia | 2013-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: A voluntary (other than religious) association or community group?

Moreover, few Tunisians report having contacted their leaders or officials to discuss a problem or share their views. One in 10 say they contacted a local government councillor or government agency official during the year preceding the survey, while only about one in 20 report having contacted a religious or traditional leader, political party official, or member of Parliament (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Contacted officials and leaders | Tunisia | 2018**



**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?

## Conclusion

Nine years after their democratic revolution, a majority of Tunisians perceive freedoms to have improved compared to the recent past. Most Tunisians discuss politics and get daily news from television or, especially among younger citizens, the Internet and social media.



Even so, survey findings suggest limited citizen engagement. A growing proportion of Tunisians feel they have to be careful about what they say about politics, and electoral participation has declined over the past five years. Membership in civic groups is low, and few citizens contact leaders or officials to discuss a problem or share their views.

While a growing number of Tunisians express a willingness, in principle, to join others to raise an issue or to participate in a protest, survey findings suggest considerable room for strengthening democratic engagement through citizen action.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan survey research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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