Confronting threats to civic spaces

Final report

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Executive summary

Civic freedoms, including freedom of the press and of association, are central to liberal democracy. However, publics are often divided in their support for such freedoms, particularly when they see rights to share messages and organize as causing potential harms to society. Further, politicians often stoke or take advantage of such fears to squelch potential challenges.

Recent Afrobarometer surveys have shown worrying trends in this area, with significant declines over the past decade in popular support for freedoms to join organizations and for media to operate. The Confronting Threats to Civic Spaces project is intended to determine the underpinnings of support for freedoms of association and the media on the African continent.

What explains why some Africans are more supportive of civic freedoms than others? This project begins with hypotheses, developed from reviews of existing literature and interviews with African experts working in these areas. We group these nine hypotheses into three families: perceived threats to order, the public good, and national sovereignty; partisanship and polarization; and concerns about democracy.

We test these hypotheses with data from a variety of existing and original sources, both large-*N* and small-*N*, and observational and experimental. Sources include Round 8 Afrobarometer data from 34 countries; special phone surveys, with an embedded conjoint survey experiment, in four countries (Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda); focus group discussions in those four countries; and an online survey of media experts (Nigeria).

Perceived threats to order, the public good, and national sovereignty

- On concerns about <u>violence</u>, we find:
  - People want media outlets associated with armed groups to be dealt with *harshly*.
  - Those concerned about violence are actually *more supportive* of civic freedoms, suggesting they see openness, and not clampdowns, as antidotes.
- On concerns about <u>hate speech</u>, we find:
  - *Broad support* for government limitations on hate speech.
  - *No evidence* these concerns are driving calls for broader limits on civic freedoms.
- On concerns about <u>false information</u>, we find:
  - *Broad support* for government limitations on false information.
  - *No evidence* these concerns are driving calls for broader limits on civic freedoms.
  - False information is a relatively *low-priority* concern.
- On concerns about <u>foreign influence</u>, we find:
  - People who see foreign influence as excessive are *more likely* to call for limits on civic spaces.
  - *No evidence* that people want harsher limits on foreign-owned media, however, except in Côte d'Ivoire.

Partisanship and polarization

- On <u>political leanings</u>, we find:
  - Government supporters are *much more likely* to support restrictions on civic spaces than opposition supporters are.

    - *No evidence* that people are simply following government leaders' calls for restrictions, however. In our experiment, presidents calling for restrictions on media are *no more persuasive* than independent agencies are.
- On partisan bias, we find:
    - *Widespread concerns* about partisan bias in CSOs and media.
    - *Limited evidence*, however, that these concerns drive support for limits on civic spaces.
- On partisan polarization, we find:
    - Among ruling party supporters, higher partisan trust gaps are associated with *more calls to restrict civic spaces*.

Democratic rights and participation

- On perceptions of freedom, we find:
    - Those who perceive freedoms to join associations as protected are *more likely* to support those freedoms.
    - Those who perceive media freedoms as protected are *less likely* to support those freedoms.
- On commitment to democracy, we find:
    - People who support democracy are *more supportive* of civic freedoms generally.
    - People who support democracy are also *more likely* to call for censorship of false information and hate speech specifically.
- On political engagement, we find:
    - People who are more engaged in politics and access news more frequently are generally *more supportive* of civic freedoms.

Our findings suggest a complex picture of popular attitudes about civic freedoms in Africa; there is no simple explanation for why some people support these freedoms more than others. However, we highlight four key takeaways:

1) Support for restrictions on media and associational life is highly situational. While people are broadly supportive of limits to hate speech, false information, and calls to violence, this does not necessarily mean they want to give governments broad discretion to limit civic freedoms more generally.
2) Those who support limits to civic spaces are not just following leaders' arguments. Africans have their own complex feelings about civic spaces; a call by a president is not enough on its own to drive public sentiment significantly.
3) Polarization is inimical to civic freedoms. As government supporters trust their own group more and the opposition less, they are more open to limiting civic spaces, possibly to squelch opponents.
4) People do not necessarily see limits to civic spaces, such as censorship of hate speech and misinformation, as anti-democratic. Rather, they might see it as essential to protect liberal democracy.

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1. Democracy and civic spaces

Democracy requires more than just elections. This is obvious in an era in which nearly every country, from Finland and New Zealand to North Korea and Syria, regularly holds legislative or executive elections. To characterize regimes as "democratic," the playing field in those elections must be level, with no party or candidate having a systematic advantage in their attempts to woo voters (Levitsky and Way 2010). In practice, this means that competitors must all be able to do things like access mass media, mobilize the electorate during campaigns and on election days, and trust that vote-counting processes will be conducted fairly. This obviously does not hold in many contexts, where ruling parties or dictators engineer results and allow minimal popular threats to their power.

Further, most scholars argue that competitive elections are not the only *sine qua non* for democracy (Dahl 2008). Rather, citizens must also be able to enjoy basic freedoms, particularly around expression and association, at all times, not just around polling day. Media and organizations must be able to collect and disseminate information to these citizens, without undue interference from powerful actors. Without these rights – of association, expression, and the press – citizens' abilities to hold governments accountable, especially between elections, will be constrained. Zakaria (1997) refers to such regimes, which hold regular elections yet do not guarantee these individual-level rights, as "illiberal democracies." Some have called such arrangements an "oxymoron," arguing that the free and fair electoral competition necessary to categorize a country as "democratic" in the first place is impossible if basic rights are not also guaranteed (Sadurski 2019).

Attacks on these basic rights have contributed to the general decline in democratic performance worldwide. In each of the last 16 years, the global democracy watchdog Freedom House has documented a general trend of democratic backsliding, with more countries seeing declines – rather than improvements – in their levels of democracy, and the number of countries deemed "free" decreasing (Freedom House 2022). In Africa, the "Third Wave" of democratization in the early to mid-1990s saw personalist, military, and *de jure* single-party dictatorships giving way to multiparty systems (Bratton and van de Walle 1997). Between 1990 and 2022, the proportion of African countries Freedom House considered "not free" declined, from 60% to 44%. However, the majority of those countries moving out of the "not free" category ended up in the "partly free" category, due to continued problems of uneven electoral playing fields, hyper-powered executives, limited government transparency, and other factors. "Partly free" countries now constitute 41% of regimes in Africa, up from 32% in 1990. The proportion of "free" countries has only increased slightly, from 9% in 1990 to 15% in 2022. Rather, the last 15 years have seen democratic backsliding across the continent, in countries such as Benin, Guinea, and Mali.

1.1. The state of civic spaces in Africa

Civic freedoms focus on individuals' rights to organize and express themselves in ways that enable them to participate in the shaping of their political and social environments. Specifically, individuals must be able to associate, assemble, and express themselves without significant barriers; these freedoms are among those enumerated in the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. With specific reference to Africa, these rights are enshrined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, which went into effect under the aegis of the Organisation of African Unity in October 1986. Also known as the Banjul Charter, the instrument cites freedoms of

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association (Article 10), assembly (Article 11), and information and expression (Article 9).[1] In exercising these freedoms, individuals may participate in organizations (i.e. freedom of association) and produce and consume content disseminated over mass media (i.e. freedom of the press). Basic guarantees of these rights are essential for modern conceptualizations of democracy to work. As Jide Ojo, a columnist with Nigeria's *Punch* newspaper and a TV host, told us, civil society and the media "are the pillars that have made this democracy endure."[2]

On the positive side of the ledger, there have been significant gains in recent years in Africa. Many of the key informants interviewed for this project identified recent apparent successes for civil society organizations (CSOs), social movements, and individuals and groups using media to pressure for reforms and social change. Dr. Freedom Onuoha, a political scientist at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, argued that, in the wake of the 2020 protests against Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which had a long-standing reputation for abusing civilians, government politicians increasingly feared the power of associational life and social media. "[Y]ou could then see that those [the government] that felt that the action would undermine their own interests and influence would then be in opposition to civil space. And that is what really played out."[3]

Further, digital media show potential to flatten power imbalances between the governed and governors. "Twitter," as Kenyan lawyer Francis Aywa, who works on democratic-development issues, put it, "is a platform where you can speak truth to power. Anonymity...can be a useful tool to give courage to those who cannot face power directly."[4] Nigerian disability rights activist David Anyaele put it similarly, describing social media "as a tool for social mobilization, for education, for timely information ... as a platform for anti-corruption activities. … Social media is the fastest tool you can use to explain yourself. When the mainstream media cannot carry your story, you can share your story by yourself. And it will get to a wide audience."[5] And Prof. Jill Cottrell Ghai of the Katiba Institute, which conducts civic education about the Kenyan constitution, put it succinctly: "Social media has given people an opportunity to express themselves unlike before."[6]

On the other hand, there are growing concerns about an erosion of civic spaces in Africa.[7] In Jide Ojo's assessment, "the civic space in Nigeria … is shrinking like Lake Chad. You know the way that Lake Chad has shrunk from its initial size to less than one-tenth of the size now? That is the way it is shrinking."[8]

[1] The charter established the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is based in Banjul. In 2019, the Commission adopted the Declaration of Principles of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, which, among other things, addressed those Article 9 rights and updated considerations for the digital age.

[2] Interview with Jide Ojo (4 July 2021).

[3] Interview with Dr. Freedom Onuoha (4 August 2021).

[4] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

[5] Interview with David Anyaele (8 August 2021).

[6] Interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021).

[7] Even more worryingly, closure of civic spaces is often more serious at local levels, which receive less focus from international observers, and where media and civil society are often less developed. As Jide Ojo told us, with respect to Nigeria, "people don't even get to know about this repressive action of some of the governments in many of the states." Interview with Jide Ojo (4 July 2021).

[8] Interview with Jide Ojo (4 July 2021).

David Anyaele agreed: "The civic space in Nigeria is shrinking." He placed blame squarely on the government:

> *[T]he state perceives civil society groups as their enemies as such. They use different tricks and instruments to stiffen their existence. There are different instruments that have been raised to engage the activities of civil society groups. During every sitting, we will see one lawmaker proposing one restriction or the other in order to clamp down on civil society groups. Sometimes they end up duplicating existing legislations. And you see that any time citizens revolt against the state, the state links it to civil society groups, and they try every other means to make sure that they clamp on that.*[9]

While many argue that regulations are necessary to limit organizations and media from criminality or other activities that might undermine national interests and the public good, there is the very real threat that such powers, as exercised, will shrink civic spaces and concentrate power in governments' hands. According to a Ugandan working in this space, "Implementers of the law tend to confuse regulation with control."[10]

In many ways, the latest crackdowns on civic freedoms are especially pernicious because they are done with a veneer of legalism. While brute force–in the form of violence against protesters and journalists, and attacks on the facilities of media houses or CSOs' facilities–is used, recent clampdowns are more likely to come in the form of onerous fines or registration fees and complex, dilatory procedures for registration, licensing, and renewal. As Bentuplex Media presenter Stanley Bentu told us, "What is disturbing about the recent trends [in Nigeria] is that there have been several attempts to find some legal backing to actions of government against the media."[11] Government restrictions are likely to worsen during certain periods, particularly those in which the government perceives itself to be vulnerable, such as around elections[12] or protests. And in many instances, application of the law toward media and CSOs is selective.[13] Nathalie Kouakou, of the Ivoirian NGO *Vivre Sans Violence*, told us, "*les lois sont cosmétiques*."[14]

In the media space, regulatory bodies, including *La Haute Autorité de la Communication Audivisuelle* of Côte d'Ivoire, Communications Authority of Kenya, Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Nigerian Press Council (NPC), Uganda Communications Commission, among many others, ostensibly exist to ensure professionalism among journalists and others in media, combat disinformation and hate speech, and prevent the dissemination of information that might be counter to the national interests. However, while these are laudable goals, these bodies are often politicized and/or controlled by incumbent governments, and their rules – and the enforcement of those rules – can be arbitrary or biased against the opposition and independent voices. For example, numerous experts we interviewed cited severe bias in how Nigerian media outlets, especially in radio, were licensed and regulated by the NBC and NPC, which are stacked with pro-government appointees; outlets considered too critical of the government or close to the opposition risk harsh fines, re-licensing hurdles, and even government-imposed shutdowns. Edetaen Ojo, executive director of Media Rights Agenda, characterized these bodies as existing mainly to "control", not regulate, the media space.[15] Across the continent, Bernard Tabaire, co-founder of the Uganda-based African Centre for

[9] Interview with David Anyaele (8 August 2021).

[10] Interview with [anonymous].

[11] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

[12] Interview with Bernard Tabaire (24 August 2021); interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021).

[13] Interview with Eriasa Mukiibi Sserunjoji (17 August 2021).

[14] Interview with Nathalie Kouakou (20 July 2021).

[15] Interview with Edetaen Ojo (15 March 2022).

Media Excellence and a columnist for the independent *Daily Monitor*, used hauntingly identical language: Governments are "more interested in control than regulation."[16] In Nigeria, the only focus country of this project to have experienced the defeat of an elected presidential incumbent in the last decade, the opposition's standing to complain about such biases is limited by the fact that, when in government, its appointed bureaucrats behaved similarly.[17] And, in an online survey of Nigerian media practitioners and experts conducted for this project (*N*=151), 63% said government regulations contribute "a great deal" to challenges for media in their country.[18] Overall, only 3% said media are "completely free" to "report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government"; 52% said they were "not very free," and 12% "not free at all."[19]

Similar bodies exist to regulate the CSO space. For example, in Uganda, the 2016 NGO Act established the National Bureau for CSOs, which is responsible for registering, regulating, inspecting, monitoring, and overseeing all such organizations in the country. These regulations have squeezed CSOs in at least two ways. First, merely establishing a legally recognized CSO is cumbersome and expensive, which dissuades activism and shrinks the civic space in Uganda. According to Charity Ahimbisibwe, national coordinator of the Citizens Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda (CCEDU), "The process of registration is hectic and tiring, such as acquiring a license, one requires permission from the Regional Collaboration Centre (RCC), District Internal Security Officer (DISO), town clerk, the time for approval with tendencies of red tape."[20] Further, even when one has established a CSO, ongoing reporting requirements can be onerous. "The legal framework makes it difficult to operate," Charity Ahimbisibwe told us. "The reporting structure about CSO work is unnecessary, with so many offices dealing with the same issue." Further, she reported that her organization, the CCEDU, had received warnings from the government when it had pointed out flaws in the electoral process.[21]

Second, these registering and reporting requirements – and government's rights to oversee CSO activities – provide many opportunities for governments to place barriers to – some might say to harass – and even to shut down CSOs for myriad reasons. Legal statutes enable governments to claim that such moves are legitimate and unbiased, while such moves are typically justified as being in the public interest. However, the fact that organizations working on issues such as human rights, democracy promotion, and accountability seem to be disproportionately targeted, and that restrictions seem especially likely to be enforced around elections and other potential periods of vulnerability for incumbents, frequently makes the political logic of clampdowns obvious. Those working in less obviously political areas, such as promoting community development, are less likely to be targeted. Further, organizations that frequently cooperate with state agencies and bureaucrats, such as those that provide services to poor communities, and others, like professional associations, that see themselves as apolitical and therefore not likely to be targeted by regulators engaging in selective enforcement, are more

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[16] Interview with Bernard Tabire (24 August 2021).

[17] Interview with Dr. Akin Akingbulu (14 March 2022).

[18] 22% said they create "a moderate amount of challenges," while 8% said "a little" and 7% "not at all" (1% didn't know). The most widely cited contributor to challenges for media was lack of resources (81% "a great deal"), followed by threats and intimidation from politicians (72%), access to information from the government (65%), insufficient training and mentorship for media professionals (64%), threats and intimidation from armed groups (55%), too much competition from various media sources (32%), lack of interest from the public (24%), and threats and intimidation from everyday citizens (19%).

[19] 32% said they were "somewhat free," and 1% didn't know.

[20] Interview with Charity Ahimbisibwe (17 August 2021).

[21] Interview with Charity Ahimbisibwe (17 August 2021).

likely to acquiesce to new government restrictions on civic spaces.[22] Prof. Jill Cottrell Ghai describes a similar dynamic in Kenya: "Civil society organizations at times can oppose the government and at times they don't, because they will be accused of being biased," thereby challenging their ability to collaborate with government in areas of mutual interest.[23]

1.2. The importance of mass support for civic freedoms

Key democratic institutions, such as freedoms of association and the media, are clearly under threat across Africa. In attempting to explain why democratic institutions take hold in some countries and not others, scholars long focused on elites' commitments to democratic values (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 2013; Rustow 1970; Weingast 1997). If those in government and opposition do not adhere to basic democratic norms, such thinking goes, the bargains that underpin democracy will quickly break down. Certainly, the current era of democratic backsliding has laid bare many elites' lack of commitment to democratic norms, whether through side-stepping presidential term limits in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, the Republic of the Congo, Togo, Uganda, and elsewhere (Siegle and Cook 2021), launching unconstitutional transfers of power in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Zimbabwe (Obiagu 2021), or placing new restrictions on media actors and civil society in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Uganda (Conroy-Krutz 2020).

However, a broad literature has also focused on the importance of mass support for such values, including in Africa (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004). When citizens embrace democratic freedoms – broadly, consistently, and without consideration of the partisan, ethnic, or religious identity of rights-seeking groups – powerful actors will be so constrained that, even if they do not personally adhere to the norms and would find it strategically beneficial to violate them, they do not consider overstepping well-established bounds (Diamond 1999).

There are at least two levels for measuring popular support for democracy. First, we can consider individuals' support for democracy as a general regime type, or what social scientists term "diffuse regime support" (Easton 1967).[24] In this area, African countries perform reasonably well. In an analysis of results from the first batch of Afrobarometer surveys conducted for Round 8 (in 2019-21), Gyimah-Boadi, Logan, and Sanny (2021) find that the vast majority of Africans (72%) support democracy, although this number is down slightly (4 points) since 2011-13. Further, nearly half (47%) are what they call "strong democrats," in that they not only support democracy, but also reject possible authoritarian alternatives (i.e. strong-man, military, and single-party rule).

At a second level, we can examine individuals' support for some of the basic underpinnings of liberal democracy, including basic civic freedoms. The idea that all individuals should enjoy certain rights, particularly around expression and association, is a fairly recent historical creation, and populations have not broadly supported these notions across time or space. Social scientists have devoted tremendous energy to mapping who supports which democratic freedoms, for whom, and under what conditions, and tracked how these sentiments have changed in a wide range of countries over time (Almond and Verba 1963; Norris 1999; Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Recent years have raised alarms in Africa. Not only is general support for democracy down slightly across the continent (Gyimah-Boadi, Logan, and Sanny 2021), but Afrobarometer surveys have captured apparent declines in popular support for a number of key democratic freedoms. Notably, Africans generally seem to support governments imposing more restrictions on civic

[22] Interview with Nicholas Opiyo (16 August 2021); interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021).

[23] Interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021).

[24] For examples of studies on diffuse support for democracy, see Booth and Seligson (2009), Bratton and Mattes (2001), Iyengar (1980), and Park and Shin (2006).

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spaces, including around civil society and the media. Studies using Afrobarometer data have found that support for freedoms of association and the media have slipped, sometimes substantially, in many countries (Logan and Penar 2019; Conroy-Krutz and Sanny 2019). Given the central importance of these civic freedoms to democracy, these are worrying developments. Stanley Bentu, a television and radio presenter with over two decades of experience in Nigeria's media, told us, with regard to threats to civic freedoms and democracy:

> *I think when you live in a society where a lot of people do not cherish and value democratic norms, if you have a lot of people who tend to be autocratic even starting at the family level, if you have fathers who do not like being challenged, if you have bosses who do not like being challenged, these cultures are taken into the government space...People's right to express themselves in such a manner has to be defended. So that culture is still evolving in the Nigerian public space.*[25]

1.3. Research question

What explains variation in support for civic freedoms at the individual level? In other words, why do some people oppose restrictions on civic freedoms, such as freedoms of association or the press, while others support them? In this report, we use available public opinion data from Afrobarometer, as well as observational and experimental data collected specifically for this project, to examine how various factors are related to individuals' support for civic freedoms. In doing so, we focus on demographic factors (e.g. individuals' education, gender, and lived poverty), as well as context-specific factors, such as elites' attacks on associations and media; perceived threats to national sovereignty; legacies of violence, discrimination, and national disunity; political and social polarization; and concerns over mis/disinformation. Simply, we explore whether and how support for civic freedoms changes given concerns over various types of problems that many associate with unfettered associational life and mass media.

Answering this question might be essential to reverse some of the anti-democratic trends on display across the world, including in Africa. When popular support for civic freedoms is low, incumbent governments might see more opportunities to place restrictions on CSOs and the media. These limits will, in turn, make it more difficult for oppositions to compete for votes and limit organizations' and citizens' abilities to hold governments accountable. Strong public opinion in favor of democracy and associated civic freedoms is not a guarantor of a democratic regime, but popular opposition to curbs could constrain actual or would-be autocrats. Greater understanding of the factors that contribute to popular skepticism about civic freedoms is important for those designing programs and messaging designed to promote support for these freedoms.

1.4. Outline and data sources

This report proceeds as follows. First, we discuss current levels of popular support for civic freedoms, as measured in recent Afrobarometer surveys conducted across the continent. Specifically, we examine levels of support for government restrictions on media and associational life, and how popular attitudes vary across countries and, importantly, over time.

Following that, we discuss possible explanations for popular attitudes about civic spaces in Africa. Drawing on literature on the topic and interviews with almost 25 key informants working in and studying civic spaces, we identify nine primary hypotheses in three areas to explain why some individuals declare support for government restrictions on media and civil society in their countries, while others oppose such moves.

[25] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

We test these hypotheses using a range of different types of quantitative and qualitative data First, our study draws on Afrobarometer data from all 34 countries included in Round 8 of the survey.[26] Next, we focus more closely on popular support for civic space in four countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. These countries were selected for a number of reasons. First, they are diverse in terms of region, with Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria in West Africa, and Kenya and Uganda in East Africa, and in colonial and linguistic background, with Côte d'Ivoire being a former French colony, and Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda being former British ones. They are also politically different from one another. While all have multiparty systems that have held regular elections since at least 2010, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Nigeria have had at least one case of presidential turnover via elections since the return to multipartyism,[27] while Uganda has never experienced such change in its history.[28] Perhaps most importantly, however, these four countries all have seen some moves by governments in recent years to limit civic spaces, while popular sentiments have followed varied paths.

In focusing on these four countries, we go beyond the existing Afrobarometer surveys and collect original data on popular support for media freedoms. First, we conducted virtual and face-to-face interviews with experts on civic spaces in all four countries to inform hypothesis development and then, in the case of Nigeria, after other types of data collection, to better understand results. Second, in Nigeria, we also conducted a closed-ended online survey of 151 practitioners in and experts on the media space.

Third, we conducted phone surveys, with at least 1,200 respondents in each country, with questions designed specifically to help us test many of our hypotheses. Questions in these phone surveys were designed to go beyond existing Afrobarometer data, by asking more-detailed questions on the performance of CSOs and media in respondents' respective countries, and by collecting data on topics such as bias, hate speech, and foreign involvement in civic spaces that were not available in pre-existing Afrobarometer data but were necessary to test hypotheses.

Further, these phone surveys went beyond the typical observational data collected by Afrobarometer and included embedded experiments designed to help identify factors that drive support for or opposition to civic freedoms.[29] Participants in these phone surveys were presented with different vignettes about hypothetical radio stations that had been accused of committing various infractions and asked what the government's response should be. The infractions, which included failure to pay taxes, propagation of hate speech, support for violent groups, propagation of lies about public health issues or political candidates, and partisan bias, varied randomly across vignettes, as did other aspects of the radio station (i.e. the source of funding) and the identity of the entity making the accusation (i.e. the government, the opposition, or an independent monitoring group). This conjoint experimental design allows us to gauge citizens' support for media freedoms under varied scenarios and thereby test our hypotheses. Further, since we as researchers controlled the details of the various scenarios, we are able to identify more clearly what factors *cause* changes in support for media freedoms; with observational data, we generally cannot rule out the possibility that individuals' pre-existing levels of support for media freedom drive other factors (e.g. support for the president or ruling

[26] Countries and fieldwork dates are presented in Appendix A.

[27] Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 election was marked by the then-incumbent's refusal to accept defeat, followed by a civil war that resulted in his ouster.

[28] President Yoweri Museveni, who seized power following a civil war in 1986, has consistently won re-election in contests often heavily skewed against the opposition.

[29] Because of sample size limitations, this experimental component focuses solely on support for media freedom, rather than freedom surrounding associational life.

party), rather than vice versa. We argue that this design marks an important innovation in the study of popular support for civic freedoms.

Finally, we conducted multiple focus group discussions in each of the four focus countries, to gather more in-depth, qualitative data on citizens' perceptions about associational life and media in their countries, and the proper role of government in regulating these spaces. While we do not claim that these discussions, given their limited number, are representative of citizen opinions in any of the four focus countries, the open-ended nature of the interactions allows us to better understand the results of our large-*N* data collection efforts. Further, despite significant contextual differences across the four countries, striking patterns emerge in responses.

2. Trajectories of public opinion on civic spaces in Africa

Afrobarometer, a pan-African, non-partisan research network, has been collecting public opinion data in Africa since 1999, when it conducted surveys in Botswana, Ghana, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. By 2001, it had completed a first round of surveys in six more countries: Lesotho, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda. Subsequent rounds were conducted approximately every three years, with a total of 39 sub-Saharan countries – representing more than 70% of the region's total population – eventually being surveyed at least once. Afrobarometer's regular surveys collect data through face-to-face interviews, in the language of the respondent's choice, with nationally representative samples yielding country-level results with margins of error of +/-2 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

While the project's focus on certain areas differs from round to round, questions to gauge regime orientations – namely, support for democracy and its alternatives, and support for basic freedoms and principles typically associated with democracy – have always been included. In fact, question wordings often remain consistent from round to round – with some exceptions – to enable tracking over time. Over the years, researchers have published dozens of books, peer-reviewed articles, and Afrobarometer papers using these data.

In 2019, researchers using Afrobarometer data published two policy papers that raised particular concerns about the state of popular support for civic spaces on the continent. Both drew on data from the project's seventh round, which was conducted between September 2016 and September 2018 in 34 countries,[30] with 45,823 respondents. The first focused on popular support for **freedoms of expression and association**.

In that paper, Carolyn Logan (Afrobarometer and Michigan State University) and Peter Penar (Davidson College) found that support for freedom of association was on a "steady decline" (Logan and Penar 2019, 2). Across the 20 countries where responses to the same question had been tracked over the previous decade, the number of people who agreed with the statement that people "*should be able to join any organization whether or not the government approves of it*" had decreased, from 66% in 2008/9 (Round 4) to 61% in 2016/18 (Round 7). Conversely, the number of people who agreed with the alternate statement – "*Government should be able to join any organization that goes against its policies*" – increased, from 29% to 35%.

[30] These countries included Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, São Tomé e Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Data are weighted to ensure national representativeness, but Africa-wide results reported are averages across countries, with all countries weighted equally.

In fact, of the 33 countries included in at least two survey rounds, two-thirds (22) saw some decline in support for freedom of association.[31] Support plummeted dramatically in Zimbabwe (-23 points), Liberia (-20), and Tunisia (-20), and seven other countries experienced double-digit declines – Côte d'Ivoire (-10), Guinea (-10), Kenya (-11), Cameroon (-14), Sierra Leone (-16), Uganda (-16), and Namibia (-18). Only eight countries bucked this trend, with round-to-round increases: Mauritius (+2), Madagascar (+5), Cabo Verde (+6), Malawi (+8), Lesotho (+9), Sudan (+10), São Tomé e Príncipe (+12), and Eswatini (+18).

Ultimately, majorities supported freedom of association in most (26) countries surveyed, with support highest in Gabon (90%), Senegal (84%), Madagascar (82%), and Togo (81%). But at the other end of the spectrum, fewer than four in 10 citizens supported the right in three countries: Tanzania (39%), Liberia (33%), and Sierra Leone (32%).

Thus, while support for freedom of association remains a majority position – across the continent and in most countries – trends are concerning, and large subsets of the population apparently remain skeptical of rights in this area.

In a second policy paper, Jeff Conroy-Krutz (Michigan State University) and Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny (Afrobarometer) found that popular support for **media freedoms** had been in general decline across the continent for nearly a decade (Conroy-Krutz and Sanny 2019). In 2011/13 (Round 5), a clear majority (56%) of respondents supported the media's "*right to publish any views and ideas without government control*," while only 39% agreed with the alternate statement stressing the government's "*right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society*." Among respondents in those same 31 countries, support for media freedom declined substantially by the end of the decade (i.e. 2016/18 (Round 7)), to just 46%. Meanwhile, support for government restrictions increased to nearly half (49%) of respondents, eclipsing the media-freedom position for the first time in Afrobarometer's history.

These declines were not limited to a handful of countries. Rather, 26 of 31 (84%) saw declines in support for media freedom over the last decade, ranging from small dips in countries like Togo (-1), Morocco (-3), and Zimbabwe (-5), to more than 20-point drops in four: Tunisia (-21), Uganda (-21), Cabo Verde (-27), and Tanzania (-33).

The findings in these reports raise two important concerns. First, popular support for key freedoms associated with liberal democracy – namely, the rights to association and of the press – seem to be wavering, if not in outright decline, generally across the African continent. Second, regardless of the trends, significant subsets of populations in nearly all African countries seem to be skeptical of – if not outright hostile to – these basic freedoms. Such individuals could constitute a base of support for authoritarian-inclined politicians seeking to place further limits on key liberal democratic freedoms, or block others' attempts to extend these rights. The apparent fact that the size of this subset of the population is growing across many countries should therefore be especially worrisome.

[31] For 20 countries (Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe), the comparison is between rounds 4 and 7. For 11 (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Guinea, Mauritius, Morocco, Niger, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Togo, and Tunisia), it is between rounds 5 and 7. And for two (Gabon and São Tomé e Príncipe), it is between rounds 6 and 7.

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3. Who supports civic freedoms?

Individuals could support or oppose civic freedoms for myriad reasons. Some of these might stem from positive or negative connotations individuals have when they think of organizations or media in their respective countries. For example, many Kenyans are reportedly skeptical of associations generally, because of high-profile cases in which purportedly pro-development groups have scammed citizens and donors.[32] If individuals think mainly of such negative connotations, they might be more likely to think that, when organizations and media operate without regulations, individuals and the society overall might suffer. Organizations and media operating freely might sow discord and division, leading to discrimination, economic and political instability, and violence. They might spread false information, or be tools for foreign actors to influence domestic politics. The extent to which individuals see these organizations and media as potentially threatening might depend on their own experiences with them (i.e. the types of organizations they see as active in their areas, the types of media they are exposed to) and other salient personal experiences (e.g. someone who has personally been targeted with discrimination because of membership in a particular group might be more supportive of government moves to limit hate speech in the media).

To complicate matters further, individuals' attitudes about what kinds of regulations on associational life and media are appropriate likely vary depending on the nature of the perceived threat. Some individuals will support the possibility of government curbs to associations and media in the name of limiting hate speech, but not for spreading health-related disinformation. Some might support limits for spreading certain kinds of false information, but not other kinds. And some might want to place strict limits on all organizations, yet not support any limits to media.

However, even if individuals see some potential challenges arising from free associational life and protected press freedoms, they might resist government-imposed limitations to civic spaces if they prioritize liberal democratic rights. In other words, they might hold that the greater threat comes from clamping down on individual rights than allowing some potentially problematic organizations and media content into the public space. Such attitudes might be particularly prevalent among those who have more experience with political engagement or who view freedoms as having recently been threatened in their country.

Finally, individuals might not independently have strong attitudes in favor of or against limits to civic spaces, either generally or with regard to specific organizations and media outlets. Rather, they might be heavily influenced by arguments they hear elsewhere, including from politicians, other national or local authority figures, or influential media personalities and organizations.

In short, individuals' attitudes about civic freedoms are likely influenced by myriad factors. Based on our review of the extant literature and discussions with over two dozen key informants, we identified nine possible hypotheses to explain individual-level variation in support for civic freedoms. We group these hypotheses in three areas, focusing on perceived threats from open civic spaces, partisanship and polarization's impacts on support for open civic spaces, and the interaction between general support for and engagement with democracy and attitudes about civic spaces. In addition, although we do not develop hypotheses specifically around such factors, we explore how different individual-level demographic factors—namely, education, lived poverty, age, urban/rural residence, and gender—are correlated with support for civic freedoms.

[32] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

3.1. Threat-focused determinants

As discussed previously, individuals might perceive unfettered associational life and media as presenting numerous threats, either to them personally, to their groups, or to the society, at large. We identify three potential threats: 1) promoting division, disorder, and conflict, 2) spreading false information, and 3) undermining national sovereignty. In these cases, individuals might accept state-imposed limitations as necessary evils. As Kenyan lawyer Francis Aywa told us, citizens often "trust the government to protect them against all things real and imagined, and hence accept the limitations" on civic spaces.[33] In a similar vein, Prof. Abigail Ogwezzy-Ndisika, a Nigerian academic expert on the media said that most see a "need to strike a balance," between open civic spaces and protecting the public good.[34]

3.1.1. Promoting division, disorder, and conflict

First, proponents of limitations to civic spaces have frequently argued that openness can undermine public order. These threats can take various forms. Most broadly, many may have general concerns "too much" freedom, however defined, can threaten the function of the state and lead to general disorder. Recent cases of mass protest followed by government collapse, violence, and instability, such as Egypt, Libya, and Sudan, loom large. "Their psychology," as Jide Ojo put it to us, "is that if they allow people too much freedom, it may lead to the loss of their government."[35]

Others might not think that open civic spaces will necessarily cause state collapse, but see threats to the functioning of the economy, their ability to earn a livelihood, or their normal way of life. Protest movements, which often require civil society backing and media attention to thrive, typically operate on the presumption that these threats pressure entrenched elites to implement reforms. However, they almost invariably will generate some backlash, which could, in turn, contribute to popular skepticism about civic freedoms, at least among some subset of the population. Ojo argues that this dynamic was at work in 2020 protests against SARS in Nigeria. While government initially tolerated #EndSARS protesters, it began a sometimes-violent crackdown when the movement grew and began threatening day-to-day life more seriously. According to Ojo:

> *They [#EndSARS protesters] started blocking the highways, making people miss their flights...And then at that point, the government thought it fit that they disperse the protesters...Of course, many ordinary citizens were already feeling the pinch. People could not access hospitals, and they could not even go to work. And those who went to work in the morning were not sure whether the road will be free for them to return home. So at that point in time the government did what they felt was the alternate way, which was to sponsor attacks on the protesters.*

Other concerns relate more specifically to division between partisan, ethnic, and religious groups. Associations might agitate for group-based rights, either for politically, economically, and socially disadvantaged groups, or to defend the positions of already-dominant groups. On a broader level, some might argue that the existence of any kind of association that advocates policy or change runs the risk of fomenting divisions, by exacerbating, highlighting, or creating

[33] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

[34] Interview with Abigail Ogwezzy-Ndisika (17 March 2022).

[35] Interview with Jide Ojo (4 July 2021).

differences between those supportive of and opposed to what is being advocated.[36] Individuals might fear that such openness leads to the proliferation of speech that threatens them and their families directly. As Dr. Freedom Onuoha put it, "People tend to fear...if the civil space is left unguarded and unregulated. We should not forget that the right of Mr. A begins and stops where Mr. B's right starts."[37]

Media are often critiqued similarly. Messages propagated on mass media can stoke divisions by providing space for the airing of group-based grievances and hate speech. Here, examples of media messages sowing division – and even violence – abound from some of the continent's costliest recent conflicts, ranging from Rwanda in 1994 (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014), Zaïre/Democratic Republic of the Congo in the late 1990s and beyond (Cotton 2010; BBC News 1998; Human Rights Watch 1998), and Kenya in 2007-8 (Abdi Ismail and Deane 2008; Mutahi and Kimari 2017; Njoroge, Kimani, and Kikech 2011), to the ongoing conflict in Cameroon (Abel 2019; Frère 2007, 171–90). Around elections, monitoring organizations like Ghana's National Media Commission and Kenya's National Cohesion and Integration Commission have documented cases of overt and coded hate speech, appeals to support particular parties on the basis of shared ethnic identity, and even "fighting words," or incitements to violence.

Broadcast media have been common conduits for these kinds of messages, with notable offenders including Rwanda's Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) (Chrétien 1995; Thompson 1999; Yanagizawa-Drott 2014); Cameroon's Radio Centre[38] and Radio Ngaoundéré (Frère 2007, 178); Zaïre/Democratic Republic of the Congo's Radio-Télévision Nationale Congolaise, Radio Liberté, and Voix du Patriote (Cotton 2010; BBC News 1998; Human Rights Watch 1998) and Kenya's Inooro FM, Kameme FM, Kass FM, and Radio Lake Victoria (Abdi Ismail and Deane 2008; Mutahi and Kimari 2017; Njoroge, Kimani, and Kikech 2011). Vision 4 Television used derogatory language against anglophone Cameroonians, including referring to them as "rats" and "terrorists," and even calling for the government to "exterminate" and "kill" them (Tientcheu 2018; Africa Times 2017; Barrach-Yousefi 2018). And in the earliest days of media liberalization, many print publications also propagated hate speech, with examples including Rwanda's anti-Tutsi *Kangura* (Chrétien 1995; Thompson 1999) and Cameroon's anti-Bamiléké *Elimbi* (Frère 2007, 177). However, in most countries, radio is likely more impactful on this front than print, given that it can cheaply reach a large number of people, many of whom are not comfortable with the Europe-originating *linguae francae* that television programming and print publications frequently prefer. Vernacular-language broadcasts also have the added benefit of being less noticeable to international observers[39] and of more obviously being targeted to an in-group of speakers, who often share the same ethnic identity.

Worryingly, these types of messages are increasingly migrating to digital spaces – including major social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, but also Internet message boards and SMSes – where they can spread even more quickly and surreptitiously (Schlein 2018; Cheeseman and Garbe 2020; Mutahi and Kimari 2017; Barrach-Yousefi 2018; Stanford Internet Observatory 2021; Cable and Huczok 2020).

For those ostensibly concerned about national unity, therefore, the solution might be to limit civic freedoms around associations and media that can seemingly promote division. This might not

[36] Such logic mimics the types of arguments made about political parties by leaders such as Tanzania's Julius Nyerere (1967) in early post-independence Africa and Uganda's Yoweri Museveni (1997).

[37] Interview with Dr. Freedom Onuoha (4 August 2021).

[38] Radio Centre's anti-Bamiléké broadcasts were so noxious that the station was nicknamed "Radio Sept-Collines," in an allusion to Rwanda's RTLM and Yaoundé's seven hills (Frère 2007, 178).

[39] As Samantha Power (2002) notes, however, international actors, including governments, are often all too aware of this type of speech leading into and during major crises, such as the Rwandan genocide.

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amount to the outright banning of all organizations or a return to the days of *de jure* state-controlled media monopolies (although some might indeed advocate such steps), but rather more intensive government oversight of organizations and media; enhanced licensing requirements; pre-authorization for meetings, protests, and publications; and harsher sanctions for perceived violations.[40]

In some cases, countries institute onerous requirements for CSOs, which can take months and significant resources to navigate. The Kenyan government, for example, claims that its CSO registration process, which can take 4-6 months, is necessary to weed out potential terrorism-supporting organizations. This puts a burden of proof on the organization to prove that it does not have malign intention, and organizations that work in areas deemed as threatening to incumbents, such as those focusing on human rights and accountability, are often singled out for delays, *vis-à-vis* those working in areas like health. As Francis Aywa, a lawyer working on democracy-promotion initiatives in Kenya, told us:

> *CSOs should be assumed to mean well until they prove otherwise. This [long registration process] is not what happens when one is setting up a business. The same should apply to CSOs, and it should not be so especially if they are human rights groups or have an intention of speaking truth to power. This makes operating in such environments difficult.*[41]

In Nigeria, a 2017 bill would have regulated organizations' funding and affiliations, controlled CSOs' assets, and required all to register with a NGO Regulatory Commission biennially (Carsten 2017). Sponsors argued that the Commission would enhance national security, making (reportedly unsubstantiated) arguments that some NGOs were supporting *Boko Haram*. With such a framing, opponents of the limits could be portrayed as weak on security issues at best, or terrorist sympathizers at worst. As one opponent of the bill wrote:

> *Admittedly, no sane Nigerian will listen to this concern expressed by a fine profession like the Nigerian military that works round the clock to protect the territorial integrity of the nation, without throwing his/her weight behind the lawmakers doing everything within the ambit of their power to help the military come out fine in their effort to secure the nation (Utomi 2019).*

Nigeria has seen similar moves on the media side. In January 2019, just weeks before presidential, legislative, and gubernatorial elections, security agents simultaneously raided the offices of the *Daily Trust* in Maiduguri and Lagos, seized computers, and arrested two journalists. Officials claimed the newspaper had "divulged classified military information" and undermined national security, in reaction to its reporting on the *Boko Haram* insurgency. After the raid, the military announced that it "had no intention of muzzling the press or jeopardizing press freedom," but that it could "not tolerate a situation where a publication would consistently side with terrorists and undermine our national institutions" (Searcey and Akinwotu 2019). The 2019 Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill in that country targeted hate speech (i.e. language that might "cause enmity or hatred towards a person or group of persons"), as well as statements that might "affect the security of any part of Nigeria" or "affect public public

[40] Of course, calls for government limits on civic spaces to combat hate speech must also grapple with the unfortunate reality that it is often governments themselves, or their allies, that are responsible for propagating such speech. In 1994, Cameroon Radio and Television, the national broadcaster, exhorted its listeners, in the Ewondo language of President Paul Biya's most important allies, "to beware the Bamiléké" (Frère 2007, 178). Public broadcasting in that country has long been accused of stoking anti-Bamiléké sentiments (Barrach-Yousefi 2018). And while RTLM was officially a privately owned station, the majority of its shareholders came from President Juvénal Habyarimana's region (Gulseth 2004), and the station even broadcast on the frequencies of the public Radio Rwanda for three hours each morning before the genocide began (McDoom 2021, 88).

[41] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

health, public safety or public finance." That Bill also limited sharing of messages that might "influence the outcome of an election." Proposed fines of 300,000 ₦ or three years' imprisonment for individuals, and 10 million ₦ for organizations, led many to critique the Bill as potentially chilling (Rotimi 2021). As Nigerian media personality Stanley Bentu told us:

> *[T]here is no need for the government to create a new law that gives them power to regulate what is said and done on social media. Because it will turn from who the right is given to decide what is hate speech and not. If the government is given the power to decide what is hate speech, or what rises to the degree of hate speech, and what is not, then the government has effectively been given the power to decide that critical views on them are hate speech.*[42]

Moves to couch limits on media in Ethiopia have used similar justifications. As the government launched a bloody war against the regional government of Tigray in 2020, it increasingly cracked down on media for reporting on the conflict, or for using banned terminology. In July 2021, for example, the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) briefly suspended the English-language *Addis Standard*, a website and monthly magazine, for "advanc[ing] the terrorist group's [the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)'s] agency." The outlet had run afoul of the EMA's earlier proscription against any reference to the "Tigray Defense Force" or the "TDF," which the government claimed risked "legitimizing a terrorist group" by presenting it as an arm of a representative, regional government. Several weeks earlier, 20 media staff from the Awlo Media Center and the YouTube-based Ethio-Forum were arrested, again for ostensibly supporting the TPLF (Scott 2021; VOA News 2021). These and other moves ended a relatively short opening in the media space, during which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's government released all imprisoned journalists (Dahir 2018).[43] Finally, many in government in Kenya increasingly questioned whether media could be trusted to openly report on security issues in the wake of terror attacks in Nairobi, at the Westgate shopping mall attack in 2013 and the Dusit D2 complex in 2019.[44]

While new restrictions and other government moves against individual organizations or media houses are frequently couched in language suggesting protection of national security as a motivating factor, skeptics argue the main motivation is quashing dissent and messages that could politically embarrass governments. As Professor Sabiti Makara of Makerere University argued, "It's very clear that the state is panicking because of political pressure we are having in this country" (Kiyonga 2020).

For example, in recent years, numerous prominent Ugandan CSOs have had their finances targeted, under the pretense that they are supporting terrorism.[45] As January 2021 general elections neared, the Financial Intelligence Authority (FIA) froze the accounts of four CSOs – the Uganda Women's Network, Uganda National NGO Forum, Women's International Peace Centre, and the Alliance for Finance Monitoring, under Section 17A of the Anti-Terrorism Act. However, none of the organizations was accused of supporting terrorism, at least as it is traditionally defined. As one lawyer put it, "The definition of terrorism is so wide, and the state is using it to fight civil society organizations" (Kiyonga 2020).

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[42] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

[43] In fact, the official announcement of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize to Abiy cited, among other things, his "discontinuing media censorship" (Norwegian Nobel Committee 2019).

[44] Interview with Oloo Janak (5 August 2021).

[45] Intimidation through taxation threats is not uncommon in Kenya, either. Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021). Such accusations of terrorism are deployed against CSOs working on certain "sensitive" topics in Kenya, as well. Interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021).

One targeted CSO, for example, had been accused of providing food and drink to those protesting the November 2020 arrest of member of Parliament and presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi (aka Bobi Wine).[46] Previously, in 2017, two prominent CSOs – ActionAid and the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS) – had seen their accounts frozen because an arrested youth leader had participated in a conversation with the heads of those organizations. These moves were part of a broadening crackdown on CSOs in Uganda, which escalated in 2021 with the January suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility, an initiative sponsored since 2011 by the European Union, several other European countries, and the United States to support organizations working to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and the August suspensions of 54 CSOs, including prominent organizations such as Chapter Four Uganda, the Citizens' Coalition for Electoral Democracy in Uganda, and GLISS, for various reputed administrative violations (Tumwesigye 2021). As GLISS Associate Director Godber Tumushabe put it, "What we have heard since 2006 is a systematic regime initiative to demobilize civil society. ... They [the government] kill labor unions, civil society; they co-opt them, and those that cannot be co-opted are destroyed. … [I]t is going to get worse before it gets better" (Mutaizibwa 2021).

In many instances, governments' arguments that crackdowns are in response to threats to national unity or public order are flimsy, at best. Numerous Ivoirian experts we interviewed referenced the case of Pulchérie Gbalet of the Alternative Citoyenne Ivoirienne.[47] Gbalet was arrested two days after an August 2020 demonstration in Abidjan, where she called for peaceful protests against the constitutionally dubious third-term bid of President Alassane Ouattara, and accused of "violation of public order" and "participation in an insurrectional movement," among other crimes. She spent eight months in pre-trial detention, before being provisionally released in April 2021 (Richard 2021).

Regardless of their underlying motivation, arguments presenting CSOs and media as potential threats on these counts tend to present a stark choice between order and unfettered freedoms. In doing so, they oversimplify complex issues and portray debates in Manichean terms. Further, issues like terrorism can evoke such strong emotions that people are willing to accept severe limitations as protection. In such matters, "the public is often gullible enough to believe these things," as Kenyan lawyer and pro-democracy activist Francis Aywa told us.[48]

On these bases, we hypothesize that:

> H_1: Individuals who are more concerned about insecurity and inter-group division will be more likely to support limits to civic freedoms.

3.1.2. <u>Spreading false information</u>

In recent years, media monitoring organizations and other groups have increasingly pointed to the apparent scourge of mis- and disinformation prevalent on many prominent media platforms.[49] For example, when we asked Nigerian TV and radio presenter Stanley Bentu why

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[46] The organization – Uganda National NGO Forum – denies this.

[47] Interview with Fangnanga Karim Yeo (13 July 2021); interview with Ivoirian human rights campaigner (who wished to remain anonymous) (translated from French).

[48] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

[49] Misinformation refers to information that is false or presented out of context, regardless of the distributor's intent. In many cases, misinformation is spread unwittingly. Disinformation, on the other hand, refers to information that the distributor knows to be false, and it is spread with the express purpose of intending to deceive an audience. Colloquially, both kinds of information are often referred to as "fake news," but that term is

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Nigerians might be more supportive of restrictions on the media, he instantly responded, "The reason is that there has been information even within the public media space that are put out that are proved to be either false or misleading."[50]

To be fair, false information spread long before the development of modern mass media; even today, so-called "pavement radio" and "*radio trottoir*" are important conduits for information-sharing (Ellis 1989; Bourgault 1995). However, broadcast and social media speed the dissemination of such information, while also making it more visible to potential regulators, watchdog groups, and the general public. In our online survey of Nigerian media experts, only one in about one in seven (14%) said media were doing "extremely well" in terms of providing information that the average citizen found trustworthy. (48% said they were doing "moderately well," 29% "slightly well," and 8% "not well at all." 1% didn't know.) And only 6% said media were doing "extremely well" in terms of correcting false information. (17% said they were doing "very well," 29% "moderately well," 34% "slightly well," and 12% "not well at all." 1% didn't know.)

Further, false information that proliferates on social media often finds its way into traditional media, where it can reach even larger audiences. Resource-strapped media houses often provided limited, if any, training and resources to journalists, who then turn to unreliable digital sources for content.[51] And, in forming assessments of the media generally, individuals might not distinguish outlets that engage in rigorous fact-checking from those that traffic in rumors and disinformation; the anything-goes practices of the latter contaminate reputations of the former.[52]

While many pieces of such information are somewhat innocuous, such as false reports of celebrity breakups, others can have more serious consequences. False reports of immigrants being responsible for violence, crime, and public health dangers have been tied to waves of xenophobic violence in South Africa (Solomon 2017). During the COVID-19 outbreak, public health officials frequently battled false information about the threat that the virus posed to African populations (Africa Check 2020), its origins (Obaji 2021), or dubious – and potentially dangerous – ways to prevent or cure infection (Kazeem 2020; BBC News 2020).[53] And these threats are neither new nor particular to COVID-19. In 2014, the Liberian government placed a ban on the *National Chronicle* newspaper for circulating conspiracy theories about the origins of Ebola (Blair 2020, 215).[54]

Of course, just because false information is propagated does not necessarily mean that all individuals – or even most of those who are exposed to it – will accept it as factual. In fact, survey research suggests that Africans – or, at least, Kenyans, Nigerians, and South Africans – are

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conceptually squishy, encompassing everything from disinformation campaigns to politicians' propaganda intended to undermine unflattering news stories or outlets (Habgood-Coote 2018).

[50] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

[51] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

[52] Interview with Edetaen Ojo (16 March 2022); interview with Motunrayo Alaka (17 March 2022).

[53] Perversely, the Tanzanian government punished media outlets for publishing *accurate* information about COVID-19. In July 2020, authorities issued an 11-month suspension against Kwanza Online TV for "providing false information regarding [the] status of COVID-19 in Tanzania without verifying that information from the Government." The station had posted the US embassy's declaration that Tanzania had an "elevated" COVID-19 risk, thereby challenging then-President John Magufuli's declaration that the country was free of the virus (CPJ 2020).

[54] After a closure of nearly a year, the country's Supreme Court ruled against President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's administration, and the newspaper reopened. The previous year, the Court had also ruled that the government's ban on political rallies was unconstitutional.

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less trusting of social media than those in the United States are (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). Regardless, false information can cause discrimination, violence, public health crises, and other broader social problems even if only a minority of those exposed to it internalize it. Further, false information is more likely to be accepted when it confirms individuals' pre-existing biases, fears, and beliefs.[55] For this reason, it can be particularly dangerous when it feeds on already-existing divisions between groups (Cheeseman et al. 2019).

A number of African governments have used the threats of false information to justify general moves against civic spaces, particularly the media. For example, in July 2021, Museveni called on authorities "to locate very quickly" and arrest those responsible for sharing rumors about his death on social media (East African 2021). Building on such concerns, cabinet minister Betty Amongi justified Uganda's election-time social media disruptions by pointing to "a lot of misuse of social media to spread unfounded information that has been discrediting government officials." She went on to justify the move as one supportive of democratic institutions: "[R]eally if we are to practice democracy we need people to present facts as they are" (BBC News 2021). Ironically, the government in that case had previously itself been accused by Facebook of operating its own "coordinated inauthentic behavior" campaign against the opposition (@DFRLab 2021). The 2019 so-called "anti-social media bill" in Nigeria also specifically targeted false information. And after several months of intensifying protests against perceived anti-anglophone discrimination, the government of Cameroon justified a three-month blackout of all Internet services in the increasingly restive South West and North West regions in January 2017 by alluding to threats from "false news." The government even went so far as to send SMS messages warning against "spreading false news," while the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications advised social media users of criminal penalties against those who would "issue or spread information, including by way of electronic communications or information technology systems, without any evidence" (Abel 2019).

The fear, of course, is that governments will seize upon the very real threats that false information pose to justify sweeping – and potentially draconian – limits on the spread of myriad types of information, including messages that might merely embarrass or challenge those in power. These limits can include pre-clearance requirements for media. In 2018, Tanzania passed sweeping new regulations that, among other things, required Internet content producers to pay steep registration fees to the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) (Human Rights Watch 2019). Crackdowns in Tanzania increased as the October 2020 elections neared. In August, for example, Clouds FM and Clouds TV were required to air an hours-long apology and then suspend programming for a week after they broadcast parliamentary candidate nominating results without first verifying with the National Electoral Commission (Mumo 2020).

However, the deeper threat that these regulations pose is likely more pernicious, and more difficult to observe. Rather than risk incurring serious penalties, journalists and media houses might simply steer clear of any reporting that might draw regulators' attention. As Jenerali Ulimwengu, a Tanzanian columnist with the *East African*, a Kenyan weekly, put it, "There is an atmosphere of fear [in Tanzania] – a deeply ingrained fear for journalists. Self-censorship has set in. People prefer not to do things rather than do them and risk censure" (Mumo 2020). This sentiment extends beyond the media to the civil society realm. As the director of a Dar es Salaam-based CSO told Human Rights Watch in August 2018, "as long as I am quiet, I am safe (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Critics often lambaste these moves as disingenuous excuses to limit accountability and stories generally unfavorable to the incumbent, regardless of their veracity. Even those who accept the

[55] Interview with Stanley Bentu (20 July 2021).

threats that false information poses often critique many recently enacted or proposed government limitations as excessive and potentially counterproductive.

Further, governments and their allies have often been accused of spreading disinformation themselves. The Ugandan government's decision to block various social media sites in the days surrounding the January 2021 presidential election was, at least officially, retaliation for Facebook's accusation that it was operating multiple false profiles to spread disinformation and other pro-incumbent propaganda (@DFRLab 2021). And in the weeks leading up to Guinea's October 2020 elections, the Stanford Internet Observatory (SIO) identified nearly 100 Facebook pages that were, in its analysis, likely engaged in "coordinated inauthentic behavior" supporting President Alpha Condé's third-term bid and other forms of disinformation.[56] In a country where social media use is surging but media literacy is low, these kinds of disinformation – or what Guineans frequently call "intoxication" – can be broadly influential. As one source told SIO's investigators, "This is a huge problem in Guinea. Everything people see on Facebook, they think it is reality" (Cable and Huczok 2020).

Still, we might expect that individuals in the general public who are more familiar with the problems associated with false information to be more accepting – or demanding of – government limits on civic spaces, particularly around the media. People might determine that any costs associated with limits on the press or expression, which ultimately fall upon individual speakers and writers, or the organizations they work for, are outweighed by the benefits that accrue to society from the reduction in information that could harm public health, provoke disorder, or misinform voters. Thus, we can expect that:

> H_2: Individuals who judge the spread of false information to be more problematic will be more likely to support limits on civic freedoms.

3.1.3. Threatening national sovereignty

The expansion of democracy-promotion activities, particularly by long-established democracies in the West, in the aftermath of the Cold War involved aid to develop civil society and independent media in many African countries (Ottaway and Carothers 2000; Lawson 1999; Whitehead 2001; Burnell 2000). These efforts raised concerns that foreign governments and CSOs were imposing cookie-cutter solutions that did not consider local conditions adequately (Carothers 1999). Perhaps more cynically, leaders of these countries often complained that these initiatives constituted foreign meddling in sensitive domestic affairs and were thus undermining national sovereignty.

Such complaints have increased in prominence in recent years. Several African leaders have taken a page from leaders in other countries, like Russia (RFE/RL 2020b), India (Ghoshal 2020), and Hungary (Deutsche Welle 2017), and targeted organizations working in areas of democracy promotion and human rights as Trojan horses for foreign-influence campaigns. In contexts in which domestic CSOs working in these areas rely on external funding and capacity-building efforts, these attacks can be devastating and affect a broad swath of the civic space. Proponents of limiting these organizations' abilities to receive funds, expertise, and other kinds of support from overseas contend that such moves are justified to protect national sovereignty.

Attacking CSOs as foreign puppets can be a useful rhetorical strategy for undermining their work and casting aspersions on their concerns. For example, on a continent where conservative views about sexuality predominate, accusing groups of "promoting homosexuality" can be especially

[56] Facebook disagreed with SIO's conclusions and, as of September 2020, had not taken down any of the allegedly fake pages (Cable and Huczok 2020).

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potent.[57] During his campaign for re-election for an eighth term, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni often raised the specter of such threat: "Some of these [opposition] groups are being used by outsiders, homosexuals, I don't know – groups outsider there who don't like the stability of Uganda, the independence of Uganda" (Dahir 2021). Earlier, he had painted CSOs as potential conduits for malign foreign influence, claiming "NGOs funded by foreign governments actually give money to opposition players, give advice, lie on their behalf" (AfricaNews 2018). Similar concerns are often raised with regards to foreign-supported organizations that promote gender equality, which "could lead to a certain group in the society, even religious people, to pull away from civil society groups."[58]

These kinds of arguments, tying CSOs to dangerous or countercultural ideologies, serve at least three purposes: 1) to discredit the opposition and independent actors, 2) to present the incumbent as defending national sovereignty, and 3) to lay the groundwork for steps to limit civic freedoms. As Nicholas Opiyo, a noted Ugandan human rights activist and executive director of Chapter Four, told us, governments' evocation of CSOs' foreign connections is a key component of a broad effort to delegitimize an entire class of organizations in the public's eyes.[59] Proponents of the previously discussed 2017 bill to create a regulatory commission for CSOs in Nigeria raised particular suspicions regarding some organizations' receipt of funds from overseas and affiliation with international groups (Carsten 2017). As Victor Bwire of the Media Council of Kenya summarized to us, "There is a perception that civil societies work with foreigners to bring change, which has enlisted a negative and hostile environment towards non-state actors."[60]

For example, Tanzania has seen especially stringent crackdowns on ostensible foreign influence. In June 2020, the 2018 Electronic Postal Communications Act was updated to require broadcasters to receive clearance from the Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) before airing content produced by a foreign entity. Soon after, the TCRA issued warnings to four radio stations, including Radio Free Africa, for airing an interview the British Broadcasting Corporation had conducted with opposition leader and presidential candidate Tundu Lissu (Mumo 2020; Karashani 2020).

Tech companies have also been the subject to such critiques. Given the wide popularity of their platforms, these companies' policies – which are typically determined in corporate offices in California's Bay Area and other areas far afield from most African countries – can be immensely impactful. Governments have thereby justified limits on social media as necessary moves to rebalance power dynamics, in favor of domestic governments and against "big tech." For example, when the Ugandan government blocked Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter in advance of the January 2021 general elections, President Yoweri Museveni declared that "Uganda is ours" (Dahir 2021).

However, just as governments often both allegedly engage in disinformation campaigns while also using "fake news" as justification for media crackdowns, foreign influence is not, of course, limited to favoring the opposition, CSOs working on democracy or human rights agendas, or other entities that might threaten incumbent governments. Rather, governments themselves are often the beneficiaries of foreign investment in associational life and media.

[57] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021); interview with David Anyaele (8 August 2021); interview with Jill Cottrell Ghai (5 August 2021). See also Boryczka (2020).

[58] Interview with David Anyaele (8 August 2021).

[59] Interview with Nicholas Opiyo (16 August 2021).

[60] Interview with Victor Bwire (16 August 2021).

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With regards to the latter, one recent example is the Central African Republic, where Russian influence favoring President Faustin-Archange Touadéra has raised alarms. Lobaye Invest, a firm linked to Kremlin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, has interests in diamond and gold mining in the country. Lobaye has invested in everything from youth soccer matches and beauty contests to a radio station, Lengo Sango, which was launched in 2018 (Obaji 2021; RFE/RL 2020a) and reportedly ranges farther than state-run radio (Searcey 2019). Government officials also distributed free newspapers, with content promoting Russian interests. Russian mercenaries have played key roles in fighting insurgents and staving off coups threatening Touadéra (RFE/RL 2020a), while pro-Russian – and anti-French – messaging has been traced to Russian-operated troll farms (Stanford Internet Observatory 2021; Olivier 2021; Edwards 2021; RFE/RL 2020a; Obaji 2021; Stanford Internet Observatory n.d.). Messages spread on WhatsApp have purported that the French government was financing rebels,[61] involved in coup plots, and bribed constitutional court justices to rule against President Touadéra's attempt to postpone elections due to COVID-19, while messaging before the December 2020 election sought to portray opposition candidate Karim Meckassoua as a French puppet (Obaji 2021).

Individuals may develop their own attitudes about the overall positive or negative aspects of foreign influence based on their own experiences and access to information. For example, some individuals might benefit from a foreign government or firm's investment in their area, in the form of employment or construction of a new road. Others might see these moves as primarily extractive endeavors that mainly benefit expatriates and foreigners, while local populations bear costs of dislocation or environmental degradation. In the cultural realm, some might enjoy the opportunity to consume foreign-produced television, films, and music, while others view this content as threatening to local artists, traditions, and cultural norms. In sum, individuals' attitudes about the overall costs and benefits of foreign influence might affect their susceptibility to sovereignty-related critiques on open civic spaces. Given this, we can expect that:

> H_3: Individuals who have broader concerns about foreign influence on domestic politics, economics, and society will be more supportive of government limits on civic freedoms.

3.2. Partisanship and polarization

Our next set of hypotheses examines how individuals' partisan leanings, the strength of those leanings, and their attitudes about other partisan groups affect attitudes towards civic spaces.

3.2.1. Elite cues

As discussed in the previous section, arguments for or against limitations on civic spaces are usually accompanied by some kind of logic. Importantly, these arguments can come from government officials, including presidents and cabinet ministers, but also from opposition figures, traditional or religious leaders, or influential figures in the business or civic society communities. A large literature in political science highlights that individuals often rely on heuristics, or informational shortcuts, when making decisions or forming opinions about complex issues (Downs 1957). The broad topic of civic freedoms is certainly a challenging one, with many potential considerations affecting positions. Further, for many individuals, issues surrounding civic freedoms are somewhat abstract, as many will have limited direct experience with behaviors like working in the media space themselves or participating in a politically oriented association. In other words, when an interviewer appears unexpectedly to ask these individuals about their attitudes about these topics, they might draw upon easily available information to formulate their

[61] According to research by SIO, dozens of fake Facebook pages linked to Harouma Douamba, the pseudonym of a purported Burkinabè citizen, were involved in spreading disinformation that the United Nations was also involved in trafficking arms to rebels (Stanford Internet Observatory 2021).

responses; political scientist John Zaller (1992) famously referred to these as "top-of-the-head" considerations. Political elites' rhetoric around these issues might constitute such information (Mondak 1993; Bullock 2011; Levendusky 2010).

In a given country's political space, different sets of political elites are likely making different kinds of appeals regarding civic spaces. The type of appeals that individuals hear and/or consider persuasive is likely determined to a large extent by their pre-existing political biases. As previously discussed, those already in power are more likely than those in the opposition to call for limits to civic spaces in recent years. For example, Uganda's Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, has frequently attacked the media during campaign rallies,[62] while Nigerian First Lady Aisha Buhari seemed to enthusiastically embrace strict limits on civic freedoms: "If China can control over 1.3 billion people on social media, I see no reason why Nigeria cannot attempt controlling only 180 million people" (Samanga 2019). And, at a press conference in March 2017, late Tanzanian President John Magufuli, whose government instituted some of the harshest new restrictions on civic spaces, warned "Media owners, let me tell you: Be careful. Watch it. If you think you have that kind of freedom–not to that extent" (Paget 2017). Given many governing elites' prominent roles in advocating for restrictions on civic spaces, we would expect that those who are already supportive of those in government are more likely than others – i.e. non-partisans and those supportive of the opposition – to hear and be persuaded by such arguments:

H_{4A}: Supporters of incumbent governments will be less likely to support civic freedom.

Similar logic can hold for individuals who support the opposition.[63] In many cases, opposition politicians and groups make government attacks on civic spaces a central plank in their rhetorical arguments for change. In each of the countries studied, we see examples of such opposition rhetoric. For example, in Nigeria, former Kwara State Governor and Senate President Abubakar Bukola Saraki of the opposition Peoples Democratic Party criticized President Buhari's Twitter ban in a Facebook post using the hashtag #KeepItOn.[64] In these situations, we should expect that individuals who are already supportive of the opposition will be more persuaded by these critiques. Of course, opposition-leaning individuals might adopt such attitudes in response to limitations even if they do not hear such rhetoric. In fact, for those opposed to the government, simply hearing the government's argument in favor of something can increase their opposition to it. Regardless of the precise mechanism, we expect that:

H_{4B}: Supporters of the opposition will be more likely to support civic freedoms.

Note that these hypotheses are distinct from others that argue that individuals oppose or support civic freedoms primarily because of independent concerns about related topics, such as dis/misinformation, national security, social cohesion, or liberal democratic values. For example, an individual who believes that free media undermine national unity might also accept their government's limitations on the press and agree with incumbents' rhetoric on this issue, but their position regarding civic freedoms in this scenario stems from their own attitudes about the media, and not simply because of government rhetoric. Of course, individuals with such attitudes might also support the incumbent, perhaps for this very reason, or for some unrelated reason. Disentangling the factors underlying an individual's attitudes about civic spaces is thus challenging. Although we apply specific research designs in an attempt to identify general factors that independently affect attitudes about civic spaces across general populations,

[62] Interview with Bernard Tabaire (24 August 2021).

[63] Interview with Oloo Janak (5 August 2021).

[64] https://www.facebook.com/53942489961/posts/10159541445029962

discerning why a particular individual holds the attitudes they do is a supremely challenging – perhaps impossible – task.

3.2.2. Partisan bias

Since independence, African media have generally fallen short of expectations that they would be non-biased in their approaches to political coverage. Early experiments with openness gave way to near-total state control of broadcast media in many countries, including Ghana (Faringer 1991) and, after political liberalization, many newly emergent commercial outlets aligned with–or were outright owned by–politicians and parties (Frère 2007, 2011; Nyamnjoh 2005).

Nigeria fits this phenomenon well, where, according to Edetaen Ojo of the Media Rights Agenda, the "vast majority" of broadcast outlets are owned by politicians or politically affiliated businesspeople.[65] In our online survey of Nigerian media experts, more than three in four (78%) said ownership by politicians contributes to bias "very often,"[66] while 70% said ownership by a businessperson or company allied with a politician or party, and 51% said editorial staff biases did.[67] Public broadcasters at the state level clearly skew reportage to favor the governor's party, meaning that such outlets are "not public broadcasters in the serious sense of the word," according to Dr. Akin Akingbulu of the Institute for Media and Society.[68] Licensing decisions are reportedly politicized, which forces media houses to "pander" to the ruling party.[69] And, in situations of economic precarity, individual outlets rely on advertising revenues, often from the government, to stay afloat. As Motunrayo Alaka of the Wole Soyinka Centre for Investigative Journalism put it, "In a country like Nigeria … government equals business."[70] In our survey, 69% of experts said that reliance on "advertisements from government, politician, or party" contributes to bias "very often."[71]

As a result, the experts we surveyed saw widespread issues with partisan bias in Nigerian media. Majorities said 50% or more of radio stations (70%), television stations (77%), print publications (72%), and websites (59%) were biased.[72] More than eight in 10 said media were biased in favor of the government or ruling party either "very often" (41%) or at least "sometimes" (41%).[73] And more than three-quarters said media were biased against the opposition "very often" (26%) or

[65] Interview with Edetaen Ojo (16 March 2022).

[66] 15% said it does "sometimes," 5% "only rarely," and 3% "never."

[67] For business ownership, 21% said it does "sometimes," 7% "only rarely," and 1% "never." 1% didn't know. For editorial bias, 36% said it does "sometimes," 9% "only rarely," and 2% "never." 1% didn't know.

[68] Interview with Dr. Akin Akingbulu (14 March 2022).

[69] Interview with Dr. Akin Akingbulu (14 March 2022).

[70] Interview with Motunrayo Alaka (17 March 2022).

[71] 23% said it does "sometimes," 6% "only rarely," and 1% "never." 1% didn't know. Other potential sources of biases included a desire to appeal to a certain audience (42% "very often," 34% "sometimes," 20% "only rarely," and 2% "never," with 2% not knowing) and leadership and staff fearing upsetting a certain group or person (55% "very often," 31% "sometimes," 9% "only rarely," and 2% "never," with 3% not knowing).

[72] For radio, 6% said "all" stations were biased, 27% that "between half and all" were, 37% that "about half were, 18% that "between none and half" were, 4% that "none" were, and 7% didn't know. For television, 6% said "all," 31% "between half and all," 40% "about half," 17% "between none and half," 2% "none," and 5% didn't know. For print publications, 9% said "all," 28% "between half and all," 35% "about half," 19% "between none and half," 6% "none," and 2% didn't know. And for websites, 9% said "all," 22% "between half and all," 28% "about half," 22% "between none and half," 4% "none," and 14% didn't know.

[73] 13% said "only rarely," 3% "never," and 1% didn't know.

"sometimes" (50%).[74] However, large numbers also saw bias that favored the opposition: almost three-quarters said media were biased in favor of the opposition "very often" (22%) or at least "sometimes" (49%),[75] while more than two thirds said media were biased against the government "very often" (30%) or "sometimes" (36%).[76] When asked how well media were doing in "treating government and ruling party politicians fairly, without bias," a majority said they were doing "slightly well" (31%) or "not well at all" (20%),[77] while even larger numbers said they were doing "slightly well" (36%) or "not well at all" (23%) in treating opposition politicians similarly.[78] What's more, almost two-thirds said the proportion of biased outlets was increasing, with 57% saying it was increasing "a lot," and 8% "a little."[79]

In Nigeria, these issues are reportedly clear to the general public. As Lanre Arogundade of the International Press Centre told us, citizens see "editors hobnob with people in authority" and are consequently skeptical of reportage.[80] And Olufemi Asuntoki of the Nigerian Institute of Journalism characterized media houses as "chameleons" because "they have different colors," depending on their allegiances.[81] Similar concerns manifest in countries like Ghana (Hasty 2005).

There are broader critiques that, perhaps due to these biases, media do not report on issues of direct relevance to the population. These concerns are encapsulated in the term "*githeri* media," which refers to the media frenzy in Kenya around Martin Kimotho. Kimotho became an unlikely celebrity due to a snapshot of him eating *githeri* – a common meal of boiled maize and beans – out of a plastic bag as he queued to vote in the August 2017 general elections. Critics noted the attention Kimotho received crowded out coverage of more substantive issues surrounding potential electoral irregularities and state repression (Ogola 2017). Public frustrations over "*githeri* media" are, according to some commentators, increasingly pushing Kenyans into digital spaces, where they are more vulnerable to false information and less likely to defend so-called "traditional media" against government-imposed limits (Muli 2017; Mohamed 2017). As Oloo Janak, a longtime newspaper journalist, columnist, and editor told us, "More people are likely to protest about Internet shutdown than that of the legacy media."[82]

If there is widespread dissatisfaction with media, citizens might be more supportive of government-imposed restrictions on content and operation or, at the very least, simply acquiesce. Kenyans, for example, often deride "*githeri* media," but the default response, either in terms of pressuring media to reform or stand up against government moves to limit civic spaces more broadly, is, more often than not, mass inaction.[83] And in Nigeria, media are often seen as too close to politicians, prone to sloppy reportage, or corruption themselves.[84] For example, only 8% of Nigerian experts surveyed said media were doing "extremely well" in terms of "holding government and politicians accountable for their promises to the public," while 26%

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[74] 17% said "only rarely," 4% "never," and 2% didn't know.

[75] 21% said "only rarely," 8% "never," and 1% didn't know.

[76] 22% said "only rarely," 9% "never," and 2% didn't know.

[77] 2% said "extremely well," 16% "very well," 31% "moderately well," and 1% didn't know.

[78] 1% said "extremely well," 13% "very well," 26% "moderately well," and 1% didn't know.

[79] 8% said it was staying the same, 18% decreasing (10% "a little" and 8% "a lot"), and 7% didn't know.

[80] Interview with Lanre Arogundade (14 March 2022).

[81] Interview with Olufemi Osuntoki (14 March 2022).

[82] Interview with Oloo Janak (5 August 2021).

[83] Interview with Victor Bwire (16 August 2021).

[84] Interviews with Dr. Akin Akinbgulu (14 March 2022); Edetaen Ojo (15 March 2022).

said they were doing “not well at all.”[85] Ratings on “investigating and exposing corruption were even worse: 5% said the media were doing “extremely well,” 14% “very well,” 21% “moderately well,” 39% “slightly well,” and 21% “not well at all” (1% didn’t know). According to Lanre Arogundade, director of the Lagos-based International Press Centre, many Nigerians often conclude that, when media are targeted with criticism or restrictions, they “probably had it coming.” In all, he added, “the trend of public opinion is not in favor of media.”[86]

Those in government often have their cake and eat it, too, when it comes to media bias. On the one hand, they are often beneficiaries of favorable coverage from politically aligned media outlets, or those owned outright by politicians from and businesspeople allied to the ruling group. On the other, they tap into public perceptions of and disgust with media bias to justify limits to media freedoms.[87]

In sum, these biases that pervade media in many African countries could affect attitudes about restrictions on civic spaces. Experts raised fewer concerns about CSO capture by partisan actors but, as we discuss later, focus group discussions yielded ample complaints that CSOs were either fronts for powerful politicians or, more commonly, simply that they were focused on their own narrow interests, rather than on serving the public. As Kemi Okenyodo of Nigeria’s Rule of Law Empowerment put it, “Right now, is the civil society really amplifying the voices of the public? Because they now seem to work more on the agenda of donors and the agenda of their organizations.”[88]

Given this, we hypothesize that those who assess partisan bias in CSOs and media should generally support limits to civic freedoms:

> H_5: Individuals will be more likely to support limits to civic freedoms when they view CSOs and media as biased towards a particular political side.

3.2.3. Polarization

However, individuals’ response to bias might be a function of their own degree of bias and their willingness to accept political out-groups as legitimate. On one end of the spectrum, individuals might hold strong attitudes, but be perfectly supportive of the rights of those with opposing views to air those opinions or form groups. Such individuals would not necessarily view bias as threatening, and therefore deserving of government regulation.

On the other, individuals might find messages from “the other” to be so threatening that they must be minimized, possibly by regulation. In other words, individuals’ support for pluralism might be contingent on the extent to which they see others as legitimate actors in the political space. This perspective suggests that affective polarization undermines support for civic freedoms. Following Iyengar and Westwood (2015), we define affective polarization as “the tendency of people identifying as [partisans] to view opposing partisans negatively and co-partisans positively” (p. 691). At its extremes, high levels of affective polarization can be associated with infra-humanization, or a tendency to see members of the “outgroup” as less deserving of rights. High levels of affective polarization thus undermine the “civic culture,” in which people are politically active yet accepting of others’ rights to active participation and competition, as well (Almond and Verba 1963). Given this, we might expect the following:

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[85] 12% said they were doing “very well,” 28% “moderately well,” 26% “slightly well,” and 1% didn’t know.

[86] Interview with Lanre Arogundade (14 March 2022).

[87] Interview with Oloo Janak (5 August 2021).

[88] Interview with Kemi Okenyodo (9 July 2021).

H_{6A}: As affective polarization increases, individuals will be more likely to support restrictions on civic freedoms.

However, this expectation might be too naive, in that it fails to consider individuals' position *vis-à-vis* the incumbent government. When individuals think of limits to civic spaces, they might primarily consider government-imposed restrictions. For those associated with the government, these limits will likely be generally acceptable, since such individuals will see them targeted against the opposition. As government supporters see those in the opposition as less deserving of rights, and those in the government as more justified in doing what is necessary to defend their in-group, they will become more supportive of moves to limit out-groups' rights to speech and association. On the other hand, for those associated with the opposition, government restrictions on civic spaces will be seen, perhaps rightfully, as targeted against their co-partisans. The more individuals associate with their own group and see the other as motivated by negative intent, the more they will oppose any government moves to restrict speech or association. Therefore,

H_{6B}: The effects of increasing affective polarization on support for limits on civic spaces will be conditioned by partisanship. Greater polarization among government supporters will be associated with higher support for limits, while greater polarization among opposition supporters will be associated with lower support.

3.3. Support for and experience with democratic institutions

3.3.1. Levels of restrictions

For most individuals, civic freedoms are a largely abstract topic, particularly when compared with concerns such as physical security, employment, and health care. People might be more likely to say they would support limits to speech and association when such limits are still largely in the hypothetical; under such scenarios, individuals might primarily consider the promised benefits of such limits, such as increased security or improved economic performance, and not consider any of the costs, which they might assume will be incurred by others. Further, those others might be easily dismissed, given their hypothetical status and presumed "radical" nature.

These attitudes might shift as actual limits to civic freedoms are increasingly imposed, however, for at least two reasons. First, the promised benefits of such limits might not materialize as obviously. For example, insecurity or divisions might not decrease – in fact, the reverse might happen. More generally, the increasingly repressive government might not produce the positive outcomes they promised would arise if individuals surrendered their freedoms. Second, the costs of these limitations will start to emerge. Individuals might bear some of the costs themselves, ranging from increased self-censorship to actual legal sanctions. Preferred media outlets, social media platforms, or forms of associational life might be disrupted. And even if individuals do not experience these limits personally, they might personally know or at least learn about those who face consequences. Even if the individual does conclude that certain benefits have materialized because of limits, the imposition of costs complicates potential support. For example, Dr. Akin Akingbulu argued that, while many Nigerians see clear problems with the current state of civic spaces, they tend to recoil at what they see as heavy-handed regulations: "The way government goes about it is what citizens resent."[89] In sum, we might expect that:

H_7: Individuals who see more actual limits on civic freedoms will be more likely to oppose those restrictions.

[89] Interview with Dr. Akin Akingbulu (14 March 2022).

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3.3.2. Engagement

The costs of limits on civic freedoms likely do not fall uniformly across a population. In particular, the likelihood that individuals directly experience the costs of limits on civic freedoms increases with political engagement. Those who are politically disengaged – who rarely discuss politics, do not participate in groups with political goals, and do not actively seek out political information – will not likely directly experience the costs of limitations on civic freedoms. Simply, those individuals will not see much of an impact on their day-to-day lives. Rather, it is individuals who are more engaged – who discuss politics frequently, who participate in groups with political agendas, who protest and contact leaders, and who frequently seek out political information – who will be most directly – and most negatively – impacted by limits to civic spaces. Nigerian disability rights activist David Anyaele told us, "When you are talking about clamp[ing] down [on social media] or not, it may not be a priority [to most Nigerians]. But those of us that understand the importance of the use of social media are the people that are really worried, because these are effective tools of interaction and communication."[90] Similarly, political scientist Dr. Freedom Onuoha argued that, in the midst of Nigeria's Twitter ban, netizens were not simply accepting the government's newly imposed restrictions: "It is not that people are largely accepting it. Nigerians are not accepting it. [P]eople felt that it [Twitter] has become part of their lives. The government ban of Twitter has been bypassed through VPN...I don't think that Nigerians have chickened out. The Nigerian state does not have the capacity to police over 200 million people who violate the ban on Twitter."[91]

In sum, we can expect that:

> H_8: As individuals' levels of political engagement increase, their opposition to limits to civic freedoms will increase, as well.

3.3.3. General attitudes about democracy

Given the centrality of these civic freedoms to democratic institutions, we might conclude that individuals who support democracy, more broadly, will also support such rights. These individuals might recognize, for example, that truly free and fair elections are not possible without vibrant political discourse, and full access to information about candidate characteristics and government performance, for example. Thus, we can hypothesize that:

> H_9: Individuals who are more supportive of democratic governance will be less likely to support limits on civic freedoms.

Such an assumption should not necessarily come automatically, however. While conceptualizations of *liberal* democracy include the aforementioned civic freedoms, *majoritarian* democracy, which stresses the rights of the majority over those of individuals, does not necessarily require similar emphasis. In fact, advocates for majoritarianism might stress the necessity of limits on individual rights when they view the exercising of those rights to be inimical to the rights, needs, or preferences of the majority. In some cases, these impulses can be associated with democratic decline or limits to democratic development. Recent turns in countries such as Hungary and India, where democratically elected governments have placed limits on civic freedoms in the name of protecting some majority – in both examples, explicitly

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[90] Interview with David Anyaele (8 August 2021).

[91] Interview with Dr. Freedom Onuoha (4 August 2021). Prof. Onuoha's citation of 200 million violators was hyperbolic, given that Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys suggest that only about 44% of the country's adult population uses social media, and many of those users likely do not use Twitter, specifically.

defined according to religion – highlight these dangers. On the other hand, democracies continuously face choices over what types of speech, organization, or information-sharing to limit, perhaps in the name of protecting national security or defending the rights of vulnerable groups. Governments frequently enact such limits – in fact, all of the countries perennially rated as having the most-democratic regimes have some such limits – without necessarily spurring serious democratic backsliding.

Therefore, it is not *a priori* obvious that individuals who support the basic institutional features of democracy, such as selection of governments through regular elections and a rejection of alternative regime types, such as military, single-party, or strongman rule, will necessarily embrace civic freedoms. These freedoms, which might seem essential to some, could, under certain circumstances, appear threatening to others.

4. Data sources for hypothesis testing

We test these hypotheses with a number of strategies.

4.1. Afrobarometer Round 8

First, we use recent Afrobarometer data to establish baseline correlations between certain attitudes and behaviors, and measures of support for civic freedoms. Specifically, we rely on Round 8 Afrobarometer data, which were collected in surveys conducted between July 2019 and July 2021.[92] Surveys were conducted in 34 countries: Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In most of these countries, samples of approximately 1200 respondents were drawn.[93] Approximately 48,000 people completed these surveys.

Following this, we analyze original data collected specifically for this study, including results from separate phone surveys, with embedded conjoint survey experiments, and focus group discussions conducted in each of the four focus countries. We address each of these original data sources in turn.

4.2. Phone surveys

Although Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys contained a larger module of questions on the media than previous rounds had, the omnibus survey's length limited the number of in-depth questions on the state of civic spaces. More specifically, while regular Afrobarometer surveys have historically collected information about individuals' general support for civic freedoms, they do not allow us to measure how support for restrictions to civic spaces varies according to contextual factors, such as in relation to a specific problem associated with the media or civil society. Further, existing surveys did not allow us to examine what types of restrictions individuals supported.

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[92] This round was unusually lengthy for Afrobarometer, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately 55% of surveys were conducted before early April 2020, when face-to-face interviewing was ceased. Interviews began again in late October 2020.

[93] Larger samples were collected in Nigeria and South Africa (approximately 1,600 apiece); Sudan (*N*=1,800); and Angola, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, and Tanzania (approximately 2,400 apiece).

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We therefore conducted special phone surveys in our four focus countries. Interviews were conducted between 7 November and 30 December 2021, with 1200 respondents apiece in Côte d'Ivoire and Uganda, 1222 in Kenya, and 1353 in Nigeria. For further details about the survey, including sampling methodology, remuneration procedures, and ethics, see Appendix B.

We opted to conduct surveys by phone rather than face-to-face, as is normal practice with Afrobarometer surveys, due to resource constraints and to minimize threats to interviewers, respondents, and their communities related to COVID-19. We acknowledge that there are significant and valid questions surrounding the use of phone surveys in Africa. At best, we can claim that our sample is representative of regular mobile phone users; individuals who do not own phones were, by definition, excluded from the study. Obviously, since phone ownership is not randomly assigned across relevant social and political groups in each country, this introduces potential biases to the study. Afrobarometer's own data from Round 8 suggest these biases exist in phone ownership/usage. While the vast majority (84%) of respondents to that survey owned a phone of their own, personal ownership rates were significantly higher for older respondents, men, urban-dwellers, and those with higher levels of formal education and lower levels of lived poverty. Thus, we should be cautious about generalizing findings from the phone survey to the entire population.

4.3. Conjoint experiment

While analyses with Afrobarometer Round 8 and phone surveys provide significant insight into the types of individuals more or less likely to support civic freedoms in Africa, and the attitudes most associated with those levels of support, they present significant limitations. Namely, such analyses are only *correlational;* thus, we cannot discern whether the factors examined directly affect attitudes about civic freedoms. Rather, attitudes about civic spaces could very well be driving these other factors. As such, our ability to test our hypotheses with these observational survey data is limited.

Thus, we employed an experiment to test more directly how certain kinds of framings of issues surrounding civic freedoms affect individuals' support for restrictions. Due to resource constraints, we focus in these experiments on support for restrictions on media only. While the lessons generated here might also generalize to support for restrictions on associational life, we cannot be confident of such extensions without additional data.

We designed a conjoint survey experiment using vignettes. Conjoint survey experiments are increasingly common in the social sciences, including in political science, given their ability to measure simultaneously how multiple factors can affect individuals' preferences (Bansak et al. 2021). Although the majority of conjoint survey experiments have likely been conducted in the United States, they are increasingly being employed in the global South, in countries like India (Auerbach and Thachil 2018), Malawi (Clayton et al. 2020), and Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay (Klašnja, Lupu, and Tucker 2021). According to an analysis by Bansak et al. (2021), a plurality of these studies examines how candidate attributes affect voter preferences.

Subjects in our experiment heard a series of four vignettes.[94] All described a hypothetical situation in which a radio station has been accused of some kind of infraction. Three details – or "attributes," in the methodological parlance – of each vignette varied at random.[95] First, to test whether individuals' stances on media freedoms are significantly driven by the identity of the

[94] The study involved no deception of subjects. All subjects were informed that the scenarios they were hearing were hypothetical, and the study did not use names of real radio stations, politicians, or organizations. All study protocols were approved by the MSU Institutional Review Board (STUDY00006514), and a pre-analysis plan was filed with the EGAP Registry.

[95] For all attributes, all subjects had an equal probability of being assigned to each level.

actor calling attention to the threat ($H_{4A \& 4B}$), we included an *accuser* attribute. This attribute randomly varied across three levels, with either the president, the opposition, or an independent agency making the accusation. We treat the latter level as the baseline, against which the other levels will be compared in analyses. Analyses will also consider separately whether trust in government and trust in opposition condition responses to the accuser.

Second, to measure whether people are more likely to support limits on media freedoms in response to certain kinds of potential threats than others, the *infraction type* attribute varied, with six levels. These included:

1) Using hate speech against members of certain ethnic groups (to test H_1)
2) Making arguments to build support for certain armed groups (to test H_1)
3) Spreading misinformation about COVID-19 (to test H_2)
4) Spreading lies about political candidates' private lives (to test H_2)
5) Being biased in favor of one political party (to test H_5)
6) Not paying taxes

We treat not paying taxes as the baseline infraction, against which all other types of infractions will be considered.

Precise wordings for all levels can be found in Appendix C. We note that all phrasing is deliberately vague, in that we do not include the names of ethnic groups being targeted (Level 1),[96] armed groups being supported (Level 2), candidates being targeted (Level 4), or parties being favored (Level 5), for two reasons. First, specificity in these cases could generate threats to external validity, in that certain combinations of attribute values could be unrealistic. For example, subjects might deem it unlikely that presidents would criticize a radio station for being biased in favor of their own party. Second, although we stressed to subjects that the scenarios were hypothetical, we wanted to further minimize the risk that some might come away from the exchange believing that certain constructed threats actually existed (i.e. that there was an actual radio station supporting a particular armed group), the probability of which might be increased if we named certain actors. Also on this count, in testing H_2, it would be unethical to generate or repeat false information about public health matters or certain politicians (e.g. "A radio station has been accused of suggesting its listeners avoid COVID-19 by taking hydroxychloroquine preventively.")

Finally, to test H_3, we included an attribute indicating the primary source of funding for the station. Again, here our expectation is that individuals will be more supportive of limits on freedoms for stations that receive significant foreign support. The *funding source* attribute varies across two levels, with stations being supported primarily through either "domestic" or "foreign" sources.[97]

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[96] One possibility would have been to have named certain ethnic groups or included information that would allow subjects to position themselves relative to the ethnic group targeted (i.e. indicate that the group targeted was or was not the respondent's). Further, levels could have included information about the size or relative power of the targeted group. These additional levels would have allowed for the possibility of testing whether support for restrictions varies according to the target group and/or whether the individual feels particularly threatened by the content. Such issues could be the subject of future research.

[97] Future research could explore whether support for limits varies according to the identity of the funder, in terms of government vs. CSO vs. international organization, or country (e.g. US, Russia, China, France, etc.). However, justifications for limiting civic spaces frequently include protecting of national sovereignty and preventing foreign influence, more generally, without reference to threats presented by a single country or organization.

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Each subject heard four such vignettes.[98] After each vignette, subjects were asked what, if any, government response to the infraction should be.[99]

Five options were presented, in ascending order of severity, including:

[0] Nothing

[1] Issue a written warning to the station

[2] Fine the station

[3] Shut down the station for a temporary period

[4] Shut down the station permanently

In our analyses, we treat the dependent variable as ordinal, ranging from 0 for no punishment to 4 for shutting down the station permanently.

We randomize the order of the attributes in each vignette to guard against order effects. To minimize cognitive burden on subjects (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015), the order of the attributes presented in each vignette varies across individuals, but not within them. In other words, if an individual's first vignette is constructed with the accuser first, the infraction second, and the source of funding third, that individual's other three vignettes will be constructed similarly. Another individual's first vignette might be constructed with the infraction first, accuser second, and source of funding third; all three of that individual's other vignettes will be constructed with the same pattern.

4.4. Focus group discussions

Finally, in order to better understand the results obtained from the large-*N* survey data, we conducted small focus groups in each of the four focus countries. Four discussions were conducted in Kenya, and three each in the other three focus countries. Groups varied in terms of composition, with some being single-gendered and others mixed, and location, with some in urban centers and others in rural zones. Further, some focus groups targeted media and CSO professionals, while others were comprised of "ordinary" citizens not working or studying in these sectors. In Appendix D, we discuss specifics of these group meetings, as well as questionnaires that guided these discussions. Questions focused on assessments of the current state of civic spaces in participants' respective countries, as well as attitudes about proper government and social responses to perceived shortcomings in these areas.

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[98] We limited the number of tasks to reduce fatigue, cognitive burden, and attrition. While some studies have suggested that subjects can complete over two dozen tasks without apparent negative effects on response quality (Bansak et al. 2018), most conjoint experiments have been conducted using computers, with relatively wealthier, better-educated subjects. Following the recommendations of Bansak (2021, 27), we take into account the particulars of our subject pool and survey technology (i.e. mobile phones), and err on the side of fewer tasks.

[99] Of course, we recognize that individuals might support responses to infractions, but oppose responses specifically by governments. For example, they might support action by individuals, such as boycotts (e.g. "I would personally not listen to that station"); firms or trade associations, such as advertising boycotts; or non-governmental media associations, such as sanctions (e.g. self-regulation). However, given this project's focus on government-imposed limits on civic spaces, we limit our attention here accordingly. We acknowledge, though, that individuals' support for government-imposed limits might vary if some of these other sanctions are listed as possibilities; again, this could be a subject for future research.

5. Analyses and results

5.1. Outcome variables

With regard to the survey data, we focus on seven measures of support for civic freedoms in these analyses, one focusing on freedom of association and six focusing on mass media. To measure support for freedom of association, we draw upon a question from Round 8 that asked respondents whether they agreed that "*Government should be able to ban any organization that goes against its policies*" or that "*We should be able to join any organization whether or not the government approves of it*." Respondents were then asked to indicate whether they supported the statement "*strongly*" or only "*somewhat*." This outcome is then recoded, such that the highest value (4) indicates strong support for freedom of association, while the lowest value (0) indicates strong support for restrictions on associational life. Those who responded that they supported neither position are coded as 2. In the Round 8 surveys, 64% of respondents supported the freedom-of-association position (40% strongly and 24% somewhat), and 33% supported the restrictions-on-associations position (18% strongly and 15% somewhat). 1% selected neither, while 1% didn't know.[100] We asked an identical question in our phone surveys.

Next, to measure support for media freedoms generally, we use a question asking respondents whether they agree that "*The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control*" or that "*The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it disapproves of*,"[101] with respondents again asked about the strength of their support of the selected statement. Here, 62% of respondents supported press freedoms (38% strongly and 24% somewhat), while 36% supported restrictions (19% strongly and 16% somewhat). 1% selected neither, while 1% didn't know.[102] Again, we asked an identical question in our phone surveys.

The Round 8 Afrobarometer survey also included a question on support for Internet restrictions. Respondents could say that they believed that "*Unrestricted access to the Internet and social media helps people to be more informed and active citizens, and should be protected*" or that "*Information shared on the Internet and social media is dividing [nationality], so access should be regulated by government*."

Restrictions on the Internet were generally unpopular, with only 36% supporting them (20% strongly and 16% somewhat), while 53% opposed them (28% strongly and 25% somewhat), with 2% choosing neither and 9% saying they didn't know.

Finally, the Round 8 Afrobarometer also included specific questions on media restrictions with regard to 1) false information, 2) information the government disapproves of, 3) information that criticizes or insults the president, and 4) hate speech. We examine these outcomes when they are pertinent to the hypothesis under consideration (e.g. H_1 on hate speech).

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[100] This level of support for associational life is slightly higher than Round 7 (62%) (Logan and Penar 2019). Among countries included in both Rounds 7 and 8, 65% supported the freedom-of-association position.

[101] Note that this question wording is slightly different from that used in Rounds 5-7, in which people were asked whether they agreed that "*The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control*" or "*The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society*."

[102] While the Round 8 results appear to mark a significant increase in support for media freedoms from Round 7, this change might be attributable to the difference in question wordings between the two rounds. In fact, given that we do not see a remarkable increase in support for freedom of association between the rounds–and Afrobarometer's phrasing on this question did not change, making the rounds directly comparable–we are skeptical that the inter-round differences in support for media freedom represents an actual jump in support.

5.2. *Controls and models*

In our analyses, we consider several individual-level factors that might impact support for civic freedoms. First, previous studies have suggested that women are less supportive of democracy across Africa (Konte and Klasen 2016; García-Peñalosa and Konte 2014). Second, we might expect *a priori* that older individuals are more likely to accept restrictions on civic freedoms, because they might value security and the maintenance of the *status quo* more than younger individuals. Third, those living in urban areas might be less supportive of restrictions, because they are more familiar with the work of CSOs and have greater experience with media pluralism. Finally, modernization theory predicts that individuals with higher levels of education and wealth will be more likely to demand input into governance, and thus more supportive of democracy (Lipset 1959; Cheeseman 2014; Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Evans and Rose 2007). Similarly, individuals with fewer resources simply might not prioritize seemingly esoteric issues such as media and associational freedoms. As disability rights activist David Anyaele put it, "Don't forget that an average person on the street of Nigeria is already hungry. We just came out of COVID-19 lock down, and people are also struggling to put food in their stomach. So issues around social media clamping or not clamping are not the first-class priorities of an average Nigerian on the streets."[103] In this vein, Bratton *et al.* (2004, 182) find that better-educated, wealthier, urban-dwelling, and male Africans are more likely to support democracy as a regime. Following this, all analyses include controls for urban/rural residence,[104] education,[105] age, gender, and lived poverty,[106] as well as country fixed effects.[107] Finally, as robustness checks, we also often control for affiliation with the ruling party, since that could be associated with support for government-imposed restrictions. We do not do this in our main models, however, because such coding is not available for Eswatini, Sudan, or Tunisia; thus, robustness checks including ruling party affiliation exclude those three countries.[108] Given the ordinal nature of the outcome variables, we use ordered logistic regression in all models, unless otherwise specified.

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[103] Interview with David Anyaele, 8 August 2021.

[104] Urban/rural residence is not included in analyses of phone survey data, because that variable was only collected in Uganda.

[105] Education is a 10-point variable, with responses including no formal schooling (0), informal schooling only (including Koranic schooling) (1), some primary schooling (2), primary school completed (3), intermediate school or some secondary school/high school (4), secondary school/high school completed (5), post-secondary qualifications (e.g. diploma) (6), some university (7), university completed (8), and post-graduate (9). The same categories were utilized in analyses of phone surveys.

[106] Lived-poverty scores are constructed by averaging across responses to questions indicating how often the individual went without each of five items in the last six months: food, water, medical care, cooking fuel, and cash income. Possible responses included never (0), just once or twice (1), several times (2), many times (3), and always (4). Because of time constraints, the phone survey included only one measure of lived poverty. Respondents were asked generally how often in the last six months they went without "basic necessities," with food, drinkable water, and medicine named. Possible responses included never (0), once or twice (1), several times (2), and always (3).

[107] Standard errors are clustered by enumeration area for analyses of Afrobarometer data. Various types of information were collected on locality in each country for the phone survey, meaning that we cannot cluster by a standardized geographic unit in pooled analyses of those data.

[108] Analyses using the latter were not conducted in Sudan or Tunisia, given military rule in the former and the independent status of the president in the latter. Parties have officially been banned in Eswatini since 1973. Parties coded as affiliated with the government include the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Angola); Bloc Républicain and Union Progressiste (Benin); Botswana Democratic Party (Botswana); Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (Burkina Faso); Movimento para Democracia (Cabo Verde); Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais (Cameroon); Rassemblement des Républicains (Côte d'Ivoire); Ethiopian People's Revolutionary

To ease interpretation, we plot results in figures below. In each figure, the vertical line represents no estimated relationship between the variable of interest and the focus outcome. Horizontal lines indicate 95% confidence intervals around the coefficients. In other words, if the horizontal line crosses the vertical line, we cannot say with the designated level of confidence (i.e. 95%) that there is a relationship between the factor of interest and the focus outcome, holding other variables included in the model constant.

5.3. Perceived threats: Division, false information, and sovereignty threats

Our first set of hypotheses addressed perceived threats to national unity and order (H_1), informational veracity (H_2), and national sovereignty (H_3) potentially stemming from open civic spaces.

5.3.1. Violence, disorder, and division (H_1)

To measure perceptions of threats to national unity and general security, we draw on several Afrobarometer questions from the Round 8 survey on fears about and actual experiences with violence and intimidation. First, respondents were asked the frequency with which they feared violence in the last election:

> *During the last national election campaign, in [year], how much did you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? Not at all, a little bit, somewhat, or a lot?*

Nearly two-thirds (65%) did not fear violence at all, 15% did a little, 8% somewhat, 10% a lot, and 2% didn't know.

Next, individuals reported whether they experienced violence or intimidation in the last election:

> *Have you actually personally experienced this type of violence in the past two years: Violence at a political rally or public protest?*

Almost nine out of 10 (87%) reported not experiencing violence or intimidation associated with elections, while 8% did (5% didn't know).

Third, respondents indicated the extent to which they perceived the nation to be united:

> *[Nationality] are very diverse. They come from different religions, ethnic groups, political parties, and economic and social backgrounds. Overall, would you say that there is more that unites all [nationality] as one people, or more that divides them? Much more that unites us, somewhat more that unites us, somewhat more that divides us, or much more that divides us?*

Democratic Front (Ethiopia); Parti Démocratique Gabonais (Gabon); National People's Party (Gambia); New Patriotic Party (Ghana); Rassemblement du Peuple de Guinée (Guinea); Jubilee Alliance Party (Kenya); All Basotho Convention (Lesotho); Coalition for Democratic Change (Liberia); Democratic Progressive Party (Malawi); Rassemblement pour le Mali (Mali); Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (Mauritius); Parti de la Justice et du Développement, Rassemblement National des Indépendants, Mouvement Populaire, Union Constitutionelle, Union Socialiste des Forces Populaires, and Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme (Morocco); Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Mozambique); SWAPO Party of Namibia (Namibia); Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme, PNDS Tarayya (Niger); All Progressive Congress (Nigeria); Alliance Pour la République (Senegal); Sierra Leone People's Party (Sierra Leone); African National Congress (South Africa); Chama Cha Mapinduzi (Tanzania); Union pour la République (Togo); National Resistance Movement (Uganda); Patriotic Front (Zambia); and Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zimbabwe). About one in four respondents (24%) were coded as supporting the ruling party in their country.

A plurality – 41% – said there was much more that united them and 24% that there was somewhat more that united than divided; 17% said there was somewhat more that divided, while 16% that there was much more that divided (2% didn't know).

Finally, we draw on a question measuring the extent to which individuals associate multiparty competition with conflict:

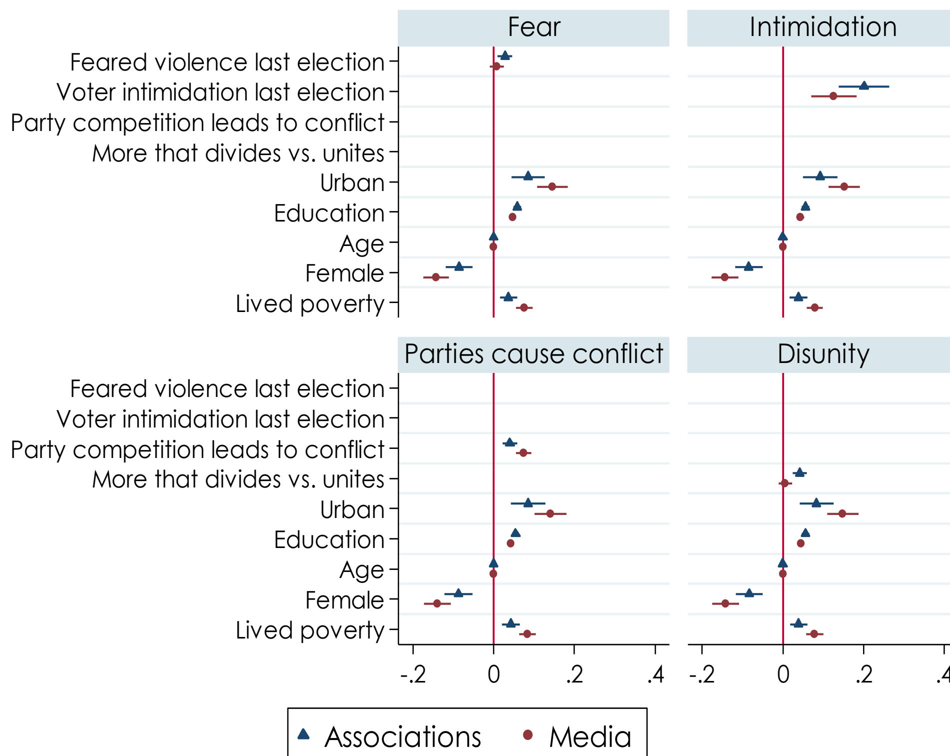
> *In your opinion, how often in this country does competition between political parties lead to violent conflict? Always, often, rarely, or never?*[109]

Nearly a quarter (24%) thought party competition always resulted in conflict, 33% that it often did, 26% that it rarely did, 15% that it never did, and 2% didn't know.

We code all four variables such that higher values indicate greater fear, experience with intimidation or violence, association of party competition with conflict, and perceptions of national disunity. Thus, since the outcome variables are coded with higher values indicating greater support for freedoms, H_1 predicts negative correlations between each of these independent variables with our dependent variables.

Results from regression analyses for these variables related to H_1 on violence, fear, and division are reported in Figure 1. We find no support for our hypothesis; in fact, in every case in which relationships are statistically significant, greater concerns in these areas are associated with *greater* support for civic freedoms. In two cases – fear of violence in the past and perceptions of disunity – the independent variables are not significantly associated with support for media freedoms. These results are unchanged when we control for ruling party support.

Figure 1: Tests of H_1 (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

[109] This question was not asked in Eswatini.

Analyses of our phone survey data also yield no evidence supporting H_1. In those surveys, we asked individuals how much they agreed with the following:

> *There is too much hate speech in media in this country*; and

> *Civil society organizations often provoke division in our country*.

Possible responses included "strongly disagree," "somewhat disagree," "somewhat agree," and "strongly agree." In those cases, we explicitly connected media (in the former) and CSOs (in the latter) to problems related to division. And in both cases, there was no statistically significant relationship between perceptions and support for civic freedoms (b=-.04, p=.17 for hate speech and media freedom; b=-.04, p=.12 for CSO division and associational freedom). Neither set of observational data therefore yields support for the notion that concerns over security or disunity are associated with support for restrictions on civic spaces. In fact, if anything, we find exactly the opposite; Those concerned with those issues are actually more supportive of civic freedoms.

Afrobarometer Round 8 did ask individuals more directly whether they supported censorship for hate speech:

> *Let's talk about whether the government should be able to limit the sharing of news, information, or opinions on radio and TV, in newspapers, or on the internet and social media. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of hate speech, that is, news, information, or opinions designed to attack or vilify certain groups in society.*

This question is more specific than the general one on support for media freedom; there was no analogous question on support for limiting CSOs that promote division. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of respondents supported censoring hate speech (36% strongly and 36% somewhat), while 23% did not (10% strongly and 13% somewhat, with 4% choosing neither and 3% saying they didn't know). This figure is considerably higher than general support for limits on media freedom; this suggests that many individuals might not be comfortable with giving power to government to limit media generally, but become more open when particular issues are presented.

Here again, however, we find that those with the greatest concerns about violence and disunity are actually not more supportive of censorship (Figure 2). In fact, when it comes to experience with and fear of violence, we find the opposite; such experiences and emotions are associated with *rejection* of censorship of hate speech. There is no statistically significant relationship with regard to equation of party competition with conflict and perceptions of national unity, however. These findings hold when controlling for ruling party support. Although we should be careful not to draw conclusions about causality from these findings, they suggest that those who have felt most vulnerable with regard to political violence do not see government-imposed restrictions on media as the solution; rather, they are more likely to embrace openness, potentially because their experiences have left them fearful of government.

When looking at Internet restrictions generally, we see again that experience with fear and intimidation are both positively associated with pro-freedom positions (Figure 3), while equation of party competition with conflict is not significantly associated with attitudes on this front. However, the one outlier finding in all of these analyses is with regards to disunity: those who perceive higher levels of disunity are *less* supportive of Internet freedom than those who perceive higher levels of unity. (These results all hold when controlling for ruling party support.) This last finding suggests that, with specific reference to the Internet, concerns about national integrity and identity could drive support for Internet restrictions, but we note that the same relationship does not manifest when looking at media generally.

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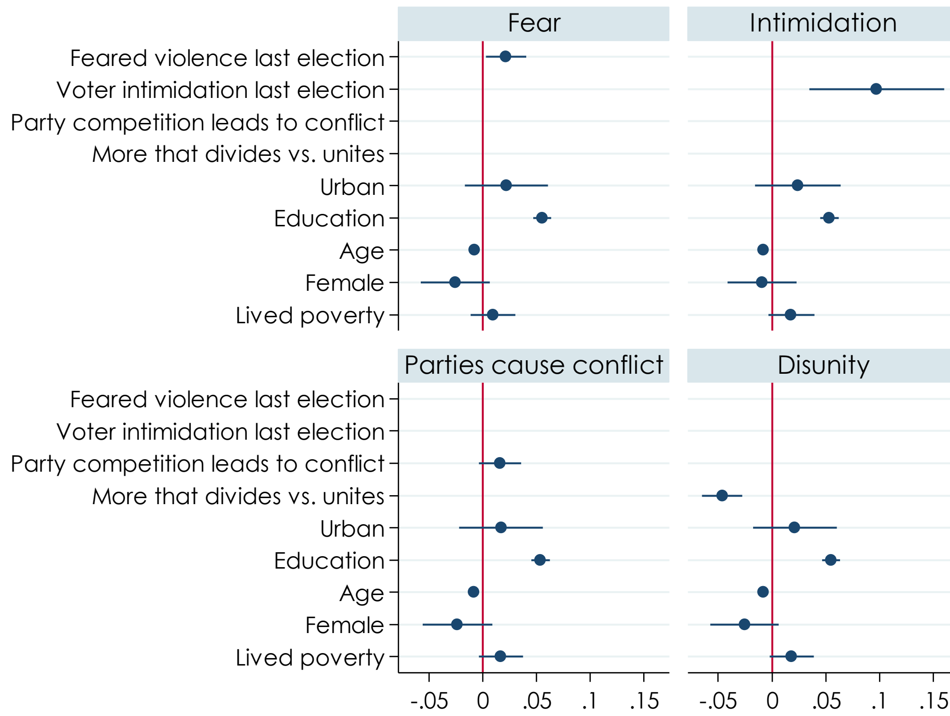
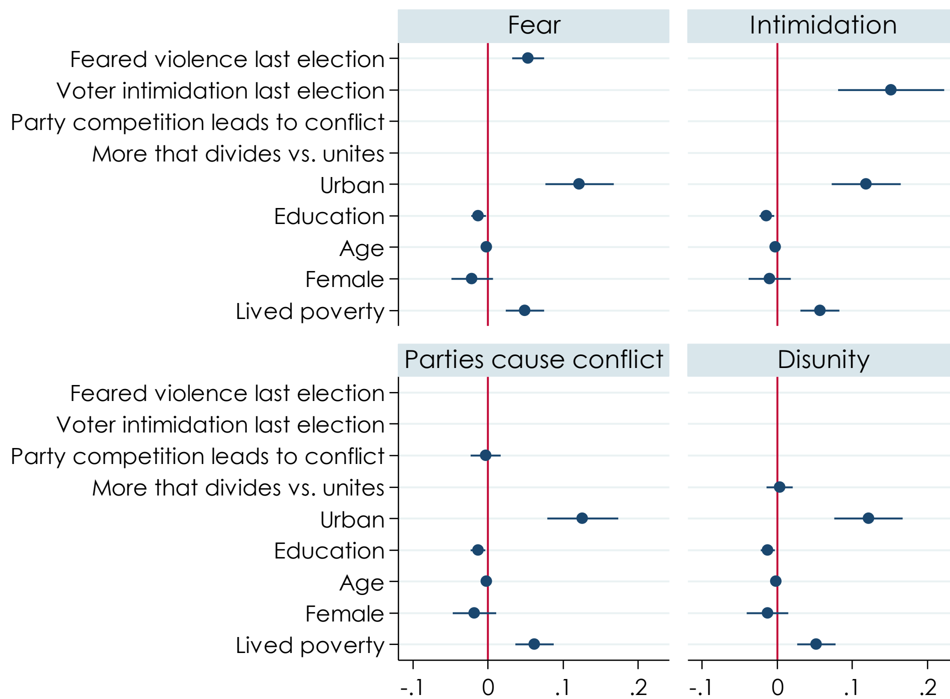
Figure 2: Support for censorship of hate speech (H_1) (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

Figure 3: Support for Internet freedom (H_1) (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

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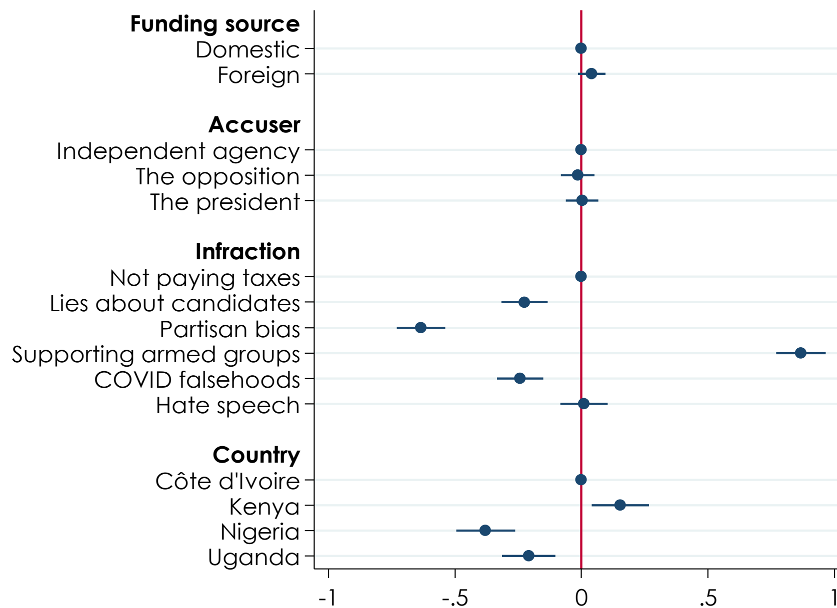
Next, we explore these relationships in our experimental data. Again, the experiment only considered support for restrictions on media, not associational life. We plot the average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for the conjoint experiment in Figure 4. Here, points that fall to the right of the vertical line indicate that the attribute level is associated with more support for restrictions on media than the baseline level, while points that fall to the left of the vertical line indicate that the attribute level is associated with less support for restrictions on media than the baseline. Two of the levels of our infractions attribute related to H_1: 1) propagating hate speech and 2) spreading messages supportive of armed groups. As a reminder, our baseline level here is not paying taxes.

In Figure 4, we see that, in the sample that pools across countries, subjects did not call for harsher penalties against radio stations that propagated hate speech than for those that did not pay taxes, since the 95% confidence interval here crosses the vertical line at zero. We must be careful, however, not to interpret this as suggesting that subjects are unconcerned about hate speech and therefore reject penalizing radio stations that propagate it. Rather, they are no more or less supportive of penalizing radio stations that propagate hate speech than those that do not pay their taxes. In other words, when it comes to restrictions on media, subjects in our sample saw hate speech as equally deserving of punishment as tax evasion. This finding does not directly refute H_1, but it does challenge the notion that concerns over hate speech are driving calls for media restrictions in Africa.

Figure 4: Support for sanctions on hypothetical radio station (conjoint experiment)



Note: Analyses include individual-level controls (not reported). Standard errors clustered by subject.

Looking at results by country, we see that Kenyans were actually significantly more supportive of penalties for hate speech than they were for tax evasion. This could be because Kenyans are relatively unconcerned about tax evasion, but the more plausible explanation is that these findings manifest because Kenya's experience with hate speech on radio apparently contributing to 2007-8 post-election violence has left a significant portion of its population amenable to restrictions to limit such language. On the other hand, Nigerians and Ugandans are significantly less supportive of penalties for hate speech than they are for tax evasion. Ivoirians are equally supportive of penalties for hate speech and tax evasion.

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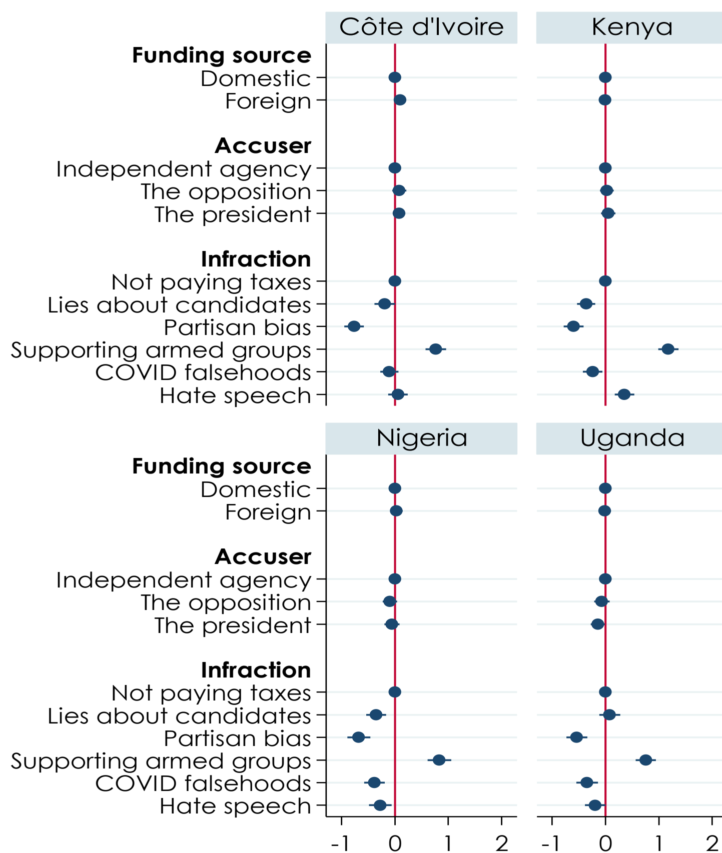
The one finding supportive of H_1 is that, in our experiment, we find that, of all the possible infractions a radio station could be accused of committing, supporting armed groups evoked the harshest responses from our subjects. Results are similar in all four countries (Figure 5). This suggests that, when a particular outlet is identified as directly contributing to insecurity, by supporting an armed group, individuals are then much more likely to call for sanctions against that outlet. However, while recent years have seen moves against outlets in countries like Cameroon and Ethiopia for such ostensible reasons, most countries have not seen governments calling out particular outlets for such reasons. Therefore, while we have evidence here that individuals would support restrictions for stations engaged in such behavior, the infrequency of such incidents in the contemporary real world suggests such concerns are not likely driving general support for media restrictions across the continent.

Figure 5: Support for sanctions on hypothetical radio station, by country (conjoint experiment)



Note: Analyses include individual-level controls (not reported). Standard errors clustered by subject.

Finally, the focus group discussions did not yield significant evidence that concerns about security and national unity are at the forefront of driving support for restrictions on media or civil society. Some participants did allude to harmful language, or to politicians using media to stoke inter-ethnic division (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021) and called for action against media that spread such messages (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021; Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021). In reference to social media, one participant said, "The pen is created for writing. But I can also use it to stab

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somebody. So, if it is misused, it becomes bad" (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021). And others made ties directly to violence:

> *If you look at so many civil wars that happened in African countries, it was caused by the media, whether traditional or social media (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).*
>
> *We know that Nigerians are actually emotional people. That means something one says on television can incite violence (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).*
>
> *Some things that one says in public are actually insightful. So, to that end, it is necessary for the government to limit what can be said publicly. Right now, there are so many issues such that different parts of this country [Nigeria] want to secede. … But we are trying to keep a country together. In order to do that, the news or information coming from these various factions have to be limited. That makes it necessary for the government to make laws on hate speech (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).*

However, this individual immediately went on to warn that governments can use the threat of harmful language to squelch speech freedoms, more generally:

> *But then they have to be clearer. They just put hate speech without defining it. What is hate speech? It is not clear. So, it is left for the government to declare things that people say as hate speech or whatever (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).*

Further, critiques of the media were much more likely to focus on sensationalism and negativity, more generally, than divisive and hateful language, specifically:

> *[If I am the media], I will do everything I can to make the news sensational as possible … so that people can listen and pay me. … Everything still boils down to the fact that I want to make profits (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).*
>
> *If it bleeds, it leads. So any story that is bleeding will likely lead (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).*
>
> *During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was that fear because it was propagated in the media that people should not go out. People did a whole lot of outrageous things. So, I think that needs to be curbed (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).*
>
> *During COVID-19, [the media] keep saying people die every day but people also recover. But they report more of negative than positive. That is the problem of the media, I think. … So, when those market women gather, they talk about those bad news (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).*

In fact, there were far more references to the threats that unregulated media content can pose to youths and morality, generally, than concerns about insecurity (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021; Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021; Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021). Some mentioned threats from child/human traffickers and sex predators (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021). At once focus group in Mpondwe Village (rural) in Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda, 15 November 2021), critiques included:

> *[People] post bad things on social media.*
>
> *[It] has become addictive to an extent of spoiling people's homes, since the marrieds have no time for each other while on WhatsApp.*
>
> *Some use it to steal from other people.*

There are movies they put on social media…involving killing, which has trained young people on how to do it, making it look easy for them to kill.

It has washed away culture. For example, the dress code has changed. Young people are learning sexual acts on social media.

The drama series [soap operas] aired on TVs have made women fail to work while watching them, and others' families have failed. Food gets burned.

Some programs are meant for adults, and they are good, but children sneak and watch and listen to them even though they are aired late at night, like "Trespass," which talks about sexual and family affairs on Radio West.

The music shows which have almost naked dancers and singers, kissing, which has resulted into children kissing themselves when they are even brothers and sisters.

[Social media] has consumed a lot of time for the youth, and most of the information is not so good for their development.

In Uganda, in particular, multiple focus group participants critiqued CSOs for promoting LGBTQ rights (Uganda FGD 2). Such concerns about youth were not limited to Uganda:

[Youth] are hiding and watching adult content (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village (Kenya), 20 December 2021).

Children are becoming disobedient in the home (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village (Kenya), 20 December 2021).

[P]eople are used to watching porn nowadays. And there are those that are into Internet fraud (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

[S]o many people have been defrauded through…social media (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Participants at a focus group in Rangau (Rural) in Kenya's Kajiado Sub-County (21 December 2021) cited all manner of threats from media for youth, including cyberbullying, cultural erosion ("people are living like they see on TV"), con artists and cybercrime, and animosity between fans of different football teams.

And one focus group participant even blamed social media for "poor eyesight and deformed spinal cords" (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021).

In sum, we cannot conclude that people are not concerned about divisive media content and organizations. However, we see little evidence, in our large-*N* observational or experimental data, or in our qualitative data from focus group discussions, that such concerns are likely at the forefront in the minds of most members of the general public if and when they call for curbs on civic freedoms. In fact, the large-*N* observational data suggest that, if anything, those most concerned about violence and lack of national unity are actually more, not less, supportive of civic freedoms, although we cannot make an argument that those concerns drive support for civic spaces.

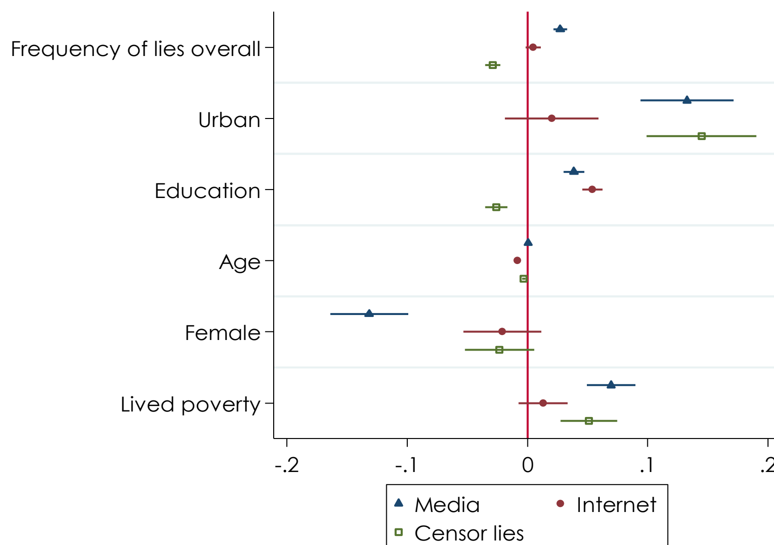
5.3.2. False information (H_2)

Next, we hypothesized that individuals who perceive more potential threats from mis- and disinformation would be more likely to support limits to civic freedoms, particularly around the media. Afrobarometer's Round 8 survey included a new subset of questions on the extent to which various actors – government officials, politicians and parties, social media users, and

activists and interest groups – disseminate false information.[110] People were most likely to say that social media users spread lies "often" (35%), with only 9% saying they "never" did so. In fact, a strong majority – 63% – said social media users spread lies at least "sometimes." The next most commonly cited group was politicians and parties: 63% said those actors spread lies "sometimes" or "often," although more said social media users spread false information "often" than politicians and parties do (29%). Nearly equal numbers said media and government spread lies "sometimes" or "often" (50% for both), while a slightly smaller number (44%) said the same for activists and interest groups. We generate an overall assessment of problems with false information by summing individuals' assessments across actors.[111]

Here, our findings seem to run counter to our hypothesis: our overall index of perceptions of false information is *positively* associated with support for media freedom (Figure 6). In other words, as people were more likely to say that false information was more common and shared by a larger number of groups, they were more likely to support media freedom. Initially, this could suggest that individuals do not see government-imposed restrictions on the media as solutions to false information. And the false information index is positively related to support for Internet freedoms, although the relationship is not statistically significant at conventional levels (p=.13).

Figure 6: False information and support for media freedom (H_2) (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

However, the Round 8 survey also included a unique question on censorship of false information:

> *Let's talk about whether the government should be able to limit the sharing of news, information, or opinions on radio and TV, in newspapers, or on the internet and social media. Please tell me whether you agree or disagree that the government should be able to limit or prohibit sharing of news or information that is false.*

[110] Respondents were not asked about activists and interest groups in Benin, Cameroon, Gambia, Liberia, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Togo, Zambia, or Zimbabwe.

[111] This summary measure does not include the assessment of activists and interest groups, since that question was not asked in 14 countries. To construct the index (alpha=.76), we code responses of never as 0, rarely as 1, sometimes as 2, and often as 3.

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An overwhelming 77% agreed that government should be able to censor false information (34% strongly and 43% somewhat), vs. only 19% who disagreed (8% strongly and 11% somewhat, with 2% choosing neither and 2% responding that they didn't know).

Here, we do see a statistically significant correlation showing that, as the false information index increases, support for censorship of false information specifically increases, as well. (Again, we consistently code outcome variables such that higher values indicate greater support for the civic freedom.) This suggests that individuals who see false information to be more prevalent are not willing to give governments *carte blanche* power to restrict media freedoms, but they might be more supportive of targeted efforts against false information in particular. All of these findings are robust to the inclusion of a dummy indicating support for the ruling party.

Examining the specific components of the false information index adds further weight to this interpretation. To the extent that individuals think that it is the government that is itself spreading false information, it does not make sense that empowering government to impose restrictions on content generally would be a preferred solution. In fact, it isn't. Those who saw government as more likely to spread false information were also significantly more likely to support media freedoms generally (b=.13, p=.00) and Internet freedoms specifically (b=.06, p=.00). They were still more likely to support censorship of false information, however (b=-.06, p=.00). Those who blamed the media for false information were, understandably, also less supportive of media freedoms generally (b=-.05, p=.00), more supportive of Internet restrictions (b=-.01, p=.00), and more supportive of censorship of false information (b=-.04, p=.00). Citing social media usage for spreading false information was also associated with greater support of Internet restrictions (b=-.06, p=.00). Finally, we surprisingly do not find that people who blame activists and interest groups for spreading false information are more likely to support restrictions on freedom of association; in fact, they are less likely to do so (b=.03, p=.02).

In the phone survey, we asked respondents the extent to which they agreed that "*Media in this country spread too many lies*." Here, in an ordered logistic regression, we do find a significant, negative relationship between perceptions of the frequency of lies in media and support for media freedom (b=-.09, p=.00). This finding is consistent with those from the Afrobarometer Round 8 data: when individuals think media, specifically, spread false information, they are significantly more likely to call for restrictions on media.

The experimental data suggest, however, that, when it comes to possible reasons to clamp down on media, false information is not high on individuals' priorities (Figure 4). Subjects called for significantly milder penalties for hypothetical radio stations that broadcast lies about COVID-19 and politicians' private lies, in relation to stations that did not pay their taxes. Again, we cannot conclude from these results that individuals do not support restrictions on media for false information–in fact, the observational data suggest that they do, at least when they see media themselves as the purveyors of the false information. Rather, they consider other infractions, including tax evasion, hate speech, and supporting armed groups as more worthy of harsher penalties. Finally, however, we note that there are country-by-country differences here (Figure 5). In Côte d'Ivoire, subjects supported penalties for both types of false information at the same rate as tax evasion. In Uganda, subjects' judgments of tax evasion and lies about politicians' private lives were equally harsh, but they judged lies about COVID-19 to be less deserving of punishment. And Nigerian subjects saw both types of false information as less deserving of punishment than tax evasion, but equally as deserving of punishment as hate speech. Importantly, though, neither type of information was deemed more deserving of punishment than tax evasion in any of the four focus countries, suggesting, again, that it is not necessarily among the most significant drivers of calls for media restrictions.

Finally, we see in our focus groups that participants did raise concerns about false information but, as was the case with hate speech, it received less attention than other media-related issues,

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such as age-inappropriate, frivolous and sensational, or con-artistry content. Some, like several Ugandans, pointed to false news, such as the reported death of the *kabaka* (monarch of the Buganda Kingdom) (Mpondwe Village (rural), Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda), 15 November 2021). Some individuals cited multiple examples:

> *There are some [social media accounts] who also lie a lot. Last time they showed on Facebook that Blaise Compaore died. However, this is false. They showed that Gbagbo was released. I started dancing. I was even ready to go get my old bottle of wine to come and drink. It was my son who held me back. He told me, but dad, we are in corona time. If Gbagbo was free, wouldn't you see people wearing a face mask? It was at this moment that he held me back a little (Cocody, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).*

Some participants cited traditional media for false information:

> *Some of the information on TV is incorrect. … They must occasionally apologize for broadcasting incorrect information. They don't do much fact-checking (Rangau (Rural), Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).*

Some saw the intense competition for audiences–and, thus, revenue–as driving the frenzy to report first, and verify second (if ever):

> *More and more the media no longer cares about ethics, and it's all about the business, so much so that they have been known to report un-researched facts, and in other cases lied outright and has not even had the grace to issue a clarification (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021).*
>
> *Since everyone wants to run their newspaper, there are many who write what they haven't seen (Abobo, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) (8 November 2021).*

But many more blamed digital media, with some comparing it negatively to traditional media:

> *At a TV station, it is not everybody that is allowed to present on TV. But on social media, one can just pick their phones and type anything they want to type be it true or false, and it will go worldwide or viral (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).*

Concerns over false information on social media – and its potential relationship to violence – were especially prevalent at one focus group of women working in media in Lagos (18 November 2021):

> *Fake news is everywhere. During that EndSARS, it was said that there is this group called One Million Boys that were going round to rob people; they will take everything in your house…That was a fake news. One day, somebody just sent a WhatsApp broadcast that they were on the second street from ours…So, they create unnecessary panic.*
>
> *When there was this xenophobia in South Africa, most of the videos we saw were old videos of things that had happened in the past. They made the whole matter seem escalated.*
>
> *It is not every story on the Internet that is true. But how can we get the genuine ones? What are we getting from the information that we see on the Internet and social media platforms? Is it not the wrong information being talked about? ... I don't disseminate what I am not sure of.*
>
> *And this is the advantage that traditional media has over the social media. There is no reporter that will report anything that does not have a verifiable source. They double-check to be sure that the stories are true.*

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There is an editor that must edit what one will say. If one says anything on radio that is implicating, the editor gets in trouble. But there is no editor for social media.

A mixed-gender group in Lagos raised similar issues about social media (17 November 2021):

The social media is a crazy place, as people put up all sorts of things there.

And the issue in Nigeria is that a large chunk of the Nigerian population does not really understand the thing about news.

There are a lot of quacks that are not professional journalists and are taking advantage of the social media spaces to report anything as they see it. Most times they flash rumors as news.

I have septuagenarians that are more active on WhatsApp than even younger ones. They are the ones that share the unverified news that go viral. I get more videos and unverified news from my mother than any other person. That is almost every day.

In summary, our analyses suggest that those who see media as spreading lies are significantly more likely to call for government-imposed curbs on those media, although concerns about false information in the public realm are not significantly associated with support for media limits. Further, our experimental data suggest that, to the extent that individuals see media outlets spreading lies as a problem, they do not rate it particularly highly as a concern.

5.3.3. H_3: Concerns about national sovereignty

We hypothesize that individuals who feel that foreign actors' influence is mostly negative will be more supportive of limits on civic spaces. Afrobarometer's Round 8 survey asked respondents to rate the influence of five sets of foreign actors: the country's former colonial power (e.g. United Kingdom, France, Portugal), China, the United States, a regional power (e.g. Nigeria, South Africa), and Russia:

And what about the following countries? Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on [country] is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

China generated the most positive assessments (75%, vs. 17% negative), with the United States essentially the same (74% positive, vs. 16% negative). Smaller majorities viewed a regional superpower (65% positive/21% negative) their former colonial power (59% positive/33% negative), and Russia (53% positive/25% negative) positively. We generate an index measuring overall sentiments towards these actors (Cronbach's alpha=.73) by averaging across valid responses per respondent.[112]

As Figure 7 shows, we do not find support for our expectation that negative evaluations of international actors drive stronger support for government limits on civic freedoms. Evaluations of international actors are not correlated with support for associational or media freedoms. We do find that evaluations of international actors are positively and significantly correlated with support for Internet freedoms. However, given that focus of foreign influence has been on funding for organizations and traditional media outlets, this finding regarding the Internet is somewhat surprising. These findings are all robust to the inclusion of the dummy for ruling party support.

[112] Respondents were not asked about every actor in every country. In Liberia, respondents were not asked about the former colonial power. In Kenya, respondents were not asked about a regional superpower. And respondents in six countries--Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, and Uganda--were not asked about Russia.

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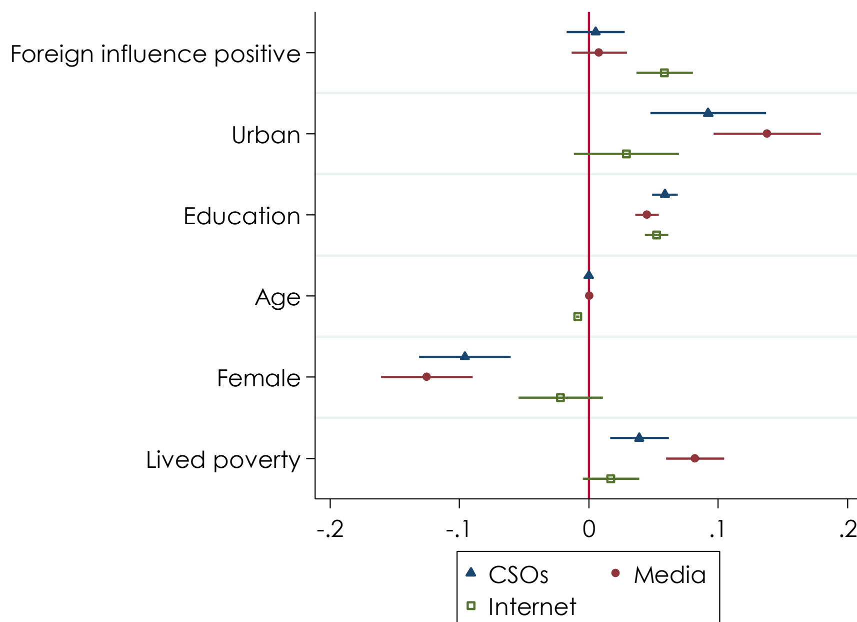
Figure 7: Tests of H_3 (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

The phone surveys measured respondents' concerns about foreign influence on civic spaces more directly than the Round 8 Afrobarometer surveys did. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed with the following statements:

> *There is too much foreign influence over media in this country.*
>
> *There is too much foreign influence over civil society in this country.*

Respondents generally were concerned about foreign influence in both spaces. 58% agreed (25% strongly and 33% somewhat) that there is too much foreign influence in media, while 34% disagreed (14% strongly and 20% somewhat, with 8% saying they did not know). And nearly two thirds (63%) said there is too much foreign influence in civil society (31% strongly and 32% somewhat), with only 30% disagreeing (13% strongly and 17% somewhat, with 8% saying they didn't know). Here, we did find significant relationships: as individuals' agreement with the statements that foreign influence of civil society and media increase, their support for civic freedoms decrease (b=-.06, p=.04 for civil society and b=-.10, p=.00 for media).

However, the experimental data do not suggest that concerns over foreign influence drive popular support for restrictions on civic freedoms, at least in the media space. Here, in the pooled data, radio stations described as being funded primarily by foreign sources do not elicit calls for harsher penalties than those funded primarily by domestic ones (Figure 4). This holds in three of the four countries: the exception is Côte d'Ivoire, where foreign-funded stations accused of infractions do generate calls for harsher penalties (Figure 5). This might be because concerns about the influence of Françafrique were on the front burner in the region at the time, with anti-France protests in Mali culminating in the withdrawal of French forces from the country in February 2022 (Onishi, Maclean, and Breeden 2022).

Finally, we see no evidence from our focus group discussions that concerns over international influence were at the forefront of participants' minds when considering civic spaces in their countries. In fact, such concerns were never mentioned at a single focus group meeting.

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In summary, evidence on the effects of concerns over foreign influence on civic spaces is mixed. The Afrobarometer Round 8 data find no relationship between assessments of multiple foreign actors' influence and support for civic freedoms, while the phone surveys, which measure attitudes about influence on civic spaces more specifically, do suggest that individuals who see foreign influence as excessive are more likely to call for government-imposed limits on those spaces. Finally, the conjoint experiment suggests that funding sources–domestic or foreign–do not influence individuals' assessments of whether particular radio stations should be sanctioned for infractions (except in Côte d'Ivoire), nor was the issue raised in focus group discussions.

5.4. Partisanship and polarization

5.4.1. H_4: Elite cues

Individuals' attitudes about civic spaces might largely be determined by their pre-existing, independent support levels for various political elites who advocate for or against restrictions. In other words, individuals will form their attitudes at least partly on the basis of what they hear from political leaders – or referents, to use the social science terminology (Downs 1957), moving their attitudes towards those of elites they favor and away from those of elites they oppose.

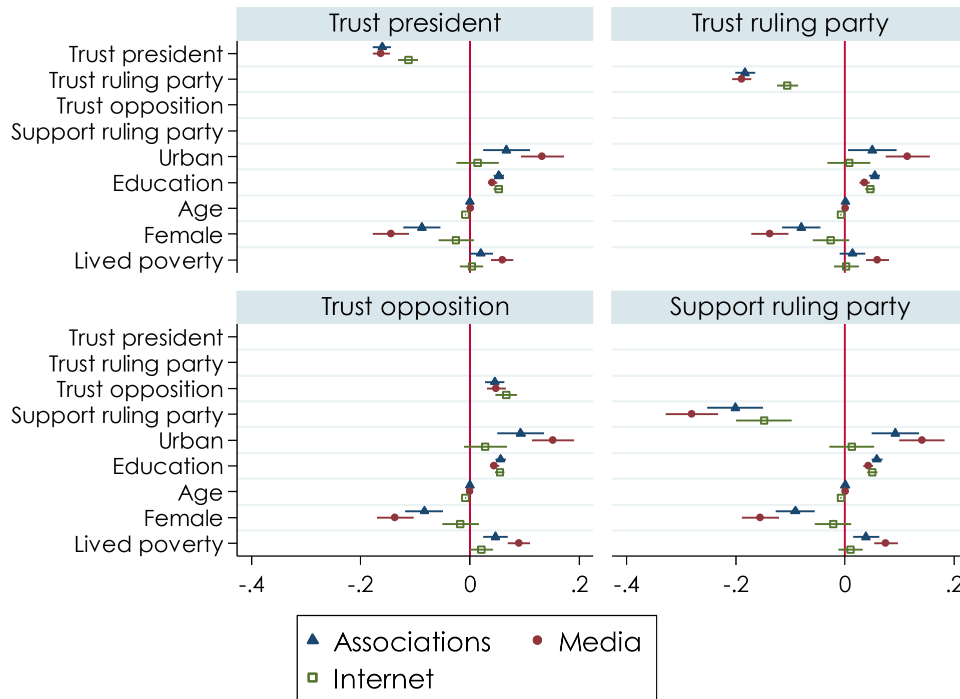
In our analyses here, we adopt an admittedly simplistic approach, with the assumption that governments are more likely to support restrictions to civic spaces, while oppositions are more likely to oppose them. (Our experimental analyses, discussed below, do not rely on such assumptions.) To measure support for these actors, we draw on four Afrobarometer questions measuring 1) trust in the president, 2) ruling party, and 3) opposition, and whether or not the respondent indicates 4) support for the ruling party.

Generally, those interviewed were more supportive of the government than opposition. 30% trusted the president "a lot" (vs. 24% who did not trust the president at all), and 22% strongly trusted the ruling party (vs. 31% who did not trust it at all). Conversely, only 12% trusted the opposition strongly, while 34% did not trust it at all. Less than a quarter (24%) of respondents identified with the ruling party in their country, however; this is, therefore, a stronger indicator of support for the incumbent.

We consistently find that, across measures of political leanings and outcomes, those who are closer to those in government are more supportive of restrictions on civic spaces, as hypothesized (Figure 8). Trust in the president and ruling party are significantly and negatively correlated with support for associational and media freedoms. Those who identify with the ruling party are less likely to support these freedoms. These findings all support H_{4A}. We also find support for $H_{4B,}$ in that trust in the opposition is positively associated with support for civic freedoms.

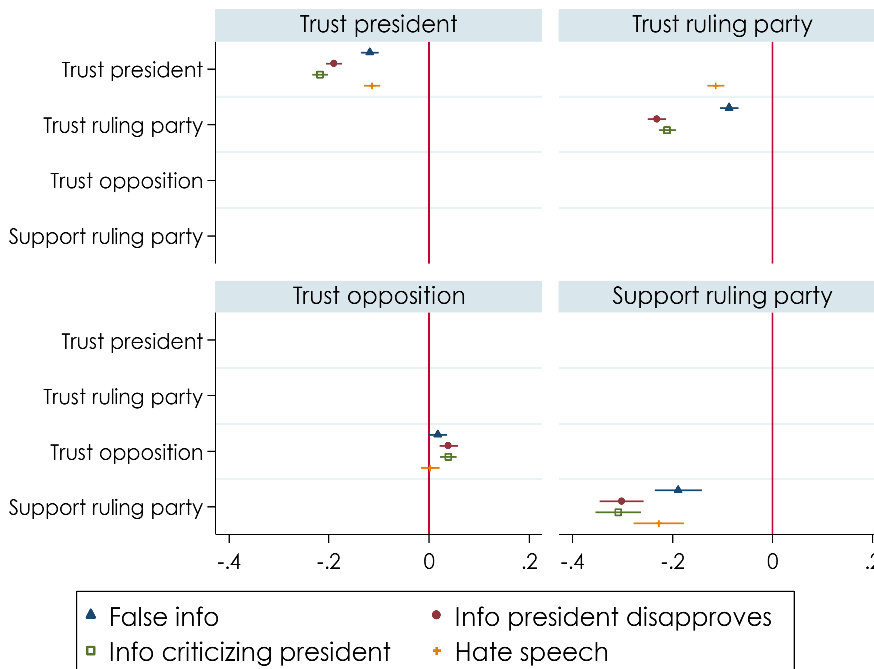
These patterns extend to several other measures that look specifically at censorship (Figure 9). As expected, those who trust the president, trust the ruling party, and identify with the ruling party are more likely to support censorship of content that the government disapproves of and criticisms of the president. Greater trust in the opposition is negatively associated with support for these types of censorship. We also see that indicators of support for the government are also positively and significantly correlated with support for censorship of false information and hate speech, while trust in the opposition is negatively correlated with support for censorship of false information (and not significantly associated with support for censorship of hate speech). Since censorship of these kinds of content should not necessarily privilege government or opposition in the general case, these patterns suggest that those with warmer attitudes about the government are more willing to put their trust in government to engage in censorship, while those with colder feelings about the government (and warmer feelings about the opposition) are less likely to want to empower rulers with the censors' pen, even to limit false information.

Figure 8: Tests of H4A & B (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

Figure 9: Tests of H4A & B (Afrobarometer Round 8)



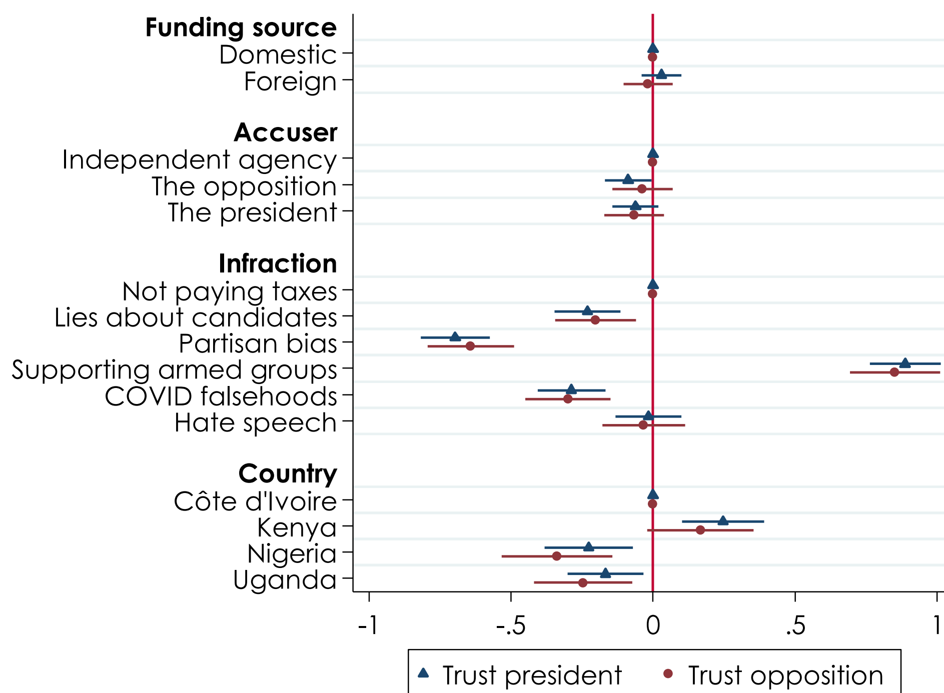
Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects and individual-level controls (not reported).

As noted previously, these results should be interpreted with caution, given the theoretical possibility that individuals' attitudes about parties and prominent politicians are affected by their stances on civic freedoms (e.g. an individual who believes that freedom of association should be limited might support a president who is placing limits in that area *because* of those moves). Again, we address these potential concerns about causation with our experimental results.

Respondents to the phone survey were asked to rate their trust in the president and opposition, using the same question wording used in Afrobarometer Round 8. Here, we also see a negative and statistically significant correlation between trust in the president and support for freedom of association (b=-.27, p=.00) and the media (b=-.27, p=.00). However, in this sample, we find no significant relationship between trust in the opposition and support for freedom of association (b=-.00, p=.86) or the media (b=.00, p=.98). Thus, the phone survey data support H_{4A}, but not H_{4B}.

Finally, we included an attribute in our embedded conjoint experiment to measure how elite cues affect attitudes about media restrictions. Again, we varied the source of the accusation against the radio station, with possibilities including the president, the opposition, and an independent agency.[113] To test H_{4A} and H_{4B}, we conduct separate analyses, first on those who report trusting the government "somewhat" or "a lot," and then on those trusting the opposition at the same levels.[114] Results are presented in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Support for sanctions on hypothetical radio station, by partisan trust (conjoint experiment)



Note: Analyses include individual-level controls (not reported). Standard errors clustered by subject.

[113] We did not include any specific questions in the focus group discussions on whether people respond to leaders' cues, and no participants raised the possibility that individuals are following leaders when forming opinions on civic freedoms.

[114] Note that individuals could appear in both analyses, since some were particularly trusting of both sets of political actors.

Here we see that those who trust the president and those who trust the opposition respond similarly to accusations made by the president. Namely, they support sanctions on the radio station at equal levels as they do when accusations are made by an independent agency. Another way to interpret this is that people see accusations from the president as compelling (or as non-compelling) as accusations from an independent agency, and this holds for those who trust the president and those who trust the opposition.

However, accusations made by the opposition are conditioned by partisan trust. Namely, those who trust the president call for penalties on radio stations that are significantly *less* harsh when those accusations are made by the opposition, vs. when they are made by an independent agency. At the same time, there is no in-group bump among the opposition: those who trust the opposition respond the same to accusations made by all three actors (i.e. opposition, president, independent agency). This suggests that opposition actors face an especially tough road in public opinion in calling for sanctions against offending media outlets, given that government-trusting citizens far outnumber opposition-trusting ones in most countries.

In sum, the findings with regard to individuals' attitudes about civic freedoms being driven by elite cues is mixed. We find strong support in the observational data in favor of H_{4A}–and, to a lesser extent, H_{4B}–in that those who trust or support those in power are much more supportive of restrictions on civic spaces, while those more favorable to the opposition are more supportive of civic freedoms. However, a concern with such observational data is the direction of causality; namely, there remains a possibility that individuals who are predisposed to support restrictions on civic spaces are drawn to the very actors most likely to call for them (i.e. incumbents). The experiment was designed to help address these concerns, by randomizing the source cue. Notably, here we found that accusations from the president were not particularly convincing, at least relative to accusations from an independent agency, even among those with higher levels of trust in the president. Thus, the full evidence suggests that, while government supporters are indeed much more likely to support curbs on civic freedoms, we should be careful about concluding that elite cues are responsible for this relationship.

5.4.2. H_5: Partisan bias

First, we expected that individuals who think the media cover politics more fairly will be more supportive of media freedom. These individuals will have fewer complaints about media, and thus be more supportive of uninhibited media. We draw upon a question in Afrobarometer Round 8 asking respondents how frequently media covered all candidates fairly in the last election:

> *During the last national election campaign in [year], how often did the media provide fair coverage of all candidates?*

Only about one in six (17%) respondents said media "always" covered candidates fairly; 18% said they did so "often," 29% "rarely," and 20% "never." (15% didn't know.)

Surprisingly, we find that positive assessments of the media are actually negatively associated with support for media freedom, across all measures (Figure 11). (These findings are robust to the inclusion of a dummy measuring ruling party support.) Those who positively assessed the media on this count were more likely to support government-imposed restrictions on the media and the Internet, and more likely to support government-imposed censorship for all types of content tested (i.e. false information, government-disapproved content, criticism of the president, hate speech). One possible explanation for these findings is that people see government restrictions not as an impediment to fair coverage, but as reason for it. In other words, many people who assess the media favorably attribute government restrictions as the reason for such fairness, while many who assess media negatively see lack of government restrictions as the reason. This logic

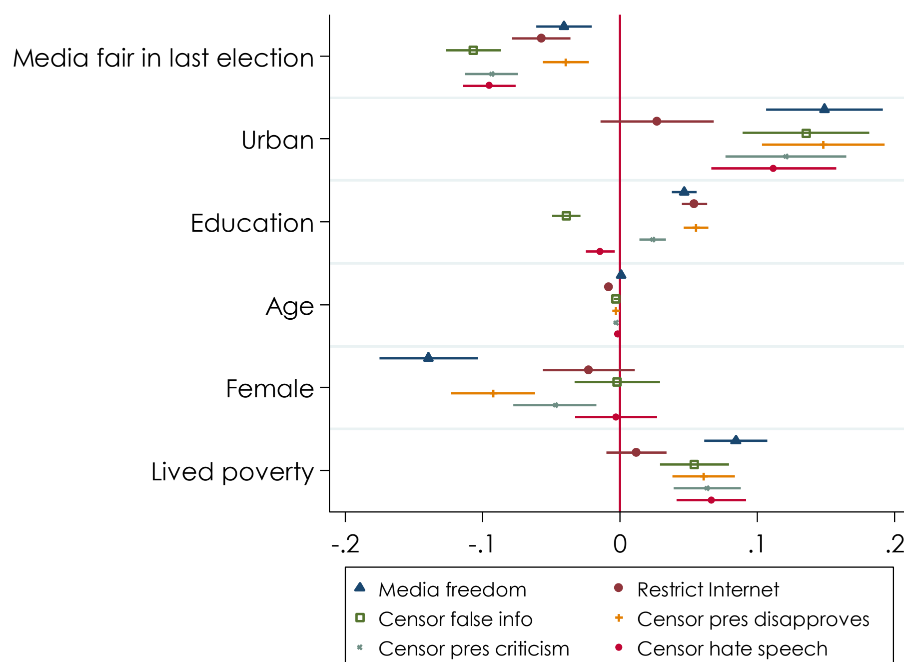
might make sense in contexts in which media councils allot time for candidates, ostensibly to ensure equal access for all.

Since there were no specific questions about perceptions of partisan bias among CSOs or media in Afrobarometer's Round 8 surveys, we asked respondents to our phone surveys to tell us how much they agreed with the following statements:

> *Media in this country are often biased in favor of one political party or another.*
>
> *Civil society organizations in this country are often biased in favor of one political party or another.*

Ordered logistic regression yields no evidence in favor of H_5, however. There is no statistically significant relationship between perceptions of partisan bias in CSOs and support for associational freedoms (b=-.02, p=.48), nor is there a significant relationship between perceptions of partisan bias in media and support for media freedoms (b=-.02, p=.44).

Figure 11: Tests of H_5 (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

While we therefore cannot argue that concerns about bias in CSOs and media are driving support for crackdowns on these spaces, we should not conclude that people do not perceive problems of this type. In fact, in our four countries, we find that 50% agree that CSOs are often biased (44% disagree and 6% don't know), while 61% agree that media often are (36% disagree and 4% don't know). Again, more than eight in 10 of respondents to our Nigerian expert survey told us that media are biased at least sometimes.

And the focus group discussions yielded ample complaints of bias. At the most general level, there is concern that, since media are tied to politicians and parties, they do not address issues that matter to most people:

[Media] is serving politicians. Politicians take most of the space on media. Most of the time it is about politicians. Media will not come in report about the issues of Rangau (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).

Most of what is aired is what the government says (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).

Media will not cover community stories if they have no interest (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).

[Media] cover stories of politicians. They are not [doing] their watchdog role effectively (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).

We in the community, what will we give them [the media]? Politicians are given more attention. They own the media houses (Rangau (Rural) Kajiado East Sub-County (Kenya), 21 December 2021).

[Media] do not cover community issues or human rights issues. They do not give coverage. Politicians are given coverage (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya) 15 December 2021).

I was watching an issue on HIV/AIDS. It did not get the attention that it deserves. They are giving more time [to] politicians (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021).

These days, [media] serve the powerful. If you do not have money to give them, it is hard to get media services even if you have news that benefits the country, which was not the case in the past years (Mpondwe Village (rural), Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda), 15 November 2021).

Others pointed to how ownership, financial dependency, and the drive for revenue result in biased coverage:

Today, the press is segmented, huh. Each newspaper that comes out or that publishes an article publishes according to the political line of the political party to which it is attached. So…the [state-owned] RTI, you will never see it go against the actions of the government. In the meantime, not all government actions are good. The written press also writes according to the political line of its party or of the party in power to which it is attached (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Today the media have their hands more or less tied because it's like someone who is in a job who is obliged to do what his boss asks him to do. So understand that the media in place cannot do more than what is asked of them (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Every media house has an interest. If you go to the social media, it is the same thing. So, we have to be careful where we get our information from (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

[M]edia are not meant to be identified with any political party in the real sense of it. But today, we are already seeing politics in it (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Check NTA [Nigerian Television Authority]. They won't show you anything that is not APC [the ruling All Progressives Congress]. NTA will only show you APC programs. The same thing with AIT [Africa Independent Television] that will not show you anything that is not for PDP [the opposition Peoples Democratic Party]. And these are called fifth columnists, the media. They are supposed to be unbiased/impartial, and not taking sides…The media is supposed to be impartial. The government is using some of them and has infiltrated into their ranks already. So they more or less serve and work for the interest of

those paying them. They don't bite the fingers that are feeding them (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Even those private [media] organizations…also have their bosses put words in their mouths; they tell them what to say…They are not independent. That is because they sieve whatever they have to say (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).

If you look at it in Nigeria, there is no independent TV station or radio. They are always affiliated with one political party of the other. Any TV station or radio that is not affiliated with any political party is not popular, and they will never move forward…It is bad, because they are not serving us. They are not serving us, and they are protecting the interests of those people that are feeding them (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

There are a good number of people, in any case, who are opposed to this press there because, to come back to just one, a small example during the attack which took place in Bassam in previous years [2016] while the social networks convey information, the RTI presents a documentary on crayfish. Did you see a little? It's, it's still weird to see that there is an event that marks the entire country and that the RTI itself does not talk about it. So, well, we don't care about the RTI now (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

I don't trust the RTI (Cocody, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

With the media close to the government, the RTI, it is the power in place that we see a lot…[B]ecause of that, I don't even watch RTI. I'm in pain (Cocody, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Many media outlets in [Uganda] start out with noble ideals of objectivity and fair coverage but are eventually forced by government harassment to lose this independence…There are media outlets that are openly biased in favor especially of the government…This is really bad, because if as a reader you lack objectivity, you are bound to be misled by propaganda (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021).

[The media] have sides. For example, there was a time when [opposition leader] Kiiza Besigye came to Mbarara and was stopped from talking on Radio West, which shows it is sided. Another example … [opposition leader] Bobi Wine was stopped from talking on radio in Mbale (Mpondwe Village (rural), Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda), 15 November 2021).

These concerns were shared in a group of media practitioners interviewed in (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021):

I feel it is a case of "he who pays the piper dictates the tune." If you check it, most of these private media platforms are being owned by politicians. So, no matter how you look at it, the government has its hands in these things one way or the other…The only way we [as journalists] got paid when we went for events, and we were excited going for events because we collect money. And in school, I was told not to collect brown envelope.

I think that they are serving themselves…For every business, profit is expected.

You spoke about the media being the watchdog of the society, One thing about a dog is that it could be domesticated. You can tell a dog to sit down, and it will. So, we [as journalists] are watchdogs, but then we have been domesticated such that when we are told to sit down, we do. … I feel like the eyes of the people that we are have been blinded. The eyes have totally gone blind!

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We [in the media] are overly dependent. We are dependent on our listeners on one hand, and we are dependent on the government on the other hand. We are under their sanctions. The government can say no media house should report on anything tomorrow. Believe me that no media would. So, we are dependent on the government.

We are not reporting to the interest of the people but to the interest of our sponsors.

It is just like a child suckling from the mother. We are hugely dependent. And our nourishment comes from our listeners and the government. So, we are like the middleman.

[E]veryone [in southwestern Nigeria] tends to look at the fact that [the vice president] is their kith and kin, and so they hold back, or what they would do might potentially harm someone they know, or the fact that it is their business. So, everyone will be careful.

This situation often benefits those in power:

I do feel that some of these media platforms work for the government (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).

If you really want to know the real unemployment figures, if you went to the RTI, you're on the wrong track, that's clear. Because they will only praise the parties in power. Because RTI is a national channel…When you go to [state-owned newspaper] Fraternité Matin, it's also a government press. So inevitably they will praise the party in power (Codody, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Apart from those private media stations that were in support of the youths, TVC never showed that Lekki Toll Gate shooting [where at least 12 protesters were likely shot and killed by security forces in 2020] or any EndSARS protest. I watched it live to know that TVC and NTA did not carry the protest. But other private TV and media stations did. But the ones that have ties with the government or that are in support of the government did not carry that. So, in Nigeria, I think that media stations are in support of power (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

During the EndSARS protest, TVC did not cover almost everything that happened there. I know that for a fact. Arise [TV] was trending because they opened the secrets, and they reported everything firsthand. So, the private ones have the right to do everything or everything they want to. But public ones don't have the right (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).

[O]ne thing I have noticed about these government-owned media is that they are on the side of the ruling parties. If the person leaves today and another person comes into power tomorrow, they will be on the new one's side. They are not at all independent, as they are dependent on whosoever is on that chair (Lagos (Nigeria), 18 November 2021).

Since the episode where [failed presidential candidate] Raila [Odinga] was "sworn in," the media freedom has been checked by the government…The media is giving information that is favoring the government. If they report anything negative against the government, they can be closed (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021).

The media promotes what the government wants (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021).

To me, I think when we think of media presently, they serve the interest of the government of the day. When we look at the likes of NTA, TVC, Channels TV, etc., if any media house does anything that does not go in line with the government, they close them down. That is why other media in the country are afraid to do what they ought to do. So, they must serve the government of the day (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

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I don't believe the media is serving people. I tend to agree…that they have been forced to the corner to the point whereby they just have to do the bidding of the government in power…[T]hey serve what will pay them. The media will not dish out information to their own detriment. They will dish out information that they will profit from. We have seen some instances that TV stations would say something, and the government will shut them down (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

If one is working with any of the media house in this country such as Lagos state television, one is always careful not to do anything that goes against the government. If that is done, one can be sacked. During elections, they have to advertise the candidate of the ruling party. The media in this country actually serve power (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Some in Kenya portrayed media as more independent-minded, but this was a decidedly minority position:

TV is serving everyone, and the media is available to both children and adults (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village, 20 December 2021).

The media is always objective. It is advantageous to be objective, because the radio allows both the poor and the wealthy to learn about what is going on. … Citizen Radio seems to be supporting both sides (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village, 20 December 2021).

Under [the] one-party system [media bias] was possible. The media is 99% independent [now] (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village, 20 December 2021).

With regard to civil society, focus group participants were more likely to critique CSOs as ineffectual or as mainly interested in seeking funding to benefit their own employees than they were to claim that CSOs are biased on partisan lines (Machakos (Rural) Maanza Village (Kenya), 20 December 2021). Some even referred to them as thieves, for taking resources from local communities but not providing promised services (Mpondwe Village (rural), Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda), 15 November 2021). For example:

[M]any people create NGOs with the mindset that they will get funding after creation…So, it motivates some people that feel they have the capacity to start NGOs for their own benefit…My own opinion is that they exist in terms of us knowing that they exist, but in terms of impact, it is just little or nothing for me (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Just very few of them have made meaningful impact on the society…Just very few of them responded to the needs of the people [during COVID-19] (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

[S]ome – very few of them – do go to schools to create some awareness and then give some orientation on how the students or pupils could take precautions on some health issues. And some of them even go all the way to churches and mosques to create awareness on some issues. And as well as make some provisions. Like I said, they are very few (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

I don't trust any civil society organization, none (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Civil society organizations as soon they start an action, the rulers call them, they call the leaders, we give them money. It's over. There's no sequel. They are jokes (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

Many organizations have come into this community ostensibly to uplift livelihoods but have ended up swindling our communities, and this has caused much mistrust. For example, a case has been reported in Mugongo where an NGO urged many members to save with them for a year and at the end the organization swindled all the members' savings, leaving them broken. Another organization…also ended up swindling all members' savings (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021).

Some organizations have a tendency of using communities for their corporate agendas (Kashekure, Nyaruhandazi I & II Villages (Rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District (Uganda), 13 November 2021).

I don't even know if there are civil society organizations in Côte d'Ivoire. I don't know if it exists. Because when the Ivoirian complains to say today who talks about the high cost of living, who talks about several things, and no one intervenes. When we talk about the cost of electricity, when we talk about the cost of the telephone…So I don't think there is any civil society in Côte d'Ivoire (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

I think people from civil society are not playing their role. One, they are not in the field. Two, they do not educate the population on what they are doing (Abobo, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 8 November 2021).

Civil societies only exist in name. Otherwise, in a concrete way, there isn't any, there isn't even any. So it's, it's, so you can't trust something that doesn't concretely exist (Yopougon, Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), 7 November 2021).

One CSO employee who participated in a focus group said that:

The community think what we are doing is negative. The community think we are supporting bad people. For us it is positive but for the community, it is negative. The community sometimes think we are looking for votes. If we are organizing protests, businesspeople will think we are disrupting their business and closing roads (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021).

"The community think that we about to take their land," said another, in reference to a CSO's fight against a dump site (Mathare Sub-County (Kenya), 15 December 2021).

At least one participant did say that CSOs are sometimes artificially created support groups for politicians:

For instance, let's say that I am the governor of Lagos state, and I feel like the youths are always after me because they felt like I probably requested for the intervention of the military during the Lekki Toll Gate #EndSARS protest. And what do I do next? I will look for about 20 people and support them financially, and they will create a CSO. I could have about 2 to 5 that will be busy countering the actual CSOs. And by so doing, they will say the real CSOs are not serious. It happened during the EndSARS protest whereby some thugs were sent to infiltrate their ranks, and the whole thing became a very serious issue. So, the government has devised various means (Abuja (Nigeria), 19 November 2021).

Some did defend CSOs. Again, however, this was a decidedly minority position:

We have not heard of any CSO/NGO doing bad things. They have been generally good to us, through planting trees, child advocacy. However, far away from here we hear that there are CSOs advocating for family planning among men and women, thus limiting their fertility (Mpondwe Village (rural), Kamengo Sub-County, Mpigi District (Uganda), 15 November 2021).

As the transcripts from the focus group discussions demonstrate, citizens in the four focus countries clearly have significant grievances with the media and CSOs, with regard to their impartiality and whom they serve. However, the large-*N* data offer no evidence in support of the expectation that these concerns, at least as they relate to partisan bias, drive support for restrictions of civic spaces. Nigerian media experts we interviewed also seemed somewhat skeptical that media bias was contributing to decreased support for press freedoms. Experts were presented with six possible consequences of media bias. Strong majorities said that bias contributes "a lot" to "dividing or polarizing the population" (70%), "spreading false information" (63%), "leading people to mistrust media more" (59%), and "helping politicians escape accountability" (59%), while a plurality (41%) said the same for "spreading violence." However, only 31% said it was "leading people to support government limits on media freedoms more" at similar levels.[115]

Finally, we see in the results of the conjoint survey experiment (Figures 4-6) that a radio station being biased in favor of a party was the least likely potential infraction to elicit calls for harsh sanctions. Thus, it appears that, even though Africans in the focus countries see widespread bias in the media, they do not prioritize governments stepping in with restrictions to address the matter.

Before moving on, we should note a possible limitation of our study. By focusing on partisan bias, we might be ignoring other, potentially more relevant types of bias in reportage. Specifically, we asked experts in our Nigerian survey the extent to which media are biased in favor of or against eight groups in addition to government and opposition: urban areas, rural areas, the rich, the poor, men, women, members of certain ethnic groups, and members of certain religious groups. While 41% said media are biased in favor of the government or ruling party "very often," a larger number—48%—said the same about the rich. In fact, majorities said media were at least sometimes biased in favor of the rich (78%), men (74%), members of certain religious groups (76%), members of certain ethnic groups (73%), urban areas (67%), women (61%), rural areas (53%), and the poor (52%). Majorities also said media are often biased against the same groups at least sometimes: 73% against members of certain ethnic groups, 73% against members of certain religious groups, 65% against the poor, 62% against rural areas, 55% against women, 53% against the rich, 51% against urban areas, and 50% against men. In other words, to the extent that members of the public judge media to be biased in favor of or against any particular relevant group, this might affect their support for press freedoms. These other potential popular concerns should be explored in future research.

5.4.3. H_6: Polarization

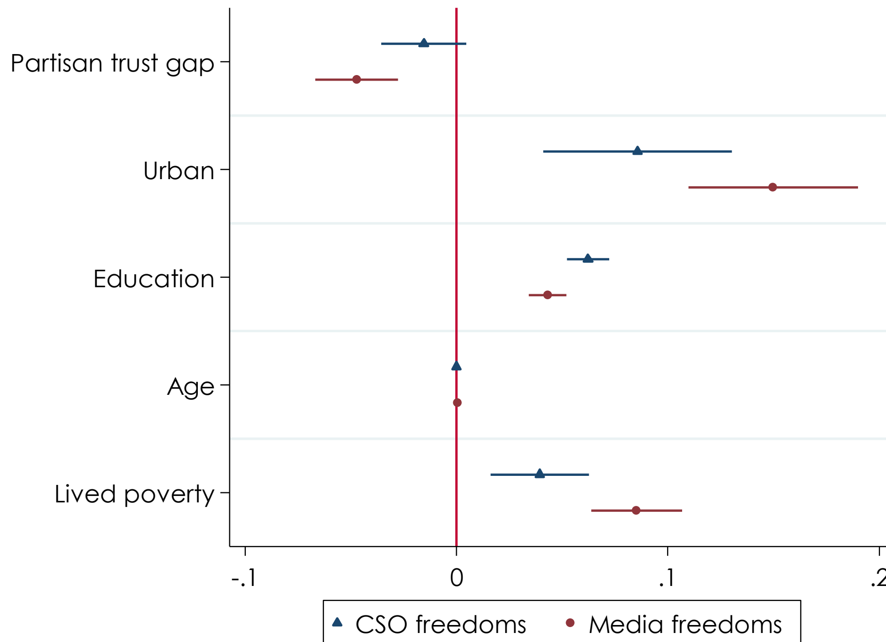
We presented two hypotheses related to polarization. First, we posited that higher levels of polarization would be associated with more support for limits on civic freedoms (H_{6A}). We measure polarization by focusing on trust in parties – namely, the ruling party and "the opposition," collectively[116] – x which respondents said they trust "not at all" (recoded as 0), "just a little" (1), "somewhat" (2), or "a lot" (3). We take the absolute value of the difference in trust between the two. An individual with the highest score (3) trusts one party "a lot" and the other "not at all," while one with the lowest score (0) has the same level of trust between the two. Results are presented in Figure 12.

[115] 36% said it was doing so "a moderate amount," 22% "a little," and 6% "not at all." (4% didn't know, and 1% said that wasn't a problem in Nigeria today.)

[116] Unfortunately, the Afrobarometer survey does not ask respondents to assess trust in individual opposition parties.

In line with H_{6A}, we see that larger gaps in trust in ruling and opposition parties are associated with greater support for media and CSO restrictions, although only the former is statistically significant at conventional levels.

Figure 12: Test of H_{6A} (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

However, we also suggested that the relationship between affective polarization and support for civic freedoms would be conditional on pre-existing partisanship. Namely, among government supporters, higher levels of affective polarization would be associated with greater support for limits on civic spaces, since it is particularly strong supporters of the government with low opinions of the opposition (i.e. pro-government and high levels of affective polarization) who will be most strongly supportive of government limiting civic spaces, which provide opportunities for opposition communication and organization (H_{6B}). We test this by interacting the partisan trust gap measure with our dummy for support for the ruling party. We expect a negative coefficient on this interaction term, indicating that the depressive effects of polarization on support for civic freedoms is larger for government supporters than independent- and opposition-leaning individuals. In fact, this is what we find with respect to both associational and media freedoms. We plot these relationships in Figure 13 for CSOs and Figure 14 for media.

First, we see that, at the lowest levels of affective polarization, ruling party supporters and independents/opposition supporters have indistinguishable levels of support for associational freedoms. In other words, when ruling party supporters have the same level of trust in the ruling party as they do in the opposition, they have the same level of support for associational freedoms as independents/opposition supporters with similarly low levels of affective polarization. However, as affective polarization increases among ruling party supporters, their support for associational freedoms drops significantly. Increases in affective polarization among independents/opposition supporters have no effect on support for associational freedom. Therefore, at the highest levels of affective polarization, ruling party supporters are much less supportive of associational freedoms than independents/opposition supporters are.

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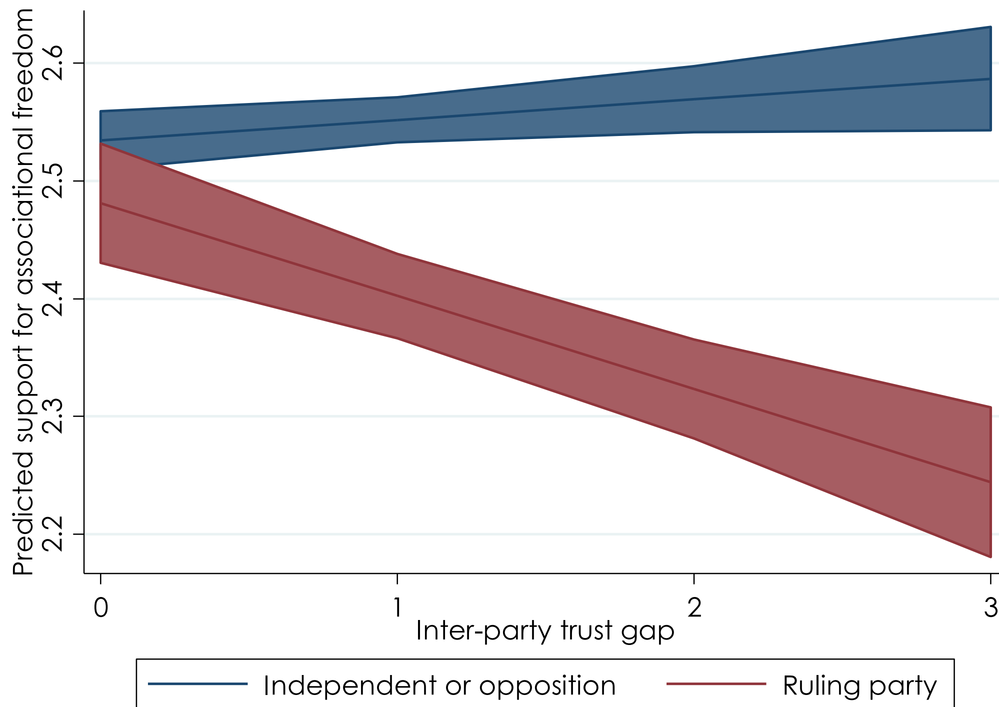
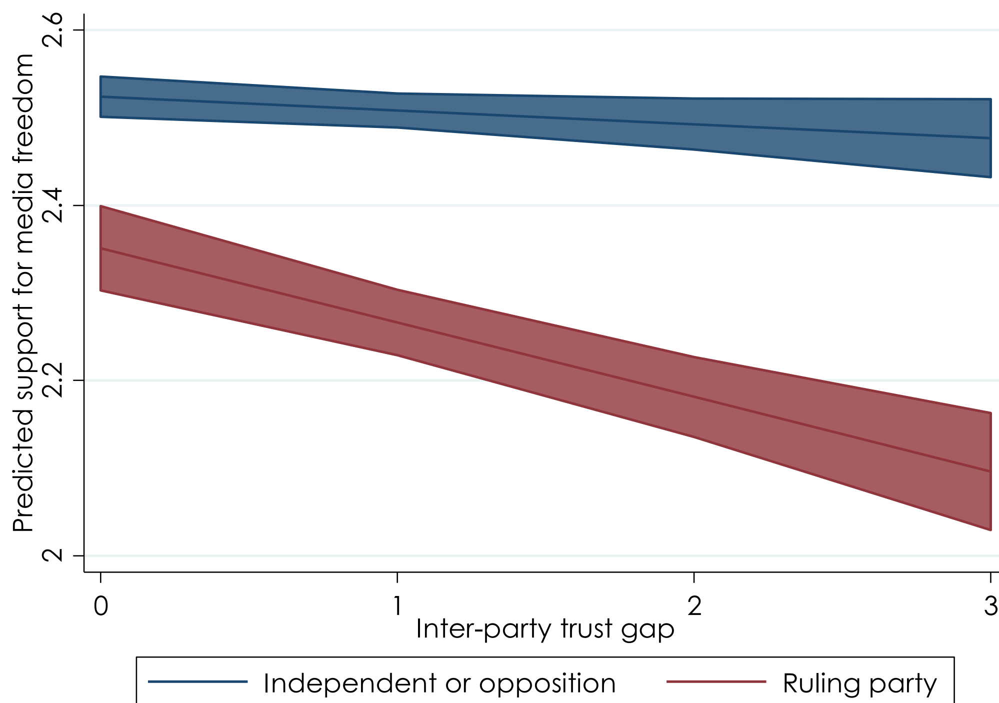
Figure 13: Test of H_{6B} on associational freedoms (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Notes: Linear regression model. 95% confidence intervals noted.

Figure 14: Test of H_{6B} on media freedoms (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Notes: Linear regression model. 95% confidence intervals noted.

We see a similar dynamic at play with regard to affective polarization and support for media freedoms. Here, the only difference is that, even at the lowest levels of affective polarization, independents/opposition supporters are still more supportive of media freedoms than ruling party supporters are.

In sum, these results suggest that, for ruling party supporters, higher levels of affective polarization could lead to greater support for restrictions on civic freedoms. Those individuals–who strongly trust the ruling party but strongly mistrust the opposition–are the most likely to call for clampdowns on civic spaces, possibly because they see the opposition as illegitimate and/or dangerous, and thus wish to use the power of the government to close spaces for those groups to organize and communicate. Interestingly, we do not see similar results for independents and those in the opposition, however; their level of support for civic freedoms remains at roughly the same level, despite their level of affective polarization. In sum, though, we might expect that, with rising affective polarization, more Africans would call for more restrictions on civic freedoms.

5.4.4. H_7: Civic space restrictions

In H_7, we raised the possibility that individuals are more likely to support civic spaces when they see those freedoms as threatened. Obviously, there are significant methodological challenges to testing such an expectation, namely because individuals' perceptions about the status of civic freedoms in their country are largely subjective. Even if we were to use more objective (read, expert) measures of the status of civic spaces in countries as predictors of support for civic freedoms, we would face the challenge that individuals will still form their own assessments about civic spaces, and not necessarily rely on objective realities. Ultimately, we cannot rule out the possibility that individuals form their assessments about how open civic spaces are in their country on the basis of how open they think they *should* be. For example, someone who strongly supports civic spaces might see a minor regulation as a major threat, and characterize civic spaces as tightly closed. Conversely, someone who is skeptical of CSOs or the media might see the same regulation as inadequate, and characterize civic spaces as broadly open. Therefore, we must interpret the subsequent analyses cautiously.

Here, we rely on two questions about the openness of civic spaces from Round 8 Afrobarometer:

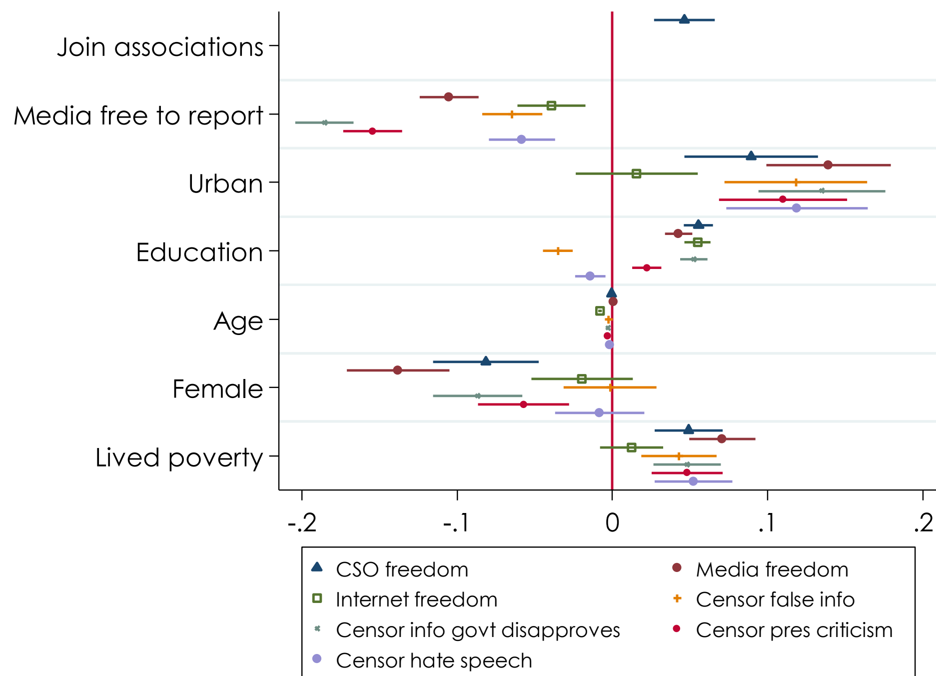
> *In this country, how free are you to join any political organization you want? Not at all free, not very free, somewhat free, or completely free?*[117]

> *In your opinion, how free is the news media in this country to report and comment on the news without censorship or interference by the government? Completely free, somewhat free, not very free, or not at all free?*

Strong majorities saw civic spaces as relatively open in their country. 79% saw the freedom to join organizations as protected (57% completely and 22% somewhat), vs. only 19% who saw it as mostly constrained (10% not very free and 9% not at all free, with 2% not knowing). And 60% saw media as primarily free (27% completely and 33% somewhat), vs. 35% who saw it as mostly censored (24% not very free and 11% not at all free, with 5% not knowing). We report results for these analyses in Figure 15.

[117] This question was not asked in Eswatini.

Figure 15: Test of H_7 (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects (not reported).

First, we find that those who assess freedom to join organizations as more open are *more* likely to support civic freedoms. However, we find the opposite for all measures of support for media freedom: Those who assess media as open are more likely to support general restrictions on media and the Internet, and specific censorship related to content that is false, hateful, critical of the government, or simply disliked by the government. (These results are all robust to the inclusion of the dummy for ruling party support.) Again, while there are challenges in interpreting these results, they suggest that those who see associational life as open are likely to call for even greater openness, while perceptions of media openness are associated with greater calls to *limit* that space.

5.4.5. H_8: Engagement

We expect that individuals who have been more politically engaged will be more likely to defend civic freedoms, given the relative frequency with which they exercise these freedoms, to organize, engage elites, collect information, and express their political attitudes and preferences. Afrobarometer Round 8 survey provided numerous opportunities to measure engagement. First, we include a measure of self-reported frequency of discussing politics:

> *When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?*

Fewer than one-fifth (19%) of respondents said they discussed politics frequently, 44% said they did so occasionally, and 36% said they never did (fewer than 1% said they didn't know).

Next, the Afrobarometer survey asked respondents to indicate the frequency with which they have attended community meetings, joined with others to raise an issue, or participated in a protest.

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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 yes]: Was this often, several times or once or twice? [If no]: Would you do this if you had the chance?

Attended a community meeting

Got together with others to raise an issue

Participated in a demonstration or protest march

The most common activity was attending community meetings, which 23% said they did often (and 13% that they never have and wouldn't), followed by raising an issue (17% often and 16% would never), and protesting (5% often and 55% would never). Individuals who say they have not participated in an activity and would never do so are coded as 0, those who have not but would as 1, those who have once or twice as 2, those who have several times as 3, and those who have often as 4. These items are combined to generate an overall participation index, ranging from 0 to 12.

Individuals might also engage in politics by contacting others, to make their preferences known, seek assistance, or affect policy. We generate an index measuring political contact by combining self-reports of recent contacts of local government officials, legislative representatives, party officials, and traditional leaders.[118]

During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views? Never, only once, a few times, or often?

A local government councillor

A member of Parliament

A political party official

A traditional leader

Traditional leaders were contacted most frequently, with 15% saying they did so often (vs. 58% who said they never did). 6% said they contacted their councillor often (and 73% never), 3% a party official (80% never), and 2% their MP (87% never). We summed these responses to generate an overall contact index, ranging from 0 (never contacted any of the four types of individuals) to 12 (often contacted each of the four types of individuals).

The survey also asked individuals whether they had, with reference to the last election, voted, attended a campaign rally, or campaigned on behalf of a candidate or party.

People are not always able to vote in elections, for example, because they weren't registered, they were unable to go, or someone prevented them from voting. How about you? In the last national election held in [election], did you vote, or not, or were you too young to vote? Or can't you remember whether you voted?

Thinking about the last national election in [year]:

Did you attend a campaign rally?

Did you work for a candidate or party?

---

[118] The question about local councillors was not asked in Angola, Liberia, or Sudan. The question about MPs was not asked in Sudan. The question about party officials was not asked in Eswatini. And the question about traditional leaders was not asked in Cabo Verde, Mauritius, or Tunisia.

About two-thirds (67%) of respondents said they voted, while 6% said they were too young, 26% were old enough but did not, and 1% could not remember. About one third (35%) attended a campaign rally (64% did not and 1% didn't know), while 17% worked for a candidate or party (82% did not and 1% didn't know).

Finally, individuals reported the frequency through which they accessed news on various mass media, including radio, television, newspapers, Internet, and social media.

> *How often do you get news from the following sources? Every day, a few times a week, a few times a month, less than once a month, or never?*
>
> > *Radio*
> >
> > *Television*
> >
> > *Print newspapers*
> >
> > *Internet*
> >
> > *Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, or others*

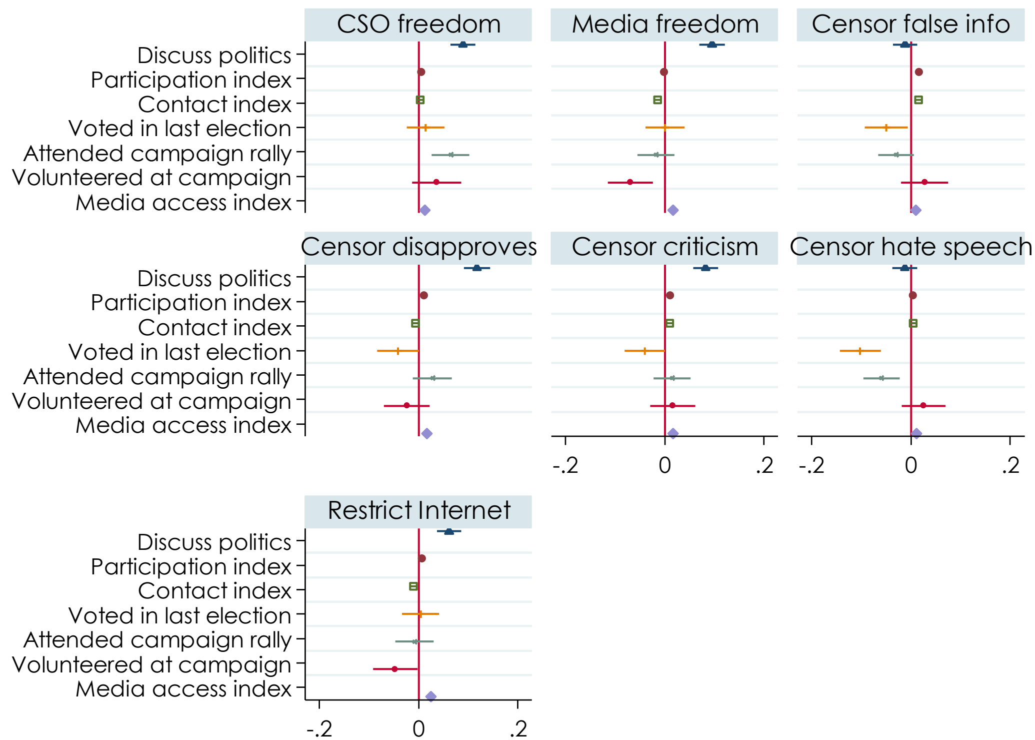
Radio was the most-utilized source, with 45% saying they got news from it every day (vs. 18% who said they never did). Television was second, with 38% using it every day (and 34% never), followed by social media (29% every day and 50% never), Internet (26% every day and 54% never), and newspapers (7% every day and 64% never). We generate an index of media use here by summing across the five items. The scores range from 0 (never using any of the sources) to 20 (getting news from all five sources every day).

We report results from these analyses in Figure 16. The relationships between the various measures of political engagement and support for civic freedoms are not entirely consistent, although, in most cases in which there is a statistically significant relationship between an engagement measure and civic freedoms, it is in the direction predicted by H_8 (i.e. higher levels of engagement are associated with greater support for civic freedoms).

Several findings of note:

- Those who discuss politics more are supportive of greater civic freedoms on almost every measure here (except with regards to government censoring hate speech and false information).
- Higher measures of the participation index are generally associated with stronger support for civic freedoms.
- Voting is never associated with greater support for civic freedoms (and, in the case of censoring false information and hate speech, it is associated with more support for government restrictions).
- The most consistent finding is with regard to accessing news media: those who report more frequent access of news from the greatest variety of types of media are supportive of greater civic freedoms, on every measure.

Figure 16: Tests of H_8 (Afrobarometer Round 8)



Note: Logistic regression models. 95% confidence intervals noted. With country fixed effects and individual-level controls (not reported).

5.4.6. H_9: Support for democracy

Earlier, we hypothesized that individuals who are more supportive of democracy as a regime type will be more likely to also support civic freedoms. Afrobarometer surveys always include myriad questions to assess overall support for democracy, attitudes on possible (anti-democratic) alternate regimes, and support for various democratic institutions, such legislative and judicial oversight of the executive, elections, presidential term limits, and government transparency.

For ease of interpretation, we follow Afrobarometer's convention of characterizing individuals as "committed democrats" if they support democracy and reject all three provided anti-democratic alternate regimes: military regimes, personalistic dictatorships, and single-party rule (Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Mattes 2019). These questions included the following:

> *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives* [follow ups to probe strength of opinion]?
>
> > *Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.*
> >
> > *The army comes in to govern the country.*
> >
> > *Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything*
>
> *Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?*
>
> *Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.*

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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.

The vast majority of respondents rejected each authoritarian alternative, with 77% rejecting single-party rule, 75% military rule, and 75% one-person rule.[119] And 69% said they supported democracy, vs. 15% who said it didn't matter and 14% who rejected it (2% didn't know).

Rather than creating a dummy variable, in which individuals are either "committed democrats" or not, we create a continuous variable, by taking the mean of the variables measuring rejection of alternatives to democracy, and then taking the mean of that measure and the measure of support for democracy. (The two are weighted equally.) The resulting variable ranges from 0 to 4, with higher values indicating greater stated commitment to democracy.

Finally, given the focus here on media, we also examine attitudes on media's role in investigating and reporting on government.

Which of the following statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: The news media should constantly investigate and report on government mistakes and corruption.

Statement 2: Too much reporting on negative events, like government mistakes and corruption, only harms the country.

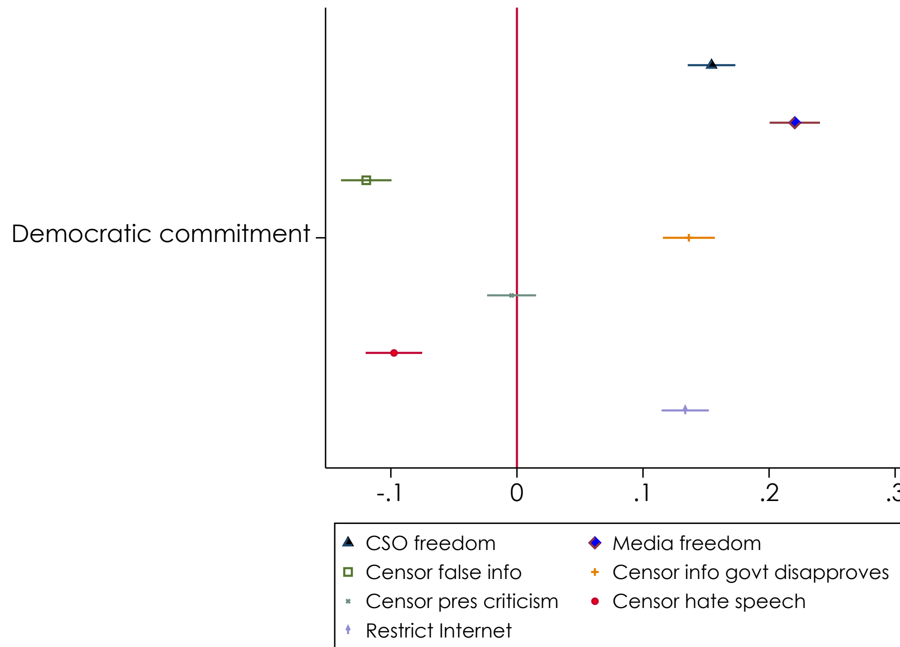
Almost three-fourths (73%) supported the investigatory position (48% strongly and 25% somewhat), vs. 25% who opposed it (12% somewhat and 13% strongly), with 1% choosing neither and 1% not knowing.

We report regression results in Figures 17 and 18. We see that, generally speaking, our expectations were supported: stronger commitment to democracy and support for media's investigatory role are significantly associated with greater support for civic freedoms. There are three interesting exceptions to this pattern, though.

First, greater commitment to democracy and support for media's investigatory role are both associated with *greater* support for censorship when it comes to false information. Both of those variables also predict *greater* support for censorship of hate speech, as well. These findings suggest that those more committed to democratic values, as measured here, actually see limits on false information and hate speech as compatible with, or even supportive of, democracy, rather than as empowering governments to act in possibly illiberal ways. Finally, we also see that, while those supportive of media's investigatory role are generally more supportive of media freedoms–again, with the notable exceptions of false information and hate speech–they are actually *less supportive* of Internet freedoms. This might suggest that individuals who support media's oversight role do not see online actors as part of that effort. In fact, they seem to see those in the digital space as potentially countering media's role, perhaps due to previously discussed concerns that false information thrives particularly on the Internet and social media.

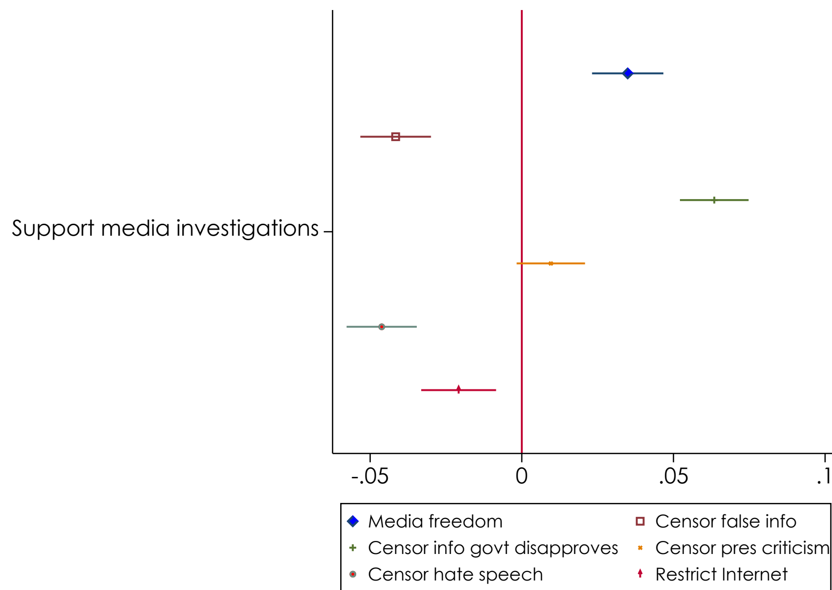
[119] 51% strongly rejected one-party rule and 26% somewhat. 20% supported one-party rule (12% somewhat and 8% strongly), with 2% saying it didn't matter and 1% not knowing. 51% strongly rejected military rule and 24% somewhat. 21% supported military rule (13% somewhat and 8% strongly), with 3% saying it didn't matter and 1% not knowing. 52% strongly rejected one-person rule and 26% somewhat. 20% supported one-person rule (12% strongly and 8% somewhat), with 2% saying it didn't matter and 1% not knowing.

Figure 17: Test of H_9 (Afrobarometer Round 8), commitment to democracy



Linear regression model. 95% confidence intervals noted. Control variables not included.

Figure 18: Test of H_9 (Afrobarometer Round 8), support for media investigations



Linear regression model. 95% confidence intervals noted. Control variables not included.

These findings are all robust to the inclusion of a dummy variable measuring support for the ruling party, with the exception of the relationship between support for media's investigatory role and

censorship of criticism of the government. There, the relationship becomes statistically significant with the inclusion of that control; in that case, individuals more supportive of media's investigatory role are also less supportive of government censorship of material that criticizes the president.

5.5. Individual-level factors

Finally, in most of the preceding figures, we have reported how individual-level controls – namely urban/rural residence, gender, age, formal education, and lived poverty – are related to support for civic freedoms. We find the following with reasonable consistency:

- Women are more likely than men to support restrictions to civic spaces.
- Those with higher levels of lived poverty are more likely to support civic freedoms than those with lower levels.
- In most analyses, those living in urban areas were more likely to support civic freedoms than those living in rural areas.
- Those with higher levels of formal education are generally more likely to support civic freedoms than those with lower levels. There are two exceptions, with better-educated individuals more likely to support censorship for hate speech and false information.

6. The path forward

The African experts we interviewed were of mixed views on the future of civic freedoms in their respective countries. Some said that it depended on the nature of the next governments elected. Governments inclined to protect liberal rights would allow civic spaces to thrive, while those seeing benefits in further crackdowns will erode the hard-fought rights that many citizens across the continent won in the early 1990s. Ultimately, such a perspective is itself worrisome; the protection of fundamental rights should not depend on the outcomes of particular elections.

In general, though, many were wary. As Kenyan lawyer Francis Aywa put it, "If we are not careful about this, the steady erosion [in civic freedoms] will continue and will end in a bad place."[120] Nigerian columnist Jide Ojo spoke of how increasing concerns about insecurity, economic hardship, and declining state capacity are pushing citizens to agitate against governments more. These pressures are, in turn, incentivizing governments to clamp down on civic spaces: "[A]s far as those things are happening, [clampdowns] will be used to make sure people fall in line. And that will mean shrinking civic space."[121]

There are also concerns that, as narrowed civic spaces become more common, they will become normalized, and citizens will adjust their expectations for how they can participate, speak, and communicate accordingly. As Nigerian political scientist Dr. Freedom Onuoha put it, "In as much as it is seen that there is a construction of the civic space and it appears as if members of the public are already accepting it as normal...there is a danger in that kind of thinking."[122]

The consequences of the hardening of such restrictions could be dire. Most obviously, electoral competition can be neither free nor fair without robust associational life and media. Democratic accountability, similarly, is threatened when incumbents face limited challenges at the ballot

[120] Interview with Francis Aywa (5 July 2021).

[121] Interview with Jide Ojo (4 July 2021).

[122] Interview with Dr. Freedom Onuoha (4 August 2021).

box, organizations' and social movements' capacity for mobilization is clipped, and media actors cannot investigate government performance or communicate freely with citizenries.

A dearth of civic freedoms can also undermine the social order as well. Limiting CSOs and media does not eliminate individuals' actual grievances about their day-to-day lives and governments' effects on them. Rather, it simply eliminates important outlets for individuals to speak, hear others, and engage in activities aimed at generating change. When these channels do not exist, individuals may turn to activities that are less healthy for themselves and the body politic, including extremist ideologies, anomie, and even violence.

Dr. Onuoha evoked such logic, even tying it to the emergence and growth of the Boko Haram terror group:

> *Mind you that the constrictions of the civic space bottle up anger in people. When you have a liberal civic space, people tend to voice their concerns and express themselves. And when you have very capable state institutions that can appropriately respond to such concerns, that helps to diffuse tensions. But when you have gradual but consistent constriction or restriction of the civic space, you are inevitably laying the foundation for people to have bottled up anger and frustration...What cannot be predicted is how that bottled-up anger will manifest in the event of any tipping point.…[That] could even lead to something very devastating....I am seeing that there is a limit to which people can be pushed in that direction, and there are consequences."*[123]

Regardless of individuals' attitudes, there are also concerns that, if individuals who do support open civic spaces do not prioritize these issues and act upon them, erosion will continue. As Victor Bwire of the Kenya Media Council told us, "If people don't fight and push for civic freedoms, it will not come on a silver platter."[124] Eriasa Mukiibi Sserunjoji, a longtime Ugandan media professional with the Nation Media Group, shared a similar warning. "The public is now used to the way the government operates, and they don't seem to expect anything better," he said. "The people have relaxed about issues of freedom and care less about the truth."[125]

There is also a danger that, as governments adopt increasing restrictions on civic spaces, other countries in the region will follow suit. As Bwire put it, "Countries borrow from each other. What happened in Uganda might happen to us" in Kenya.[126] In other words, just as scholars wrote of "democratic diffusion" in the 1990s (Huntington 1993; Gleditsch and Ward 2006; Brinks and Coppedge 2006; Bunce and Wolchik 2006; Beissinger 2007), closure of civic spaces and other forms of democratic backsliding can spread like a contagion as well.[127]

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[123] Interview with Dr. Freedom Onuoha (4 August 2021).

[124] Interview with Victor Bwire (16 August 2021).

[125] Interview with Eriasa Mukiibi Sserunjoji (17 August 2021).

[126] Interview with Victor Bwire (16 August 2021).

[127] Interview with Oloo Janak (5 August 2021).

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Appendix A: Afrobarometer Round 8 country survey details

Country	N	Dates
Angola	2,400	27 November 2019 – 4 January 2020
Benin	1,200	22 November – 7 December 2020
Botswana	1,200	25 July – 10 August 2019
Burkina Faso	1,200	15 – 30 December 2019
Cabo Verde	1,200	8 – 22 December 2019
Cameroon	1,200	17 February – 9 March 2021
Côte d'Ivoire	1,200	1 November – 7 December 2019
Eswatini	1,220	23 March – 15 April 2021
Ethiopia	2,378	26 December 2019 – 10 February 2020
Gabon	1,200	7 – 23 February 2020
Gambia	1,200	1 – 23 February 2021
Ghana	2,400	16 September – 3 October 2019
Guinea	1,200	20 November – 15 December 2019
Kenya	2,400	28 August – 26 September 2019
Lesotho	1,200	23 February – 9 March 2020
Liberia	1,200	19 October – 25 November 2020
Malawi	1,200	18 November – 2 December 2019
Mali	1,200	16 March – 3 April 2020
Mauritius	1,200	6 – 30 November 2020
Morocco	1,200	8 – 25 February 2021
Mozambique	1,110	31 May – 19 July 2021
Namibia	1,200	5 – 22 August 2019
Niger	1,199	29 October – 13 November 2020
Nigeria	1,599	20 January – 13 February 2020
Senegal	1,200	12 December 2020 – 9 January 2021
Sierra Leone	1,200	9 – 31 March 2020
South Africa	1,600	2 May – 10 June 2021
Sudan	1,800	11 February – 26 April 2021
Tanzania	2,398	23 February – 25 March 2021
Togo	1,200	23 December 2020 – 4 January 2021
Tunisia	1,200	24 February – 18 March 2020
Uganda	1,200	30 September – 31 October 2019
Zambia	1,200	28 November – 30 December 2020
Zimbabwe	1,200	17 April – 1 May 2021

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Appendix B: Phone survey details

Surveys were conducted by the Afrobarometer national partner in each country: the Centre de Recherche et de Formation sur le Développement Intégré (CREFDI) in Côte d'Ivoire, Institute of Development Studies (IDS) (University of Nairobi) in Kenya, NOIPolls in Nigeria, and Hatchile Consult in Uganda. All partners used a standardized questionnaire.

Respondents received a token payment at completion of the survey: 2000 FCFA (~ $3.49 US) for Côte d'Ivoire, 200 KSh (~$1.70 US) for Kenya, ₦700 (~$1.70 US) for Nigeria, and 6000 USh (~$1.70 US) for Uganda.

In Nigeria, phone numbers were selected using random digit dialing (RDD) from the NOIPolls Number Database (NPND), which has over 70 million active phone numbers. NOI used information from the NPND, including gender, age, and country administrative divisions, to draw a representative sample on those bases, with targets derived from the latest population census. In Côte d'Ivoire, CREFDI purchased phone numbers from each of the three major mobile service providers in the country–Moov, MTN, and Orange–and randomly dialed numbers from those lists, with proportions per provider according to provider market share. The Kenyan sampling strategy utilized lists of numbers already collected for other surveys conducted by the organization. Each of these databases was already representative of the population of adult citizen mobile phone users in the country. IDS then drew from these databases to create a sample, stratifying by county and gender. As a supplemental strategy, IDS obtained a sampling frame from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. Respondents were randomly selected from this dataset, stratifying by urban/rural residence, region, and gender. In Uganda, the Afrobarometer partner used a pre-existing dataset of mobile phone numbers for this survey. In December 2020-January 2021, Afrobarometer conducted a survey (Round 8.5) in Uganda, during which respondents' mobile phone numbers were collected (*N*=2400). The sample for this phone survey was randomly selected from this list, with targets to achieve geographic and gender representativeness in the final sample.

Surveys were conducted in Dioula and French in Côte d'Ivoire; English and Kiswahili in Kenya; English, Hausa, Ibgo, Pidgin, and Yoruba in Nigeria; and Alur, Ateso, English, Japadhola, Luganda, Lugbara, Luo, Lusoga, N'Karamojong, Runaynkole, and Runyoro in Uganda.

All individuals completed an informed consent process before proceeding to the survey. To be eligible, individuals had to be at least 18 years of age.

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Appendix C: Vignette wordings

I'd like to ask you a few questions about government regulations of the media.

Some people think government should not regulate the media much, arguing that freedom of the press is essential. Others argue that, in certain circumstances, it is necessary to regulate the press, to achieve certain good outcomes.

I am going to read you four scenarios. After I read each, I will ask you what you think the government response should be.

Here's the first scenario: Imagine a radio station in your country.

[*Order of attributes varies for each individual. For example, an individual might hear the attributes in the order of ABC, ACB, BAC, BCA, CAB, or CBA. For a given individual, the order of the attributes will not change across items. So an individual who hears the first item with attributes in the order of BCA will hear the other three items with attributes in the order of BCA.*]

[Levels of attributes assigned at random, with equal probability.]

[Attribute A] It receives its funding primarily from [2 levels: FOREIGN or DOMESTIC] sources.

[Attribute B] [3 levels: THE PRESIDENT or AN OPPOSITION PARTY or AN INDEPENDENT AGENCY] has made accusations against the station.

[Attribute C] The station has been accused of [6 levels: SPREADING MISINFORMATION ABOUT PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES LIKE COVID-19 or SPREADING LIES ABOUT CERTAIN POLITICAL CANDIDATES' PRIVATE LIVES or USING HATE SPEECH AGAINST MEMBERS OF CERTAIN ETHNIC GROUPS or MAKING ARGUMENTS TO BUILD SUPPORT FOR CERTAIN ARMED GROUPS or BEING BIASED IN FAVOR OF ONE POLITICAL PARTY or NOT PAYING ITS TAXES]

What do you think the government should do in this situation?

A) Nothing

B) Issue a written warning to the station

C) Fine the station

D) Shut down the station for a temporary period

E) Shut down the station permanently

[Repeats three additional times per respondent]

Appendix D: Focus group discussion details

All focus group participants were at least 18 years old. In-country research partners made determinations of research sites and target populations (e.g. whether groups would include practitioners from media and civil society, or whether they would be comprised of community members, generally). All participants were remunerated, with rates varying by country.

Country	Date	Location	Participants
Côte d'Ivoire	7 Nov 2021	Yopougon, Abidjan	11 (mixed gender, from community)
	7 Nov 2021	Cocody, Abidjan	10 (mixed gender, from community)
	8 Nov 2021	Abobo, Abidjan	11 (mixed gender, from community)
Kenya	15 Dec 2021	Mathare Sub-County (Urban), Nairobi	15 (mixed gender, CSO representatives)
	15 Dec 2021	Mathare Sub-County (Urban), Nairobi	15 (mixed gender, CSO representatives)
	20 Dec 2021	Maanza Village (Rural), Machakos County	15 (mixed gender, from community)
	21 Dec 2021	Rangau Village (Rural), Kajiado County	15 (mixed gender, from community)
Nigeria	17 Nov 2021	Lagos	8 (mixed gender, media practitioners)
	18 Nov 2021	Lagos	9 (women only, media practitioners)
	19 Nov 2021	Abuja	11 (mixed gender, CSO representatives)
Uganda	13 Nov 2021	Kashekure, Nyaruhandagazi I & II Villages (rural), Bugamba Sub-County, Rwampara District	13 (mixed gender, from community)
	15 Nov 2021	Mpondwe Village LC1 (rural), Kamengo Sub-Country, Mpigi District	12 (mixed gender, from community)
	15 Nov 2021	Kyengera Town Council (urban), Kampala District	15 (mixed gender, from community)

The following questionnaire was used as a guide to motivate discussions:

	TOPIC 1	TOPIC 2	TOPIC 3	TOPIC 4
	Associations	**Media**	**Limits on civic spaces**	**Digital Media**
Intro Material	In our study, we are focusing on how Africans think about civic freedoms in their countries. We're specifically therefore looking at things like freedom of association, with regards to the work of civil society organization, and the media. Based on this, we would like to know more about how people like you in this community feel about these issues.	I'd now like to ask you some questions about media in this country, like radio, television, and newspapers.	Many people are willing to accept limits on their rights for free expression and association, and they seem more willing to accept government limits on the media.	I'd like to ask you a few questions about social media and the Internet specifically, because this has been a topic of special controversy in recent years.
Question 1	Are there a lot of organizations and associations doing work in this community? Probe for what kinds of work they do and whether they have many participants or only a few	Do you think that media do a good job in providing information to you that you need for your life? Probe: Why or why not?	What are the main reasons you think people in this country would accept limits on associations and the media? Are there specific problems you think that people think associations and the media are causing that need to be addressed? Probe: How should they be addressed?	Do people in this community use digital media, like social media and the Internet much? What types of people use it? What do they use it for?
Question 2	What kinds of positive changes do these organizations and associations make in this community?	Whom do you think media in this country mostly serve? The people or the powerful?	Do you think there are limits on what the public is willing to let the government do, with regard to limits on associations and the media? In other words, do you think it is possible that the government could go too far? If so, what kinds of things do you think the public finds acceptable, and what do you think they would see as crossing the line? Probe for the level of the government actions on CSOs/media, how far the government can go, things the public finds acceptable and what they see as going beyond. Limitations on what citizens are willing to let the government do.	From what you know about the Internet and social media, what positive things do you think they bring to the community?

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Question 3	Are there any negatives that these organizations and associations bring to this community?	Do you think most media in this country are independent, or do they have ties to one political group or another? Probe: Is this good or bad?	What kinds of people do you think are more likely than others to accept these limits? In other words, are there certain groups in society that you think are more skeptical about civic freedoms and therefore more supportive of limits? Are there certain groups that you think are more likely to oppose limits? Which groups?	What negative things do you think they bring?
Question 4	What kind of challenges do these organizations and associations faces as they try to do their work?	What kind of information does the media provide that you find helpful?		Do you think overall the Internet and social media are harmful or helpful to your community?
Question 5	Do you think government is mostly supportive of these organizations and associations, or does it place barriers to their work? Probe: What kind of barriers? Do you think there should be these barriers, or do you think they do more harm than good?	Is there information that the media provides that you think is harmful to society? What kinds?		How do you think government should address the possible negative things? Do you think they should put certain kinds of limits? Probe: What kinds of limits?
Question 6		When people choose what media they are going to use, like what radio stations they are going to listen to, do you think it is important to them what political allegiances the station has? Like, whether it is pro-government or pro-opposition?		Recently, there have been attempts by governments in many countries to place limits on the Internet and social media. How do you see the public reacting to these limits? Do you think they are largely accepting of them, because they agree with the new limits, or do you think there is broad opposition, or is the reaction more mixed? Why do you think so?

Closing the discussion: Is there anything else that we have not talked about on these topics that you would like us to discuss? Thank you very much for taking your time to share with us your experience.

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