

Freedom of information: Botswana back private communication, public accountability

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 172 | Mpho G. Molomo and Wilford Molefe

Summary

Freedom of information is a critical facet of democratic governance. The right to information is not only essential to the news media in authenticating its reports and reducing the realm of speculation, but it is also a prerequisite for an informed citizenry capable of holding its government accountable. A democratic society requires a free flow of information and ideas, whether between citizens in private communication or in public discourse involving civil society and political parties. Yet freedom of information can also be seen as a challenge by governments required to open their operations to public scrutiny and perhaps limit state actions in pursuit of national security.

In Botswana, the constitution provides for free speech and a free press, but efforts to legally protect citizens' rights to privacy in communication (such as mobile phones) and to obtain information held by public authorities have not advanced. With strong civil-society backing, a private member's bill for freedom of information was introduced in 2010 that would ensure the right of the public and the media to access information held by public authorities at all levels. However, the bill was withdrawn on the understanding that the government was preparing a similar bill, and neither version has ever come to Parliament for debate (Regonamanye, 2016).

Meanwhile, even basic press freedoms have come under attack: Amnesty International (2017) has flagged Botswana for harassment and intimidation of journalists.

The latest survey from Afrobarometer shows that a majority of Botswana endorse freedom of information in the media's right to publish without government interference, citizens' right to access government information, and individuals' right to private communication without government monitoring. Many see growing freedom for opposition political parties and civil-society to function, but they feel unable to freely access government information that would enable them to hold their public officials accountable.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2016, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

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

Key findings

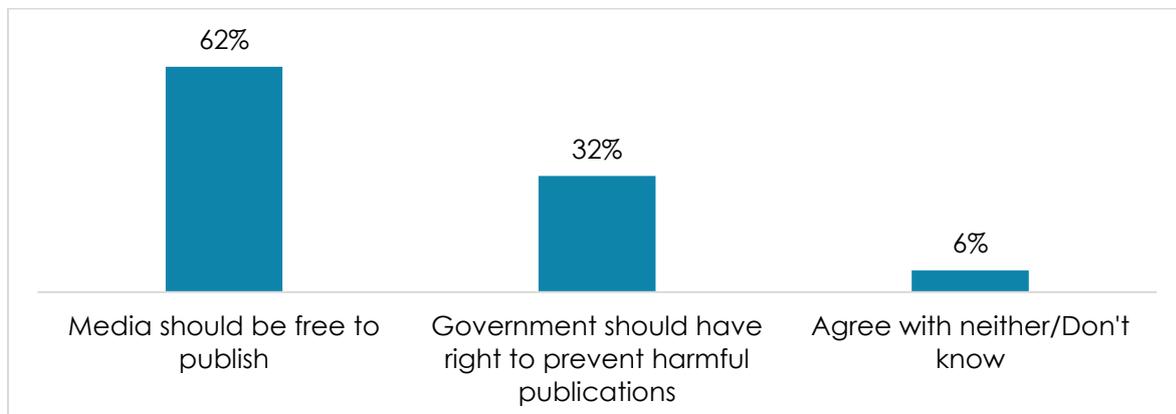
- By a 2-to-1 margin (62% vs. 32%), Batswana support the news media's right to publish any views or ideas without government control. More than four in 10 (43%) say the media's freedom to investigate and criticize the government has diminished in recent years, but an equal proportion say it has increased.
- Six in 10 Batswana (61%) say opposition political parties and candidates enjoy "somewhat" or "much" more freedom than they did a few years ago. A plurality (45%) say the same about civil-society groups.
- About two-thirds (64%) of Batswana disagree with the idea that information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials and should not be shared with the public.
- But many think it's unlikely they would be able to access government information on school budgets (47%), land ownership (45%), and development plans and budgets (39%).
- Almost three-quarters (73%) of Batswana say it's more important for citizens to hold government accountable than to have a government that gets things done.
- Six in 10 Batswana (59%) say the government should not have the right to monitor private communications, such as mobile-phone conversations, even if it's for security purposes. This attitude is especially strong among younger and better-educated citizens.

Freedom of information and the media

If freedom of information is a yardstick for a country's transparency and willingness to subject itself to public scrutiny, a free news media is paramount in keeping the population knowledgeable and holding the government accountable.

By a 2-to-1 margin, Batswana support media freedom. More than six in 10 respondents (62%) "agree" or "agree very strongly" that the media should be free to publish any views or ideas without government interference, while 32% say the government should have the right to prevent publication of information they consider harmful to society (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Media freedom vs. government control | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views or ideas without government control.

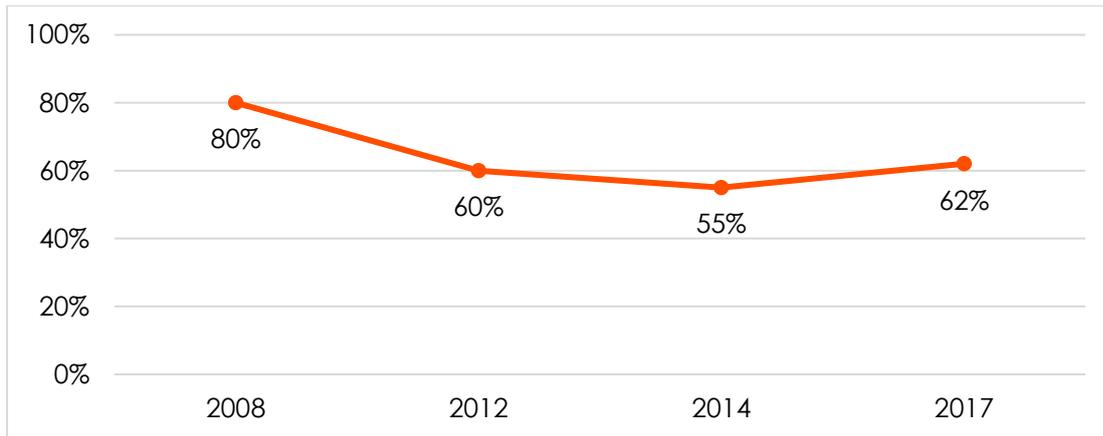
Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.

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

Popular support for media freedom increased by 7 percentage points from 2014, though it remains below the 2008 level of 80% (Figure 2).

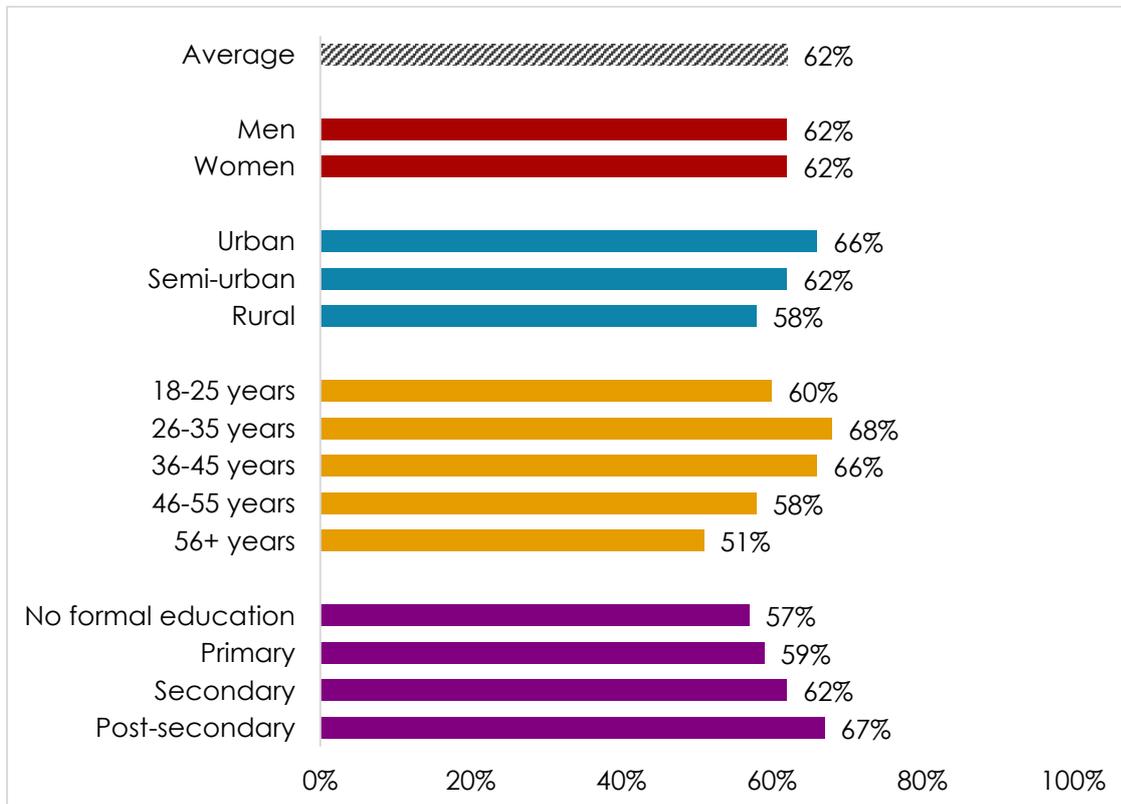
City dwellers are more likely to support press freedom (66%) than semi-urban (62%) and rural (58%) residents (Figure 3), as are better-educated respondents compared to those with less education. The middle-aged are more likely to agree that the media should be free of government interference than are youth or the elderly.

Figure 2: Media freedom vs. government control | Botswana | 2008-2017



(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that media should be free to publish)

Figure 3: Media freedom vs. government control | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017

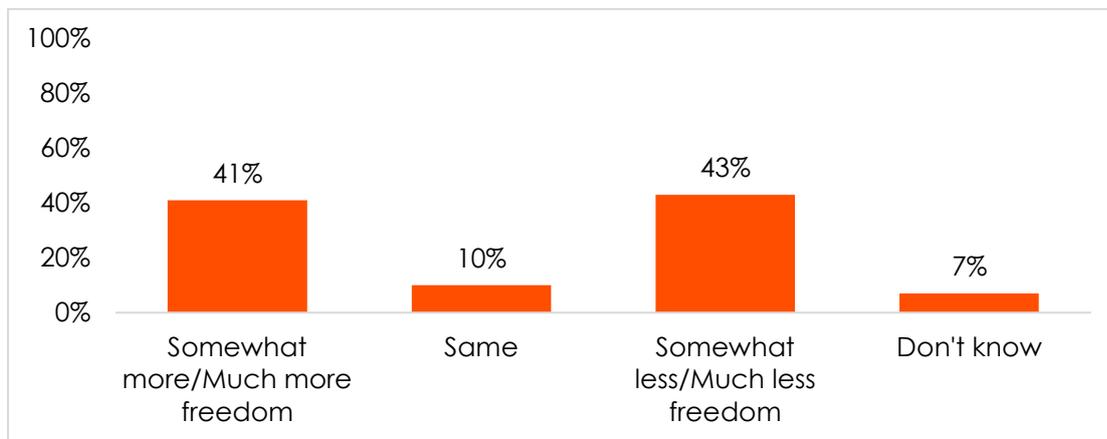


(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that media should be free to publish)

Batswana are almost evenly divided in their perceptions of how media freedom has been evolving: 41% say the media now enjoys “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom to investigate and criticize the government than “a few years ago,” while 43% say there is somewhat/much less freedom (Figure 4).

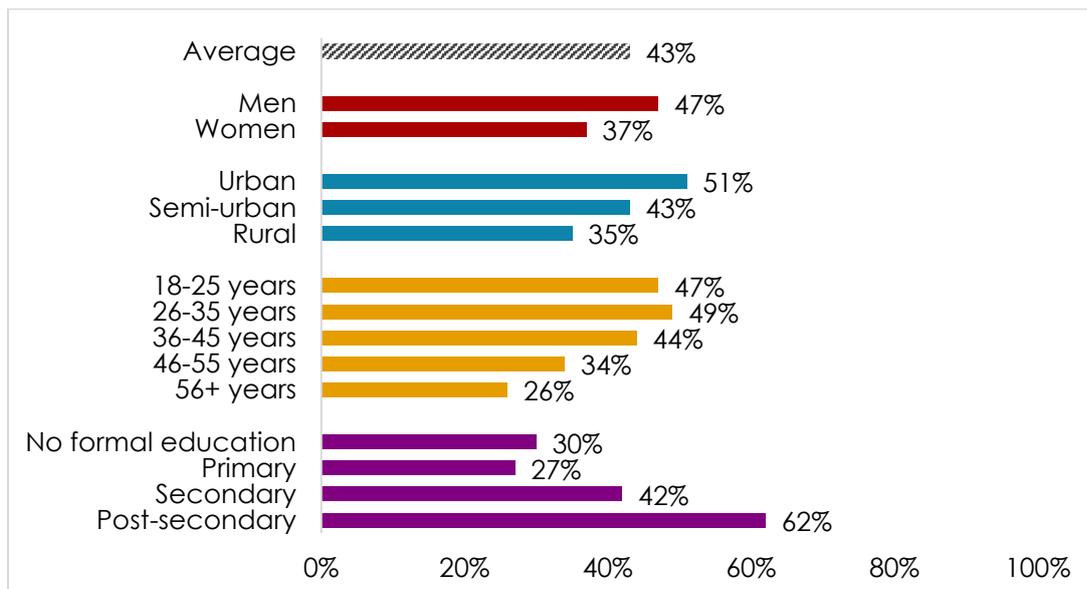
A perception of less press freedom is more common among men (47%) than women (37%) and among urbanites (51%) compared to rural residents (35%) (Figure 5). Batswana with a post-secondary education are more than twice as likely to complain of less media freedom (62%) as those with only a primary education (27%) or no formal education (30%), and younger respondents are more critical of shrinking media freedom than their elders.

Figure 4: Media freedom to investigate and criticize | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?

Figure 5: Media less free to investigate and criticize | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



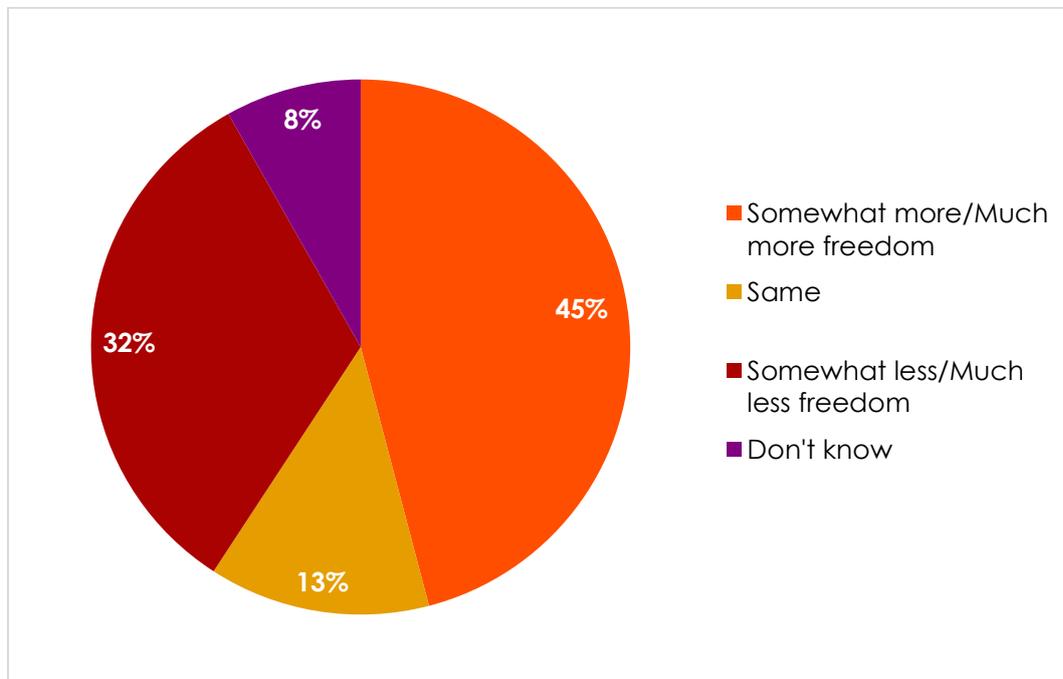
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance? (% who say “somewhat less freedom” or “much less freedom”)

Freedom of civil society and the political opposition

Freedom of information also implies the free exchange of facts and ideas by civil society and the political opposition. When asked to assess whether independent groups or NGOs are becoming freer or less free in Botswana, almost half (45%) of respondents say that compared to a few years ago, these organisations now have “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom to “speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose” (Figure 6). One in three Botswana (32%) say civil society has somewhat/much less freedom now, while 13% see no change.

By demographic group, the pattern is similar to views on media freedom, with men, urban residents, younger respondents, and the better-educated more likely to perceive freedom as shrinking than women, rural dwellers, elders, and those with less education.

Figure 6: Freedom of independent groups and NGOs | Botswana | 2017

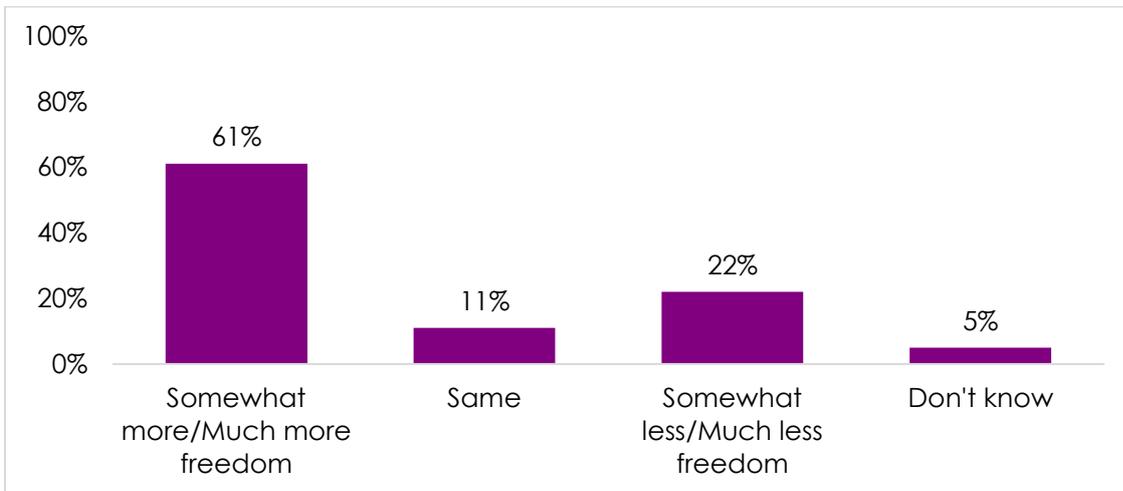


Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organisations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?

Notably, a majority of Botswana say the environment has been improving for opposition political parties and candidates: 61% say they enjoy “somewhat more” or “much more” freedom to “speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government” than they did a few years ago (Figure 7). About two in 10 (22%) see the opposite trend.

Again, the pattern of less favourable perceptions by men, urbanites, and respondents with post-secondary qualifications holds (not shown).

Figure 7: Freedom of opposition parties and candidates | Botswana | 2017



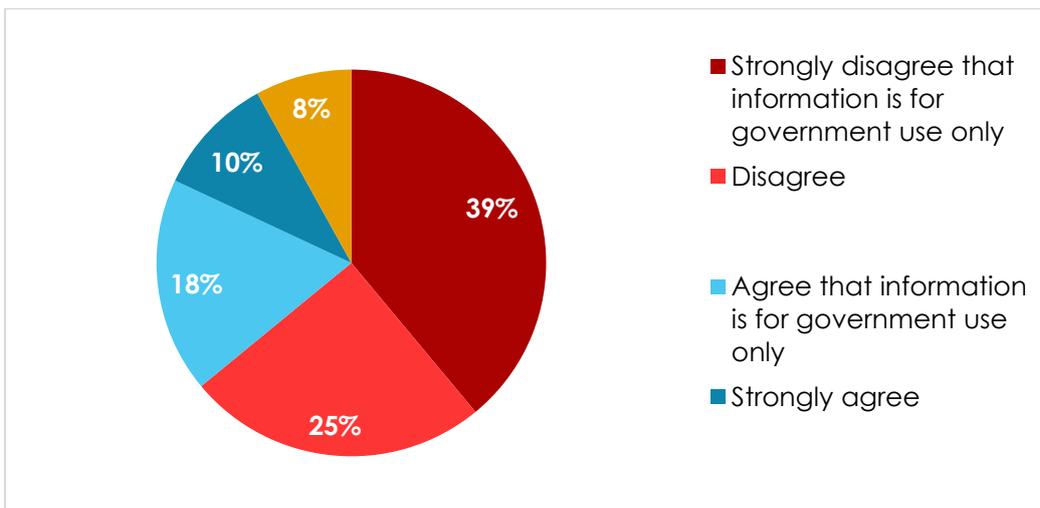
Respondents were asked: Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same: The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

Access to public information

If free media, civil society, and political opposition are important to a democratic society, citizen access to information held by public institutions is fundamental to both democratic participation and accountability. As one measure of popular support for freedom of information, Afrobarometer asked respondents whether they agree with the idea that “information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials and should not have to be shared with the public.”

In their responses, Botswana endorse freedom of information: Almost two-thirds (64%) disagree with the idea of government-only information, including four in 10 (39%) who “strongly disagree” (Figure 8). Only 28% argue that information held by the government should remain a preserve for public officials.

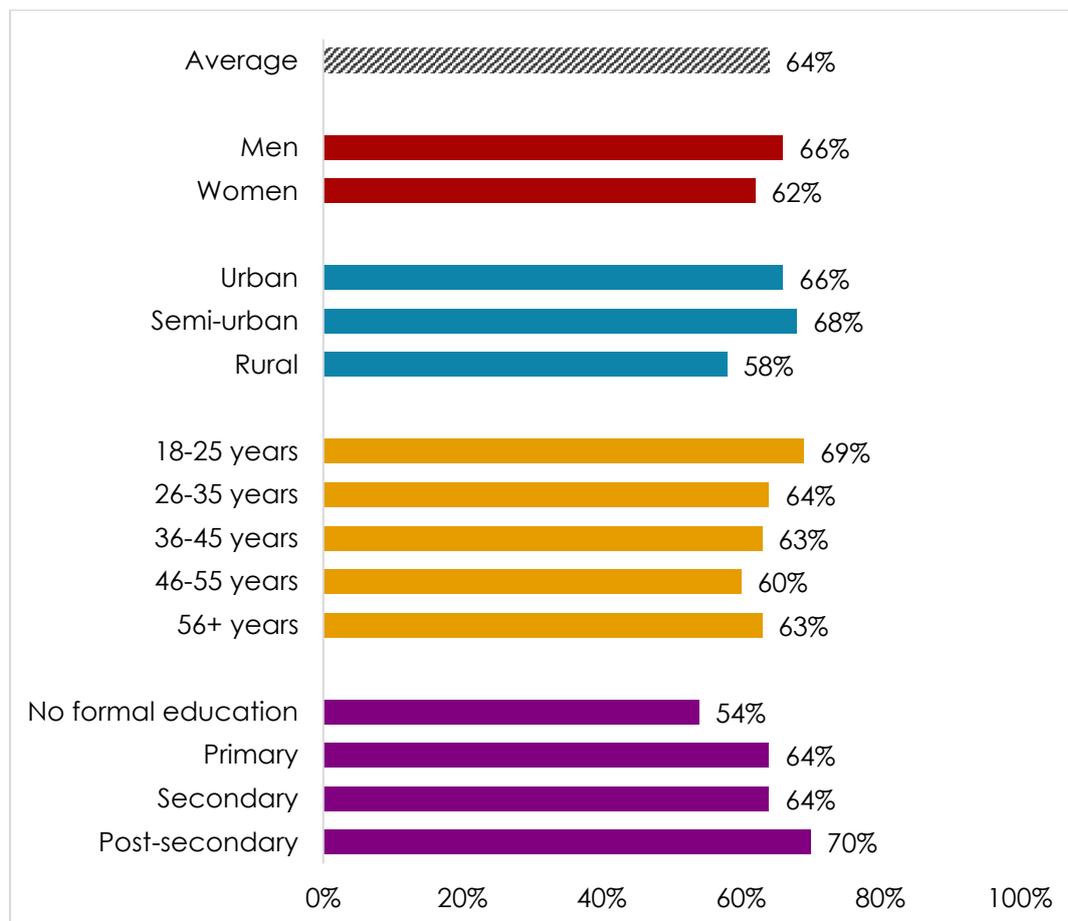
Figure 8: Should information be for government use only? | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public.

Support for sharing government information with the public, rather than shielding it for government use only, is strong across genders and age groups, and increases with respondents' education level (ranging from 54% of those with no formal education to 70% among the best-educated) (Figure 9).

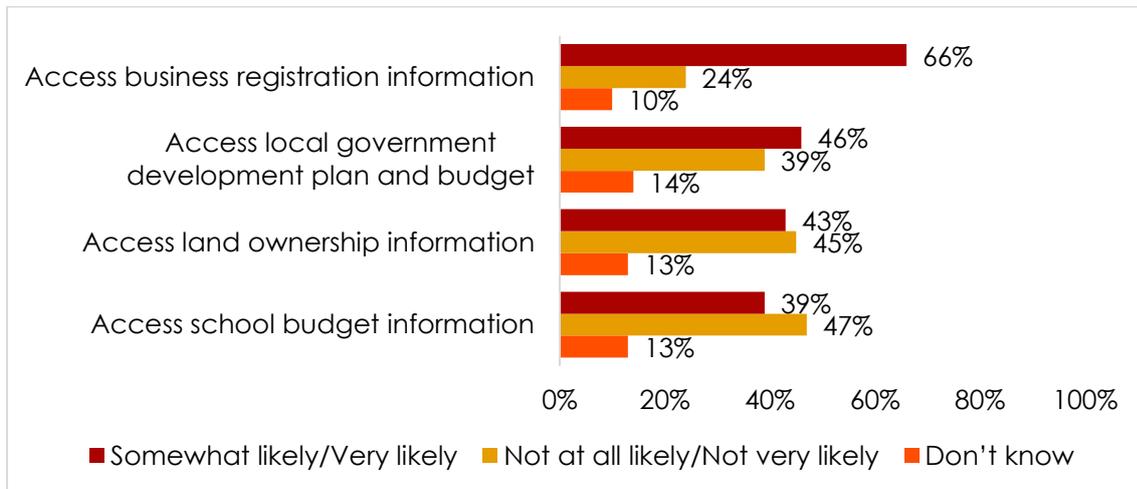
Figure 9: Information should be accessible to the public | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Information held by public authorities is only for use by government officials; it should not have to be shared with the public. (% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

But when asked whether they think they could obtain such information from a variety of government institutions, substantial proportions of respondents say they probably could not. While a majority (66%) see it as “somewhat” or “very” likely that they could access information from local government about how to register a new business, fewer than half say the same about finding out about the district development plan and budgets (46%), getting information on land ownership at the land board (43%), and finding out what a school's budget is and how the funds were used (39%) (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Difficulty accessing information from public institutions | Botswana | 2017

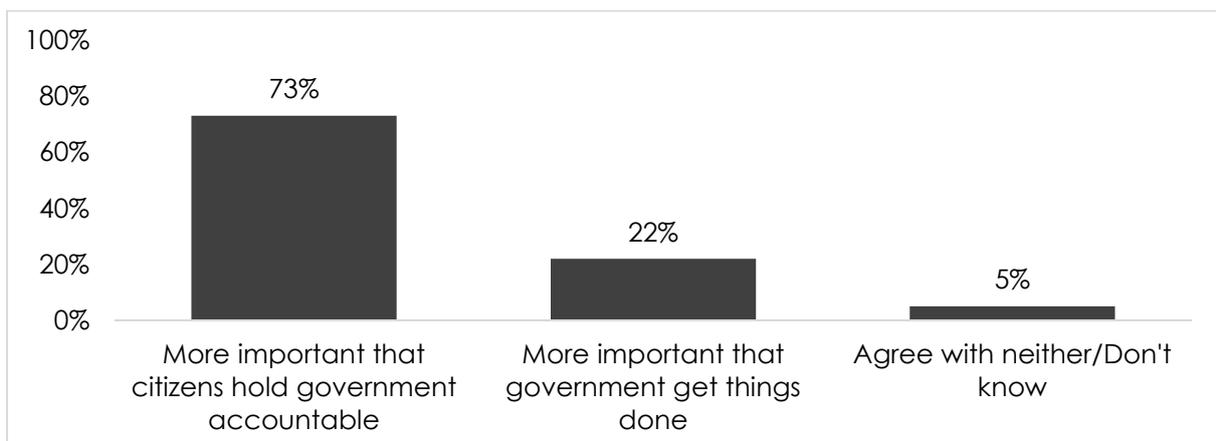


Respondents were asked: How likely is it that you could get the following information from government or other public institutions, or haven't you heard enough to say?

- If you went to the local school to find out what the school's budget is and how the funds have been used?
- If you went to the land board to find out who owns a piece of land in your community?
- If you went to the local government office to find out about the district development plan and budgets?
- If you went to the local government office to find out how to register a new business in your community?

Yet without the ability to obtain such information, citizens would face enormous hurdles in holding government accountable – a high priority for Botswana. An overwhelming majority (73%) of respondents “agree” or “agree very strongly” that it is more important to ensure that citizens can hold government accountable than to have a government that can get things done (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Holding government accountable more important than efficiency | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

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

Right to privacy

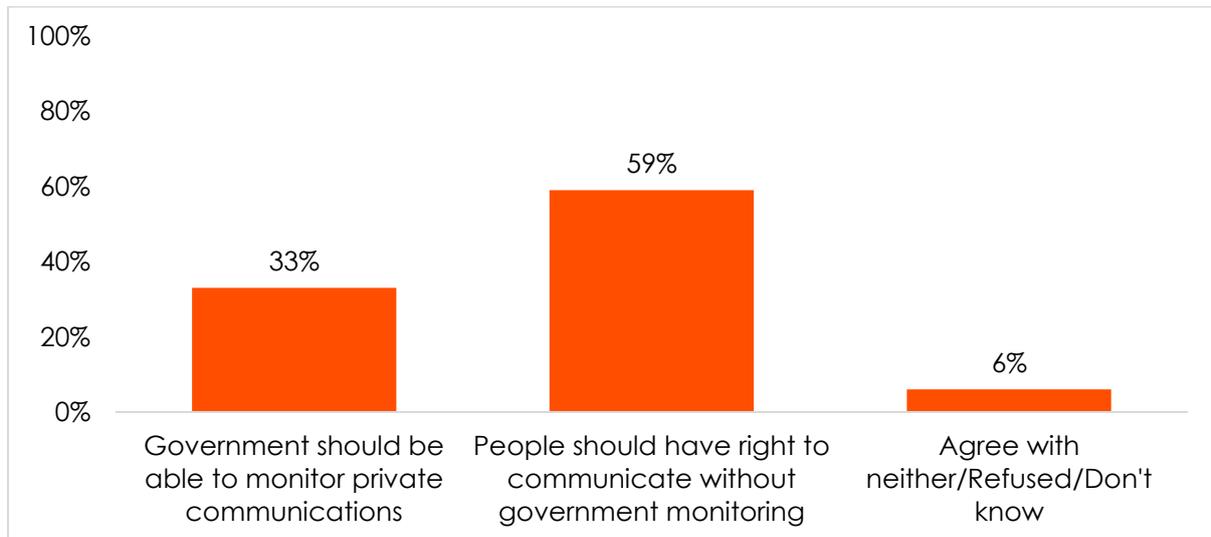
The right to private communication is an important aspect of freedom of information in the digital/telecommunications age, allowing individuals to exchange information and opinions without fear of reprisal. It is also one of the rights that may conflict, at times, with the government's efforts to fight crime and terrorism by monitoring certain communications.

When asked to choose between the two priorities when it comes to private communications, such as mobile-phone conversations, six in 10 Batswana (59%) “agree” or “agree very strongly” that people should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they say. One-third (33%) of respondents disagree, supporting the government's ability to monitor private communications to make sure people are not plotting violence (Figure 12).

This protection of private communication is particularly valued by younger respondents (67% of 18- to 25-year-olds vs. 47% of those age 56 and older) and better-educated citizens (76% of those with post-secondary qualifications vs. 45% of those with no formal education) (Figure 13). Urban residents (66%) are also more likely than rural dwellers (53%) to favour private communication free of government monitoring.

By political-party affiliation,¹ support for unmonitored private communication is strongest among Botswana Congress Party supporters (68%) and weakest among adherents of the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (53%).

Figure 12: Monitoring of private communications | Botswana | 2017



Respondents were asked: Let's talk for a moment about the kind of society you would like to have in this country. Some people say that, in order to enjoy security from violence in our society, we must limit the amount of freedom that citizens are allowed to enjoy. Others say that political liberty is too important to sacrifice and must always be maintained, even if it threatens the security of the country. Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

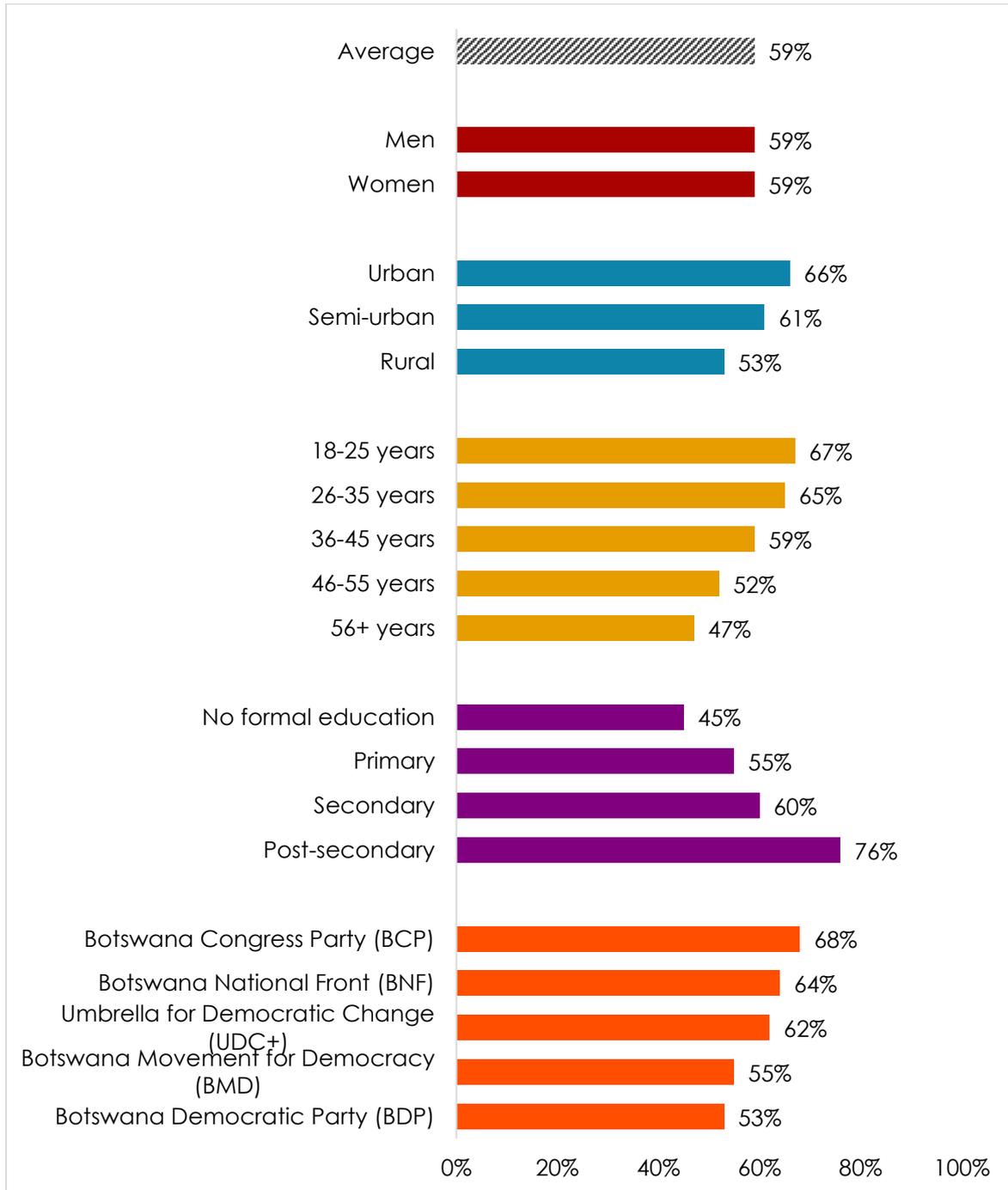
Statement 1: Government should be able to monitor private communications, for example on mobile phones, to make sure that people are not plotting violence.

Statement 2: People should have the right to communicate in private without a government agency reading or listening to what they are saying.

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

¹ Afrobarometer measures party affiliation based on responses to the questions “Do you feel close to any particular political party? [If yes:] Which party is that?”

Figure 13: Private communications should be free from government monitoring | by socio-demographic group | Botswana | 2017



(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that people should be able to communicate without government monitoring)

Conclusion

If information is power, freedom of information is part of the democratization of power. While Botswana has suffered attacks on media freedom and has so far failed to legally protect citizens' rights to privacy in communication and access to government information, survey

findings suggest that a majority of Batswana endorse these freedoms. A majority of citizens also support a free news media as essential to an informed citizenry and an accountable government.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question,
for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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

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