

Will of the people? Election results and public opinion in Gabon

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 119 | Peter Penar

Summary

According to Gabon's national electoral commission and a subsequent Constitutional Court ruling, incumbent President Ali Bongo won re-election in August against challenger Jean Ping. His razor-thin and disputed victory margin relies in part on extraordinarily strong support and high voter turnout in the president's home province, Haut-Ogooué.¹ The officially announced results prompted protests in which several people died and many were arrested. They continue to be widely questioned by the opposition and international observers amid fears that failing to address election-quality concerns that have festered since the previous presidential election in 2009 could lead to further instability.

As partisans on both sides debate how likely or believable they find the official election results, one source of comparative data is Afrobarometer's nationally representative survey in Gabon. This survey was conducted in September-October 2015 – almost a year before the election – and views can certainly change over time. Still, survey findings offer insights into the perceptions of Gabonese citizens – including those in Haut-Ogooué – and highlight the critical importance of addressing public doubts about the trustworthiness of their electoral bodies and processes. As the African Union and the international community assess Gabon's compliance as a signatory to the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, the Afrobarometer results can contribute to an understanding of the evolving situation.

At the time of the survey, public trust in President Bongo and public approval of his job performance were high in Haut-Ogooué but low across the rest of the country. Voter turnout in previous national elections was far lower than turnout reported for the 2016 contest. More broadly, Gabonese citizens – including those in Haut-Ogooué – voiced strong distrust of the Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome et Permanente (CENAP), doubts about the expected fairness of the vote count, low levels of trust in the courts and security forces, and dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in Gabon.

In addition to immediate fears of potential unrest, the crisis in Gabon reflects deep public concerns about the fairness of election processes, the trustworthiness of state institutions, and the ability of Gabon's democracy to respect the will of the people.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more

¹ Gabon's Commission Electorale Nationale Autonome et Permanente (CENAP) announced that Bongo had won 49.8% of the vote to 48.23% for Ping, including 95.5% of the vote on 99.9% turnout in Haut-Ogooué. The Constitutional Court revised the numbers (50.66% for Bongo overall, including 83.2% on 98% turnout in Haut-Ogooué) while confirming Bongo's victory.

than 30 countries in Africa. After five rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2013, results from Round 6 surveys (2014-2015) are currently being published. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Gabon, led by Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche en Géosciences Politiques et Prospective (CERGE), interviewed 1,198 adult Gabonese in September and October 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. Because the survey is nationally representative, the sample is distributed across provinces in proportion to the population of each province (Table 1). Since fieldwork may slightly over- or under-sample an area, the sample is then weighted to ensure that it represents the national population. In the case of Gabon's 2015 survey, weighting changed the number of responses per province only slightly (by up to four responses). Because sample sizes are much smaller at the provincial level, the margin of error on provincial-level results is considerably larger, so provincial-level results should be interpreted with caution. Because of the large margin of error, we do not report provincial-level results for provinces with fewer than 100 respondents.

Table 1: Sample size by province | Gabon | 2015

Province	Population*	Share of national population*	Unweighted sample size	Weighted sample size
Estuaire	877,924	48.7%	606	607
Haut-Ogooué	250,548	13.9%	152	153
Woleu-Ntem	160,513	8.9%	104	106
Ogooué-Maritime	149,966	8.3%	104	100
Ngounié	107,149	5.9%	72	69
Moyen-Ogooué	68,611	3.8%	48	45
Ogooué-Lolo	67,916	3.8%	40	43
Ogooué-Ivindo	67,257	3.7%	40	41
Nyanga	52,789	2.9%	32	34
Total Gabon sample	1,802,673	100%	1,198	1,198

* Projected population figures, Gabon Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitation (RGPH), 2013

For more details on Gabonese citizens' perceptions related to elections and democracy, please see Afrobarometer's recent press releases "[In Gabon, overwhelming public distrust of CENAP and election quality forms backdrop for presidential vote dispute](#)" and "[Behind Gabon's election dispute, citizens strongly support multiparty democracy, reject autocratic alternatives.](#)"

Key findings

■ Ratings for President Bongo

- In September-October 2015, two-thirds (65%) of Gabonese saw the country as heading in the wrong direction (Figure 1). Concern with the direction of the country was highest in Woleu-Ntem (85%) and Ogooué-Maritime (71%), but even in Haut-Ogooué, 43% said the country was heading in the wrong direction.

- Six in 10 Gabonese said they did not trust the incumbent president “at all” (31%) or trusted him “just a little” (30%) (Figure 2). Although trust levels were higher in his home province, 38% of Haut-Ogooué residents expressed little or no trust in Bongo.
- A majority (54%) of Gabonese said they “disapprove” or “strongly disapprove” of Bongo’s performance in office (Figure 3). Disapproval ranged up to 70% in Woleu-Ntem (Figure 4). In contrast, eight in 10 Haut-Ogooué residents (80%) said the president was doing a good job. Bongo’s approval rating was the seventh-worst among presidents of 34 African countries surveyed on this question (Figure 5).

■ **Voter turnout and voting intentions**

- Only 39% of Gabonese (including 45% of Haut-Ogooué residents) reported having voted in the previous national election in 2011 (Figure 6). That was a parliamentary (not a presidential) election and was boycotted by the opposition – factors that would likely contribute to a low voter turnout. Official turnout in 2011 was 34%. By comparison, official turnout for the 2009 presidential election was 44%. In the 2016 election, official voter turnout was announced as 59.5%, including 99.9% (revised to 98% by the Constitutional Court) in Haut-Ogooué.
- When asked in 2015 which party’s candidate they would vote for if the election were held the next day, 27% of Gabonese said they would support the ruling Parti Démocratique Gabonais (PDG), while 22% said they would vote for other parties, 22% said they would not vote, and 28% said they “don’t know” or refused to say. In Haut-Ogooué, 50% said they would support the PDG (Figure 7).

■ **Concerns about elections**

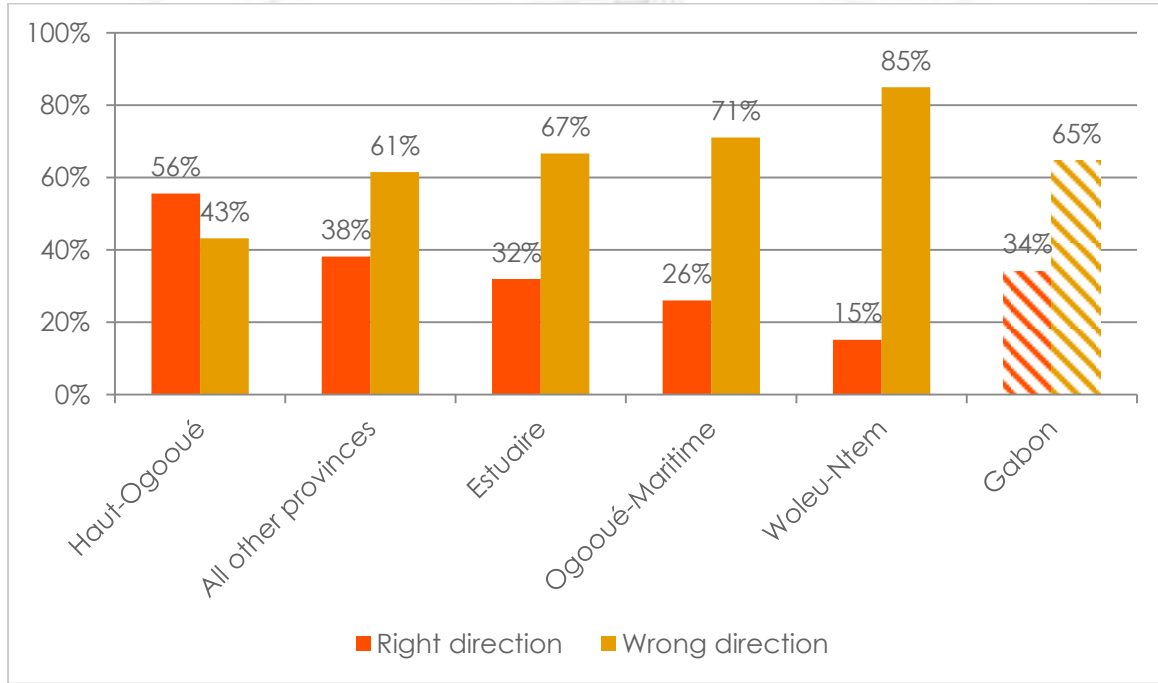
- Trust in the national election commission was very low: Three-fourths of Gabonese said they trusted CENAP “not at all” (50%) or just a little (24%) (Figure 8). Levels of distrust were high in all of Gabon’s provinces, including Haut-Ogooué (61%).
- Months before the presidential election, citizens expressed strong doubts about the likely fairness of the upcoming vote count: 41% said votes are “never” counted fairly in Gabon, and an additional 31% said the count is only “sometimes” fair (Figure 9). In Haut-Ogooué, too, a majority of residents doubted the fairness of the vote count (23% “never,” 37% “sometimes”).

■ **Perceptions of democracy and institutions**

- An overwhelming majority (84%) of Gabonese, including 67% of Haut-Ogooué residents, are “not at all” or “not very” satisfied with the way democracy works in their country (Figure 10).
- Six in 10 citizens (60%) said they have no trust or “just a little” trust in the courts (Figure 11). This level of distrust is far higher than the average across 36 African countries surveyed in 2014/2015 (43%).
- A majority of citizens express little or no trust in the military (56%) and the police (59%). These are among the highest levels of mistrust in these institutions recorded across 36 surveyed countries (Figure 12 and Figure 13).

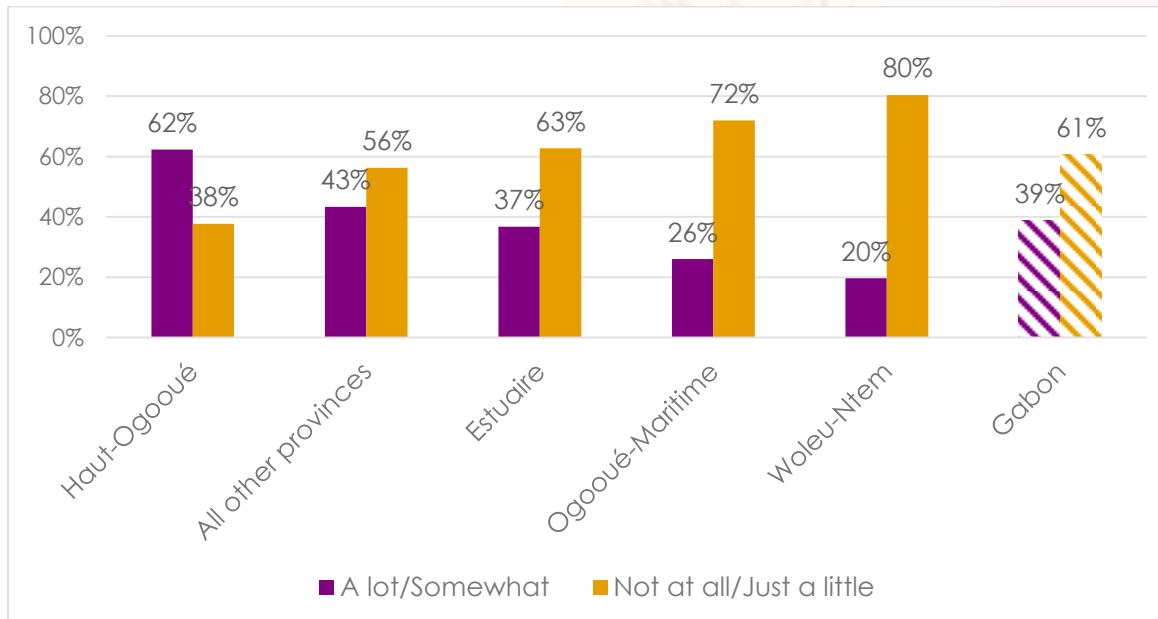
Figures

Figure 1: Country heading in the right or wrong direction | by province | Gabon | 2015



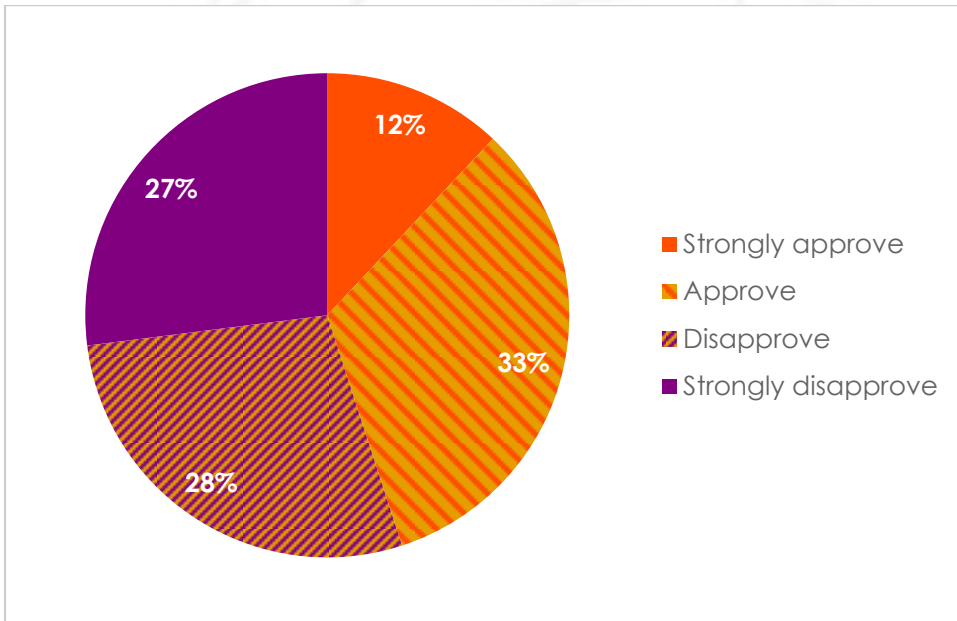
Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 2: Trust President Bongo | by province | Gabon | 2015



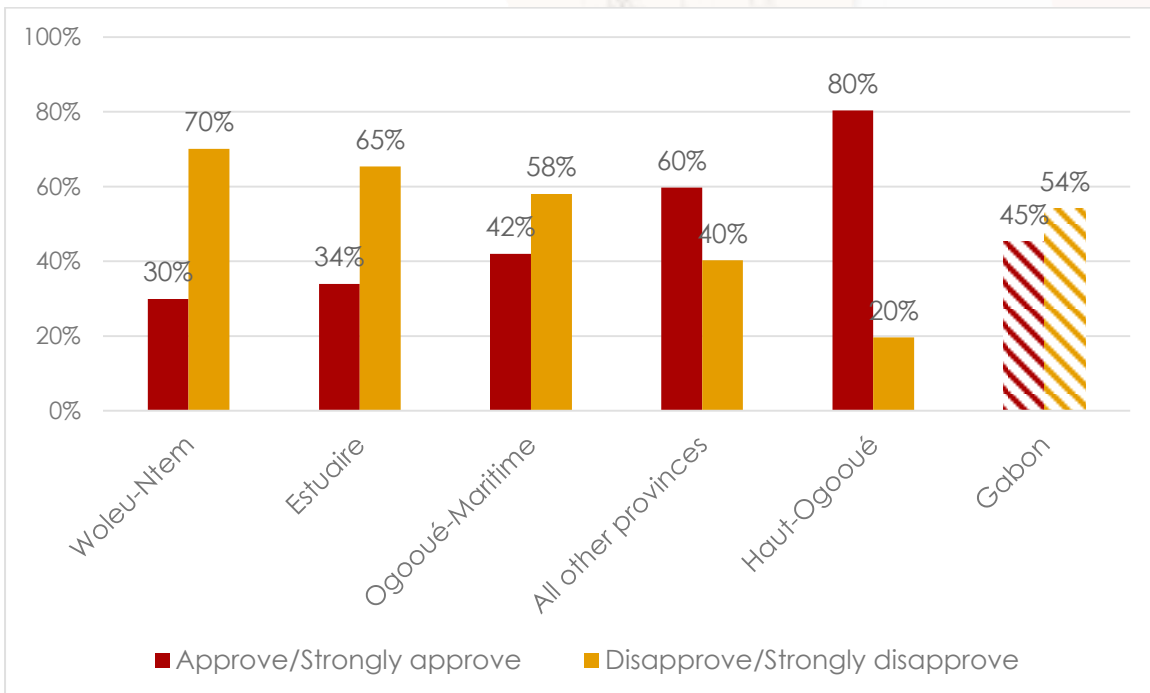
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president?

Figure 3: Public approval of President Bongo's performance | Gabon | 2015



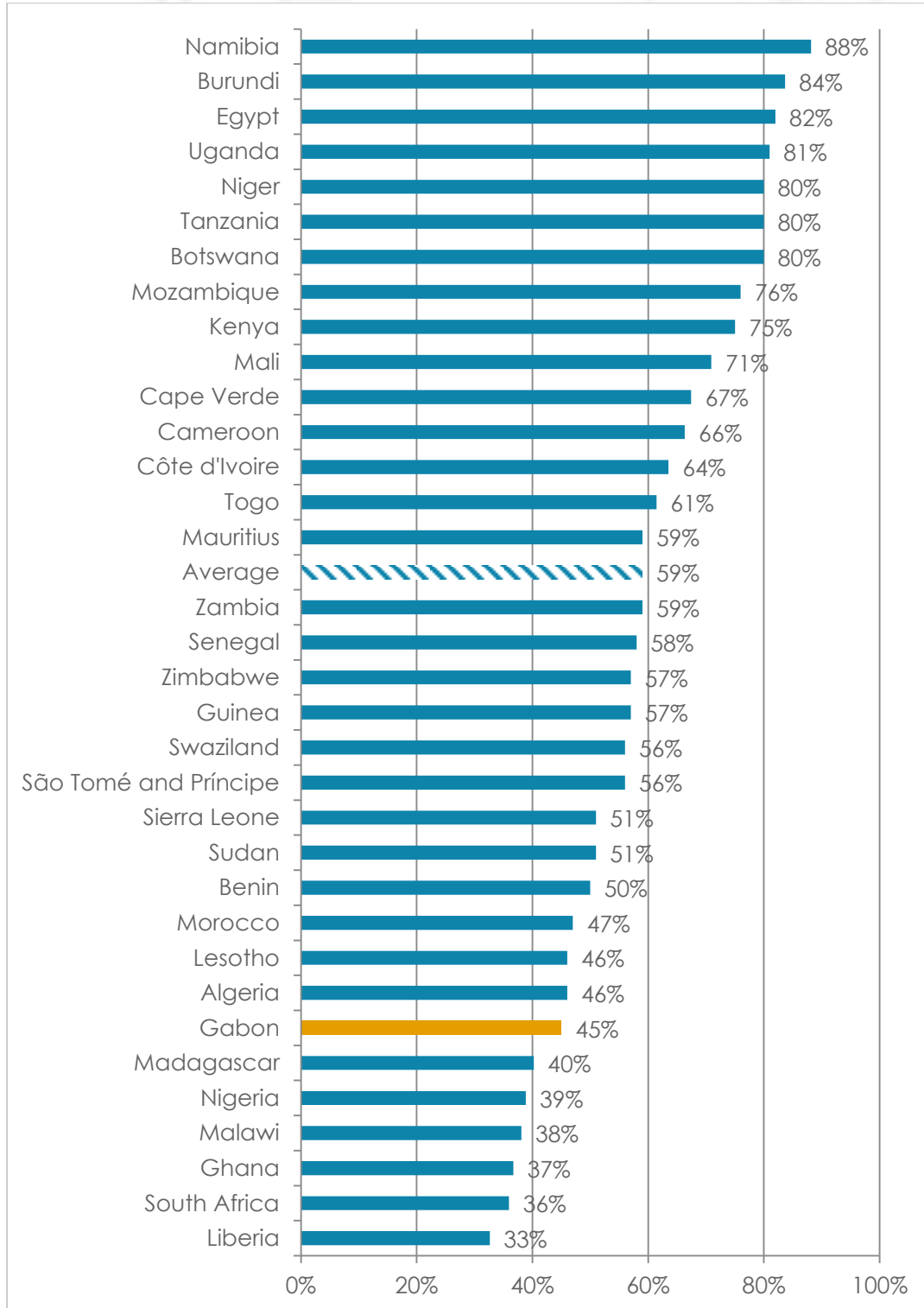
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President Ali Bongo Ondimba?
 (Note: Due to rounding, a percentage for combined categories (e.g. 54% disapprove/strongly disapprove) may appear to differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of sub-categories.)

Figure 4: Public approval of President Bongo's performance | by province | Gabon | 2015



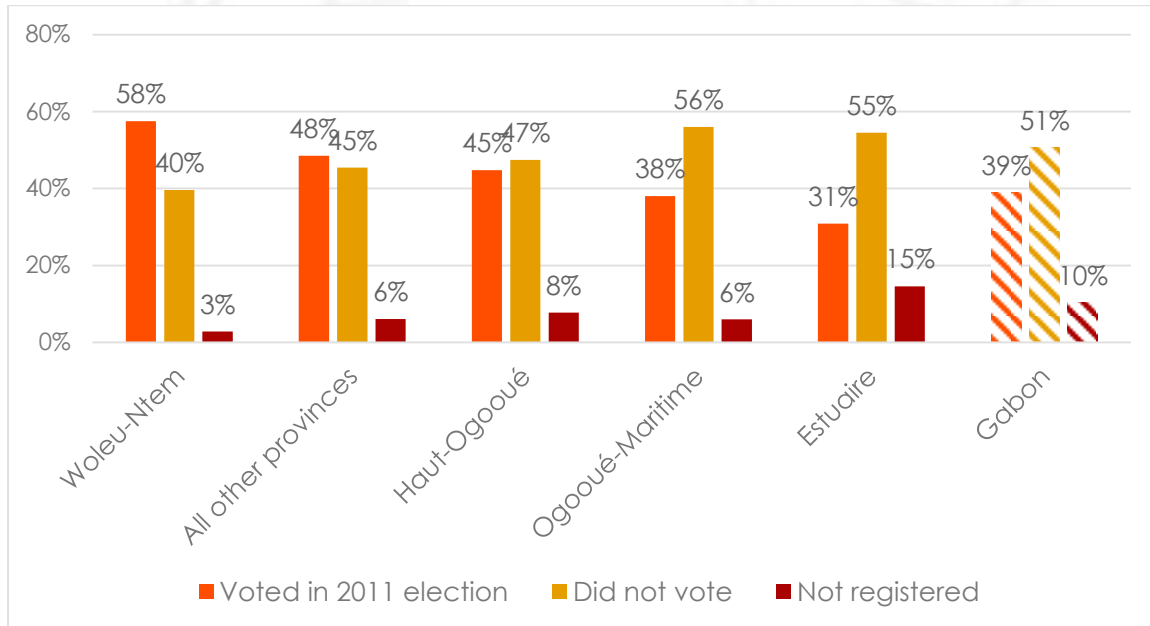
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President Ali Bongo Ondimba?

Figure 5: Public approval of president's performance | 34 African countries
 | 2014/2015



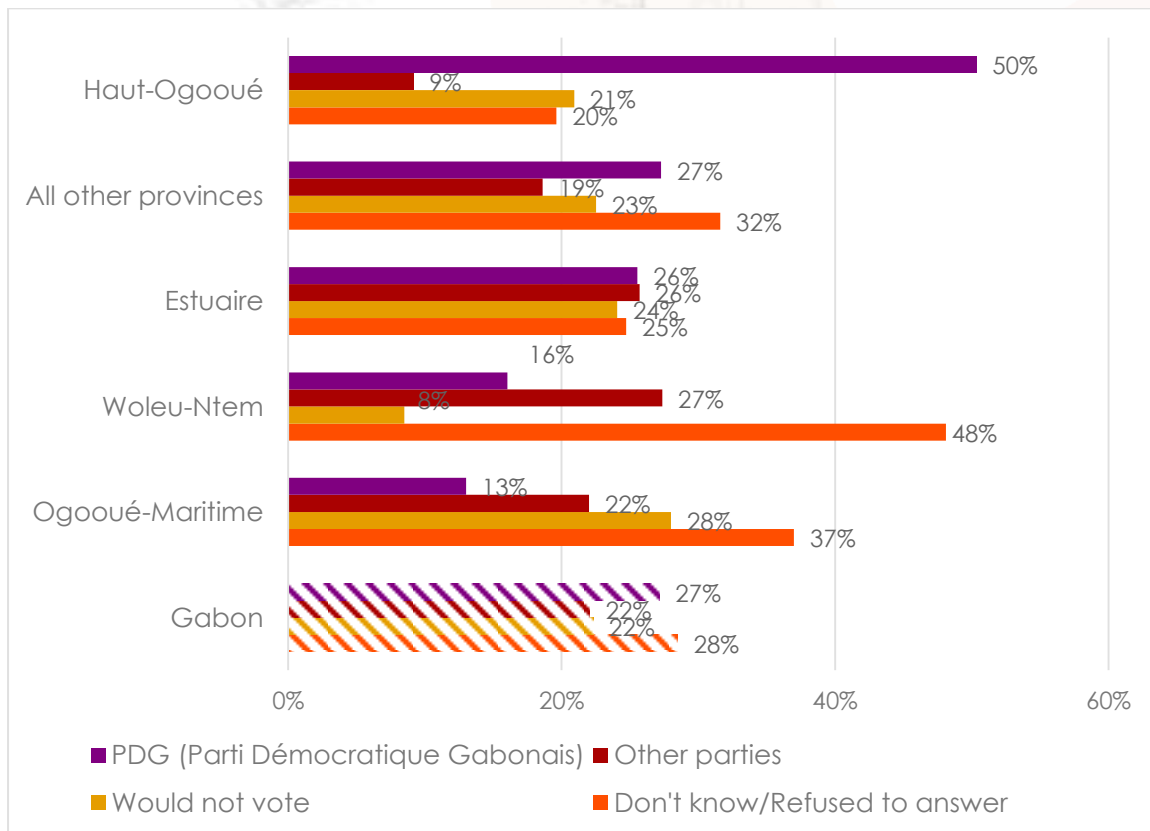
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: President [Name]? (% who said they "approve" or "strongly approve")

Figure 6: Self-reported voter turnout in 2011 legislative election | by province | Gabon | 2015



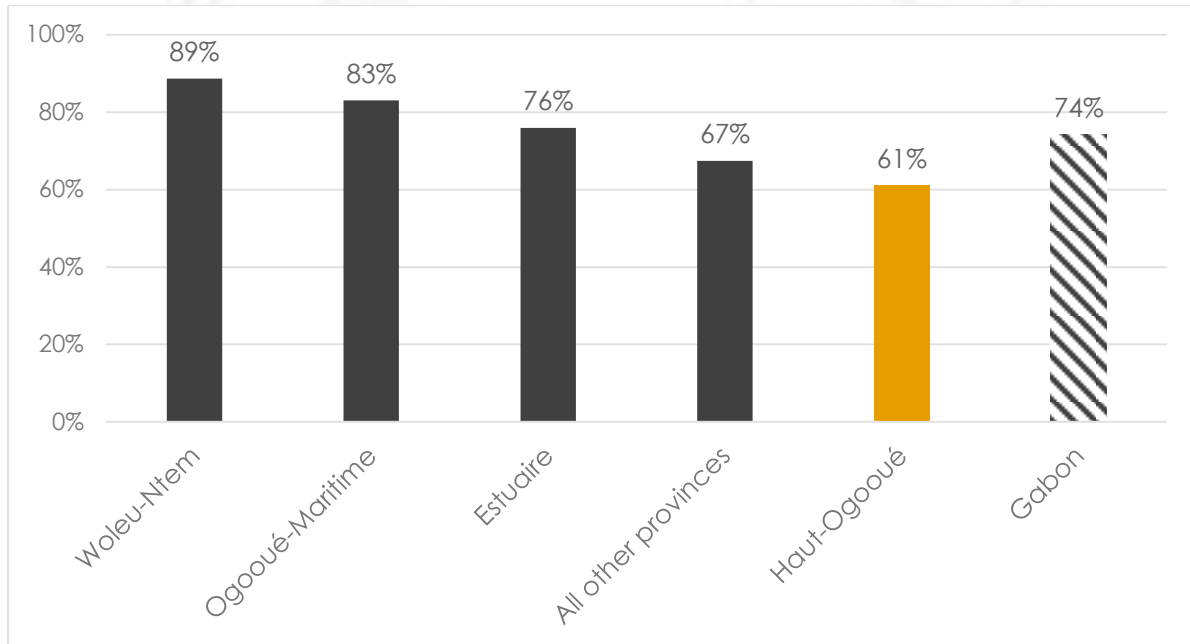
Respondents were asked: Understanding that some people were unable to vote in the most recent legislative elections in 2011, which of the following statements is true for you?

Figure 7: Voting intentions | by province | Gabon | 2015



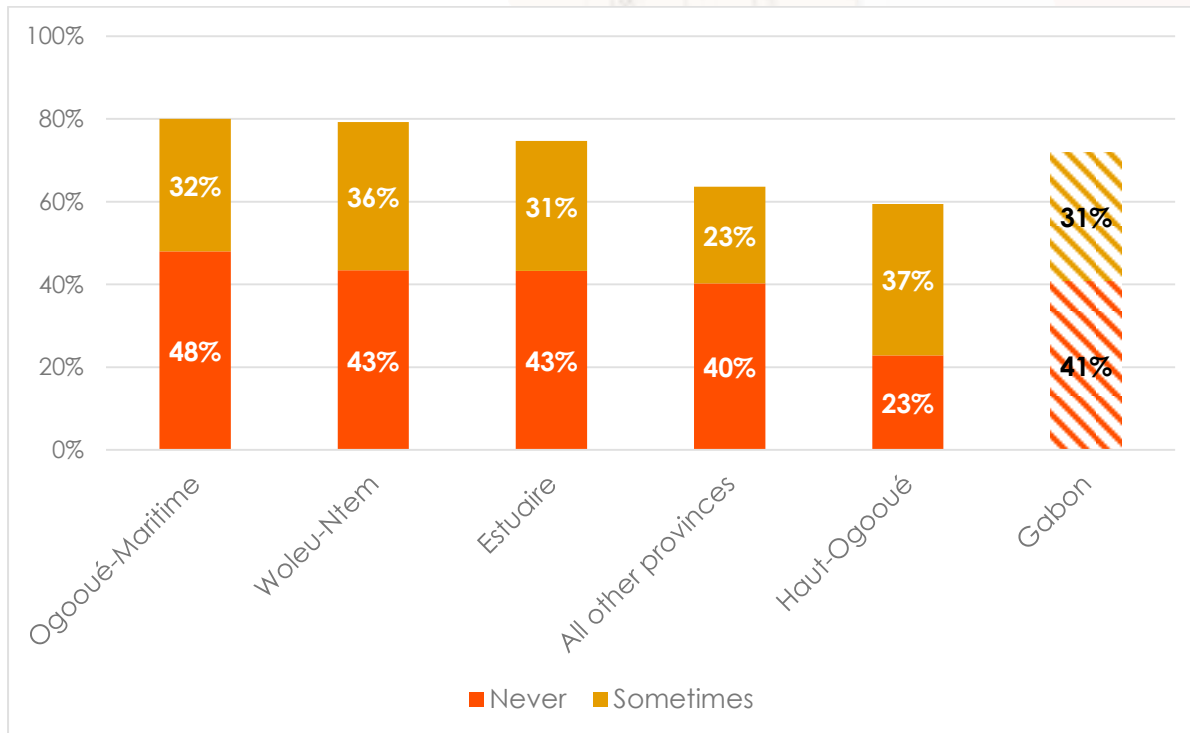
Respondents were asked: If a presidential election were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?

Figure 8: Trust electoral commission 'not at all' or 'just a little' | by province | Gabon | 2015



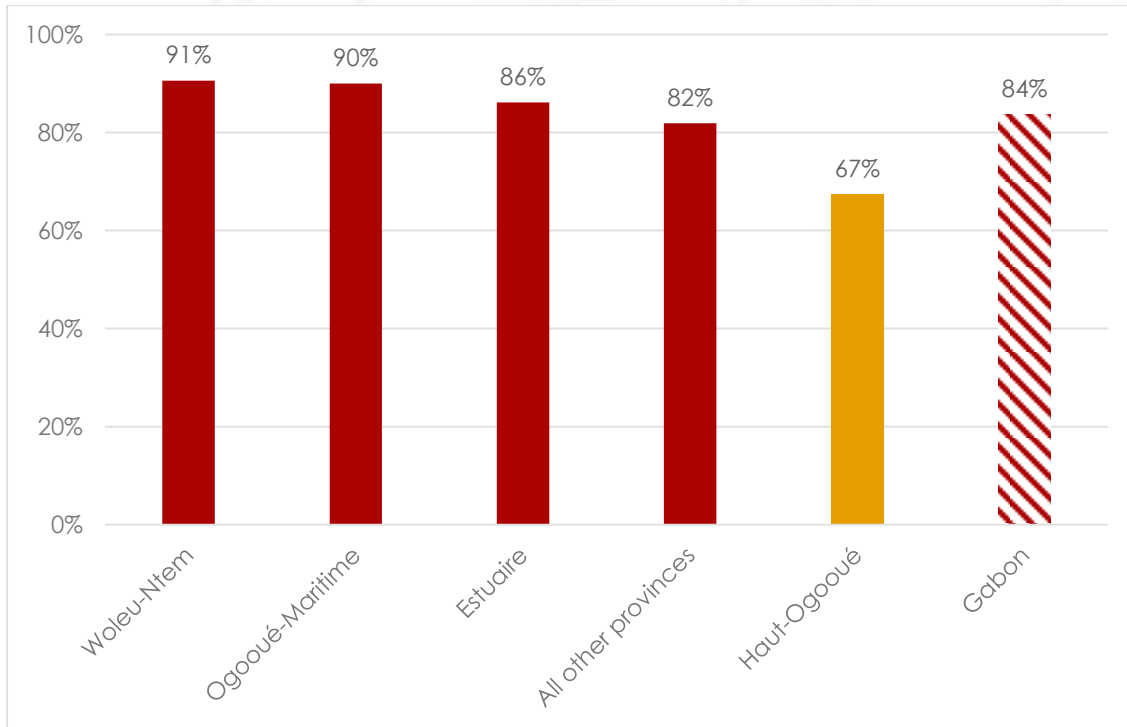
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The National Autonomous and Permanent Electoral Commission (CENAP)? (% who said "not at all" or "just a little")

Figure 9: Votes are 'never' or 'only sometimes' counted fairly | by province | Gabon | 2015



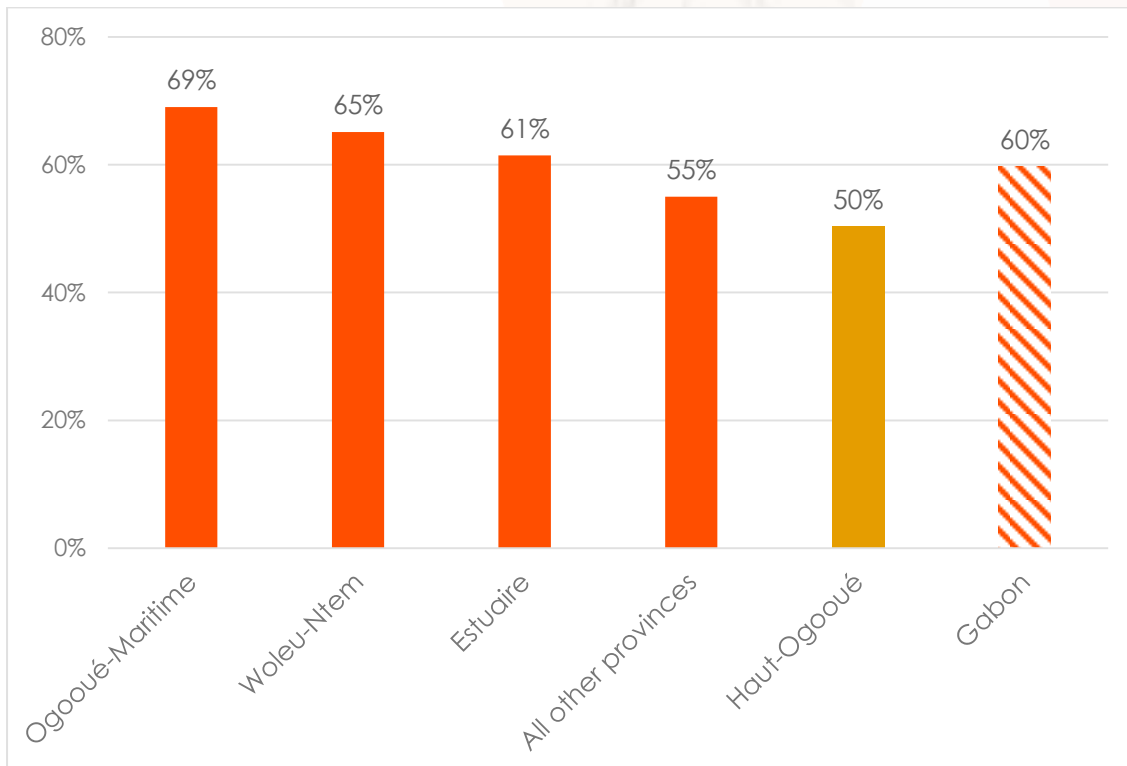
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Votes are counted fairly? (% who said "never" and "sometimes")

Figure 10: Dissatisfaction with democracy | by province | Gabon | 2015



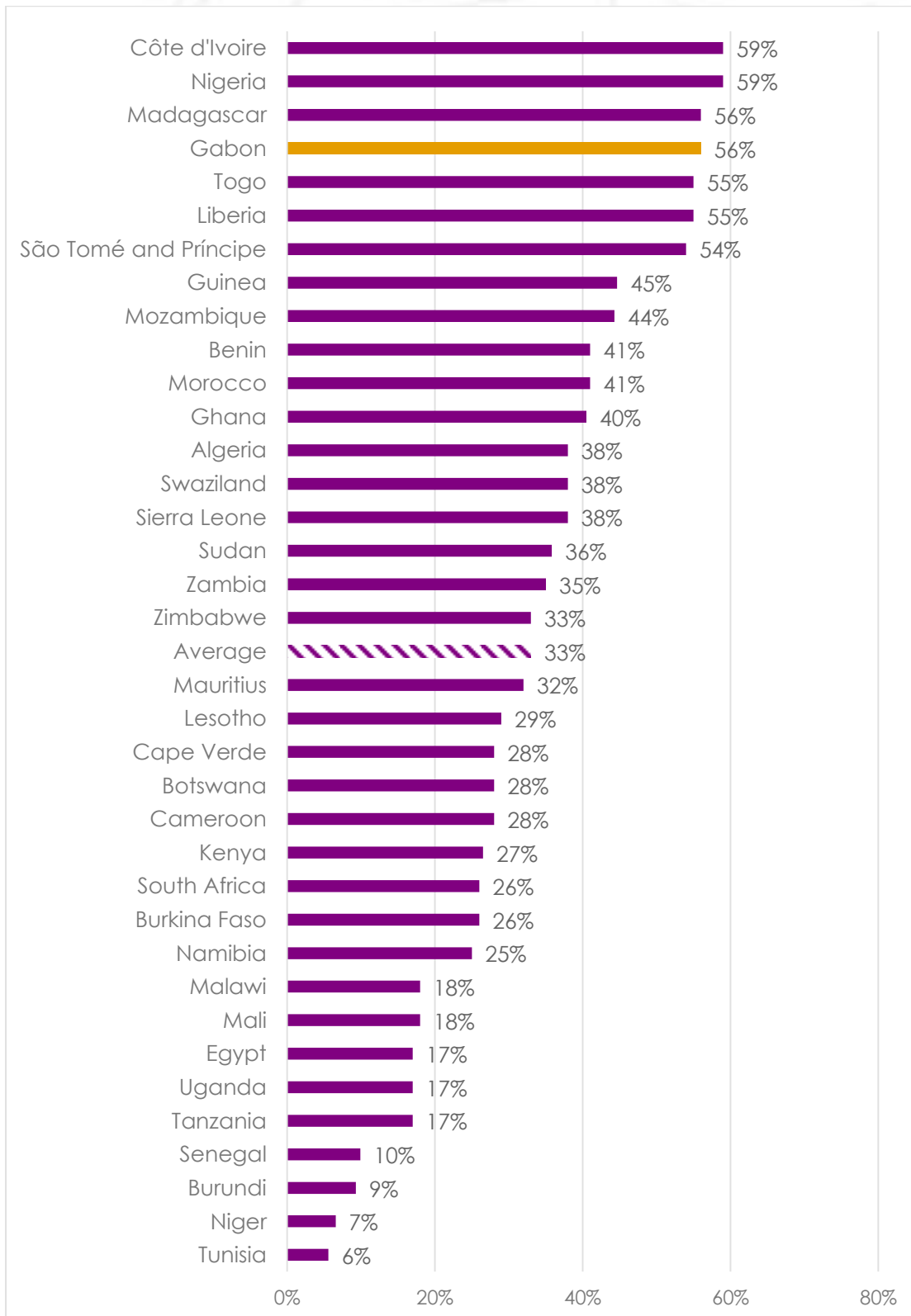
Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Gabon? (% who said “not at all satisfied” or “not very satisfied”)

Figure 11: Lack of trust in courts of law | by province | Gabon | 2015



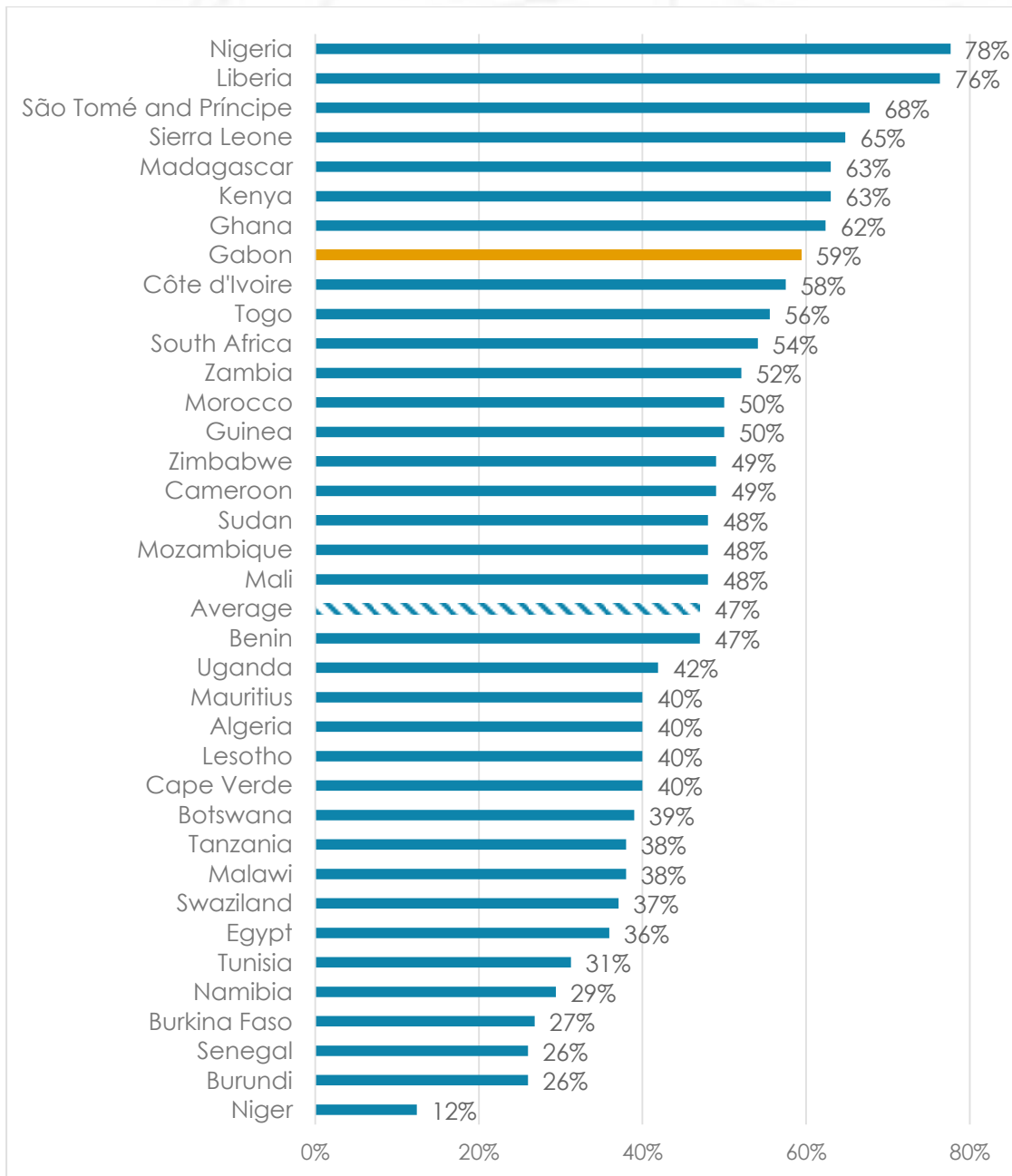
Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: Courts of law? (% who said “not at all” or “just a little”)

Figure 12: Lack of trust in the army | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The army? (% who said "not at all" or "just a little")

Figure 13: Lack of trust in the police | 36 countries | 2014/2015



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: the police? (% who said "not at all" or "just a little")

**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.**

Peter Penar is a research assistant for Afrobarometer and PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Michigan State University. Email: ppenar@msu.edu. Twitter: @PPenar.

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.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

Donations help the Afrobarometer Project give voice to African citizens. Please consider making a contribution (at www.afrobarometer.org) or contact Aba Kittoe (akittoe@afrobarometer.org) to discuss institutional funding.

For more information, please visit www.afrobarometer.org.

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 119 | 26 September 2016