

## **Freedoms seen as expanding, but fewer Malians back free media, feel free to speak their minds**

**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 262 | Fadimata Haidara and Thomas Isbell**

### **Summary**

For democracy to be “lived” by ordinary citizens, their ability to engage with others and the state must be protected. While civil freedoms and rights are thus considered core elements of democracies, their mere existence on paper does not mean that citizens will use or benefit from them. In fact, studies have found that the most “free” societies are often characterized by relatively low engagement and participation by citizens (Gray & Caul, 2000; Putnam, 2000), perhaps because they delegate these responsibilities to representatives and only become active if their views or interests are fundamentally threatened (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Dalton & Shin, 2014). However, in non-consolidated democracies, lack of participation may suggest issues of lack of freedom or access, weak civil society, or a lack of cognitive engagement.

Since Mali democratized in 1992, the Constitution has guaranteed certain civil freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of the press. Yet at times these freedoms come under attack, as when, during the recent presidential elections, some social media sites were blocked and a radio station was accused of inciting hatred and shut down. Reporters Without Borders (2018) rates Mali 115<sup>th</sup> out of 180 in its 2018 World Press Freedom Index.

While these incidents make headlines, how do ordinary Malians assess their civil freedoms and their ability to engage with the political system? Using Afrobarometer survey data collected in 2017, we find that a majority of Malians say basic freedoms have expanded in recent years, including citizens’ freedom to join any organization they wish and to express their views as well as the media’s freedom to investigate, report, and criticize. At the same time, more Malians than in the past say they have to be careful about what they say, and only one in four support media freedom from government interference. Many Malians say they participate in community meetings and join others to raise issues, though fewer report contacting their elected officials to share their views.

### **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 2015, and Round 7 surveys were 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 Mali, led by Groupe de Recherche en Economie Appliquée et Théorique (GREAT), interviewed 1,200 adult Malians in February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys were conducted in Mali in 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012 (did not include the regions of Tombouctou, Gao, and Kidal due to the security situation), 2013, and 2014.

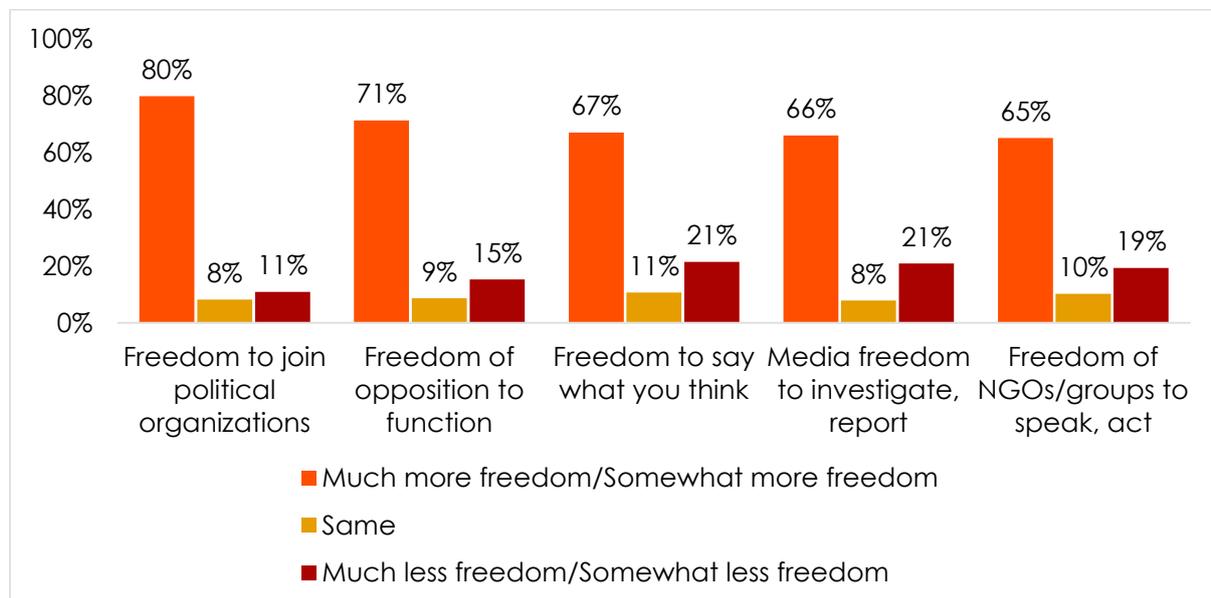
## Key findings

- A majority of Malians say that the freedoms of speech and association, the freedom of the opposition and independent groups to function, and media freedom have all improved compared to a few years ago.
- Over the past decade, however, the share of Malians who feel “completely free” or “somewhat free” to say what they think has dropped from 84% to 59%.
- Three in four Malians (74%) say the government should be able to prevent publications it considers harmful. Across 34 African countries, only Senegal reports higher levels of support for government restrictions on the media.
- Malians are more likely to attend community meetings and join others to raise an issue than to contact officials or participate in protests, and only 57% say they ever discuss politics.

## Malians see freedoms expanding

A majority of Malians say that several of their freedoms have increased over the past few years (Figure 1). Most widely, Malians report having “much more” or “somewhat more” freedom to join political organizations (80%). Seven in 10 (71%) see greater freedom for the political opposition to function, while about two-thirds perceive increased freedom to say what they think about politics (67%), media freedom to investigate and criticize the government (66%), and the freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak out (65%).

**Figure 1: Change in the level of freedoms | Mali | 2017**

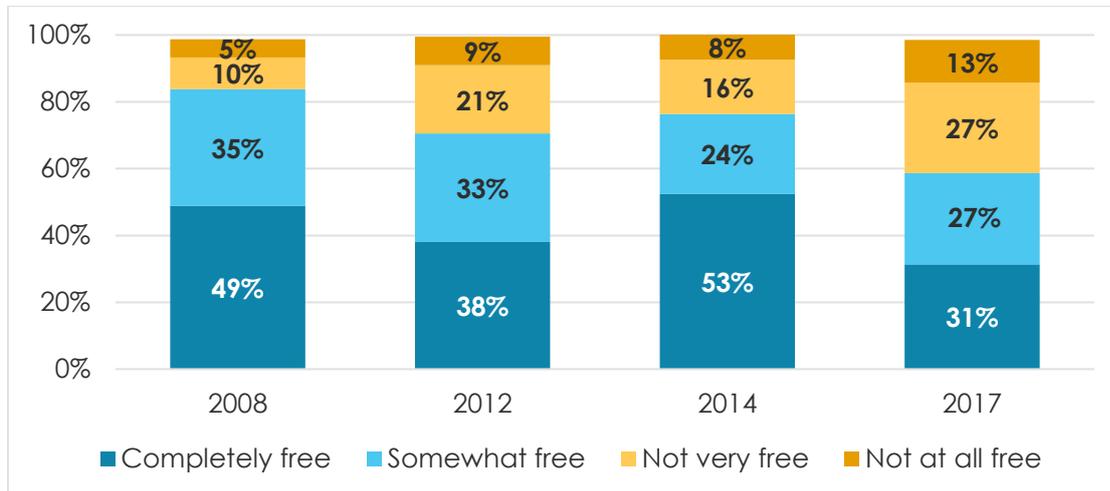


**Respondents were asked:** Please tell me if there is more or less freedom now for each of the following things compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same:

- Your own freedom to say what you think about politics?
- Your own freedom to join any political organization you want?
- The media's freedom to investigate and report on government mistakes or to criticize government actions or performance?
- The freedom of independent groups or non-governmental organizations to speak, hold meetings, or advocate their views freely, including criticizing the government if they choose?
- The freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government?

But while most Malians see their freedoms as expanding, only 31% of Malians report feeling “completely” free to say what they think, down from 53% just three years earlier (Figure 2). The proportion who feel either “somewhat” or “completely” free to speak their minds has declined from 84% in 2008 to 59% in 2017.

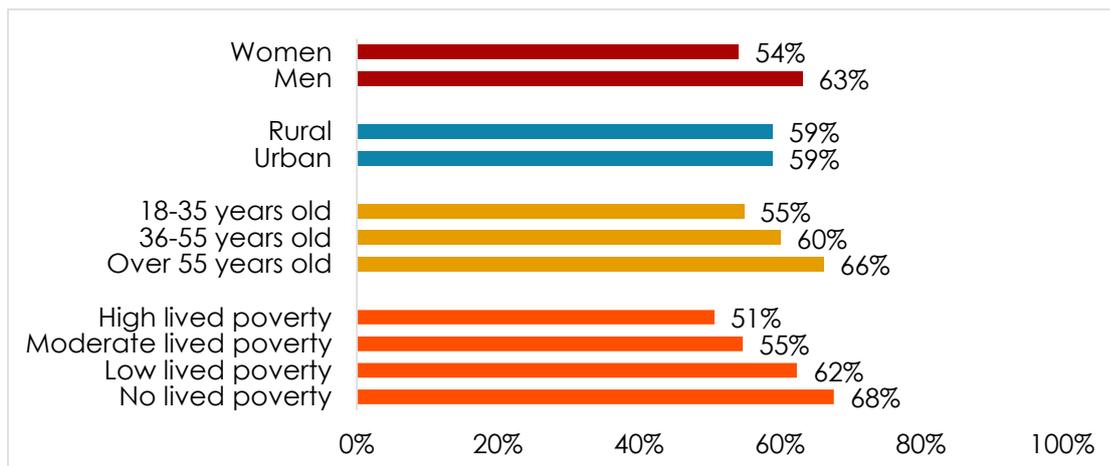
**Figure 2: Freedom to say what you think | Mali | 2008-2017**



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

Comparing across sociodemographic group, differences emerge. Women, younger people, and poor citizens<sup>1</sup> feel less free to speak their minds. For example, while about two-thirds of men (63%), elders (66%), and wealthy respondents (68% of those who experience no “lived poverty”) say they feel “somewhat” or “completely” free to say what they think, only slightly more than half of women (54%), youth (55%), and poor respondents (51% of those with high “lived poverty”) agree (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Freedom to say what you think | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017**



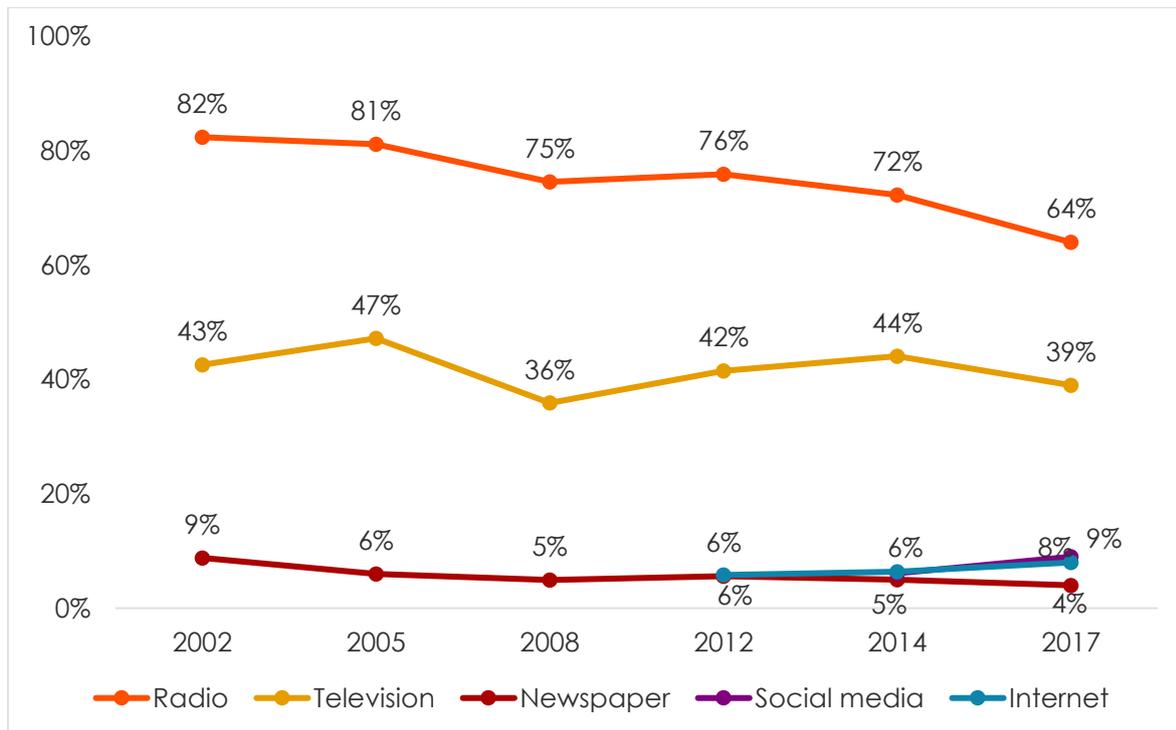
**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you to say what you think? (% who say “somewhat free” or “completely free”)*

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following questions: “Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?”

## Media use and freedom

Effective public engagement in a democracy requires an informed citizenry. In Mali, radio is still the most common source of news, though regular consumption of radio news continues to decline: 64% of Malians say they get news from the radio “daily” or “a few times a week,” down from 82% in 2002 (Figure 4). Regular consumption of television news continues to hover around four in 10 (39% in 2017), while newspaper readership, already low, has dropped by half since 2002, from 9% to 4%. The use of the Internet and social media for news has increased slightly since 2012, the first year for which data were collected on these forms of media.

**Figure 4: Sources of news | Mali | 2002-2017**

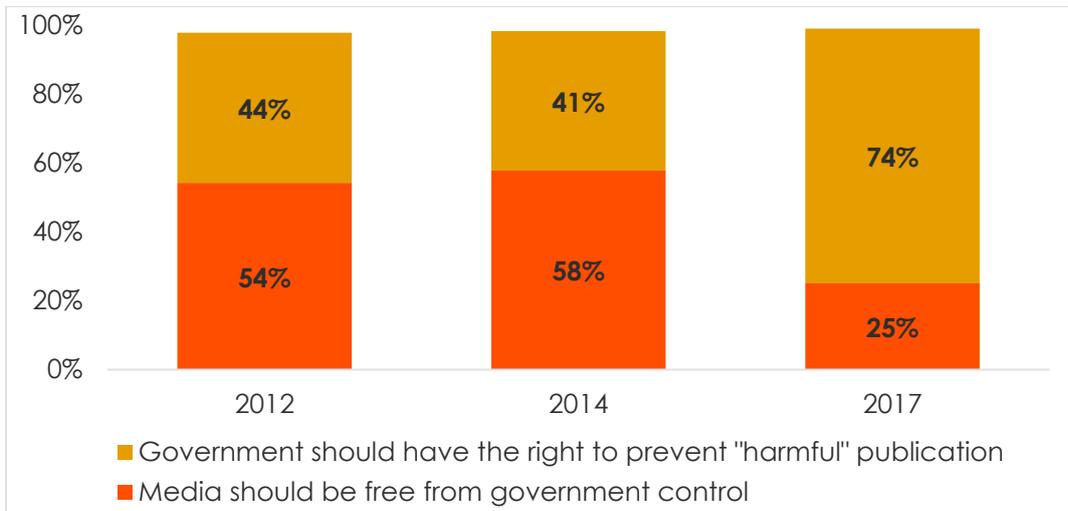


**Respondents were asked:** How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? Television? Newspaper? Social media? Internet? (% who say “a few times a week” or “daily”)

While most Malians turn to media sources for news on a regular basis, a large majority of them do not insist that their media be free from government control. Three-fourths (74%) of respondents “agree” or “agree very strongly” that the government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things it considers “harmful to society,” an increase of more than 30 percentage points from 2014 (Figure 5). Only one in four (25%) assert that the media should be free to publish any views and ideas without government interference. One possible explanation for this increased acceptance of government restrictions on the media could be a fear that an unfettered media might incite more tensions in the country, already plagued by ongoing tensions in the North and Center.

Mali is less likely to support media freedom than most other Africans. Among 34 countries surveyed in 2016/2018, only Senegal shows weaker support for an unfettered media (18%) (not shown).

**Figure 5: Media freedom vs. government control | Mali | 2012-2017**



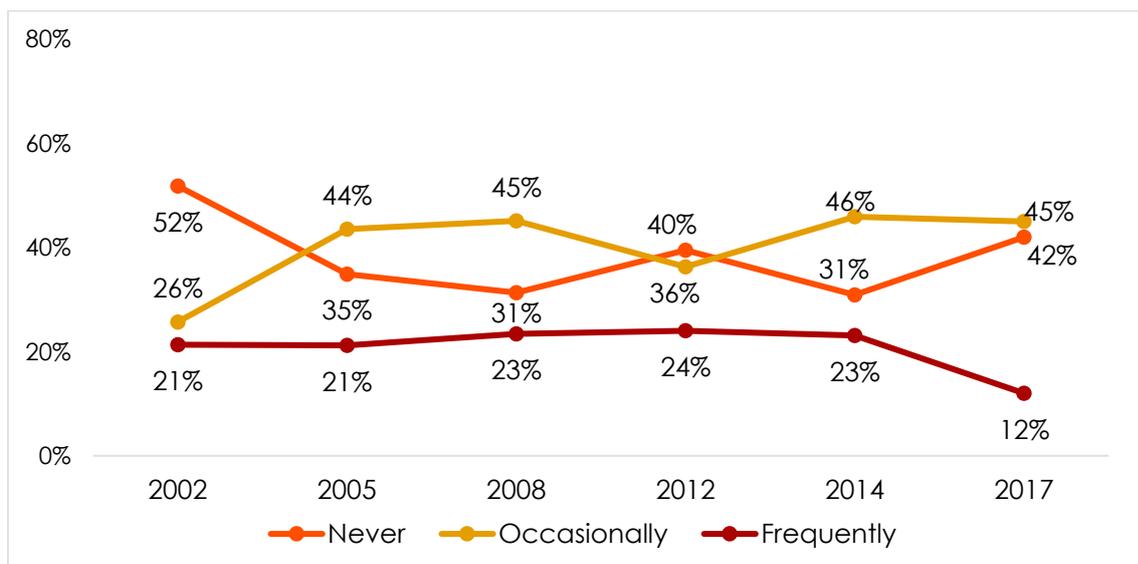
**Respondents were asked:** Which of the following statements is closest to your view?  
 Statement 1: The media should have the right to publish any views and ideas without government control.  
 Statement 2: The government should have the right to prevent the media from publishing things that it considers harmful to society.  
 (% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

### Political and civic engagement

When we turn to Malians' engagement in political and civic activities, we see they are far more likely to attend community meetings and join others to raise an issue than to contact officials or participate in protests.

But more than four in 10 Malians (42%) say they never discuss political matters with friends and family. Only 12% say they "frequently" talk about politics – about half as many as reported doing so between 2002 and 2014 (Figure 6).

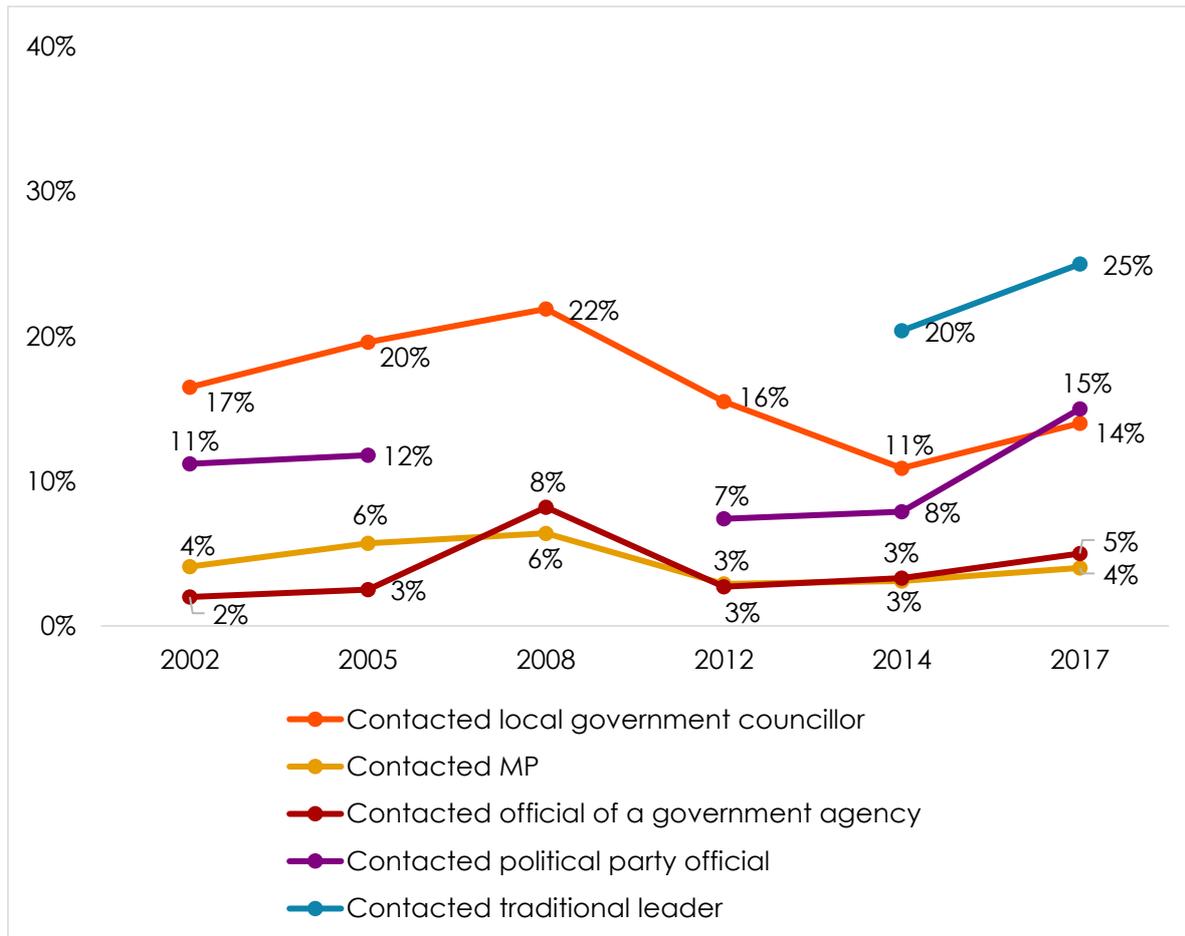
**Figure 6: Discuss politics | Mali | 2002-2017**



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

To ask an official for assistance with a problem or to share their views, Malians are most likely to contact a traditional leader: 25% of respondents say they did so at least once in the year preceding the survey. Only about one in seven (14%) contacted a local government councillor, and only one in 25 (4%) got in touch with their member of Parliament (Figure 7). While just 15% contacted party officials for help, that's twice as many as in 2014 (8%)

**Figure 7: Contacting officials and representatives | Mali | 2002-2017**



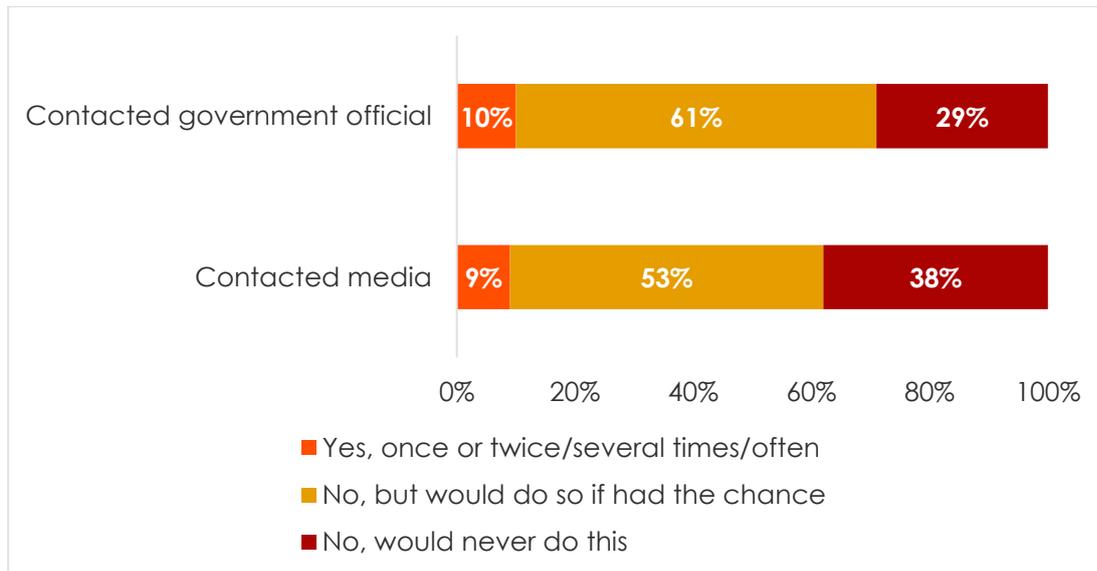
**Respondents were asked:** During the past year, how often have you contacted any of the following persons about some important problem or to give them your views:

- A local government councillor?
- A member of Parliament?
- An official of a government agency?
- A political party official? A traditional leader?

(% who say "only once," "a few times," or "often")

About one in 10 Malians say they expressed their dissatisfaction with government performance during the previous year by contacting a government official to ask for help or register a complaint (10%) or by contacting the media, such as calling in to a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper (9%) (Figure 8). But a majority say they would do so if they "had the chance," suggesting that access to officials and media outlets may be limited for some Malians.

**Figure 8: Actions to voice dissatisfaction with government performance | Mali | 2017**

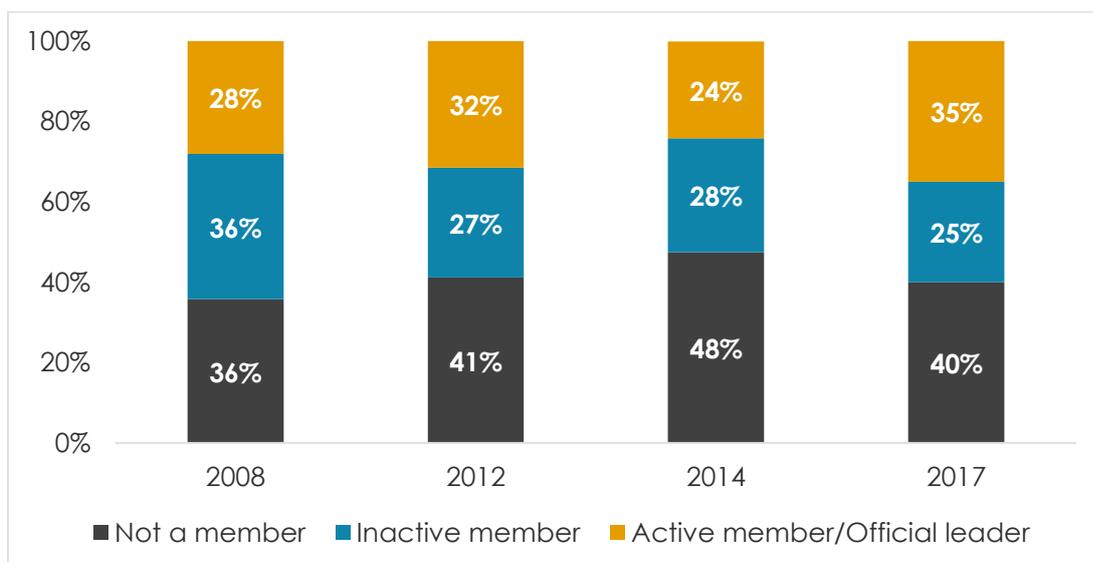


**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance?

- Contacted a government official to ask for help or make a complaint?
- Contacted the media, like calling a radio program or writing a letter to a newspaper?

A majority (60%) of Malians report being a member of a voluntary organization or community group, though only about one-third (35%) are active members or leaders. Compared to 2014, active membership has increased by 11 percentage points, while the share of respondents who are not members has dropped by 8 percentage points, from 48% to 40% (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Membership in voluntary associations or community groups | Mali | 2008-2017**

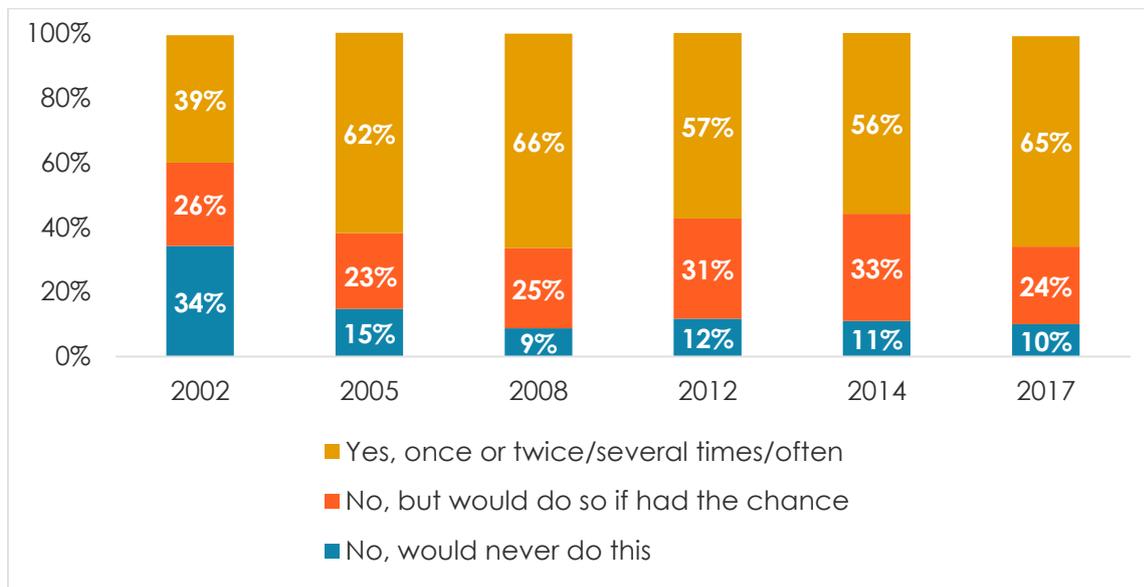


**Respondents were asked:** Now I am going to read out a list of groups that people join or attend. For each one, could you tell me whether you are an official leader, an active member, an inactive member, or not a member: Some other voluntary association or community group?

Two-thirds (65%) of Malians say they attended at least one community meeting during the year preceding the survey, a 9-percentage-point increase from 2014 and 26 points higher than in 2002 (Figure 10). The share of respondents who say they would never attend a community meeting dropped from one-third (34%) in 2002 to about one in 10 in 2008, where it has remained ever since (10% in 2017).

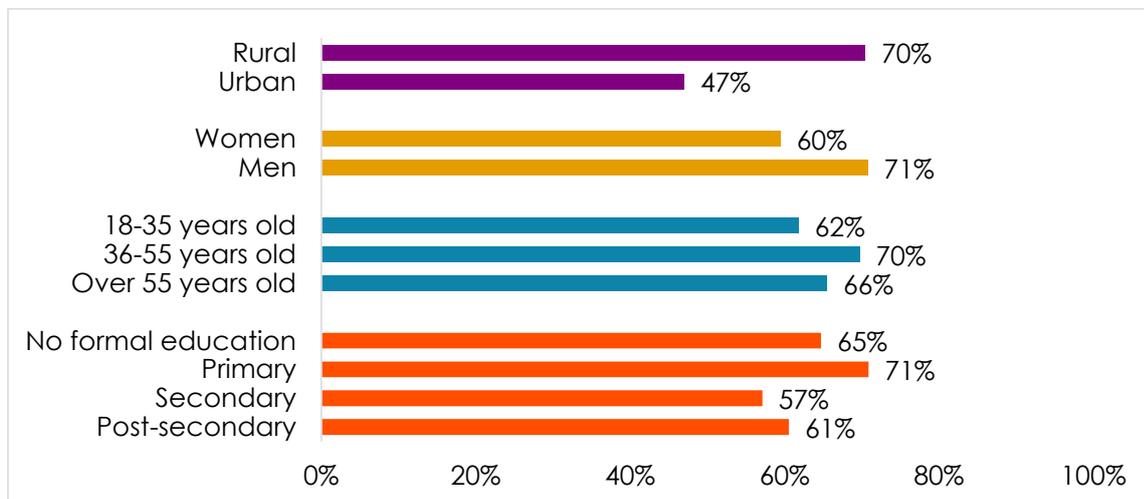
Men (71%) and rural residents (70%) are significantly more likely to attend community meetings than women (60%) and urbanites (47%) (Figure 11). Malians with lower levels of education also more frequently attend community meetings (71% for those with primary schooling and 65% for those with no formal education, compared to 57%-61% for those with higher levels of education).

**Figure 10: Attending a community meeting | Mali | 2002-2017**



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Attended a community meeting?

**Figure 11: Attending a community meeting | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017**

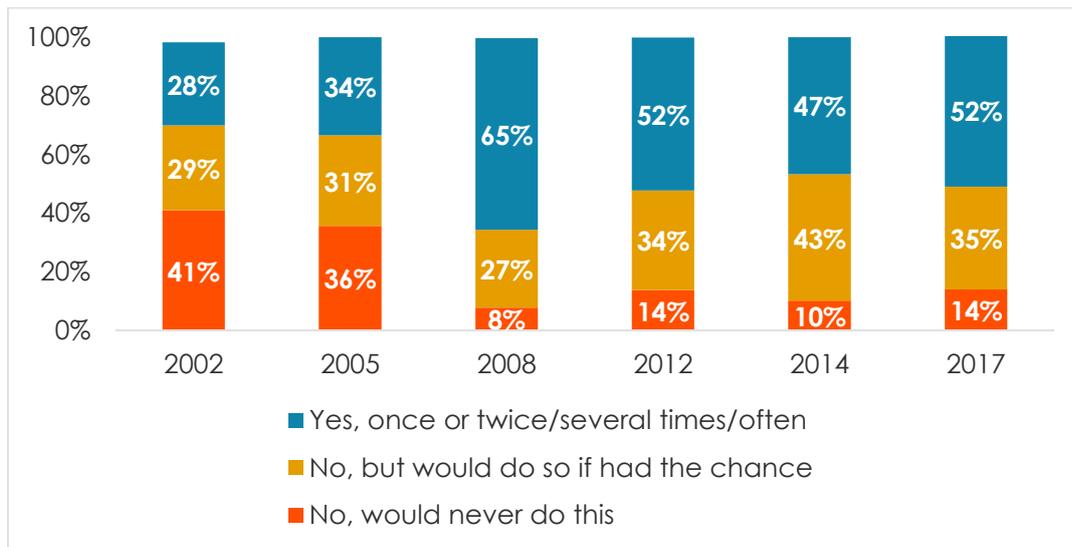


(% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

Besides attending community meetings, many Malians are open to joining others to raise an issue. Around half (52%) say they did so at least once during the previous year, and another 35% say they would do so if they had the chance. This is greatly increased from 2002, when only 28% reported having gotten together to raise an issue and 41% said they would never do so (Figure 12).

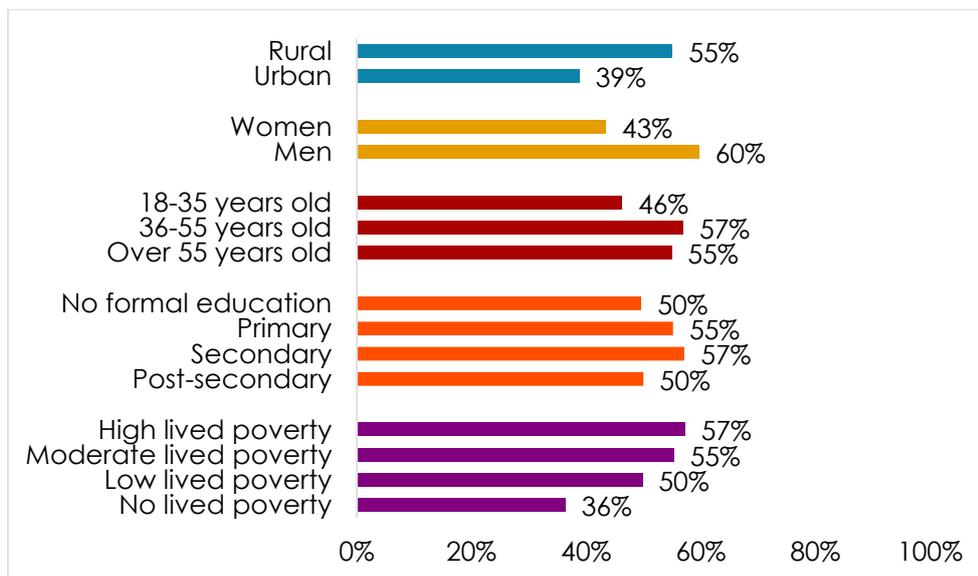
Again, rural and male Malians are more likely to join with others to raise an issue than women and urban residents (Figure 13). Youth (46% among those aged 18-35) and the wealthy (36%) are less likely than their elders and their poorer counterparts, respectively, to organize to raise an issue.

**Figure 12: Joining others to raise an issue | Mali | 2002-2017**



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Got together with others to raise an issue?

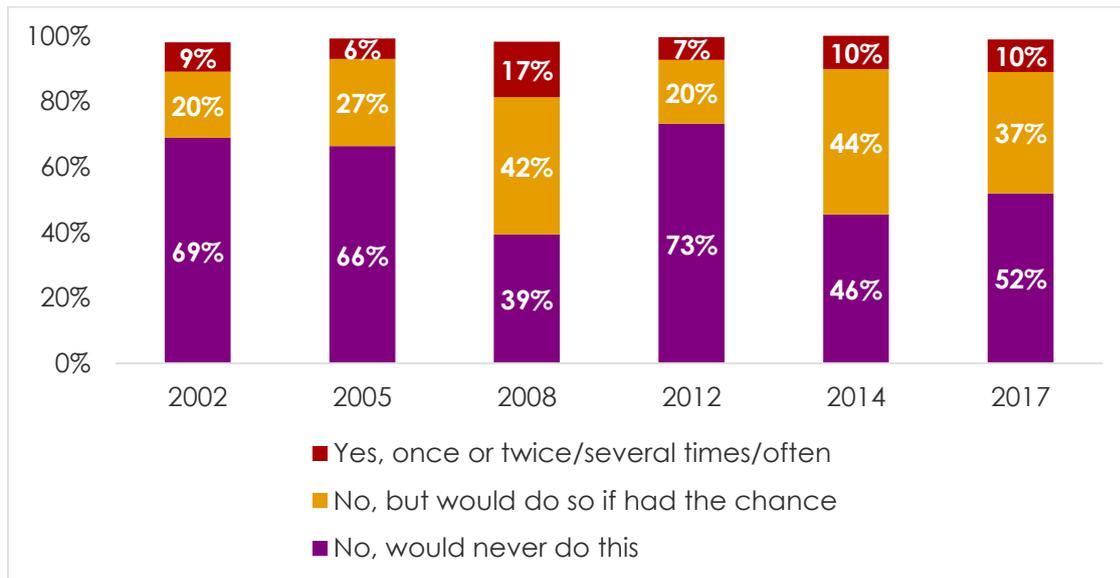
**Figure 13: Joining others to raise an issue | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017**



(% who say "once or twice," "several times," or "often")

In contrast to attending meetings or joining others to raise an issue, very few Malians participate in demonstrations or protest marches. One in 10 (10%) say they did so at least once during the year preceding the 2017 survey, while more than half (52%) say they would never join a demonstration (Figure 14). Responses were substantially different in 2008, the year after a presidential election, when 17% reported having participated in a protest or demonstration while another 42% were willing to do so if they had the chance. However, four years later, after a military coup and large-scale political instability, very few Malians were open to protesting: Only 7% said they had done, while 73% said they would never do such a thing.

**Figure 14: Attending a demonstration or protest march | Mali | 2002-2017**



**Respondents were asked:** Here is a list of actions that people sometimes take as citizens when they are dissatisfied with government performance. For each of these, please tell me whether you, personally, have done any of these things during the past year. If not, would you do this if you had the chance: Participated in a demonstration or protest march?

## Conclusion

Freedoms of expression and association are pillars of a healthy democracy. A quarter-century after democratization, Malians say their civic spaces have increased in recent years. Nonetheless, a growing number of citizens – especially women, youth, and the poor – feel less than free to say what they think, and a large majority of citizens are willing to forego a free media in favour of government protection from “harmful” publications. While contact between citizens and their elected officials is not a common experience, many Malians report being active in community meetings and mobilization to raise an issue, and many others say they would do so if they had the chance.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at [www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis](http://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis).

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