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Gabonese say president should be accountable to courts and Parliament, but often ignores both

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 335 | Thomas Isbell and Sadhiska Bhoojedhur

Summary

Accountability forms a central pillar of democratic governance. While free and fair elections help promote government of, by, and for the people, what happens between election days can be equally important. Respect for the rule of law and other government branches are as essential in the day-to-day business of governing as they are for ensuring high-quality elections.

In Gabon, a highly personalized executive around President Ali Bongo Ondimba and flawed electoral processes undermine both horizontal and vertical accountability. In rating Gabon as “not free,” Freedom House (2019) cites shortcomings on several dimensions of accountability, such as independence of branches of government, transparency of government work, and equal treatment of people under the law.

Ali Bongo has been in power since 2009 following the death of his father, Omar Bongo, who ruled Gabon for 42 years. Ali Bongo claimed a second seven-year term after a 2016 election marred by violence and charges of fraud, and in 2018 pushed through constitutional amendments further expanding executive powers (Hoije & Batassi, 2018). Legislative elections scheduled for late 2016 were repeatedly postponed, then disputed by opposition parties when they finally took place – resulting in a victory for the ruling party – in late 2018 (eNCA, 2018a, 2018b; Reuters, 2018; Freedom House, 2019).

How do ordinary Gabonese see government accountability in their country? Based on the most recent national Afrobarometer survey, conducted in 2017, most Gabonese value accountability even more highly than efficiency. Strong majorities say the president must obey the courts and laws and justify government expenditures to Parliament. But increasingly, Gabonese say their president commonly ignores both the judiciary and the legislature.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer heads a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018, and Round 8 surveys are planned in at least 35 countries in 2019/2020. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Gabon, led by the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche en Géosciences Politiques et Prospective (CERGE), interviewed 1,200 adult citizens in November 2017. A sample of this size produces country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. One previous survey was conducted in Gabon in 2015.

Key findings

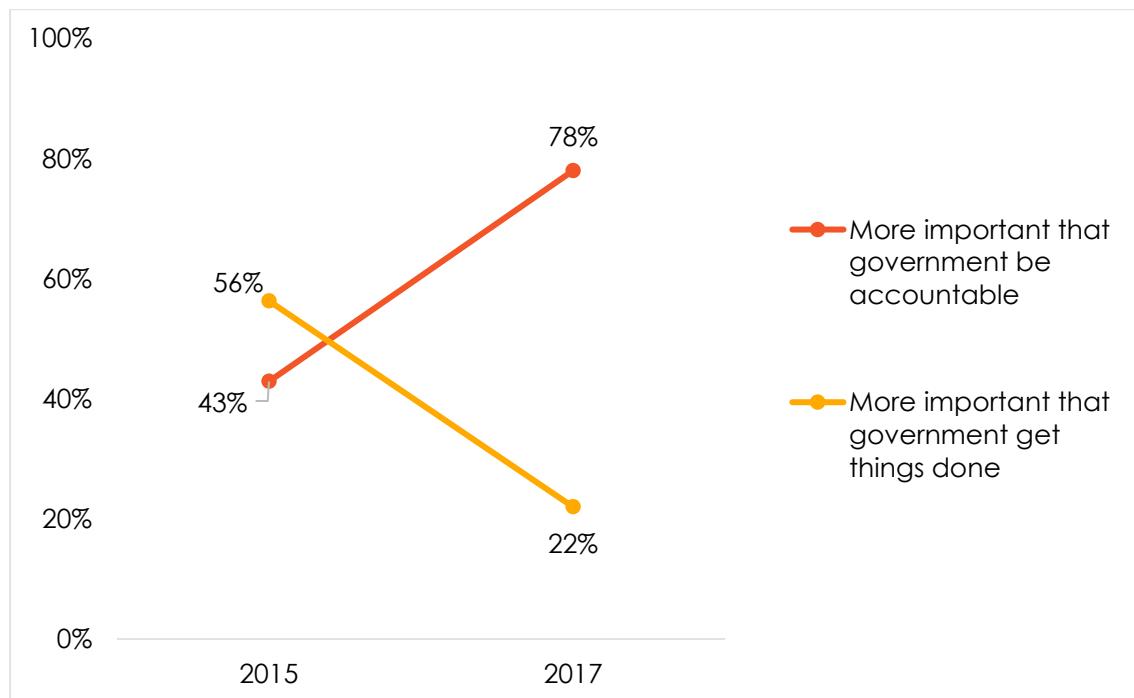
- More than three-fourths (78%) of Gabonese value government accountability more highly than efficiency, a 35-percentage-point increase from 2015.
- Most Gabonese say the president must always obey the laws and the courts (88%) and should account to Parliament for how his government spends taxpayers' money (68%).
- But growing majorities say that in fact the president "often" or "always" ignore the laws and courts (66%) as well as Parliament (66%).
- More than seven in 10 Gabonese (72%) disapprove of the president's job performance. But only four in 10 (40%) believe it's their responsibility, as voters, to make sure that he does his job.
- Popular support for elections as the best way to choose leaders has decreased from 76% to 68%, but Gabonese overwhelmingly reject the idea of abolishing elections and Parliament in favour of one-man rule (90%).

Gabonese demand accountable government

More than three-fourths (78%) of Gabonese say that it is more important for citizens to be able to hold their government accountable, even if that means slower decision-making, than to have a government that can get things done. Support for government accountability grew by 35 percentage points between 2015 and 2017 (Figure 1).

Among 34 African countries surveyed in 2016/2018, Gabon ties for second (behind Benin) in its support for government accountability, well above the continental average of 62%.

Figure 1: Government accountability vs. efficiency | Gabon | 2015-2017



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

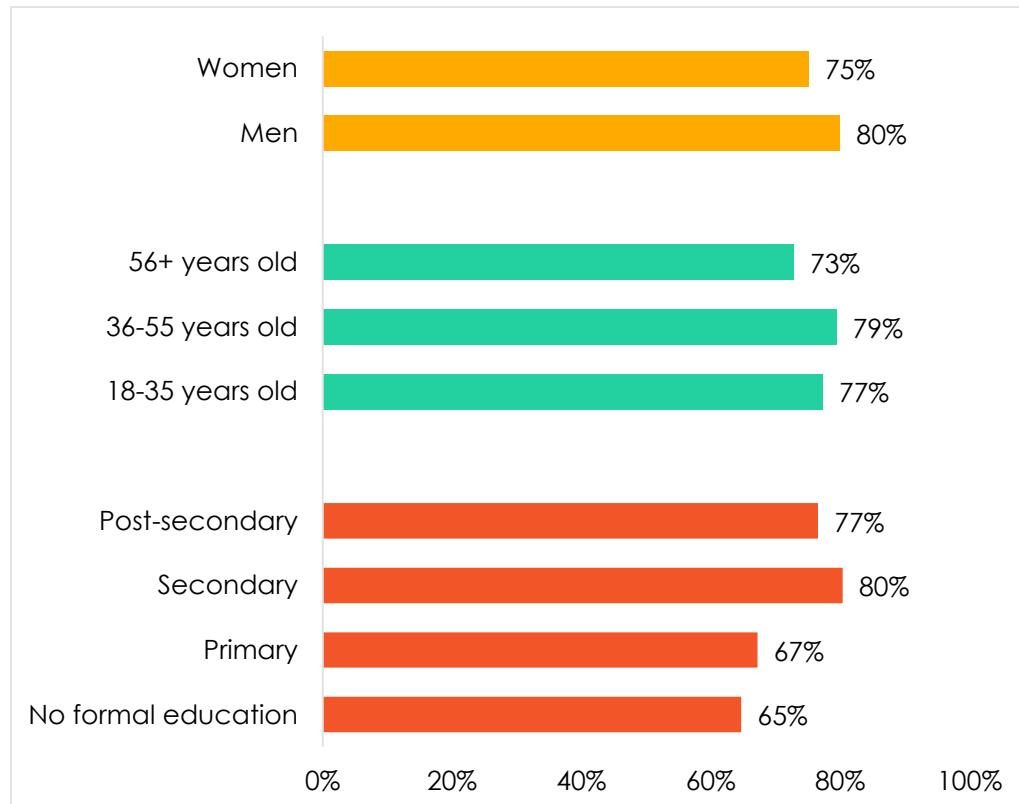
Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

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)

Support for government accountability is stronger among men than women (80% vs. 75%) and among citizens with at least a secondary education (77%-80%) than those with less schooling (65%-67%). Older citizens are somewhat less likely to value accountability over efficiency (73% among those above age 55) than younger respondents (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Accountability more important than efficiency | by socio-demographic group | Gabon | 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)

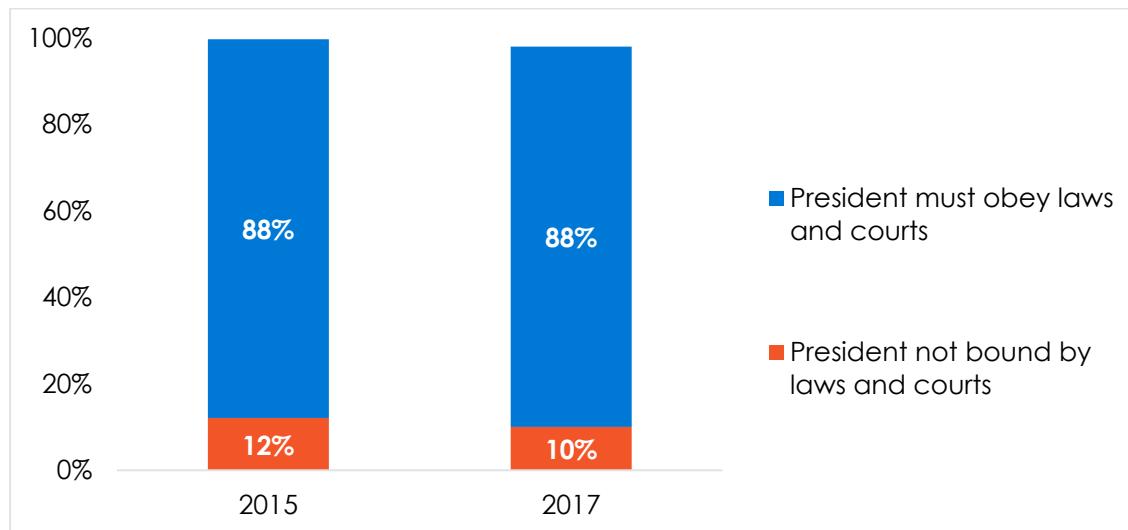
Gabonese strongly support limits on executive powers

By large majorities, Gabonese say the president must always obey the laws and courts and must account to Parliament for how his government spends taxpayers' money. But between 2015 and 2017, the proportion of citizens who say their president ignores the courts and Parliament grew from half to two-thirds of the population.

Almost nine out of 10 Gabonese (88%) say the president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong. This proportion has held constant since 2015 (Figure 3).

Yet two-thirds of respondents (66%) say their president "often" or "always" ignores the courts and laws, an increase from 50% in 2015 (Figure 4).

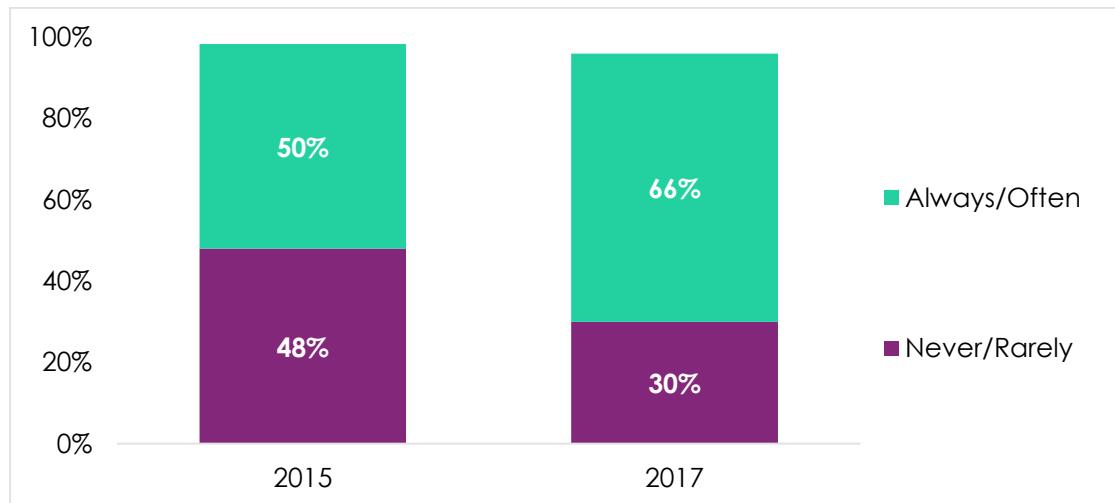
Figure 3: Must president obey courts and laws? | Gabon | 2017



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

- Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong,
- Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

Figure 4: How often president ignores courts and laws | Gabon | 2015-2017

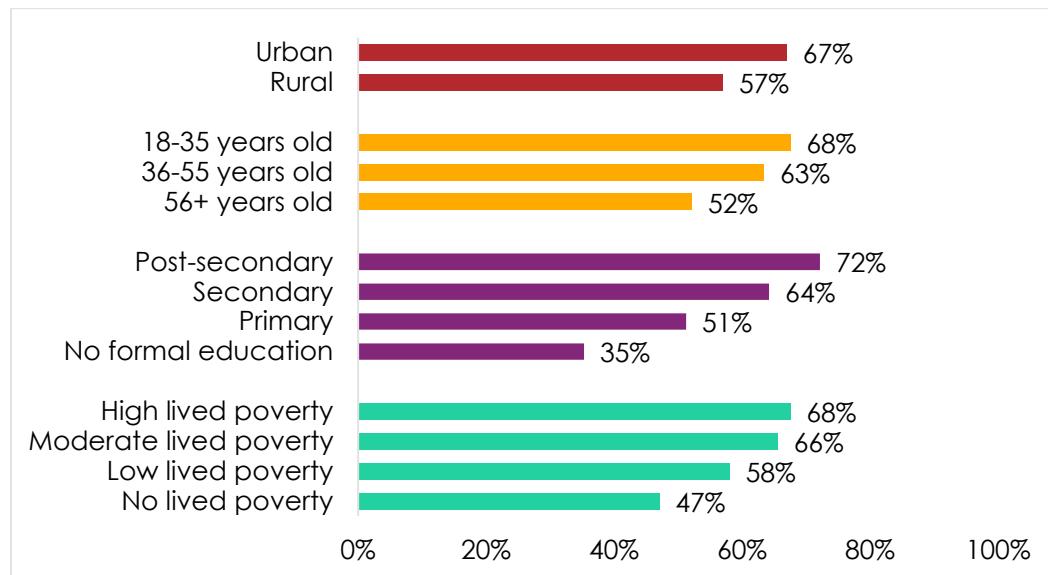


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country?

The view that the president ignores the laws and courts is most common among urban residents (67%), young respondents (68% of those aged 18-35 years), the more educated (72% of those with post-secondary qualifications), and poor respondents (68% of those who experienced high lived poverty¹) (Figure 5).

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

Figure 5: President often/always ignores courts and laws | by socio-demographic group | Gabon | 2017

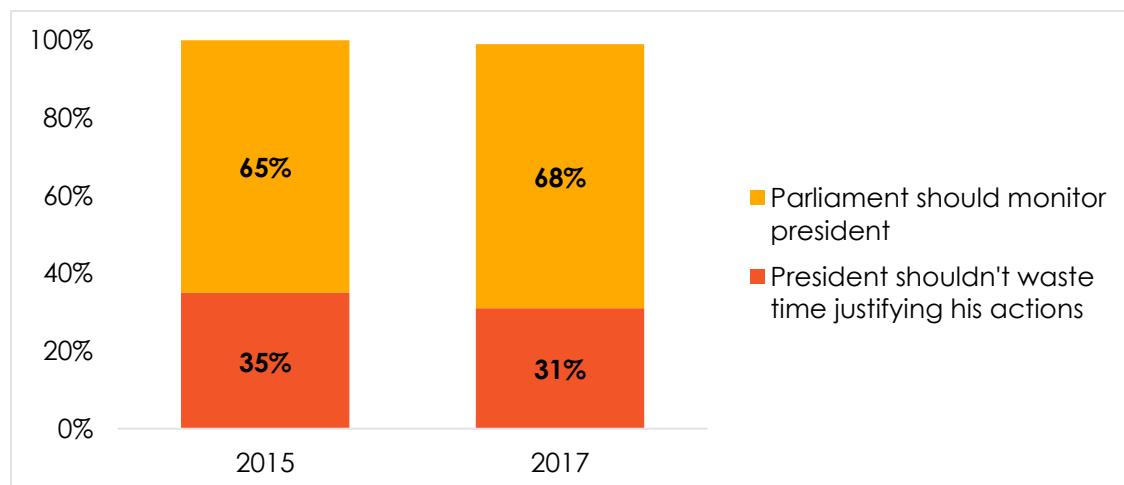


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore the courts and laws of this country? (% who say "often" or "always")

Similarly, two-thirds (68%) of Gabonese say Parliament should ensure that the president explains government expenditures on a regular basis, while 31% believe the president should focus his attention on developing the country rather than on justifying his actions (Figure 6).

But a growing majority (66%) say the president in fact "often" or "always" ignores Parliament and does what he wants, up from 50% in 2015 (Figure 7). Gabon far outpaces all 33 other countries surveyed in 2016/2018 in the proportion of citizens who see their president as ignoring Parliament (27% on average across all 34 countries) (Figure 8).

Figure 6: Should president have to account to Parliament? | Gabon | 2015-2017



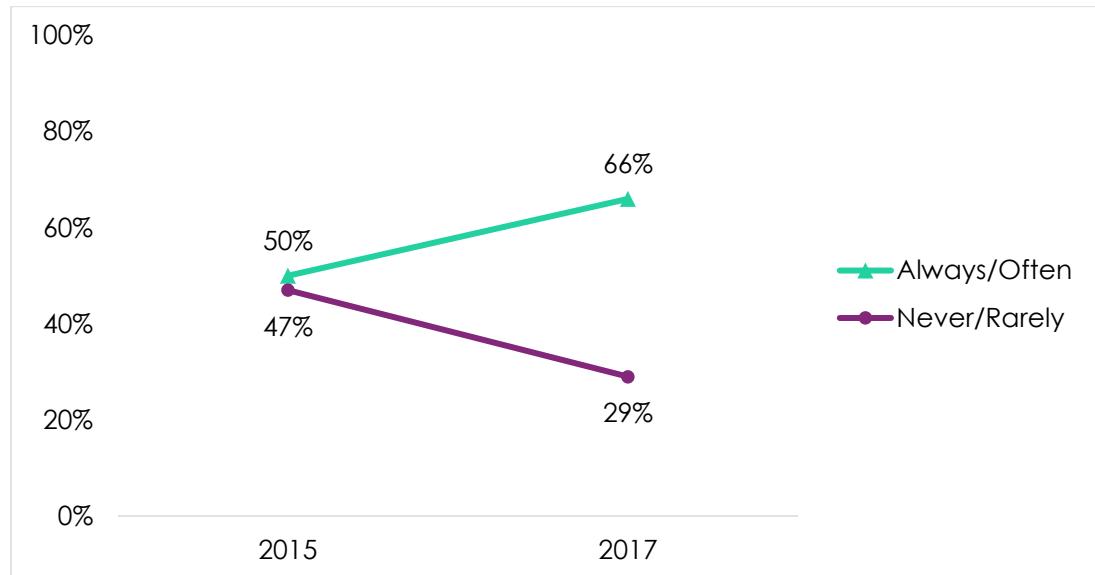
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Parliament should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

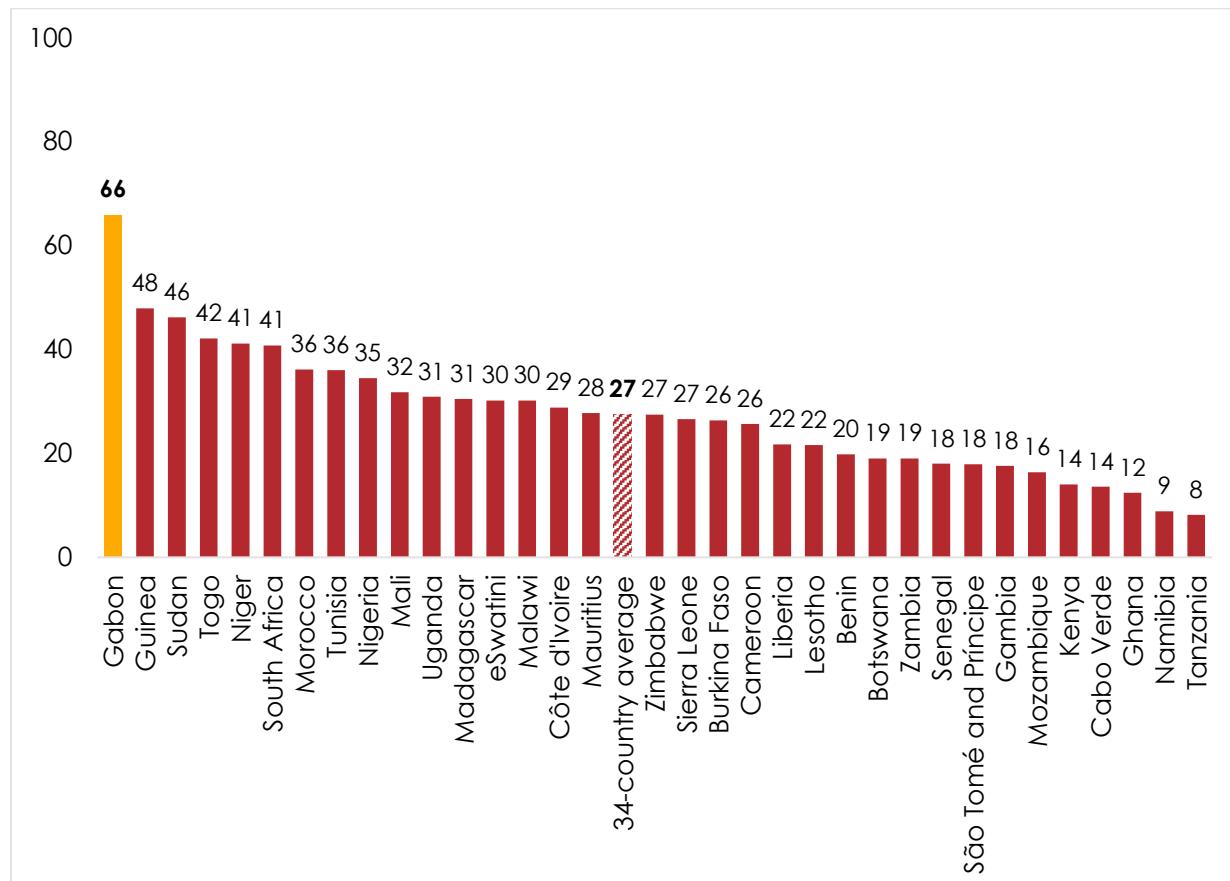
(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" with each statement)

Figure 7: How often president ignores Parliament | Gabon | 2015-2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants?

Figure 8: President often/always ignores Parliament | 34 countries | 2016/2018

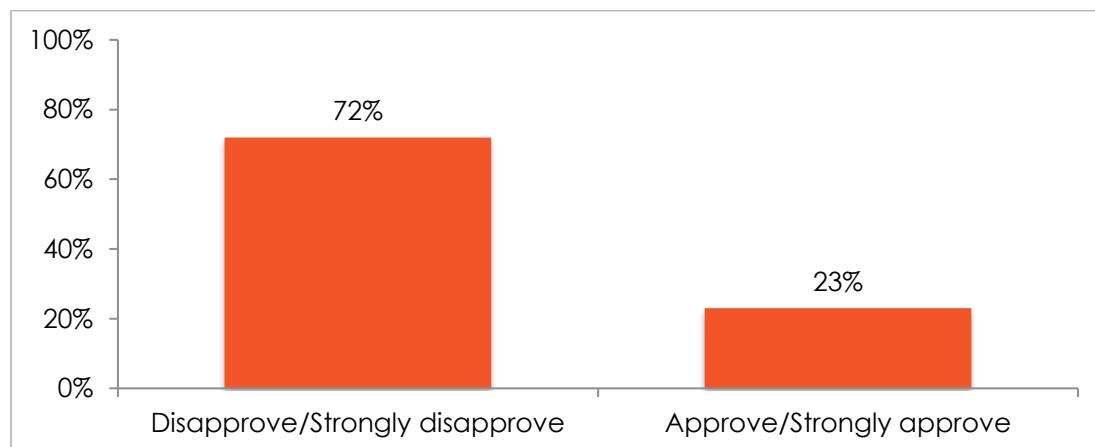


Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country, does the president ignore Parliament and just do what he wants? (% who say "often" or "always")

Holding the president accountable

While two-thirds of Gabonese say the president ignores the laws and courts as well as Parliament, even more (72%) disapprove of his job performance during the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 9).

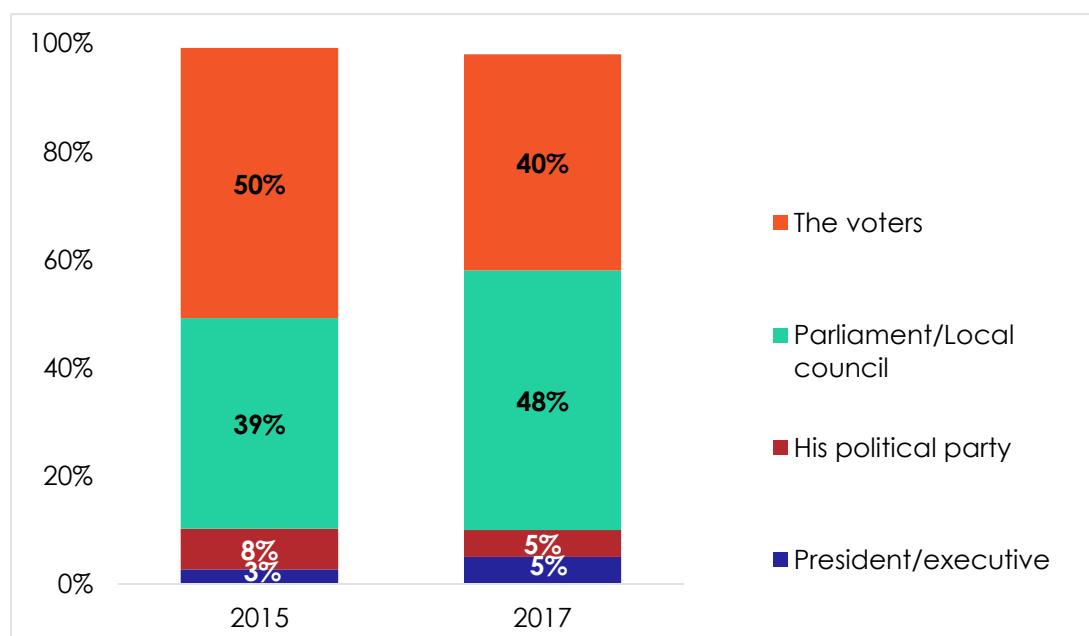
Figure 9: Job performance of the president | Gabon | 2017



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: The president?

But only four in 10 (40%) believe that they, as voters, are responsible for making sure the president does his job, down from 50% who held this perception in 2015. More (48%) assign that responsibility to Parliament or local government councils (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Who is responsible for making sure the president does his job? | Gabon | 2015-2017

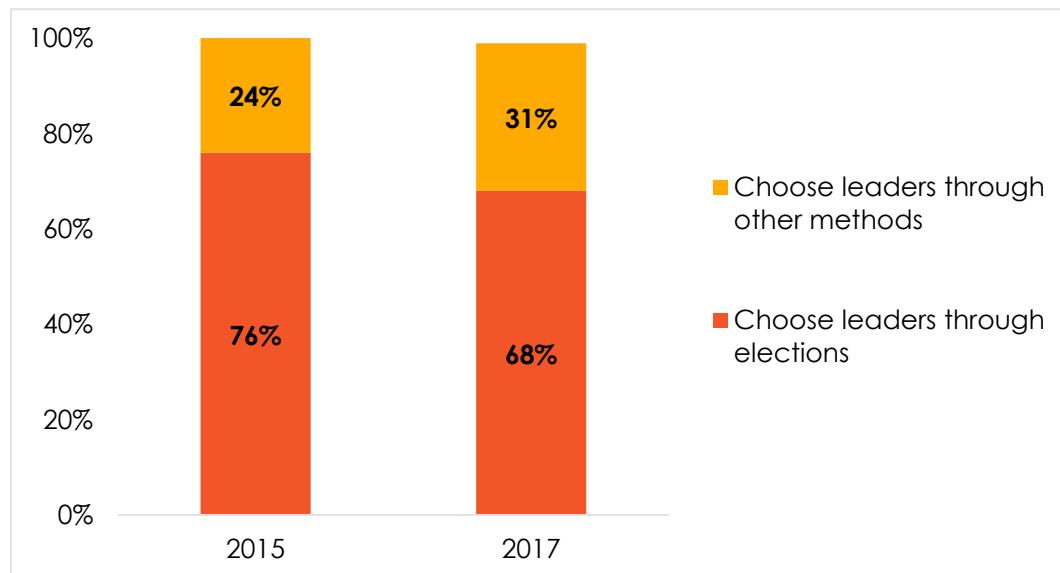


Respondents were asked: Who should be responsible for making sure that, once elected, the president does his or her job?

Moreover, support for elections as the best way to choose the country's leaders has declined in Gabon. While more than two-thirds (68%) of citizens still want regular, open, and honest elections, that represents an 8-percentage-point drop from 2015 (76%). The proportion who prefer other methods for choosing leaders increased from 24% to 31% over the period (Figure 11), perhaps as a result of perceived declines in election quality (Isbell & Bhoojedhur, 2018).

Even so, Gabonese still overwhelmingly reject (90%) the idea of abolishing elections and Parliament in favour of one-man rule (Figure 12).

Figure 11: Choose leaders through elections? | Gabon | 2015-2017



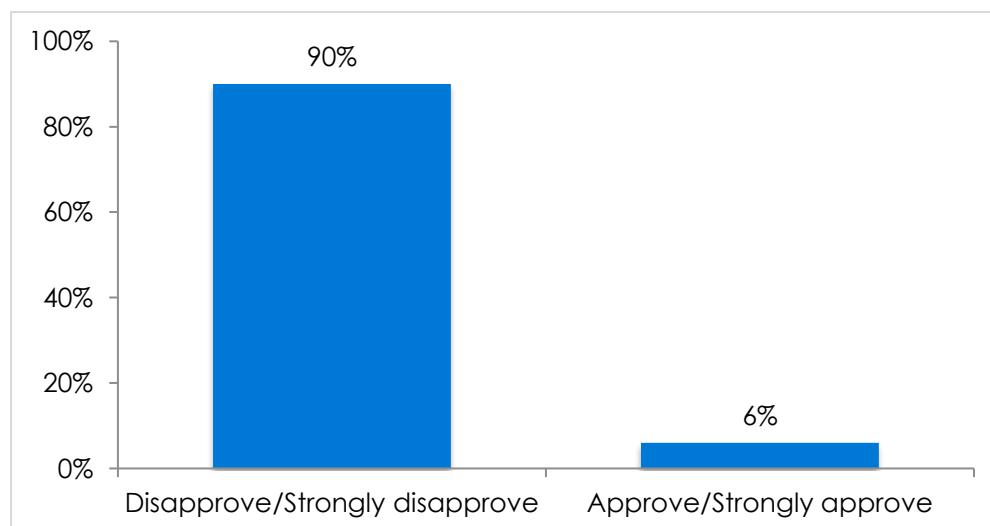
Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.

Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

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

Figure 12: Should elections and Parliament be abolished? | Gabon | 2017



Respondents were asked: There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything?

Conclusion

Most ordinary Gabonese prefer a government that is accountable to its citizens over one that gets things done without input by the people. They also say the president must always obey the laws and courts and be accountable to Parliament. Yet by a two-thirds majority, they say their current president ignores both the judicial system and the legislative branch on a regular basis.

Even though most Gabonese disapprove of the president's performance, the proportion of citizens who think that they, as voters, are responsible for making sure he does his job has decreased. Indeed, popular support for elections has declined – perhaps a sign that some citizens are doubting their ability to effect change at the ballot box.

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

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