Perceived patronage: Do secret societies, ethnicity, region boost careers in Cameroon?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 162 | Thomas Isbell

Summary

An effective and transparent administration forms the backbone of a well-run democratic state and market economy in the developing world (Grindle & Hilderbrand, 1995.) Recruitment of public-sector staff based on merit plays an important role in ensuring not only that the machine functions smoothly but also that ordinary citizens have confidence in how their country is governed. Patronage or favouritism can undermine both functioning and public confidence (Anderson & Tverdova, 2003; Seligson, 2002; Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

In Cameroon, many critics of the government have long argued that factors other than merit help determine who holds government positions and gets promotions (Ayukogem, 2014; Nsom, 2012). Leaders have been accused of giving preferential treatment to particular regions and ethnic groups as well as to fellow members of secret societies – from fraternal groups such as the Ekpe to the Rosicrucian Order AMORC and the Freemasons to religious groups such as Eckankar and the Illuminati (Ayukogem, 2014; Nsom, 2012).

Do ordinary Cameroonians believe that such factors play an important role in public-sector careers? Based on data from Afrobarometer's Round 6 (2015) survey, substantial proportions of the population do. Moreover, citizens who see such favouritism at work in career advancement are less likely to hold positive views of Cameroon's democracy.

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 than 30 countries in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were completed between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are currently underway. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

For its Round 6 survey in Cameroon, the national Afrobarometer team, led by Centre d'Etudes et de Recherche en Economie et Gestion (CEREG), interviewed 1,200 adult Cameroonians in January and February 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. A previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in Cameroon in 2013.

Key findings

- Almost half (45%) of Cameroonians say that membership in a secret society helps people reach top positions in the public sector, while around four in 10 feel that being from a certain ethnic group (43%) or region (40%) helps. Only one in four (25%) say that being a member of a particular religious group helps in pursuing a public-sector career.

- The perception that membership in a secret society can boost a career is more common among urban residents, men, older respondents, and the better-educated. It varies sharply by region, ranging from 15% in Extrême-Nord to 84% in the Est region.

- Cameroonians who feel that their own ethnic group is "often" or "always" treated unfairly by the government are more likely to see ethnicity as an important factor in career advancement.

- Respondents who see favouritism on the basis of secret-society membership, ethnicity, or region as an important factor in public-sector advancement are somewhat less likely to offer positive assessments of Cameroon's democracy, the efficacy of their elections, and the motivations of their political leaders.

Do social networks help public-sector careers?

Almost half of Cameroonians say that membership in a secret society or secret group helps "a lot" (31%) or "somewhat" (14%) in enabling public servants to rise to top positions in Cameroon's government (Figure 1). One in nine respondents (12%) say it helps "just a little," while one in four (24%) say it doesn't help at all. One in five (20%) say they "don't know."

Figure 1: Does membership in social networks help people rise to top positions in the public sector? | Cameroon | 2015
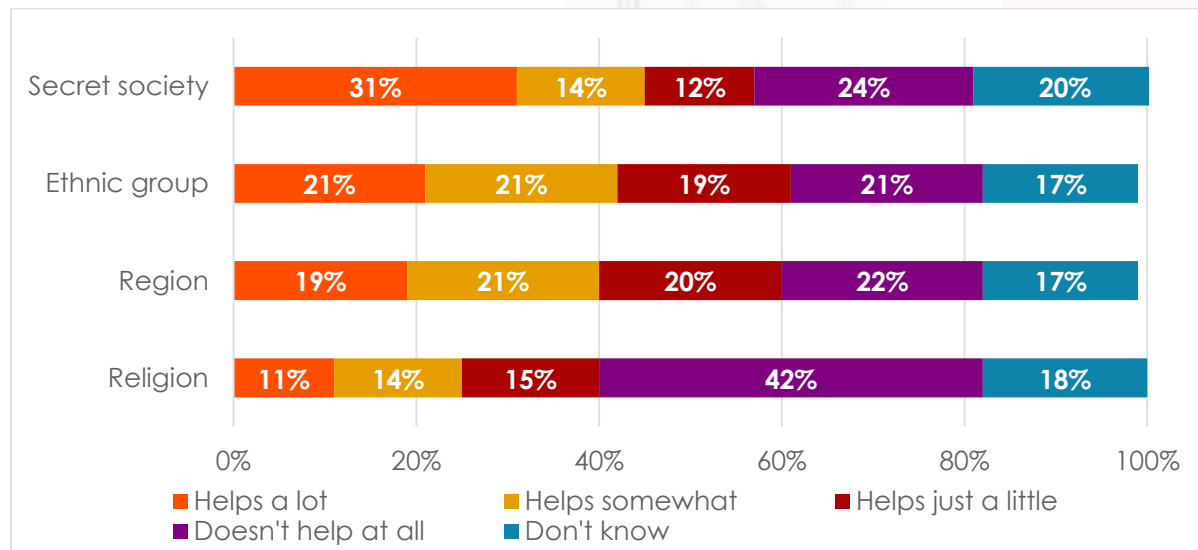
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A secret society or group? A particular ethnic group? A particular region? A religious group?*

About four in 10 respondents see belonging to a particular ethnic group (43%) or being from a certain region (40%) as helping "somewhat" or "a lot" in boosting the careers of public officials.

Only one in four Cameroonians see belonging to a particular religion as helping "somewhat" or "a lot."

Secret-society membership helps

The perception that being a member of a secret society is helpful to one's government career is significantly more common among urban residents (52%) and men (51%) than among rural dwellers (37%) and women (39%) (Figure 2). Older respondents are more likely to hold this view (57% among those aged 56 or older). Among respondents with no formal education, only 20% see secret-society membership as helpful, while 40% say they "don't know." By contrast, among respondents with secondary or post-secondary education, almost half (48%) say being in a secret society helps.

Figure 2: Secret-society membership helps public-sector career
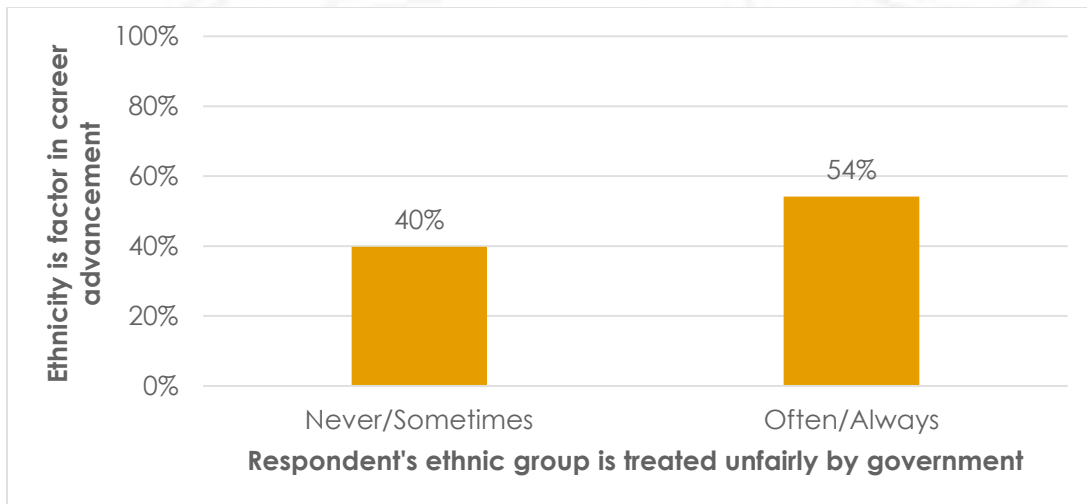| by socio-demographic group | Cameroon | 2015
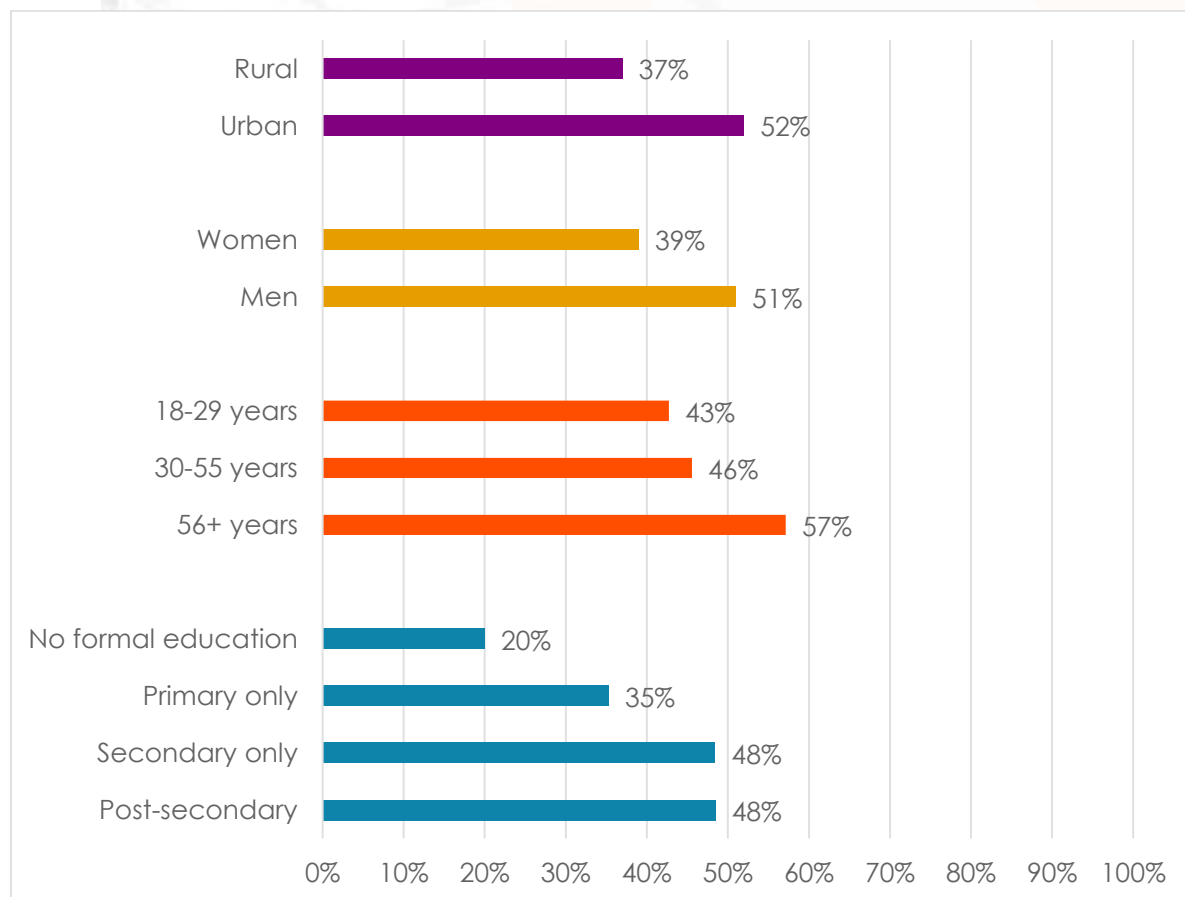
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A secret society or group? (% who say it helps "somewhat" or "a lot")*

By region, perceptions on this issue vary widely: While large majorities see secret-society membership as helpful in Est (84%), Ouest (65%), and Centre-Yaoundé (63%), far fewer respondents feel this way in Cameroon's poorest regions – Extrême-Nord (15%), Nord (32%), Nord-Ouest (33%), and Adamaoua (34%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Secret-society membership helps public-sector career | by region | Cameroon | 2015
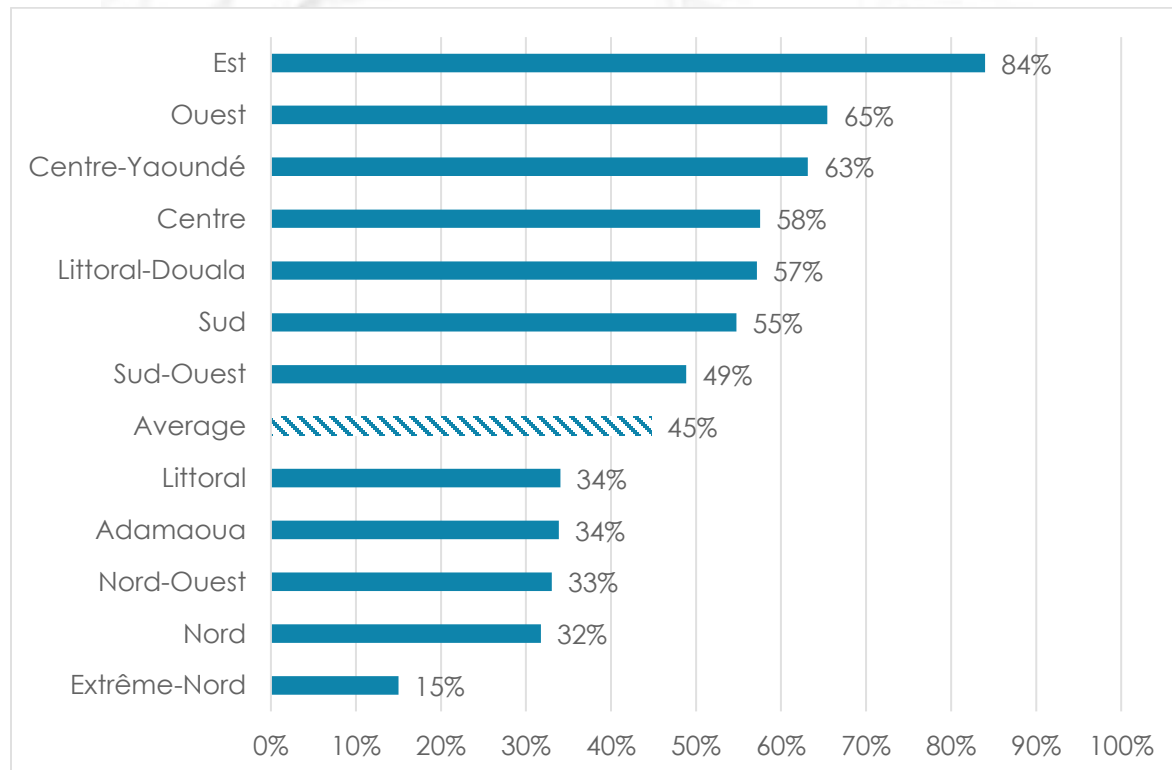
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A secret society or group? (% who say it helps "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Ethnic group helps

Similar regional differences in perceptions are apparent with regard to the question of whether ethnicity makes a difference in whether a bureaucrat advances. Moreover, Cameroonians who in general feel that their own ethnic group is treated unfairly by the government are more likely to see ethnicity as an important factor in career advancement: 40% among respondents who say their ethnic group is "never" or only "sometimes" treatment unfairly vs. 54% among those who say their ethnic group is "often" or "always" treated unfairly by the government (Figure 4).

Interestingly the perception of a particular ethnicity as being helpful for career advancement is not more common among respondents who identify primarily as members of an ethnic group rather than as Cameroonians. In fact, those who privilege their ethnic identity over a national identity are somewhat less likely to see ethnicity as a career factor than are those who value their Cameroonian identity at least as much as their ethnic affiliation (Figure 5).

Figure 4: Ethnicity helps public-sector career | by whether respondent's ethnic group is treated fairly or unfairly | Cameroon | 2015

Respondents were asked:
- *How often, if ever, are _____ [respondent's ethnic group] treated unfairly by the government?*
- *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A particular ethnic group? (% who say it helps "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Figure 5: Ethnicity helps public-sector career | by ethnic vs. national identity | Cameroon | 2015
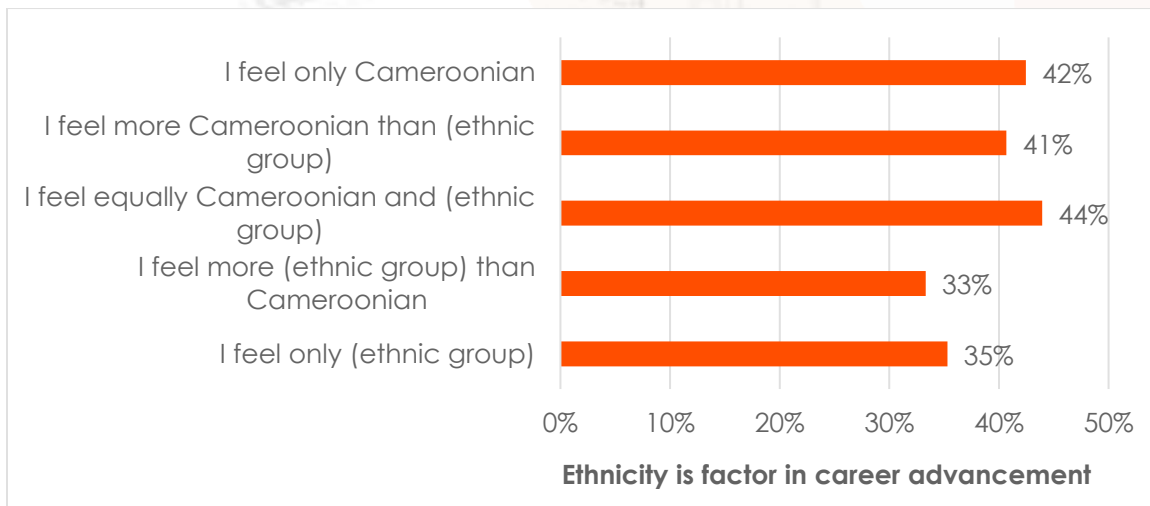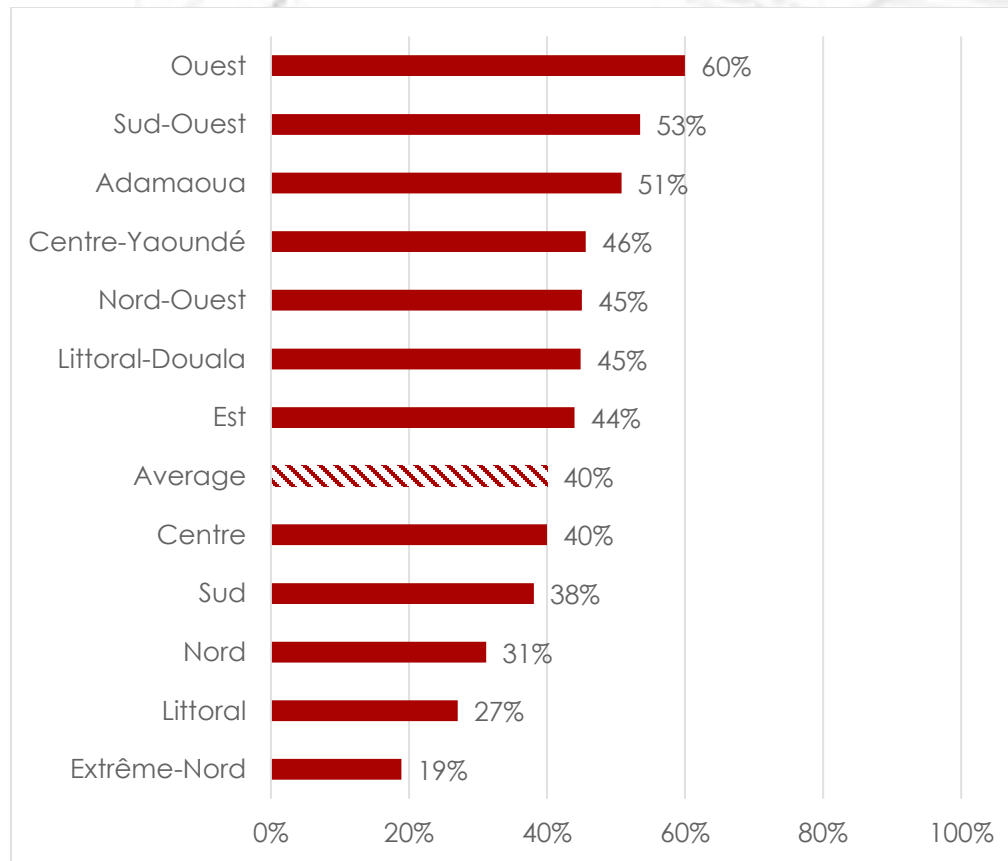

Respondents were asked:
- *Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Cameroonian and being a ____ [member of respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings?*
- *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A particular ethnic group? (% who say it helps "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Region helps

The perception that being from a particular region is helpful in a government career, affirmed by 40% (helps somewhat/a lot) of all Cameroonians, is far more common in the Ouest (60%), Sud-Ouest (53%), and Adamaoua (51%) regions than in Extrême-Nord (19%) or Littoral (27%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Regional affiliation helps public-sector career | by region | Cameroon | 2015

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, to what extent does membership in the following social networks or groups assist people to rise to top positions in public office in this country: A particular region? (% who say it helps "somewhat" or "a lot")*

Cameroonians also report dissatisfaction with the way regionally proportional representation in public service schools and institutions is implemented. Fewer than three in 10 respondents (28%) say they are "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with regionally proportional representation in placements in public-service schools (e.g. administration and magistrature (ENAM), education (ENS), international relations(IRIC)) and military and police service schools (Figure 7). Only about one-fourth (24%) are satisfied with its implementation with regard to appointments to public offices and state enterprises.

Figure 7: Regionally proportional representation in public-service schools and public offices | Cameroon | 2015
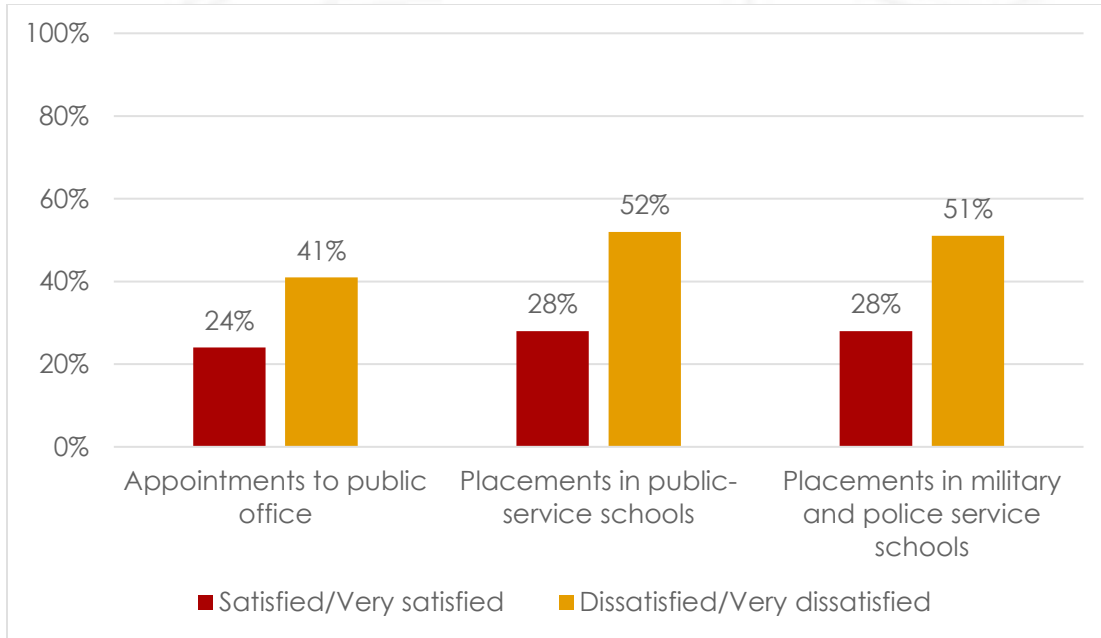
Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you are satisfied or dissatisfied with the way proportional representation is implemented in each of the following sectors, or haven't you heard enough to say: Placements in public-service schools like ENAM, ENS, or IRIC? Appointments to public office such as ministries and state-owned enterprises? Placements in the military and police service schools? (% who say "somewhat satisfied" "very satisfied")*

Does perceived favouritism affect views on democracy?

If success in the public sector is determined in part by membership in a particular group rather than solely by merit, it is plausible that this could undermine citizens' confidence in the system and their role as active participants. While our simple cross-tabulations do not allow us to draw conclusions about causation, we find that Cameroonians who see favouritism based on secret-society membership, ethnic group, and region as an important factor in government careers are somewhat less likely to offer positive assessments of their country's democracy, elections, and motivations of political leaders than those who see no significant preferential treatment at play.

We look first at Cameroonians' perceptions of the supply of democracy in their country, which Afrobarometer measures by combining respondents' answers to two survey questions. Respondents are counted as perceiving an adequate supply of democracy if they 1) consider their country either "a full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems" and 2) are "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied" with "the way democracy works."

As shown in Figure 8, perceptions of an adequate supply of democracy are about 3-10 percentage points lower among those who think that secret-society membership, region, and ethnicity boost careers "somewhat" or "a lot" than among those who see such factors as helping "just a little" or "not at all."

Figure 8: Perceived supply of democracy | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015

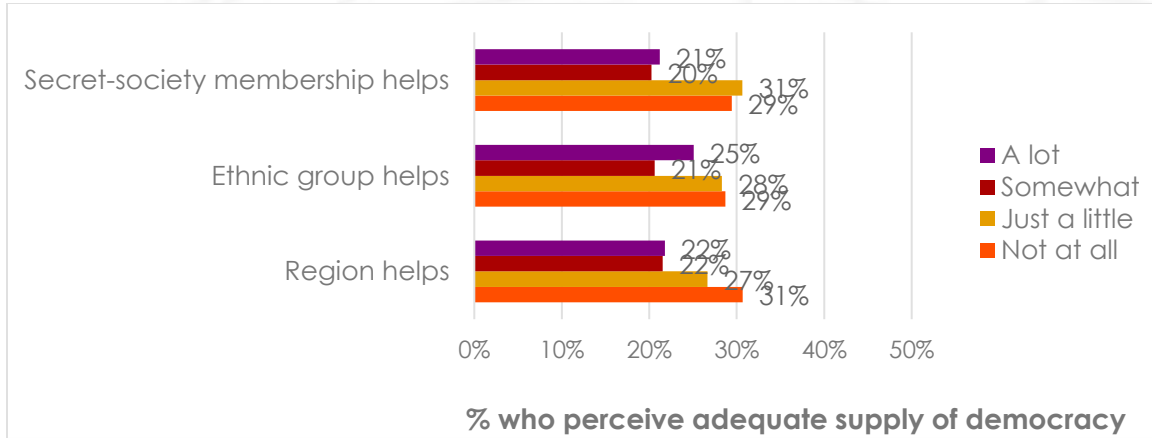**% who perceive adequate supply of democracy**

Figure shows % of respondents who perceive an adequate supply of democracy in Cameroon, as measured by responses to these two questions:
- In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Cameroon today?
*- Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Cameroon today?*

Looking at a more specific aspect of democracy, we see a similar pattern when it comes to assessments of how well elections ensure that voters' views are represented (Figure 9) and that voters can remove elected leaders who don't do what voters want (Figure 10). For example, only 23% of respondents who see membership in a secret society as helping "somewhat" or "a lot" in boosting careers say that elections work "well" or "very well" in making sure that voters' views are represented, compared to 42% of those who see secret-society membership as helping "just a little" or "not at all."

Figure 9: Elections ensure voters' views are reflected | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015
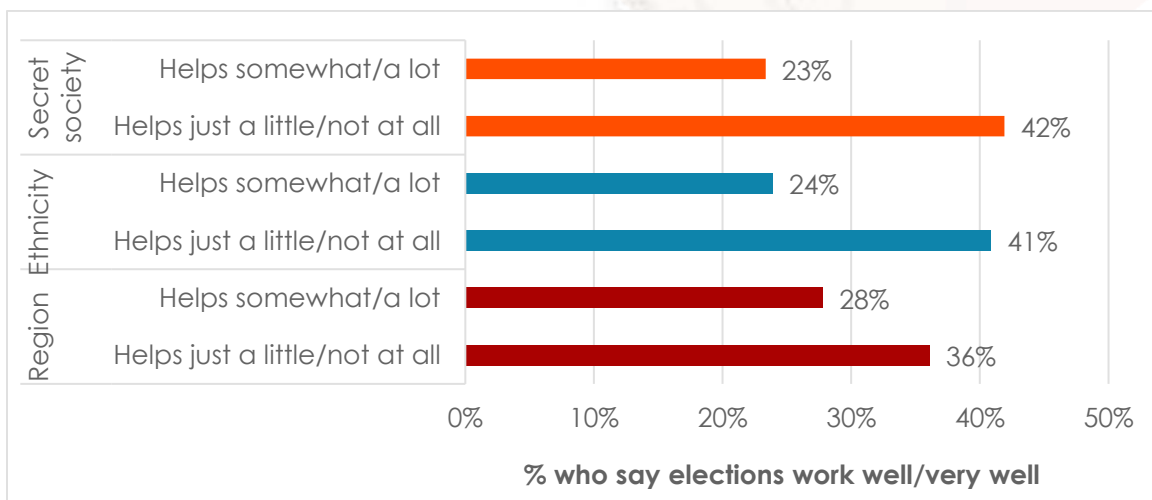
% who say elections work well/very well

Respondents were asked: *Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections ensure that representatives to the National Assembly reflect the views of voters?*

Figure 10: Elections enable voters to remove leaders from office | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015
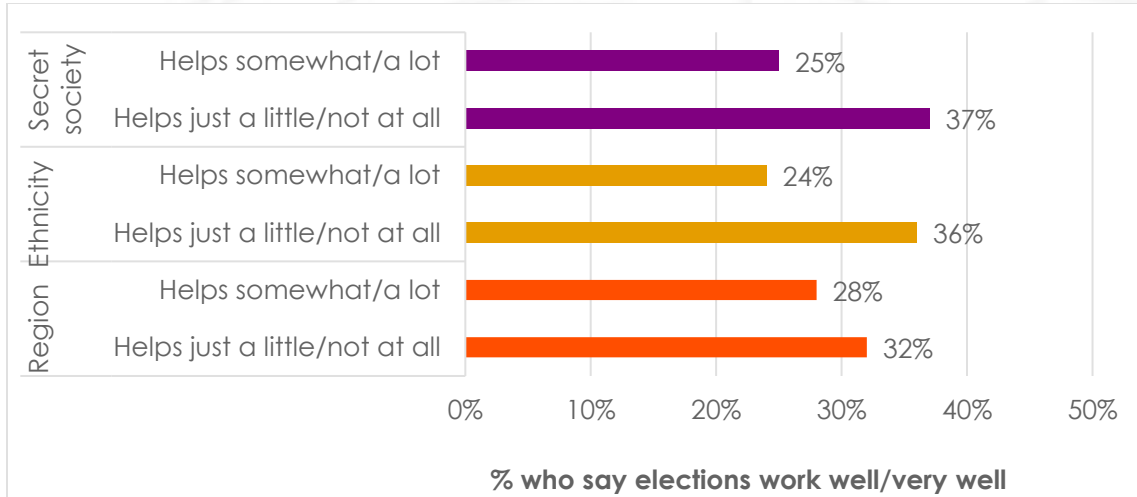
Respondents were asked: *Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?*

Similarly, respondents who see favouritism at work in government careers are more likely to think that political party leaders are primarily interested in serving their own political ambitions rather than the public good (Figure 11). For example, 79% of those who think membership in a secret society is helpful to a career say political leaders are motivated by their own ambitions, vs. 56% among those who don't see favouritism as an important factor.

Figure 11: Leaders serve their own political ambitions | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015
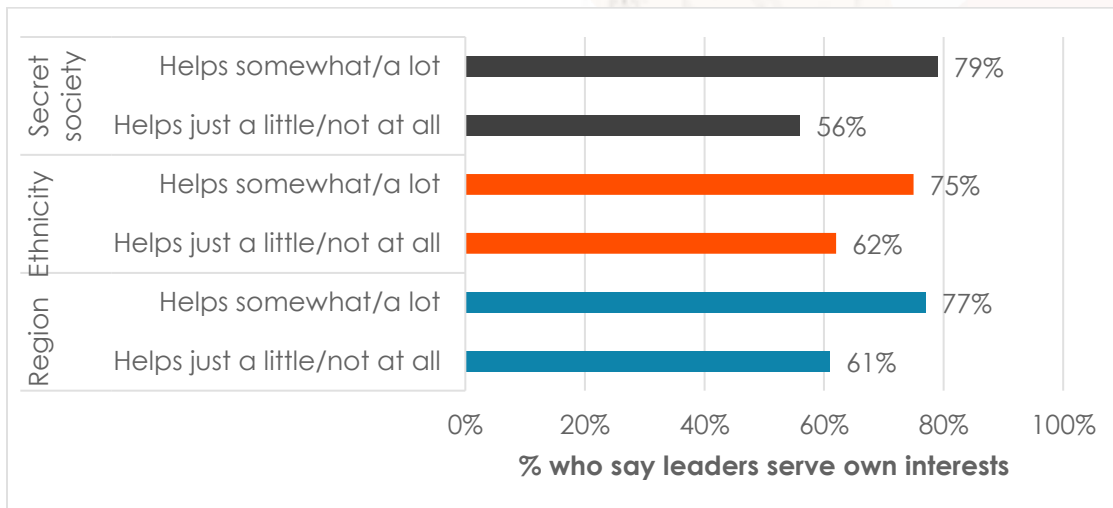

Respondents were asked: *Do you think that leaders of political parties in this country are more concerned with serving the interests of the people, or more concerned with advancing their own political ambitions, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who "agree" or "agree strongly")*

The pattern is similar for views on whether people are treated unequally under the law, although the difference is marginal regarding the perceived usefulness of region for reaching top positions in the public sector (Figure 12).

Enjoying preferential access to better positions in public services may also be understood as a form of corruption. As shown in Figure 13, respondents who think that membership in a secret society, ethnicity, or regional origin helps access top positions in the public sector are more likely to say that overall levels of corruption in the country have increased.

Figure 12: People treated unequally under the law | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015
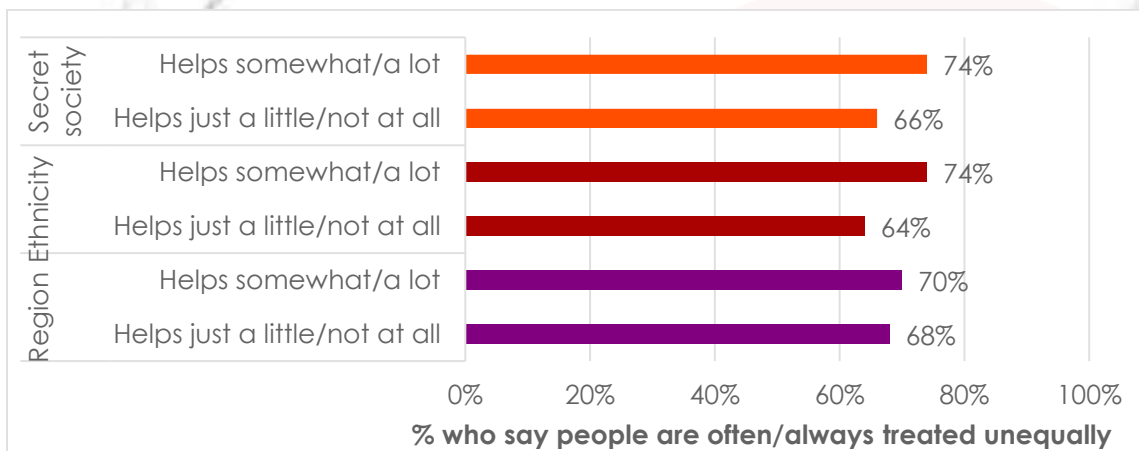
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how often, in this country, are people treated unequally under the law?*

Figure 13: Level of corruption | by perceived extent of group membership helping public-sector career | Cameroon | 2015
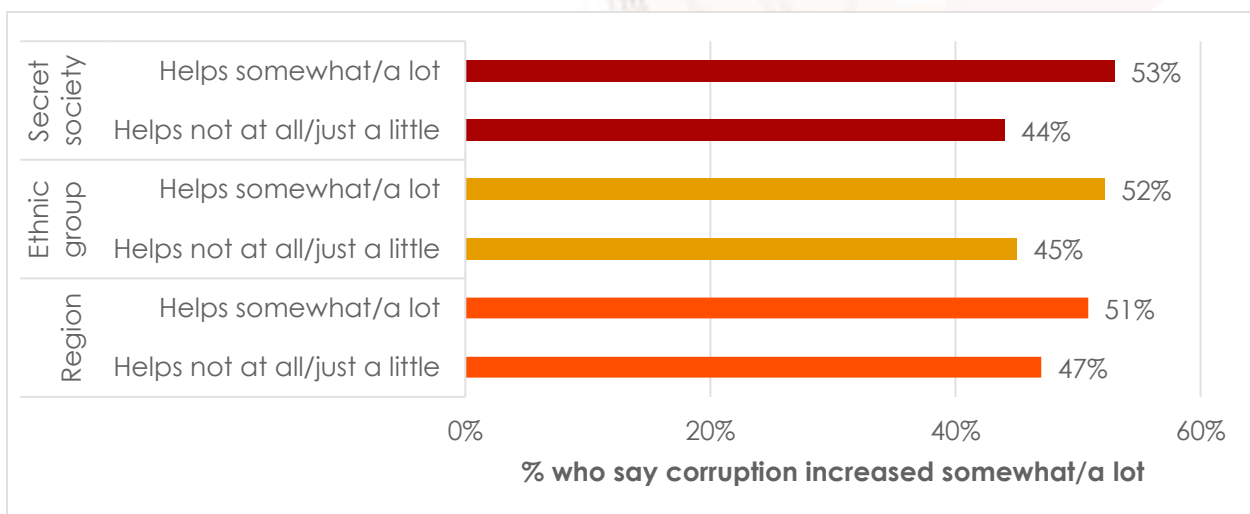
Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?*

Conclusion

A substantial share of ordinary Cameroonians believe that belonging to a secret society, being part of a particular ethnic group, or being from a particular region helps people reach top positions in the public sector. Religious affiliation is less often seen as an important factor in career advancement.

Perceptions of such preferential treatment are associated with lower perceived supply of democracy and less positive views of elections and elected officials. More in-depth analysis is needed to identify causation, i.e. to determine whether ordinary citizens' view of the state and its services are shaped in part by perceived patronage.

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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