

# Cameroon's linguistic divide deepens to rift on questions of democracy, trust, national identity

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 283 | Mircea Lazar

## Summary

After more than a half-century as a single nation with a dual colonial heritage and two official languages – French and English – Cameroon is in danger of coming apart. Protests against perceived discrimination and lack of inclusion began peacefully in the anglophone regions in October 2016 but have escalated into violent conflict with a harsh government response (Africa Times, 2018; Morse, 2017; Confédération Suisse, 2018). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has voiced grave concerns about reported extrajudicial killings by state armed forces as well as abductions and killings by armed anglophone secessionists (AfricaNews, 2018; Atabong, 2018). Nearly half a million Cameroonians are internally displaced, and at least 30,000 have fled to neighbouring Nigeria (Africa Times, 2018).

The October 2018 presidential election, which extended the 36-year reign of President Paul Biya, was marred by violence, irregularities, and a boycott by most residents of the anglophone regions. An opposition leader was later jailed after his party staged demonstrations against the election result (France24, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2018).

These tensions between the two major linguistic zones have taken a clear toll on the country's unity. Anglophone and francophone Cameroonians, who have lived as friends and neighbours for decades, are deeply divided on fundamental questions of democracy and state legitimacy, an analysis of 2018 Afrobarometer survey data shows. Major divisions have emerged as many anglophone Cameroonians have abandoned their support for and belief in the durability of Cameroonian democracy, as well as their fundamental trust in the state.

## Afrobarometer

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in Africa. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 African countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys were completed in 2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Cameroon interviewed 1,200 adult Cameroonians in May-June 2018. 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 have been conducted in Cameroon in 2013 and 2015.

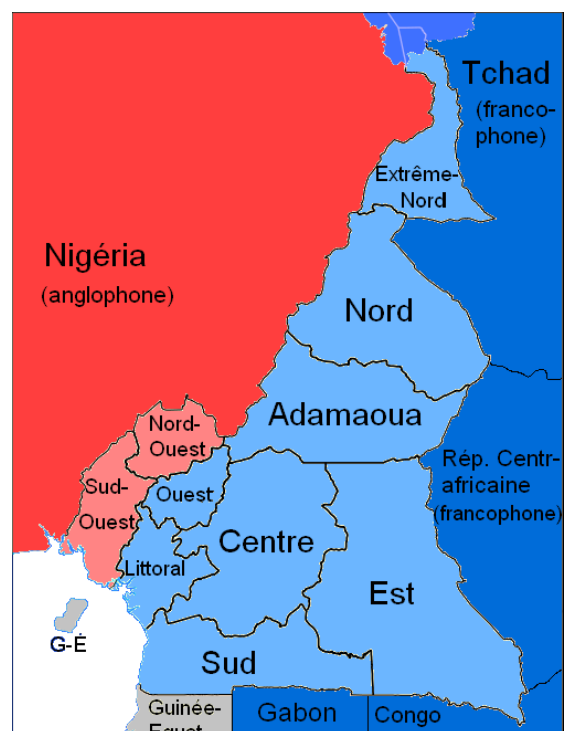
## Key findings

- Only one in eight anglophone Cameroonians (12%) see their country as “a democracy with minor problems” or “a full democracy,” down from 52% in 2015. Francophone citizens are almost four times as likely (45%) to say they live in a functioning democracy.
- The proportion of anglophone Cameroonians who are at least “fairly satisfied” with the way their democracy is working has dropped from 43% in 2015 to 7% – less than one-fourth the share of francophones who express satisfaction (33%).
- Eight out of 10 anglophone respondents (81%) say people have less freedom than “a few years ago” to say what they think about politics, compared to 22% of their francophone counterparts.
- Anglophone citizens are more than twice as likely as francophones to say they fear political intimidation or violence, 46% vs. 20%.
- Fewer than half (45%) of anglophone Cameroonians now prefer democracy to any other political system, down from 64% in 2015. Among francophones, support for democracy has remained at two-thirds (66%). Support for elections shows a similar pattern.
- About six in 10 anglophone citizens say they do not trust the police (58%) and the army (62%) “at all,” compared to 24% and 13%, respectively, of francophones. Distrust in the security forces has increased sharply among anglophones since 2015.
- The proportion of anglophone respondents who identify more strongly with their ethnic group than their nationality has quadrupled since 2015, to almost one-third (31%), compared to 13% among francophones.

## Assessments of Cameroon's democracy

For the purposes of this analysis, we define “anglophone” respondents as those living in Cameroon's two anglophone regions (North-West and South-West 16% of the sample) and “francophone” as those residing in the eight francophone regions (Adamawa, Centre, East, Far-North, Littoral, North, West, and South, making up 84% of the sample). This is a simplification, since a significant minority of French speakers live in anglophone regions and vice versa.

The country's anglophone and francophone regions differ on a variety of socio-demographic indicators collected in the 2018 Afrobarometer survey. For example, the anglophone regions are less urbanized (45% of survey respondents live in urban areas, vs. 54% of respondents in francophone regions) and better educated (29% with post-secondary qualifications, vs. 21% in francophone regions). Their religious makeup differs as well, with Muslims making up 26% of respondents in francophone regions compared to just 3% in anglophone regions.

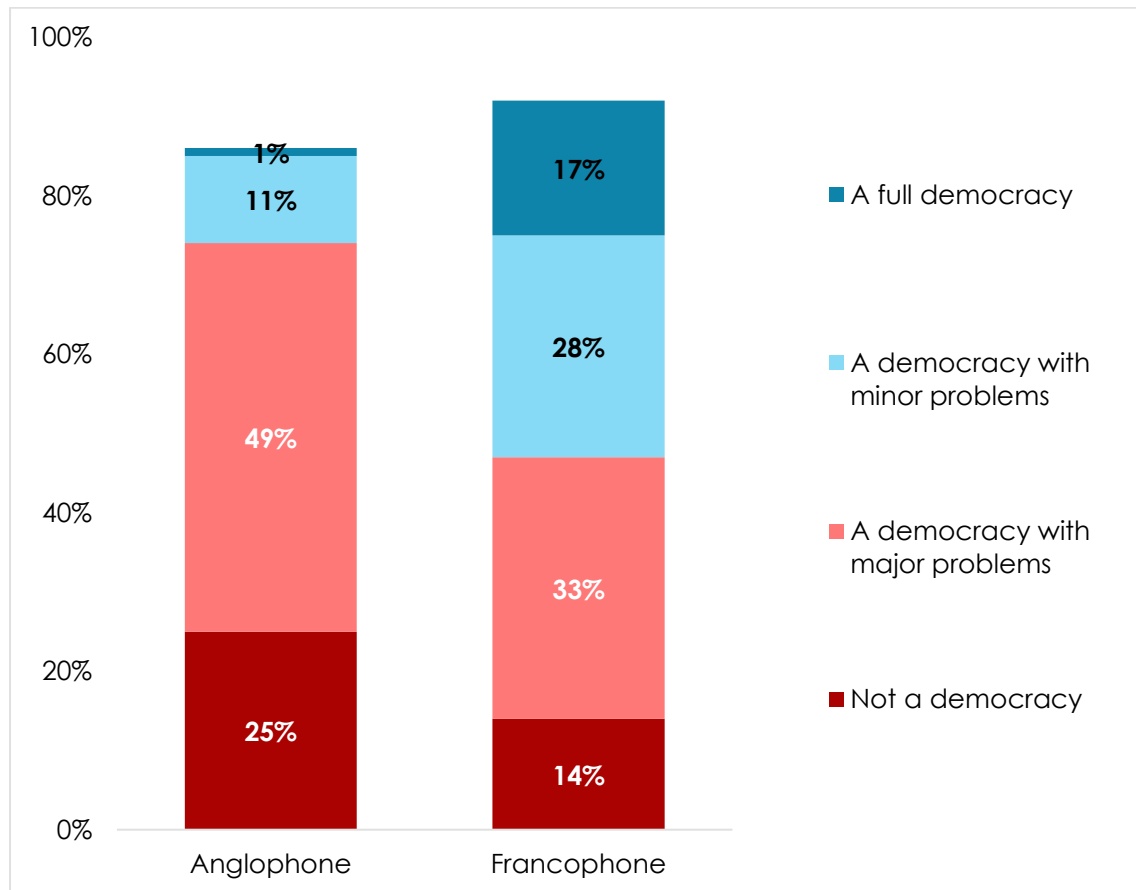


These and other socio-demographic factors might well influence views on any number of issues – differences that would require a more sophisticated analysis to tease out. Nonetheless, a simple comparison of anglophone and francophone zones shows striking differences – and sharply different trends – in attitudes and perceptions regarding the country’s political system.

Most anglophone citizens of Cameroon no longer see their country as a functioning democracy – a drastic shift from four years ago and a sharp contrast to their compatriots in French-speaking regions. Three-fourths (75%) of anglophone Cameroonians, compared to fewer than half of francophones (47%), say their country is “a democracy with major problems” (49%) or “not a democracy” at all (25%) (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> Fewer than 1% of anglophones consider their country “a full democracy,” compared to 17% of francophones.

The proportion of anglophones who see Cameroon as a functioning democracy – “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems” – dropped from more than half (52%) in 2015 to just one in eight (12%) in 2018, while the share of francophones who agree continued a slow increase to 45% (Figure 2).

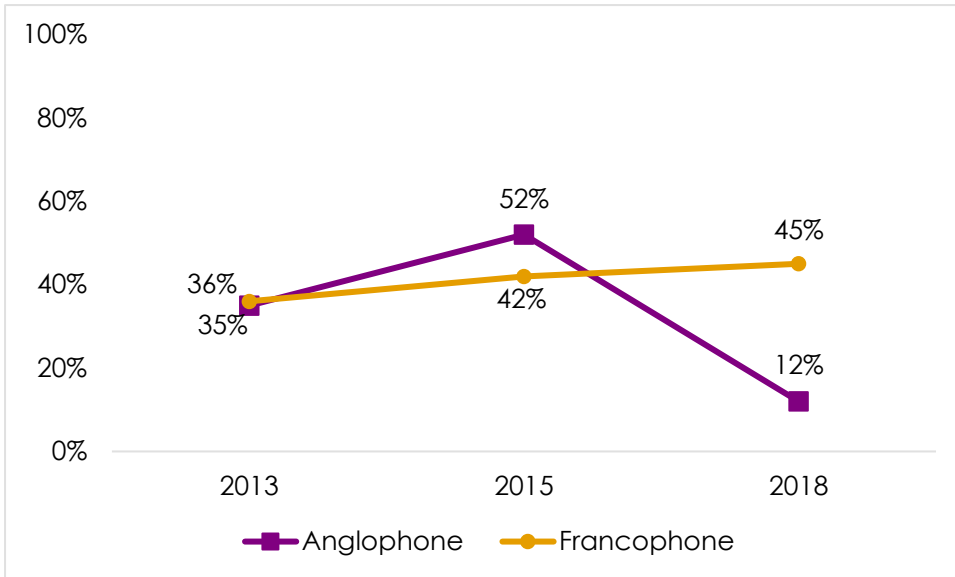
**Figure 1: How much of a democracy is Cameroon? | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Cameroon today?*

<sup>1</sup> Due to rounding, percentages for combined categories may differ slightly from the sum of sub-categories (e.g. 25% “not a democracy” and 49% “a democracy with major problems” combine to 75%).

**Figure 2: Cameroon is a democracy** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018

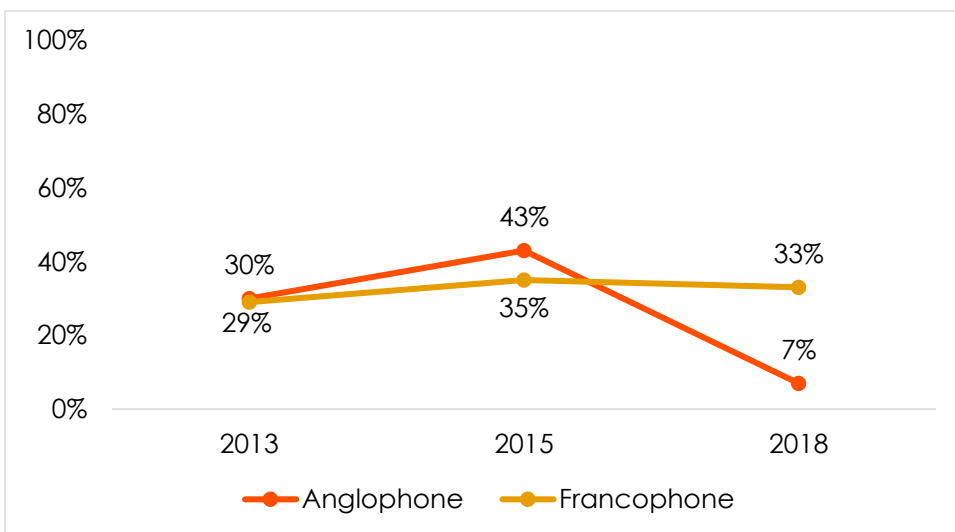


**Respondents were asked:** In your opinion, how much of a democracy is Cameroon today? (% who say “a full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems”)

Similarly, satisfaction with the way democracy is working has plummeted among anglophone citizens, from 43% who said they were “fairly” or “very” satisfied in 2015 to just 7% in 2018 (Figure 3). Among francophones, meanwhile, satisfaction remains low but fairly steady (33%).

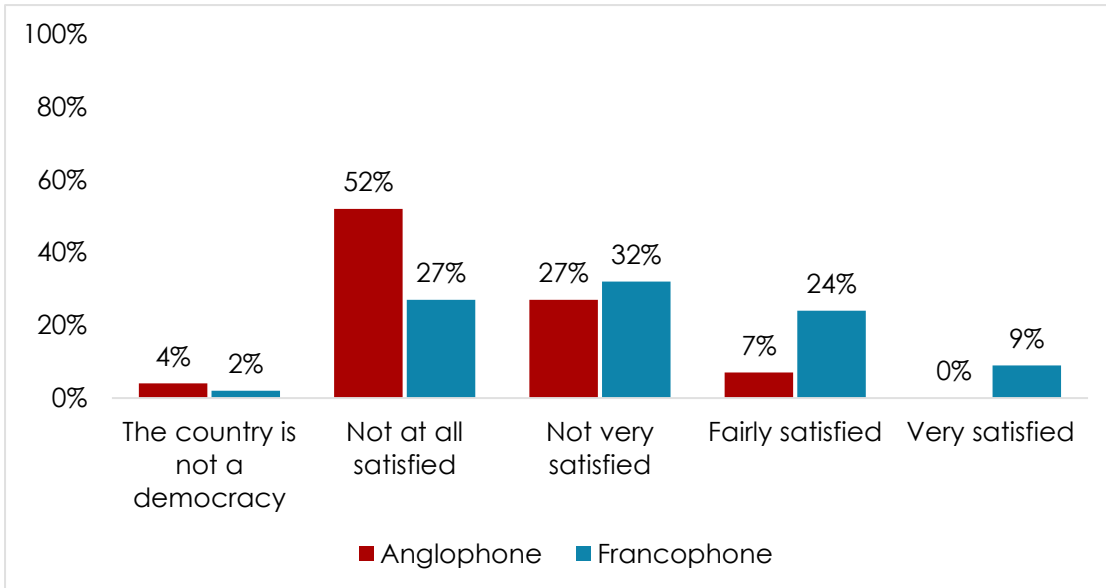
Anglophone citizens are nearly twice as likely as francophones to say they are “not at all” satisfied with how democracy is working in their country (52% vs. 27%), and not even one in 100 anglophones reports being “very satisfied” (Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Satisfied with democracy** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018



**Respondents were asked:** Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Cameroon? (% who say “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied”)

**Figure 4: Satisfaction with democracy** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2018

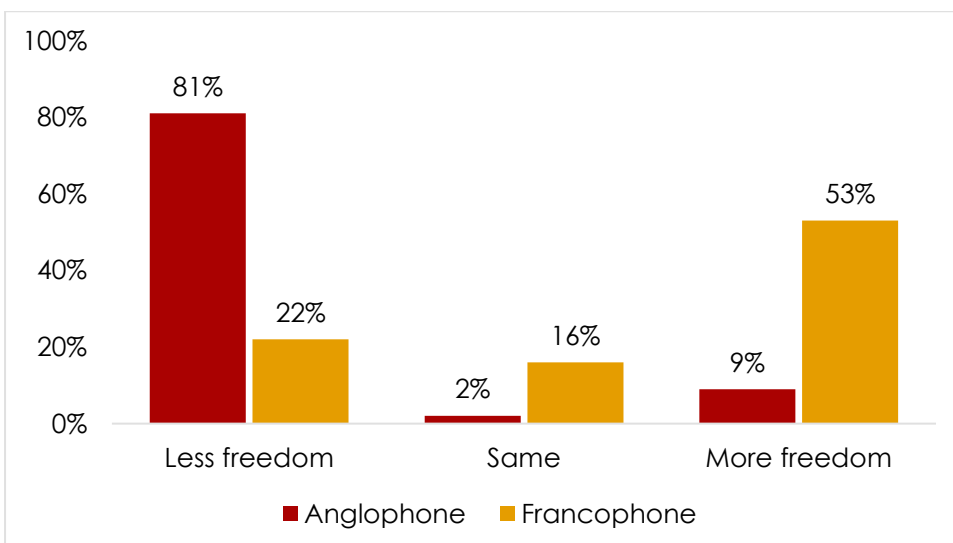


**Respondents were asked:** Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Cameroon?

### Political freedoms

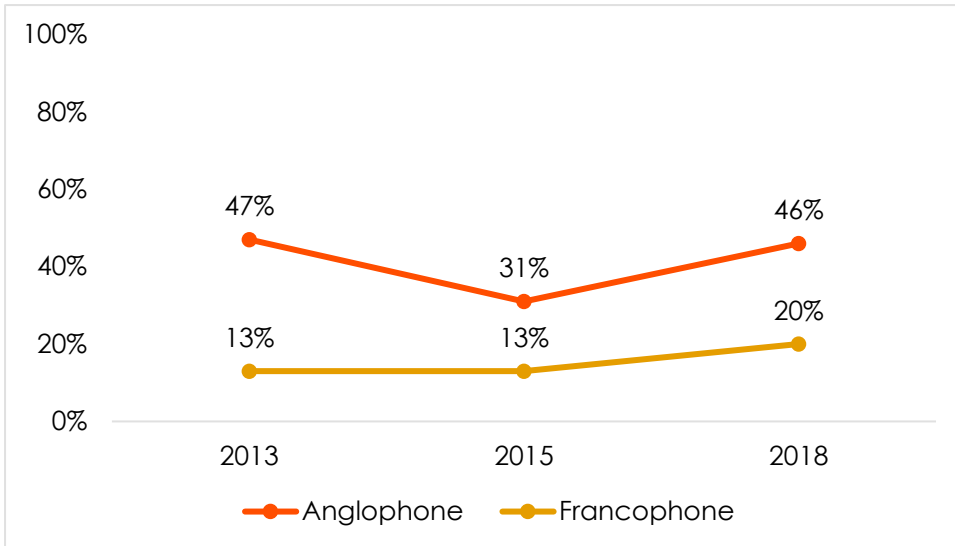
Stark divides are also apparent between the two zones in perceptions of freedom of speech and in fear of political intimidation or violence. Eight out of 10 inhabitants of the anglophone regions (81%) say people have less freedom than “a few years ago” to say what they think about politics, whereas only 22% of their francophone counterparts say the same (Figure 5). And anglophone citizens are more than twice as likely as francophones to fear political intimidation or violence, 46% vs. 20% (Figure 6).

**Figure 5: Freedom to say what you think** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2018



**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?

**Figure 6: Fear of political intimidation or violence** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018



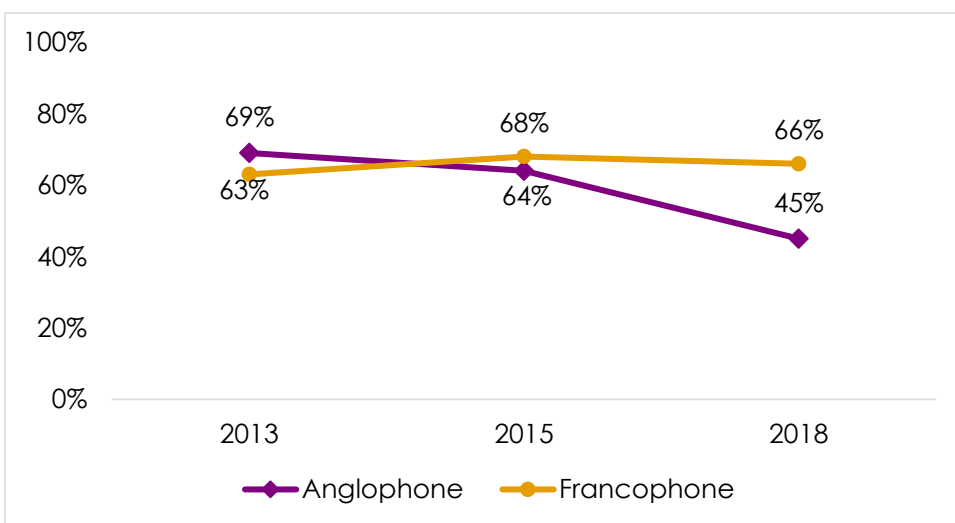
**Respondents were asked:** During election campaigns in this country, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence? (% who say "somewhat" or "a lot")

### Support for democracy and elections

Beyond darkening their assessments of Cameroon's democracy, the recent experiences of anglophone citizens appear to have sapped their enthusiasm for democracy in general.

While two-thirds (66%) of francophones continue to say that democracy is preferable to other systems of governance, fewer than half (45%) of their anglophone counterparts say the same – a 19-percentage-point decline since 2015 (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Support for democracy** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018



**Respondents were asked:** Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

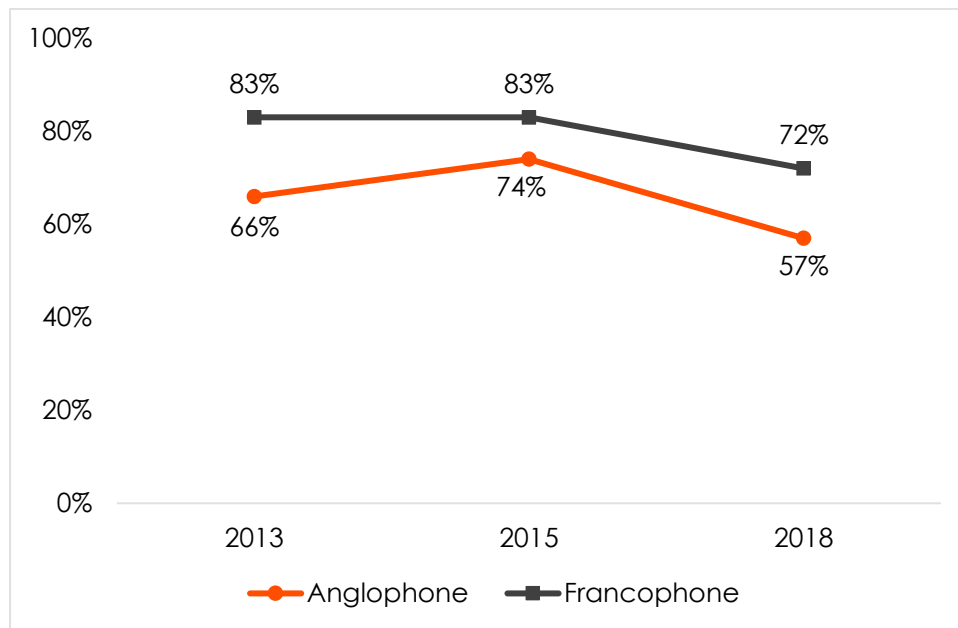
Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that democracy is preferable)

Furthermore, only 57% of anglophone citizens agree with the view that leaders should be selected through regular, open, and honest elections, compared to 72% of francophones. Both groups were more supportive of this view in previous surveys (up to 83% of francophone and 74% of anglophone citizens) (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Support for choosing leaders through elections | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018**



**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.

### Trust in police and army

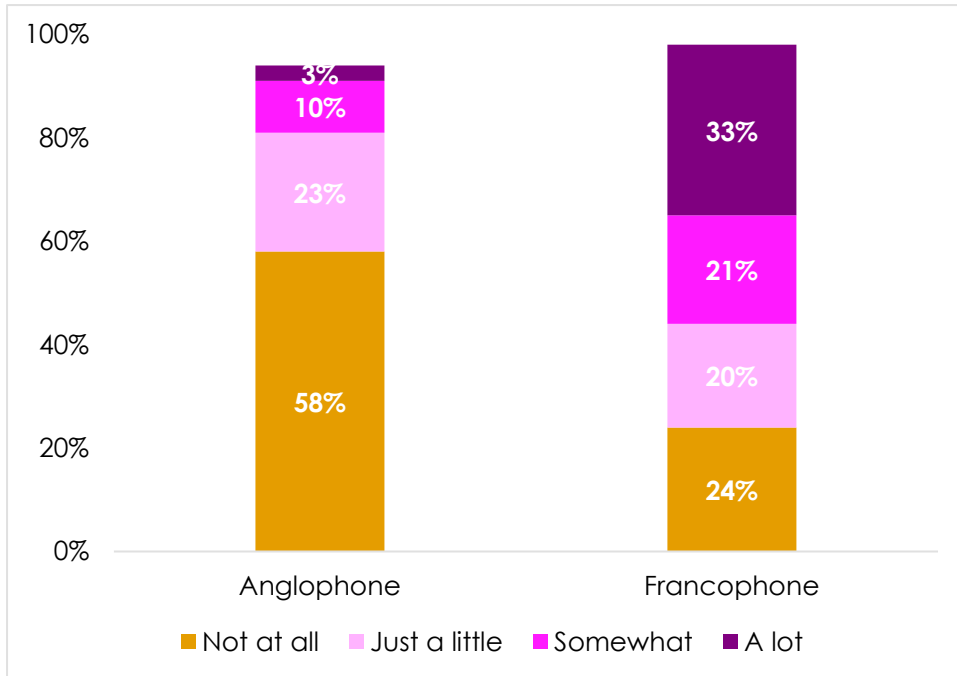
If levels of popular trust in the police and army are indicative of citizen confidence more broadly in the state, the legitimacy of state power itself appears to be in question in anglophone Cameroon. Six in 10 anglophone citizens (58%) do not trust the police "at all" – more than double the proportion of absolute distrust found among francophones (24%) (Figure 9). Only three in 100 anglophones (3%) say they trust the police "a lot," compared to one in three francophone citizens (33%).

The divide is even greater when it comes to trust in the army: 62% of anglophones don't trust the military "at all" (vs. 13% of francophones), and only 3% trust soldiers "a lot" (vs. 59% of francophone citizens) (Figure 10).

While levels of distrust have held steady in the francophone areas, they have increased sharply in the anglophone areas since 2015, nearly tripling (from 22% to 62%) in the case of the military and rising by 19 percentage points (from 39% to 58%) with respect to the police (Figure 11).

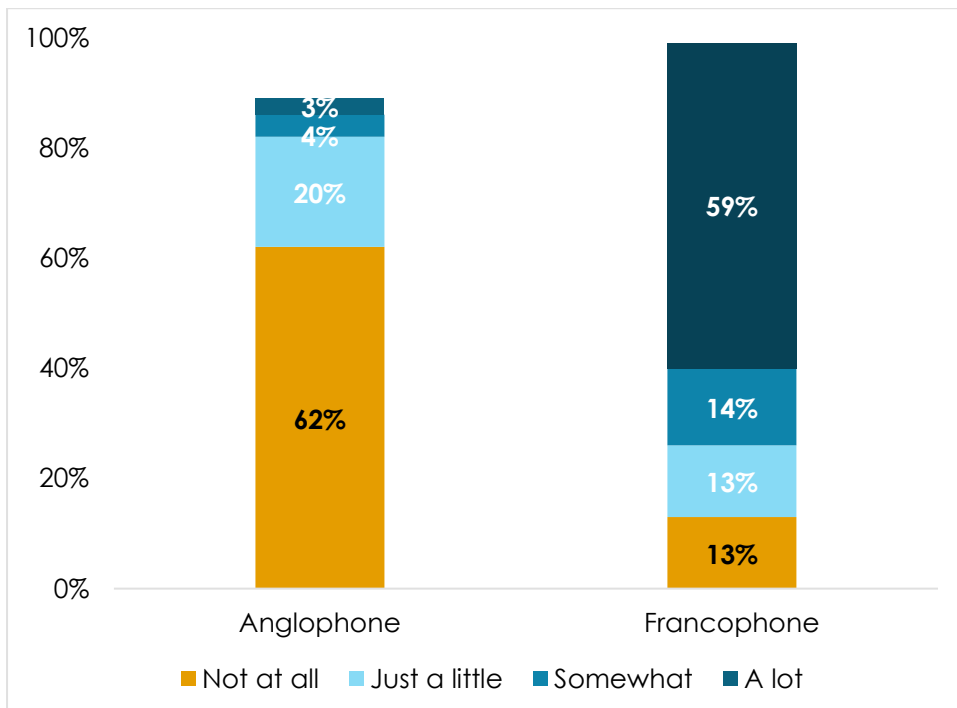
Much like support for democracy, popular trust in the police and the army is a bedrock indicator that lends significant reason for worry regarding the future state of Cameroonian unity and stability.

**Figure 9: Popular trust in the police** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2018



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

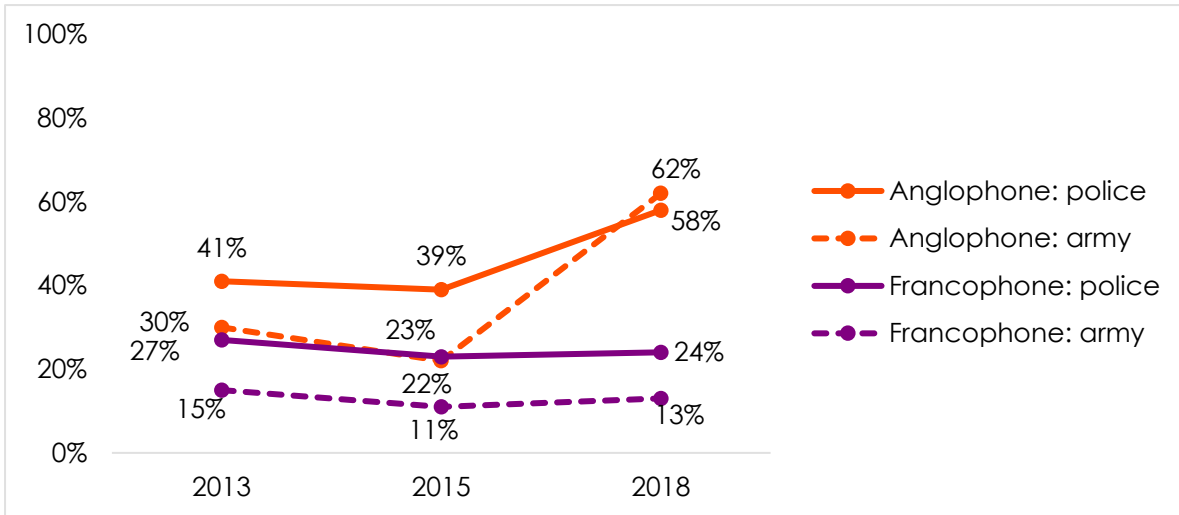
**Figure 10: Popular trust in the army** | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2018



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



**Figure 11: Don't trust police and army 'at all' | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018**

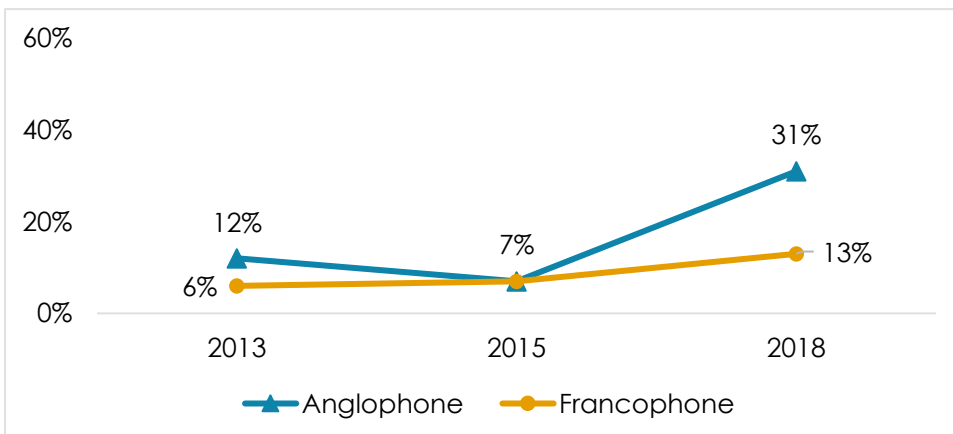


**Respondents were asked:** How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The police? The army? (% who say "not at all")

### Identity

Ethnic and national identities also appear to be in a state of flux in Cameroon. Afrobarometer surveys ask respondents to state whether they identify more with their ethnic group or with their nationality. Until recently, only small minorities (between 6% and 12%) of both anglophone and francophone Cameroonians identified more closely with their ethnic group than with their Cameroonian nationality. But a major shift has occurred since 2015: The proportion of anglophones who identify more strongly with their ethnic group than their nationality has quadrupled, to almost one-third (31%). The proportion of francophone citizens taking this view also increased, but much less dramatically (to 13%) (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Ethnic over national identity | anglophone vs. francophone | Cameroon | 2013-2018**



**Respondents were asked:** Let us suppose that you had to choose between being a Cameroonian and being a \_\_\_\_\_[respondent's ethnic group]. Which of the following statements best expresses your feelings: I feel only [ethnic group]? I feel more [ethnic group] than Cameroonian? I feel equally Cameroonian and [ethnic group]? I feel more Cameroonian than [ethnic group]? I feel only Cameroonian? (Figure shows % who say they feel "only [ethnic group]" or "more [ethnic group] than Cameroonian")

## Conclusion

Conflicts between anglophone and francophone Cameroonians have thrown into question the future of the country. Stark divides have emerged, clearly evident in recent Afrobarometer surveys, in how the two groups perceive their political freedom, their police and army, and their democracy. Increasingly negative perceptions among anglophone citizens extend even to their identification as Cameroonians. Even with Cameroon's long history of individual English and French speakers living peacefully as friends and compatriots, these tears in the national fabric will take skilled and inclusive political leadership, and time, to mend.

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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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