

## African democracy update: Democratic satisfaction remains elusive for many

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 45 | Thomas Bentley, Kangwook Han, and Peter Halley Penar**

### Summary

For democracy advocates around the world, International Day of Democracy highlights the contributions of citizens to making decisions for their countries and ensuring that governments are accountable to their people. On International Day of Democracy 2015 (September 15), Afrobarometer examines how African citizens perceive the quality of their democracies. Many African countries have signed or ratified the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, which clearly expresses governments' commitments to "human rights and democratic principles," a representative system of government (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5), and free and fair elections (Chapter 7). New Afrobarometer data from 28 countries<sup>1</sup> suggest that the extent to which African countries put democratic ideals into practice varies widely across countries.

On average, barely half of surveyed citizens consider their country a "full democracy" or "a democracy with minor problems," and less than half (46%) are "fairly" or "very" satisfied with how democracy is working in their country, a decrease from the previous survey round. Levels of satisfaction range from highs of 72% in Namibia and 68% in Botswana to lows of 26% in Togo and 11% in Madagascar.

Regular, free, and fair elections, a cornerstone of democracy, are not yet a universal reality, the survey data indicate. While large majorities in Mauritius (91%) and Senegal (87%) consider their most recent national elections either "completely free and fair" or "free and fair but with minor problems," only 46% share this opinion in Ghana.

Other important elements of democracy, such as freedom of speech and association, also show substantial differences among countries. In several countries, such as Swaziland, Togo, and Zimbabwe, citizens perceive high barriers to speaking freely, whereas most Malawians and Ghanaians believe they can say what they think. Differences across the 28 countries are smaller with regard to the freedom to join political organisations and the freedom to vote for candidates of their choice, although a majority of Swazis register a lack of freedom of association and vote choice.

As the African Union and international community work to support African countries to fulfil their commitments to democracy, the perceptions of ordinary citizens provide an important window on progress and remaining challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer Round 6 surveys, representing two-thirds of African countries and 76% of the continent's population, cover countries at various levels of democracy, although a number of the continent's least democratic states are excluded. The 28 countries for which Round 6 data are currently available are Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Swaziland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

## Afrobarometer surveys

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. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples that yield country-level results with margins of error of +/-2% (for samples of 2,400) or +/-3% (for samples of 1,200) at a 95% confidence level.

This dispatch presents some preliminary findings based on data from 41,953 interviews completed so far in 28 countries during Round 6 (see the appendix for fieldwork completion times). Interested readers should watch for additional findings on democracy and other topics to be released once Round 6 surveys are completed, starting in October 2015.

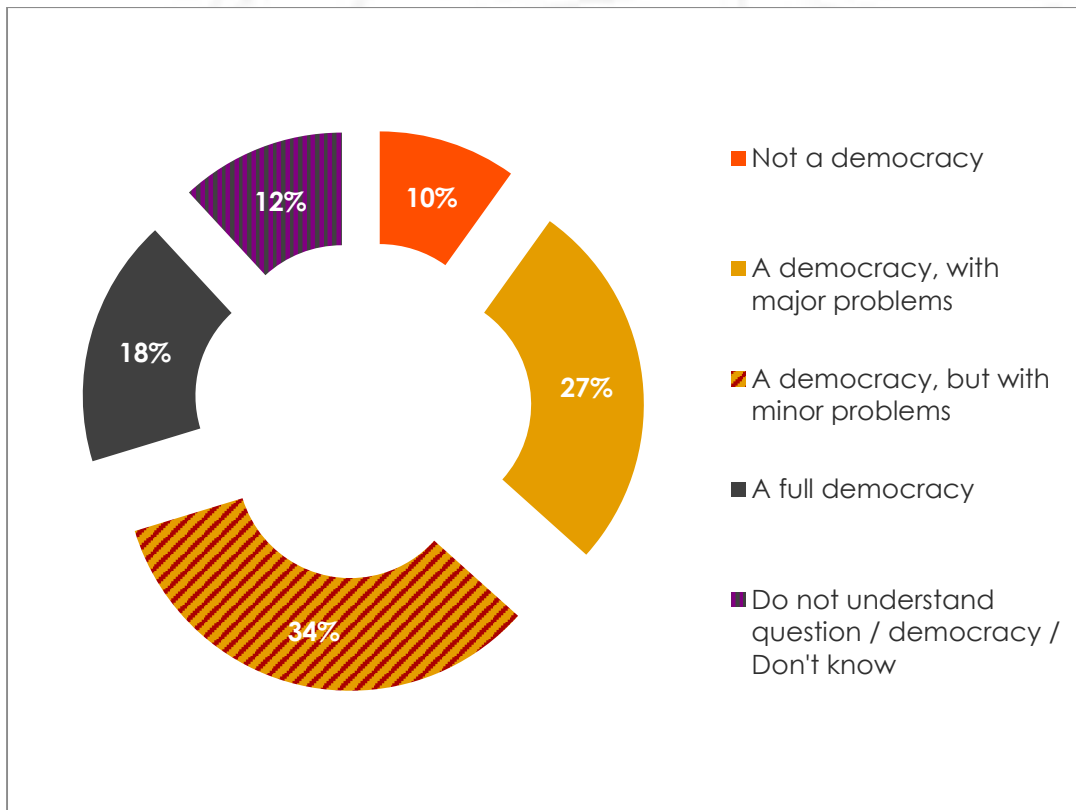
## Key findings

- On average across 28 countries, a slight majority (52%) of citizens perceive their country to be a full democracy (18%) or a democracy with only minor problems (34%). In 10 of the 28 countries, the more frequently expressed view is that the country is a democracy with major problems or not a democracy at all.
- Compared to the previous round of surveys (Round 5, 2011-2013), satisfaction with democracy declined from 50% to 46% of citizens who say they are "very" or "fairly" satisfied. Satisfaction levels vary substantially across countries, from highs of 72% in Namibia and 68% in Botswana to lows of 26% in Togo and 11% in Madagascar.
- Seven of 10 respondents say their most recent national elections were "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems." About nine of 10 citizens in Mauritius (91%) and Senegal (87%) share this view, but only 46% of Ghanaians agree.
- A bare majority (51%) of citizens say they are "completely free" to say what they think. Freedom of speech is perceived as most limited in Swaziland (where only 18% say they are completely free), Togo (26%), and Zimbabwe (27%). Citizens are somewhat more confident in their freedom of political association (61% completely free) and express relatively high confidence in their freedom to vote as they choose (73%).

## No consensus on the supply of democracy

A slim majority (52%) of Africans perceive their country to be either a full democracy (18%) or a democracy with only minor problems (34%) (Figure 1).

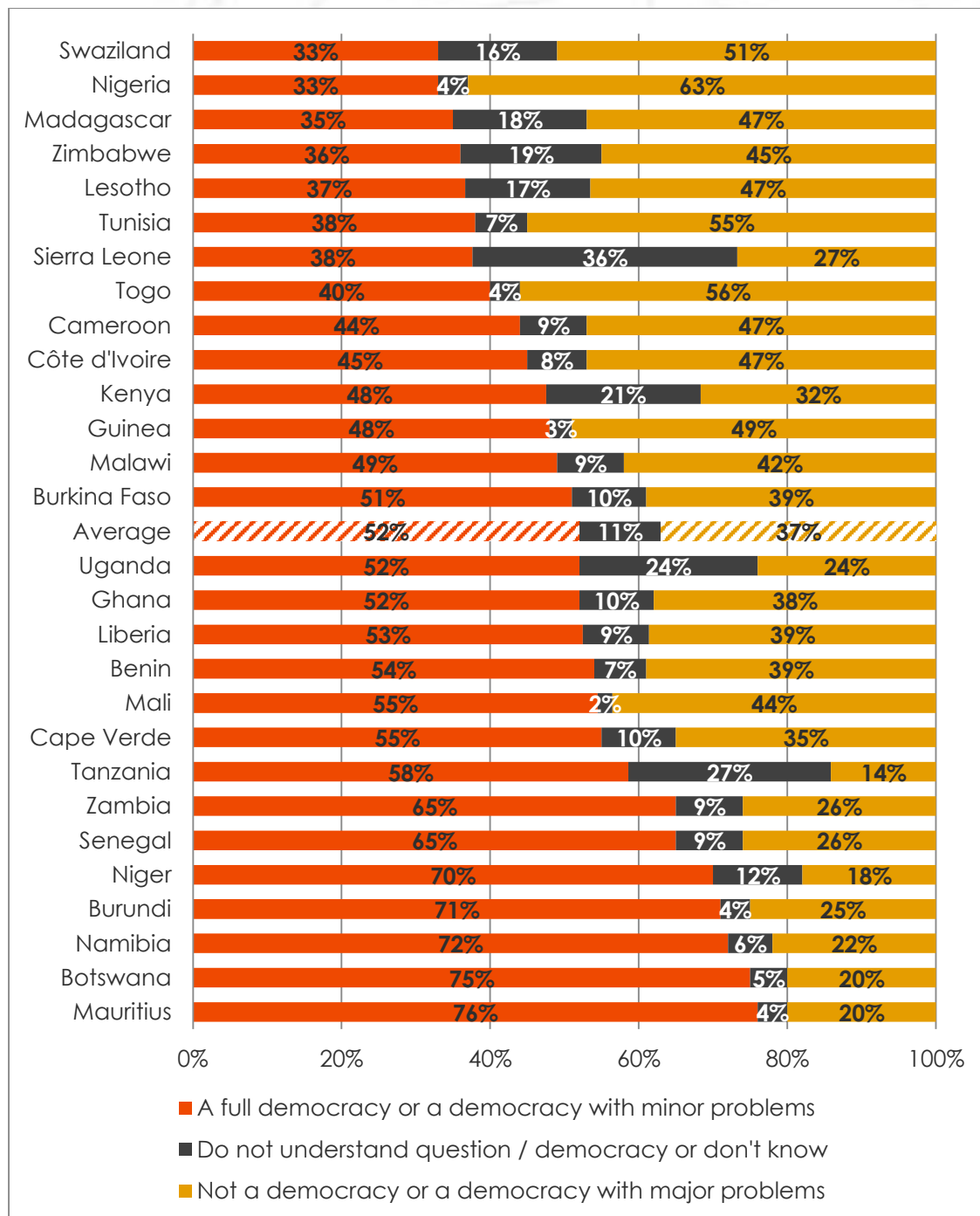
**Figure 1: Extent of democracy** | 28 countries | 2014/2015



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

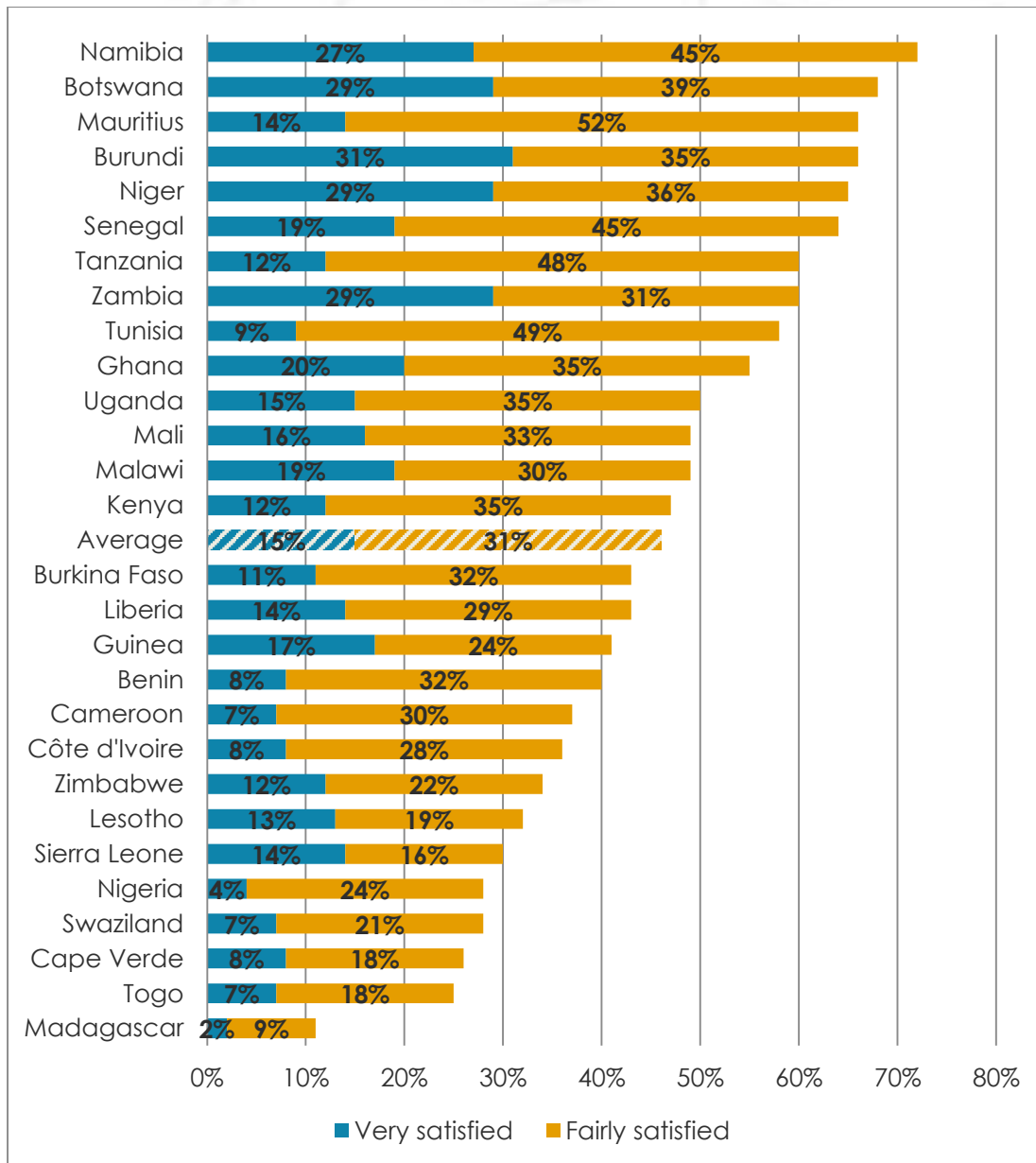
Countries differ considerably in the extent of democracy that their citizens perceive. Majorities give favourable assessments in 15 countries, led by Mauritius (76%), Botswana (75%), and Namibia (72%) (Figure 2). But at the other extreme, only one-third of citizens in Swaziland and Nigeria share this positive assessment. (Note that Nigerians' negative assessments of the extent of their democracy, their satisfaction with democracy, and the quality of their most recent national election were captured in December 2014, some three months before the country underwent a historic electoral transition. On the flipside, Burundians' relatively positive assessments were recorded in September-October 2014, long before the highly contested 2015 election that saw President Pierre Nkurunziza win a constitutionally questionable third term while many opposition and civil-society leaders had to flee the country.) Overall, in 10 of the 28 countries, more citizens say their country is not a democracy or a democracy with major problems than hold the more favourable view.

**Figure 2: Extent of democracy** | by country | 28 countries | 2014/2015



Satisfaction with democracy varies just as widely. Across 28 countries, only a plurality (46%) of citizens say they are “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied” with the way democracy works in their country (Figure 3), while 43% say they are “not very satisfied” or “not at all satisfied.” Satisfaction runs highest in Namibia (72%), Botswana (68%), Mauritius (66%), and Burundi (66%) but falls below one-third of citizens in seven countries, including Madagascar (11%), Togo (25%), Cape Verde (26%), and Nigeria (28%). (As above, the caveats regarding the timing of the Burundi and Nigeria surveys apply.) Sizeable majorities express dissatisfaction with their democracy in 11 of the 28 countries.

**Figure 3: Satisfaction with democracy** | 28 countries | 2014/2015



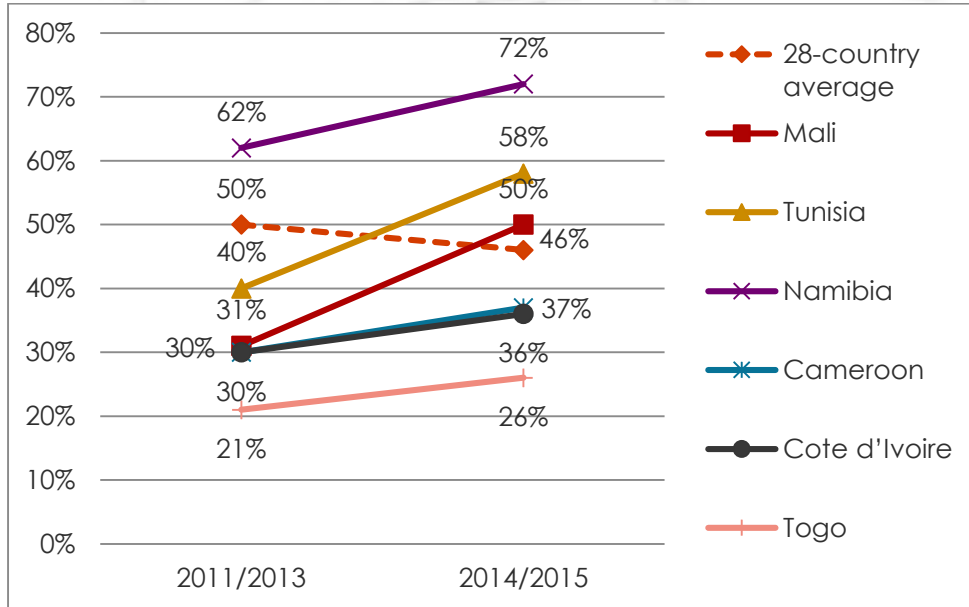
**Respondents were asked:** Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in your country?

Satisfaction with democracy is not static, and changes over time may sometimes reflect factors other than the functioning of democratic institutions (such as economic problems that citizens may attribute to “democracy,” or rising (as-yet unsatisfied) public expectations of how democracy should work). Looking at short-term changes since Round 5 surveys were conducted in 2011-2013, we find that on average across the 28 countries, satisfaction with democracy decreased from 50% to 46%. It increased markedly, however, in six countries, led by Mali (a 19-percentage-point increase) and Tunisia (18-point increase) (Figure 4).

In contrast, seven countries experienced declines in satisfaction of more than 10 percentage points, most dramatically a 32-percentage-point drop in Sierra Leone (Figure 5). Ghana's 18-percentage-point decrease in satisfaction is particularly remarkable; discontent with the

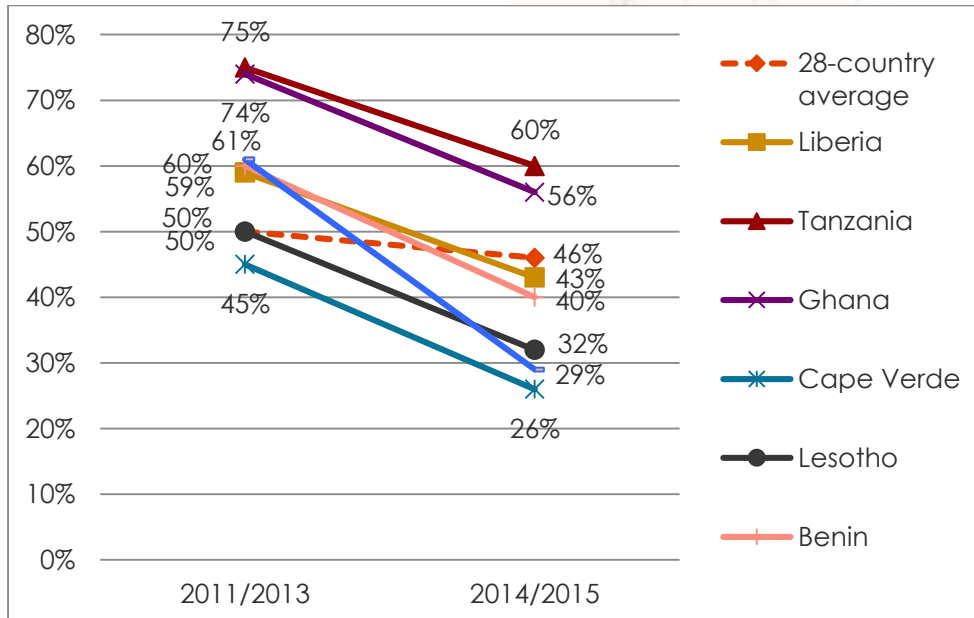
government's economic management may be one of several factors contributing to this change.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 4: Increasing satisfaction with democracy** | 6 countries with largest increases | 2011-2015



(% "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied")

**Figure 5: Declining satisfaction with democracy** | countries with declines of more than 10 percentage points | 2011-2015



(% "very satisfied" or "fairly satisfied")

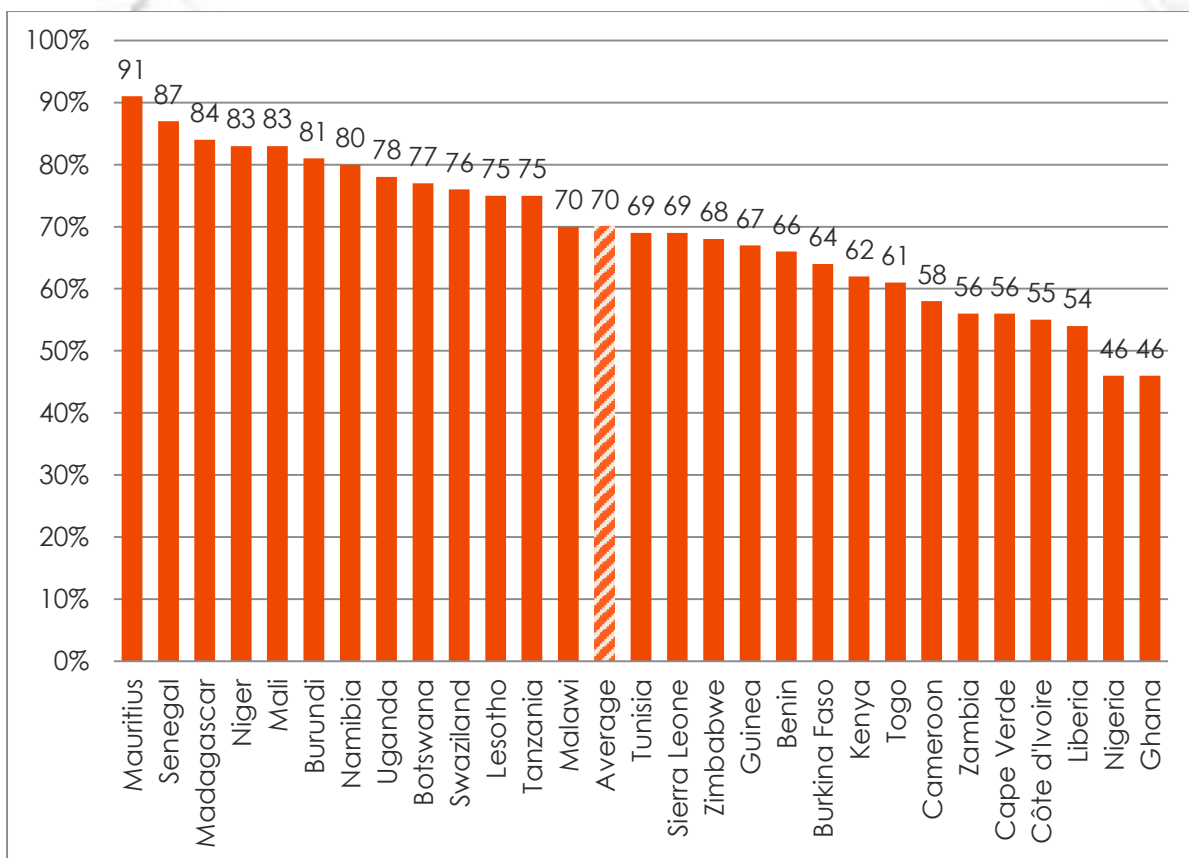
<sup>2</sup> See Bratton, M., & Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2015). Political risks facing African democracies: Evidence from Afrobarometer. Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 157, at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

## Elections: A key democratic indicator

Elections are widely recognized as a key component of the democratic process, and the perceived quality of elections has been found to be a strong indicator of popular ratings of the quality of democracy. Afrobarometer asked respondents to rate the quality of the most recent national election in their country (see the appendix for election year by country).

Across 28 countries, seven in 10 African citizens (70%) indicate that their elections were “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems” (Figure 6). About nine of 10 citizens in Mauritius (91%) and Senegal (87%) share this view, while citizens in Ghana (46%), Nigeria (46%), Liberia (54%), and Côte d’Ivoire (55%) are least likely to agree.

**Figure 6: Quality of elections** | 28 countries | 2014/2015

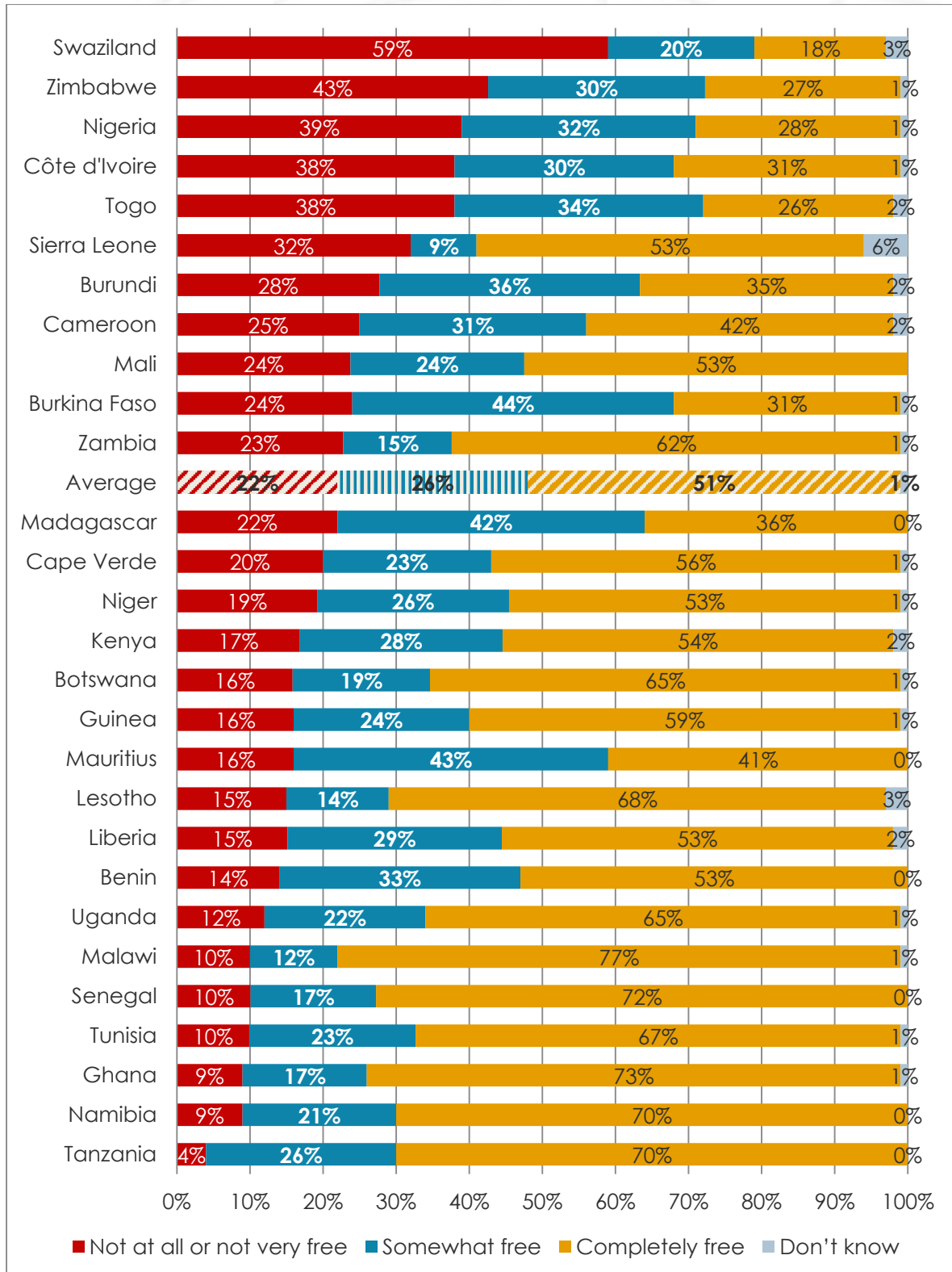


**Respondents were asked:** *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election? (% who say “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems”)*

## Freedom of speech limited in several countries

Another key indicator of the quality of a democracy is the enjoyment of basic freedoms of speech, association, and vote choice. Across the 28 countries, a bare majority of 51% of citizens say they are “completely free” to speak their minds (Figure 7). Another 26% feel “somewhat free,” while 22% say they are “not at all” or “not very” free to say what they think. Malawi (77%) and Ghana (73%) top the list of those who say they enjoy complete freedom of expression; majorities share this view in 18 of the 28 countries. Freedom of speech is perceived as most limited in in Swaziland (where only 18% say they are completely free), Togo (26%), Zimbabwe (27%), Nigeria (28%), Burkina Faso (31%), and Côte d’Ivoire (31%).

Figure 7: Freedom of speech | 28 countries | 2014/2015

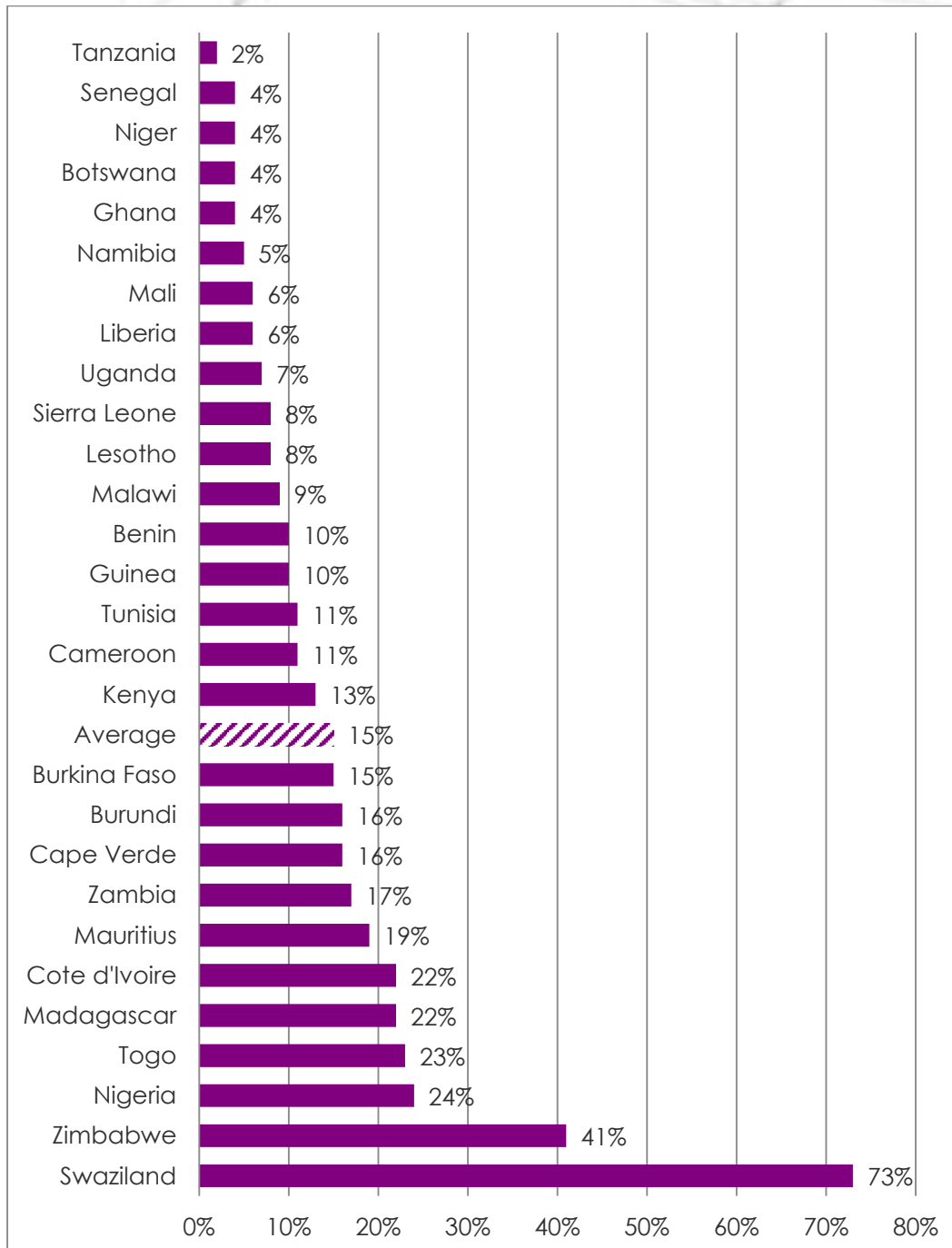


Respondents were asked: *In this country, how free are you to say what you think?*



Citizens are somewhat more confident in their freedom of political association. In half of the countries, no more than one in 10 citizens say they are “not very” or “not at all” free (Figure 8). On average across 28 countries, 15% say they lack freedom of association, 21% feel “somewhat free,” and 62% feel “completely free.” The most dramatic exceptions are Swaziland (where 73% of citizens say they do not enjoy freedom of association) and Zimbabwe (41% not free).

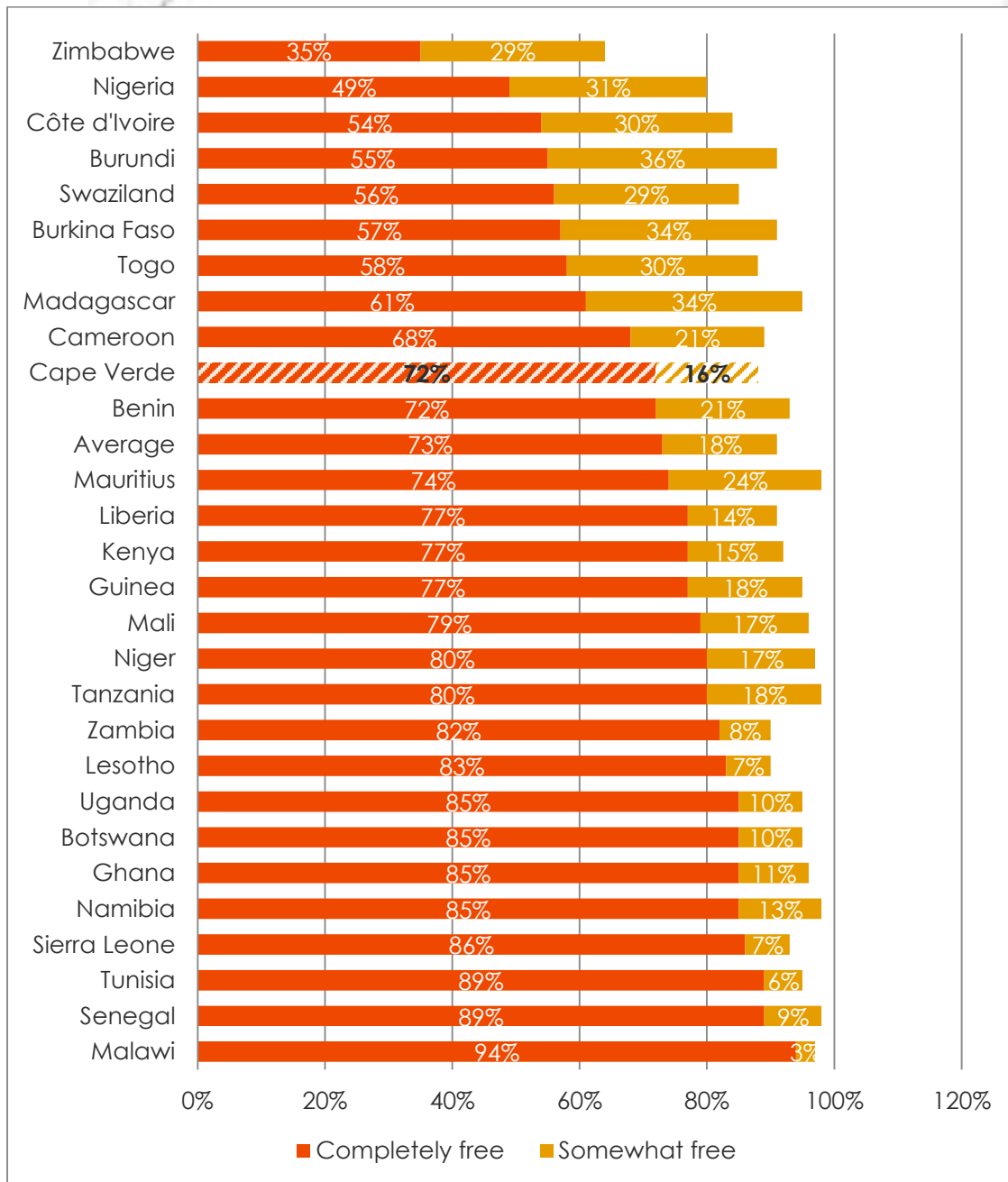
**Figure 8: Lack of freedom of political association** | 28 countries | 2014/2015



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you to join any political organisation you want?*  
 (% who say “not at all free” or “not very free”)

Voting freedom is reported to be considerably more robust. Nearly three-fourths (73%) say they are completely free to vote as they choose, while 18% feel at least “somewhat free” (Figure 9). But while 80% or more say they are completely free in 12 countries, in several others confidence is considerably more circumscribed, including Zimbabwe (35% completely free), Nigeria (49%), Côte d’Ivoire (54%), Burundi (55%), and Swaziland (56%). Just 8% report that they do not enjoy any electoral freedom, although this number rises to more than one-third (35%) in Zimbabwe. So while overall confidence in voting freedom is high, it is clear that citizens in a number of countries still face significant barriers to voting for the candidate of their choice.

**Figure 9: Freedom to vote for candidate of their choice** | 28 countries | 2014/2015



**Respondents were asked:** *In this country, how free are you to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured?*

## Appendix

Country	Month when Round 6 fieldwork was completed	Last national election prior to survey
Benin	June 2014	2011
Botswana	July 2014	2009
Burkina Faso	May 2015	2012
Burundi	October 2014	2010
Cameroon	February 2015	2013
Cape Verde	December 2014	2011
Côte d'Ivoire	September 2014	2011
Ghana	June 2014	2012
Guinea	April 2015	2013
Kenya	December 2014	2013
Lesotho	May 2014	2012
Liberia	May 2015	2011
Madagascar	January 2015	2013
Malawi	April 2014	2009
Mali	December 2014	2013
Mauritius	July 2014	2010
Namibia	September 2014	2009
Niger	April 2015	2011
Nigeria	January 2015	2011
Senegal	December 2014	2012
Sierra Leone	June 2015	2012
Swaziland	April 2015	2013
Tanzania	November 2014	2010
Togo	October 2014	2013
Tunisia	May 2015	2014
Uganda	May 2015	2011
Zambia	October 2014	2011
Zimbabwe	November 2014	2013

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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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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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For more information, please visit [www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org).

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