



Africans want open elections – especially if they bring change

By Michael Bratton and Sadhiska Bhoojedhur



Afrobarometer Policy Paper No. 58 | June 2019

Introduction

Observers now commonly assert that multiparty elections are institutionalized as a standard feature of African politics (Posner & Young, 2007; Bratton, 2013; Cheeseman, 2018; Bleck & van de Walle, 2019). By this they mean that competitive electoral contests are the most commonplace procedure for choosing and changing political leaders across the continent. As a result of a wave of regime transitions in the 1990s, the vast majority of African countries

abandoned one-party systems and military rule in favour of democratic constitutions that guarantee – at least on paper – civil and political rights, civilian control of the military, and legislative and judicial oversight of the executive branch of government. Almost all countries have introduced a regular cycle of elections (usually every five years), and many have placed constitutional limits on the number of terms that African presidents can serve (usually two). Today, encouraged by the African Union's African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, all political leaders feel compelled to pay at least token respect to a new set of continent-wide electoral standards.

In short, elections are now embedded in the formal rules that govern politics on the continent. But the institutionalization of elections requires more than an international proclamation, an aspirational constitution, and a tightly drafted framework of statutes and regulations. It also requires political actors at all levels of the political system to grant value to open elections as the preferred method for selecting leaders and holding them accountable. In other words, politicians and citizens alike must make sincere commitments to hold elections dear and to offer vigorous protection if electoral procedures are ever threatened.

Yet there is already evidence that some African presidents are all too ready to abandon presidential term limits (Dulani, 2011) – a reversal, for example, that Togo's Parliament ratified in May 2019. And political leaders are too often tempted to manipulate election processes and outcomes in order to retain power (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018) – as Joseph Kabila demonstrated in the December 2018 general election in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).¹ Under these circumstances, much of the burden for protecting open and competitive elections falls to the ordinary citizens of Africa. The political commitments of the man and woman in the street represent the last line of defense should leaders take it upon themselves to violate widely accepted electoral norms.

Accordingly, several key questions arise: Do Africans actually support elections? Do they regard African elections as free and fair? Do high-quality contests boost the value that citizens attach to elections?

This Pan-Africa Profile offers affirmative answers to all these questions. Drawing from recent Afrobarometer survey data covering more than 30 countries across Africa's main geographical regions, we find that Africans want open elections and, for the most part, think they are getting them. Importantly, popular support for elections is driven by the perceived freedom and fairness of the balloting process. Digging deeper, we find that the quality of elections – and thus popular support – is seen to hinge on whether elections bring about leadership alternation, which we define as a change not only of the top ruler but also of the ruling party. This “change effect” suggests that the political preferences of the general public are just as essential as formal political rules – if not more so – to the health of democracy in Africa.

¹ Election observers from the Catholic Church claimed that Kabila colluded to anoint the purported winner, Felix Tshisekedi, who actually finished far behind the real winner, Martin Fayulu.

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 between 1999 and 2015. Findings from Round 7 surveys, covering 45,823 respondents in 34 countries between September 2016 and September 2018, are currently being released. Interested readers may follow our releases, including our Pan-Africa Profiles series of cross-country analyses, at #VoicesAfrica and sign up for our distribution list at www.afrobarometer.org.

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 to +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level.

This policy paper draws mainly on Round 7 data, with over-time comparisons for countries surveyed in earlier rounds (see the Appendix for a list of countries and survey dates). The data are weighted to ensure nationally representative samples. Each country is weighted equally; the Africa-wide data below are thus averages of national data, without adjustment for the size of the national populations.

Pan-Africa Profiles typically present data and analysis in aggregate form. For example, this paper reports average proportions of public opinion for African *countries*. In other words, we use the country – rather than the individual citizen – as the main unit of analysis. These summary results complement other Afrobarometer publications that focus on the disaggregated opinions of various demographic groups within particular countries. A wider-angle lens enables cross-national comparisons that rank countries on various public opinion indicators. It also allows consideration of other factors measured at the macro level (in this instance, the type of electoral system in each country and the total number of elections conducted). Finally, the bigger-picture approach of Afrobarometer Pan-Africa Profiles facilitates over-time comparisons of whole countries through several survey rounds as well as the construction of continent-wide trend lines over time.

Key findings

- On average, three-quarters (75%) of the Africans interviewed in 2016/2018 say they prefer to use regular, open, and honest elections to choose their country's leaders. But popular support for elections was somewhat higher in the recent past, reaching 83% across 35 countries surveyed in 2011/2013.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of all Africans interviewed see the last national election in their country as having been free and fair (either "completely" or "with minor problems"). About one in four say it had "major problems" (13%) or was "not free and fair" (15%). Popular assessments of election quality have remained almost unchanged since 2005.
- Citizens who think their most recent elections were free and fair are more likely to support elections as the best way to choose their leaders.
- Surprisingly, opposition-party supporters are almost as likely as ruling-party supporters to see their elections as free and fair. Non-partisans are far less likely to perceive electoral integrity.
- Popular support for elections is higher in countries with two-round presidential electoral systems than in systems in which leaders are chosen indirectly by parliamentary majorities or that allow winners to take office with less than 50% of the votes.
- Importantly, the perceived quality of elections is closely linked to electoral changes in ruling party. Whereas 71% of Africans infer free and fair conduct in the wake of an electoral alternation, just 56% see the same for elections that confirm the incumbent party in power.

- We conclude that support for elections is a function of both leadership alternation and perceived election quality. Indeed, alternation is embedded in popular perceptions of electoral quality as the strongest evidence for what constitutes a high-quality election. Simply stated, Africans support “change elections.”

Building support for elections: Quality and change

34 African countries • 2016/2018

Popular support for elections



% who say elections are the best way to choose their country's leaders

1. Gambia	88%
2. Sierra Leone	87%

AVERAGE (34 countries)

75%

33. eSwatini	54%
34. Lesotho	48%

High-quality elections
increase support for elections

Perceived election quality

% who say most recent election was free and fair
("completely" or "with minor problems")

1. Ghana	87%
2. Tanzania	85%

AVERAGE (34 countries)

63%

33. Morocco	25%
34. Gabon	17%

"Change elections"
increase perceived election quality

Leadership change

% who say election was free and fair

when **opposition** won the election **71%**

when **incumbent** won the election **56%**

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BAROMETER
LET THE PEOPLE HAVE A SAY

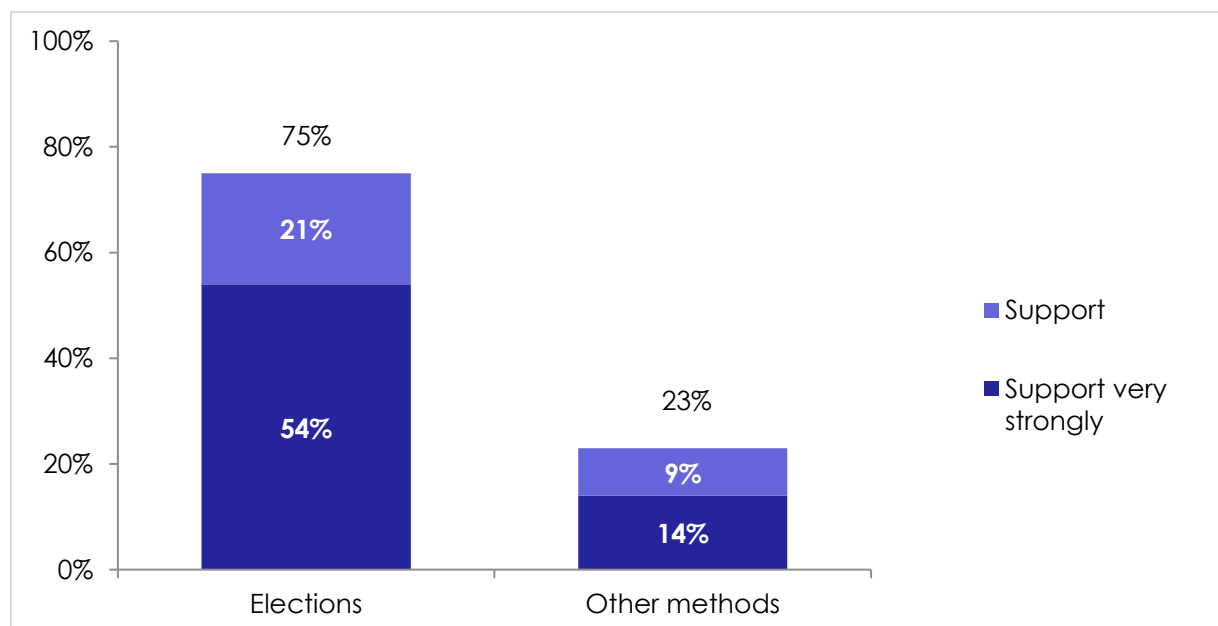
Popular support for elections

To gauge popular support for elections, Afrobarometer presents survey respondents with a choice: *Which of the following statements is closer to your view?*

1. We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
2. Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.


On average, a large majority (75%) of the Africans interviewed in 2016/2018 say they prefer to use open elections to choose their country's leaders (see Figure 1). More than half (54%) feel "very strongly" that elections are a more desirable procedure than "some other method." We do not know what "other methods" respondents may have had in mind. But we assume that these include schemes tried previously, such as monarchical or chiefly inheritance, selection by councils of elders, controlled plebiscites, or seizures of power by civilian or military insiders. The main point, however, is that for contemporary Africans, open elections outdo all alternative methods of leadership selection that may have been employed in Africa in the past.

Figure 1: Popular support for elections | 34 countries | 2016/2018



In wording the survey question, we went out of our way to make sure people's answers made reference to elections that were "regular" (meaning on time), "open" (meaning free), and "honest" (meaning fair). Nonetheless, it remains possible that some respondents simply endorse the sort of less-than-competitive contests that remain a common feature in dominant-party states. The extreme version of this type of election under single-party constitutions allowed only one candidate for president and candidates from only one political party to run for the legislature. So the survey also explicitly asks about popular support for multiparty competition. The question is again posed as a choice between two statements:

1. Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in [this country].
2. Many political parties are needed to make sure that [the citizens of this country] have real choices in who governs them.



Whereas, on average across 34 countries, just 33% agree with the first statement, fully 63% endorse the second statement (42% “very strongly”). Moreover, in the 16 countries for which we have data since 2002, the proportion that supports multiparty competition has gradually risen from 55% to 64% (not shown). More importantly, there is a strong cross-country correlation between the proportion supporting elections and the proportion supporting multiparty competition.² This statistically robust linkage helps to allay concern that citizens are expressing satisfaction with non-competitive elections; instead, they clearly associate the notion of elections with open contests among two or more political parties.

The level of popular support for open elections is not equally strong everywhere; indeed, support varies greatly across countries. As shown in Figure 2, support for elections is particularly high in certain West African countries, including the Gambia (88%), Sierra Leone (87%), Côte d’Ivoire (84%), and Liberia (84%). But support for elections is far lower in a number of Southern African countries, such as Mozambique (61%), South Africa (61%), Malawi (57%), and eSwatini (54%). In Lesotho, fewer than half of all adults (48%) express overt support for elections.

Perhaps the popularity of elections depends on whether voting choice is a novel phenomenon. If a given contest is a “founding” election – that is, if it signals a possible regime transition, usually toward democracy after a long period of autocratic rule – then people are likely to welcome the unfamiliar opportunity to vote for their leaders. If, however, the most recent election is just business as usual in a long sequence of routine contests, and especially if democratization has not brought about observable change in people’s lives, then people may be lukewarm in their support. In this regard, the institutionalization of elections may be a mixed blessing, especially if popular familiarity with a string of low-quality procedures tends to breed apathy, even contempt.

Selected country examples support this proposition about recent electoral experience. In the Gambia, for example, euphoric levels of citizen enthusiasm for elections probably reflect what the BBC (2016) called “one of the biggest election upsets West Africa has ever seen.” The November 2016 victory of challenger Adama Barrow, followed by the January 2017 exile of incumbent Yahya Jammeh at the hands of an ECOWAS military force, represented the Gambia’s first change of regime in more than 20 years. By contrast, the June 2017 National Assembly elections in Lesotho were called more than three years ahead of schedule because Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili had lost the confidence of both Parliament and his own deputy. Incoming Prime Minister Tom Thabane, an old-guard politician recently returned from exile, was sworn in while grieving the assassination of his wife and facing infighting in the armed forces. The voters of Lesotho therefore had reasons to conclude that elections in their country had allowed squabbling political elites to appropriate power.

Indeed, popular support for elections was somewhat higher in Africa in the recent past, that is, during a wave of regime transitions. In the 18 countries that Afrobarometer has tracked consistently since 2005, average support declined from 82% to 74% over the past 13 years (see Figure 3). A preference for “other methods” of choosing leaders has risen in tandem from 16% to 24% over the same period. Paradoxically, the downward trend in support for elections contradicts the previously documented rise in support for multiparty competition. Perhaps the electorate is gaining a nuanced appreciation for the double-edged sword of electoral institutionalization. To be sure, citizens welcome the expanded range of political choice made available by the broadening and deepening of competitive party politics. At the same time, however, people are recognizing that regular elections alone do not satisfy the full gamut of popular hopes, not least for consolidated democracy, but also for social and economic development.

² Pearson’s correlation coefficient $r = .407$, $\text{sig.} = .017$

Figure 2: Support for elections | by country | 34 countries | 2016/2018

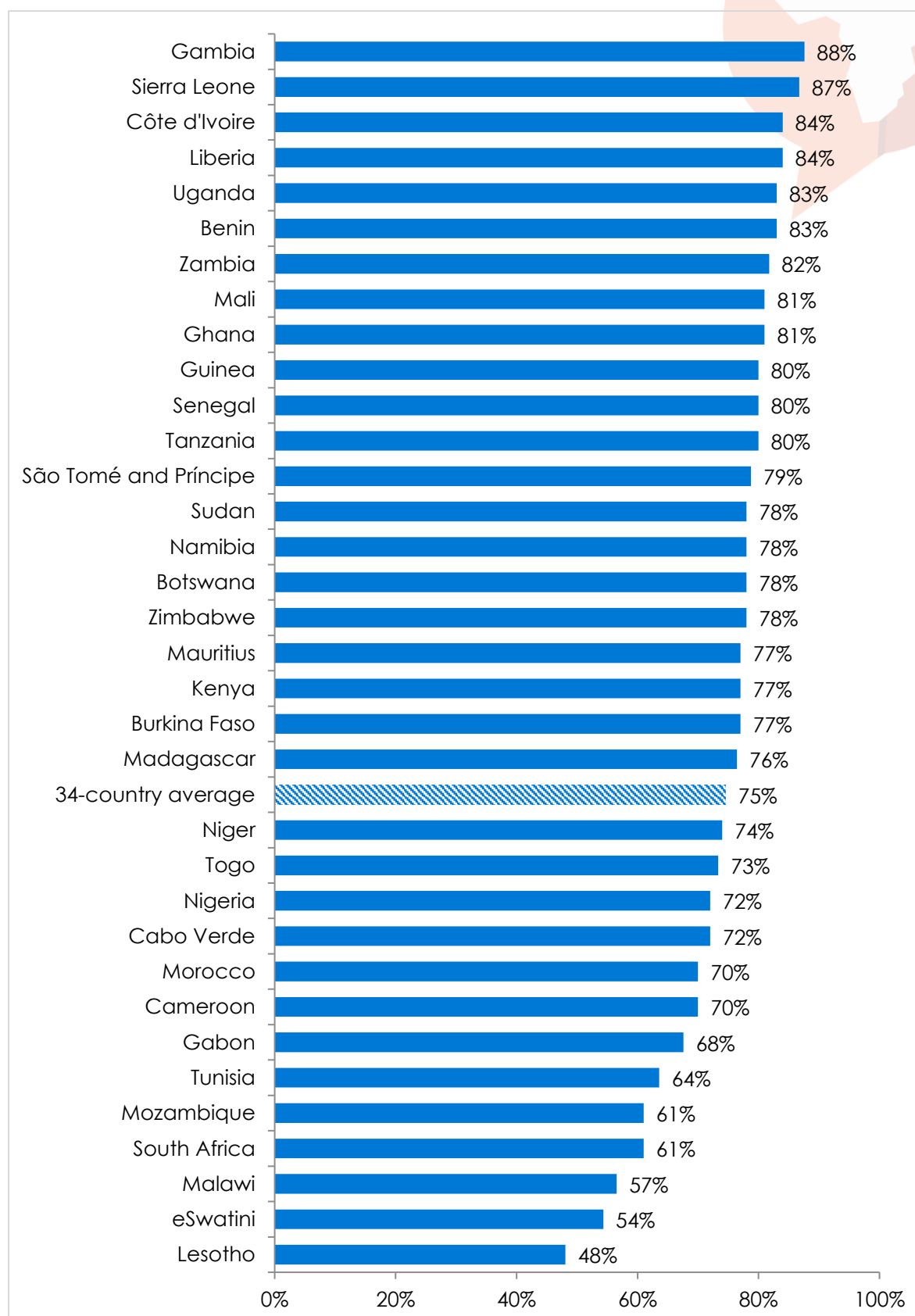


Figure shows % of respondents who "agree" or "agree very strongly" that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections.

Figure 3: Support for elections | 18 countries | 2005-2018

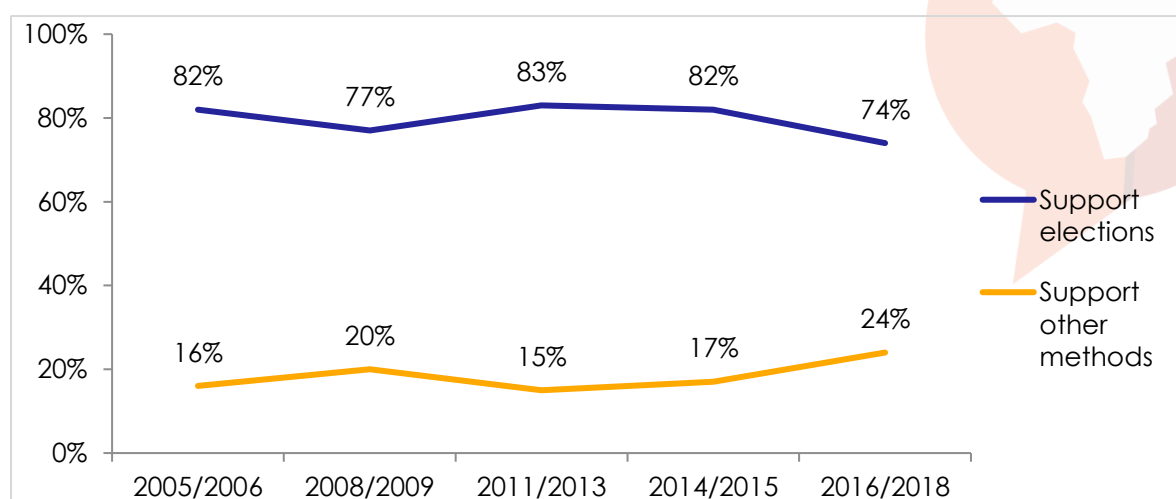


Figure shows % of respondents who “agree” or “agree very strongly” with each statement.

A breakdown by country of changes in popular support for elections reinforces the observed downward continental trend. Of the 15 countries displayed in Figure 4, all except Namibia experienced meaningful declines (minus 5 percentage points or more) in aggregate support over the period 2005-2018. Instances of popular disillusionment with the electoral process are not hard to find. In Benin in April 2019, voter turnout sank to a record low of 23% in parliamentary elections held without any opposition; all candidates came from just two approved parties, both allied with the sitting president, Patrice Talon (France24, 2019). And in South Africa, about 10 million people eligible to vote, many of them young people, never cast a ballot in national and provincial elections of May 2019 because they had failed to register as voters.

Figure 4: Changes in support for elections | by country | 2005-2018

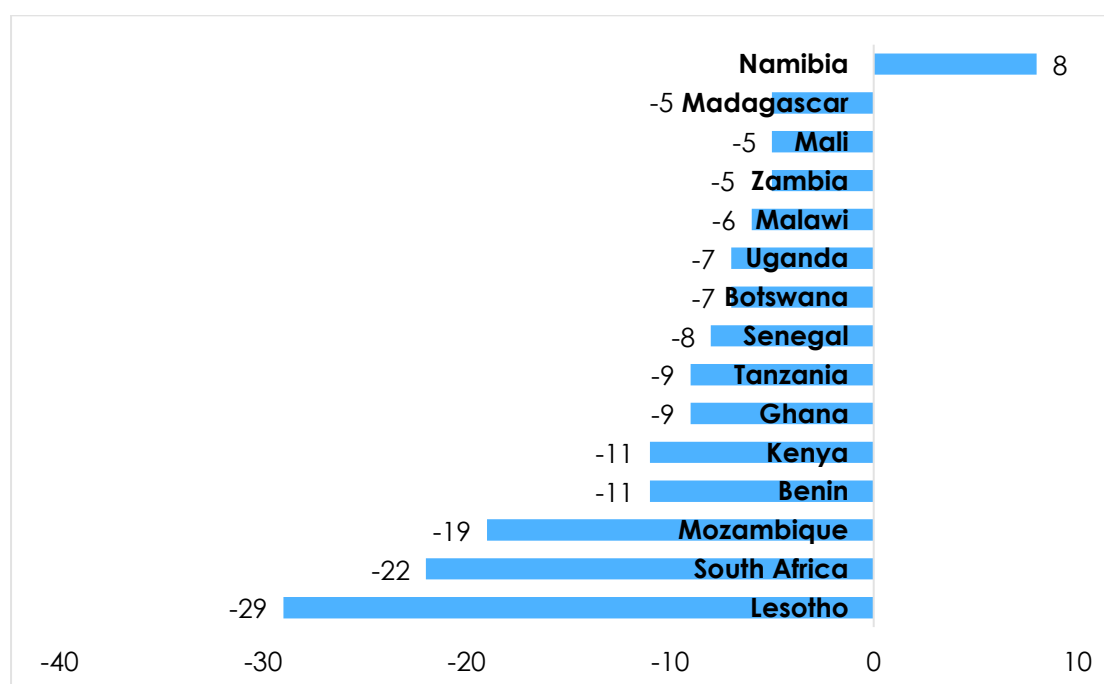
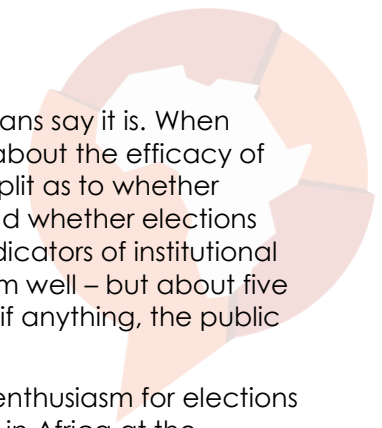


Figure shows change, in percentage points, since Round 3 (2005/2006) in % of respondents who “agree” or “agree very strongly” that leaders should be chosen through regular, open, and honest elections. Three countries are not shown because they recorded little change (<5 percentage points) over time: Cabo Verde (-2), Nigeria (-3), and Zimbabwe (+3).



It is therefore unexpected that support for elections is as high as Africans say it is. When prompted, people reveal that, in practice, they harbor reservations about the efficacy of these institutions. When last asked (in 2014/2015), respondents were split as to whether elections ensure that voters' views are reflected in policy debates and whether elections enable voters to remove underperforming leaders. On both these indicators of institutional effectiveness, about four in 10 respondents said that elections perform well – but about five in 10 said they perform badly (Penar, Aiko, Bentley, & Han, 2016). So, if anything, the public was doubtful that elections are a reliable instrument of popular will.

In sum, recent Afrobarometer surveys reveal evidence that popular enthusiasm for elections has waned somewhat since the high-water mark of democratization in Africa at the beginning of the new century. Perhaps, as a result of hard-won experience with actual electoral practice, popular jubilation over the once-novel procedure of open voting begins to wear off with the passage of time. But a balanced conclusion is required. With three-quarters of all adults expressing overt support for elections and almost two-thirds confirming a preference for multiparty competition, the metaphorical glass appears much more than half full. Based on the most recent observations from a long series of over-time data, however, popular support for open elections is on a downward trajectory. To stretch the metaphor, there is a leak in the bottom of the glass that does not augur well for sustaining widespread support for competitive elections over the longer run.

The perceived quality of elections

At minimum, the institutionalization of elections requires that governments convene a popular vote on a regular cycle. Although eager would-be voters sometimes face delays – see, for example, the two-year postponement of the 2018 ballot in the DRC – lapses in election schedules are exceptions to the rule. Every year, presidential and legislative elections now routinely take place on a timely basis in about a dozen of the continent's 54 countries.³ In short, few concerns remain today about the quantity of elections in Africa.

Some commentators argue that repetitive elections are sufficient to chart a path toward democracy. The influential theory of “democratization by elections” posits that an uninterrupted series of elections has “self-reinforcing power” to gradually precipitate expanding civil liberties, even regime change (Lindberg, 2006, p. 2). According to this theory, “the link between elections and democratization is not ... tied to the freedom and fairness of elections” (Lindberg, 2009, p. 328). In essence, it is the frequency of elections that creates

democratic change, or so goes the argument; the quality of these contests is apparently less important.

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We disagree. A repetitive cycle of elections may be a necessary condition for democratization, but it is not sufficient. Attention must be paid not only to the quantity of elections but also to their quality.

While a sequence of high-quality contests may well contribute to the construction of democracy, a series of less-than-perfect elections can lend longevity and legitimacy to illiberal or authoritarian rule. Other theorists note the contribution of low-quality elections to the worldwide emergence of competitive authoritarianism, a regime in which contestation is “real but unfair” because it is never played out on “a reasonably level playing field” (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 5 and 7). The electoral terrain is uneven because incumbents use state resources to promote their own partisan campaigns and to block political opportunities for opposition forces.

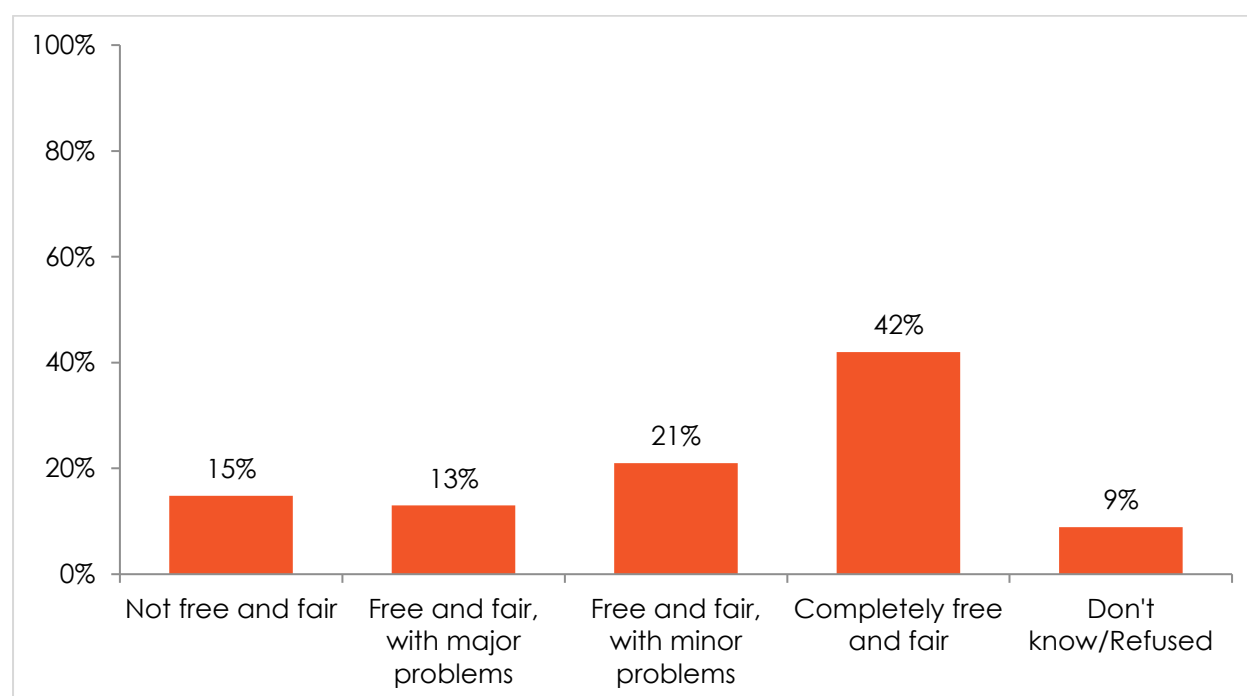
³ Although national elections adhere to a regular cycle, the convocation of local government elections remains more intermittent in many countries.

So, do Africans themselves see the elections in their countries as free and fair? Afrobarometer asks a direct question:

On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?

On average in 34 countries across the continent, only two in five Africans interviewed (42%) see the last national election in their country as “completely free and fair” (see Figure 5). But a further one-fifth think this election was free and fair with just “minor problems” (21%). while 13% say it had “major problems.” Importantly, only 15% describe the election as “not free and fair.” Moreover, when last asked (in Afrobarometer Round 5, 2011/2013) about a key element of electoral integrity – the secret ballot – almost eight in 10 respondents did not think that “someone powerful” could discover how they had voted.

Figure 5: Perceived quality of elections | 34 countries | 2016/2018

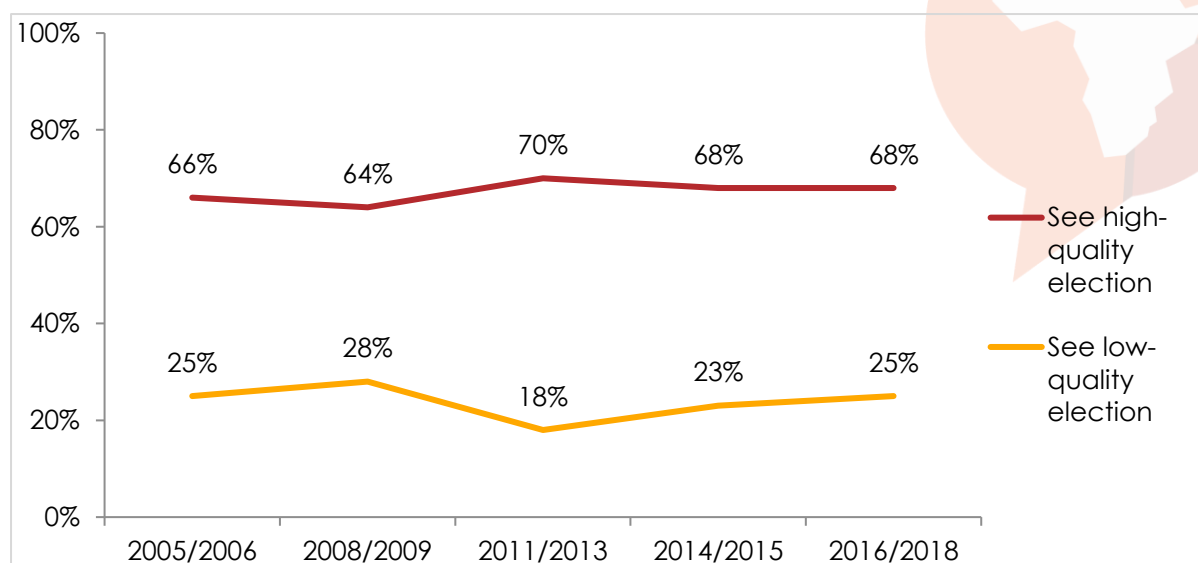


Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]?*

The distribution of public opinion on election quality has remained remarkably stable over time. As Figure 6 shows for 18 countries, the proportion seeing high-quality elections (either “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems”) is effectively the same in 2017 (68%) as it was in 2005 (66%).⁴ And the trend lines for this opinion remains largely flat between these data points. Bleck and van de Walle have noted a “paradoxical disjuncture between the great changes in African society and the relative stagnation in its politics” and argue that “the quality of ... elections and the democratic institutions that structure them have not changed dramatically in most countries” (2019, pp. 8 and 20). As we suggest below, continuity in public viewpoints about election quality is in part an artifact of the averaging of diverse opinion across countries on divergent political paths. But it also reflects uncertainty in the public mind born of a persistent lack of transparency of electoral processes, especially in less democratic countries.

⁴ The difference falls within the surveys’ margin of sampling error of +/-3 percentage points.

Figure 6: Perceived quality of elections | 18 countries | 2005-2018



Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]? ("High-quality elections" = "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems"; "Low-quality elections" = "free and fair with major problems" or "not free and fair")*

As usual, continental averages conceal major cross-country differences. According to popular perceptions, several African countries run high-quality elections. More than eight in 10 adults in places such as Ghana (87%), Tanzania (85%), and Botswana (85%) regard national elections as completely free and fair or, at worst, as displaying only minor problems (see Figure 7). But in certain other countries, more than half the adult population label elections as having major problems or being altogether unfree and unfair. Very low levels of perceived election quality are reported in Morocco (25%), Sudan (28%), and Malawi (32%), where fewer than one-third of citizens think their country's elections meet desired standards. At the bottom of the list is Gabon, where only 17% see acceptably free and fair elections.

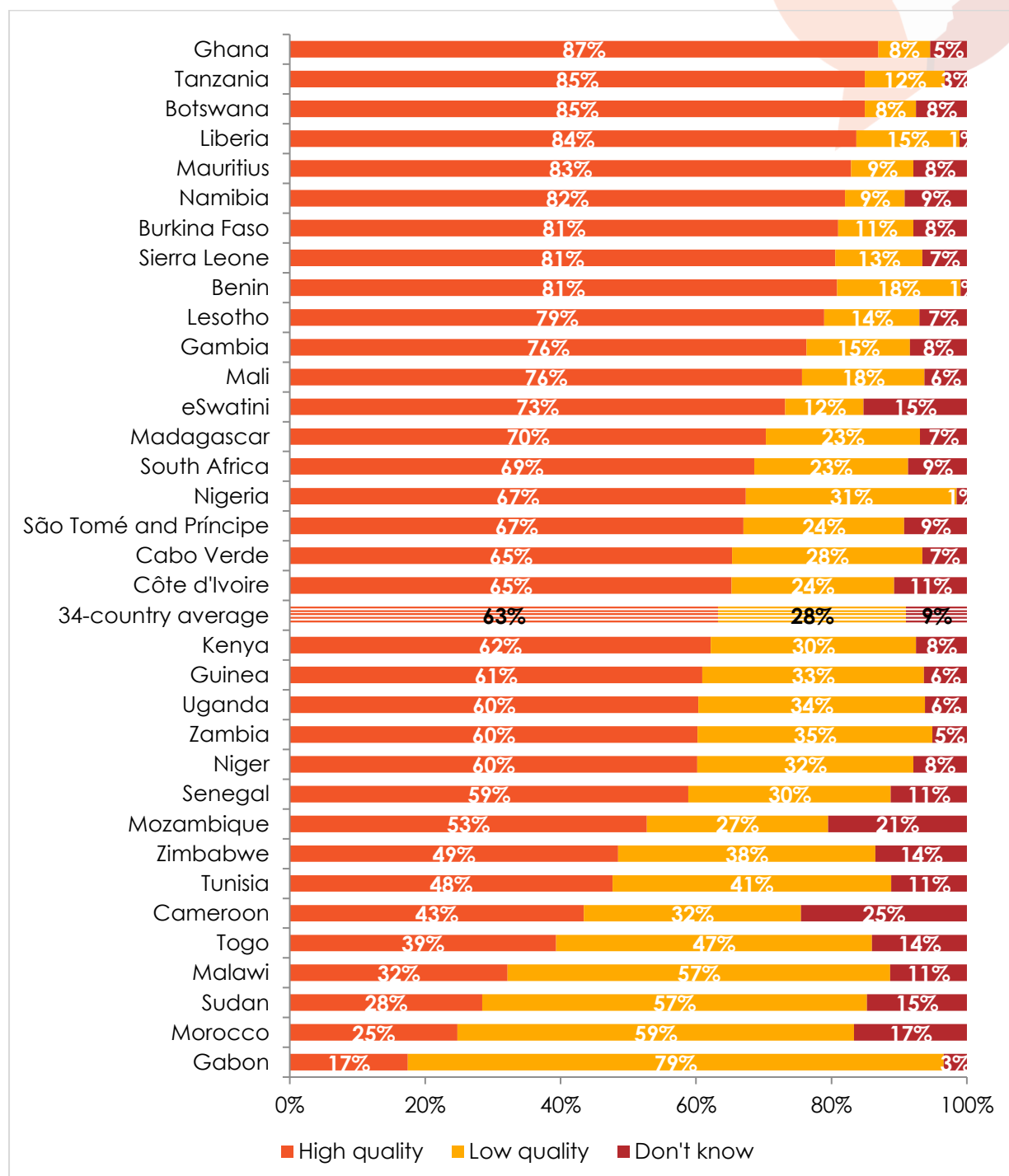
Consider the latest elections in the countries at the extreme ends of this range. In Ghana in December 2016, the leader of the opposition, Nana Akufo-Addo, was elected president, displacing incumbent John Mahama in a single round of voting. The former was humble in victory and the latter conceded gracefully, quickly announcing respect for the will of the electorate. In the opinion of a seasoned observer, Ghana "continued to uphold the tradition of peaceful elections. ... Indeed, since 2000, Ghanaians have three times voted out of office an incumbent in highly contested, but fair, peaceful and credible elections" (Mbaku, 2016).

By contrast, the August 2016 presidential election in Gabon was deeply flawed. The campaign of the incumbent, Ali Bongo Ondimba, was marred by the defection of core ruling-party allies even as a fragmented opposition began to unify around the challenger, diplomat Jean Ping. Yet Bongo claimed a razor-thin victory, including returns showing 99% turnout and 96% approval in his home district. These unlikely results sparked widespread protests – the Parliament building was set on fire – but could not prevent a Constitutional Court ruling in the incumbent's favour and Bongo's reinstallation for a second term, extending the Bongo family's hold on power beyond 47 years.

In sum, the contrast in public reactions between Ghana and Gabon suggests that Africans are accurate judges of the quality of their own country's elections. That said, and from the perspective of overall continental averages, citizen assessments of electoral quality perhaps appear overly generous. After all, the modal cross-national response is "completely free and fair," an assessment that might strike many as implausibly charitable (see Figure 5). Since ordinary folk probably lack information about the more opaque aspects of the election process, they may be inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to results announced by

official election management bodies. Or people may be risk-averse; they simply want to move on after elections, no matter the outcome.

Figure 7: Perceived quality of elections | by country | 34 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in [20XX]? ("High quality" = "completely free and fair" or "free and fair with minor problems"; "Low quality" = "free and fair with major problems" or "not free and fair")

The reliability of public opinion about election quality can be tested against a common standard such as the Freedom House (2019) Freedom in the World index. The outcome is mixed. This index scores 10 of the 34 countries in Afrobarometer Round 7 as "free," while the

remainder are either “partly free” or “not free.”⁵ As expected, we find that citizens in free countries are more likely to perceive good-quality elections than their counterparts in less-than-free countries (70% vs. 60%). Thus, to some extent, popular opinion mirrors expert judgments. But two caveats are in order. First, the difference between opinions in the two types of country is not statistically significant.⁶ And second, an average of fully six in 10 citizens perceive nothing more than “minor” problems with electoral conduct in the 24 countries that Freedom House rates as less than free. In this regard, competitive authoritarian regimes habitually receive a clean bill of electoral health from their own citizens.

The uncertainty that some citizens feel about the actual quality of their country's elections is evident at the country level. As Figure 8 shows, Tanzanians and Zimbabweans apparently feel that the quality of their elections is improving, even though the management of these contests remains tightly controlled. And Kenyans and Senegalese seem to feel that the quality of their ballots is declining, even though the campaign atmosphere in their countries' well-run and much more open contests has been marked by growing and shifting pluralism. The mixed record of citizen judgments about election quality is perhaps best illustrated by trends in Nigeria and Zambia, which citizens regard as showing the most improvement of all countries surveyed. Citizens are correct that Nigeria's March 2015 presidential election marked a zenith in the quality of electoral administration in that country (up 35 points between 2005 and 2017). But endorsement by Zambians of August 2016 general elections (up 30 points between 2005 and 2017) is more puzzling, since it was marred by the muzzling of the country's leading independent newspaper, accusations of the incitement of violence from both sides, and the subsequent jailing of the main opposition leader.

Figure 8: Changes in perceived quality of elections, by country | 2005-2018

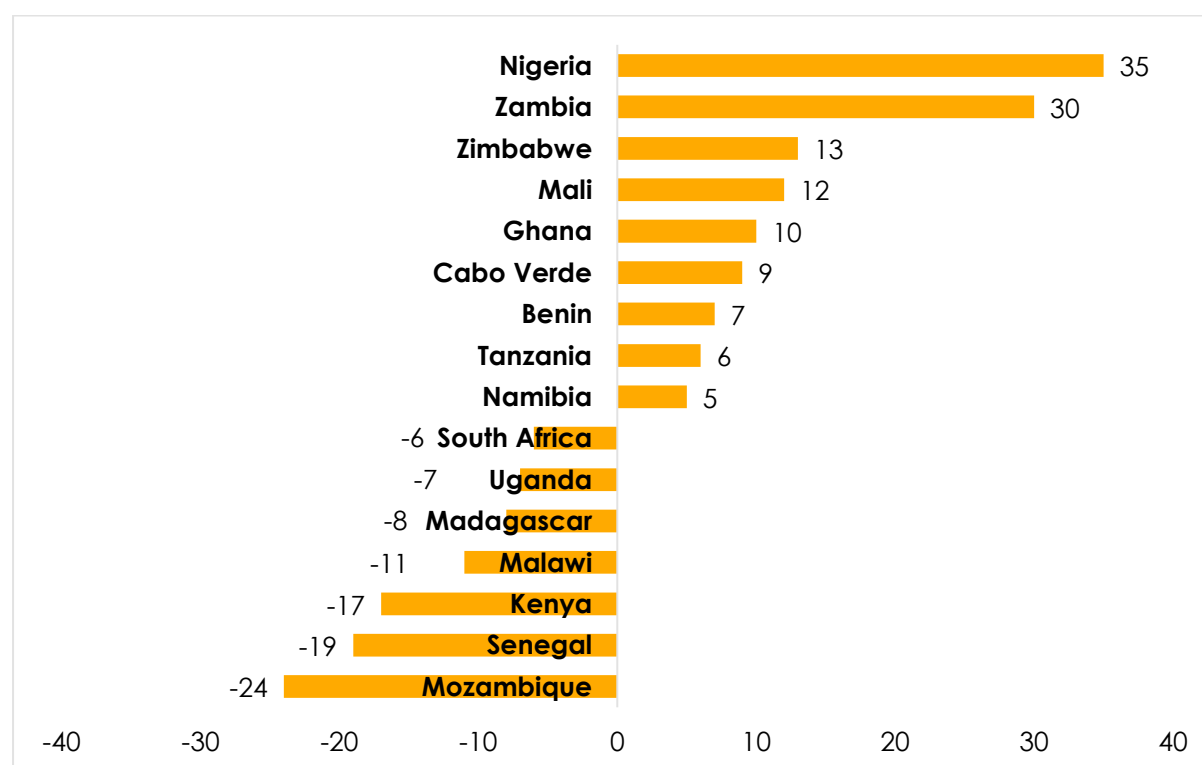
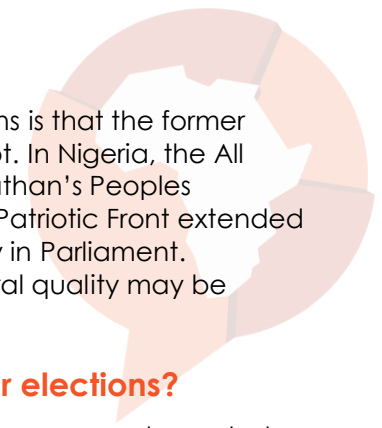


Figure shows change, in percentage points, since Round 3 (2005/2006) in % of respondents who say that their most recent national election was “completely free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems.” Two countries are not shown because they recorded little change (<5 percentage points) over time: Botswana (+1) and Lesotho (0).

⁵ The benchmark is relevant since these expert assessments are based in good part on the observed quality of a country's elections.

⁶ A test of difference of means with independent samples yields $F = .190$, $sig. = .666$, and $t = 1.418$, $sig. = .166$.



An important difference between the Nigerian and Zambian elections is that the former resulted in an alternation of winners and losers, while the latter did not. In Nigeria, the All Progressives Congress of Muhammadu Buhari ousted Goodluck Jonathan's Peoples Democratic Party from control of the presidency. But in Zambia, the Patriotic Front extended its hold on the presidency for Edgar Lungu and enhanced its majority in Parliament. Intriguingly, this contrast suggests that popular perceptions of electoral quality may be shaped by the alternation of leaders, a theme we will return to later.

Does perceived election quality affect popular support for elections?

For the moment we analyze whether the perceived quality of elections – correct or not – has an observable effect on popular support for elections. We would certainly expect it to do so. Indeed, Norris (2014, 2015, 2017) has argued that the integrity of elections enhances political legitimacy, whereas failed elections undermine the claims of leaders that they have a right to rule. The legitimacy of a regime derives in part from political recognition by other countries and bodies in the international arena. But the bulk of the essential resource of legitimacy is granted (or not granted) by the citizenry itself. So it stands to reason that mass perceptions of whether voting processes are free and fair ought to inform the level of popular support for elections.

The data provide affirmative evidence. Figure 9 plots aggregate scores for 34 countries to show a positive relationship (an upward-sloping fit line) between the perceived quality of elections (X-axis) and the level of citizen support for elections (Y-axis). The associated correlation coefficient ($r = .315$, $\text{sig} = .070$) suggests that each variable accounts for a meaningful amount of variance in the other. While correlation is not causation, we find it likely that citizens use assessments of election quality as a benchmark for deciding whether they support elections. In other words, they defend elections if they are cleanly run but not if they think electoral procedures are manipulated. This logic is more plausible than the reverse, that is, that citizens use some sort of innate or automatic support for elections (come hell or high water) to drive their judgments about election quality.

In some countries – such as Tunisia and Mali in Figure 9 – citizen assessments of election quality are precise predictors of mass support for elections. In Tunisia, for example, low levels of perceived quality (just 48% think elections are free and fair) are associated with relatively low levels of popular support for elections (65%, as compared with a pan-African average of 75%). By contrast, Malians express an above-average opinion of the quality of elections in their country (76% consider that these are largely free and fair) and, consequently, also extend popular support to the whole idea of using electoral mechanisms to choose national leaders (81%, with 57% “very strongly”).

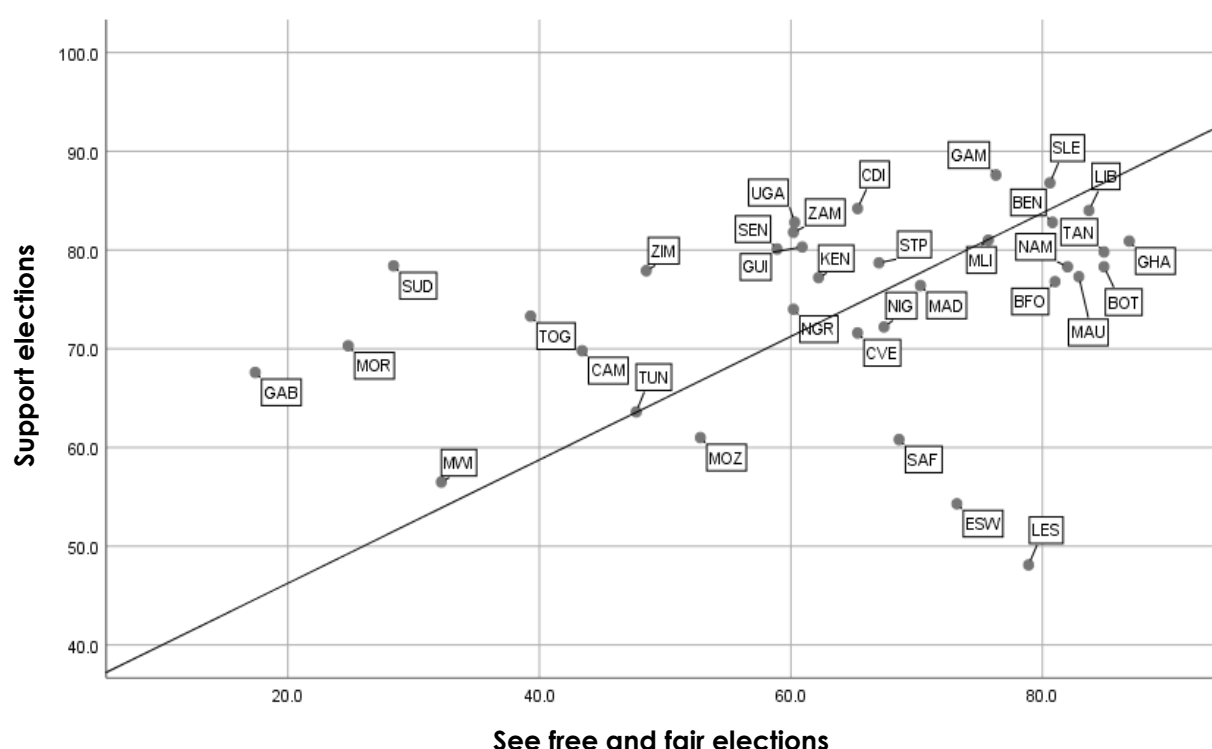
It is noteworthy that the link between election quality and support for elections is most robust at the high end. In Figure 9, the country cases cluster more closely around the fit line in the upper-right part of the scatterplot than in the lower-left. This pattern suggests that the quality of elections is an increasingly reliable source of popular support for elections in places where citizens think elections are freer and fairer. According to the latest Afrobarometer data, these places include countries that have undergone recent transitions from autocratic to democratic rule – such as the Gambia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia – as well as countries whose democracies have developed deeper roots – such as Ghana, Botswana, and Namibia.

It must also be remembered that any observed relationship between election quality and support for elections is probabilistic rather than perfect. In an unruly political world, there will always be outlying cases that do not fit the general mold. Many of these cases cluster at the bottom of the spectrum where either popular support or perceived quality is low. Figure 9 indicates that citizens in countries such as Lesotho, eSwatini, and South Africa fail to strongly endorse electoral methods even though they think elections are conducted cleanly in their countries. In eSwatini and Lesotho, at least part of this anomaly may be due to conservative backers of the monarchy who prefer to see leaders selected by heredity rather than election. In South Africa, survey respondents may be lamenting the fact that even as a

professional electoral commission routinely conducts honest elections, other institutions of government have become deeply tainted by corruption.

A contrasting set of outlying cases can be found in Sudan, Morocco, and Gabon. In these places, citizens harbor a high level of attachment to elections but are much less likely than the average African to think that elections are conducted cleanly in their own country. Many here can be described as “dissatisfied democrats,” that is, individuals who feel that they are being supplied with less democracy than they persistently demand (Mattes, 2019). One important implication is that citizens who support elections as an ideal but rue the low quality of elections in practice may well provide a constituency for electoral and democratic reform. This prospect came to pass in the dramatic events of April 2019 in Sudan, when an idealistic popular movement used street protests to oust an entrenched military strongman and demand a civilian successor government.

Figure 9: Support for elections by perceived quality | 34 countries | 2016/2018



The underlying connection between election quality and support for elections is highlighted in sharp relief once outlying cases are excluded. Rather than covering all 34 country cases, we re-ran the analysis after dropping the six outliers in Figure 9 – Lesotho, eSwatini, South Africa, Sudan, Morocco, and Gabon (see previous paragraph). A correlation test on the remaining 28 cases boosts the covariance from less than one-third ($r = .315$) to almost two-thirds ($r = .660$). From this perspective, it seems safe to assume that the perceived quality of elections is a major component of popular support for elections in Africa. Moreover, a virtuous cycle – with better elections reinforcing popular support – appears to take hold as the quality of elections improves.

Institutional factors?

If competitive elections are becoming institutionalized, then perhaps the formal characteristics of these emerging institutions are helping to shape public opinion. Most observers would probably agree that elections are the most routinized of all democratic

institutions in Africa; they are more reliably embedded than other essential practices such as civilian control of the military or legislative and judicial checks on the executive branch.

This section examines several institutional characteristics that may be relevant to the formation of public opinion about elections:

- The electoral system mandated by a country's constitution
- The total number of consecutive elections held in a country
- Whether presidential and legislative elections are held concurrently
- The time elapsed between the last election and the latest Afrobarometer survey

Let's discuss each issue in turn. First, most African countries possess presidential rather than parliamentary constitutions, including former British colonies that chose not to follow the Westminster model. Even where presidents are elected indirectly by the legislature – as in Botswana and South Africa – they still enjoy extensive executive powers. The most common system for electing African presidents requires an absolute majority; if no candidate attains more than 50% of the vote on a first round, then the election must go to a second round between the top two vote-getters. Out of the 34 countries covered in Afrobarometer Round 7, 20 employ this system.⁷ The remaining countries select their political chief executive (usually a president but sometimes a prime minister) either by indirect means (six countries) or via a plurality system such as first-past-the-post (eight countries).

Second, we have already noted that almost all African countries now hold regular elections at intervals required by national constitutions. Counting from 1990 – the latest transition to multiparty politics – the median African country had held five rounds of national elections by the end of 2017.⁸ Some 15 out of 34 countries in the latest Afrobarometer survey round had reached this milestone. Some had progressed even further: 10 countries had held six consecutive presidential and/or parliamentary elections. But Sudan – where elections were repeatedly delayed – held only three national contests between 1990 and 2017. In Côte d'Ivoire – where elections were resumed after a protracted civil war – only two national voting contests were held after a regular electoral sequence was restored. Finally, open elections have never been held in eSwatini, where political parties are banned, the upper house is indirectly elected, and the monarch appoints some legislators.

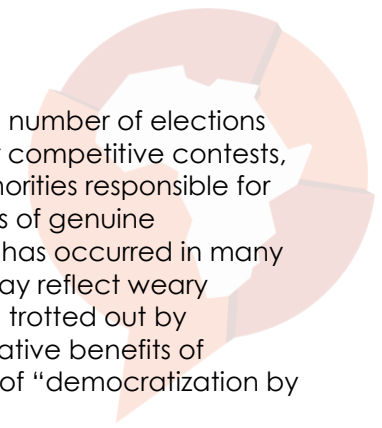
Of the most recent elections in the remaining 33 countries (excluding eSwatini), the majority (19, or 58%) were concurrent or general elections, meaning that presidential and legislative contests were held on the same day. All remaining contests were for president only (nine) – as in Senegal in 2012 – or Parliament only (five) – as in Mauritius in 2014. The time elapsed between these elections and the survey averaged 28 months, with a range from four months in Sierra Leone to 79 months in Cameroon. In other words, the survey occurred soon after the last competitive election in Sierra Leone but almost seven years after a similar contest in Cameroon.

It seems reasonable to expect that institutional factors would be related to public opinion. But, according to Figure 10, correlation tests reveal only two statistically significant results.

First, popular support for elections is higher in countries with two-round presidential electoral systems. Perhaps people appreciate a constitutional arrangement in which electoral winners are required to amass an absolute majority of votes and thus a clear political mandate. Or perhaps opposition supporters value a second chance to rally around a challenger in situations where an incumbent fails to break the 50% threshold in the first round. Either way, fewer citizens offer support to electoral systems in which leaders are chosen indirectly by parliamentary majorities or – as with first-past-the-post systems – that allow winners to attain office with less than 50% of the votes.

⁷ For example, Zambia reformed its constitution by adopting a two-round system in 2015.

⁸ Aggregate data for the 34 surveyed countries are drawn and updated from an existing source. We thank Nicolas van de Walle and Jamie Bleck for sharing their data set of African elections, 1990-2015.



Second, the perceived integrity of elections is related to the previous number of elections conducted in any given country. The longer the sequence of regular competitive contests, the more likely that citizens will grant a clean bill of health to the authorities responsible for conducting elections. In some cases, this outcome may be the results of genuine improvements in the technical aspects of election administration, as has occurred in many countries. In other cases, mass acceptance of election legitimacy may reflect weary popular skepticism about often-unfounded claims of election rigging trotted out by defeated opposition parties. Either way, this finding about the cumulative benefits of repeated elections lends a measure of credence to the proponents of “democratization by elections.”

Otherwise, the institutional characteristics of elections have little observable effect. As Table 1 shows, the type of election and the temporal proximity of the vote and the survey are largely unrelated to either popular support for elections or citizen perceptions of the quality of elections. None of these factors attains statistical significance, admittedly in part because of the small size of the sample of countries. Nonetheless, by focusing only on the signs on the coefficients, trace evidence can be found that citizens grant more legitimacy to concurrent rather than separate presidential and legislative contests. Perhaps they find comprehensive rather than piecemeal contests more salient to national needs and thus more deserving of legitimacy. By contrast, citizen confidence in the electoral mechanism tends to erode as time elapses since the last election was convened. People are especially likely to lose faith if the period between the last election and the opinion survey violates an accepted electoral schedule.

Table 1: Institutional factors and public opinion about elections | 33 countries
| 2016/2018

	Popular support for elections	Perceived quality of elections
Type of electoral system^a	.385 (*)	.048 (ns)
Total number of elections, 1990-2018	-.127 (ns)	.365 (*)
Type of last election^b	.086 (ns)	.276 (ns)
Time lapse, election to AB survey	-.199 (ns)	-.219 (ns)

Cell entries are Pearson's correlation coefficients; *significance $\leq .05$, ns = not significant

^a two-round presidential; ^b concurrent

Political factors?

In our opinion, formal rules will always have limited power to explain what ordinary Africans say and do. To better understand the relationship between citizens and elections, it is necessary to supplement the legal requirements of national constitutions with attention to the cut and thrust of everyday politics. After all, people are driven to participate in elections less by the mandates of law (for example, no African country has compulsory voting) than by a voluntary desire to advance deeply held values and interests. To compete effectively for political influence, people need to coalesce with others, for example in non-constitutional bodies such as political parties. And because the outcomes of competitive elections are always to a degree uncertain, there is an ever-present possibility that shifts can occur in who wins and who loses.

This section explores two major political factors that are plausibly germane to popular support for elections and citizen assessment of electoral integrity:

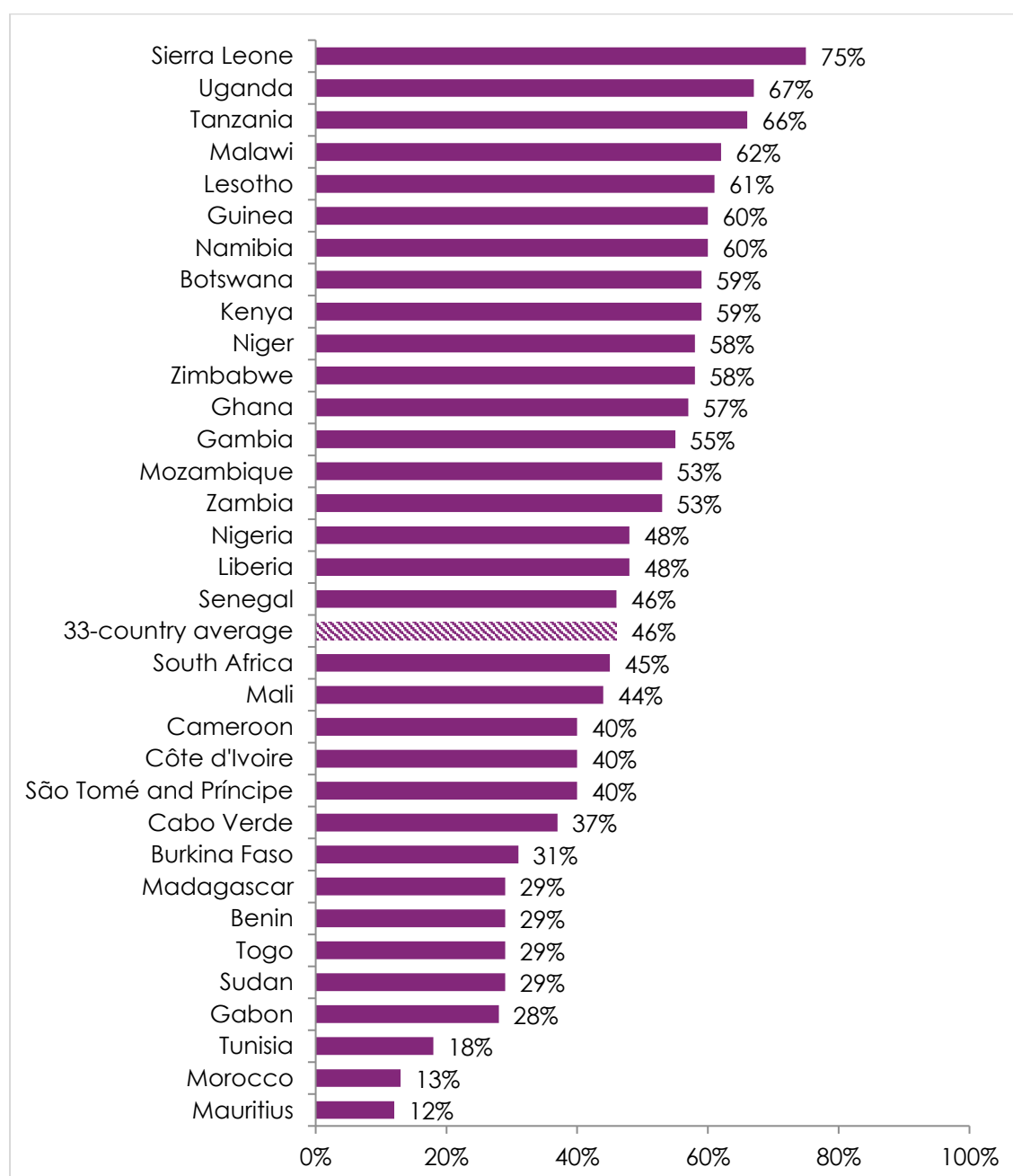
- The extent to which the citizens of a country identify with political parties
- The likelihood that any given election will result in the alternation of leaders

Party identification. First, what role partisanship? Afrobarometer's standard questions ask:

Do you feel close to any particular political party? (If yes:) Which party is that?

We find that, on average, political partisanship is not widespread within African electorates. Figure 10 shows that fewer than half (46%) of all respondents across 33 countries identify as feeling close to a political party. In many countries, political parties are organizationally weak and party systems are often inchoate and fluid, meaning barely institutionalized (Kuenzi & Lambright, 2005; Elischer, 2013). Accordingly, it is hardly surprising that most people in Africa do not express a deeply felt party ID; majorities remain independent, non-partisan, or disengaged from politics.

Figure 10: Proportion of the electorate who identify with a political party | by country
| 33 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party? (% who say "yes")
(Note: Question was not asked in eSwatini, where political parties are banned.)

Nonetheless, levels of self-reported participation in partisan campaign activities are remarkably robust. In the latest survey, some 38% of respondents say they attended an election rally during the campaign for the last national election, and 21% say they worked for a candidate or party. It is of course possible that non-partisans attend campaign rallies out of political curiosity or in search of social contact or token rewards. And it is unclear how respondents conceive of “working” for a candidate or party; a broad definition could include simply urging acquaintances to vote a certain way.

Again, a partial resolution of inconsistent results can be found in cross-country differences. Countries with dominant parties tend to register higher proportions of self-professed partisans, as in Uganda (67%) and Tanzania (66%). And countries with a limited history of political-party formation are prone to score low on the proportion of partisans, as is the case in Tunisia (18%) and Morocco (13%). That said, there is also evidence that some supposedly dominant parties have a shaky political base (see South Africa at 45%) and that countries with unstable party systems can nonetheless attract an above-average proportion of adherents (see Malawi at 62% and Kenya at 59%).

For our purposes, however, the main issue is whether political partisanship is connected to public opinion about elections. As Table 2 shows, popular support for elections is largely unaffected by the proportions of a country’s population that are partisans of the ruling party, partisans of an opposition party, or non-partisans. The signs on the correlation coefficients reveal a slight tendency for partisans (of any political stripe) to be more supportive of elections than non-partisans, but the link is not statistically significant.

Table 2: Political partisanship and public opinion about elections | 33 countries
| 2016/2018

	Partisans of ruling party	Partisans of opposition parties	Non-partisans
Support elections	.124 (ns)	.111 (ns)	-.146 (ns)
See free and fair elections	.349 (**)	.294 (*)	-.402 (**)

Cell entries are Pearson’s correlation coefficients; *significance = <.10, **significance <.05, ns = not significant

By contrast, a profound difference separates partisans and non-partisans when it comes to the perceived integrity of elections. By large and statistically significant margins, the former see free and fair elections and the latter do not (see Table 2). Partisans of the ruling party are especially likely to feel positive about the quality of the country’s last election, no doubt because, as winners, they are well positioned to benefit from an election victory. It is both surprising and encouraging, therefore, that partisans of opposition parties feel almost as strongly that the last election was free and fair. Even though they were on the losing side in that election, this group of partisans nonetheless endorses the quality of the contest. Perhaps they feel that good-quality elections offer the best chance that they can prevail in a future quest for power. As others have noted, “loser’s consent” is essential to the ongoing loyalty of the opposition to the government of the day, the institutionalization of elections, and the eventual consolidation of democracy (Anderson, Blais, Bowler, Donovan, & Listhaug, 2005).

Leadership alternation. While others have confirmed the positive effect of changing leaders on attitudes supportive of democracy (Cho & Logan, 2013), we inquire here into possible effects on public opinion about elections.

It seems reasonable to suppose that citizens come to support elections, and regard them as free and fair, mainly when these contests bring about desired political change. In particular, citizens may value elections as devices for removing underperforming leaders and parties. Against an inheritance of personal rule, in which aging “big man” presidents cling to power

for decades, elections hold promise as a method of dismissing incumbents who have overstayed the electorate's welcome.

In this paper we define leadership alternation (sometimes also called political turnover) as a change in ruling party as the result of an election. We distinguish alternation from a change of leadership within a ruling party as the result, say, of a president's death in office, resignation due to ill health, or other trigger to replacement by a co-partisan (such as a vice president). In short, for alternation to occur, a ruling party must lose an election and its leader must be replaced by the head of a former opposition party or alliance.

In the national elections conducted in 33 African countries immediately prior to the latest Afrobarometer survey, 15 resulted in leadership alternation and 18 did not. This unexpectedly high number of turnovers was due either to successful campaigns mounted by organized opposition forces against incumbents (see Nigeria 2015 or Ghana 2016) or open-seat elections at the end of term-limited presidencies (see Benin 2016, Liberia 2017, and Mali 2013).

What role, if any, does alternation of ruling parties play in the formation of public opinion? According to Table 3, there is no apparent linkage between electoral alternation and popular support for elections. Regardless of whether elections lead to turnover at the top, identical proportions of citizens (75%) say they prefer to use elections to install leaders. Thus we can reconfirm that sometimes elections are effective devices for extending legitimacy to entrenched leaders.

Table 3: Alternation of ruling parties and public opinion about elections | 33 elections
| 2016/2018

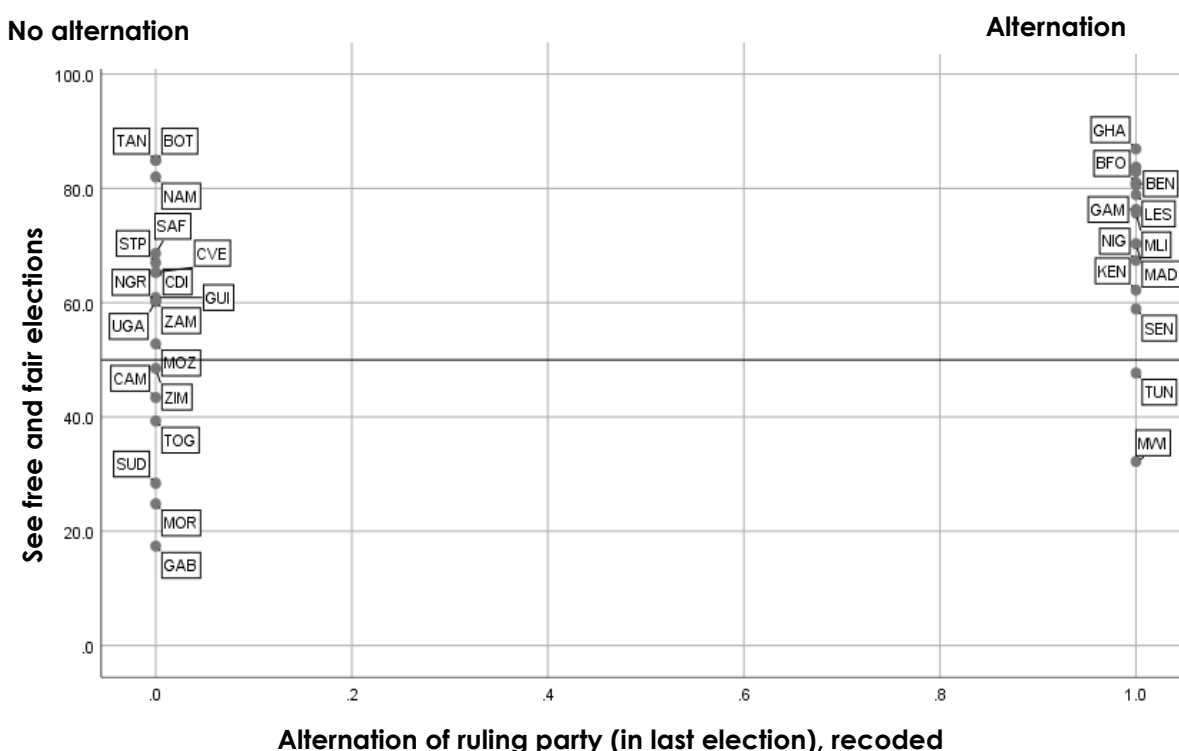
	Alternation	No alternation	t-test*	Significance
Support elections	75%	75%	-.145	.886
See free and fair elections	71%	56%	-2.414	.022

* Equal variances not assumed

Importantly, however, *alternation is closely linked to the perceived quality of elections*. Whereas 71% of Africans see free and fair conduct in the wake of an electoral alternation, just 56% see the same for elections that confirm incumbents in power, a statistically significant difference. This result suggests that the legitimating effect of elections is greater for installing new leaders than it is for reconfirming the incumbency of old ones. It also suggests that citizens recognize that incumbency endows rulers with more resources than their opponents to manipulate electoral outcomes, thus calling the quality of "no-change" elections into question.

To summarize, larger majorities of citizens are likely to endorse the quality of competitive elections when these contests result in political change at the leadership level. In Africa's personalized politics, a change of leaders instills popular hope that improvement in government performance will follow. Alternation also seems to signal that the rules of electoral competition are sufficiently robust to overcome any untoward incumbency advantage. Moreover, since we test for alternation events that occur prior to the measurement of perceived election quality (in a subsequent Afrobarometer survey), we may infer a causal connection from alternation to public opinion. In short, as illustrated in Figure 11, Africans have most confidence in the integrity of "change" elections.

Figure 11: Perceived quality of election by alternation in last election | 33 countries
| 2016/2018



Pulling the argument together

This concluding section proposes a comprehensive account of key factors shaping public opinion about elections in Africa. Table 4 presents results of three regression analyses⁹ that weigh the influence of institutional, political, and attitudinal factors on election quality and popular support for elections. In pulling the strands of this paper together, we make a case that support for elections depends on the perceived quality of elections, which in turn is driven by leadership alternation. In short, “change elections” foster mass support for elections.

The perceived quality of elections. As a first step, we review the factors underpinning citizen views of election quality (or integrity). In Table 4, Model 1 confirms that this attribute is a function of both institutional and political factors. On the institutional front, the total number of elections since 1990 is a strong and significant predictor of perceived election quality, a result that lends credence to the idea that mere repetition of the balloting process is a source of democratization. But, judging by the size and significance of the relevant coefficients, political factors are even more important. These include the extent to which the electorate is partisan (i.e. identifies with political parties) and, especially, whether the

⁹ In lay terms, regression analysis can be thought of as a statistical method for weighing the relative influence of several possible “causes” on a particular “effect.” In the ordinary least squares (OLS) version of this test employed here, the regression produces coefficients with two characteristics: strength, which measures the degree of association between predictor and target variables, and significance, which indicates the probability that the observed link is due to chance. A large numerical coefficient (on a scale of 0-1) indicates a strong association and is usually accompanied by a small likelihood of a chance relationship. Since the reported coefficients are standardized (sometimes called “beta” coefficients), their magnitudes can be compared as an indication of relative explanatory power, with each predictor taking the influence of all others into account. The OLS procedure also produces an estimate of the overall explanatory power of the model (r square), again on a 0-1 scale.

previous election led to an alternation of top political leaders. Indeed, *the most important influence on whether citizens see a good-quality election is whether the vote precipitates a turnover of ruling party.*

Table 4: Factors shaping public opinion about elections | 33 countries | 2016/2018

	Perceived quality of elections	Popular support for elections	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Institutional factors			
Type of electoral system ^a	.108 (ns)	.382 (**)	.323 (**)
Total number of elections 1990-2018	.329 (**)	-.113 (ns)	-.293 (*)
Political factors			
Proportion identifying with a party	.332 (**)	.115 (ns)	-.067
Leadership alternation in previous election	.410 (***)	.088 (ns)	-.137
Attitudes toward elections			
Perceived quality of elections			.547 (***)
Explained variance (r square)	.402	.178	.357

Cell entries are standardized OLS regression coefficients (beta); *significance = <.10, **significance = <.05, ***significance = <.01, ns = not significant

^a Two-round presidential

Popular support for elections. The same set of factors is much less persuasive at explaining popular support for elections (18% of the variance vs. 40% for the quality of elections). Indeed, precisely because popular support for elections is a diffuse opinion that is held by fully 75% of all adults, it is difficult to account for. Of the factors considered here, only the type of electoral system (a two-round presidential ballot) seems to provide much explanatory leverage. Partisanship and alternation play no discernible role. And the sign on the cumulative number of elections is negative, which *calls into question whether the “democratization by elections” thesis applies outside the context of high-quality elections.*

Leadership alternation as a driver of perceived election quality. An all-inclusive account of popular support for elections is offered in Model 3. It differs from Model 2 insofar as the perceived quality of elections (previously an object of explanation) is entered as an additional explanatory factor.¹⁰ The amount of explained variance is thereby doubled (from 18% to 36%). Institutional factors continue to have strong and significant effects; while the type of election still matters, the total number of elections exerts a negative influence. Given the contrasting signs on these coefficients, the effects of these formal institutional influences can be thought of as effectively canceling each other out.

Rather, *popular support for elections hinges critically on an informal factor: the electorate's perceived quality of elections.* The effect of this aggregate citizen preference is far larger and more statistically significant than any other factor in Model 3 (or in models 1 or 2, for that matter). It appears to “absorb” explanatory power from leadership alternation, whose coefficient turns negative, small, and insignificant. We interpret these results to mean that a high-quality election, especially one that involves a turnover of leaders, is the main driver of

¹⁰ We previously argued that “citizens use assessments of election quality as a benchmark for deciding whether they support elections. ... This logic is more plausible than the reverse, that is, that citizens use some sort of innate or automatic support for elections (come hell or high water) to drive their judgments about election quality.”

popular support for elections. It essentially determines whether African citizens extend political legitimacy to the electoral mode of selecting leaders, and therefore to elected leaders themselves.


By way of conclusion, we summarize our argument: Support for elections is a function of both leadership alternation and perceived election quality. A proposed causal path among these factors is represented graphically in Figure 12.

Figure 12: Proposed causal path to support for elections



Africans support elections if they judge that these contests have been well conducted. They judge that these contests have been well conducted if the election leads to a change of top political leadership. But the relationship between leadership alternation and support for elections is indirect. In other words, alternation is embedded in popular perceptions of electoral quality as the strongest possible evidence – a “gold standard,” if you will – for what constitutes a high-quality election. Simply stated, Africans support elections to the extent that these contests are seen to bring about desired political change.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Afrobarometer Round 7 fieldwork dates and previous survey rounds

Country	Round 7 fieldwork	Previous survey rounds
Benin	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Botswana	June-July 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Burkina Faso	Oct 2017	2008, 2012, 2015
Cabo Verde	Nov-Dec 2017	2002, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Cameroon	May 2018	2013, 2015
Côte d'Ivoire	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2013, 2014
eSwatini (Swaziland)	March 2018	2013, 2015
Gabon	Nov 2017	2015
Gambia	July-August 2018	N/A
Ghana	Sept 2017	1999, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Guinea	May 2017	2013, 2015
Kenya	Sept-Oct 2016	2003, 2005, 2008, 2011, 2014
Lesotho	Nov-Dec 2017	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Liberia	June-July 2018	2008, 2012, 2015
Madagascar	Jan-Feb 2018	2005, 2008, 2013, 2015
Malawi	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Mali	Feb 2017	2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2014
Mauritius	Oct-Nov 2017	2012, 2014
Morocco	May 2018	2013, 2015
Mozambique	July-August 2018	2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015
Namibia	Nov 2017	1999, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2012, 2014
Niger	April-May 2018	2013, 2015
Nigeria	April-May 2017	2000, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2015
São Tomé and Príncipe	July 2018	2015
Senegal	Dec 2017	2002, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2014
Sierra Leone	July 2018	2012, 2015
South Africa	August-Sept 2018	2000, 2002, 2006, 2008, 2011, 2015
Sudan	July-August 2018	2013, 2015
Tanzania	April-June 2017	2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2014
Togo	Nov 2017	2012, 2014
Tunisia	April-May 2018	2013, 2015
Uganda	Dec 2016-Jan 2017	2000, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2015
Zambia	April 2017	1999, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2014
Zimbabwe	Jan-Feb 2017	1999, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2014

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Michael Bratton is a senior adviser to Afrobarometer.

Sadhiska Bhoojedhur is a research analyst at StraConsult Ltd, the Afrobarometer national partner in Mauritius.

Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, directs 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.

Financial support for Afrobarometer Round 7 has been provided by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) via the U.S. Institute of Peace, the National Endowment for Democracy, and Transparency International.

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Contact: mbratton@msu.edu
sadhiska.bhoojedhur@gmail.com