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An investigation into Afrobarometer's survey results and methodology

by Loubna Marfouk, Martin Sarvaš, Jack Wippell, and Jintao Zhu
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Abstract

This paper explores the presence of politically sourced sensitivity bias, which leads respondents to report alternative answers to their true beliefs, in Afrobarometer's survey results. To this end, we run a set of regressions on Afrobarometer Round 7 data to explore mechanisms through which the perceived sponsor of the survey is associated with response patterns related to trust in political parties. Questions regarding individuals' trust levels in political parties are prone to sensitivity bias insofar as political concerns can lead respondents to favour a certain response for strategic reasons. Moreover, if respondents believe that answers will be shared with the perceived sponsor of the interview, they are likely to tailor their answers to what they judge is the preferred answer of their perceived survey sponsor. We find a number of statistically significant results that suggest some sensitivity bias is present in the survey responses. In particular, we show that there are statistically significant differences in responses for self-reported trust in both opposition and ruling parties when the respondent perceives the government to be the survey sponsor compared to when they perceive the sponsor to be Afrobarometer. We also explore how these responses vary by country-specific characteristics, such as regime type. Reducing respondents' variation in perception of the survey sponsor might alleviate biases throughout Afrobarometer's interviews, and a set of methodological changes might mitigate the effects of this sensitivity bias in future surveys. While other studies have focused on potential bias from interviewer effects, our research suggests a new avenue for research, in Africa and beyond, on respondent perceptions of sponsorship.

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1. Introduction

In "Rejecting the disloyal opposition? The trust gap in mass attitudes toward ruling and opposition parties in Africa," Logan (2008) reports that Africans were more likely to say they trust the ruling party than the opposition (a 20-percentage-point gap) in Afrobarometer Round 3 data. She concludes that opposition parties have weak support because many Africans admire "father-leaders" in dominantly patriarchal systems. Although Africans' low trust in opposition political parties may partly reflect an unconscious bias in favour of consensus due to historical and institutional legacies, this paper explores another possible explanation: Is low trust in opposition political parties a manifestation of a conscious effort to avoid political threats? Are higher levels of reported trust in ruling parties an indication of respondents' reluctance to demonstrate dissidence? Fundamentally, does self-reported trust in opposition and ruling parties suffer from sensitivity bias caused by a feeling of political risk?

We test this possibility using Afrobarometer's Round 7 survey, which interviewed 44,623 individuals across 34 African countries in 2016/2018. Specifically, we investigate whether Africans' perceptions of the sponsor of the survey are associated with their reported trust in ruling and opposition parties. We argue that citizens are more likely to evince support for the incumbent party – and less likely to support the opposition – if they believe that the government sponsored the survey. Using logistic regression models, we examine the association between citizens' reported trust in political parties and their "perceived sponsor" of the Afrobarometer survey ("*Who do you think sent us to do this interview?*"). We assume that, theoretically, individuals' perceptions about who deployed the survey enumerators can induce sensitivity bias because they may fear losing out on government benefits or even being targeted with punishment if they believe the perceived sponsor to be related to the government and thus able to share survey responses with the government. We find evidence of sensitivity bias when respondents perceive that the sponsor of the interview is the government vs. when they perceive it to be Afrobarometer. Our finding is robust to controlling for factors such as ethnicity or socio-economic conditions that might influence citizens' support for the incumbent party.

What is sensitivity bias?

Sensitivity bias arises when self-reported attitudes and opinions diverge from privately held beliefs. Tourangeau and Yan (2007) distinguish among three sources of sensitivity bias. First, respondents might be motivated to misreport (by either altering their answers or refusing to respond altogether) because they judge the question to be intrusive. Second, respondents might be concerned about the cost of reporting a truthful answer to sensitive questions to the interviewer (or about this answer being shared with a potential third party), who could use this answer against them (hereafter termed the *threat of disclosure*). This can be influenced by various factors, such as the presence of bystanders. Third, sensitivity bias can arise because of social desirability, when respondents misreport answers because of a concern that their responses may be socially undesirable. Finally, we note that although sensitivity bias varies in its sources, it always emerges from the content of the questions asked or contextual factors of the interview itself.

Of further note is the distinction between *threat of disclosure* and sensitivity bias due to social desirability (hereafter referred to as *social desirability bias*, or SDB). In the case of threat of disclosure, respondents misreport because they fear the consequences of having their answers disclosed to any actor. These consequences could be physical, monetary, or social. SDB can be a factor regardless of whether the response is disclosed. In the event of disclosure, respondents would fear social sanctions. But even if respondents do not fear disclosure, SDB might still motivate them to adapt their answers out of a desire to be perceived in a particular way by the interviewer.

Why should we care about sensitivity bias?

Not only does sensitivity bias increase nonresponse rates, but it also has the potential to lead to widespread misreporting on sensitive questions. Therefore, anyone engaged in measurement of public opinion should be concerned about sensitivity bias. Considerable research has explored how social desirability bias affects responses. For instance, work has been carried out on the underreporting of socially undesirable behaviours such as drug use (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007) and smoking (Bauman & Dent, 1982), as well as of financial hardships (Locander, Sudman, & Bradburn, 1976) and racist attitudes (Krysan, 1998). Moreover, respondents also tend to overreport socially desirable behaviours. For instance, Kelly, Soler-Hampejsek, Mensch, and Hewett (2013) conducted research on sexual behaviour in Malawi, where extramarital sexual activities are considered a sign of masculine prowess, and found that men who were interviewed tended to overreport sexual experiences.

Hence, sensitivity bias traced to intrusiveness or social desirability has been shown to lead to substantial misreports. However, another significant source of sensitivity bias is somewhat less explored in the literature and is particularly relevant to the African context: the respondent's perception of a threat of truthful disclosure. Tannenberg (2017) notably found that in African autocratic regimes, questions related to the citizen-state relationship were subject to a considerable bias. Due to fear of various forms of repression by the government, respondents in this study reported attitudes and beliefs to better align themselves with what they perceived to be government officials' preferred answers.

Concerns about disclosing truthful answers with regard to political questions do not appear to be unique to specific regime types. Indeed, in Afrobarometer Round 7 surveys, 42% of respondents surveyed across all 34 countries – some more democratic, others more authoritarian – believed that people always have to be careful about what they say about politics. This suggests that many respondents deem political questions to be sensitive. Hence, this paper seeks to identify whether reported levels of trust in opposition and ruling political parties, as responses to politically sensitive questions, suffer from sensitivity bias. We also break down these results by country and rank them by Freedom House score to investigate whether there is some specific relation to regime type.

Sensitivity bias: Theoretical mechanisms

In order to determine whether sensitivity bias affects reported levels of trust in political parties, we first need a more precise definition of sensitivity bias. Building on the work of Blair, Coppock, & Moor (2020), we argue that politically sourced sensitivity bias arises when:

1. A respondent has a referent in mind when answering a sensitive question;
2. The respondent feels that the referent has a preferred answer or non-answer to the sensitive question; and
3. The respondent perceives that failing to provide that preferred response will entail a cost.

Hence, politically sourced sensitivity bias arises when respondents adjust reports of trust in opposition or ruling parties because they believe that some referent (interviewer, bystander, potential third party) has a preferred answer in mind and that failing to respond accordingly has a (social, physical, or monetary) cost. For the purposes of our research, we focus on referents created by the interview context and look at the role of situational factors in the creation of politically sourced sensitivity bias. Interview context has already been shown to have a significant role in the promotion of sensitivity bias. Adida, Ferree, Posner, and Robinson (2016) found statistically significant evidence that respondents give different answers to coethnic and non-coethnic interviewers in 14 African countries. Similarly, Erlich and McCormack (2020) analyzed differences in ages between interviewers and respondents and identified statistically significant differences in response patterns induced by differences in ages across a range of questions. Building on this work, we aim to identify which, if any,

situational factors give rise to sensitivity bias when respondents reported their trust in opposition and political parties.

Although our research explores the entire data set offered by Afrobarometer Round 7,[1] misreports caused by politically sourced sensitivity bias may differ significantly in scope across the countries studied here. Looking at country-specific characteristics in a comparative light may allow us to identify whether some country-specific characteristics (such as regime type) are more likely to give rise to politically sourced sensitivity bias.

In order to test for the presence of sensitivity bias, we examine the relationship between reported trust in both the opposition and ruling political parties and the answer the respondent gave to the final question asked during the interview: "*Who do you think sent us to do this interview?*" We show that there are systematic differences in responses to the trust questions based on the perceived sponsor. We examine our results by country to isolate any state-specific catalysts for sensitivity bias.

2. Methodology

Choice of variables

In this section, we introduce the relevant variables in our research and explain our motivations for choosing them. We use data from Afrobarometer's Round 7 survey (R7 2016/2018).

We chose to use reported trust in opposition political parties and trust in ruling parties as our dependent variables. The key reason for this choice was that there is a plausible connection between reported trust in opposition and ruling parties and the possible existence of sensitivity bias caused by political pressure. If respondents feel affected by some political pressure imposed by the incumbent government, they should be more hesitant to speak positively about opposition political parties so may underreport their trust in opposition political parties. Likewise, they should be inclined to speak positively of the ruling party and so may overreport their trust in it.

With respect to our independent variable, we chose to use the perceived sponsor designated by respondents' answers to the final question in the survey. This variable appealed to us for several reasons.

First, it contains the essential elements for giving rise to politically sourced sensitivity bias:

1. The respondent may have a referent (the government) in mind when answering a sensitive question (about trust in opposition and ruling parties);

2. The respondent may feel that the referent had a preferred answer (low trust in opposition parties/high trust in the ruling party) to the sensitive question; and

3. The respondent may perceive that failing to provide that preferred response would entail a cost. (The respondent may believe that the government will know if the respondent shows support for opposition parties and dissidence toward the ruling party, and this could well be punished).

Secondly, unlike many questions, perceived sponsor has a very large sample size. Among 44,101 respondents, 30% thought the interview was sponsored by the government (Table 1).

[1] Excluding Eswatini, where questions about trust in political parties were not asked.

Table 1: Perceived sponsor of Afrobarometer survey | 33 countries | 2016/2018

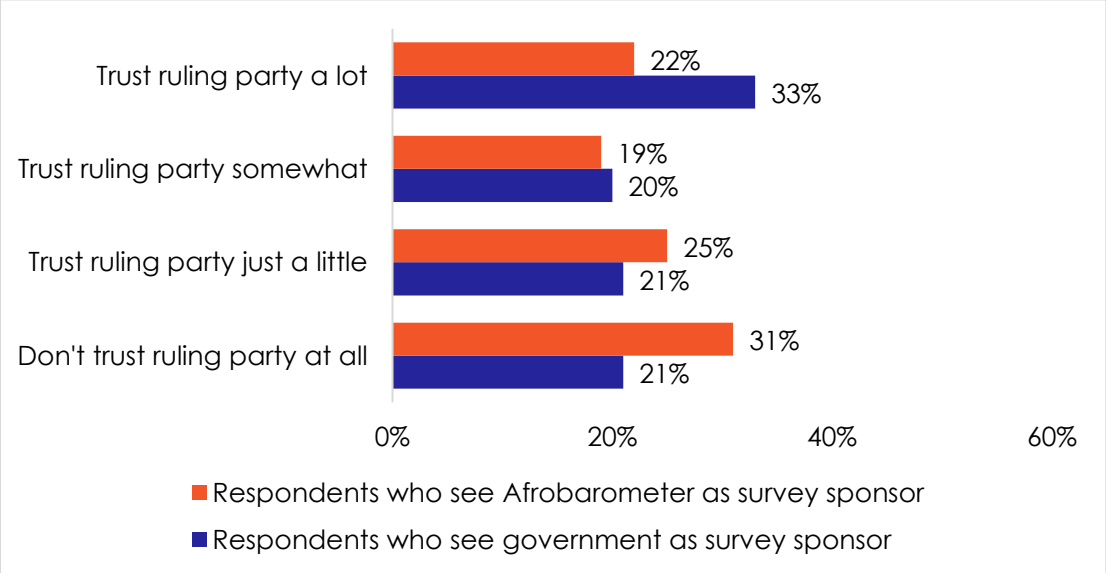
Perceived sponsor	%
Afrobarometer	32
Government	30
Research company	6
Non-government or religious organization	5
Political party or politician	4
University/School/College	3
Private company	2
No one	1
Media	1
International organization or another country	1
God	1
Other	2
Don't know	13

Respondents were asked: *Who do you think sent us to do this interview? (N=44,101)*

Descriptive data analysis

In terms of trust in ruling parties, we find substantial gaps based on perceived survey sponsorship (Figure 1). On average across the continent, 31% of respondents who thought that Afrobarometer sponsored the survey said they did not trust the ruling party "at all," compared to just 21% of those who thought the government sponsored the survey. Similarly, 22% of those who believed Afrobarometer was the sponsor reported trusting the ruling party "a lot," but this number increased to 33% when the perceived sponsor was the government. An initial descriptive data analysis thus seems to support our theory of sensitivity bias.

Figure 1: Trust in ruling party | by perceived survey sponsor | 33 countries | 2016/2018

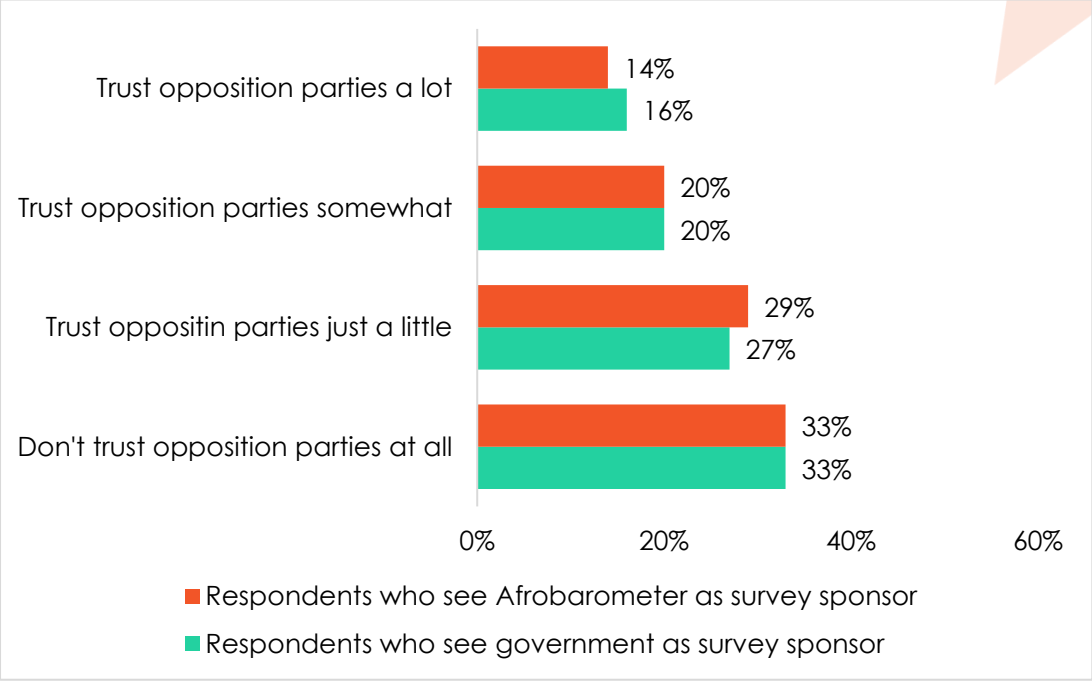


Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust the ruling party, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

In terms of trust in opposition political parties, however, responses do not differ significantly by perceived sponsor. One-third (33%) of respondents reported that they did not trust opposition political parties "at all" – regardless of whether they thought the survey was sponsored by

Afrobarometer or the government (Figure 2). And while 14% of respondents who perceived the sponsor to be Afrobarometer reported "a lot" of trust in opposition parties, 16% of those who believed the sponsor to be the government gave the same answer. These results do not align with our theory of sensitivity bias.

Figure 2: Trust in opposition parties | by perceived survey sponsor | 33 countries | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: *How much do you trust opposition political parties, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?*

However, we cannot rely on these descriptive analyses alone to draw conclusions about potential sensitivity bias. First, potential confounders and other factors may have influenced reported trust in opposition and ruling parties. These could provide alternative explanations for any observed link between perceived sponsor and reported trust. Second, our subject of analysis is the combined sample collected from 33 African countries. Even if we could not find correlations at this level, that does not rule out the possibility of a correlation for individual countries.

Regression analysis

To address these concerns, we constructed several models regressing each of our two dependent variables – reported trust in opposition parties and reported trust in the ruling party – on perceived survey sponsor and several controls.

We chose controls that could theoretically influence trust levels in opposition and ruling political parties. We started with a list of social, developmental, and economic variables at the individual, regional, and country levels from the Round 7 survey and also included two additional country-level factors: GDP per capita and Freedom House Index scores. A full list of these controls can be seen in the Appendix.

As a number of variables in Afrobarometer's data set described similar phenomena, we created indices to avoid multicollinearity. A description of these indices can also be found in the Appendix.

Having established our control variables, we ran two regressions for each of our dependent variables.

We opted to code our dependent categorical variables as binary, rather than ordinal, as we were specifically interested in evaluating the impact of sensitivity bias on reporting trust vs. not reporting trust. In other words, if respondents did adjust their reported levels of trust because of perceived sponsorship, we would expect them to switch from a negative to a positive evaluation, rather than adjusting incrementally within a negative or positive evaluation. Hence, we deemed the answers "A lot" and "Somewhat" as conveying positive evaluations and coded these as "High." We took "Not at all" and "Just a little" to reveal that respondents did not trust the party very much and coded these as "Low."

We chose to use answers from the group of respondents who perceived the sponsor of the survey to be Afrobarometer as our baseline, to which we would then compare three other groups of respondents: Those who perceived the sponsor to be the government, those whose answer was "Don't know," and an "Other" group that included all responses other than government, Afrobarometer, and "Don't know."[2]

3. Results

Key findings

Results from Model 1, which examines the effects of perceived sponsorship on reported trust in ruling and opposition parties, are shown in Figure 3A (for the opposition) and Figure 3B (for the ruling party). In Figure 3A, we note that the marginal effect for perceived sponsor government is both negative and significant on the opposition party trust dependent variable. Thus we see that those who believed the sponsor of the survey to be the government were less likely to indicate high levels of trust in the opposition than those who thought the survey was sponsored by Afrobarometer. In addition, we see that, controlling for other factors, those who identified an "other" sponsor of the survey and those who responded "Don't know" when asked about sponsorship were also less likely than those who thought Afrobarometer sponsored the survey to have high levels of trust in the opposition.

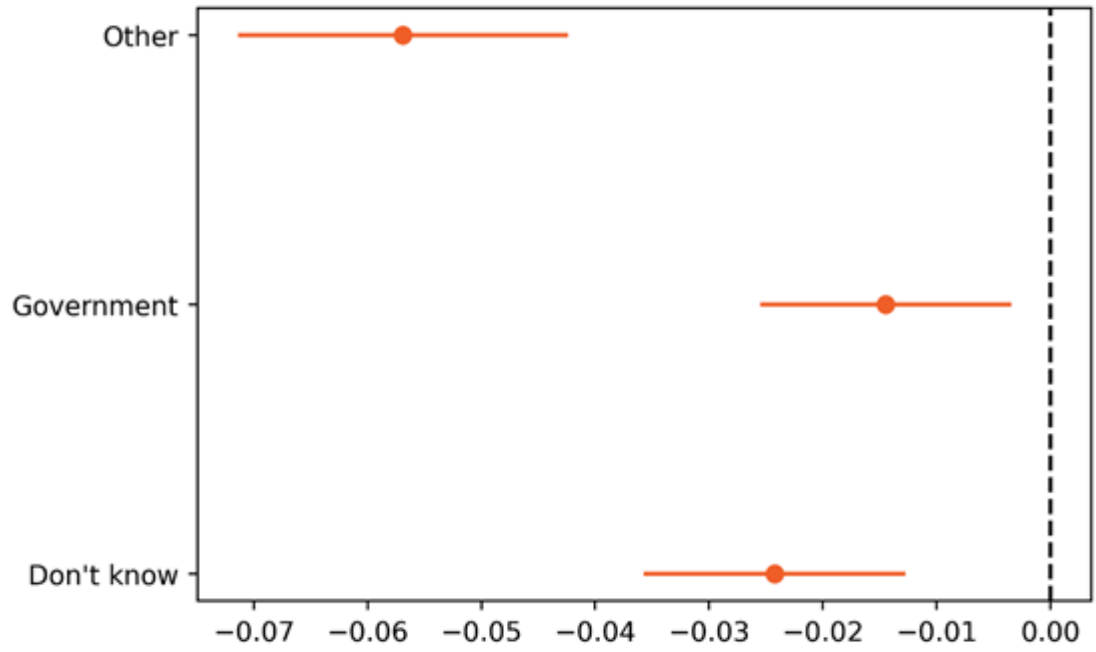
On the other hand, those who thought the survey was sponsored by the government were significantly more likely to indicate high levels of trust in the ruling party (Figure 3B). Again, this result is in line with our expectations regarding bias. Further, as was the case for trust in the opposition, we see that those who identified an "other" sponsor and those who did not identify a sponsor had significantly lower levels of trust in the ruling party than did those who identified Afrobarometer as the sponsor.

Note that the magnitude of the effect of perceived Afrobarometer vs. government sponsorship on reported trust in the ruling party (0.0611) is much larger than that found with regard to the opposition party (0.0145). However, over such a large sample of respondents, both magnitudes could manifest themselves in quite large differences in the distribution of responses.

One possible interpretation for the different magnitudes is that people were keener to over-report trust in the ruling party than they were to under-report trust in the opposition party when they thought the government was sponsoring the survey. Although our initial theory did not make such a prediction, such a finding could be highly relevant as we think more broadly about politically sourced sensitivity bias. Further, this may suggest that questions in the rest of the survey that are related to the ruling party are especially prone to sensitivity bias. Finally, the directions of the two coefficients suggest that our results may go some way in explaining the trust gap between opposition parties and ruling parties in Africa, though it is unclear precisely how much of the gap they might explain.

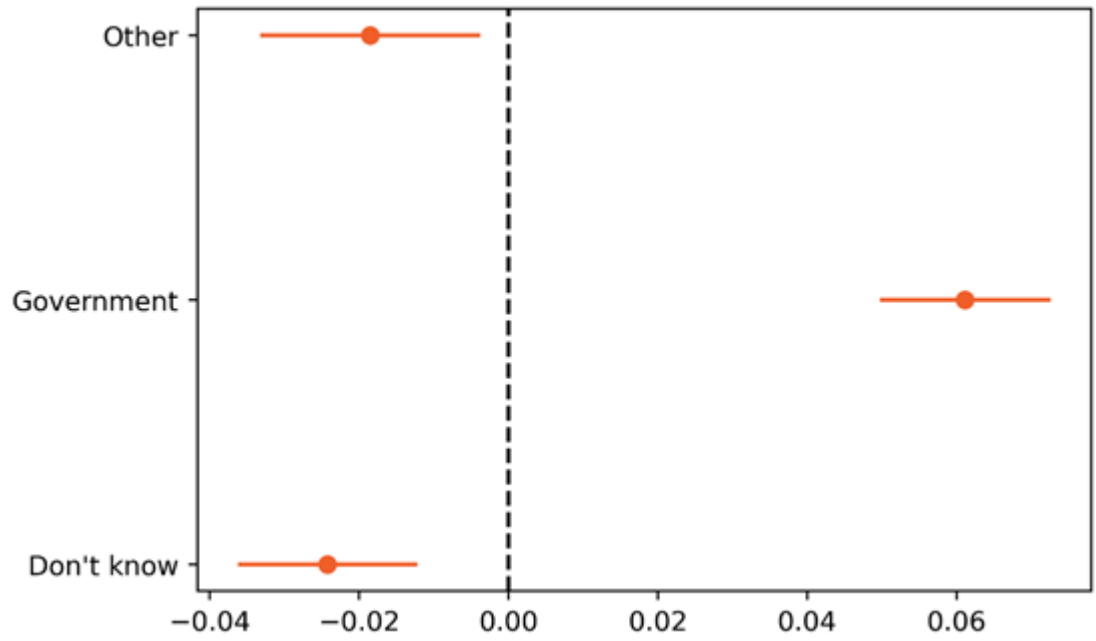
[2] The "Other" group contained the responses "No one," "Research company," "Non-government or religious organization," "University/School/College," "Private company," "Media," "Political party or politician," "International organization or another country," "God," and "Other."

Figure 3A: Estimated marginal effects of perceived sponsor on high opposition trust (Model 1)



Estimated marginal effects and their 95% confidence intervals from Model 1 with controls. The "Other" category refers to all other possible answers to the question "How much do you trust opposition political parties, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?" except for "Afrobarometer," "Government," and "Don't know."

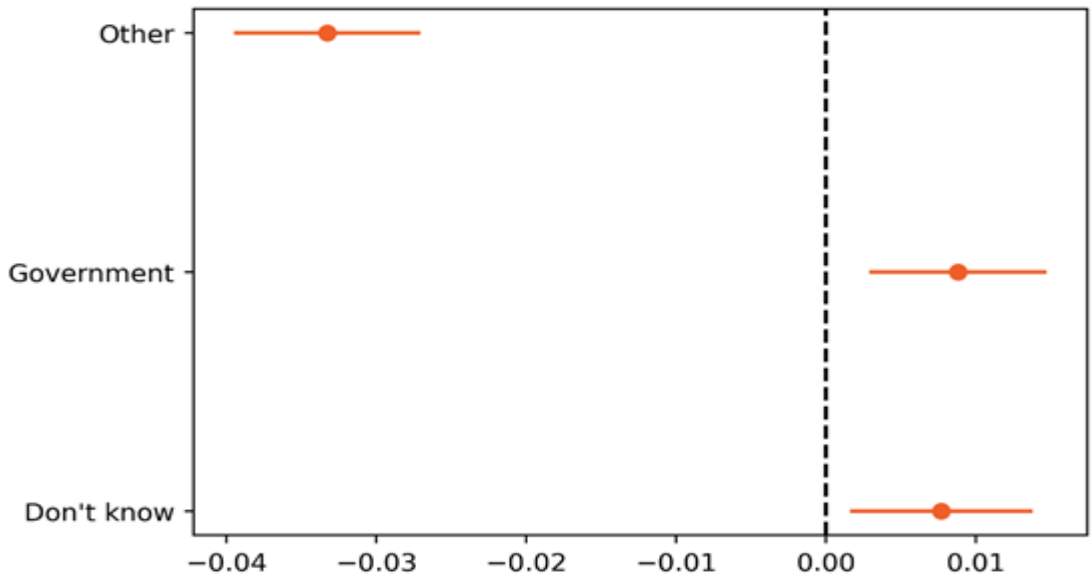
Figure 3B: Estimated marginal effects of perceived sponsor on high ruling party trust (Model 1)



Estimated marginal effects and their 95% confidence intervals from Model 1 with controls. The "Other" category refers to all other possible answers to the question "How much do you trust the ruling party, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?" except for "Afrobarometer," "Government," and "Don't know."

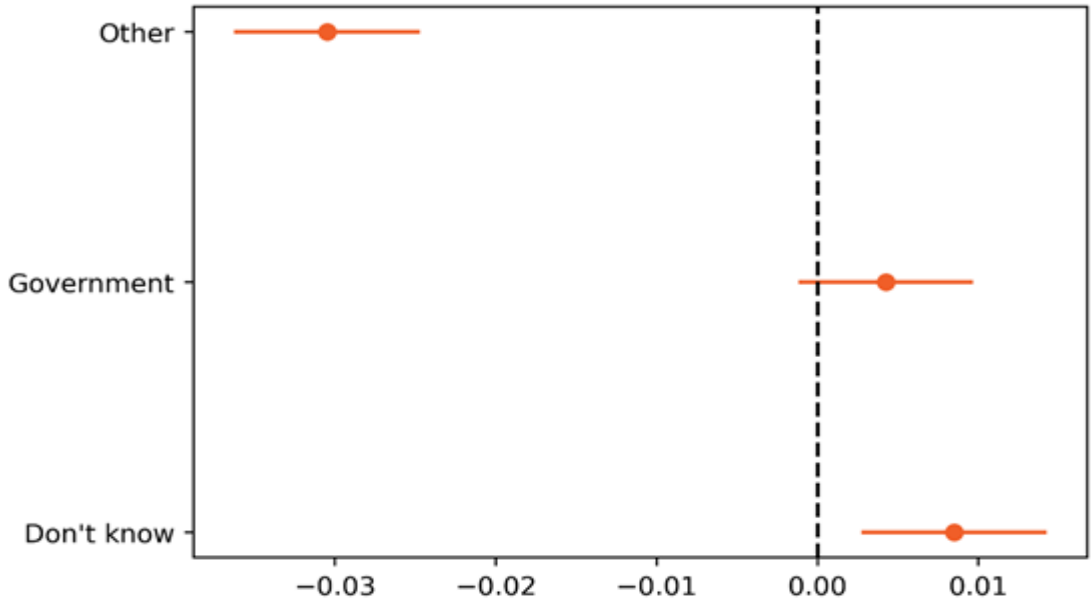
Of course, perceived sponsors might not only affect *how* people answer particular questions, but also *whether they respond at all*. To explore this, we run the same model with a dummy variable as the new dependent variable, indicating whether the respondent offered a response to the questions about trust in the ruling and opposition parties.

Figure 4A: Estimated marginal effects of perceived sponsor on providing an attitude on opposition trust (Model 2)



Estimated marginal effects and their 95% confidence intervals from Model 2 with controls. The "Other" category refers to all other possible answers to the question "How much do you trust opposition political parties, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?" except for "Afrobarometer," "Government," and "Don't know."

Figure 4B: Estimated marginal effects of perceived sponsor on providing an attitude on trust in the opposition (Model 2)



Estimated marginal effects and their 95% confidence intervals from Model 1 with controls. The "Other" category refers to all other possible answers to the question "How much do you trust the ruling party, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?" except for "Afrobarometer," "Government," and "Don't know."

In both cases, we see that those who believed that an "other" sponsor was responsible for the survey were less likely to provide answers on the questions of interest than those who believed that Afrobarometer was the sponsor (Figure 4A and Figure 4B). Those who thought the government sponsored the survey produced significantly different results from the Afrobarometer group only when asked about their level of opposition trust. Interestingly, those who said they did not know who sponsored the survey were more likely to respond to both questions than those who identified Afrobarometer as the sponsor.

These analyses also allow us to make two observations that go beyond our initial hypotheses, with regard to when people responded that they did not know who the survey sponsor was.

First, those who reported that they did not know who the survey sponsor was were more likely than those who thought Afrobarometer sponsored the survey to report low levels of trust in both opposition and ruling parties. One possible explanation here is that people who say they do not know who is sponsoring the survey might be generally more distrusting – they have, after all, told the interviewer they do not know who sent them, even though the interviewer has earlier stated affiliation with Afrobarometer. These individuals thus are also less likely to trust both ruling and opposition groups.

Second, those who reported that they did not know who the survey sponsor was were also more likely than those who thought Afrobarometer sponsored the survey to choose not to report an answer at all. This finding adds another dimension to the point on uncertainty: If people do not know who is sponsoring the survey, and so do not know who will have access to the data, they may be less willing to provide any evidence at all that points toward their actual level of support, whether that be for ruling or opposition parties, preferring instead to refuse or answer "Don't know."

4. Country-level analysis

As mentioned in the methodology section, we recognize that these findings are based on averages across almost three dozen diverse countries; therefore, a country-by-country analysis might be useful to test (1) whether the general case theory holds across countries; (2) whether any inter-country variation that does exist is easily explainable by country-level factors, such as regime type; and (3) if the findings hold generally, whether there is any noticeable difference in the size of the apparent sensitivity bias between countries. Specifically, we expect that a country's level of democracy might matter. Namely, countries with more-democratic regimes might see less sensitivity bias (i.e. perceived sponsorship will matter less) than those with less-democratic regimes. In more-democratic countries, individuals might feel less compelled to adjust responses on the basis of perceived sponsorship, as they will feel that openly expressing distrust of the ruling party in the face of an interviewer who has ostensibly been sent by the government will have fewer negative repercussions.

To test this possibility, we conducted separate regression analyses for each country, grouping them by Freedom House scores. Table 2 shows results for the nine (out of 33) countries where at least one of the marginal effects (for trust in the opposition or trust in the ruling party) was statistically significant.

First, with regard to trust in the opposition, we see that most of the coefficients are non-significant. Only in Madagascar and Mauritius was trust in opposition parties different among those who thought the government was the sponsor of the survey compared to those who thought it was Afrobarometer. Surprisingly, in both cases, those who identified the government as the sponsor were actually more likely to trust the opposition.

When we look at the country-by-country breakdown for trust in the ruling party as the dependent variable, we see a very similar picture: In all nine countries, those who thought the ruling party was the sponsor were more likely to say they trusted the ruling party.

Table 2: Trust in opposition and ruling parties | by country and Freedom House Index score

	Trust in opposition	Trust in ruling party	
Country	**Marginal effect of government vs. Afrobarometer as perceived sponsor**	**Marginal effect of government vs. Afrobarometer as perceived sponsor**	**Freedom House Index**
Mauritius	0.072 *	0.082 **	89
Sierra Leone	-0.076	0.135 ***	65
Lesotho	0.015	0.121 ***	63
Malawi	0.001	0.133 ***	62
Madagascar	0.071 *	0.072 *	61
Burkina Faso	0.039	0.139 ***	56
Gambia	-0.021	0.066 *	46
Guinea	-0.032	0.090 **	40
Tanzania	-0.042	0.099 ***	40
Significance levels represented as *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001. Countries where neither marginal effect was statistically significant are not shown.			

The country-by-country analysis suggests that the overall level of political freedoms in a country does not seem to impact the generally observed relationship between perceived sponsor and stated trust in the ruling party. In other words, politically sourced sensitivity bias seems to play similar roles in both free countries (e.g. Mauritius) and less-free countries (e.g. Guinea and Tanzania). This is a counterintuitive finding. More-democratic countries should have a higher level of freedom of speech, and therefore we would expect lower politically sourced sensitivity bias. One possible explanation for this surprising finding is that there are still costs for picking a side even for individuals who benefit from the relatively healthier political competition in more-democratic countries. Individuals still wish to demonstrate their loyalty to their aligned parties to maximize potential benefits. In other words, while the response discrepancy in authoritarian states is mostly explained by threat and fear, the response discrepancy in democratic states might be more explained by temptations or possibilities for personal enrichment. Of course, another possible explanation is that, even in freer countries, individuals still have concerns about potential sanctions that might arise from openly critiquing the government to a perceived agent of said government.

5. Future research considerations

Our analyses suggest that perceptions about survey sponsorship are significantly related to at least some potentially sensitive questions commonly included in many surveys, including Afrobarometer. However, we consider these analyses to be the starting point – and not the final word – on this topic. In particular, future research should address a number of potential concerns.

First, future work should extend these analyses to other rounds of Afrobarometer and other surveys, and explore other questions as potential dependent variables.

Second, research should explore what shapes respondents' perceptions of survey sponsorship. As noted previously, our paper is not the first to examine potential interviewer effects with regard to Afrobarometer surveys. However, our project differs from those papers, which focus on age (Erlich & McCormack, 2020) and ethnicity (Adida et al., 2016), in that, while those studies consider interviewer-interviewee matches on those dimensions to be randomly assigned, we cannot make a similar assumption with regard to perceptions of survey sponsorship. One possibility is that respondents' interpretations of perceived

sponsorship were shaped by the previous questions they were asked, since the question about the perceived sponsor was the very last question asked. In fact, it is possible that individuals who trust the government are more likely to think the government cares enough about them to ask their opinion, while those who do not trust the government are more likely to think that some non-governmental organization (e.g. Afrobarometer) would be more likely to care. The best way to investigate this possible endogeneity is probably to conduct an experiment in which Afrobarometer varies the ways in which it conveys its identity to respondents (such as showing them a video of Afrobarometer's past work vs. simply stating, at the survey's outset, that the interviewers are from Afrobarometer, as is current practice). Another approach, which we discuss below, might be to change the position of the question about perceived sponsorship.

Further, while our analyses identified differences in average responses based on perceived sponsorship, we cannot conclude on the basis of these differences that they can be attributed to a particular mechanism. Since we lack a measure of individuals' "true" trust levels in ruling or opposition parties, we cannot know whether, to the extent that politically sourced sensitivity bias exists, it is pulling responses in a particular direction. For example, reported trust in the ruling party might be higher among individuals who perceive the government as the sponsor vs. those who perceive Afrobarometer to be the sponsor because the former fear divulging less-than-rosy assessments of the ruling party to a government agent or seek potential benefits from presenting themselves as ruling-party supporters. However, such a gap might also be attributable to individuals who perceive Afrobarometer to be the sponsor and assume (incorrectly) that the research organization is affiliated with the opposition – a perception that incumbents and their allies have stoked in some countries at times – and who as a result indicate less trust in the ruling party. Further, mechanisms likely operate differently for different groups, depending on pre-existing attitudes toward the ruling party and opposition. Again, future experiments could perhaps help identify directions of bias.

Finally, due to a lack of information, we were not able to account for the potential influence of national partner organizations that conduct the Afrobarometer surveys. Their local reputations, as well as their members' interview skills, may have affected both perceptions of the survey sponsor and the outcome variables of interest.

6. Recommendations

The important conclusion of our research is that individuals' responses on key survey questions of interest – i.e. trust in the ruling and opposition parties – vary systematically according to perceptions of the survey sponsor. Hence, our recommendations are aimed at ensuring respondents' accurate perceptions and understanding of Afrobarometer, its goals, and its staff, and at reducing variations between respondents' perceptions of the survey sponsor in order to minimize the potential emergence of various biases.

Recommendation 1: Increase respondents' knowledge that the survey is sponsored by Afrobarometer and ensure that they remember this throughout the interview. We suggest that interviewers:

- Provide more evidence to indicate they are from Afrobarometer.
- Explain more clearly what Afrobarometer is by using videos and other media materials instead of a simple verbal notification.
- Ask respondents about sponsorship perceptions at the beginning, middle, and end of the interview. If a respondent gives an incorrect answer or cannot identify a sponsor, correct the respondent before continuing.

Recommendation 2: Increase respondents' confidence that responses are confidential and that the survey is free from political interference. To accomplish this:

- Interviewers should elaborate on the independent and cross-national nature of Afrobarometer during the introduction, showing evidence (documents, pictures, videos) of past work conducted in other countries, if it is helpful.
- Interviewers should explain clearly who will access the collected data, how the data will be used, and who provides funding for Afrobarometer.
- As an organization, Afrobarometer should do more brand building of Afrobarometer via traditional and social media approaches to establish a reputation of legitimacy among African populations.

Recommendation 3: Improve interviewers' skills, via more training and practice, to deliver messages effectively. This is especially important in countries where a great proportion of respondents reported they did not know who the survey sponsor was or perceived an organization other than Afrobarometer to be responsible. Under the same interview protocol, more than 60% of respondents in Tunisia reported that they did not know who the survey sponsor was, while only 5% of respondents in Benin gave the same answer.

Recommendation 4: Increase the precision of survey questions and/or response options where appropriate. For example, if people other than the respondent are present during the interview, the current questionnaire records "Spouse only," "Children only," "A few others," and "Small crowd." These options could be expanded to record "Government official" and other categories of interest.

On the "perceived survey sponsor question, the response option "political party or politicians" should specify whether it refers to the ruling or opposition parties.

7. Conclusion

This paper explores the presence of politically sourced sensitivity bias in Afrobarometer's survey results. Our findings are threefold.

First, respondents who thought the government was sponsoring the survey were more likely to report low levels of trust in the opposition than were those who thought Afrobarometer was the sponsor.

Second, when respondents thought the government was sponsoring the survey, they were more likely to report high levels of trust in the ruling party than were those who thought Afrobarometer was sponsoring the survey.

Third, when respondents thought the government was sponsoring the survey, they were more likely to report substantive answers when asked about their level of trust in the opposition than were those who thought Afrobarometer was sponsoring the survey.

Ultimately, it seems some degree of politically sourced sensitivity bias is present in the survey results. While our evidence concerns Afrobarometer's survey results, we suspect a similar bias could be present in surveys conducted by other non-government or government agencies, in Africa as well as in other contexts. For example, perceptions of "liberal bias" in the media in the United States could lead conservative-leaning individuals to respond differently to surveys, which are often sponsored by media organizations, or to not respond at all. In this century of "big data," where policy makers and political candidates often rely heavily on survey results to make policies and set strategies, biased and inaccurate survey results could bring adverse consequences. Indeed, it should be a priority for survey organizations to improve the quality of survey results. While this paper has highlighted one source of sensitivity bias, it has also emphasized the importance of respondents' perceptions to the broader literature on sensitivity bias. We hope more attention can be given to this area in the future to further investigate how to detect, alleviate, and possibly resolve sensitivity bias in surveys. With careful design, this bias can be minimized.

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Appendix

Control variables and indices design

1. Full list of controls

Fh_index: Freedom House Index

GDP_pc: GDP per capita

Area_index: Variables indicating households' proximity to facilities and services such as an electric grid, piped water, sewerage, mobile phone service, a health clinic, etc.

Without_index: see below

Own_television: Which of these things do you or anyone in your household own: Television?

Water_location: Please tell me whether each of the following are available inside your house, inside your compound, or outside your compound: Your main source of water for household use?

Phone_internet: Does your phone have access to the Internet?

Electric_mains: Do you have an electric connection to your home from the mains? [If yes:] How often is the electricity actually available?

Own_computer: Which of these things do you or anyone in your household own: A computer?

Rural_urban: Do you come from a rural or urban area?

Gendermatch: What "gender match" did the respondent and interviewer make up? (MM, MF, FM, or FF)

Agematch: Were the respondent and the interviewer of a similar age (within four years higher or lower) or of different ages (interviewer is more than four years older than the respondent or interviewer is more than four years younger than the respondent).

2. Indices design

For the control variables, we combined a number of separate variables into a set of particular indices that would give us a good idea of each respondent's personal socio-economic status (the without index, the wealth index, etc.).

Notably, all questions within each created index came with the same range of possible responses, so we did not risk mistranslating data. It should be noted that we did not weight different questions, either (not owning a car is, in our metric, considered the same as not owning a television). For the purposes of this study, this seems a reasonable assumption to make, especially given that scores around the middle would seem to represent a decent quality of life, anything above is good, and anything below is bad.

Construction of the without index follows the below example:

The questions of concern were "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without …

1. Enough food to eat?
2. Enough clean water for home use?
3. Medicines or medical treatment?
4. Enough fuel to cook your food?
5. A cash income?

For each question, possible responses were "Always," "Many times," "Several times," "Just once or twice," "Never," "Don't know," "Refused," or "Missing." Since "Don't know," "Refused," and "Missing" were unclear responses and made up a very small percentage of responses (around 1%), we did not include these in the indices.

To each of the other answers, we assigned values of 0, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, or 1 as shown in Table A.1 (assuming each response to have an equal gap between it and the next response below or above, which we believe to be reasonable with regard to these particular selections of variables).

Table 3: Example of coding of control variables: The without index

Afrobarometer response	Coded frequency	Code value
Always	Often	0
Many times	Often	0.25
Several times	Often	0.5
Just once or twice	Rarely	0.75
Never	Rarely	1
Don't know	Rarely	n/a
Refused to answer	Refused	n/a
Missing	n/a	n/a

The values for each of the questions were then summed to reach a "without index" score between 0 and 5. If the response to one of the five questions was n/a, that respondent's whole index score is counted as n/a to prevent errors in the meaning of each index score when comparing respondents.

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