

CTORAL
MISSION

ASSISTANT

Who says elections in Ghana are 'free and fair'?

By Sharon Parku

Introduction

Since 2000, elections in Ghana have been lauded by observers both internally and externally as being “free and fair.” The losing political party, however, has consistently contested the election results. After the 2004 presidential election, three key opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) members challenged the results announced by the Electoral Commission (EC), suing the EC to publish detailed data from the election. Similarly, at the end of the closely contested 2008 presidential election and the subsequent run-off, leading NDC members accused the EC of trying to manipulate results, and their frustrated supporters invaded the EC head office in Accra. When the NDC was eventually declared the winner, the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP) accused the NDC of rigging the election. Again in the aftermath of the 2012 presidential election, the opposition NPP accused the winner – John Dramani Mahama and the NDC – of rigging the election, boycotted the inauguration of the president, and asked the Supreme Court to overturn the official results declared by the EC.

Table 1: Summary of the past three presidential election results

Election	Political party	Votes obtained
2004 presidential election	National Democratic Congress (NDC)	44.64%
	New Patriotic Party (NPP)	52.45%
2008 presidential election	NDC	47.92%
	NPP	49.13%
2008 presidential election run-off	NDC	50.23%
	NPP	49.77%
2012 presidential election	NDC	50.70%
	NPP	47.74%

These objections to electoral results by losing parties run counter to the findings of international and domestic election observers. In the 2012 election, for example, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Commonwealth mission, the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA), and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) considered the election “free and fair.”

According to Nadeau and Blais (1993), a key factor that influences individual assessment of the freeness and fairness of an election is whether the political party that the individual supported won or lost. Is there a “winner bias” in the Ghanaian political environment? Are there other factors that also explain citizens' assessments of elections? If so, what are the implications for the development of strong democratic institutions and practices in Ghana?

This paper uses Afrobarometer survey data from 2008 and 2012 to examine whether Ghanaians' assessment of the “freeness and fairness” of elections depends on how their own party fared in the election, on their level of trust in election-related institutions, on their level of consumption of news from different media, and on their level of education.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is an African-led, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Five rounds of surveys were conducted between 1999 and 2013, and Round 6 surveys are currently under way (2014-2015). Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's

choice with nationally representative samples of between 1,200 and 2,400 respondents.

The Afrobarometer team in Ghana, led by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), interviewed 1,200 adult Ghanaians in March 2008 (a sample of this size yields results with a margin of error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level) and 2,400 adult Ghanaians in 2012 (margin of error: +/-2%). Previous surveys were conducted in Ghana in 1999, 2002, and 2005.

Findings

Perceptions and party affiliation

Afrobarometer asked respondents in Ghana to rate the freeness and fairness of the most recent national election (2004 election in the 2008 survey, 2008 election in the 2012 survey). Large majorities of Ghanaians considered both elections “free and fair” or “free and fair with minor problems.”

However, the percentage of respondents who believed the election was “completely free and fair” dropped sharply from the 2004 election (61%) to the 2008 election (39%), an indication of a downward shift in public perceptions of the efficacy of Ghana's elections (Table 2). This decline appears to have gone into swelling the numbers of those who felt there were minor challenges with the 2008 elections, although they still believed that it was “free and fair.”

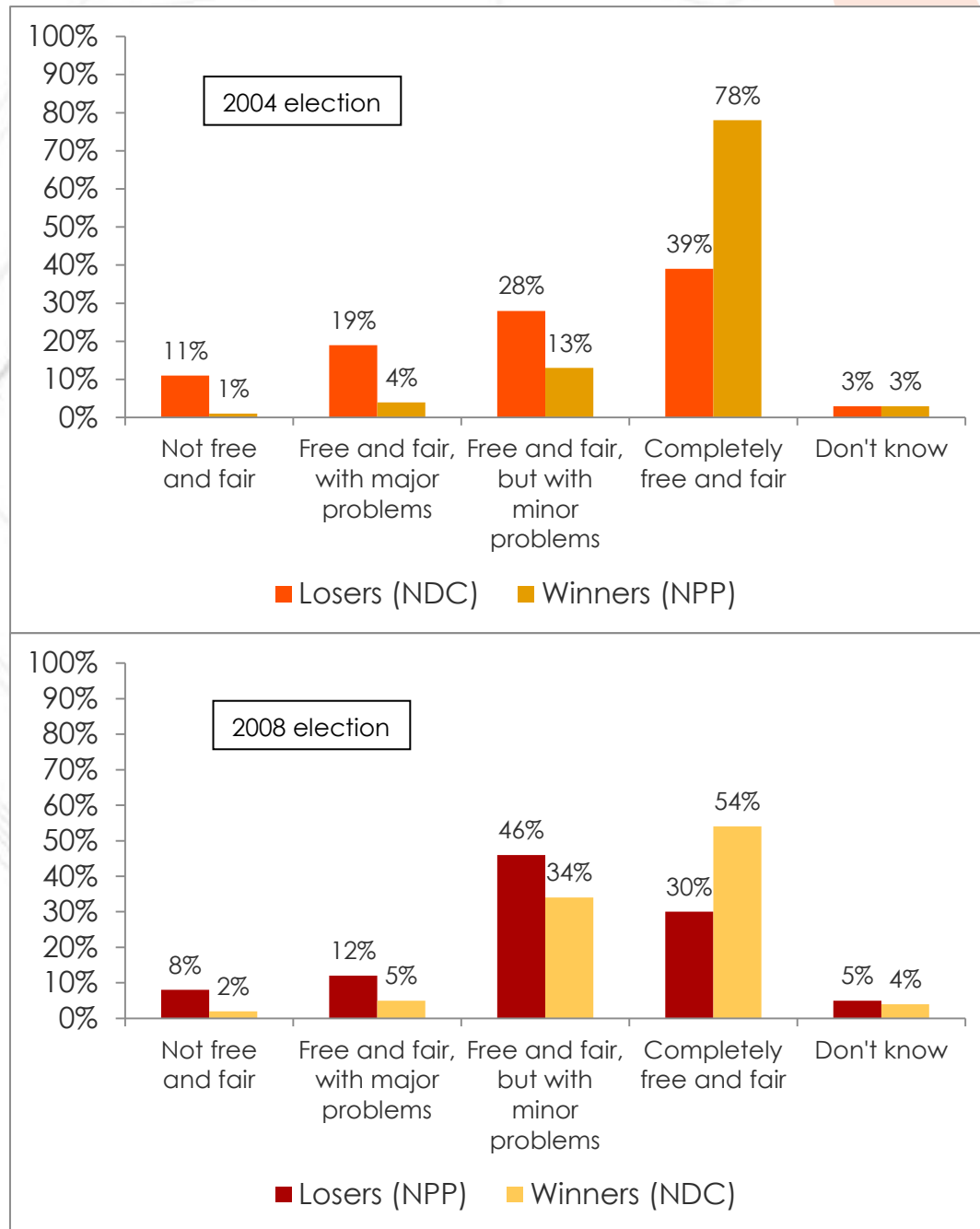
Table 2: Individual assessment of elections in 2004 and 2008

Assessment	2008 survey (2004 election)	2012 survey (2008 elections)
Not free and fair	5%	5%
Free and fair with major problems	7%	10%
Free and fair with minor problems	22%	40%
Completely free and fair	61%	39%
Don't know	5%	6%

Respondents were asked: *On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2004/2008?*

Respondents' perceptions of elections appear to be shaped by the electoral success of their party. Regarding the 2004 election, supporters of the winning NPP overwhelmingly (78%) described the elections as “completely free and fair” (Figure 1, top). In contrast, only 30% of NPP supporters described the 2008 election, which the NPP lost, as “completely free and fair” (Figure 1, bottom). As for NDC supporters, only 39% rated the 2004 election, which the NDC lost, as “completely free and fair,” whereas 54% said the same of the 2008 election, which their party won.

Figure 1: Assessment of freeness and fairness of 2004 and 2008 elections, by political party affiliation



Freeness and fairness: Other factors

Strong preliminary evidence for a winner's bias in Ghana, as seen above, does not rule out other explanations for individuals' assessment of elections. To control for and test competing explanations, linear regression modeling that includes as independent variables political party affiliation, trust in specific institutions, level of education, and media consumption was used to predict citizens' opinions on the freeness and fairness of elections.

The dependent variable was freeness and fairness of elections. It is based on a survey question that gauged respondents' perceptions of the freeness and fairness of the most recent national election. This was re-scaled on a four-point scale ranging from 0

to 3, where 0 means “not free and fair,” 1 means “free and fair with major problems,” 2 means “free and fair with minor problems,” and 3 means “completely free and fair.”

The four independent variables include two indexes constructed from a number of questions. Political party affiliation is based on two questions: “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if respondents said “yes,” “Which party is that?” Respondents favoring the NPP (presidential election winners in 2004, losers in 2008) were re-coded “1” in both survey data sets. Affiliation with the NDC (losers in 2004 and winners in 2008) was assigned code “0.” This variable allows a test for a winner’s bias in citizens’ opinions of the freeness and fairness of elections.

The second independent variable, the Trust Index¹, was derived as the average scores of re-scaled responses to questions that tracked the level of trust that citizens have in the president, the ruling party, and the Electoral Commission. Each of these questions was on a scale of 0 to 3, with 0 meaning “Not at all,” 1 “Just a little,” 2 “Somewhat,” and 3 “A lot.” The hypothesis is that trust in these institutions and political leaders should be positively associated with assessment of the freeness and fairness of elections.

The Media Consumption Index², the third independent variable, was constructed using the average scores of re-scaled responses to questions on how frequently people obtain news from radio, television, and newspapers. Each variable was re-coded on a four-point scale: 0 means “Never or less than once a month,” 1 means “A few times a month,” 2 means “A few times a week,” and 3 means “Every day.” The hypothesis is that an increase in media consumption should be associated with an increased rating in the freeness and fairness of elections. This is because media makes information available to citizens who are then able to process it to make informed choices. As a result, where citizens have access to election news from the media before, during, and after elections, they are able to conclude whether an election is free and fair or otherwise.

The last independent variable is level of education, with a hypothesis that education should be negatively associated with assessment of the freeness and fairness of elections, as education should make citizens more critical and skeptical.

In addition to these four variables of interest, two control variables were included in the model. The first, settlement location, was included with the expectation that urban populations would be more skeptical than rural populations about the freeness and fairness of elections. The second control variable, whether a respondent said he/she had voted or not voted in the previous election, could have either a positive or negative relationship with the dependent variable (i.e. freeness and fairness of election). This is due to the fact that voting in an election makes one a participant in the electoral process and therefore capable of judging the freeness and fairness of the process on the basis of one’s own experiences.

¹ The Trust Index had the following statistics: [(2008 Data: Mean = 2.033; Standard Deviation = 0.916; Eigenvalues Total = 2.234, Eigenvalues Percentage of variance = 74.5%; Cronbach Alpha, 0.828); (2012 Data: Mean = 1.597; Standard Deviation = 0.916; Eigenvalues Total = 2.114, Eigenvalues Percentage of variance = 70.5%; Cronbach’s alpha, 0.790)].

² The Media Consumption Index had the following statistics: [(2008 Data: Mean = 2.097; Standard Deviation = 1.113; Eigenvalues Total = 1.714, Eigenvalues Percentage of variance = 57.1%; Cronbach’s alpha, 0.623); (2012 Data: Mean = 2.101; Standard Deviation = 0.993; Eigenvalues Total = 1.598, Eigenvalues Percentage of variance = 53.3%; Cronbach’s alpha, 0.559)].

Regression results

A linear multiple regression analysis (Table 3) confirms that Ghanaians affiliated with political parties that win an election are more likely to consider that election free and fair than their losing counterparts.

Considering the estimates of the first model, it can be observed that for the 2004 election, being a supporter of the winning party (NPP) has a significant and positive relationship with the perception that the elections were free and fair. In contrast, for the 2008 election, the analysis establishes that being a supporter of the NPP (which lost the election) lowered the belief that the elections were free and fair.³ These findings indicate that the views of party followers regarding an election's fairness match those of their party leaders.

Table 3: OLS coefficient estimates of models predicting perceived election efficacy

	2004 Election		2008 Election	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)	1.559***	1.392***	2.280***	2.262***
Winners / losers (NPP)	0.276***	0.278***	-0.167***	-0.169***
Trust Index	0.308***	--	0.161***	--
Trust the president	--	0.205***	--	0.125***
Trust the ruling party	--	0.008	--	0.017
Trust the Electoral Commission	--	0.137***	--	0.045
Media Consumption Index	0.004	--	-0.032	--
Access to radio news	--	0.057	--	-0.014
Access to television news	--	-0.015	--	0.011
Access to newspaper news	--	-0.043	--	-0.045
Voted in 2004 (or 2008) election	-0.004	-0.004	0.054**	0.055**
Level of education	-0.068*	-0.038	-0.133***	-0.122***
Urban residence	0.071*	0.064*	0.013	0.001
Adjusted R²	0.252	0.264	0.120	0.119

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; and * $p < 0.1$ (two-tailed).

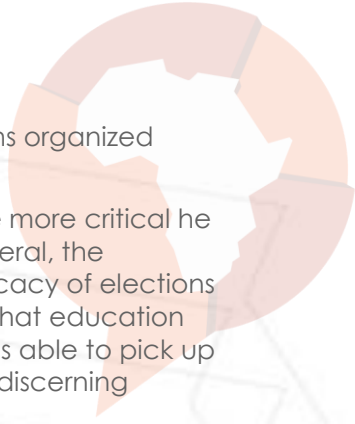
All constants are the unstandardized coefficients. All others are the standardized coefficients.

The regression results also show that trust in key institutions and leaders is positively and significantly associated with perceptions of the freeness and fairness of an election. Ghanaians who express trust in the president, the ruling party, and the EC were more likely to consider elections free and fair than their compatriots who do not trust these institutions.⁴

This finding is quite understandable, since these institutions are critical in the organization of any elections. The president and his government (controlled by the ruling party) have to ensure that all arrangements (release of funds and other logistics) are made in a timely manner for the EC to implement its election-related activities and the elections according to schedule. Thus, where citizens have high

³ In the model that used 2008 Afrobarometer Round 4 data, the regression coefficient was 0.276. In the model that used 2012 Afrobarometer Round 5 data, the regression coefficient was -0.167. In both cases, the estimates were significant at the 99% level.

⁴ The regression coefficient estimates that turned out to be significant at the 0.01 level are 0.308 in the 2008 model and 0.161 in the 2012 model.



trust in these institutions, the likelihood that they will perceive elections organized under their watch as free and fair is quite high.

The analysis also shows that the higher an individual's education, the more critical he or she is when assessing the freeness and fairness of elections. In general, the negative relationship between education and evaluation of the efficacy of elections is statistically significant across models.⁵ One possible explanation is that education enlightens and provides more information to individuals, who are thus able to pick up on cues from the political environment and analyze them in a more discerning manner before drawing their own conclusions.

The Media Consumption Index showed no consistent or statistically significant association with the evaluation of the freeness and fairness of elections. This is contrary to expectations, because Ghana has many media houses (both print and electronic) that are actively involved in monitoring election activities and reporting on the challenges and successes of electoral processes. Most citizens get information on the conduct of elections through these channels, and one would have expected that these would shape citizens' opinions regarding the freeness and fairness of elections.

Contrary to expectations, living in an urban area has a significant positive relationship with the perception of efficacy in the 2004 election. Having voted in the previous election turned out to be positive and significant in 2008, an indication that citizens' experiences regarding the 2004 election were positive.

To test the robustness of these findings, a second model that uses the individual variables employed in constructing the trust and media consumption indexes as predictors were estimated (see Model 2 for 2004 and 2008 elections). As shown in Table 3, the results are very similar.⁶

Conclusion

In sum, this analysis shows that:

- Individuals affiliated with political parties that win elections are more likely to consider those elections free and fair than their losing counterparts.
- High trust in institutions that are critical in the organization of elections potentially increases the perception of elections as free and fair.
- High levels of education contribute to a more skeptical assessment of the freeness and fairness of elections.
- Access to news media does not have a significant impact on perceptions regarding the freeness and fairness of elections.

These findings have implications for electoral and democratic development in Ghana. Politicians appear to endorse elections only when the outcome is in their favor. Their followers take similar views. Such a lack of objectivity represents a threat to the integrity of the election management body and the public faith underpinning democratic processes. The political class should be in the forefront of building strong

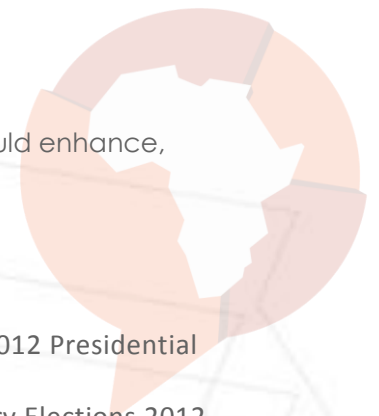
⁵ The regression coefficient estimates in the 2008 and 2012 models were -0.068 and -0.133, respectively. While the estimate of the 2012 model was significant at the 0.01 level, that for the 2008 model was significant only at the 0.10 level.

⁶ The coefficients of the 2008 and 2012 models (0.278 and -0.169, respectively) were significant at the 0.01 level.

institutions that are perceived to be impartial, and their actions should enhance, rather than undermine, the legitimacy of electoral institutions.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

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