

Poll of 18 African Countries Finds All Support Democracy

June 12, 2006

Divided on Performance of Elected Governments

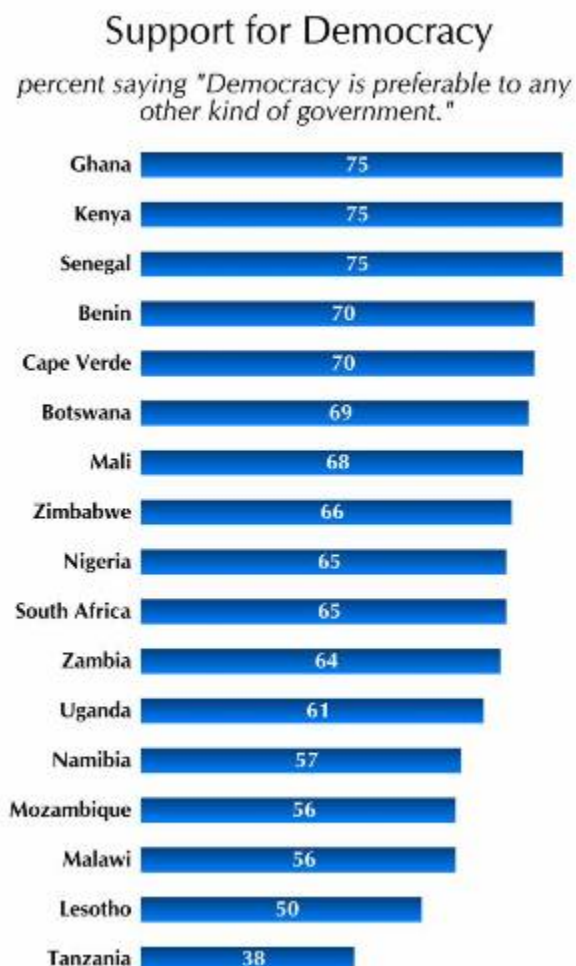
Africans strongly support democracy despite frustration in some countries with unfair elections, corruption and unresponsive political leaders, a multinational poll by [Afrobarometer](#) shows.

In all 18 countries surveyed the most common view was that democracy was “preferable to any other kind of government.” On average 62 percent said they favored democracy; only nine percent said a non-democratic government might be preferable in some cases and 12 percent said the kind of government did not matter to them. Respondents in Ghana, Kenya and Senegal were the most positive with 75 percent saying democracy was preferable to any other system, followed by Benin and Cape Verde (both 70%). In only one country, Tanzania, did the number endorsing democracy fall below 50 percent—38 percent of Tanzanians said they preferred democracy, but few opposed it, while 59 percent did not answer either way.

But though Africans were overwhelmingly in favor of democracy in principle, nationalities differed when asked about its practice in their country. In half of the countries surveyed, 50 percent or more were pleased with how their governments functioned. Satisfaction was highest in Ghana (70%), followed by Namibia (69%) and South Africa (63%). In five countries, less than a third said they were satisfied including Zimbabwe (14%), Zambia (26%), Nigeria (26%), Malawi (26%) and Madagascar (26%).

The multinational Afrobarometer surveys are a joint project by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa, the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development and Michigan State University. The network has conducted three rounds of surveys since 1999/2000 in a dozen sub-Saharan countries: Botswana, Ghana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The most recent survey, fielded from March 2005 to March 2006, added Benin, Cape Verde, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique and Senegal. At least 1,200 people were interviewed in each country.

Afrobarometer’s findings reaffirm the results of other recent surveys showing that Africans, despite living on a continent plagued by high rates of poverty, violence and disease, continue to prefer governments that are chosen democratically. A poll of eight African countries by [GlobeScan](#), completed in January of 2004, also found strong support for democratic rule in Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe and Egypt. More than 80 percent in seven of the eight countries agreed with the statement: “Democracy may have its problems, but it is the best system of government for my country.” Here too



Tanzania was lower than other countries with just 54 percent agreeing. On average 83% of those polled agreed democracy was the best system.

When asked about specific features of democracy, such as multiparty elections, the Africans polled by Afrobarometer confirm their preference for democratic governance. Majorities in all countries surveyed agreed with the statement, "Many political parties are needed to make sure that [citizens] have real choices in who governs them." Support also appears to have risen compared to findings from 12 countries Afrobarometer also polled in 2002. Agreement on the need for multiple parties increased in nine of the 12 countries, falling only in Tanzania, South Africa and Namibia. It rose the most in Lesotho (from 31% to 59%), where the ruling party crushed the opposition in disputed 2002 elections, and in Zimbabwe (55% to 76%), where President Robert Mugabe has been accused of engaging in electoral fraud to consolidate one-party rule.

But overall, the Africans polled seemed pleased with the electoral process. Majorities in 14 countries said their elections were either "completely free and fair" or suffered from only "minor problems." The four countries in which a majority said that recent elections were unfair or had major problems were Nigeria (61%), Zimbabwe (58%), Zambia (56%) and Malawi (51%).

The Afrobarometer report warns, however, that the countries included in its polls may not be completely representative of sub-Saharan Africa. "[H]aving undergone a measure of political and economic reform," the authors state, "they are among the continent's most open regimes." Most of the countries are also relatively stable, though the survey does include several that have suffered recently from internal conflicts: Nigeria, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

Ignoring the People

Most Africans feel that their elected leaders generally failed to pay attention to the people. Majorities in 16 of the countries (overall average=66 percent) surveyed by Afrobarometer said lawmakers "never" or "only sometimes" listened to what "people like you have to say." The conviction that lawmakers were unresponsive was most prevalent among Kenyans (82%), Zambians (81%) and Zimbabweans, Tanzanians and Madagascans (77%). Locally elected officials got slightly higher marks. Majorities in 13 countries said they were unresponsive, especially in Zambia (76%), Kenya (73%) and Zimbabwe (72%). Only in Mali did a majority (53%) say locally elected councillors often or always paid attention to their concerns.

The GlobeScan poll got similar results. On average more than half (56%) said the people's will did not prevail in their countries. This perception was strongest in Nigeria (85%) and Zimbabwe (73%). Only in Ghana did a clear majority (61%) say their government was representative.

The conviction that governments fail to respond to the people's concerns is hardly unique to Africa, however. A [Gallup International](#) poll of 50,000 people across 65 countries conducted between May and July 2005 found that only a third agreed that their country was "governed by the will of the people." Europeans, Latin Americans, and East Asians were all more cynical than Africans about the responsiveness of their elected leaders. While the survey found that 34 percent of Africans agreed that their governments responded to the will of the people, only 22 percent of Eastern and Central Europeans did, 28 percent of Latin Americans, 29 percent of those in Asia and the Pacific, and 31 percent of Western Europeans. Those polled in North America and the Middle East were only slightly more positive, with 36 percent and 37 percent, respectively, saying they agreed with the statement.

Downward Trend in Enthusiasm

Trend line analysis reveals some deterioration in the support for democracy in most of the 12 countries surveyed since 2000. On average, the proportion of those saying they preferred democracy over other political systems was 61 percent in 2005, compared to 69 percent in 2000. The percentage of those supporting democracy fell in seven countries, went up in three and remained about the same in two. The drop was especially dramatic in Tanzania, where those who considered democracy preferable fell from 84 percent in 2000 to 38 percent in 2005. The multiparty elections held in Tanzania since the mid-1990s have been marred by allegations of fraud, especially in the region of Zanzibar, and the formerly socialist ruling party has embarked on painful fiscal and free-market reforms. Support for democracy also declined by more than ten points in Uganda (from 80% to 61%), Nigeria (81% to 65%), Botswana (85% to 69%) and Zambia (75% to 64%). The three countries where the percentage in favor of democracy went up were Lesotho (40% to 50%), Mali (60% to 68%) and South Africa (60% to 65%).

The trend on satisfaction with democratic governments among the 12 countries was also negative, declining on average from 58 percent to 45 percent. Here again, however, there were significant variations among nations. While satisfaction went down in eight countries, it went up in three, and stayed about the same in one. Nigeria showed the steepest decline: while 84 percent said they were satisfied with their country's democracy in 2000, only 26 percent were satisfied in 2005. The 2000 poll took place shortly after Nigerians ended 15 years of military rule with the election of President Olusegun Obasanjo, whose popularity has declined over his two-terms in office with his government beset by corruption scandals and unable to resolve ethnic and regional conflicts.

Zambia, Malawi, Tanzania, and Botswana also saw satisfaction with their own elected governments fall by more than ten points. In Zimbabwe, only a minority (18%) expressed satisfaction with their country's democracy in 2000. By 2002 that minority had grown to 37 percent only to drop to 14 percent in 2005. The increased satisfaction in 2002 may reflect hopes that Mugabe's land redistribution program—which began in 2000 when his supporters began seizing land from white farmers—would improve the lives of black Zimbabweans. But the expropriations instead have contributed to severe food shortages, exacerbated in 2005 by a severe drought. Opposition leaders accused Mugabe of using fraud and intimidation to engineer his re-election in 2002.

But in Ghana and South Africa, the trend is reversed. Ghanaians have grown more satisfied with their elected government since 2000, when Jerry Rawlings stepped down after two decades in power. While 54 percent said they were fairly or very satisfied with democracy in Ghana in the first Afrobarometer poll, 70 percent say they are in the most recent survey. More South Africans also say they are pleased with how democracy works, more than a decade after they first voted the African National Congress into office. In 2000, when Thabo Mbeki succeeded Nelson Mandela as president, 52 percent said they were satisfied with democracy. In 2005, a year after Mbeki's re-election, 63 percent did. The third country where democracy seems to be getting more popular, though only slightly, is Namibia. Sixty-four percent of Namibians registered satisfaction with their government in 2000 rising to 69 percent five years later. Namibia has enjoyed stability—plus a relatively free press and elections generally regarded as clean—under SWAPO party governments since gaining independence from South Africa in 1989. Party founder Sam Nujoma handed over power after serving three terms in 2005.

Perceptions of Corruption

Large numbers of Africans perceive government officials as crooked, but again the variations between countries were large, with Nigerians seeing the most corruption and Cape Verdeans the least. Afrobarometer found that on average nearly a third of those polled believed that "most" or "all" officials across eight categories (presidential, legislative, local councilors, national and local bureaucrats, police, tax collectors, and judicial) were involved in corruption. A majority of Nigerians thought that most officials were corrupt in all categories, except the

courts. In contrast, fewer than 10 percent of Cape Verdeans judged officials in any of the categories as mostly dishonest. Police were generally seen as the most venal: 50 percent or more of those polled in eight of the 18 countries said most or all were dishonest. But while large majorities of Nigerians (75%), Zambians (70%) and Ugandans (67%) saw police as corrupt, only a minority of Cape Verdeans (7%), Senegalese (27%), and Malawians (28%) did.