

Is Benin's democracy living up to its reputation?

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 321 | Christina Scheller and Mircea Lazar

Summary

Benin has long been seen as a stable democracy, consistently rated as free by Freedom House and achieving several peaceful electoral transfers of power since democratization in the 1990s (Paduano, 2019). However, Benin's recent legislative elections have called this image into question. New eligibility requirements left only two political parties on the ballot, both allied with President Patrice Talon. The government violently suppressed large protests and restricted Internet access, and widespread boycotts led to the lowest voter turnout on record (Paduano, 2019; BBC News, 2019).

Is Benin's democracy as strong as its reputation would suggest?

Results from Afrobarometer 2017 survey in Benin suggest some reservations even before the troubling 2019 elections. While citizens overwhelmingly supported democracy, wanted multiparty competition, and desired a government that is accountable, only half were satisfied with the way the country's democracy was working, and many said they have to be cautious in talking about politics, joining political organizations, and voting. On indicators of the opposition's freedom to function, citizens' marks were only about average compared to other African countries.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer directs a pan-African, nonpartisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys in 2019/2020 are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Benin, led by the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP), interviewed 1,200 adult Beninese in December 2016 and January 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys have been conducted in Benin in 2005, 2008, 2011, and 2014.

Key findings

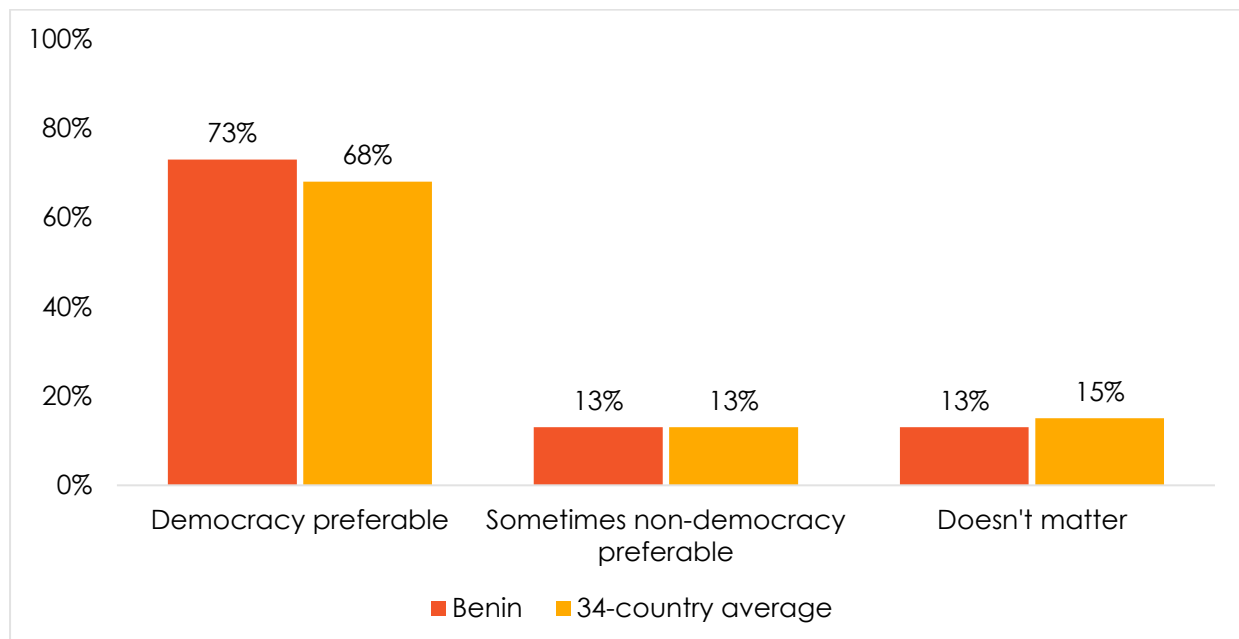
- Nearly three-quarters of Beninese (73%) said they prefer democracy to other systems of government. Large majorities also consistently express a preference for having many political parties, although only 29% said they personally felt close to a party.
- Eight in 10 citizens (79%) said it's more important that the government be accountable than that it get things done – almost twice the level of support for accountability recorded in 2011.

- Only half (51%) of citizens said they were “fairly” or “very” satisfied with the way democracy was working in Benin.
- Strong majorities said that citizens “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (66%), which political organizations they join (69%), and how they vote (78%).
- Four in 10 respondents (41%) said they fear political intimidation or violence during election campaigns at least “a little bit,” including 11% who expressed “a lot” of fear.
- Fewer than half (47%) of Beninese said opposition parties have more freedom to function than they did a few years ago. And 37% said opposition candidates are at least “sometimes” prevented from running for office. On both counts, even before the 2019 elections, Benin was about average among 34 surveyed countries.

Strong demand for democracy

Almost three-fourths (73%) of Beninese said they prefer democracy to other kinds of governments, while one-fourth said that non-democratic regimes can sometimes be preferable (13%) or that it doesn't matter what type of political system the country has (13%). Popular support for democracy is somewhat stronger in Benin than on average across 34 countries surveyed in 2016/2018 (Figure 1).

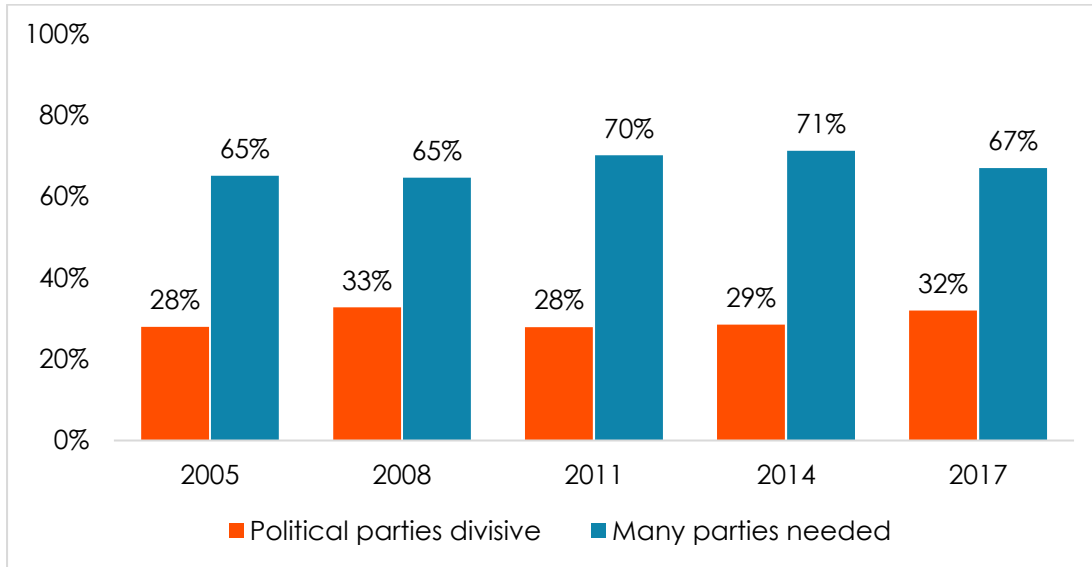
Figure 1: Support for democracy | Benin vs. 34-country average | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?
 Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.
 Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.
 Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

Contrary to moves that kept most political parties off the 2019 ballot, Beninese also consistently prefer having many political parties to ensure that voters have real choices in who governs them. Two-thirds (67%) endorsed multiparty competition in the 2017 survey, a result that has varied only slightly (65%-71%) since 2005 (Figure 2). Only one-third (32%) hold the view that political parties are divisive and should be limited.

Figure 2: Are political parties divisive or are many parties needed? | Benin
 | 2005-2017



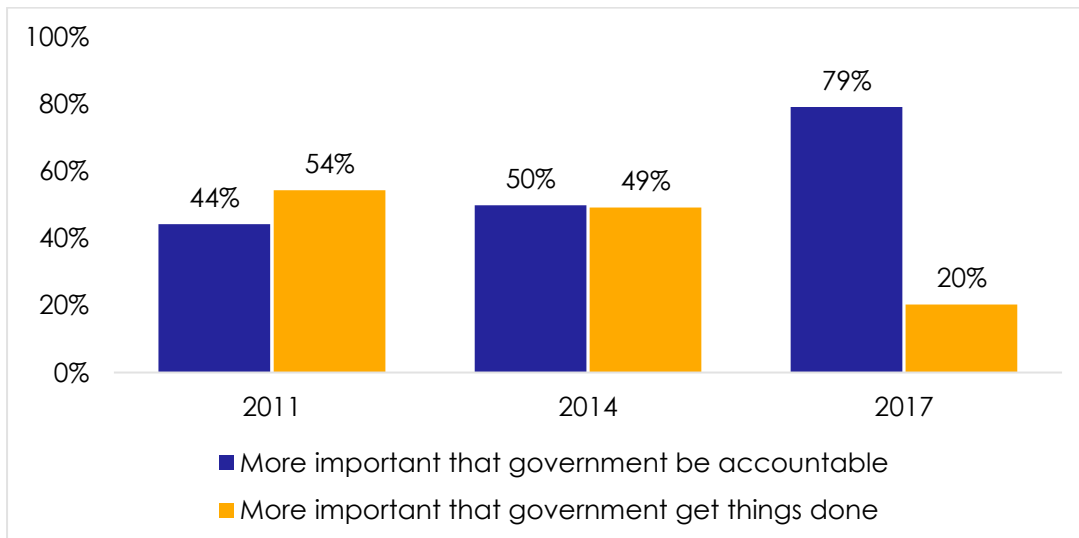
Respondents were asked: Which statement is closest to your view?

Statement 1: Political parties create division and confusion; it is therefore unnecessary to have many political parties in Benin.

Statement 2: Many political parties are needed to make sure that Beninese have real choices in who governs them.

In addition to consistent support for democracy, citizens express a growing desire for government accountability. In 2011, a majority (54%) preferred a government that could get things done, even if citizens had no influence over what it does. But by 2017, nearly eight in 10 said it's more important to have a government that is accountable to its citizens, even if it works more slowly (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Government accountability vs. efficiency | Benin | 2011-2017



Respondents were asked: Which statement is closest to your view?

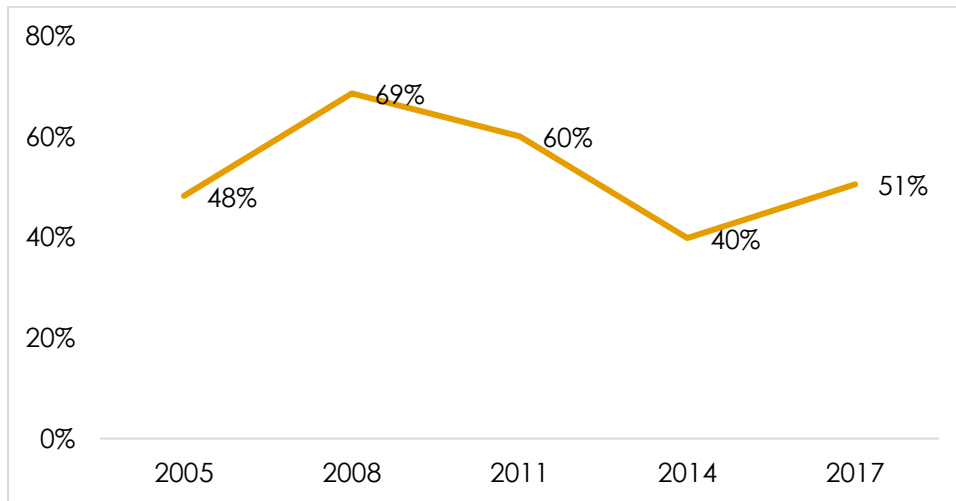
Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

Dissatisfaction with democracy

While most Beninese want a democratic and accountable government, only half (51%) said they were “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the way their system was working. That’s an increase of 11 percentage points compared to 2014 but well below satisfaction levels in 2008 (69%) and 2011 (60%) (Figure 4)

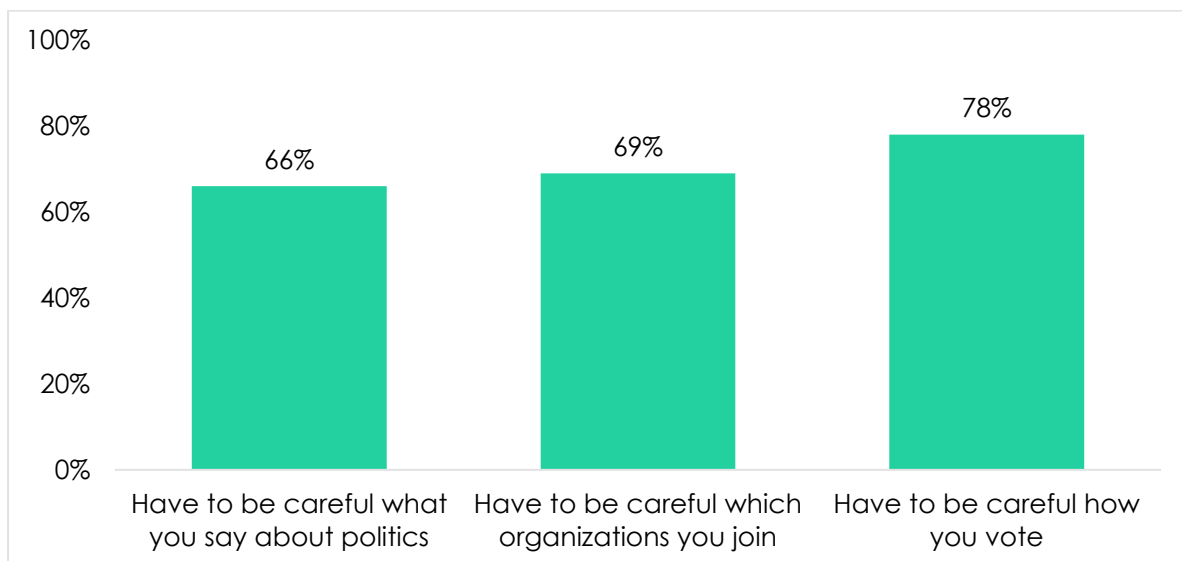
Figure 4: Satisfaction with democracy | Benin | 2005-2017



Respondents were asked: Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Benin? (% who said “fairly satisfied” or “very satisfied”)

Most Beninese are also cautious in exercising their political rights. About two-thirds of respondents said that people “often” or “always” have to be careful about what they say about politics (66%) and about which political organizations they join (69%). An even greater majority (78%) said people have to be careful about how they vote (Figure 5).

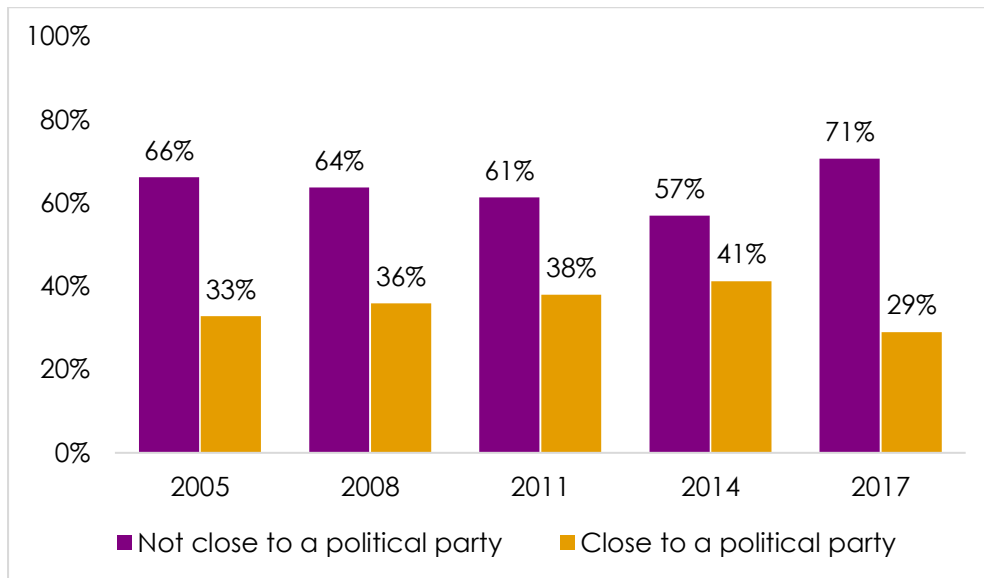
Figure 5: Caution about exercising political freedoms | Benin | 2017



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, how often, in this country:
 Do people have to be careful what they say about politics?
 Do people have to be careful about which political organisations they join?
 Do people have to be careful about how they vote in an election?

Benin also has a very weak and volatile political-party system, with major changes in parties from one election to the next and a tradition of independent political candidates winning office (Paduano, 2019). In 2017, 71% of Beninese said they did not “feel close to” any political party, up from 57% in 2014 (Figure 6). Thus, while two-thirds of Beninese prefer many political parties, few feel close to a party themselves.

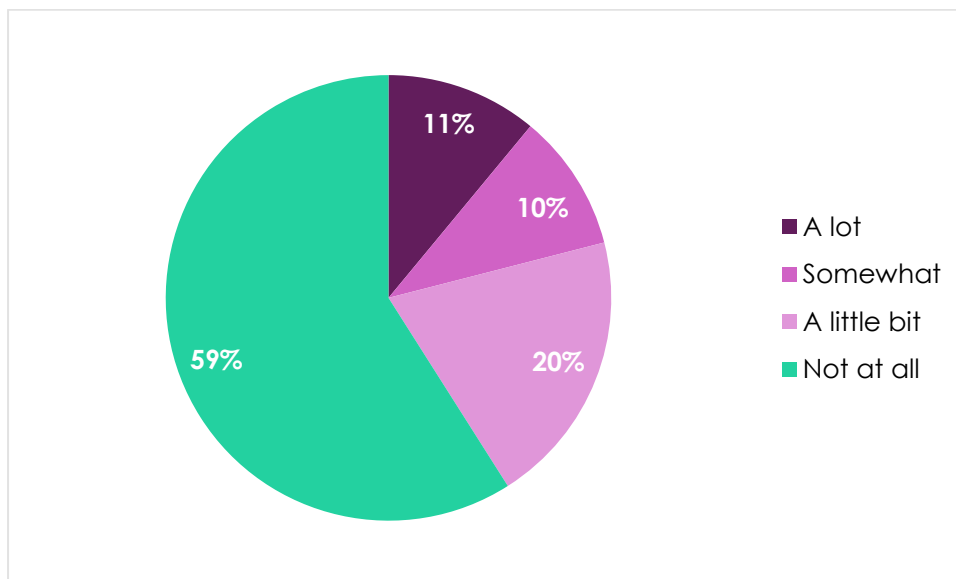
Figure 6: Do you feel close to a political party? | Benin | 2005-2017



Respondents were asked: Do you feel close to any particular political party?

Four in 10 Beninese (41%) said they feared political intimidation or violence during election campaigns, including 11% who expressed “a lot” of fear (Figure 7). While a majority (59%) were unafraid, the proportion of citizens worried about political violence was sizable even prior to the violent confrontations during the 2019 elections.

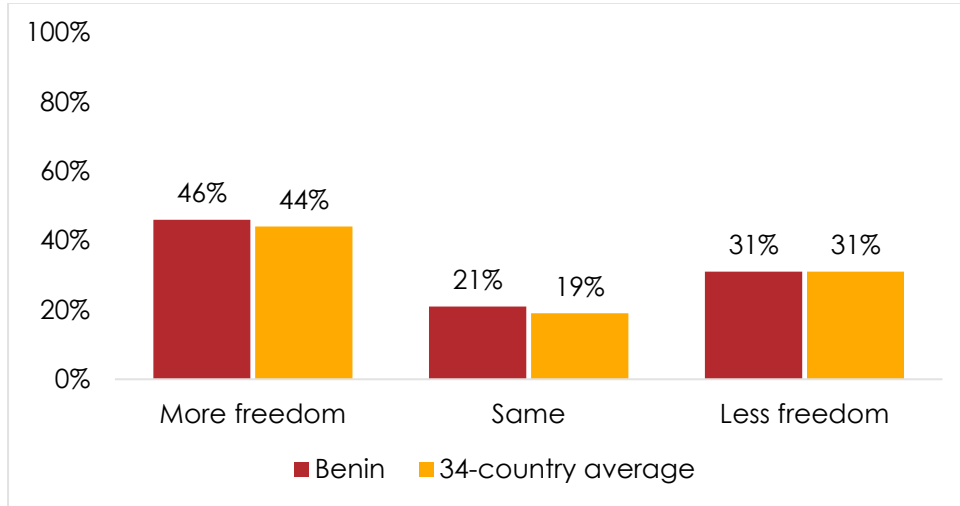
Figure 7: Fear of political intimidation or violence | Benin | 2017



Respondents were asked: During election campaigns in Benin, how much do you personally fear becoming a victim of political intimidation or violence?

Fewer than half (46%) of Beninese said in 2017 that the freedom for opposition parties to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize the government had increased compared to “a few years ago.” A slim majority instead thought that the opposition’s freedom had diminished (31%) or remained unchanged (21%) (Figure 8). Even before the events of 2019, these assessments – about average among the 34 surveyed countries – did not highlight Benin as an unusual democratic success story.

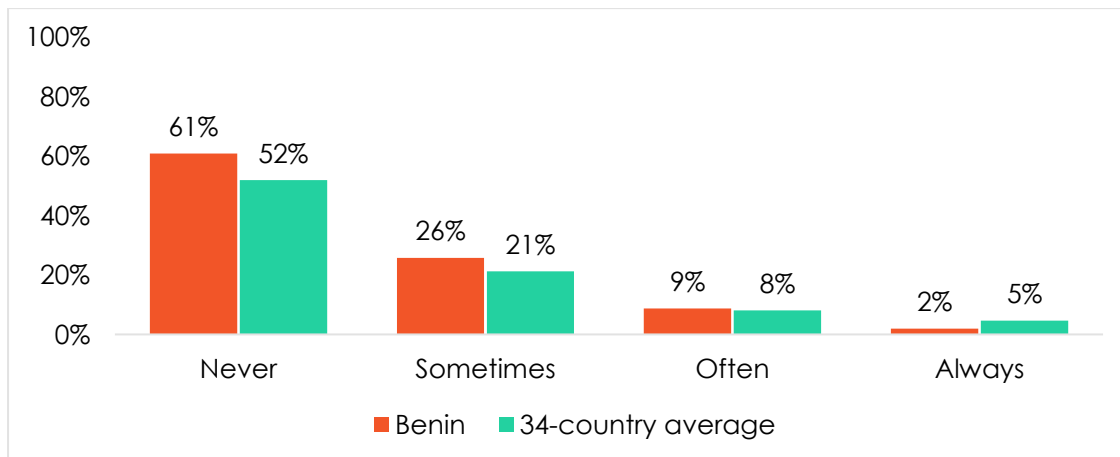
Figure 8: Opposition freedom compared to a few years ago | Benin vs. 34-country average | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: Regarding the freedom of opposition parties or candidates to speak or hold rallies, state their views, or criticize their government, is there more or less freedom now compared to a few years ago, or are things about the same?

A substantial minority (37%) of respondents said opposition candidates are at least “sometimes” prevented from running for office, including about one in 10 who said this happens “often” or “always” (Figure 9). Compared to the average across 34 surveyed countries, Beninese in 2017 were somewhat more likely to say that opposition candidates are “never” prevented from contesting elections (61% vs. 52%). We do not know how the 2019 legislative election might affect assessments on this issue.

Figure 9: Are opposition candidates prevented from running for office? | Benin vs. 34-country average | 2016/2018



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, during this country’s elections, how often are opposition candidates prevented from running for office?

Conclusion

The legislative elections of 2019 did little for Benin's reputation for stability and democracy. But Afrobarometer findings suggest that even two years earlier, many citizens were less than enthusiastic about their democracy. While most demanded democratic practices, about half were dissatisfied with the way their democracy was working, and majorities said people have to exercise caution when it comes to political expression. Findings from the next Afrobarometer survey, expected in the coming months, will provide an update on how Benin's long-standing reputation compares against realities on the ground.

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for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at
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References

BBC. (2019). Benin holds vote with no opposition candidates. 28 April.

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