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# Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat'

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## Introduction

The increasing threat to democracy from populist movements and authoritarian leaders occupies a prominent place in current political debate. Yet political scientists who study this question reach contrasting conclusions, often because they use different measures and standards of democracy. Some say the world is in a democratic recession, with countries experiencing recent declines in the quality of democracy outnumbering those where it has improved (Diamond, 2015; Lührmann, Mechkova, & Wilson, 2017; Economist, 2018; Freedom House, 2018). Others see no such decline (Levitsky, 2015) or trendless variation (Jiménez, 2017; Skaaning & Jiménez, 2017).

In Africa, Freedom House has tracked a significant retreat in political rights, civil liberties, and the overall quality of democracy. The biggest shifts have occurred among countries previously rated as “partly free,” many of which have retreated to “not free” status. Analysts have observed that this is often the result of hybrid regimes using counter-terrorism legislation to shrink democratic spaces (Temin, 2017) or of governments responding to increased electoral competition by restricting opposition parties and critical civil society organizations (Cheeseman, 2019). On the other hand, the V-Dem Institute finds more positive than negative change in Africa (Lührmann et al., 2018).

African public opinion seems to embody this sense of divergence. While Yasha Mounk (2018) has claimed to find a systematic decline in citizens' attachment to democracy across most of the established democracies in North America and Western Europe, Africans' responses to questions posed by Afrobarometer over the past decade present a more varied and complex picture.


At the most general level, the picture seems relatively clear and simple: The typical African is strongly committed to democracy and opposed to authoritarian rule, and has remained so for more than a decade.

However, this image of solid democratic commitment changes radically if we narrow our focus to only those people who consistently express pro-democratic preferences across several different survey questions – those whom Afrobarometer describes as “demanding democracy” (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005). Under these more demanding criteria, fewer than half of all Africans qualify as committed democrats. And levels of commitment vary sharply depending on a person's demographic category and level of political engagement.

The picture becomes even more complex when we look at specific countries or take a longer-term view. In some countries, publics are strongly committed to democracy, while in others people are largely indifferent. Similarly, some societies are developing more favourable views of democracy over time, while others are moving in the opposite direction. These trends in individual countries may matter even more than trends on the continent as a whole.

The same kind of complexity emerges when we examine people's evaluations of democracy. A slight majority of the Africans we interviewed say their country is a democracy, and somewhat fewer people are satisfied with the way democracy works – two indicators that Afrobarometer combines to measure the perceived “supply of democracy.” Overall, Africans say they get less democracy than they want. But in some countries, the perceived supply of democracy is greater than demand. And while this supply is increasing in some countries, it is declining in others.

What does this mix of results mean for the survival of Africa's multiparty regimes and the deepening of democracy? Of course, a great deal will depend on factors other than what citizens think, such as the degree to which democratic values are embraced by a country's leaders and elites, as well as the extent to which countervailing institutions (legislature, courts) constrain the executive. But we argue that popular demands also have the power to drive countries toward democracy, and that this is most likely under certain conditions of high, but unmet, popular demand. In particular, this report concludes by highlighting the specific



importance of citizens who are not only deeply committed to democracy but who also adopt a critical perspective toward their country's current leaders and institutions – in other words, those citizens who demand democracy but do not think they are getting it. We describe these citizens as “dissatisfied democrats.” To the extent that citizens' commitment to democracy matters for the survival and quality of democracy, evidence suggests that it is these dissatisfied democrats who matter most.

While fewer than one in six Africans qualify as dissatisfied democrats in our most recent round of surveys, they make up much larger proportions in some countries in which electoral processes are deeply flawed and opposition forces are harassed, suggesting a continuing struggle between the forces of democracy and autocracy. However, dissatisfied democrats are in especially short supply in other places where the space for opposition has recently narrowed, offering little evidence that further restrictions will meet popular resistance.

## 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, conducted with more than 45,000 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 Round 7 cross-country analyses, at #VoicesAfrica and sign up for our distribution list at [www.afrobarometer.org](http://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 33 countries that were surveyed in both Round 6 (2014/2015) and Round 7, as well as longer-period comparisons for countries that have been tracked for more than a decade (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.

## Key findings

- Across 34 surveyed countries, the average African still prefers democratic rule. As in the previous survey round, more than two-thirds (68%) say that democracy is the best form of government. In addition, more than seven in 10 reject abandoning multiparty elections in favour of strong-man rule (78%), a one-party state (74%), or military rule (72%).
  - However, this apparently optimistic finding is tempered by three important forms of divergence in popular attitudes to democracy:
    - First, individual respondents vary greatly in terms of their depth of commitment. While between two-thirds and three-quarters of all people agree with at least one of our signature questions on democracy and autocracy, only four in 10 (42%) simultaneously agree with all four – a measure of what we call popular “demand for democracy.”
- Citizens' commitment to democracy also varies in important ways across demographic categories. Demand is highest among those who live in urban settings and work in middle-class occupations. Women are significantly less likely to demand democracy than men.
- But attitudes toward democracy have even stronger roots in people's cognitive abilities, with demand highest among those who have a university

education, are strongly interested in politics, and/or frequently read newspapers and use the Internet.

- Second, countries vary greatly in their attitudes toward democracy. While two-thirds of respondents in Zambia (67%) and Mauritius (66%) prefer democracy and reject all three forms of authoritarian rule, fewer than one-quarter do so in South Africa (23%), Burkina Faso (23%), Madagascar (22%), Mozambique (21%), Lesotho (19%), Tunisia (17%) and eSwatini (15%).
- Third, attitudes at the country level have followed very different paths over time. Over the past three years, demand for democracy declined in 14 countries and grew in only seven countries. Over a decade-long time frame, however, demand grew in eight countries and shrank in only four.
- Slightly more than half (51%) of all Africans surveyed say their country is a full democracy or a democracy with minor problems. But only 43% are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. And just 34% both feel they live in a democracy *and* are satisfied, meaning they perceive what we call an adequate supply of democracy.
- Across Africa, the perceived supply of democracy is lower than demand, meaning that many people get less democracy than they want. For the most part, Africans' judgments about the quality of democracy in their country align with the assessments of outside experts. However, a substantial number of people think they are living in a democracy when, according to a range of different expert ratings, they are not. This is especially salient in countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, and the Gambia.
- Available evidence suggests that democracy is most secure against backsliding in countries where significant proportions of citizens demand democracy yet remain discontented with its performance. Perhaps our most worrying finding is that fewer than one in six Africans (15%) currently qualify as "dissatisfied democrats."

## The good news

Since 2000, Afrobarometer has asked respondents the same series of core questions to gauge their preferences with regard to political regimes. To assess the level of popular support for democracy, we ask:

*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 government we have.*

Based on interviews with more than 45,000 citizens across 34 African countries in 2016/2018, the average (median) African sees democracy as the preferred type of regime. More than two-thirds (68%) of all respondents say that democracy is preferable. Just one in eight (13%) believe that a non-democratic regime is sometimes better, and the balance say that the form of political regime "doesn't matter" (15%) or that they "don't know" (4%).

However, many people who study public opinion worry about the validity of responses to questions that use the "d-word." They point out that people may have widely differing views of what "democracy" means, or that respondents may simply register socially desirable responses to a "motherhood" issue. Thus, to probe the depth of popular commitment to democracy, we also ask people to evaluate alternative types of non-democratic regimes by asking:

*There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?*

*A. Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.*

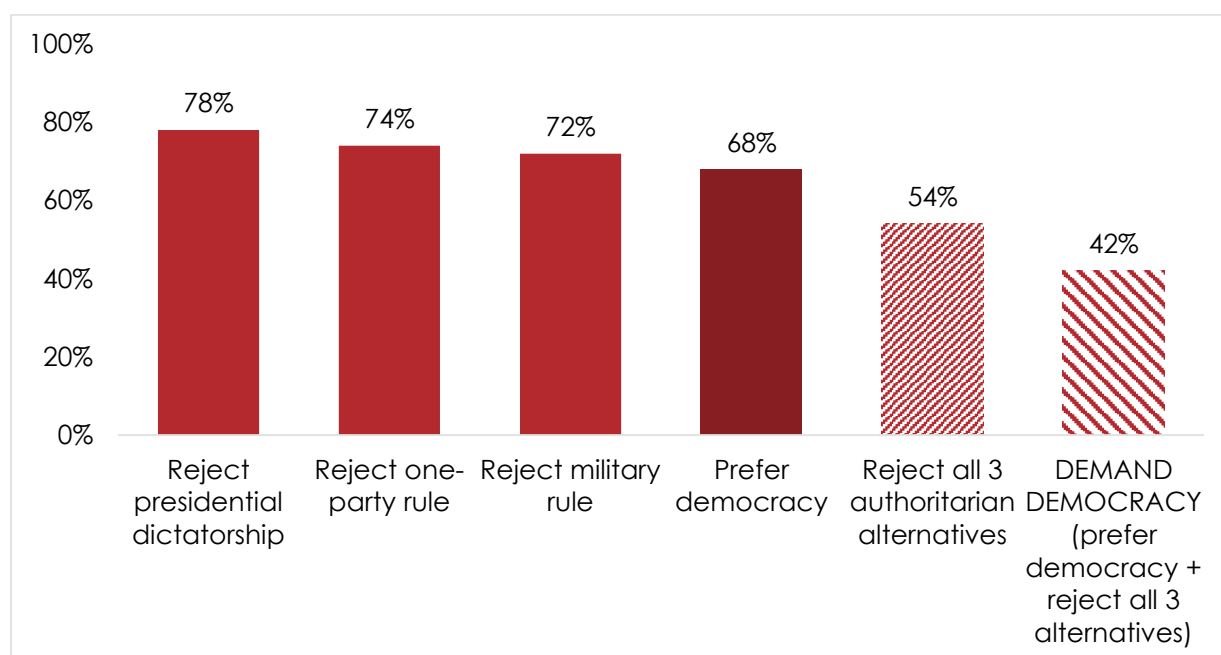
- B. The army comes in to govern the country.
- C. Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

We find that these concerns are misplaced. Responses to this second set of questions are broadly consistent with those to the question that uses the “d-word” (democracy). Across the 34 countries surveyed, at least seven in 10 respondents reject presidential dictatorship (78%), a one-party state (74%), and military rule (72%) (Figure 1). Thus, not only do people say they support democracy, but the average African also opposes the very kinds of authoritarianism that most African countries have experienced in the past. Indeed, opposition to these alternatives is higher than explicit support for democracy, suggesting that Africans are slightly more certain about the kinds of regime they *don't* want.

To be sure, significant pockets of explicit approval of authoritarian practices exist: Fully one in five respondents support the idea of military rule (22%) or a one-party state (20%), and 12% are willing to accept an unfettered executive.

Against the view of a weakening popular embrace of democracy, an over-time examination among the 33 countries that were also surveyed in Round 6 (2014/2015)<sup>1</sup> shows that support for democracy and rejection of presidential dictatorship remain unchanged, though there are small but statistically significant decreases in rejection of one-party rule (from 79% to 74%) and rejection of military rule (from 74% to 71%).

**Figure 1: Key demand-side indicators of democracy | 34 countries | 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 government we have.

(% who say democracy is preferable)

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives?

A. Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

B. The army comes in to govern the country.

C. Elections and Parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

(% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

<sup>1</sup> Of the 34 countries surveyed in Round 7, only the Gambia was not included in Round 6.

## Africans' diverging views

While the average African prefers democracy and rejects alternative authoritarian regimes, the image of a continent-wide consensus in favour of democracy should be tempered by three important forms of divergence in popular attitudes toward democracy: the (in)consistency of people's answers across these questions, the divergence of results across national publics, and the contrasting directions in which various societies have moved over time.

### Individual-level divergence

While large majorities of respondents agree with any one of the pro-democracy indicators reviewed in the previous section, fewer than half consistently agree with *all* of these sentiments simultaneously. A slim majority (54%) consistently reject military rule, presidential dictatorship<sup>2</sup>, and the one-party state. And when we add the requirement that a committed democrat also prefer democracy, the percentage drops even further: Only four in 10 (42%) agree with all four items, or “demand democracy” (Figure 1).

Moreover, the level of consistent demand for democracy varies in important ways across demographic and social categories (Figure 2). For example, demand is higher among men (46%) than women (37%) and among urban (45%) than rural (39%) residents. It is also higher among middle-aged respondents (46% of 46- to 55-year-olds) than either younger or older people (39% of 18- to 25-year-olds, 38% of those aged 66 and over).

**Figure 2: Demand for democracy** | by demographic group | 34 countries | 2016/2018

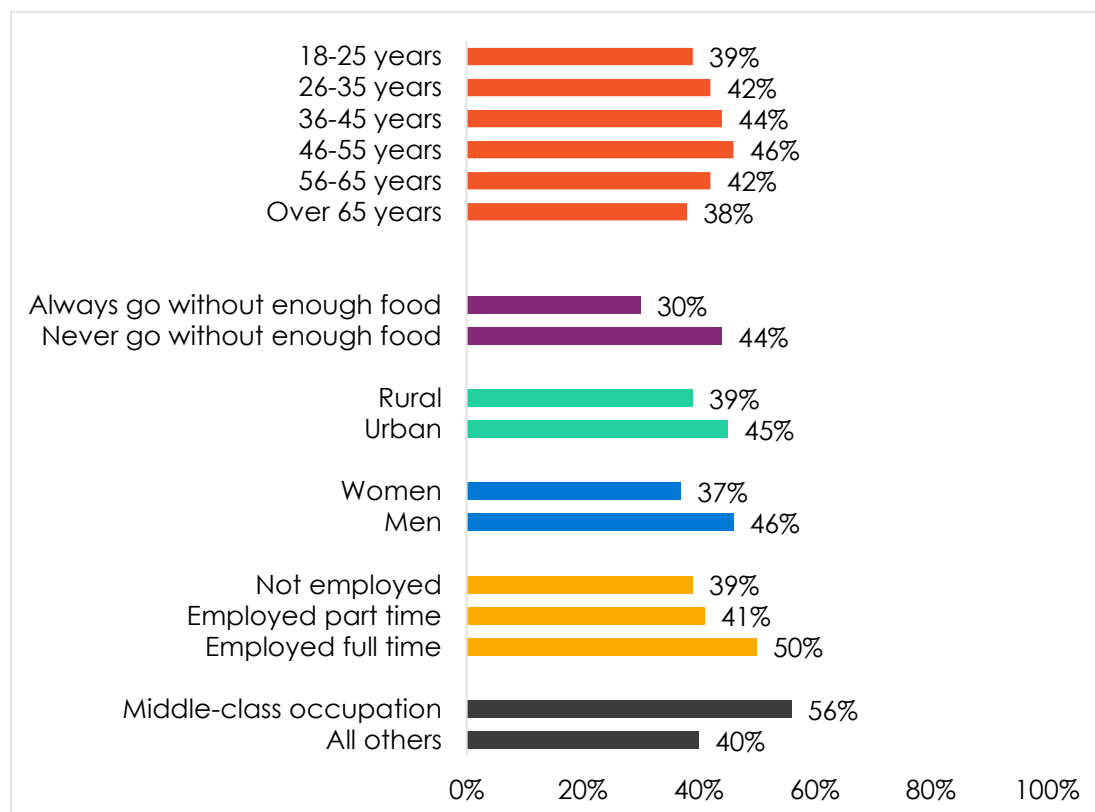


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives, disaggregated by demographic group.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the question about presidential dictatorship was not asked in eSwatini in Round 7, so for eSwatini we substituted a similar question that asks respondents whether “the president must always obey the laws and courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.”

Demand is also higher among the most economically secure respondents. For example, of those people who told Afrobarometer that they “never” went without enough food in the past 12 months, 44% are committed democrats, compared to just 30% of those who said they “always” lack sufficient sustenance. And one-half (50%) of people with full-time jobs demand democracy, compared to 39% of unemployed respondents. Demand rises as high as 56% among those who have a middle-class occupation (businesspeople and professionals), compared to just 40% among all other respondents.

The divergence is even greater when we compare people at different levels of political and social engagement and awareness (Figure 3). For instance, people who frequently discuss politics with friends and family are 17 percentage points more likely to demand democracy than those who never do so (50% vs. 33%). The same trends emerge with regard to watching television news and using the Internet or mobile phones. The differences are greatest with regard to formal education. Among those with a post-secondary education, demand is a full 20 percentage points higher (54%) than among those with no formal education (34%).

**Figure 3: Demand for democracy** | by cognitive indicator | 34 countries  
| 2016/2018

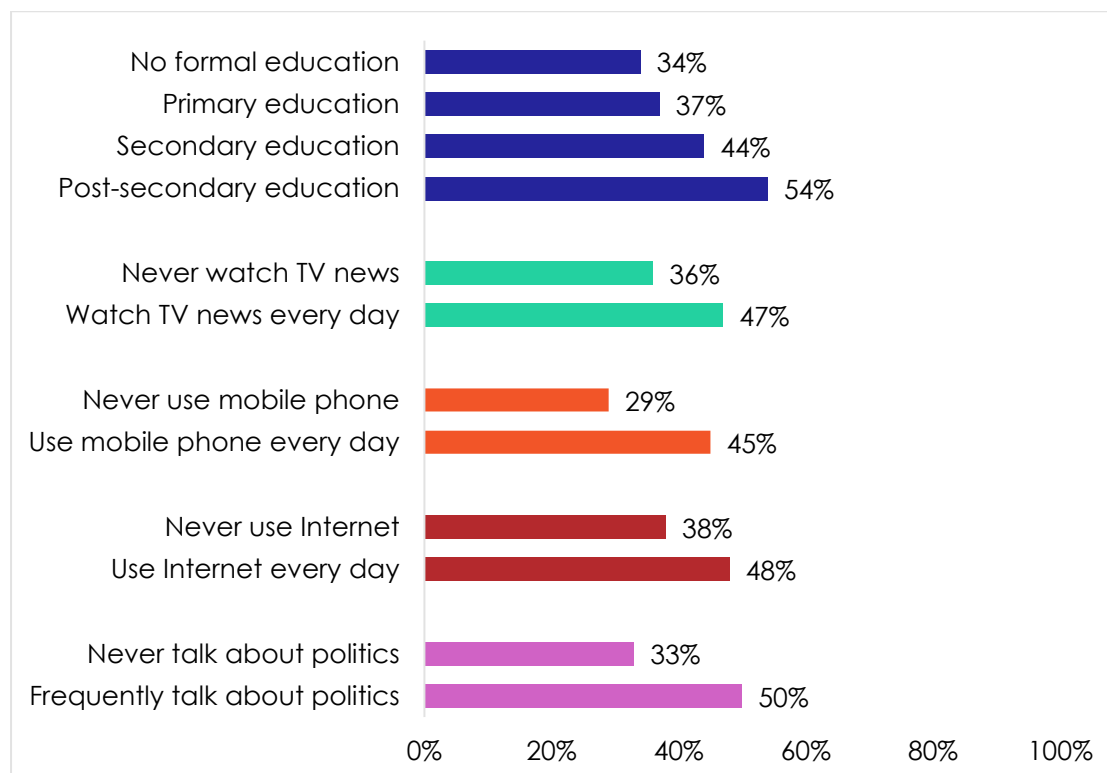


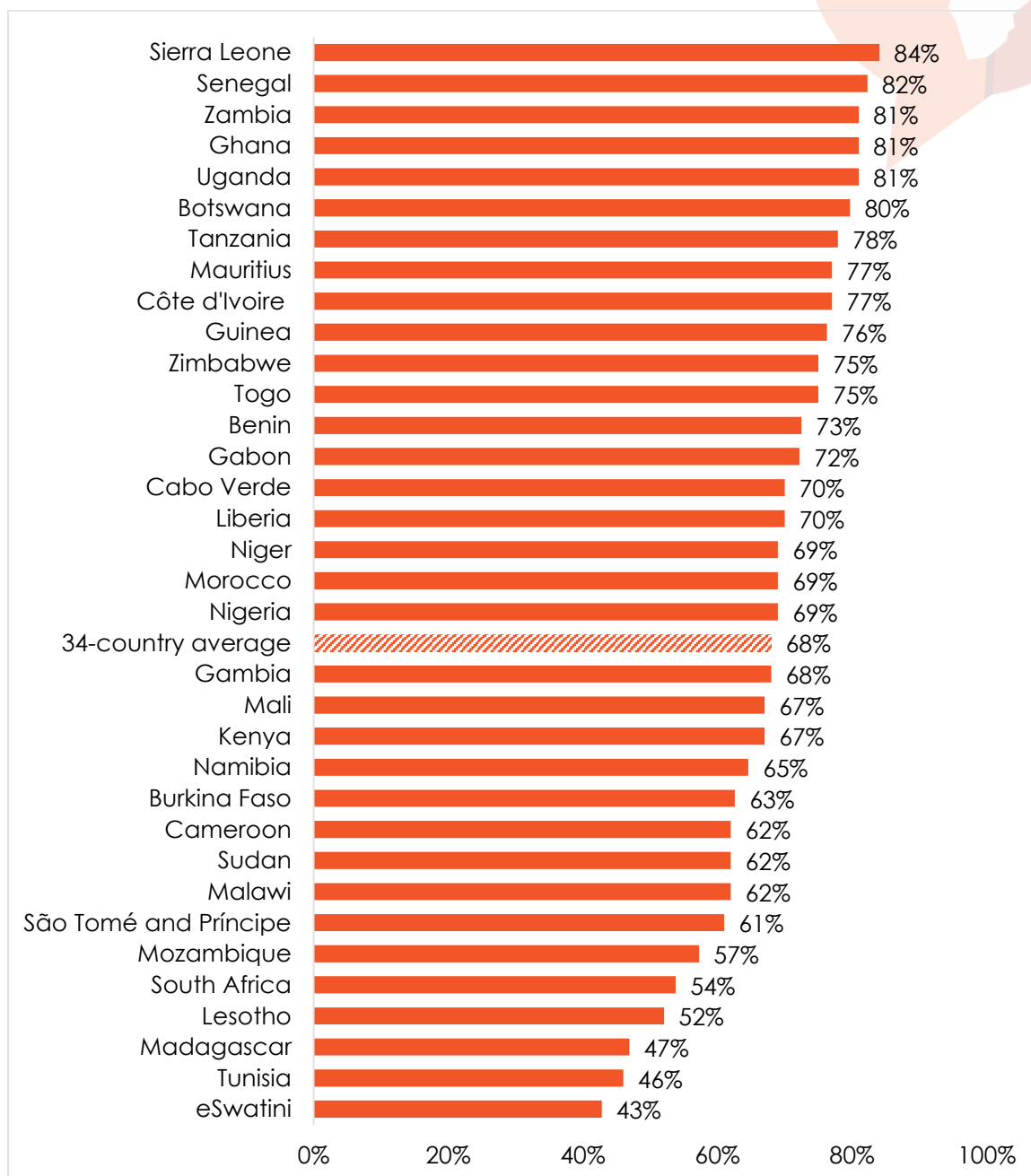
Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives, disaggregated by cognitive indicator.

### Variation across countries

From a continent-wide perspective, the average African supports democracy, but this is not always true at the country level. In fact, there is a 41-percentage-point difference between the countries with the highest and lowest levels of support (Figure 4). While 68% of all Africans interviewed say they prefer democracy, the figure rises as high as 84% in Sierra Leone, a country that has just experienced a successful turnover in power after the previous government respected constitutional term limits. Support is also very high in some of Africa's most established democracies, such as Senegal (82%), Ghana (81%), Botswana (80%), and Mauritius (77%). But it also remains high even in some countries where presidents have actively tried to shrink democratic spaces and harass opposition forces, such as Zambia

(81%), Uganda (81%), and Tanzania (78%). Yet fewer than half of all citizens prefer democracy in Madagascar (47%), Tunisia (46%), and eSwatini (43%).

**Figure 4: Support for democracy** | 34 countries | 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.

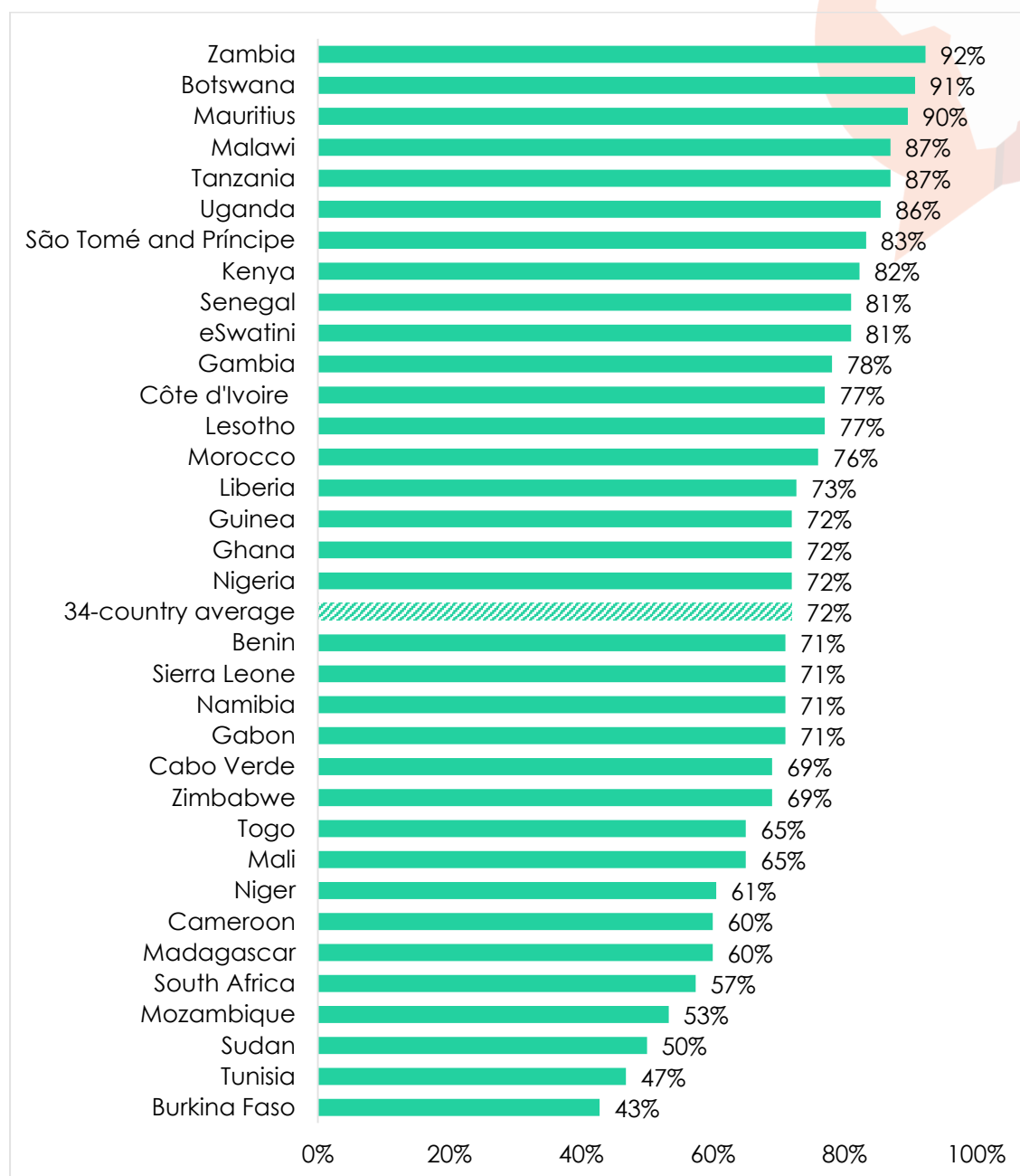
Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind government we have.

(% who say democracy is preferable)

There are even larger cross-country differences when we turn to the rejection of authoritarianism. For rejection of military rule, there is a 49-percentage-point gap between Zambia (92%) at the top and Burkina Faso (43%) at the bottom. Rejection also declines to fewer than six in 10 in South Africa, Mozambique, Sudan, and Tunisia (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Rejection of military rule | 34 countries | 2016/2018**



**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: The army comes in to govern the country?*  
 (% who “disagree” or “strongly disagree”)

We see a similar 50-point difference in rejection of a one-party state (not shown), ranging from Senegal (89%) down to Lesotho (39%), with rejection also falling to fewer than six in 10 in Mozambique and Tunisia. And for rejection of presidential dictatorship (not shown), 51 points separate the highest (Benin, Botswana, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia, all 92%) and the lowest (Mozambique, 41%), though there is at least greater consensus on this item: At least six in 10 respondents oppose an unelected president in all countries except Mozambique (the question was not asked in eSwatini).

The largest gap across countries (52 percentage points) occurs in the combined indicator of demand for democracy. While two-thirds of respondents in Zambia (67%) and Mauritius (66%) both prefer democracy and reject all three forms of authoritarian rule, fewer than one-

quarter do so in South Africa (23%), Burkina Faso (23%), Madagascar (22%), Mozambique (21%), Lesotho (19%), Tunisia (17%) and eSwatini (15%) (Figure 6). Thus, while democracy has taken great strides over the past five years in Burkina Faso and Tunisia, the publics in those societies have yet to fully embrace this form of regime. On the other hand, the popular image of democracy has been tarnished in other established democracies by unstable electoral coalitions (Lesotho) or numerous examples of high-level corruption (South Africa).

**Figure 6: Demand for democracy | 34 countries | 2016/2018**

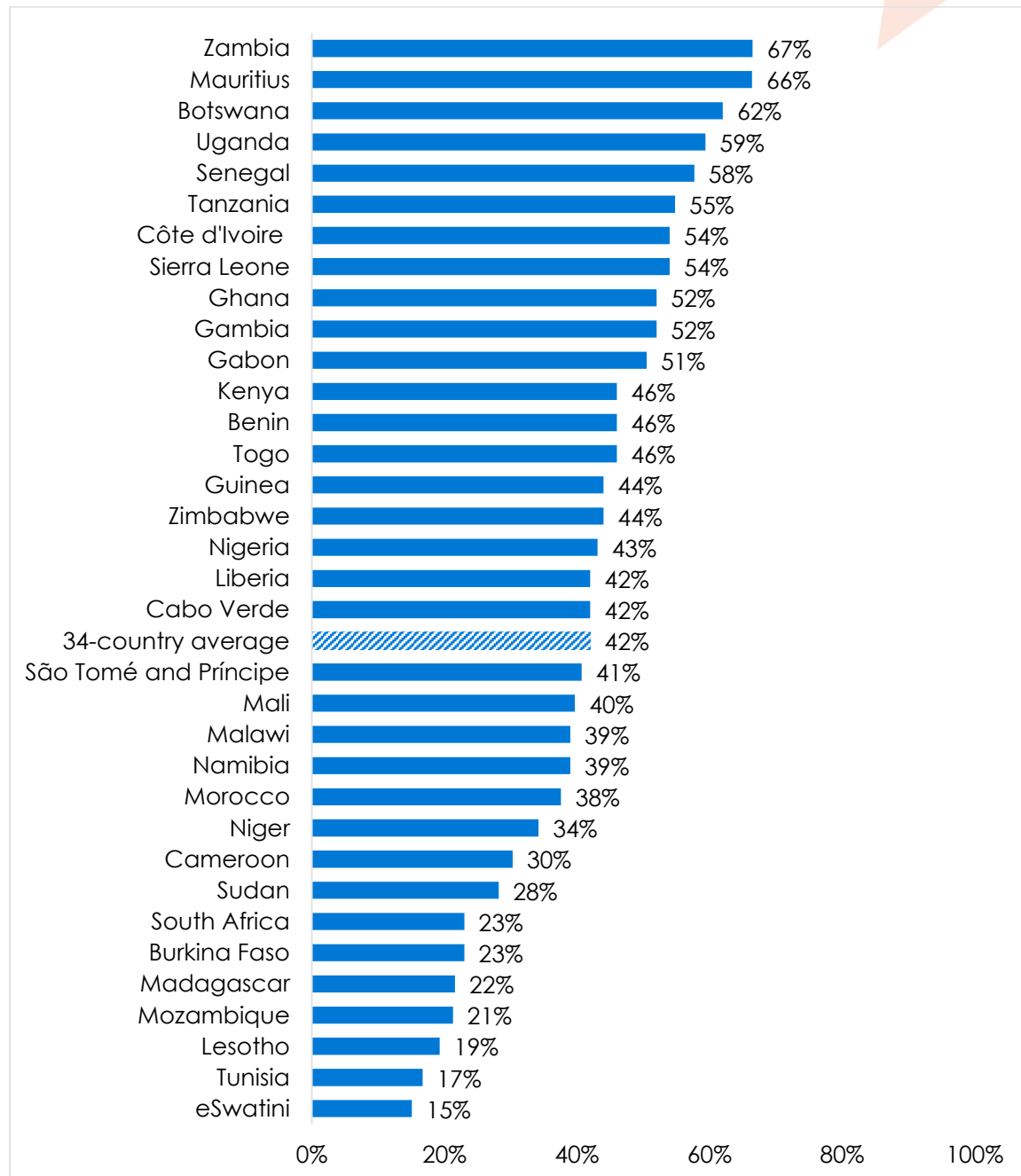


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives.

### Variation across time

Not only do attitudes to democracy vary widely across countries, but public opinion in different societies has followed contrasting paths over time. We begin by examining the most short-term change, from Round 6 surveys in 2014/2015 to Round 7 surveys in 2016/2018. As

reported earlier, continent-wide levels of support for democracy and rejection of presidential dictatorship remain unchanged across the 33 countries included in both rounds, though there were decreases in rejection of one-party rule and rejection of military rule. Taken together, these question-specific differences resulted in a 3-percentage-point reduction in the combined indicator of demand for democracy. In Round 6, 44% of respondents were consistent democrats, but this figure declined to 41% in Round 7 among this slightly smaller group of countries.

However, this decline was not uniform across all countries. Using a minimum of a 5-percentage-point change over time as our criterion, there was no substantial change in 13 countries. We observe *increased* demand for democracy in seven countries, led by a +17-percentage-point surge in Uganda and substantial gains in Tanzania (+13 points), Mozambique (+12), and Sudan (+11) (Figure 7). These increases are all the more encouraging because they appear to have taken place in the face of government attempts to harass political opponents, especially in Tanzania and Uganda.

At the same time, public opinion moved in the opposite direction in 14 countries, including double-digit declines in demand for democracy in Niger (-19 points), Burkina Faso (-17), Cabo Verde (-15), South Africa (-12), Namibia (-12), Benin (-11), and Côte d'Ivoire (-11).

**Figure 7: Changes in demand for democracy | 2014-2018**

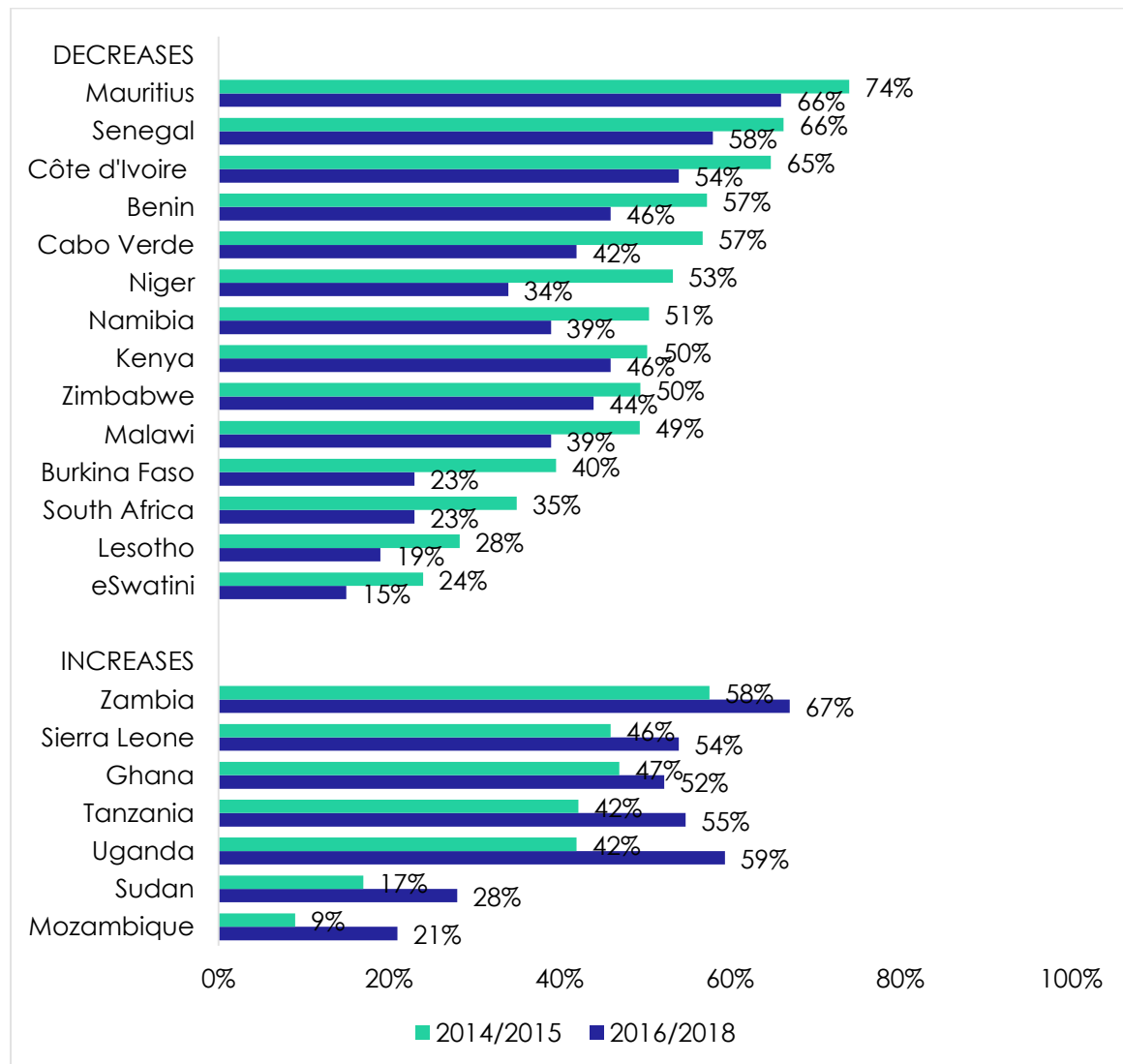


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives.

If we go back further and instead use the Round 5 surveys (2011/2013) as our benchmark, it is apparent that several of these declines had been set in motion even earlier. We find consistent declines in demand across the last three survey rounds in Zimbabwe, Malawi, South Africa, and Lesotho. No country registered consistent increases over this time span (Figure 8). So in these near-term comparisons, there is somewhat more bad news than good news, and some support for the contention that Africa is experiencing democratic decline.

But to obtain an even longer-term perspective, we focus on a smaller set of 20 countries that have been surveyed by Afrobarometer for at least a decade.<sup>3</sup> When viewed in this way, we find a more balanced set of reasons for both optimism and pessimism about the continent's democratic trajectory.

For example, even though Senegal, Zimbabwe, and Namibia have witnessed recent declines in demand for democracy, the current levels of demand in those countries are still higher than they were in Afrobarometer surveys carried out in 2002/2003 (Round 2). In fact, eight of the 20 countries for which we have longer time series have seen *increases* in demand over this period (Figure 9). In contrast, just four countries have levels of demand that are lower today than in 2002/2003: South Africa, Kenya, Lesotho, and Liberia (compared to that country's first survey in 2008/2009) (Figure 10).

**Figure 8: Decreases in demand for democracy | 2011-2018**

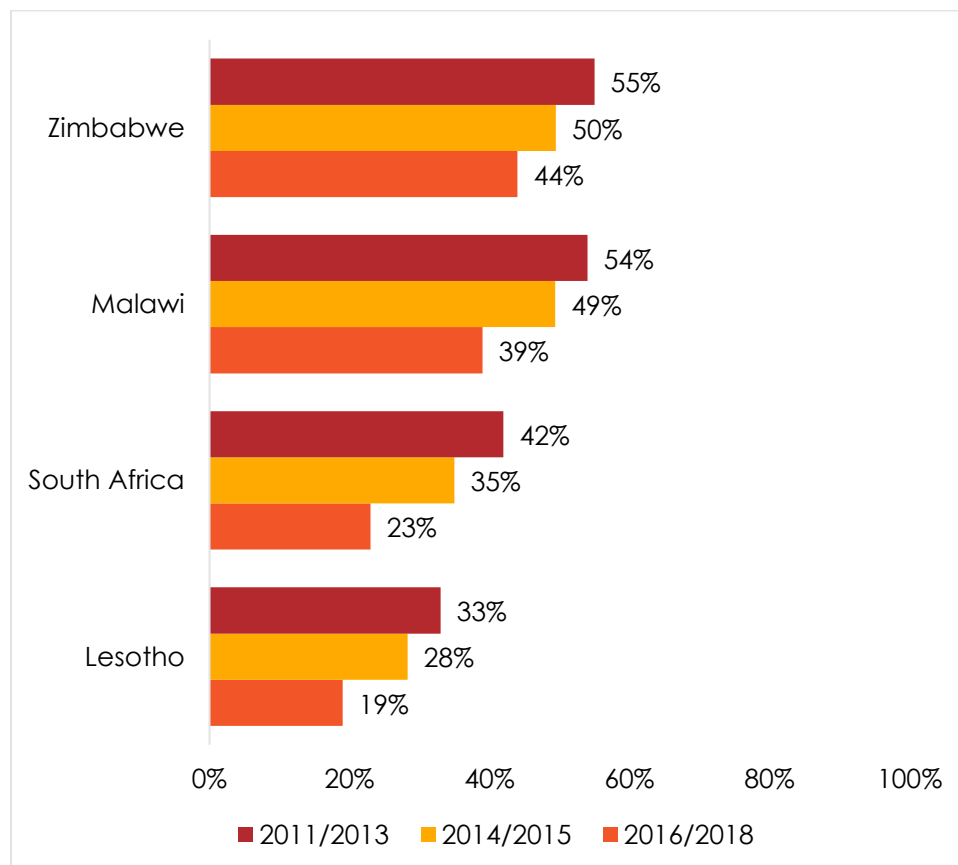


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives.

<sup>3</sup> We have surveys going back to Round 4 (2008/2009) in Burkina Faso and Liberia, back to Round 3 (2005/2006) in Benin and Madagascar, and back to Round 2 (2002/2003) in Botswana, Cabo Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

**Figure 9: Long-term increases in demand for democracy | 2002-2018**

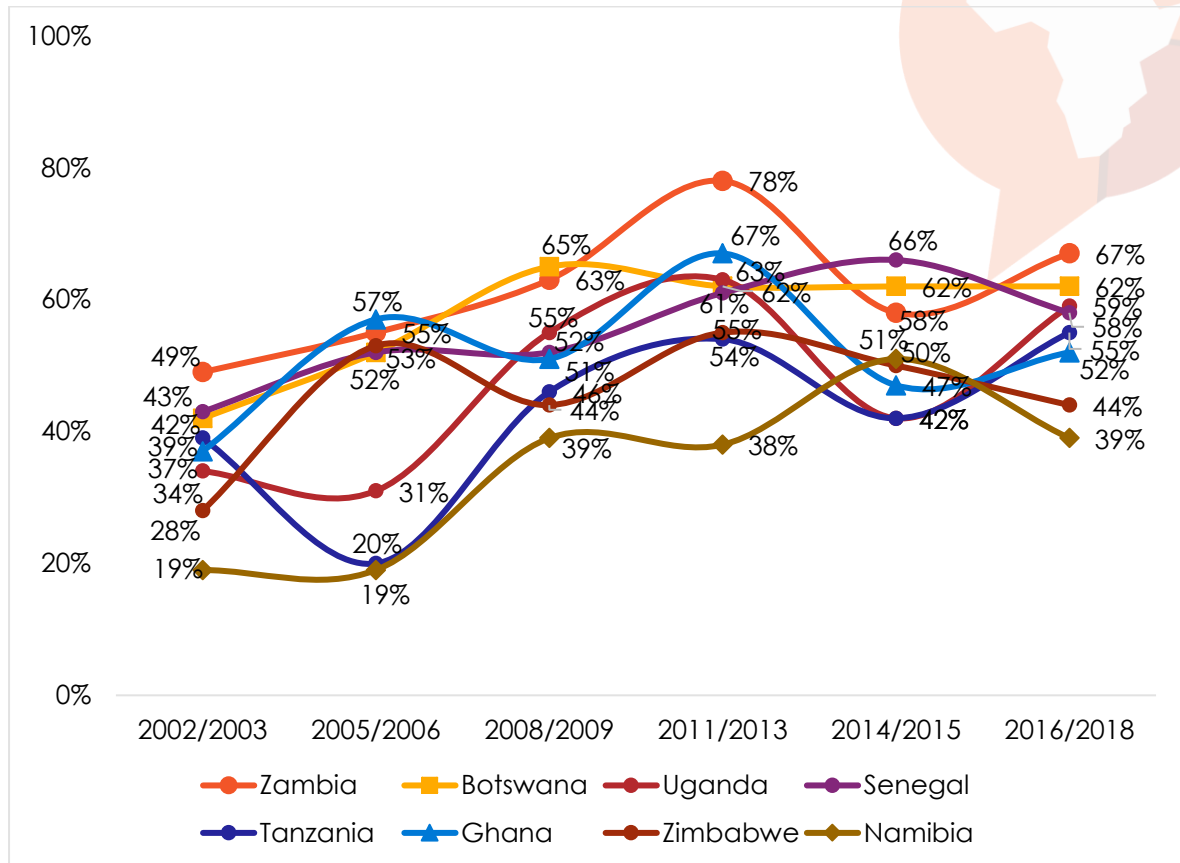


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives.

**Figure 10: Long-term decreases in demand for democracy | 2002-2018**

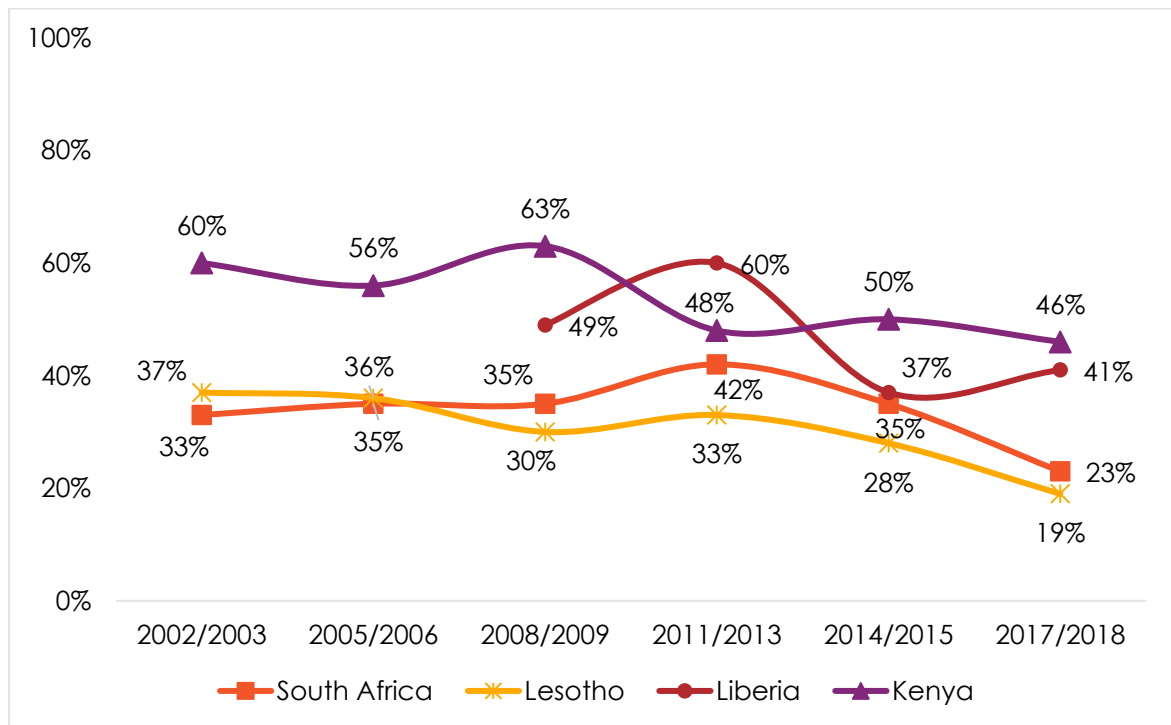


Figure shows % who demand democracy, i.e. who both prefer democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives.

## Do Africans think they are getting democracy?

To recap: We have seen that significant proportions of Africans want to be ruled democratically, though the picture varies greatly across individuals, across countries, and across time. We now turn to the question of whether Africans think they are getting democracy.

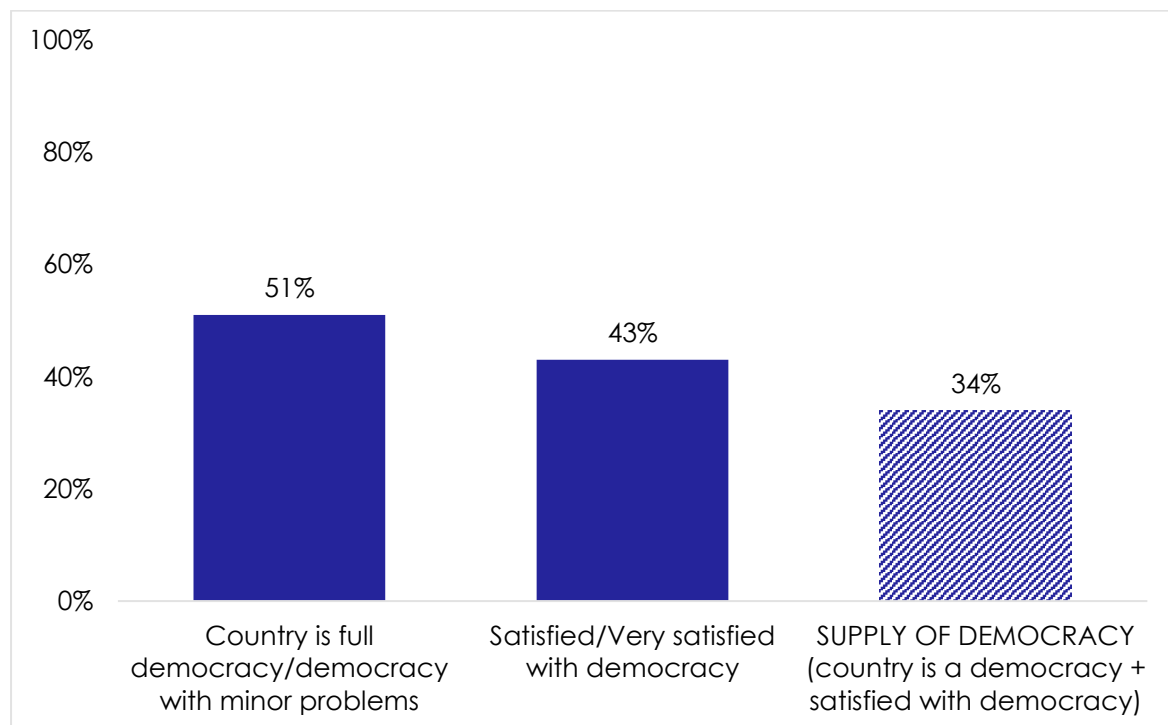
To measure the perceived supply of democracy, Afrobarometer combines respondents' answers to two survey questions:

*In your opinion, how much of a democracy is [this country] today? Is it a full democracy, a democracy with minor problems, a democracy with major problems, or not a democracy?*

*Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [this country] today? Are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied? (Note: Some respondents also respond that their country is not a democracy.)*

As of 2016/2018, just slightly more than half of all respondents (51%) judge their country to be a “full democracy” or “a democracy with minor problems,” and only 43% are “very satisfied” or “fairly satisfied” with the way democracy works. Barely more than one-third of African citizens (34%) offer positive evaluations to both questions, indicating what we call the perceived “supply of democracy” (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Key supply-side indicators of democracy | 34 countries | 2016/2018**



**Respondents were asked:**

*In your opinion, how much of a democracy is [this country] today?*

*Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [this country] today?*

To an even greater degree than we saw with demand for democracy, there is a gaping 64-percentage-point divergence in the way publics in different countries evaluate the performance of democracy. While seven in 10 Ghanaians (70%) both think they live in a democracy and are satisfied with the way democracy works, fewer than one-third of the public think they are being supplied with democracy in fully half of all countries surveyed, including fewer than two in 10 people in Cabo Verde (19%), Sudan (15%), São Tomé and Príncipe (13%), Togo (12%), Madagascar (7%), and Gabon (6%) (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Perceived supply of democracy | 34 countries | 2016/2018**

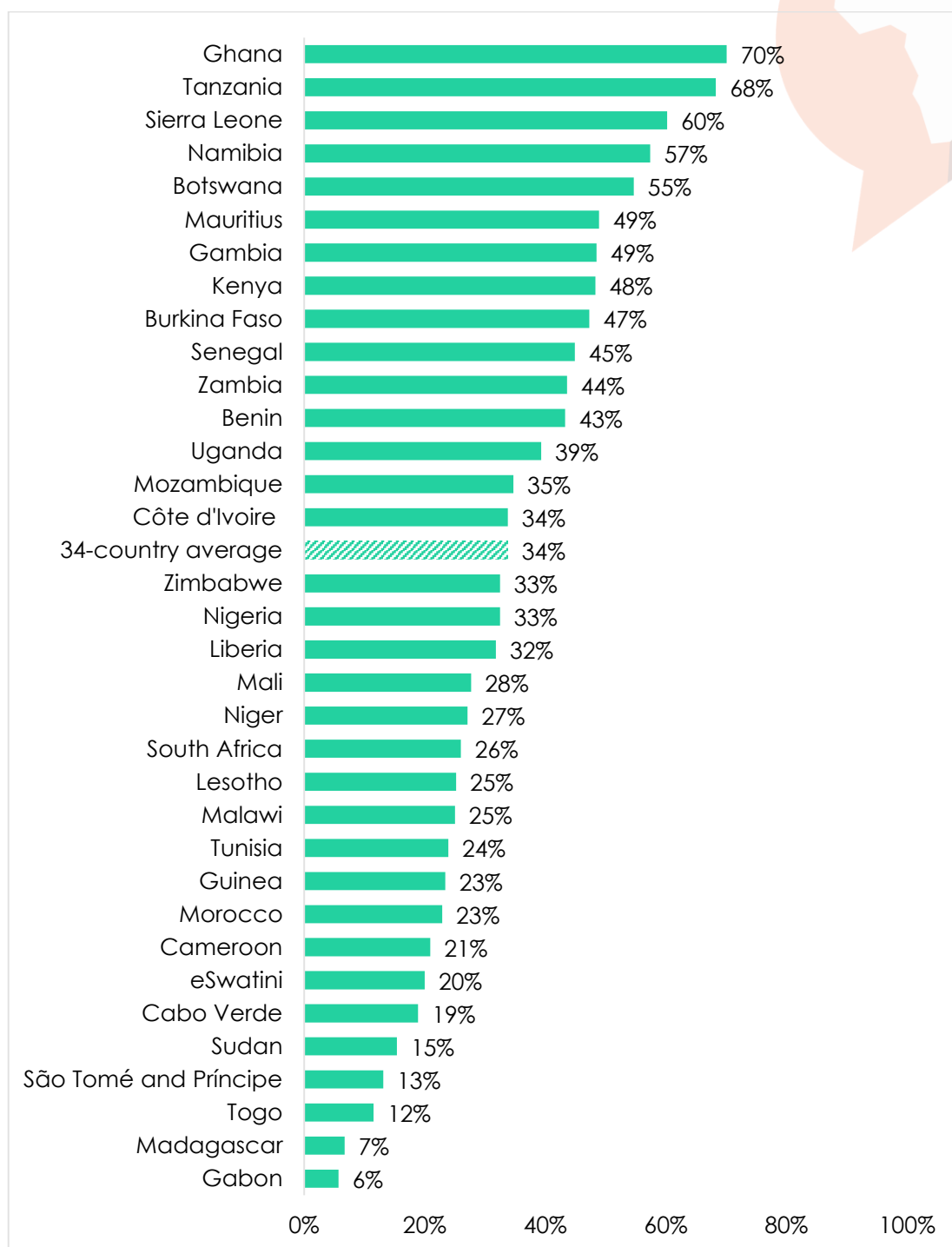


Figure shows % who perceive an adequate supply of democracy, i.e. who say they live in a democracy and are satisfied with how democracy works.

Looking across the 33 countries included in both Round 6 and Round 7, we find no statistically significant changes in Africa-wide evaluations of the supply of democracy or its constituent components, extent and satisfaction. But as we saw with regard to demand, this apparent stability is actually the result of differing sets of countries moving in opposite directions. Indeed, there were substantial increases in the perceived supply of democracy in eight countries (Figure 13) and significant decreases in 15 countries (Figure 14).

**Figure 13: Short-term increases in supply of democracy | 2014-2018**

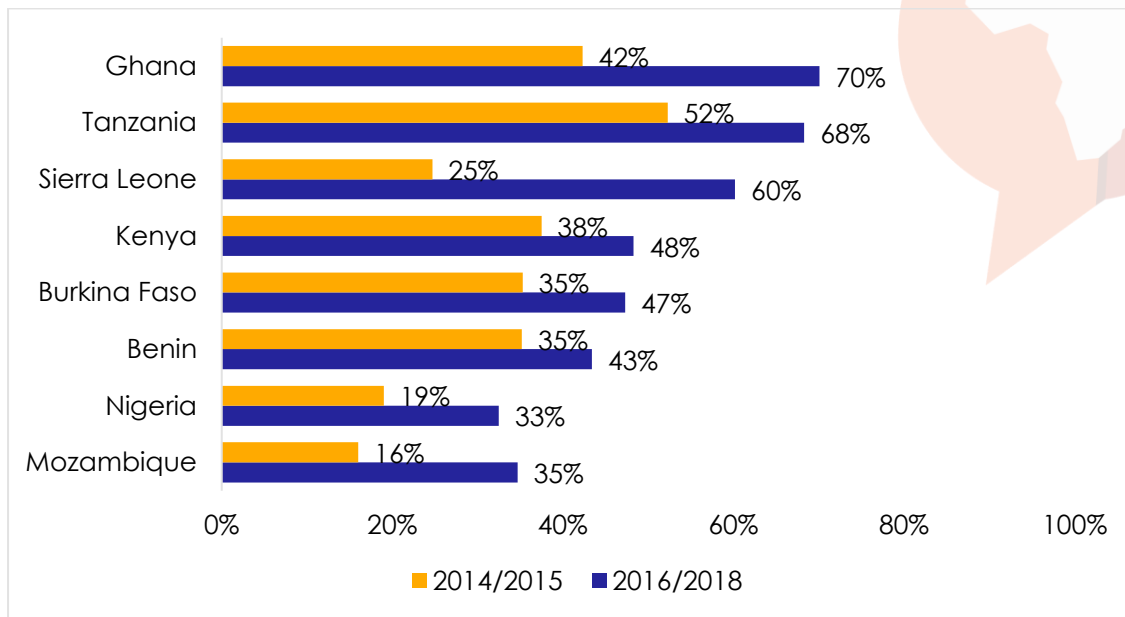


Figure shows % who perceive an adequate supply of democracy, i.e. who say they live in a democracy and are satisfied with how democracy works.

**Figure 14: Short-term decreases in supply of democracy | 2014-2018**

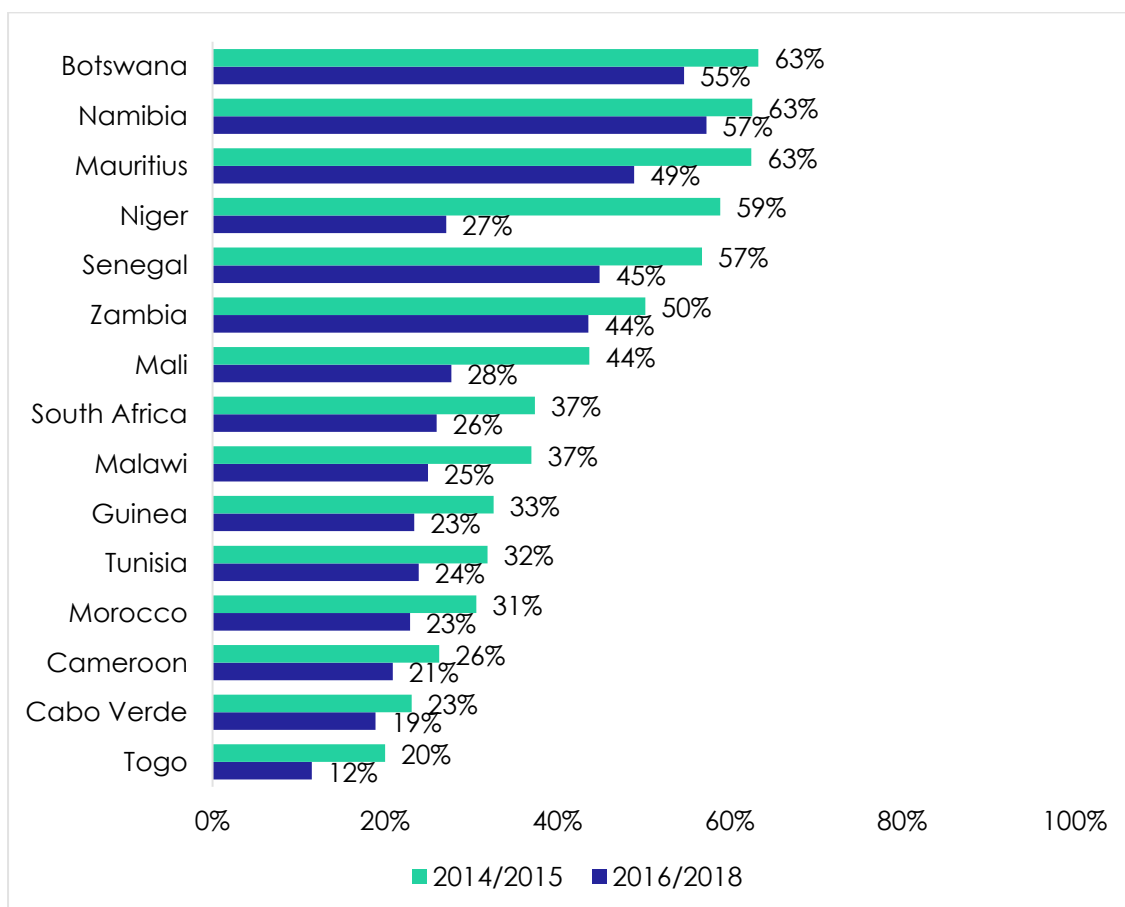
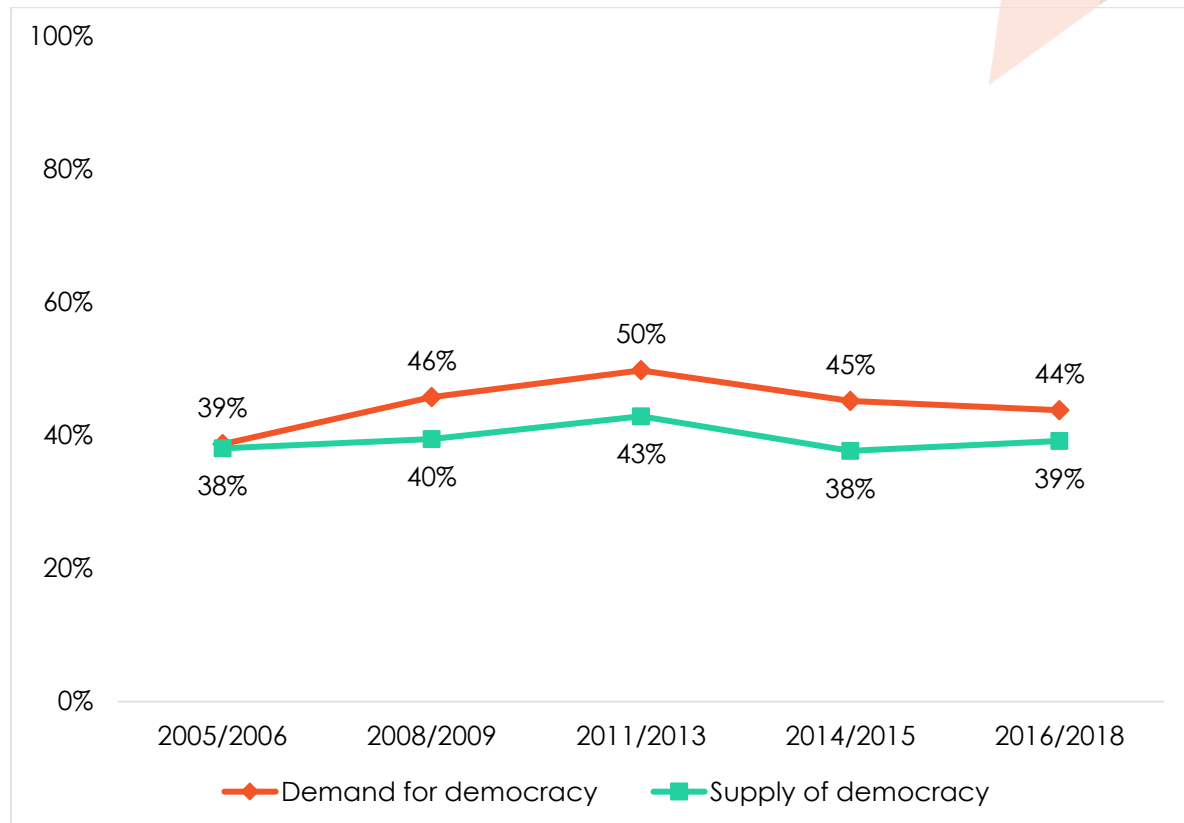


Figure shows % who perceive an adequate supply of democracy, i.e. who say they live in a democracy and are satisfied with how democracy works.



We again examine longer-term trends in countries for which we have results going back more than a decade. On average across 18 countries surveyed since 2005/2006, perceived supply of democracy has ranged between 38% and a high of 43% (in 2011/2013), following a pattern similar to, and somewhat lower than, that for democratic demand (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Longer-term trends in democratic demand and supply | 18 countries**  
| 2005-2018



Perceptions of the supply of democracy exhibit long-term upward trends in seven countries (Ghana, Tanzania, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Namibia, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) where, even with significant fluctuation, the measured supply of democracy is higher in 2016/2018 than it was in 2002/2003 (or 2008/2009 for Burkina Faso) (Figure 16). In contrast, public opinion about the performance of democracy is in long-term decline in Mozambique, Mali, Madagascar, and Kenya (though Kenyans have shown increasingly positive evaluations since 2008/2009, with the first and highest data point (66% perceiving supply in 2003) captured in the euphoria following the 2002 election that ushered in the post-Moi era) (Figure 17).

In sum, while the cross-country average of the perceived supply of democracy has held quite steady over time, this stability again masks quite significant positive and negative changes in differing groups of individual countries over the past decade.

**Figure 16: Long-term increases in supply of democracy | 2002-2018**

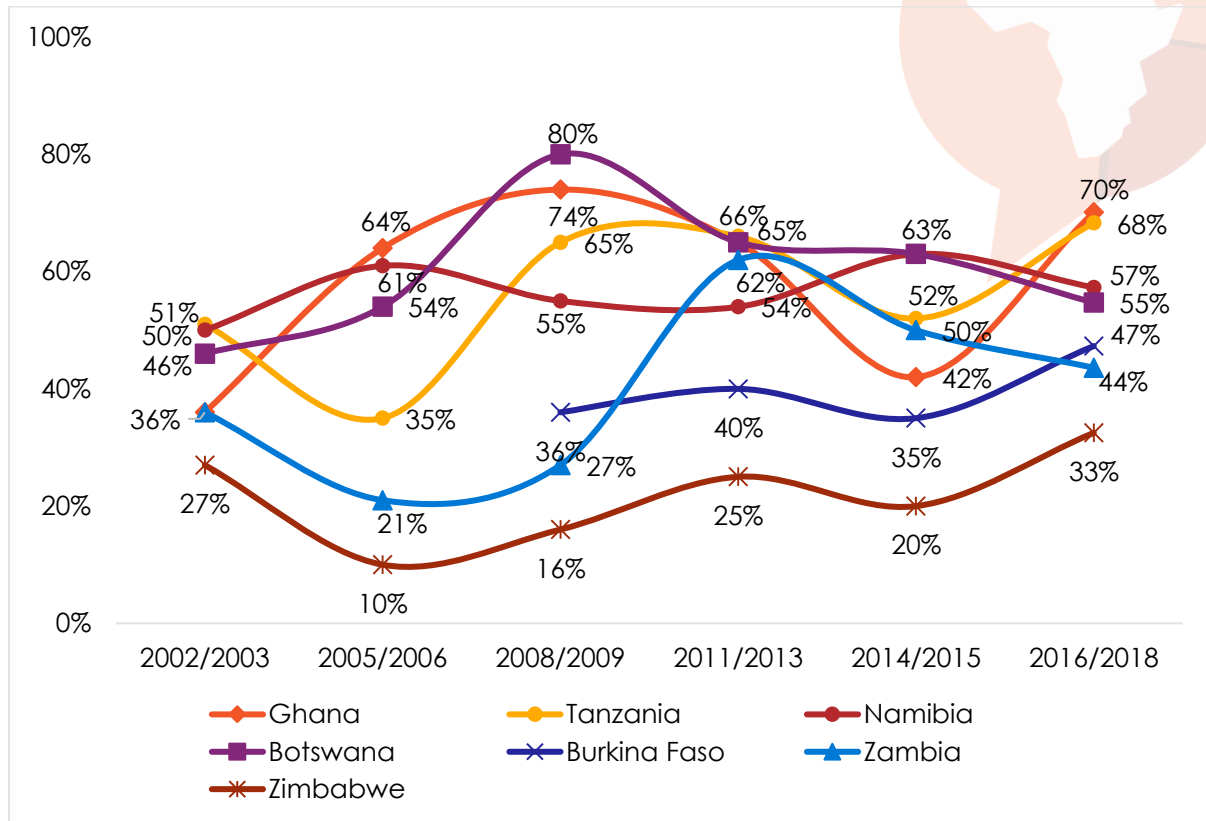


Figure shows % who perceive an adequate supply of democracy, i.e. who say they live in a democracy and are satisfied with how democracy works.

**Figure 17: Long-term declines in supply of democracy | 2002-2018**

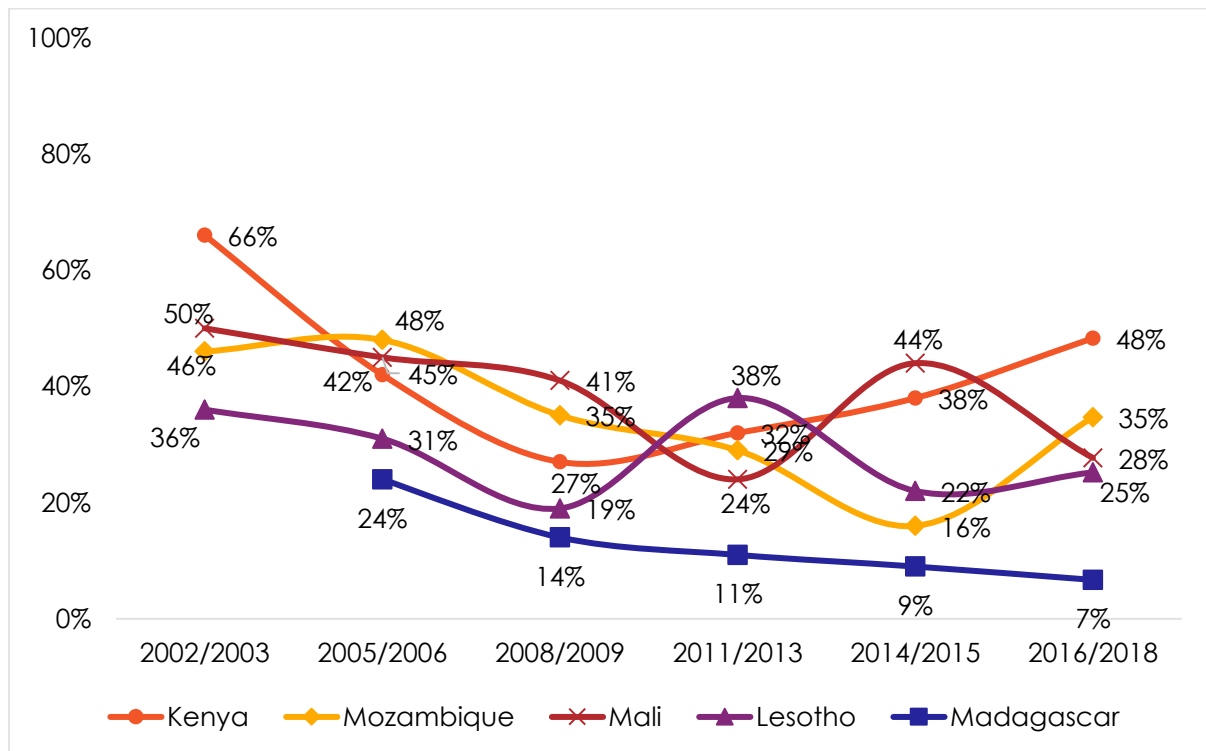
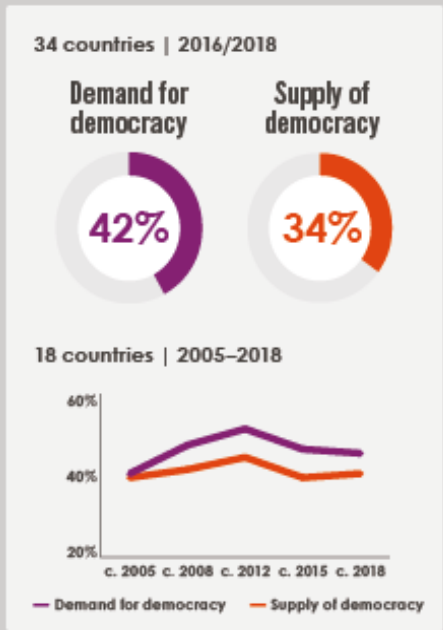
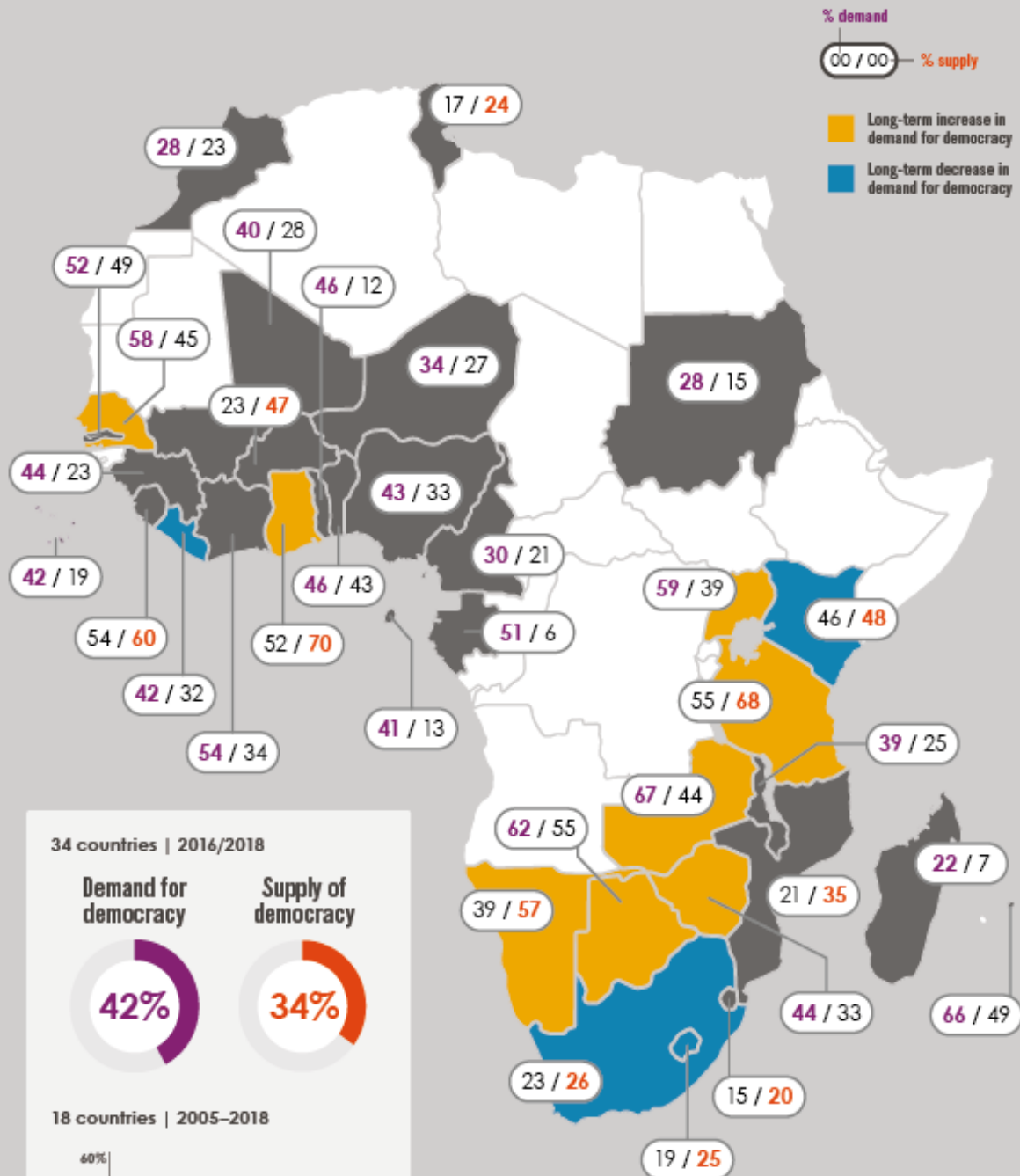


Figure shows % who perceive an adequate supply of democracy, i.e. who say they live in a democracy and are satisfied with how democracy works.

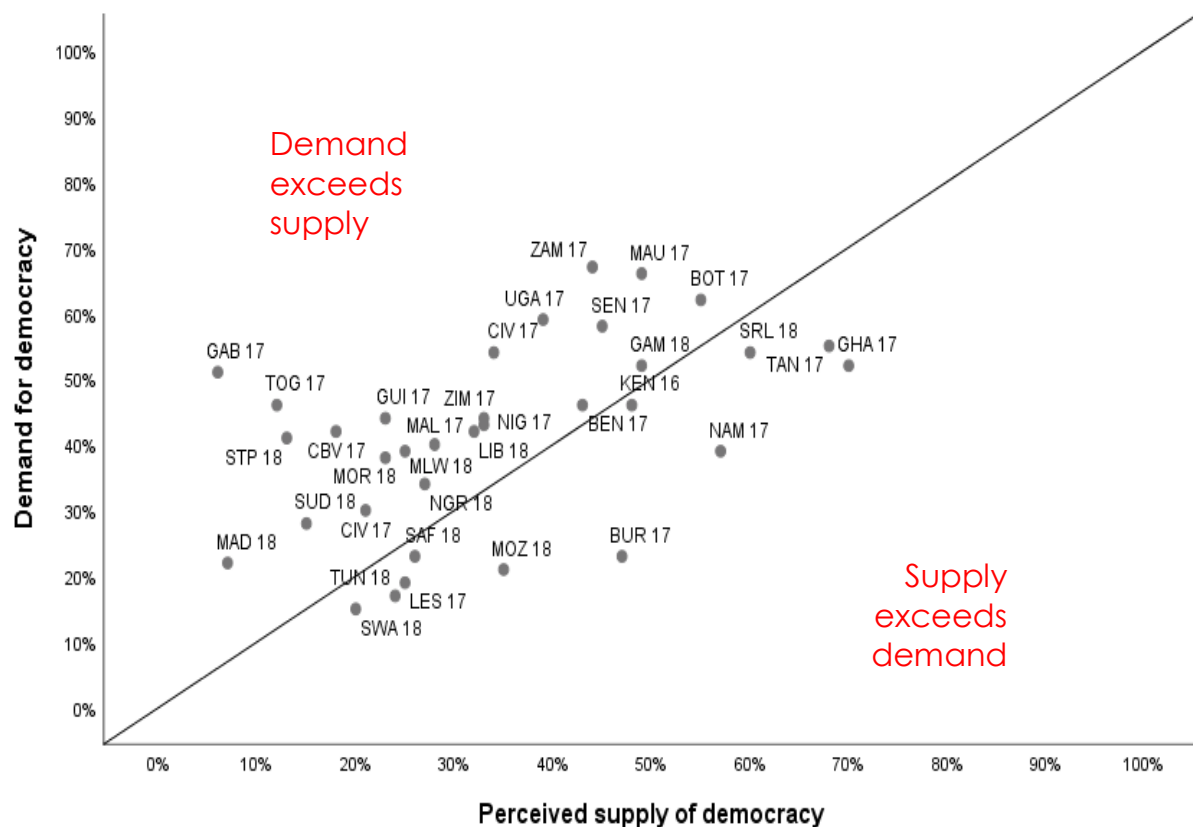
# Democracy in Africa: Demand and supply

34 African countries | 2016/2018



As we have found in past survey rounds, the proportions of people who perceive an acceptable supply of democracy (34%) falls well short of the 42% who express consistently pro-democratic attitudes across 34 countries in 2016/2018. However, when we examine how publics in specific countries perform on both indicators, we find several countries where the proportion who think they are being supplied with democracy is larger than the proportion who demand democracy, suggesting that many citizens in these countries are receiving more democracy than they want (Figure 18). This group includes Ghana and Burkina Faso, but also Tanzania, Namibia, and Mozambique – countries that previous research has suggested are characterized by large proportions of “uncritical democrats” (Chaligha, Mattes, Bratton, & Davids, 2002; Keulder & Wiese, 2005; Mattes & Shenga, 2013).

**Figure 18: Democratic demand and supply in Africa | 34 countries | 2016/2018**

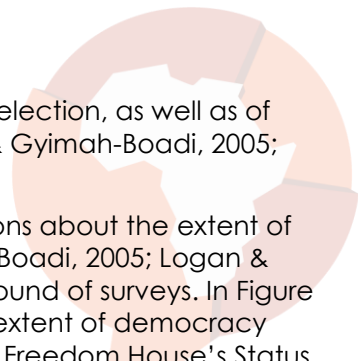


On the positive side, aggregate demand exceeds supply in more than 20 countries. Especially in places such as Gabon, Togo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Mauritius, and Zambia, people want more democracy than they say they are getting. This imbalance in favour of popular demand suggests that citizens in these places are likely to press their leaders for more democracy.

### Are Africans good judges of the quality of democracy?

One might be forgiven for wondering whether Africans are good judges of the state of democracy, especially given that most African societies are marked by state-controlled news media, low levels of formal education, and a latent materialist understanding of democracy (Mattes, 2019 forthcoming). And many analysts have argued that popular satisfaction with democracy is driven almost entirely by perceptions of the state of the economy (Przeworski et al., 1995; Gunther, Montero, & Torcal, 2006).

Yet previous analyses of Afrobarometer data have found that Africans pay a great deal of attention to political developments when evaluating the quality of democracy, especially



popular perceptions of the freeness and fairness of the most recent election, as well as of current levels of political freedom and corruption (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Logan & Mattes, 2012; Greenberg & Mattes, 2013; Mattes, 2014).

Indeed, on average Africans have tended to reach similar conclusions about the extent of democracy in their countries as experts (Bratton, Mattes, & Gyimah-Boadi, 2005; Logan & Mattes, 2012). The same thing can be observed in the most recent round of surveys. In Figure 19, we examine the relationship between citizen evaluations of the extent of democracy and four different expert-based indices of democratic governance: Freedom House's Status of Freedom Index, the Polity IV Autocracy-Democracy Score, the World Bank's Voice and Accountability Index, and the Ibrahim Index of African Governance measure of "rights and participation." In each case, citizen and expert evaluations are positively correlated: Higher positive citizen evaluations of the extent of democracy are associated with higher ratings from experts, and vice versa.<sup>4</sup> This is an encouraging finding and suggests that it is difficult for undemocratic elites to fool their publics about the true state of democracy in their country.

However, we need to take note of at least two other considerations. First, we are looking here at national averages. This means that there are many citizens who are more critical of their governments, but also many who are more forgiving of democratic under-performance.

Second, while these correlations between citizen and expert ratings are positive, they are not overwhelmingly strong by the usual standards for aggregate-level measures.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while citizen and expert ratings increase or decrease together, there are still considerable

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differences between them as well. For example, in the first panel of Figure 19, six countries surveyed in Round 7 received a (reversed) Status of Freedom score of 3.0, which Freedom House considers "partially free" (and which, depending on their score on the political-rights dimension, might not qualify them as "electoral democracies").<sup>6</sup>

Yet the proportions who say their country is democratic range from a high of almost 80% in Tanzania to between 50% and 60% in Kenya, Zambia, Mozambique, Côte d'Ivoire, and Niger, and to fewer than 30% in Togo. In Tanzania, for example, the perceived supply of democracy – as measured in 2017 – had increased by +18 percentage points since the previous survey in 2014 even though President John Magufuli had already begun a process of narrowing political space that has since progressed to include bans on opposition gatherings and limitations on social media.<sup>7</sup>

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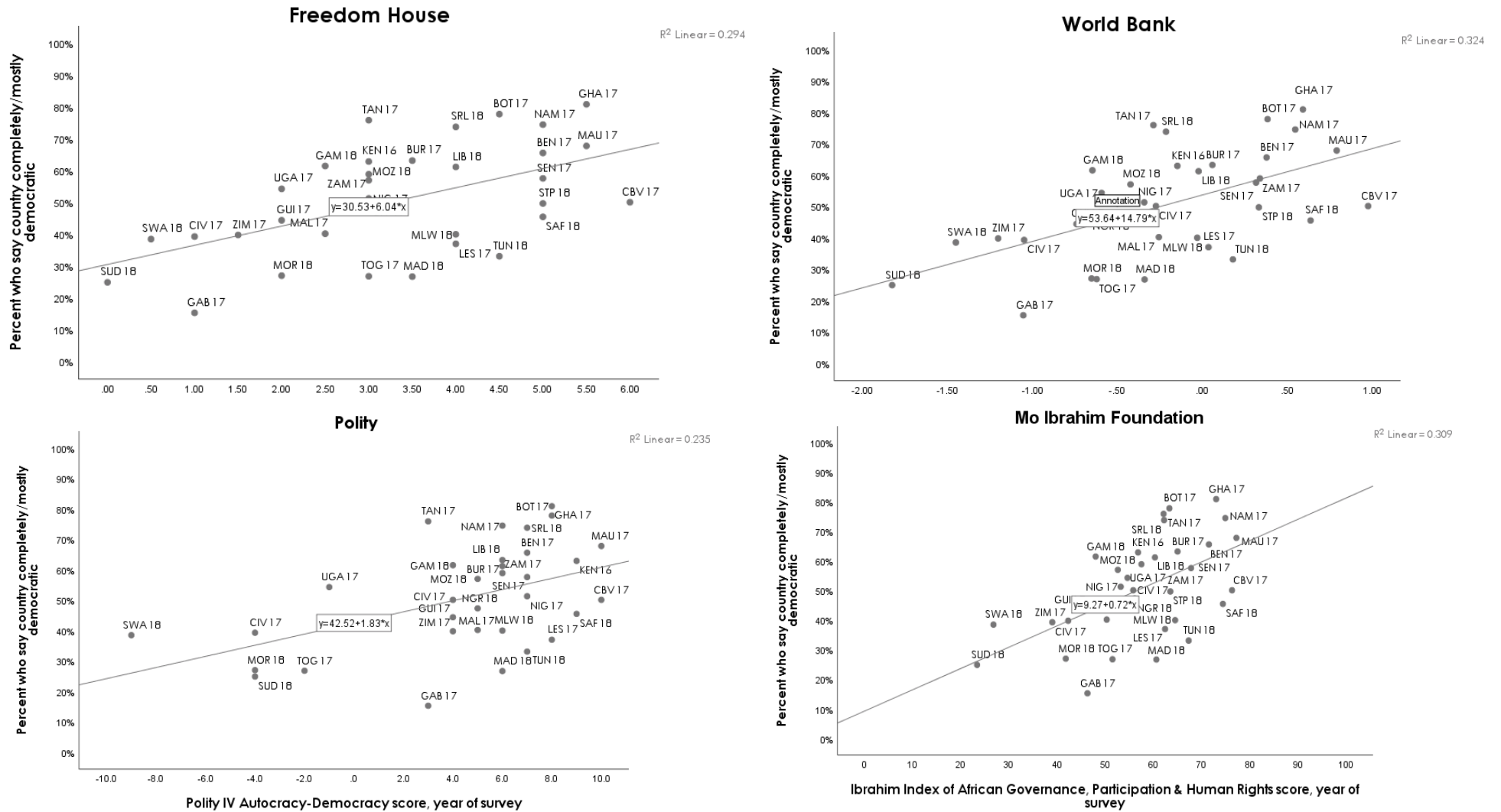
<sup>4</sup> The World Bank and Mo Ibrahim Foundation use some Afrobarometer data in calculating their indices, which would contribute to these correlations, but they also use many indicators from other sources.

<sup>5</sup> The Pearson's  $r$  correlations run from .569 (World Bank) downward to .484 (Polity). Popular evaluations of the extent of democracy correlate at  $r=.557$  with the widely used Freedom House Status of Freedom Index.

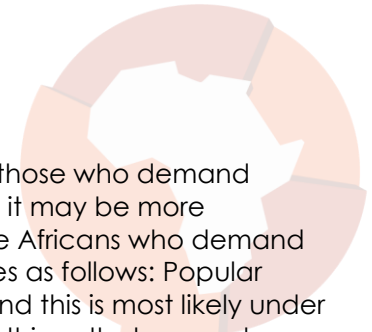
<sup>6</sup> Freedom House gives its quantitatively highest score (7) to the least free country, and the lowest score (1) to the most free. We follow standard social science methodology and reverse the scores, with 0 denoting a lack of freedom and 6 denoting the highest level of freedom.

<sup>7</sup> Clearly, citizen evaluations may also diverge from expert ratings because experts lack everyday on-the-ground experiences of ordinary people living under these governments.

Figure 19: Citizen and expert ratings of the quality of democracy | 34 countries | 2016/2018



## Dissatisfied democrats



Beyond the imbalance, in aggregate, between the proportions of those who demand democracy and those who say they are supplied with democracy, it may be more important to understand – at the level of the citizen – whether those Africans who demand democracy think they are being supplied with it. The reasoning goes as follows: Popular demands have the power to drive countries toward democracy, and this is most likely under certain conditions. That is, the people who are most likely to do the things that expand democracy, or at least guard against its erosion, are those who are *both* deeply committed to democracy *and* dissatisfied with the current performance of the political system. Such citizens should be more likely to support strong countervailing institutions, such as effective legislatures and independent courts. They should also be more likely to hold their leaders accountable, including working with others to protect political spaces, or to mobilize against elite attempts to interfere with rights and liberties. We describe these citizens as “dissatisfied democrats.” To the extent that citizens’ commitment to democracy matters for the survival and quality of democracy, we argue that it is dissatisfied democrats who matter most.

In fact, Lingling Qi and Doh Chull Shin (2011) have provided important evidence to support this argument. Using World Values Survey data from a sample of 46 “transitional regimes,” they measured “dissatisfied democrats” as those who scored both above the median on a scale of support for democracy and rejection of authoritarianism (i.e. what Afrobarometer calls “demand for democracy”) and below the median on a scale of satisfaction with democracy and confidence in political institutions (i.e. similar, but not identical, to Afrobarometer’s indicator of “supply of democracy”). They found that these dissatisfied democrats were more likely than other respondents to report participating in activities such as signing petitions and taking part in boycotts and demonstrations. More importantly, at the country level, they found that the proportion of dissatisfied democrats in a country was strongly and positively related to *subsequent* (i.e. future) levels of democracy and even more strongly linked to changes in the level of democracy.

We conducted a similar analysis using data from Afrobarometer Round 5 (2011/2013). In our analysis, “dissatisfied democrats” are those who demand democracy but are dissatisfied with the performance of democracy.<sup>8</sup> The findings are not quite as clear as what Qi and Shin found. For example, we find that Africa’s dissatisfied democrats are *not any more likely* than others to contact public officials or take part in protest, and they are only slightly more likely to join civic or religious community groups<sup>9</sup> or to attend community meetings and join with others to address an important issue.<sup>10</sup>

However, dissatisfied democrats in Africa are *more likely* to support civil liberties<sup>11</sup> and to see themselves as responsible for holding elected officials accountable between elections.<sup>12</sup> And they are much more likely to support a range of vertical and horizontal limits on government.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These are respondents who (1) demand democracy (i.e. prefer democracy and reject military rule, one-party rule, and presidential dictatorship) *and* (2) say their country is a flawed democracy or not a democracy *and* (3) are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way democracy is working.

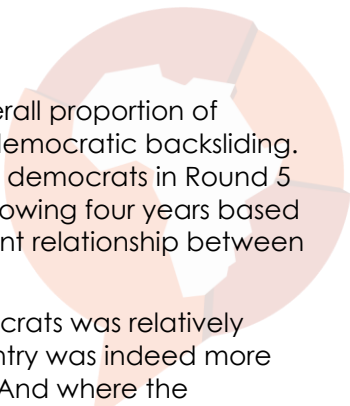
<sup>9</sup> After controlling for gender, age, urban/rural location, and formal education, partial correlation = .073,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>10</sup> Partial correlation = .070,  $p = .001$ .

<sup>11</sup> Partial correlation = .147,  $p = .000$ . The measure is a two-item construct combining the beliefs that people should be able to join any organization of their choice and that the news media should be able to publish what they want free of government interference.

<sup>12</sup> Partial correlation = .134,  $p < .000$ .

<sup>13</sup> Partial correlation = .269,  $p < .001$ . The measure is an average index created from responses indicating the beliefs that people should control government like an employee, that it is more important to have a government that’s accountable than a government that gets things done, that multiparty competition is necessary to provide choice, that opposition parties should conduct oversight, that Parliament should make laws, that the president should obey the law, and that presidents should be bound by term limits.

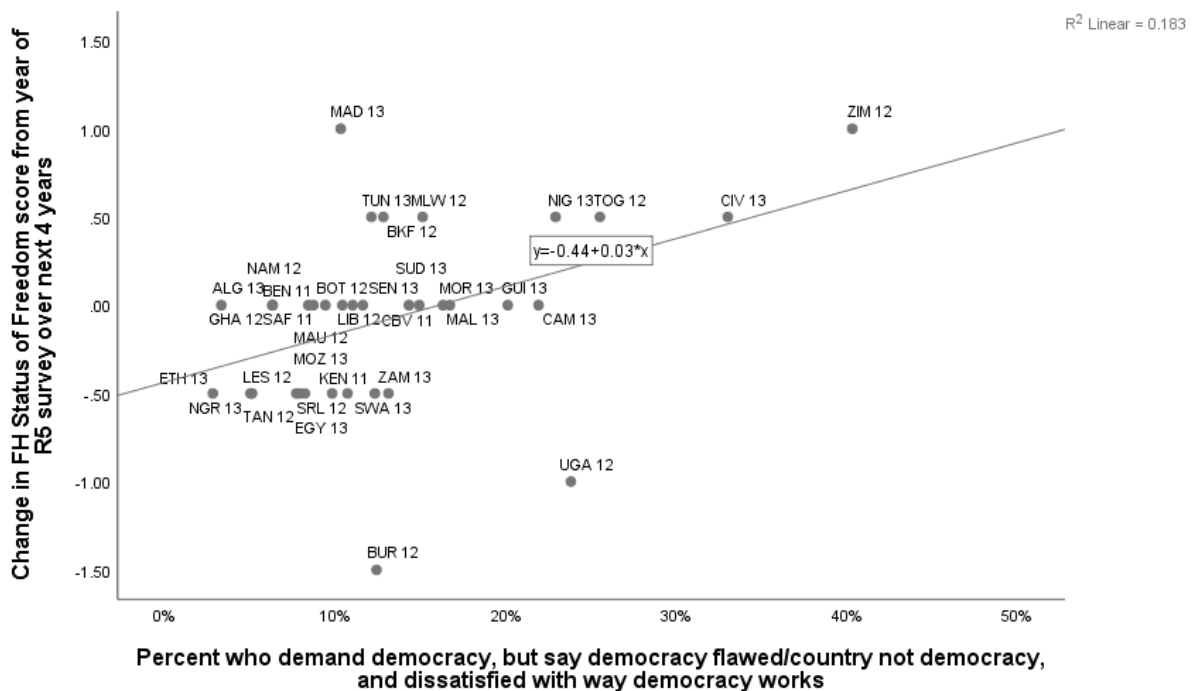


More importantly, there is evidence that at the country level, the overall proportion of dissatisfied democrats is linked with subsequent democratization or democratic backsliding. As displayed in Figure 20, we correlate the percentage of dissatisfied democrats in Round 5 with the extent of democratic change (progress or regress) in the following four years based on Freedom House indicators. We find a positive, statistically significant relationship between the two variables ( $r=.428$ ,  $p=.013$ ,  $n=35$ ).

In other words, in countries where the proportion of dissatisfied democrats was relatively large (such as Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Nigeria), the country was indeed more likely to move up the Freedom House scale over the next four years. And where the constituency of dissatisfied democrats was very small (e.g. Ethiopia, Niger, Tanzania, and Egypt), the country was likely to move down the scale.

But clearly, the fate of democracy depends on many things other than mass opinion, including the (anti-)democratic commitments of the elite (Mainwaring & Perez-Linan, 2013), the existence of strong countervailing institutions such as the legislature and courts (Jakli, Fish, & Wittenberg, 2018), and the relative power balance between the government and the opposition (McFaul, 2002). This may help explain three “outlier” cases that fall far from the regression line. Madagascar (re)democratized even without a large body of dissatisfied democrats to push the process, while Uganda regressed despite having a relatively large share. Burundi, meanwhile, moved much further backward than other countries with similar (relatively small) proportions of dissatisfied democrats.

**Figure 20: Dissatisfied democrats and the fate of democracy | 35 countries | 2011-2017**

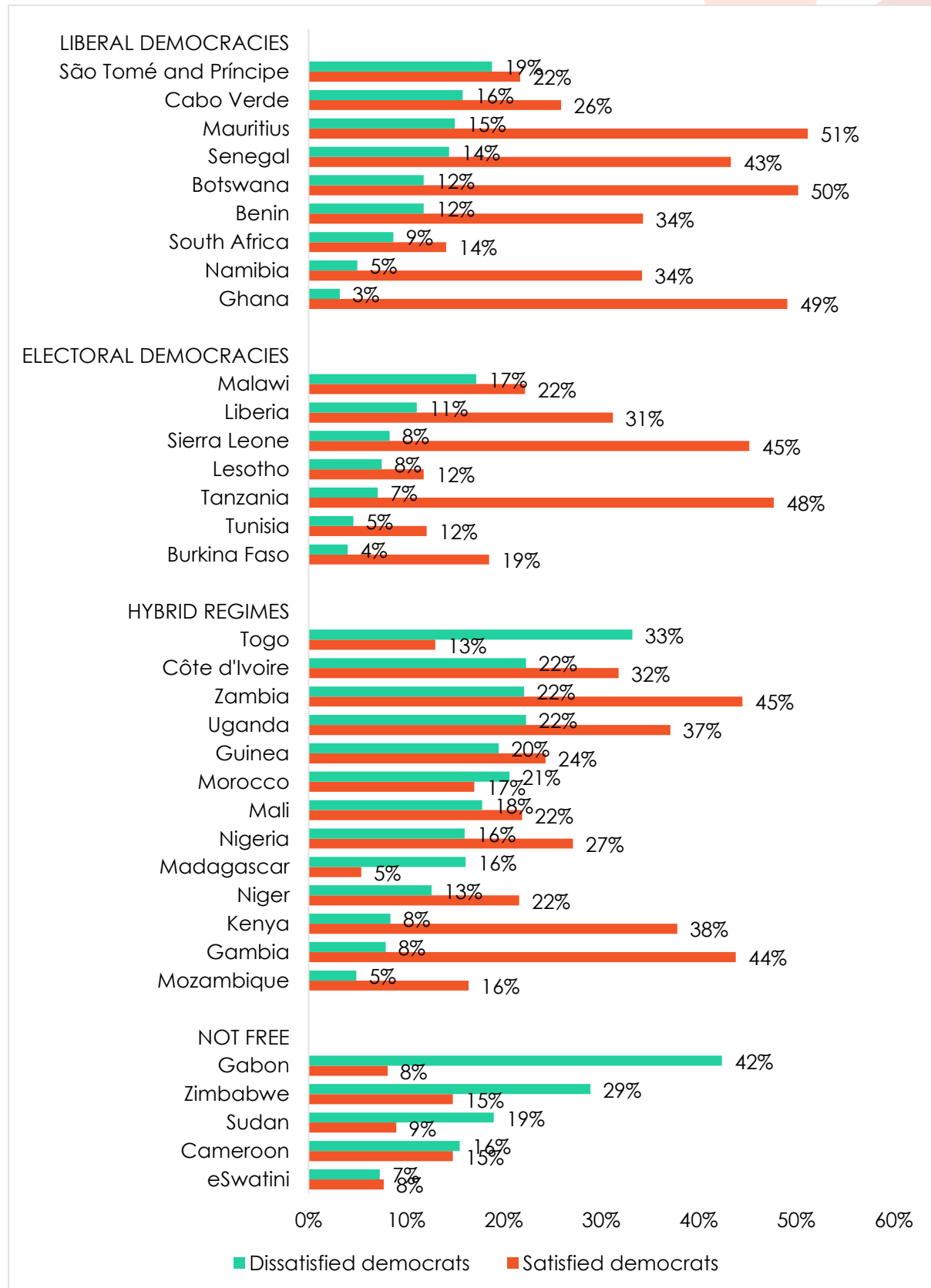


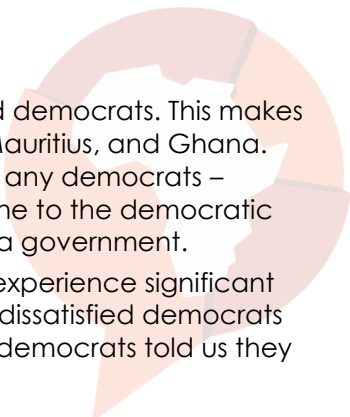
Given this evidence, we conclude by looking at the balance of satisfied and dissatisfied democrats in Round 7 surveys and considering the implications for the future of democracy. The first thing to note is that – across the entire sample – fewer than one in six people (15%) qualify as dissatisfied democrats. However, the proportion is much larger in some countries than in others. The most useful way to consider nationally specific responses may be to group countries by level of democracy. Figure 21 displays four sets of countries: 1) “liberal democracies” (countries that Freedom House rates as “free” and that also hold free and fair elections); 2) “electoral democracies” (countries that are rated as “partly free” but still conduct quality elections); 3) “hybrid regimes” (countries that are “partly free” and whose



electoral process is marred by significant problems); and 4) countries that Freedom House rates as “not free.”

**Figure 21: Dissatisfied and satisfied democrats | 34 countries | 2016/2018**





Among the liberal democracies, most democrats tend to be satisfied democrats. This makes sense where democracy is stable and robust, such as in Botswana, Mauritius, and Ghana. However, the small constituency of dissatisfied democrats, indeed of any democrats – satisfied or not – in South Africa is concerning, given the damage done to the democratic system over the past decade by the extensive corruption of the Zuma government.

Among the electoral democracies – democracies that nonetheless experience significant shortcomings in the protection of rights and liberties – the number of dissatisfied democrats never rises above one in five. Indeed, the vast majority of Tanzanian democrats told us they were *satisfied* with a system where democracy is in retreat.

The positive outlook of professed democrats also prompts concern in Kenya, where the Supreme Court had annulled the results of the previous election and the resulting rerun was marred by political violence and an opposition boycott. In both countries, this suggests that further restrictions may meet little popular resistance.

In the Gambia, the large proportion of satisfied democrats is more understandable. Even though the country is only partly free, and the electoral machinery is still flawed, respondents there were no doubt reflecting on their recent ability to use the ballot box to produce the first turnover in power since that country's 1994 coup.

We see cause for concern, however, in the large number of satisfied democrats in Zambia (45%), where the previous election was widely disputed, opposition parties were subsequently harassed, and the opposition leader was placed under arrest even as our 2017 survey was under way. Yet the fact that at least one-fifth of the public are dissatisfied democrats (22%) also suggests that any attempts to further restrict political space may meet significant popular resistance.

Finally, the relatively larger proportions of dissatisfied democrats in other “partly free” countries such as Côte d'Ivoire (22%) and Togo (33%) and in “unfree” countries such as Gabon (42%) and Zimbabwe (29%) suggests an ongoing struggle between the forces of democracy and autocracy.

## Conclusions


These results carry both positive and negative implications for the state of democracy in Africa. While large majorities of Africans provide strong support for various aspects of the democratic regime in specific survey questions, much smaller proportions – certainly no more than half of all respondents – are consistently democratic across a range of issues. Moving beyond continental averages, pro-democratic attitudes are widespread in some countries (such as Zambia and Mauritius) but perilously sparse in others (such as Lesotho, Tunisia, and eSwatini).


While Africans' assessments of the state of democratic governance in their own country tend to align with expert ratings, many people overrate the quality of their democracy. And while the publics in most countries say they receive less democracy than they desire, in several other societies more people think they are being supplied with democracy than actually want it. Indeed, many apparently committed democrats express satisfaction with the progress of partially democratic regimes.

In many respects, the characterization of Africans' commitment to democracy employed by Michael Bratton in 2002 as “wide but shallow” still holds true almost two decades later. The “width” of nominal enthusiasm for democracy provides rulers with incentives to maintain multiparty elections, tolerate opposition parties and critical civil society organizations, and respect constitutional rules -- including term limits – and to change them, if they deem it necessary, through legislative means.

At the same time, the “shallowness” of inconsistent commitment to democracy enables elected leaders in many countries to harass opposition groups, narrow democratic spaces of debate, and restrict rights and liberties, even as they carry on with nominally multiparty elections.

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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

# AFRO BAROMETER

LET THE PEOPLE HAVE A SAY



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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.

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