

April 2004



Democracy and Electoral Alternation: Evolving African Attitudes

Almost fifteen years have passed since waves of democratization began to crash on African shores. Transitions to multiparty rule were often greeted with mass public celebration. But how long does any such political enthusiasm last? Are Africans' expressed commitments to democracy¹ enduring or ephemeral?

This paper argues that democratic commitments are not fixed. They tend to decline with the passage of time. But, more reassuringly, democratic commitments can be refreshed by an electoral alternation of power.

To reach reliable conclusions about trends in public opinion, analysts generally prefer to have at least three observations, each separated by an interval of several years. Otherwise, one can easily mistake momentary shifts in volatile attitudes – or mere measurement errors – for lasting changes in the public mood.

At the risk of incurring such errors, we report here a few preliminary differences in popular attitudes to democracy between Afrobarometer Round 1 (July 1999 - October 2001) and Afrobarometer Round 2 (June 2002 – October 2003). On a continent where very little is known about public opinion, we think it worthwhile to report even preliminary indications of attitude stability or change, even if these are tentative. But our intention at this early stage is to resist proclaiming firm conclusions about general trends.

Consistent with previous analyses,² we focus on two familiar clusters of mass attitudes to democracy. On the demand side, we examine support for democracy and rejection of authoritarian rule. On the supply side, the analysis concerns satisfaction with democracy and popular estimates of democracy's extent.

We take several measures to minimize the chances of arriving at faulty conclusions: we note if interview questions or reporting formats change between surveys; we break down Afrobarometer "averages" by country; and we only draw attention to differences in results of 10 percentage points or more. The logic of the last protocol is as follows. For any given Afrobarometer survey the confidence interval is plus or minus 3 percent. This interval doubles to 6 percent when two surveys are compared. Therefore, we prefer to use an even larger margin (at least 10 percentage points) before speculating that any observed differences between Round 1 and Round 2 survey results reflect emerging changes in public opinion.

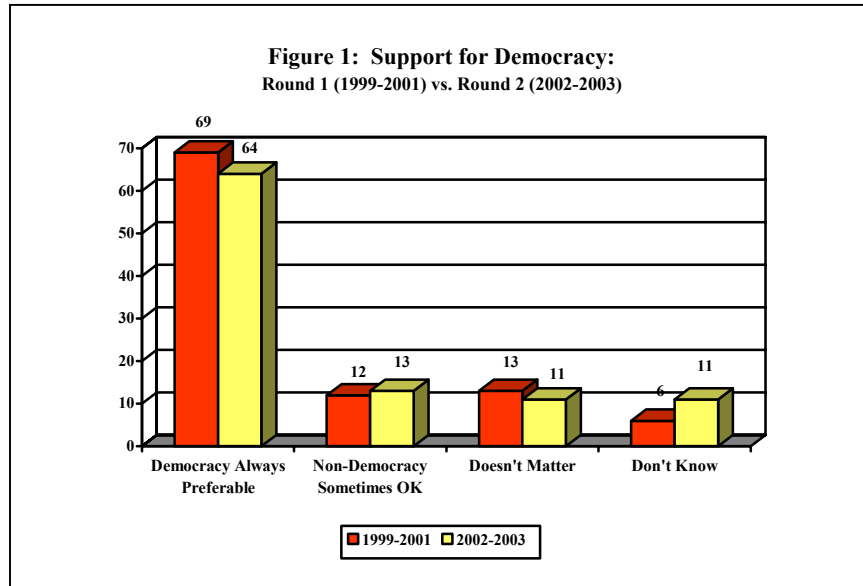
Support for Democracy

Figure 1 shows the mean level of expressed support for democracy for the 12 countries covered in Round 1 Afrobarometer surveys and the 15 countries covered in Round 2. The wording of the

¹ See *Afrobarometer Briefing Paper No. 1*, "Key Findings on Public Opinion in Africa," April 2002.

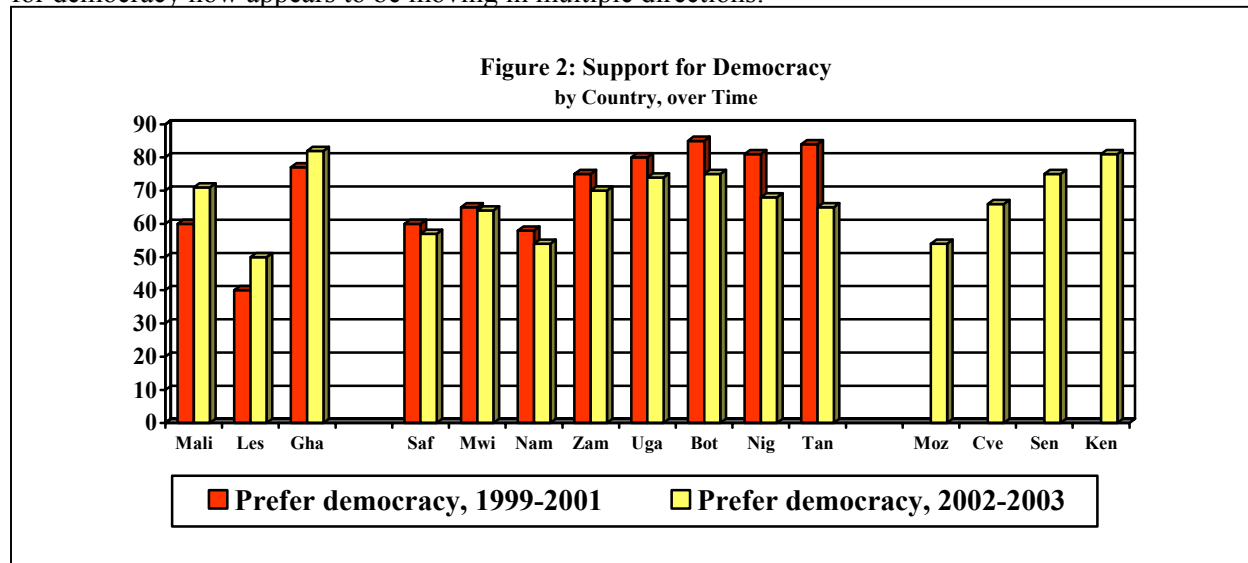
² See Michael Bratton, Robert Mattes and E. Gyimah-Boadi, *Public Opinion, Democracy, and Market Reform in Africa* (New York and London, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2004).

survey questions is given at the bottom of each figure. Overall, we observe little change in the aggregate level of support for democracy between 1999 and 2003. The slight decline in support (from 69 to 64 percent) falls within the margin of sampling error for survey comparisons. Thus, while we surmise that support is more likely to have fallen than risen, we have no basis for inferring a trend of serious erosion in popular democratic support.³



Which of these statements is closest to your own opinion? A. Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government B. In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable C. For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

The picture sharpens when the data are broken down by country (see Figure 2). Popular support for democracy now appears to be moving in multiple directions:



**Note: Results for Botswana and Ghana exclude "don't knows."*

- In three countries support is apparently increasing (by 10 points or more in two cases: Mali and Lesotho).⁴

³ If there is any erosion at all, it seems to come from an increase in the proportion of people who say they "don't know" what kind of government they prefer. This is partly a function of the large numbers of respondents in Ghana and Botswana who did not recognize the word "democracy" in English, which represented a change in the method of asking this question in this country between Round 1 and Round 2.

⁴ We think we are right in imputing growing support for democracy among Ghanaians because they also display a very high level of rejection of authoritarian rule (81 percent, second only to Kenya and Zambia) and a marginal increase over time in rejection of one party rule.

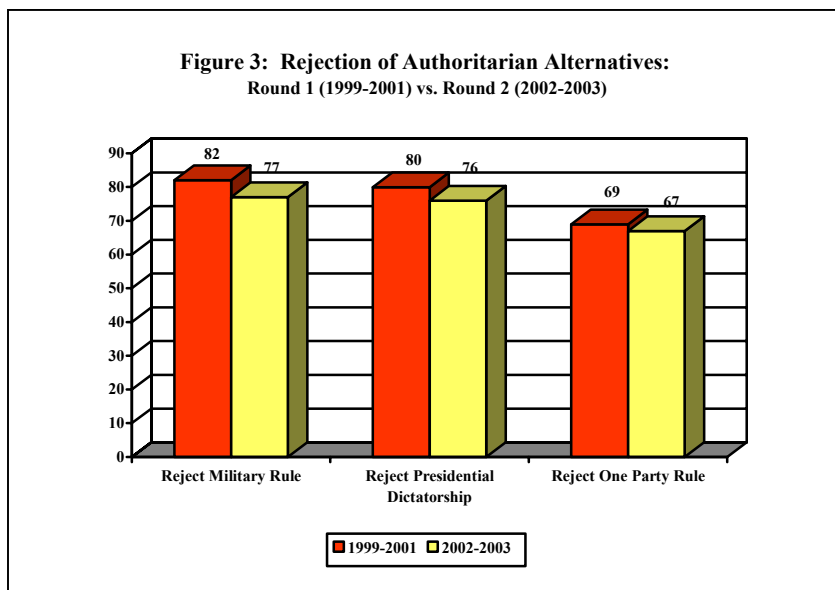
- In eight countries, support for democracy seems to be in decline (by 10 points or more in 3 cases: Tanzania, Nigeria and Botswana).
- In the four remaining countries we cannot comment on change because we have only one observation.⁵

Take an upside example. Lesotho experienced a large increase in support for democracy (10 percentage points), no doubt due to a successful election in May 2002 convened under a new, proportional electoral system. But gains in democratic support were offset by an equally large increase in the segment of adults that sees non-democratic forms as sometimes acceptable. So Basotho are becoming increasingly polarized about the type of government they prefer.

On the downside, support for democracy underwent a sharp drop in Nigeria (14 percentage points). In this case, almost all the loss in democratic support showed up as a doubling (from 9 to 19 percent) of those willing to sometimes accept non-democratic forms of government. In this country, democracy's loss clearly was autocracy's gain. We therefore feel confident about imputing a strong downward trend in this attitude, but note that two-thirds of Nigerians still support democracy in 2003, a similar proportion to all Africans interviewed.

Rejection of Authoritarian Rule

But do so-called new democrats still harbor nostalgia for strong government? Figure 3 shows the mean levels of popular rejection of three major types of authoritarianism: military rule, one-man rule, and one-party rule. Again, strong average levels of rejection recorded in Round 1 slip slightly in Round 2. But the change is never greater than the margin of sampling error for survey comparisons.⁶ The proportions rejecting one-party rule altered hardly at all. And overall levels of rejection of autocracy remain high.



There are many ways to govern a country. Would you approve or disapprove of the following alternatives? A. The army comes in to govern the country B. Elections and parliament are abolished so that the president can decide everything C. Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

We therefore find no reason to amend our findings from Round 1 that:

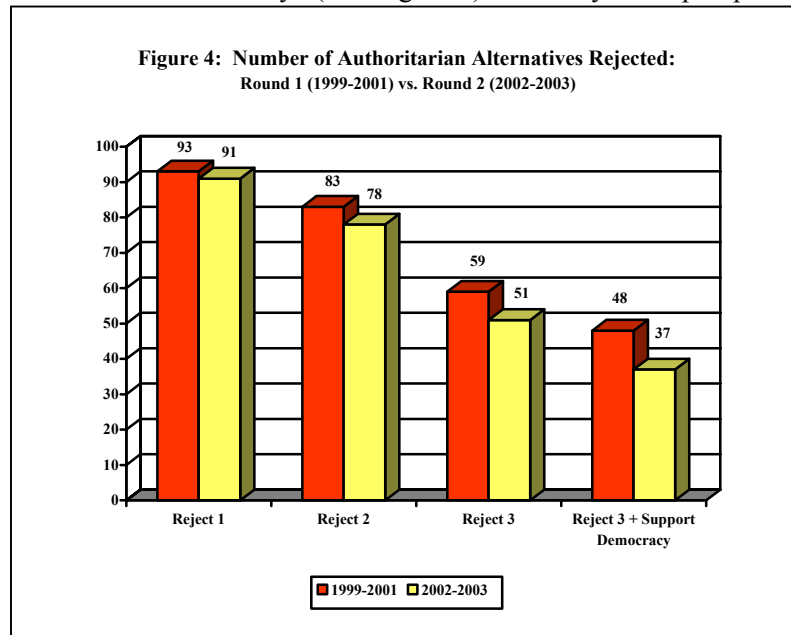
- Africans have grown thoroughly weary of military rule and presidential dictatorship;
- More Africans reject autocracies than support democracy; and

⁵ We have data from September 2001 on support for democracy and extent of democracy in Mozambique. But it has not been included in Round 1 means. And questions on authoritarian alternatives and satisfaction with democracy were not asked there.

⁶ And the dip was often smaller when the R2 comparison refers only to the 11 countries for which Round 1 data are available. For example, rejection of presidential dictatorship (one-man rule) was 78 percent compared to 76 percent for all 15 countries. The latter figure is pulled down by the fact that only 42 percent of Mozambicans reject one-man rule.

- More people remain willing to consider one-party rule than any other authoritarian alternative (especially in Mozambique, Namibia and Uganda).

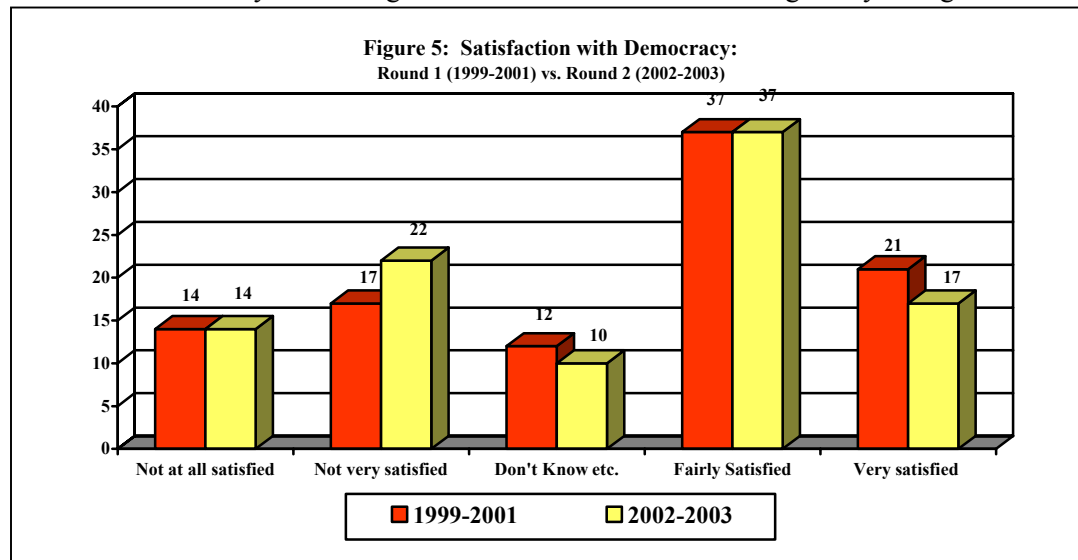
Nevertheless, we have uncovered an important decline in the compound attitude that we call “demand for democracy” (See Figure 4). This key concept taps the *depth* of popular democratic



commitments by testing whether individuals who say they support democracy *also* simultaneously reject all three forms of authoritarian rule. As in Round 1, the Round 2 results show a rapid decay from virtually universal rejection of at least one form of autocracy (91 percent) to just half who reject all three (51 percent). Most importantly, the proportion who “demand democracy” drops by more than 10 percentage points (from 48 to 37 percent) to just over one-third of all respondents. In this respect, we are beginning to find evidence that shallow democratic commitments can erode quickly over time.

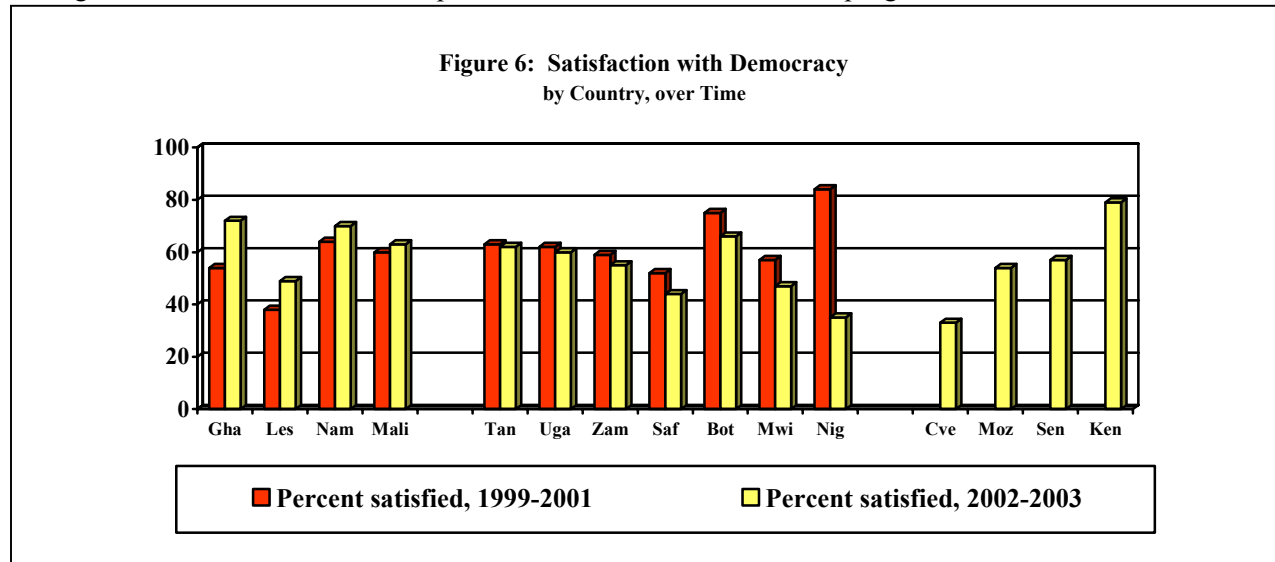
Satisfaction with Democracy

Turning from the demand side of public opinion to the supply side, we now ask whether people think that democracy is being delivered. Figure 5 reports average satisfaction with the way democracy works across all Afrobarometer countries. We again see a minor dip in the proportion that is “very satisfied” and a slight rise in the proportion that is “not very satisfied.” But one is struck that the “fairly satisfied” group, among others, remains unchanged over time. In this case, Round 2 data serve more to confirm the reliability of our original measurements than to catalogue any change.



Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in (your country)?

Cross-nationally, Ghana and Nigeria now describe the extremes (see Figure 6). Between 1999 and 2002, satisfaction with democracy apparently rose 18 percentage points in Ghana, the largest attitude shift we have measured so far. To be sure, this figure is inflated by the exclusion of “don’t know” responses (see footnotes 3 and 4). But a positive interpretation is warranted because the country underwent a peaceful alternation of ruling parties in December 2000 in elections that Ghanaians widely regarded as free and fair. They have since given the new government high and rising marks for economic management, and reconfirmed their patience with its economic reform program.⁷



Note: Results for Botswana and Ghana exclude “don’t knows.”

The trend in Nigeria, which leads in an opposite direction, is even more remarkable. Satisfaction with democracy plummeted from 84 percent in January 2000 (soon after the restoration of civilian rule) to 35 percent in October 2003 (in the wake of President Obasanjo’s re-election), a near-50 point collapse.⁸ In this case, we can confirm a straight downward trend, because an intermediate measurement in August 2001 showed a middling level of satisfaction (57 percent).⁹ So, even as average satisfaction with democracy holds steady across the continent, there is considerable volatility within certain countries, including important ones like Nigeria.

Extent of Democracy

Under these circumstances, how much democracy do Africans think they are getting? Average results for the perceived extent of democracy are reported in Figure 7. Whereas in Round 1, just 50 percent rated their country as a viable democracy (either “full”, or with only “minor problems”), some 54 percent in Round 2 felt this way. Among the 11 countries that were sampled in both surveys, however,

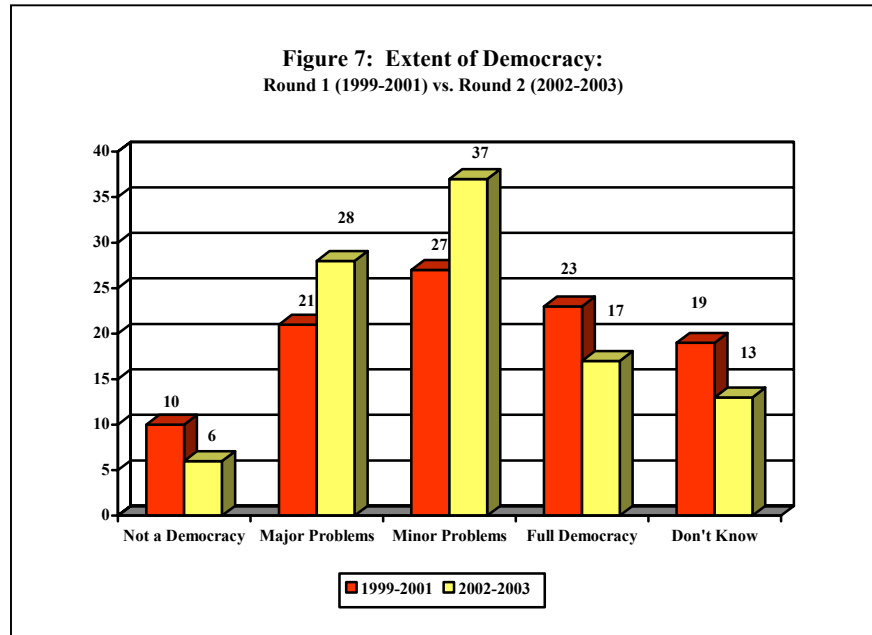
⁷ All these indicators usually help predict democratic satisfaction. For the recent Ghana results, see E. Gyimah-Boadi and Kwabena Mensah, “The Growth of Democracy in Ghana Despite Economic Dissatisfaction: A Power Alternation Bonus?” *Afrobarometer Working Paper*, No. 28, April 2003.

⁸ Nigerians probably only ever wanted Obasanjo to serve as an interim leader who could help bridge the transition from military to civilian rule. He violated this popular expectation, not only by high-handedly resisting sound advice and popular preferences on a host of policy issues, but by choosing to run again for a second term.

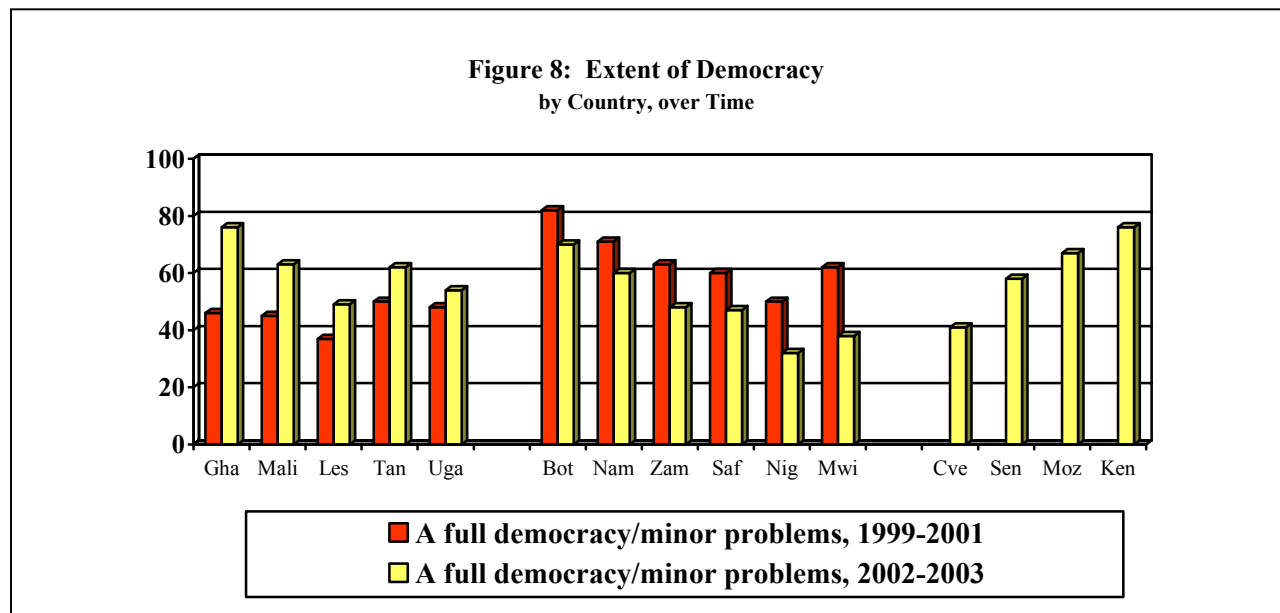
⁹ See Peter Lewis, Etannibi Alemika and Michael Bratton, “Down to Earth: Changes in Attitudes to Democracy and Markets in Nigeria,” *Afrobarometer Working Paper*, No. 20, August 2002.

we find no change in the perceived extent of democracy.¹⁰ This measure of democracy’s supply is holding steady.

Note, however, that people have begun to temper any favorable judgments. As they learn about the performance of elected governments, they also become more skeptical about democracy’s permanent consolidation. A clear plurality is emerging (37 percent) that regards their country, perhaps realistically, as “a democracy, but with minor problems.” This group has grown (by 10 percentage points) as the proportions seeing “full democracy” have shrunk. Perhaps they are recognizing, in the aftermath of transition euphoria, that real world democracies will always have imperfections.



Before concluding that little has changed, however, we should note stark contrasts at the country level (see Figure 8).



Note: Results for Botswana and Ghana exclude “don’t knows.”

¹⁰ Another way to put this is that any incremental gain in the perceived extent of democracy is due to the entry of four new countries into the Round 2 sample, especially Kenya in 2003, where 76 percent think their country have a viable democracy.

- In five of 11 countries, people perceive democracy growing over time.
- In six other countries, however, people see emerging deficits in democratic delivery.
- Volatility is greater on this attitude than any other, with changes over time in 10 of 11 countries exceeding 10 percentage points.

On the upside, for example, Mali displays a sharp rise, with the proportion seeing an almost or completely “full” democracy increasing by 18 points (from 45 to 63 percent). While popular learning about democracy is underway (as in Tanzania, “don’t knows” are declining), a successful electoral alternation in May 2002 also seemed to induce people to regard any problems with democracy as “minor” rather than “major.”

On the downside, Malawi registered the largest decline in the perceived extent of democracy (down 24 points between 1999 and 2003). During this period, President Muluzi tried to claim an unconstitutional third term, accusations multiplied about official corruption, and the country suffered a crippling food crisis. The perceived extent of democracy also slumped in Zambia as fewer people saw a “full” democracy (down 15 percentage points) and more saw “major problems” (up 22 points). In this country, the period between surveys was marked by the elections of December 2002, in which no presidential candidate or political party won a majority and where accusations of electoral fraud abounded.

Conclusion: The Alternation Effect

Samuel Huntington has proposed that electoral alternations of power – measured by what he calls the “two turnover test” – signal the consolidation of democracy.¹¹ In the wake of two cycles of political replacement, most political actors have lived as both winners and losers without revolting. They thus signal their acceptance of the rules of the electoral game.

We think that Huntington goes too far in reducing consolidation to alternation. After all, institutions other than elections are also required for democracy’s long-term prosperity. But we acknowledge that a competitive, multiparty election – especially one that leads to a *turnover of ruling parties* – has highly beneficial effects on democratic attitudes. Perhaps more than any other political event, a peaceful electoral transfer of power from one group of governors to another symbolizes “rule by the people.” In the public imagination, electoral alternation helps to broadly legitimize democracy.

On the other hand, the enthusiasm born of the electorate’s sovereignty may be short lived. We also suspect that the longer an elected government survives without refreshment of ruling parties – particularly if its elites betray their popular mandate by indulging in “minor” or “major” manipulations – the more likely are citizens to become disillusioned with democracy.

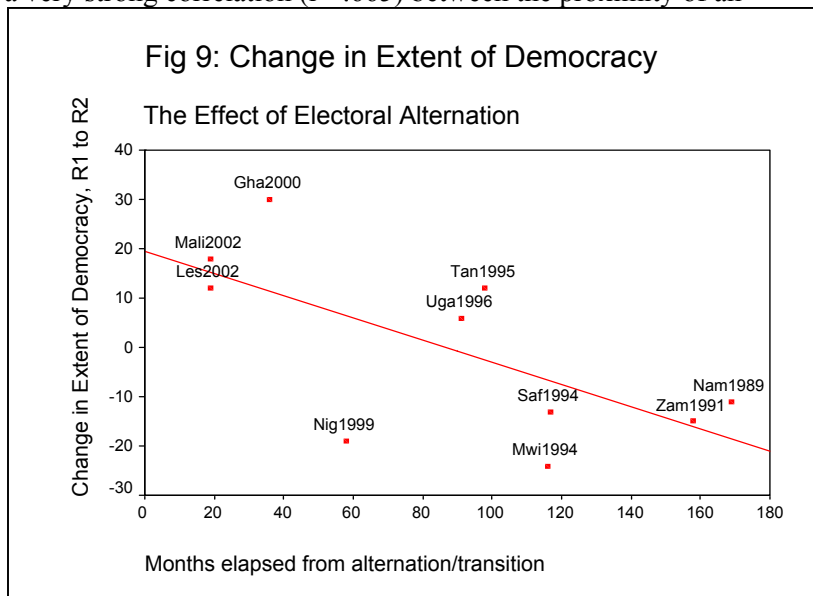
By way of conclusion, we conduct a brief illustrative test of these ideas. For each country, we calculate the number of months elapsed from the last electoral alternation or, in the cases of Tanzania and Uganda (which have never experienced a change of ruling parties at the polls), since the multiparty transition.¹² We find that, as expected, every democratic attitude examined here – on both the demand

¹¹ *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 266-7.

¹² Unlike in Tanzania and Uganda, the founding multiparty election in Malawi, Namibia, South Africa and Zambia was itself the catalyst of political alternation (though no turnover of ruling parties has since occurred). Botswana and Zimbabwe are excluded from the analysis since the multiparty transition occurred in these countries many years earlier than the current wave of democratization dating from 1989. Thus their extreme values on the “months elapsed” variable cloud the analysis.

and supply sides – is negatively related to the passage of time.¹³ In other words, the more recent an electoral alternation (or, failing that, a multiparty transition), the more positive people feel about democracy. By contrast, the more distant these defining political events, the more disillusioned citizens become.

This argument stands out most clearly with regard to change in the perceived extent of democracy (See Figure 9). There is a very strong correlation ($r = .665$) between the proximity of an electoral alternation and changes in the amount of democracy people perceive in their country. At one extreme, Ghana, Mali and Lesotho all experienced leadership turnover by election in the last three years;¹⁴ accordingly, their citizens perceive substantial increases in the amount of democracy (all over 10 percentage points). At the other extreme, it has been a decade or more since an alternation of ruling parties at the polls in Namibia, Zambia, Malawi, and even South Africa. In these countries, citizens think that the extent of democracy is in decline.



Moreover, the argument about the benefits of alternation appears to hold also in Afrobarometer countries for which we have only one wave of data. The populations of Senegal and Kenya, which experienced an alternation of ruling parties in April 2001 and December 2002 respectively, now see an above-average extent of democracy in their countries. And, consistent with the closer temporal proximity of its election, the perceived extent of democracy is presently higher in Kenya than in Senegal (76 versus 58 percent).

These results suggest a natural cycle in the evolution in political opinion in new African democracies, especially on the supply side. At first, multiparty transitions boost democratic sentiments, even in the absence of alternation. The bad news, however, is that these democratic commitments decay, often in response to disappointing government performance or to ruling parties that overstay their welcome. But the good news is that democratic legitimacy can be renewed, either by improved performance or, in its absence, by the replacement of an under-performing government at the polls.

¹³ Pearson's $r = -.492$ for change in support for democracy, $-.174$ for change in rejection of three authoritarian alternatives, $-.081$ for change in satisfaction with democracy, and $-.665$ for change in the perceived extent of democracy.

¹⁴ The alternation in Lesotho was not a straightforward affair. The Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) ruled for five years following the transition election of 1993, but its leader (Ntsu Mokhehle) split away from the BCP to form the Lesotho Congress of Democrats (LCD) in order to contest the 1998 election. This election, which resulted in an overwhelming LCD victory, was repudiated by the opposition, which then blocked the LCD's ability to govern. Only after a fresh election was held in May 2002 under a more proportional electoral system, which gave the opposition Basotho National Party (BNP) a share of legislative seats, was the LCD able to effectively assume power. Although the process was elongated and disrupted, the 2002 election resulted in the installation of a new ruling party by electoral means and according to rules that were widely accepted.

By way of conclusion, we stress again that these emerging trends are tentative. We will continue to test for an alternation-based cycle of democratic attitudes as more Afrobarometer data become available in the future.

The Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from 16 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), and Michigan State University. Several donors support the Afrobarometer's research, capacity-building and outreach activities, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the U.S. Agency for International Development. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org